DECIDING WHAT YOU VALUE
A Frank Talk with Yourself about
Your Life, Your Job, and Your Future

We are in a changing academic culture

As our culture is reshaped by technology and corporatism, all rules about higher education -- its purpose, its pathways, its delivery, its mission -- are changing. This is neither good nor bad, this is just the way it is. The long-time traditional metaphor of the university as the Ivory Tower, dedicated to the monastic life of the mind, has lost its force in our utilitarian universe (if this metaphor were ever true). Increasingly globalized and capitalized, our culture forces us all to become more entrepreneurial and inventive in how we conceive of and engage in higher education. We have also entered an anti-elitist period in our culture, a period in which higher education is no longer held to be a positive good for society unless it leads directly to a good job and lots of money.

One consequence of this new reality is that tenure track jobs, as a percentage of all professorial positions, are far fewer than they used to be. US/ED statistics show that, while the number of tenure-track positions today has grown (because the “ed biz” has expanded considerably in the last few decades, as has the production of Ph.D.s competing for those positions), the percentage of faculty in tenured and tenure track positions has fallen considerably. According to statistics maintained by the US Department of Education, in 1975, 56.8% of all faculty were tenured or on the tenure track; that fell to 46.8% in 1989, to 38% in 1998, 32% in 2005, and the percentage has continued to fall. Tenured/tenure track faculty have been replaced by adjuncts, lecturers, additional graduate teaching assistants, and per-course, part-time staff who work for a fraction of the cost of a tenured professor, but who do not contribute to student advising, tutoring, research, institutional service, gathering statistics to demonstrate accountability, strategic planning, fund-raising for the department, or any of the many other tasks now mandated by growing university administrations. More and more of this work falls on fewer and fewer numbers of full-time faculty, increasing work-loads and lowering job satisfaction. More competition, more work, greater oversight, fewer rewards seems to be the trend. Faculty salaries are flat. New Ph.D.s who spent years earning their terminal degrees are working as lecturers and adjuncts, receiving a salary on which it is difficult to support an individual, leave alone raise a family. The job security of tenure, for which many academics traded earning power, is on the chopping block. This is the current reality.

Once upon a time -- when job markets were steadier and people often remained in a single job or with a single firm for their entire lifetime -- the very few people who went to the very few graduate schools intended to become professors, to devote their life to research, teaching, and service, and to become the next generation of professors in time. It was never an easy profession, but it did offer some flexibility, the opportunity to control one’s own schedule to some extent, some degree of job security, the pleasure of working with motivated young people and seeing them grow, and growing one’s discipline. One pursued one’s research and added to the world’s body of knowledge. Most of this small group of grad students were “called,” and they “professed” their discipline: they simply could not imagine doing anything else.
Access to higher education became easier after the Second World War. As our boomer culture delayed young people’s entry into adulthood, many students continued on to grad school for many reasons other than a “calling.” They went because they were looking for themselves, because they enjoyed the grad school lifestyle and the friends they made, because they wanted to delay entering the work force, because they thought grad school was vocational training, because they had romantic (if untrue) ideas about the easy life of the professoriate, because it was a good place to find a financially stable spouse, and for a variety of other reasons having little to do with the profession itself. The number of graduate students increased and the nature of graduate training changed significantly as a response to larger numbers of students, changing student demographics, rapidly transforming technologies, and diversification and growth in number of institutions of higher learning. Meanwhile, the educational landscape also changed as K-12 education deteriorated, the BA became the new high school diploma, and the MA became the new BA. You can complete the equation yourselves. But consider this: in 1925, many American university professors held only the MA degree. The Chair and a few other senior members might have earned the title “doctor,” but most members of the faculty were “professors.” Today, an MA would not be hired for a tenure-track position at a major institution, and many people who are hired into so-called “entry-level” positions have not only the terminal degree, but also post-docs, teaching experience in temporary or replacement positions, and publications under their belt. The bar for hiring has been continually raised, creating a separate set of problems for the academy, including unrealistic expectations by hiring committees; premature, redundant, and careless scholarship produced to impress P&T committees (what the *Chronicle of Higher Education* has called “Fast Food Scholarship”¹); early burnout by junior faculty; and unrealistic bars for tenure and promotion, to name just the more obvious.

You need to think about and deal with your place in this continually changing situation. You need to begin thinking, sooner, rather than later, about how you are going to remain nimble during times of social and institutional change. To quote Paula Chambers, an Ohio State University PhD in rhetoric and composition who created the VersatilePhD.com website and with it a new career, “You’re in charge of your career. My message to you is you need to prepare to be versatile.”²

**Questions you need to ask yourself**

The good news is that the PhD degree, or even a PhD/abd, will take you to many places, not just into the professoriate. All graduate students should weigh several important factors as they undertake advanced study, and they should revisit these factors regularly as they go through the program, because human goals and aspirations change -- and, if they do, that’s OK. Some questions you need to consider:

- **Why have I chosen to work toward a PhD?** You must give some serious and honest thought to your career plans and how advanced study will help you meet them. Graduate school is a means to an end, not an end in itself. What “end” are you striving for? You should revisit this issue regularly, at least once a year. The answer may change.

