ARTICLES

How to Hire Better Professors

Warren Treadgold

Since the sixties, the students who receive doctorates in the humanities from American universities have greatly outnumbered the job openings for them. Meanwhile, in those same humanities, academic jargon, overspecialization, ideology, intellectual fads, and a general lack of direction have spread, in both writing and teaching. A causal connection between the poor job market and the intellectual trends may not be obvious. After all, if departments can choose among many candidates, they should be able to choose good ones; and the professors hired before 1970, who were less given to jargon, overspecialization, ideology, and fads, might have been expected to make reasonably good appointments. Certainly a number of factors have encouraged those fashions in humanities departments during this time. Yet the huge oversupply of candidates, by making a rational selection process almost impossible, has led to an irrational selection process that reinforces the fashions. This trend is unlikely to be reversed unless something is done about the way humanities professors are hired.

I

As nearly everyone familiar with it knows, the academic job market has been going badly wrong for the last thirty years. Receiving a Ph.D. in English, history, philosophy, or almost any other field outside the natural sciences no longer carries a reasonable expectation of an academic position. Advertisements for jobs in the humanities routinely attract more than a hundred applications apiece. Thousands of students, after spending five to ten years on graduate work and often going deeply into debt, have been forced to take positions unrelated to their degrees, or to scrape by for years on part-time and temporary jobs. This alone is a serious problem, certainly for those unfortunate enough to be the applicants. From time to time someone laments the situation, only to conclude that nothing much can be done.

The most obvious cause is the overproduction of humanities Ph.D.'s. Yet large numbers of students still enter graduate school, some because they are unaware of how bad the job market is—and probably still will be when they finish—and some because they know that the academic job market is a lottery

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that they may be able to manipulate successfully. And of course some do succeed in being hired; but they are not necessarily the best applicants, and the process through which they succeed is certainly not the best possible process.

Few people outside universities realize how haphazard academic hiring is. Many university courses are taught by graduate students and adjunct professors, often chosen almost at random from the many who are available. Even most tenure-track appointments, which usually lead to tenure, are made after only a cursory look at the candidates' academic credentials. Getting the Ph.D. itself is proof of endurance more than of distinction, since most graduate students pass their qualifying examinations, at least on the second try, and acceptance of dissertations is routine. Search committees simply assume that applicants with unfinished dissertations will have them accepted later, just as they assume (tellingly) that most accepted dissertations are unpublishable without years of additional work. A factor of enormous and usually decisive weight in job searches is the candidate's affability—or, to use a more popular term, "collegiality."

In fact, the current hiring process makes identifying the best-qualified candidate nearly impossible. Professors on search committees are almost never specialists in the field of the applicants they consider, because departments usually (and understandably) try to hire candidates with specialties not already represented in the department. Professors who are being replaced may know more about the advertised field but usually have little say in the search, on the argument that they won't have to live with the new hire and their colleagues will.

So each search committee must narrow down a long list of candidates, in an unfamiliar field, with few obvious guides. The applicants' grades in graduate school, scarcely any below A, mean so little that most committees rightly disregard them. Teaching evaluations, when the candidate has taught and chooses to submit them, may receive a bit more attention; but again, almost all of them are favorable, often because only the best ones are submitted by the candidate.

At the screening stage, most committees give most weight to letters of recommendation from the candidates' professors. This is almost always a mistake. Professors want to get their students jobs, as a matter of their own prestige if nothing else, and have little incentive to be frank, knowing that a department with an opening in their field will probably not be hiring again in that field soon. Almost all letters of recommendation are accordingly enthusiastic. The most effective ones include the most glowing praise, such as "my best student ever," or "one of the very finest students I have ever encountered." (And who can prove that the most recent student isn't always the best?)

