

bulletin

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THE VOCATIONAL CRISIS: SYMPTOM OF A DEEPER ILLNESS

Walter H. Capps
University of California, Santa Barbara, CA 93106

From a number of vantage points, graduate education in the humanities is coming under strong criticism. Some of the criticism issues from outside sources. Much of it is stimulated by internal confusions and frustrations. The crisis is heightened by the fact that the situation is bound to grow worse before it can become much better.

The impetus has come from concern about employment. At a recent Washington conference on "alternate vocations for humanists," sponsored by the National Endowment for the Humanities, it was reported that only 10 per cent of those persons currently working toward PhD degrees in the humanities can expect to find teaching positions after they complete their degree requirements. Over 30 per cent of those who have received doctorates in the past three or four years are without academic positions. And as the era of the early- and mid-80s approaches, these bleak figures turn into dire projections: faculty positions will become even fewer.

It is clear that many doctoral candidates are aware of the paucity of vocational opportunities. The subject is also becoming interesting to several "think tanks" or research institutions, among these, the Brookings Institute, the Higher Education Research Institute, and the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions. It has also been treated in numer-

ous articles in *Change*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and in *Saturday Review*, as well as in the series of books published by Jossey-Bass. The crisis has spawned some book-length studies, among which are Walter Kaufmann's *The Future of the Humanities* (1977), Mooney and Stuber's *Opening Up the Options* (1977), and (by extension) the recent issues of *Daedalus* on changing patterns of scholarship. It has also come to the attention of some of the leading foundations and extramural funding agencies, notably the Rockefeller Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Similarly, the professional societies are beginning to awaken to the seriousness of the matter. The American Historical Association is launching a major recuperative effort. The American Philosophical Association is also seeking ways to respond. And within the field of religious studies, both the American Academy of Religion and the Council on the Study of Religion have taken some initial steps and have declared an intention to approach the problem more systematically.

But with few exceptions (the SUNY system is a notable example) the crisis seems not to have generated thorough program analysis and reassessment within the schools. In most institutions, graduate programs are produced rather simply from the translation of an area of legitimate intellectual inquiry into a set of courses. After being established, these programs compete with one another for support funds, faculty positions, campus prestige, and national visibility; expansions on any of these fronts are taken as signs of success. Then, the future of the enterprises becomes dependent upon the vicissitudes of student interest, faculty enthusiasm, and the good will of the school's administrators.

Certainly, the employment factor is chief catalyst of the present crisis. But it may simply be symptomatic of a deeper illness. The evidence shows that, on the whole, the structure of graduate education in the humanities is very stereotyped: the majority of programs aspire to emulate the very finest programs in the venerable universities. Certainly this is a commendable objective, particularly if judged by the same prestigious criteria. But the tendency has an assortment of counterproductive sides. For one, graduate education seems to be directed toward training persons to become research professors in the very few graduate schools in which such opportunities exist. Students are set on a course toward vocational situations that do not and will not exist. It may very well be that less ambitious, more specifically tailored, and culturally and geographically sensitive programs would have more significant use in the longer run. But any innova-

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THOSE WHO HAVE obtained their first academic employment in the last few years can surely tell stories of colleagues who wall-papered their apartments with letters of rejection. Whether on quality stationery with embossed insignia or in crudely dittoed missives, the print had the same familiar ring: "Your application will be kept on file should something turn up in the future," or "Though your credentials are impeccable, we regret to say they do not coincide with our present needs." Recognizing the gravity and near-epidemic proportions of this problem, the AAR and the SBL sponsored a consultation on alternatives to teaching employment at their annual meeting in San Francisco last December. At the same time the CSR has been pursuing the question along similar lines but seeking to relate it also to the question of the nature of graduate and undergraduate education.

