

Learning to Earning | Higher Education and the Changing Job Market Session Summary

**Civic Ballroom
Sheraton Centre Toronto
123 Queen Street West, Toronto, M5H 2M9**

Thanks to Ian Hartlen and Adrian Philp, recent graduates from the Master of Public Policy Program at the University of Toronto, for their work in summarizing the conference.

Day One | Thursday, November 1, 2012

Session 4B | The graduate student experience

Facilitator: Miriam Kramer, OCAD University

Marilyn Rose, Brock University

What are universities and colleges doing to provide professional development for graduate students? Results indicate that there is a great deal being done, and there are programs in place across the country, but in varying degrees and intensity.

Employers consistently report that students will not be prepared for their professional life unless they graduate from a professional program, but most students do have labour market skills. The problem is simply that they too often do not know how to present them. The soft skills acquired in most programs (critical thinking, literacy, professional presentation, etc.) are reported as some of the most frequently requested credentials, but students struggle to present themselves as market ready.

Students therefore, need the opportunity to have access to professional development.

But, it takes a village to do this kind of programming. We need partnerships with other institutions and opportunities to work one-on-one with mentors.

Looking to programs that are currently in place, there are four different models identified:

- Programs with few graduate programs/students. Little is being offered, but the general programs try to accommodate graduates.
- Programs where work is being done, but it is disparate; no coordination of information.
- Institutions with professional development committees who come together to inform one another, to partner, and work toward ensuring their bases are covered. Dean of graduate studies is usually involved.
- Coordinated and branded professional development programs run out of or through the faculty of graduate studies. Dean is a prime organizer.

We need real change on campuses across the province. The overall message is not that it is the skills per se that matter, but the attitude that graduate studies can move you along as a professional.

Melonie Fullick, York University

There is a lack of research on the PhD in Canada. There is an opinion that we have “too many,” but really it is a matter of mismatches.

What are the differences between government goals for education and PhD realities? There is a lot of focus on one particular outcome for PhD students, but what happens to the people who don't become professors?

We need to confront the socialization processes that are at work in our PhD programs. We need to be more explicit about what one has to do in order to be a tenure track professor, and reassess what academic culture is teaching graduate students about what success is. There seems to be a deeply ingrained notion that anyone in a PhD who decides to pursue a non-academic career has somehow fallen short of what they were capable of.

Ultimately, there is a huge lack of clarity in the relationships between students and universities in this area. More research is therefore required, particularly qualitative. We need to analyze how our academic culture perpetuates itself and how these socialization processes play out in our universities.

Andrew Potter, Ottawa Citizen

Andrew began as a doctoral student in philosophy but instead of pursuing an academic career, he found work in journalism and is now editor of the Ottawa Citizen. However, how he ended up in his career had nothing to do with any advice he received in graduate school. In fact, while still studying, he had taken a volunteer position writing for the university paper, but received a formal warning from his supervisor that he was “losing focus” in his studies.

Moreover, despite being, by all accounts, a success, Andrew has not been contacted by the department to share his story with current doctoral students. Instead, it seems many departments are intent on perpetuating the traditional model of graduate education, wishing only to prepare students for a career in academia.

This vision of a PhD education is however increasingly unrealistic for our students and our institutions. While graduate student enrolment is increasing, faculty hires of those capable of supervising dissertations has declined. It is therefore imperative that we rethink the culture of our graduate programs and provide more transparency about their labour market outcomes.

We need to address this widening gap between the culture and expectations of doctoral committees and the changing realities of a PhD education.