

**Humanities Graduate School Reform for Social Justice:  
Re-Orienting Humanities Programs to Encourage Diversity and Human Flourishing  
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Each year, a cadre of qualified, insightful, dedicated PhD graduates compete for a shrinking pool of professorships. Many of those applicants, though they have the makings of world-class teachers, colleagues, and scholars, find themselves unemployed at the end of the cycle, perhaps juggling a series of underpaid adjunct roles, putting life decisions on hold until the next hiring cycle, or leaving academia altogether. The toll that this takes on the emotional well-being of our would-be colleagues is amply attested to by the critical, often raw narratives published by PhDs who find themselves excluded from the academic community but also by a cadre of recent and not so recent PhDs who quit the profession for careers in consulting, higher ed administration, tech, and other fields.<sup>1</sup>

In response to this environment of scarcity, observers of academia have proposed a number of adjustments to the current academic model. One of the most popular is to decrease the number of PhDs awarded each year. Through our work with ReinventPhD at Georgetown and the Mellon grant “Connected Academics,” we charted a more ambitious and optimistic course, proposing an entirely reimagined doctoral program that not only encouraged students to explore the public-facing aspects of their research, but also built in opportunities to pursue rigorous scholarship in careers beyond the professoriate.

Viewed cynically, these efforts may have appeared to comprise a turn toward pre-professionalism, with a concomitant elevation of career paths once described under the somewhat fraught umbrella term ‘alt-ac.’ We argue, however, that efforts to expand awareness of career paths beyond academia are fundamentally based on an orientation toward social justice. To continue to thrive in the 21st century, the humanities must preserve its ability to critique established systems and hierarchies, a function central to its identity since Petrarch turned to classical texts for inspiration in the face of worldly suffering unaddressed by the scholasticism of his day. If doctoral programs in the humanities come to be seen as feasible only for the privileged few, either to a lack of support during coursework or a perceived scarcity of satisfying postdoctoral careers, the academy will be even more likely than it currently is to attract a class of homogeneous scholars, mostly white, privileged males, whose very ability to participate in that system makes them less likely or willing to critique it.

Expanding the universe of potential postdoctoral careers broadens the range of students who can imagine spending the average of 6–7 years that a humanities doctorate requires, which in turn increases the diversity of trained humanists in the public at large. It also speaks to those arguments against cutting humanities programs altogether: that the habits of thought taught in humanities PhD programs have value not only in the academy, but in the world at large. Rather than propose jobs in business, government, and the nonprofit sector as ‘safety valves’ for the ‘PhD surplus,’ we enthusiastically make the case for increasing the number of humanists working, for instance, at Microsoft, at Lidl, at the Kaiser Family Foundation, at the FBI, in the

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<sup>1</sup> See <https://redmonk.com/kholterhoff/2023/06/09/quit-lit-and-the-cake-situation/> for a recent discussion and Joshua Dalezal’s “Recovering Academic” on Substack for numerous examples.

military, at both for-profit and non-profit enterprises — indeed, anywhere they can help business and institutions make decisions that better foster human flourishing.

At Georgetown, we drew inspiration for our work from the Jesuit credo that knowledge is not only to be sought, but also to be put to practical use serving others in the world. Our grant from the Mellon Foundation, shared with our partners, the MLA, Arizona State University, and the University of California Humanities Research Institute, allowed us to host speaker series, design new curricular options, sponsor career expos, and launch a certificate program that brought together current and aspiring doctoral students with professional humanists in a variety of careers that combine scholarship and public engagement. We also proposed a new master's and doctoral program in the public humanities, structured to reflect the foundational understanding that our students may pursue work either within or beyond the professoriate. Although our doctoral program ran into financial blocks, we successfully launched the MA in the Engaged and Public Humanities in 2020 with 15 students and have subsequently grown both the size and the quality of our admissions pool. I'll talk more about the way that program has developed over time when we meet.

A major thrust of the program has been to emphasize the value of humanities habits of mind as equally important to “skills”. While critical reading and writing skills are typically cited as benefits of a humanities education, we focus on more abstract habits of minds, for instance, on the tendency of advanced students of the humanities to bring current crises into focus through historical analysis or to work in numerous discourse registers, or to understand the intersection of different forms of marginalization.

A social justice orientation is one thread that draws our efforts together. We believe that models of graduate education oriented toward social justice increase our profession's sustainability. If our curricula and incentives guide students toward a wide array of fulfilling, rigorous, well-compensated careers, we will attract cohorts of students beyond those of independent means. Such programs can also recognize that the humanities are strengthened when our practitioners engage directly with their communities — not merely addressing an audience, but actively seeking to contribute to public-facing endeavors. Perhaps most directly, graduate programs designed or redesigned with social justice in mind can offer more dependable support to the students who often find themselves unable to flourish within a system indifferent to their suffering, and can better arm them to offer penetrating and constructive critiques of their own discourse community and of the systems in which all of us are enmeshed.