For this summer issue we have chosen to publish some of the addresses from the AAR/SBL consultation as well as some reflections issuing from the work of the CSR. Walter Capps, in his capacity as President of the CSR and as a professor in graduate studies, provides an overview for these articles by situating the vocational crisis in a larger context. Mildred Culp describes the persistence needed to overcome the difficulties and disappointments in finding, or even

creating, the first job. Robert Spivey uses his background as dean of a college of arts and sciences to discuss the prospects of finding employment in secondary teaching in public schools. Finally, as librarian and journalist respectively, John Batsel and John Dart highlight the special competencies needed in finding employment in those areas.

The reasons for the lack of academic job openings are well known and include the following factors. *Students*: while there will be fewer rather than more undergraduate students in the future, there are now (and will be) more graduate students than there are openings for professors. *Chairpersons*: some continue to aggravate the situation by pleading for the expansion of existing programs, while those who recognize the problem are caught in the discomfort of declining budgets and the red tape of federal regulations. *Placement mechanisms*: in spite of *TOIL* and well-placed friends, very few graduates find that specific job requirements mesh neatly with their graduate course work. *Tenure*: this feature is so highly cherished by professors that they can hardly be expected to follow the lead of manufacturers of light bulbs, tooth brushes, appliances, and automobiles and view built-in obsolescence as a thing to be desired rather than lamented.

What can be done? Besides the individual efforts of students to sniff out or create jobs, along the lines outlined in the articles in this issue, the work of the AAR, SBL, and CSR can be expected to bear some fruit in the gathering and disseminating of more (and more specific) data on what the Higher Education Research Institute has called "occupational mobility and nontraditional markets for PhDs." It is to be hoped that these efforts will not only ascertain various alternative career paths but also identify new markets for future graduates, prepare recommendations for revision of current doctoral training programs, and develop information systems to facilitate entry into new, fulfilling, and productive careers. Perhaps, against all odds, such a study might even find that many recent graduates are well-paid and satisfied in their employment. If so, it hardly matters why they were encouraged to pursue their alternative careers, or what extra training they needed.

In the meantime, I have to get going. You see, the college needed a coach for their golf team this spring, and so. . . .

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Leonard J. Biallas, Editor

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The constituent members of the CSR are:

**AMERICAN ACADEMY OF RELIGION
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CHRISTIAN ETHICS
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF CHURCH HISTORY
AMERICAN SOCIETY OF MISSIOLOGY
AMERICAN THEOLOGICAL LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
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tions along these lines still require the sanction and certification of the traditional pattern before they can be instituted.

The same practice has a debilitating influence on undergraduate education. Graduate education is a major beneficiary of undergraduate education. It can exercise an assimilative function because of the pervasive hierarchical, ascendent tendency that regulates the entire educational process. When graduate education predominates, undergraduate education is treated frequently as a dim reflection, a lesser version. Elementary and primary school are preparation for high school which is preparation for college which is preparation for graduate school, at least for many. The graduate program is understood to be the necessary complement. Although the majority of students do not follow the entire sequence to its end, a host of educational objectives are made dependent upon the completion of the entire trajectory. This means that undergraduate education is not conceived for its own sake. The bachelor of arts degree is not commonly regarded as a terminal degree. Instead, undergraduate education is approached as if it were a stepping stone to the next stage in the educational process.

The strong ascendent disposition of higher education, more than clear vocational aspirations, may help explain why the number of students enrolled in graduate schools is so large. Students sense compulsions to continue on to complete the course. Unless they do, the process has no natural culmination. The sequence of studies remains unfinished. Being brought to premature closure, it is incomplete. The desire for integration requires the next stage. And the content of much of the undergraduate curriculum—being dominated by a series of survey courses, offered primarily as the necessary basis for engaging in “more serious work”—reinforces this attitude.

It is one thing to observe that undergraduate education is conceived according to graduate standards in miniature. This carries its own confusions. But the complication may be larger. It is possible that graduate education is being sustained in large part by a self-referential process of its own creation. The clue to this prospect lies in public sensitivity. Legislators request increasingly that “the humanities” be brought into closer correspondence with “public policy” issues. Those responsible for funding, both public and private agencies, have been taking the lead in trying to reestablish connections. Students charge the programs with “irrelevance.” The citizenry of the land is becoming more adept in identifying esotericisms. From an assortment of sides, increasing criticism is being directed against the hegemony of an educational model that has lost linkage with vital supporting environments. Viewed in this light, the employment situation is a window on a deeper problem.