Consequently applicants gain a major advantage if their teachers know how to write good letters, even though the letters tell much more about the recommender than about the student being recommended. The slightest res-

ervation in a letter frequently leads to eliminating the candidate, though most reservations merely mean that the professor doesn't know how the game is played. Professors, who usually write one standard letter per student, often make favorable comments that can be misinterpreted. A major research university may take praise for a student's teaching to imply unimpressive research, while elsewhere praise for a student's research may be taken to show a lack of interest in teaching.

Among all the laudatory letters, one from a professor whom someone on the committee has heard of will usually outweigh a letter from a professor not known to the committee, regardless of the candidates' merits. Academic celebrities, often those known for embracing the latest fashion ("on the cutting edge"), are therefore in a very good position to help any students they favor, whether or not the students are very good. If members of the committee contact the recommenders, usually the high praise is repeated with more emphasis, with results almost certainly unfair to excellent students of professors unknown, or not so favorably known, to members of the committee.

II

The best indicator of applicants' merits is almost always their written work, and particularly the work on which they spend most time and effort—their dissertations. Candidates who cannot write a clear and interesting dissertation are very unlikely to be clear or interesting in the classroom, where they will have much less time to prepare. Conversely, most candidates whose dissertations are clear and interesting can develop those qualities in the classroom without much trouble. A dissertation that makes a real contribution to the field is proof of ability to go on doing important work; and though many scholars later surpass their dissertations, very few go on from producing a poor dissertation to do worthwhile research or writing. The rare candidate who writes well but speaks badly can be identified easily in person, in the interviews and presentations that make up the final stage of the search process.

Many departments, however, will not even ask for a dissertation or writing sample, and ignore it if they get it. The main reason is the enormous amount of time all those pages take to read. The most conscientious members of search committees generally look only at the work of the applicants considered most promising, and read it rapidly. While this is a fairly sure way of eliminating poor candidates, and is the most practical way to identify the best candidates as things now are, it still is far from ideal if, as is almost always the case, the reader has little time and a limited knowledge of the subject.

Although good readers can tell whether a candidate's writing is clear, interesting, and intelligent, without much expertise or checking they cannot be sure how original the work is, or how well founded its conclusions are. Most non-specialists will be impressed by a clever and literate dissertation that merely

recasts what others have already said, or that arrives at striking conclusions that any specialist would know cannot possibly be right. So search committees usually prefer these types of dissertation to a pioneering effort that makes great progress but leaves a few loose ends, or a rock-solid study that leads to important but unglamorous conclusions. They tend to favor work that looks and sounds new, regardless of whether it really is new.

That scholarly work is so often judged by scholars unfamiliar with its subject is the main reason intellectual fads plague the humanities. Though few scholars will praise brilliant-sounding work they know to be wrong, many will praise brilliant-sounding work they feel unqualified to judge. The main advantage of writing on highly specialized subjects in specialized jargon while citing specialized literature is that those who cannot evaluate it properly will be awed by it. This advantage extends to heavily ideological work, which wins over scholars committed to its ideology and intimidates many others. Committees tend to underrate clear writing, which may seem less intriguing but is the best evidence of clear thought and a good predictor of good teaching.

Above all, committees tend to be impressed by a candidate's use of the sort of language, references, and thinking that they know have won approval in other work, regardless of whether the candidate arrives at any worthwhile or even coherent results. Many nonspecialists who skim writing samples quickly will choose a pretentious rehash of some ideas of Michel Foucault in preference to a complex, well-presented, and truly original argument. Without specialized knowledge, the committee members cannot easily tell whether the complex argument is right, but they can instantly tell that the rehash is fashionable.

Some search committees try to avoid the issue of quality by relying on quantity, preferring candidates who have published several articles or given several papers at conferences, even if the articles and papers are without merit and took time that might have been better spent on the dissertation. At the worst, too often in universities today, professors argue that all value judgments are arbitrary anyway, and since nothing is true or false and any idea is as good as any other, we should prefer the interesting-sounding ones, which naturally means the fashionable and ideological ones. (Note, however, that what sounds intriguing to professors will not necessarily interest undergraduates, especially if they find it incomprehensible.)

