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A Conversation With Leonard Cassuto on 'The Graduate School Mess'

"We are perpetuating a culture that mistreats graduate students"

By Rebecca Schuman NOVEMBER 08, 2015



Tim Foley for The Chronicle

Leonard Cassuto is mad as hell about the state of graduate study in the United States, and he's not going to take it anymore. Or, all right, he's passionately concerned, and he hopes that his new book, *The Graduate School Mess*, will inspire directors of American Ph.D. programs to stop and think about what is and isn't working.

Hint: Treating the tenure-track market as if the very brief postwar hiring boom is the norm isn't

working. Privileging graduate students who aspire to become clones of their advisers isn't working. Coursework that focuses too much on the professors' hyperspecialized scholarly interests, and not enough on the breadth of knowledge that students need, isn't working. And pleading ignorance about how to prepare students for a multitude of careers? That definitely isn't working.

I recently spoke with Cassuto over email about the "mess" he so eloquently describes, about the long-entrenched contributors to it, and about how best to grab a broom and start cleaning. (Our conversation has been edited here for length and clarity.)

The book's excellent history of graduate admissions points to one of the largest and most all-encompassing problems in doctoral programs today: They're trapped in the 1950s, in more ways than one. (A few examples: the inherent conservatism that favors admission and cultivation of normative students, the elevation of the research professorship, etc.) What are some of the best ways out of the Eisenhower era?

Cassuto: There's a phrase that I like called "holistic admissions." It means looking at the whole candidate, and then assessing that candidate in relation to his or her own goals, not the professor's. Holistic admissions takes more time — for one thing, you can't begin with the GRE score to see if it makes a cutoff. I tell a story in *The Graduate School Mess* of how I admitted a student without realizing that I was responding to the way I thought she resembled me. When she was about to finish, she told me that her career goal from the beginning had been to teach at a community college. I thought back to when I first read her folder and had to admit the uncomfortable truth that I might have been prejudiced against her if she had stated that goal when she was applying.

Your layout of a better way to structure graduate programs (e.g., coursework that works with students and not against them; comprehensives that work for them in addition to the other way around) sounds eerily familiar. My own program at the University of California at Irvine was restructured to do exactly this shortly after I came aboard. I was actually the first student to do the "new" comprehensives, which consisted of a portfolio of four "sample syllabi" for German language and literature courses. I used almost every single one of those sample syllabi (watered down for undergrads) in the four years I taught. And I loved the way my program was structured. And yet — very few of my colleagues have gotten ladder-level jobs since 2007 (that's going on nine years), and most of us left the field after many years of heartbreak on the market. Now my program's in danger of being closed down entirely.

Cassuto: I have a one-word answer: shame.

Well, let me add a few more words. We are perpetuating a culture that mistreats graduate students. It teaches them to want jobs that are rare, and teaches them that *not* to get those jobs constitutes some kind of moral failure. Shame on us all — and shame can be a motivator. Change will happen most smoothly if it occurs from the top down. For example, I write in the book about some auspicious policies being discussed -at Stanford University (I've also written about [those policies](#) for *The Chronicle*), and if Stanford adopted them, it would give cover to some other places that aspire to become Stanford.

But it doesn't all have to happen first at the Harvards and the Stanfords. Vanderbilt University, for example, has a very fast time-to-degree. It supports doctoral students very well for five years, doesn't make them teach too much, and promises them an extra year as a lecturer if they finish in that time. I don't want to sound Panglossian about this — state universities particularly need the money that they save by having graduate students teach lots of courses, rather than faculty — but there's a lot more motivation to try new things than there was even 10 years ago. In the book's two most important pages (she said modestly), you write about me — specifically about my ["quit lit" account](#) of my doctoral experiences. You write: "Schuman's adviser is conspicuously absent from her personal account, and that's a telling lacuna." I'd like to clarify: I left my adviser — whom I adore — out of my "quit lit" to protect him from involuntary association

with me. He was actually very proud of me when I decided to leave academe and go public about it. But as you suspected, he definitely didn't help me prepare for any sort of alternative job search while I was finishing the diss. I'm sure he would say that this is because being a professor in a Ph.D. program doesn't train one for that sort of thing. I loved your response — that faculty, as "professional learners," should suck it up and learn what they need to about other job markets for their doctoral students.

Cassuto: I'm continually amazed that teachers of graduate school speak in public as some of our most eloquent defenders of the liberal arts, and then teach graduate school in liberal-arts fields as though it were some kind of rarefied professional school contoured to prepare people for the kinds of research-intensive jobs that only a small number of them will get. School should prepare people for the kinds of pursuits that await them when they're finished with it. By that logic, graduate school is preparing only a small number of them.

My focus in *The Graduate School Mess* is on the humanities, but these are the facts in a large number of nonhumanities fields as well. We need to pay attention to what our students are going to do, not pretend that they're all going to do something we know that most of them will not. And we need to offer them an education that is consistent with reality.

I also enjoyed the section about actually advising the workhorse aspect of writing the dissertation. In my work as a dissertation coach, I can't tell you how many of my clients have been wounded by their advisers' critique when it wasn't balanced with some encouragement. I think what a lot of advisers (and dissertation writers!) don't realize is that a diss is 15 percent knowing your subject, and then the remaining 85 percent is project management and manuscript preparation — neither of which is currently taught in grad school. You recommend a well-integrated course (or section) on research methods. Does this extend to the dissertation? Cassuto: One of the things you learn while writing a dissertation is how to write something big and involved. That is, as you say, project management. There's a way that advisers have always known this, I think — because one of the requirements for advising a dissertation is having written one yourself — but not all of us act on that knowledge.

Those of us who teach writing understand that it's collaborative work. Dissertation writers particularly need collaboration, in part because they risk disappearing down the mine shaft of their own specialization. In my travels across American academic earth in recent years, I see more dissertation seminars and writing groups than I used to. I hope it's a real trend and not a trick of my eye.

In a section of your book on advising, you relate a conversation with a potential advisee. You brought up her hypothetical choice to have a family as a positive example of your intent to be supportive despite academe's patriarchal structure, and as a positive example of how to be a human being in your advisees' lives. As a female (ex-)academic (who has written [about work-life issues](#) and who has a new baby), I balked a little at that anecdote. Do you also talk to your male students about the balance between dissertating and family life?

Cassuto: I certainly do talk to my male grad students about the work-life balance. Some of them have babies, too. But because men can more often afford to postpone that decision, more of them do. Still, the subject comes up.

I never mean for it to be a big deal — only an acknowledgment that this thing exists and that we can talk about if the student wishes. I sometimes tell my advisees the story of how I wrote my own dissertation, setting aside one day a week during my teaching terms with the goal of producing three pages a day, and working Monday through Friday during the summer with the same target.

I absolutely agree with your call for transparency in placement records of graduate departments. But who could be in charge of this transparency?

Cassuto: More and more departments are compiling their lists of student outcomes because more and more prospective graduate students are demanding to see that information as they consider whether to enroll. It would be nice if there were a master list of graduate-student career outcomes that everyone felt committed to keeping up to date, but I'm not sure that's necessary. As long as there is steady demand for the numbers by informed prospective students, any program that wants to compete for those students will have to maintain its own lists and make them easily available. Programs with attractive records — which indicates good advising, among other things — will advertise them prominently.

I think that market pressures are pushing things in the right direction right now, and with the Mellon Foundation's support of [a joint MLA/AHA project](#) to find Ph.D.s who got their degrees between 1998 and 2009, I think that the next few years are going to see a veritable data explosion. And it'll be to students' benefit.

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