It is not helpful, of course, to point an accusing finger. But one wonders if graduate programs are the way they are, and remain the way they are, because the faculty who design them want and like them the way they are. There is a basis for this possibility in the fact that the graduate program is the primary institution in which many faculty place, secure, and transmit their vested interests. Within them, the stories are told, the legacies are handed on, the process of socialization is carried out, the “we-they” distinctions are

crafted, and the boundary laws are established. In addition to whatever such endeavors are meant to do for students, graduate programs function to keep the cycles of professionalization going. But now the process is being called into question by the lack of correspondence between product and need, intention and outcome, aspiration and accomplishment.

In light of the immensity of the problem, it would be inappropriate to propose a simple solution. But there are a few areas that might be explored fruitfully. It is not too late, for instance, to “open things up” (as Mooney and Stuber’s title suggests), to create and design additional and/or alternative models for graduate work in the humanities, both in individual subject areas and in the nexuses between subjects and fields. Secondly, much more attention should be given to “specialty programs,” particularly in response to expressed needs, and most especially those which combine specific academic strengths with distinctive “area concentrations.” And strong lateral linkages between academic programs in the humanities and the professional schools should be developed with more skill, care and inventiveness.

In addition to innovations in programs, there are some perceptual and conceptual changes that can be effected. The time has come, for example, to bracket “graduate school considerations” when thinking through the goals of undergraduate education. This involves conceiving the bachelor of arts degree as the symbol of a completed process. In the same spirit, consideration might be given to a policy wherein students be discouraged from passing without interruption from undergraduate to graduate school. This would encourage engaging for a time in non-academic life. It would consider the time of first exposure as a form of “novitiate training” which is to be followed by time away from the academy before the final professional vows are taken.

But the largest challenges of all, perhaps, concern the adjustment of faculty energies, enthusiasms, and personal satisfactions. This is a very tricky subject. Changes cannot be effected by mere fiat. Yet it would be wise to think of expanding the range of challenging and rewarding scholarly undertakings beyond the category of “teaching and research” as this is commonly understood. Such an adjustment requires directing disciplined attention to how it happens that new things come into being. It is significant, for example, that the sciences have been able to avoid some of the frustrations now affecting the humanities because scientific research continues to stimulate new products; and new products imply additional vocational opportunities. For many good reasons, the humanities have not been approached from this set of interests. Yet they hold out creative and constructive opportunities that remain underdeveloped. The initial steps in this direction will be taken when established scholars give more attention to communicating in a manner that registers for a wider range of respondents. Further developments will occur when scholars give more thought to ventures for which they are in fact trained but on which they only infrequently embark, that is “alternative and additional vocations.” Even partial successes in these

areas would stimulate new forms and products of intellectual creativity. In the long run, concerted efforts in this direction, rather than attempts to increase teaching opportunities, may become the most effective response to the vocational crisis.

The suggestions made herein stem from a growing concern that the substance of graduate education has not kept pace with the dynamics of modern intellectual development. Significant components of the prevailing pattern rest on assumed intellectual syntheses that scholarship no longer actually supports. The conflict runs deep. Higher education

may be at odds with itself. And the real question is whether it can ever again become open and flexible enough to perceive whatever syntheses are coming to formation, or whether these will be encouraged and fostered primarily from outside the academy. There is good evidence that the latter development is occurring, and in increasing proportions. Thus, the lasting tragedy may be that changes in human understanding will be effected without benefit of that wisdom of which scholars in traditional colleges and universities have regarded themselves as stewards.

FINDING THE FIRST JOB

Mildred L. Culp

University of Iowa, Iowa City, IA 52242

Many job candidates with advanced degrees in religion think it is unnecessary to act creatively and persistently to obtain employment. They operate with an attitude of "divine dispensation," the feeling that somehow, despite the problems faced by other advanced degree-holders, they are different or exceptional and therefore will be excluded from the terrors of the search for fruitful employment. Such an illusion almost guarantees failure and must be overcome before the successful search can begin.