No wonder, then, that many hiring committees choose to interview a few applicants mostly on the basis of letters of recommendation. Interviews are then used to choose the candidate who impresses the department most, for often specious reasons—or, perhaps more accurately, to choose the candidate whom the department likes best personally. Since you can't tell who's good, why not choose the nicest person to have lunch with? (Unfortunately for hiring departments, some obnoxious people are smart and disciplined enough to seem affable for the length of an interview.) The boundless enthusiasm of

a department member who has found an ideological soulmate, or the deep disdain of a department member who finds a well-qualified candidate conventional and boring, tend to outweigh more measured feelings of other members of the department. And someone who questions the reigning academic fashions can be less comfortable to have around than someone who embraces them.

Many search committees have little interest in hiring well-qualified candidates anyway. Typical comments include "He wouldn't be happy here," "She wouldn't fit in here," or "We're primarily a teaching institution, and his main interest is obviously research." Even when such remarks reflect envy or a desire not to be outshone by a junior colleague, they make a point that is partly valid. Most brilliant researchers won't be happy or fit in well in a department where no one else is interested in research, with students who think of humanities courses as dull requirements standing in the way of a degree in business or computer science.

But this sort of argument is almost always taken too far. The department, in its eagerness to avoid hiring a passionately committed researcher, looks for an applicant with no interest in research whatever, which more often than not means little interest in academics (though often still an interest in academic fashions). The new hire will plod through the required courses, giving everyone high grades, telling jokes and stories unrelated to the subject, and confirming the opinion of future engineers and physical therapists that the humanities are boring and worthless. A better solution would be to hire first-rate if perhaps not stellar professors, who could keep each other company (and so be happy and fit in) and begin to raise their students' expectations. Of course, if a department truly feels that research is irrelevant to its mission, it should require not a mediocre dissertation but no dissertation at all—that is, no Ph.D.

No one planned or wanted the imbalance in today's academic job market. The original rise in production of doctorates to roughly the present level, though it may have brought lower standards, met a real demand for new professors when student enrollments exploded in the sixties. When enrollments stabilized in the seventies and the demand for professors fell, the production of doctorates failed to fall in proportion. Few people expected the crisis to remain so severe for so long; many predicted, wrongly, that it would end when a wave of professors retired in the eighties and nineties. Though by now anyone can see that the problem isn't about to go away by itself, the ways professors have found to live with it have become widely established and accepted—except by unemployed and embittered Ph.D.'s, who have little power or influence.

III

Among occasional proposals offered to improve matters, the most sensible ones aim at limiting the number of Ph.D.'s to roughly the number who can be

expected to find jobs. But after more than thirty years of the present dysfunctional job market, there are no signs that this is happening. Incentives to have doctoral programs are too strong. Graduate students can be used to teach for tiny stipends, reducing the numbers and workloads of regular faculty. Most universities and departments with doctoral programs are more prestigious, and better funded, than those without them. Though the prestige of departments that never found jobs for any of their students might suffer if others placed all of theirs, in today's academic job lottery almost every department has serious trouble with placement, and nearly all departments can place somebody somewhere.

Besides, for a single department to admit fewer students, as some have done, does scarcely anything to help. A uniform nationwide cut in admissions in every graduate department in the humanities might solve the problem; but who could impose such a cut on every university, public and private, in every state? And, since some departments are surely better than others, shouldn't the worst departments be cut more than the best? Yet the only available rankings are based mainly on the departments' reputations among outsiders, which in turn are based on very partial information and lag several years behind reality.

