No More Plan B
A Very Modest Proposal for Graduate Programs in History
By Anthony T. Grafton and Jim Grossman

Entering graduate students file in. They're nervous, they're eager, they don't know quite what to expect. If the director of graduate studies does the job well, the annual orientation ritual will nourish their anticipation, while allaying their anxieties. Still, out of a sense of responsibility, faculty should keep one source of reasonable trepidation on the table: the job market. It is what it is, and entering students need to enter with their eyes open to it.

But open to what? And what is the "it" that is the job market for historians? The academy alone? That is what we say when we offer statistics on placement. That is what we say when the department placement officer proffers the annual warning that ye who enter here do so at your own peril. Most orientations include a reference—in the best cases even some focus—on "alternatives." But the default, the hope, the gold ring, is the tenure-track position.

A curious irony. On the one hand, the intellectual experience that awaits our students is probably richer now than it has ever been in the past. Traditional core fields like political and diplomatic history are experiencing revivals, new fields like transnational history are expanding, and new methods are being forged and honed. The old economy of scarcity that limited research in the early years of graduate school to the stacks of one's own university library has made way for a digital Land of Cockaigne. Verbal, visual, and aural sources from dozens of cultures crowd the screen of anyone enrolled at a university. Meanwhile graduate conferences and social media enable students to tap into national and international networks long before they complete their dissertations, and give them vital experience in presenting their work to multiple audiences. Holders of new doctorates leave their graduate schools in possession of research experience and technical skills that were undreamt of 10 years ago.

On the other hand, this breadth and range, this openness to new ways of thinking and working, somehow disappear when we consider our students' careers. We don't tell them on that first day, "there are many ways to be a historian; there are many ways to apply what you've learned to a career." This matters for two
reasons, not necessarily in any order. First, it ignores the facts of academic employment; second, it pushes talented scholars into narrow channels, and makes it less likely that they will take schooled historical thinking with them into a wide range of employment sectors.

For all their energy and learning, their range and experience, many of these students will not find tenure-track positions teaching history in colleges and universities. In 2009–10 the number of jobs posted with the AHA fell 29.4 per cent, from 806 to 569, while 989 PhDs were conferred. This is hardly the first time these two numbers have been far apart. In 1972, the first year for which accurate statistics exist, almost 1,200 new PhDs competed for just over 600 new teaching jobs. Except for two short periods in the late 1980s and the 2000s, the number of openings in history departments has consistently fallen short, sometimes by a very wide margin, of the number of doctorates awarded. As public contributions to higher education shrink, state budgets contract, and a lagging economy takes its toll on endowments and family incomes, there is little reason to expect the demand for tenure-track faculty to expand.

As many observers have noted, this is not a transient "crisis." It's the situation we have lived with for two generations. And it's not likely to change for the better, unless someone figures out how to work magic on the university budgets that lead administrators to opt for flexible, contingent positions rather than tenure-track jobs. AHA supports and joins in efforts to convert contingent to tenure-track jobs—but it's unrealistic to expect these to pay off on a large scale. We owe it to our students and to our profession to think more broadly.

Yet graduate programs have proved achingly reluctant to see the world as it is. For all the innovation in the subjects and methods of history, the goal of the training remains the same: to produce more professors; the unchanged language of supervisors and students reflects this. We tell students that there are "alternatives" to academic careers. We warn them to develop a "plan B" in case they do not find a teaching post. And the very words in which we couch this useful advice make clear how much we hope they will not have to follow it—and suggest, to many of them, that if they do have to settle for employment outside the academy, they should crawl off home and gnaw their arms off.

We should not be surprised when students internalize our attitudes (implicit or explicit) and assume that the "best" students will be professors and that for everyone else... well, "there's always public history." Even those who happily accept jobs at secondary schools, for example, describe themselves as "leaving the academy" or "leaving the historical profession." Even worse, many of our students who actually do leave the historical profession, and take what they've learned in graduate school to the business world, are seen as having crossed the
line from the light of humanistic inquiry into the darkness of grubby capitalism—as if the life of scholarship were somehow exempt from impure motives and bitter competition.