A much more promising approach to securing employment includes detailed self-analysis and organization. The best employment-seekers will identify their skills in the spirit of flexibility (cf. Richard Bolles, *What Color is Your Parachute?*, and A. I. Zambrano and Alan D. Entine, "A Guide to Career Alternatives for Academics," *Change Magazine*) and determine the method by which the search will be conducted. It is crucial for religion degree-holders to explore the variety of skills they have and jobs for which they are qualified by virtue of those skills. Some typical ones identified by people in our field include effective written and oral communication, analysis and problem solving, and the ability to conduct research as well as plan and schedule a variety of tasks.

Once the skills are identified, the *curriculum vitae* should be written. It should be updated about every two or three months, depending upon the rapidity of the professional experience (paid or volunteered) gained. This *curriculum vitae* should be included in the letters to be sent to selected institutions, drawing on advertisements in *TOIL*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and any other appropriate listings (e.g., *MLA Job Lists*).

The indispensable next step after the first barrage of letters is to follow up with on-location visits of the identified institutions. Such visits are necessary because the personal approach makes the individuals known and remembered by potential employers outside the personnel office. Moreover, personal contact enables the job-seekers to gain an overview of the institutions in which they are seeking employment.

The on-location approach should include initiating interviews with several administrators at the selected institutions. They should be asked to describe the functions of their position so that job-seekers can learn those responsibilities. Moreover, whenever administrators are helpful, they should

be asked for the names of two or three other persons at the institution who may be of further value. Thank-you letters should be sent after all visits, with a few exceptions, and the calendar should be marked for re-contacting appropriate persons for another visit whenever an upcoming opening is discovered.

Though the search may be painful and go on for several years, scholars must remind themselves of the flexibility of their academic discipline. They need to be opportunists and learn to profit from keeping attuned to all possible openings or chances for openings. Eventually one will present itself, but the individual scholars need to create interesting times, not just live in them. The small opportunities will lead to large ones, such as teaching one section of a core course, delivering guest lectures, and perhaps even offering a summer course. The expenditure of intellectual and physical effort may be quite demanding, especially if the job-seekers are asked to present information or teach courses in areas where they are weak. This effort is further compounded if they are also attempting to prepare manuscripts for publication.

The job-seekers need to be herculean at times to build up a solid record, especially if they complete the educational process with no professional experience. This may mean accepting responsibilities in new areas and may require concentrated effort to complete assigned tasks. It is necessary to recognize that no work is beneath them. They may have to work for a salary or handle research positions that are more proper to and commensurate with the skills and abilities of persons with baccalaureate degrees.

The strategy advocated in this approach to the employment search has at least one inherent danger which often promotes lack of credibility. In the eagerness to gain professional experience in a job or cluster of jobs in which individuals are overqualified, they risk being stereotyped. As a result, it may be difficult to obtain a position for which they have been trained. Furthermore, the image of individuals in the low-level positions may be internalized so thoroughly that when they finally secure more challenging employment, effective performance may be hindered, if not blocked.

The more difficult problem, I think, is the first. Many new advanced degree-holders are told repeatedly that they have no related work experience. The question they cannot

answer revolves around what means and resources there are available to them which will provide that needed experience. The predicament is articulated in the agonizing cry, "How can I establish a work record if no one will hire me?" My solution—not a comforting one—is persistence.

The second problem, that of the range of memories, may surface less frequently but no less dramatically. There are at least two ways to counteract it. The first is simple. It involves designing a resumé or *curriculum vitae* which may obscure job titles attached to positions whose major responsibilities must be minimized. A functional format helps avoid reminders of this problem. But once the desired employment is obtained, the successful individuals must learn how to cope successfully with the people around them who have typecast them in previous roles. Overcoming this difficulty is tricky, because they may be perceived by others to veer between snobbery and unauthoritativeness.