One proposal for change would actually make matters worse: to eliminate tenure. We may leave aside the question of whether universities would make this change retroactive, breaking their contractual obligations and proving their bad faith in later dealings with their professors. Ending tenure, or ceasing to offer it in the future, would bring a major transfer of power from faculty to administrators, resulting in one of two types of institution, both already to be found. The first has temporary and mostly part-time professors, hired by administrators with no relevant academic qualifications. The second type gives primary responsibility for hiring to full-time professors on renewable term contracts, who have every reason to hire new professors worse qualified than themselves, and to resist any dismissals. In both cases, with no formal review for tenure, dismissals turn out to be rarer than under the tenure system—except among critics of the administrators. Institutions of both kinds have, and deserve, the worst reputations in American higher education.

The spread of such places would probably not even reduce the oversupply of Ph.D.'s. It might drive some of the best students out of graduate school; but worse students would take their places, because, without quality control, college teaching is easy. Even a heavy teaching load isn't so bad if you don't need to prepare—especially by the most difficult form of preparation, serious research and publishable writing. High grades, light assignments, and a minimal talent for chatting amusingly can insure adequate teaching evaluations, if anyone bothers with them. Such an institution's salaries and tuition can naturally be low. On the other hand, if price is all and quality is of no concern, students can buy degrees from a diploma mill even more cheaply—or, easiest and cheapest, do without a degree.

Given the enormous oversupply of doctorates, hiring departments cannot be expected by themselves to do much better than they do in identifying the best candidates. The departments simply lack the time and expertise to evaluate all those applications properly. Many of them also lack a strong incentive to hire well-qualified applicants, and may even have an incentive to hire poorly qualified applicants. Most incentives that now exist encourage hiring fashionable candidates, who will enhance the department's reputation, or affable candidates, who will make their colleagues feel comfortable. Knowledgeable graduate advisers know all of this, and will coach their best students to make them look like what the hiring committees want. (Hence the despairing observation of a senior member of the National Association of Scholars that today's top graduate students, the ones most likely to succeed, uniformly follow the latest academic fads.) This situation will continue until candidates can be evaluated by people with the necessary time and expertise.

IV

The proposal I suggest here might just be feasible, and if put into effect would probably redress the balance in the job market and improve both academic hiring and higher education. This is a nationwide system of rating new doctoral dissertations in the humanities by a National Humanities Dissertation Board. The main prerequisite would be an act of Congress providing funding for the Board and requiring every university receiving federal funds—that is, practically every university—to submit to the Board a copy of every doctoral dissertation accepted in the humanities. The National Endowment for the Humanities might seem the logical place for such a Board, but it could also be attached to the Library of Congress.

The Board would recruit as readers a pool of senior scholars, including many retired professors, with a record of important research in each discipline of the humanities. The Board's staff could call for volunteers who had, let us say, reached the rank of full professor and published at least 300 pages in books with reputable scholarly presses (excluding vanity presses) or in refereed scholarly articles. The staff, after deleting from the dissertations anything likely to identify their authors, would mail copies to three qualified readers not thanked or strongly praised or criticized in the dissertation (and not affiliated with the institution where the dissertation was submitted).

Following guidelines set out by the Board, the readers would rate each dissertation as acceptable or unacceptable, then rate the acceptable dissertations on a numerical scale (say from 1 to 100), evaluating their originality, accuracy, cogency of analysis, quality of writing, and importance for scholarship (perhaps with a maximum of 20 points for each of these five). The stated ideal should be to rate members of any school of thought without either dismissing their thinking out of hand or taking it for granted. In other words, Marxists, Straussians, Poststructuralists, and others would be rated on their ability to

address all readers, not just their fellow partisans. Though this ideal would in certain cases be difficult to realize, it should not be impossible, except for referees who think that truth and excellence are determined by ideology alone.

Some provision should be made to check any ratings that diverged by more than a specified margin (perhaps 5 points), by submitting the disputed dissertations either to a review committee for the relevant discipline (such as political science or art history) or when appropriate to an interdisciplinary review committee. Review committees would be needed in any case to assess readers' reports of possible plagiarism or dishonesty and, if such charges proved justified, to notify the university that awarded the degree in the hope that it would be revoked. (Most professors will realize after a moment's reflection that a certain amount of plagiarism and dishonesty would be discovered, and that this is another reason for thinking such a board is needed.)