This narrow perspective does our students a disservice. Why not tell our students, from the beginning, that a PhD in history opens a broad range of doors? As historians, let's begin with some facts. Holders of doctorates in history occupy, or have recently occupied, a dizzying array of positions outside the academy: historical adviser to the Chief of Staff of the Army, Speaker of the House of Representatives, the Chief of Staff to the Speaker of the House of Representatives, museum curators, archivists, historians in national parks, investment bankers, international business consultants, high school teachers, community college teachers, foundation officers, editors, journalists, policy analysts at think tanks (yes, an entry-level position). The skills that these historians mastered as graduate students—doing research; conceptualizing relationships between structure, agency, and culture; combining research and analysis to present arguments with clarity and economy; knowing how to plan and carry out long-term projects—remain vital in their daily work. In many organizations outside the academy, a doctorate is a vital asset for those who want to rise above the entry level.

The idea that a doctorate in history prepares one only, or primarily, to teach in a college or university is as contingent as any other, not only historically but also geographically. In Germany—the country that gave us the research university—doctorates in history and similar fields have traditionally been considered appropriate preparation for jobs in publishing, media, business, and politics. A first step towards adjusting graduate education to occupational realities would be to change our attitudes and our language, to make clear to students entering programs in history that we are offering them education that we believe in, not just as reproductions of ourselves, but also as contributors to public culture and even the private sector.

A second, and much bigger, step would be to examine the training we offer, and work out how to preserve its best traditional qualities while adding new options. If we tell new students that a history PhD opens many doors, we need to broaden the curriculum to ensure that we're telling the truth. If the policy arena offers opportunities, and we think it does, then interested students need some space (and encouragement) to take courses in statistics, economics, or public policy. Accounting, acting, graphic design, advanced language training: students thinking at once creatively and pragmatically have all sorts of options at our research universities. And of course there's the whole exploding realm of digital history and humanities, and the range of skills required to practice them.
Yes, time is a problem. It already takes a long time—a very long time—to obtain a doctorate in history. We don't advocate narrowing the historical work that constitutes graduate education in history. Nor do we agree with the well-meaning observers who suggest that graduate training in humanities fields could be made less onerous, and attrition reduced, by easing the requirements: for example, by cutting the dissertation down from the grub out of which a book should emerge into three or more articles that can be researched and written in one to two years. We leave the feasibility of shorter dissertations in other humanities disciplines for our colleagues to assess. In history, the dissertation is the core of the experience. It's in the course of research that historians firm up their mastery of languages and research methods, archives and arguments; and it's while writing that they learn how to corral a vast amount of information, give it a coherent form, and write it up in a way accessible to non-specialists. Most students learn the challenges and satisfaction associated with extended narrative and/or complex analysis only at this final stage.

Instead of cutting down the dissertation, departments need to find ways of keeping dissertation writers attuned to the full range of opportunities that their work opens. Why not incorporate preparation for the future into the later years of doctoral training? This might be the time for an additional course or two, adventures into new realms of knowledge that build skills for diverse careers. That such diversification offers an antidote to melancholy and writer's block is merely a bonus, even more so if these explorations can also add texture or new insights to a dissertation. Departments might also consider workshops that explore the world of work, bring in speakers from government and other areas where many historians find jobs, and mobilize their networks of contacts as advisers for their students. Internships could provide even deeper experience, although care would have to be taken to integrate them into dissertation writing calendars.

Most important is that we make clear to all students that they will enjoy their advisors' and their departments' unequivocal support, whether they seek to teach at college or university level, join a non-profit agency or head off into business or government. We teach our students to question received ideas and to criticize inherited terminologies and obsolete assumptions. It's past time that we began applying these lessons ourselves.

—Anthony Grafton (Princeton Univ.) is the president of the AHA. —Jim Grossman is the executive director of the AHA.

Copyright © American Historical Association