Amid these efforts, employment-seekers must adopt an attitude that the first job or cluster of jobs is temporary. Their whole life and/or career will not be determined by the first employment situation. Moreover, it is helpful to dodge people who underrate the PhD. Finding employment is difficult enough without taking seriously the negative reinforcement so earnestly and convincingly offered by graduate students, unemployed PhDs, and potential employers who see the doctorate as a barrier to job effectiveness.

One benefit derived from a thorough search is information about a variety of mysteries facing potential employees. It is possible to explore with college and university faculty, for example, ways in addition to the dissertation to find materials for publication (e.g., courses and lectures). Also, the ambitious individuals will encounter some knowledge-

able people to whom questions about the hunt itself may be addressed. Some of these include the frequency with which to contact potential employers and creative but not too blatant ways to remind them of present availability and skills. Furthermore, in untraditional times the candidates may be advised of untraditional ways to establish a solid work record (e.g., temporary appointments using only one or more skills). In addition, the people with whom they have contact may well be helpful as coworkers when a position is secured.

An important obligation all of us have, I believe, is to wipe out a practice I call "the high IQ learning/earning disability." Such a mentality is evident, for example, in the case of a colleague who, when his one-year renewable contract was transformed into a tenure-track position, expressed his desire to keep from future PhDs the untraditional nature of his original appointment unless asked directly by one of them. If our liberal arts training failed to communicate the importance of exploring new kinds of work, taking reasonable risks, and sharing with others the knowledge and insight we have gained, then the experience of locating the first job will be proportionately more difficult and less enlightening for those who follow.

Tangible rewards, like the attainment of degrees, may have to be deferred. The strategy outlined here may not lead to security, continuity, paid benefits, and peace of mind. Nevertheless, the job campaign, which is best perceived as a form of salesmanship, does produce results. Once a buyer is found, even if he/she offers only temporary employment, the candidate's opportunities are increased. Eventually, stimulating employment that nurtures professional and personal growth may well be obtained.

TEACHING IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Robert A. Spivey

Florida State University, Tallahassee, FL 32306

Teaching in public schools, probably not the first career choice of most graduate students in religion, is one alternative to college teaching. Yet even here the situation is not encouraging. Public schools are simply not looking for religion academics as teachers of the young. On one level, that does not make any of us happy because a number of AAR folk have worked for years to persuade the public schools otherwise, without signs of substantial progress. At another level, I understand why the public schools have not welcomed religionists with open arms; moreover, in the long run that reluctance may open up more desirable possibilities for religion study in the public school curriculum.

No Religion Per Se

Before turning to the possibilities, let me clarify the negative situation in regard to employment for religionists in public schools. In October 1977 I wrote to several other people who know something about religion and the public schools to ask whether they agreed with my judgment that a person whose academic field is religion should abandon hope for being employed by a public school as a *religion* teacher because the basic route for getting a job as a public school

teacher is that of becoming certified as a social studies or English teacher at the high school level or an elementary teacher at the grade school level. My four respondents agreed with that position, but their responses varied and are worth reporting here.

Nicholas Piediscalzi of Wright State University said that positions are virtually nonexistent in public schools for full-time teachers of religion studies.

A person must obtain certification in English or Social Studies, or Fine Arts, and a second certificate or minor in religion-studies and begin as an English or Social Studies, or Fine Arts teacher, and slowly introduce religion courses. In several instances, we have observed individuals develop full-time religion studies positions for themselves. But it is misleading to tell people that such positions are immediately available. On the other hand, private and parochial schools hire individuals certified in religion-studies.

Further elaboration of this general position is provided by Guntram Bischoff of Western Michigan University who makes the following observations:

The State of Michigan (1) allows for a minor concentration in the Academic Study of Religions within approved secondary education curricula prerequisite to issuance of a provisional teaching certificate; and (2) accepts pursuance of the study of religion within the specified curriculum leading to a Master of Arts in the Teaching of the Academic Study of Religions in