

Report of the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

CONCERN about the future of humanistic study motivated the Modern Language Association (MLA) Executive Council to charge a distinguished task force of members with recommending changes to doctoral education. Funded in part by a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the work of the task force involved conversations with directors of graduate studies, department chairs, and other administrators; graduate students; employers outside the academy; and the membership at large. Through presentations on individual campuses, at the annual conventions of the MLA and the American Historical Association, and at summer seminars for department chairs, members of the task force refined their thinking and finalized their recommendations. The Executive Council approved the report of the task force in February 2014. The report includes an appendix of examples of departments that have modified their programs in ways consistent with the task force's recommendations.

In the light of persistent criticism from within the academy and from a larger public, the legitimacy of doctoral study needs reformulation if we expect to meet the challenges and opportunities of the moment. We are faced with an unsustainable reality: a median time to degree of around nine years for language and literature doctoral recipients and a long-term academic job market that provides tenure-track employment for only around sixty percent of doctorate recipients. We as members of the scholarly community must insist on maintaining excellence in our research and teaching by recognizing the wide range of intellectual paths through which we produce new knowledge. We must also validate the wide range of career possibilities that doctoral students can pursue. The success of doctoral programs requires their drawing on the resources of the whole university and on professional associations to achieve goals in these four areas:

Pursue and maintain academic excellence. High intellectual standards can be sustained through creative flexibility (of the curriculum, the dissertation, and career preparation). Adaptable doctoral programs can deliver the desired depth, expertise, scope, and credentials.

Preserve accessibility. We need a more capacious view of the humanities' benefit to individuals and society. Reducing graduate program size denies access to qualified students who want to study the humanities and who will make contributions to academic and public life in their work.

Broaden career paths. Departments must recognize the validity of the diverse careers that students might follow within and beyond the campus and ensure that appropriate orienting and mentoring takes place.

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Focus on graduate students' needs. The profession would do well to endorse a shift from a narrative of replication, in which students imitate their mentors, to one of transformation, since graduate programs should be centered on students' diverse learning and career development needs.

The task force offers the following recommendations:

Redesign the doctoral program. Departments should review their programs to align them with the learning needs and career goals of students and to bring degree requirements in line with the evolving character of our fields. Non-course-based activities are essential in today's career environment.

Engage more deeply with technology. Doctoral programs should support technology training and provide ways for students to develop and use new tools and techniques for the study and teaching of languages and literatures.

Reimagine the dissertation. An extended research project should remain the defining feature of doctoral education. Departments should expand the spectrum of forms the dissertation may take and ensure that students receive mentoring from professionals beyond the department as appropriate.

Reduce time to degree. Departments should design programs that can be completed in five years. Individual trajectories vary, and some students' programs may take longer, especially those that require specialized linguistic, archival, or technological knowledge.

Strengthen teaching preparation. As a central component of doctoral education, preparation for teaching should include course work, practical experience, and mentoring. Pedagogic training should introduce students to the diverse missions, histories, and demographics of a wide range of institutions.

Expand professionalization opportunities. Departments should provide students with ways to acquire skills necessary to scholarship and future employment, such as collaboration, project management, and grant writing. Internships and work with professional associations can provide transformational experiences.

Use the whole university community. Professionals in universities who may not be regular faculty members can provide useful mentorship to graduate students. Departments should tap the expertise of librarians, informational technology staff members, museum personnel, and administrators.

Redefine the roles of faculty advisers. The director of graduate studies should be a leader of change who helps transform the program to meet the objectives outlined in this report. The placement officer needs to marshal expertise in nonteaching careers, alumni networks, and career development resources.

Validate diverse career outcomes. Departments must give students a full understanding of the range of potential career outcomes and support students' choices. Prospective and new students should have information about the program's placements, the academic job market, and the casualization of the academic workforce.

Rethink admissions practices. Departments should calibrate admissions to the changing character of doctoral education and the broadened range of career opportunities, taking care to build the pipeline of applicants for small fields and subfields and from underrepresented groups.