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• **Am I willing to work as hard as the getting degree demands (and as hard as holding the professional position demands)?** Some of you have already discovered that it is a challenge to get everything done for the classes you are taking and the class you are teaching and stay on top of your writing projects -- but it only gets more challenging on the other side of the sheepskin; do you have the stamina? does this life style stimulate you or exhaust you?

• **Am I temperamentally cut out for life in the academy?** Frankly, life in grad school is pretty straightforward compared to life in a faculty office. Do you really know what faculty do? Ask yourself:
  - do I enjoy research and writing and revising, and revising, and revising enough to want to do it for the rest of my life?
  - do I enjoy writing grant proposals so that I can buy time to research and write and revise?
  - do I like to read and edit, and edit, and edit other people’s work?
  - am I an indefatigable, voracious reader? humanities profs have to read all the time, in more than one or two languages; and they have to read many things other than work in their fields;
  - do I really enjoy teaching? preparing lectures, exercises, group activities? creating rubrics? writing exams? correcting student papers and tests?
  - am I enthusiastic about spending hours and hours with students who need lots of help with things that seem simple to me? do I mind repeating myself?
  - is endless service on departmental, college, and university committees something I look forward to? do I derive satisfaction from working on standing committees, sub- and ad-hoc committees, task-forces? writing 50 page reports, self-analyses, surveys, overviews?
  - do I welcome a 70-hour work week and a limited personal life? It is hard to have a rounded personal life and be a successful academic at a research institution.

• **Is my record good enough, is my dissertation exciting enough, is my “package” polished enough, am I persistent enough to land that increasingly rare tenure-track job?** The answer is different for each person and should be based on intelligent and honest self-evaluation, not on how much passion you think you have for the prospect.

Some students will answer an enthusiastic and resounding YES! to this last question and embrace life in today’s academy, but others might answer, I HAD NO IDEA! LET ME OUT OF HERE! Some of the students who answered YES! will discover that landing an academic position in this climate is much harder than they thought it was going to be and will need to consider their options. So this document is intended for those who may be thinking that grad school is not what they thought it was, for those who think they may be happier changing their career path at this point, and for those who want to have a Plan B in their life strategy in case Plan A goes awry. Life moves very quickly, and the ability to reinvent or refocus yourself is an important one.

**Impediments to self-evaluation: the chimeras that haunt graduate students**

A number of issues and obstacles come into play for graduate students when they start thinking about the rest of their life beyond grad school and what that life might look like. These haunting issues are chimeras, illusions, but they can impede your ability to do an honest self-evaluation. Here they are:
• **Time invested.** Some graduate students feel that they have invested so much time and effort in learning a foreign language and a discipline that they simply must continue, come hell or high water, even if learning becomes not a challenging pleasure, but an onerous chore. It should not be that way: learning and scholarship may be demanding and difficult, but they should also be satisfying, pleasurable, and even exciting. Knowledge and the ability to learn are not burdens, but gifts -- gifts that enrich your life in any sphere and on many levels. They go with you wherever you go and whatever you do. You have not wasted your time in grad school, but enriched yourself and developed skills and knowledge that no one can take from you.

The “time invested” issue comes up in spades at dissertation time, when you seem so close to the end that you begin to believe that, if you don’t finish the degree, or if you finish the degree but don’t get an academic job, you will live with regret forever and it will blight your entire life. Actually, that doesn’t really happen. Things look different inside the vortex than outside it.

• **The comfy cocoon.** Some grad students are afraid to leave the comfy cocoon: the academy is a great place to hide out if you aren’t sure who you are, don’t know what you really want, or are generally afraid of life. Grad school allows you to postpone those decisions while you receive a subsistence income, hang out with other smart people, read books, and do some things you have always been pretty good at. But many exciting opportunities await outside the cocoon.

• **Inertia.** For many, grad school is just the natural next step in a lifetime of school. You do grade school, then high school, then college, then grad school. You’ve always been good in school. In fact, you realize that you don’t know anything else -- just school, and now you are in the twentieth grade. Perhaps you have never held a regular job and do not know that you have many other options. It may be stressful to stay in grad school and position yourself for an academic job, but it is even more stressful to think about leaving grad school because you do not know what awaits you outside the academy. This is not a small fear; this is a Big Fear. But you should not let fear devour you. It is never as bad as you fear.

**Rose-colored glasses.** Do you know what the life of a professor looks like? Graduate students tend to idealize and romanticize the lives of their professors. They see the advising session, the occasional bull session on life or literature, the classroom interaction -- but they do not see the constant committee work, the reports, the endless evaluations, the scheduling issues, the fight for space, the publish or perish mandate, conference work, personal and intellectual conflicts with colleagues, and an army of other responsibilities that ride roughshod over family and personal time (although similar things happen in any job).