The Board could then use an average of the readers' scores to assign dissertations to groups, the size of which would be determined by the availability of jobs in the relevant discipline. For example, Groups I through VI could each have numbers equal to about one-fifth of the estimated number of tenure-track assistant professorships available for the following year. (Usually an average of the number of jobs advertised in each of the previous five years would do as an estimate.) Group VI, though in excess of the estimated number of jobs, would allow for mismatches between candidates and positions, candidates taking non-academic jobs, and a general margin for error. All the other minimally acceptable dissertations would be assigned to a Group VII. In a properly balanced job market, no dissertations at all should be left over for Group VII.

Each year, no later than the beginning of December, before most candidates are screened and job interviews are arranged, the Board would publish a report on all the dissertations it had received in the year ending the previous June, when most degrees are awarded. This report would include for each field in the humanities the seven rank groups plus the "unacceptable" category, with the names of the authors, their dissertation titles, and their universities.

V

Although no one would need to pay any attention to these rankings, I expect they would attract wide interest. They should give good indications of what quality of students each department was producing. Students applying to graduate school would have valuable information about the training they would receive and their job prospects afterward. By the end of the academic year, rankings of new hires could be compiled that would give a good idea of how rigorous most departments had been in their hiring. The news media and guides to colleges and universities could then assess and publish the re-

sults. A department that graduated and hired students with dissertations ranked I, II, and III would then look better than a department that graduated and hired students with dissertations ranked VI, VII, and unacceptable.

No doubt the rankings of individual dissertations would fall short of total reliability. While some referees would be influenced by ideology, this problem could be minimized by alert and careful administration, including clear guidelines on the evaluation forms and conscientious intervention by the review committees in disputed cases. Most of the many retired professors among the referees would in any case be less ideological than younger faculty. Fortunately, even many quite dogmatic professors retain a basic sense of fairness, and are less likely to be guided by ideology in evaluating work within their specialty than in hiring outside their specialty in a departmental search. The whole system, with its declared emphasis on ranking by quality, should put on the defensive anyone who considers quality a meaningless concept.

In most cases, I suspect, the final rankings would reflect a consensus among the evaluators that varied by no more than one rank group—for example, disagreement would be between ranking in Group III or Group IV rather than between ranking in Group II or Group V. These rankings would actually let search committees look more closely at applicants' credentials than is possible now, because eliminating authors of the lowest-ranked dissertations would reduce the applications to a number that could be examined with some care. The real question is not whether the rankings would be perfect—they wouldn't—but whether they would be better than what we have now, when nearly all positions are filled after much less careful consideration of any credentials.

As it became clear which departments were producing substandard dissertations, the number of doctoral programs and the number of Ph.D.'s should begin to fall, as some programs became more selective and the worst ones were abolished by embarrassed administrators and skeptical state legislatures. Dissertations, and the supervision of dissertations, should improve. Hiring should improve in most places, and where it didn't, the rankings would show which departments were hiring inferior candidates. There should also be less hiring of students who had not yet received their degrees, as departments began to prefer candidates whose dissertations were completed and ranked. Universities might then adopt a policy of offering one-year positions to almost all of their own new Ph.D.'s, using them to replace adjunct or visiting professors. The number of adjunct and visiting professors should decline, as those with better-ranked dissertations found tenure-track jobs and the others understood their prospects and left the profession. Finally, the amount of jargon, ideology, faddishness, and overspecialization in academic writing should decrease, as good work without such characteristics came to be encouraged and recognized.

Despite widely felt dismay at the persistent imbalance in the job market, the proposal outlined here would inevitably draw opposition. Many professors

would be uncomfortable at being rated, even indirectly through the dissertations they supervised. Some would invoke the usual arguments against hiring well-qualified candidates ("They wouldn't be happy here"). Some others would oppose a system that might be less favorable to their students or to their ideological preferences. Some administrators, secretly pleased with a buyer's market in Ph.D.'s that keeps academic salaries low, would probably resist any effort to bring the market into balance. As with every attempt to improve American education at any level, the charge of elitism would be indignantly raised.