In addition, the very nature of the profession is changing: teaching and research are very different now than they were even five years ago. Maybe you came in with a traditional view of the professoriate; maybe you had a professor you particularly admired and wanted to grow up and be just like her or him. But that is not where technology and globalisation and politics are taking our profession. Technology continues to radically change the way we teach, the way we communicate, and the way we do research; it has changed the face of education in two short decades. Technology makes it harder to live “the life of the mind” in any traditional sense. It has changed the job description of “professor.” So if you are looking for someplace to live the monastic life of the mind, you should look elsewhere.3

3 Read Nigel Thrift’s “What Does It Mean To Be an Academic?” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 6 January 2012
• **Ego, Passion, and Value.** Maybe your teachers since kindergarten have always told you how bright and clever you are, that you should go to graduate school because that is what people as bright and clever as you do. One respects one’s teachers, but your life should not be bound by their flattery or the flattery of others. Actually, what bright and clever people really do is things they are **passionate about** and things that they **value**; moreover, their passion and value need not be bound up in their day job. That word “value” is paramount, and you define it, not someone else. One of the most satisfying things in the world is knowing that your contribution to it is **valuable**. And that contribution could come in a number of ways, not all of them through your job. So don’t let your ego or other people's values get in your way as you travel your life's path.

“But I am passionate about the PhD!” “I am passionate about being a professor!” Yes, our culture urges us to “follow our passions,” to do what we “love,” because only if we are pursuing our passion are we going to be happy. That is laudable, but if we all followed our passions into the labor market, the world would no longer function. After all, how many people are “passionate” about garbage disposal, or plumbing, or assembling computers, or the grocery business? More important, I think, is to do what we **value**, and let what we are passionate about find another place in our lives. You may be **passionate** about literature, but that does not mean that your passion will extend to undertaking archival research, wrestling literary theory, or teaching methodology courses. Literary theory, all by itself, has killed a lot of love and passion over the years. Meanwhile, there is nothing to prevent a Ph.D. working in the university admissions office from reading a lot of literature, doing some academic writing on his or her own time, and even teaching a course in the specialization now and then.

• **Entitlement.** It is not unusual for a person who has just invested seven to ten years of their life in acquiring a Ph.D. to assume that they have “earned” a professorial position simply by finishing the race. But advanced education is no more an endurance test than it is vocational training. The Ph.D. demonstrates that you are persistent, but then so are other people. The real question is not “do you have a Ph.D.?” but “what can you offer with it?” Have you shaped an appropriate and desirable professional profile that will help you fill a needed niche in the field? The Ph.D. is a ticket that makes you eligible for one of the door prizes; it does not guarantee that a door prize will automatically be yours. Are you prepared to get on with your life if there is no door prize?

• **Fear of failure.** And now, the most evil, destructive, and pernicious fear of all: the fear of failure. Perhaps you fear that you have **failed** if you leave graduate school without a dissertation in hand or if you do something non-academic with your Ph.D. Too often faculty, educated themselves at research universities, communicate explicitly or implicitly that you have failed if you seek a position other than one at a research university, just like theirs. Perhaps it was a family expectation that you be a professor. Perhaps your family told you not to go to grad school, and if you leave academia you will have to hear them say, “I told you so.” But you have **not failed** if you decide that you are not where you want to be, not doing what you want to do, not happy in your work, not valuing what you do or seeing its significance; you have not failed if you decide instead to seek an alternative. In such situations, adults look at all of their failures...
options and cut their losses. You have failed only if you are making yourself miserable when you really do not have to be.

These impediments to clear thinking about your goals and your desires are chimeras: they are not real; they are mind-games that you play with yourself. Confronting these bugaboo issues and taking them out of your thinking will help you do what needs to be done: undertake some serious and honest self-analysis about who you really are, what you really want, what you really enjoy doing, what your skills, interests, abilities, priorities, and values are, and where you can best employ them to live your life well.

These comments are not intended to break your will, question your desire to persevere in grad school, or deflect you from pursuing an academic career with your PhD. After all, universities and colleges are still advertising tenure-track positions, and they need well-educated, hard-working, committed young academics to fill them. The number of post-docs is slowly increasing, and the Department provides mentoring and prep for those students who really cannot envision themselves doing anything else.

**Take-away points**

So: What are the take-away points?

- **Pursue your degree for the right reasons:** pursue it because you really want it, because it enriches you, because you value it, not because you do not know what else to do or think that it is a form of vocational training. Take the time to be reflective about your real goals in pursuing graduate education. Learn what “liberal education” really means.

- **Take control of your life’s path.** The faculty’s job is to clone themselves. Your job is to work toward the kind of professional and personal life you really want.

- **Become informed** about the larger issues confronting higher education, about structural and institutional issues, about the issues in your discipline, about the job market in the field, and how they affect you.

- **Consider all of the options available to people with advanced degrees,** and have a Plan B in your back pocket. Life happens. You can’t plan everything, and things do not always go according to plan.

- **Be realistic about the economic, political, cultural, and social issues of the world in which we find ourselves.** Make plans now to survive and thrive in that world.

- **Cultivate the twenty-first-century virtues of flexibility, adaptability, versatility.**