If elitism only means better education, this proposal can fairly be termed elitist. But the charge would be bogus if it implied that an undue advantage would go to whites rather than minorities, to men rather than women, or to students from prestigious universities rather than those from less prestigious ones. Under the rating system proposed here, the great majority of evaluators would not be able to identify the race, sex, or university of the authors of the dissertations they rated. Since critics would still probably charge that the system was somehow biased, those who administered it would always need to be ready to explain how it worked, to investigate complaints, and to make improvements. In disputed cases, the dissertations themselves and the rating sheets (minus the names of the referees) should be made public and discussed frankly.

Nothing would prevent any department from discounting or disregarding the rankings and hiring on any other basis it chose, including race or sex. Yet departments might have trouble justifying such practices as hiring a female or minority candidate with a mediocre dissertation when other female or minority candidates with much better dissertations were applying. In the absence of an overall ranking of candidates by qualifications, hiring any minimally qualified female or minority candidate can be defended as enhancing diversity, and is hard to attack on grounds of compromising quality. Since it is always easier to tell who is black or female than to tell who is good, many universities have been winning praise for concentrating on measurable diversity rather than unmeasured quality.

Those aware of how politicized American universities have become may reasonably fear that such a Board would also become politicized. To some extent that would probably be inevitable. The question, again, is not whether the Board would be perfect, but whether it would improve the system of academic hiring. Now academic hiring takes place behind closed doors through a haphazard process that is seldom scrutinized by anyone. A public Board overseen by the President and Congress would need to be prepared to defend its work, in both general terms and individual cases, to critics with a wide spectrum of views. In the long run, the Board could not afford to veer too far to the left or right, or to take any consistent position that would be unacceptable to the majority of the electorate. The Board would of course need to work with professors, who are typically well to the left of the general public. Yet eliciting the informed and considered opinions of senior or retired pro-

fessors can scarcely be more dangerous, or more likely to lead to politicized hiring, than leaving hiring to unaided and unscrutinized nonspecialists overwhelmed by masses of applications.

No other means of evaluating aspiring professors is nearly as reliable as rating their dissertations, which have long been the principal requirements for a doctorate in the humanities. If universities are going to demand that their graduate students spend years of hard work writing dissertations, the universities should care how good those dissertations are, and should hire candidates who have written the best dissertations in preference to those who have written worse ones. At the very least, the public should be told which institutions that award doctorates, or require their professors to have them, are indifferent to what those doctorates mean. Students, parents, taxpayers, and even Ph.D.'s deserve no less.

At Ohio State University, Patty Cunningham and German Trejo created an Undergraduate Student Government Underrepresented Constituency Committee, the goal of which, according to Miss Cunningham, was to "make the university smaller for underrepresented students by addressing their needs and concerns."

Committee Description

In order to reach the core of our diversity initiative, we will foster knowledge, understanding, empathy and utilization between distinct groups and individuals on campus. This initiative will transcend the student body and include staff, faculty and general community members. This approach will garner a true sense of cultural exchange and create a consistent, committed and passionate advocacy group that will serve the students' needs, not ulterior personal motives. "We must understand the meaning of diversity by pursuing to assess ""otherness"", or those human qualities that are different from our own and outside group"

Committee Goals

When necessary we will maintain a proactive approach toward diversity, acknowledging that even in today's student environment ableism, ageism, androcentrism, classism, ethnocentrism, eurocentrism, heterosexism, racism and sexism, etc. are rampant and need to be addressed and counteracted with educational tactics initiated by our committee and/or other supporting parties. We will recognize all of the domestic and international underrepresented and oppressed groups on campus, including: [an exhaustive list follows].