

INSIDE HIGHER ED

The Need for Outside Jobs in Grad School

The restrictions on taking work outside academe no longer match the reality that many graduate students face either professionally or financially, argues Zeb Larson.

By [Zeb Larson](#)

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Many graduate departments have some kind of rule in place to prevent graduate students from taking on outside work. The reasoning behind it might seem sound enough at first glance -- graduate students are supposed to be learning their craft, which means working on a dissertation and teaching. Ideally, they should be free from distractions while they're doing this.

I don't know anybody who feels that graduate school is too easy, and it's understandable why faculty members might want to make sure their students have the space they need to thrive. Moreover, many faculty members,

especially those in the humanities, believe that taking work outside academe is antithetical to the purpose of graduate school, which is to get people ready for tenure-track positions and then into professorships. Outside work does not serve that goal in immediately appreciable ways, and so it's often seen as an unnecessary distraction. Worse, it might suggest that the student isn't really serious about their studies.

In theory, all of these concerns sound like good reasons to make sure that students don't end up overburdening themselves with work outside of their teaching and dissertation. But in practice, such restrictions increasingly do not serve a useful function for graduate students or graduate departments. They no longer match the reality that many graduate students face either professionally or financially. Graduate education is changing whether or not departments want to acknowledge that those changes are coming, and the best way to support their students is to adapt to that reality.

At its most basic level, the idea that graduate students should be able to focus solely on their dissertations and teaching is a mirage. Students have personal lives, families, hobbies and outside problems that will intrude on writing and instruction. None of this will disappear should a student attain a tenure-track job. If anything, those competing demands for attention will multiply in the form of service commitments, multiple courses and, of course, having a life. Students do not and should not exist in hermetically sealed work environments. It's better to prepare students for the reality of juggling work and match the working conditions they will face in the future.

Cutting off graduate students from outside sources of work is also painful financially -- and needlessly so. The fact is that students typically have less funding to get through graduate school today. And I simply know too many who've talked about selling plasma and depending on food stamps to be

comfortable with the idea that they should have to live off meager graduate stipends. That attitude rewards wealthier students who can afford to be subsidized by a partner or by family members at the expense of those who cannot.

On top of this, many students are bringing a heavy debt load into graduate school. And even while they're free from having to make payments for a few years, it would be humane to allow them the chance to actually accumulate some savings (and maybe even start paying down their principal).

Beyond the financial element, outside employment is a way to meaningfully develop career paths outside academe. While professional societies such as the American Historical Association try to develop programs to help graduate students find work in nonacademic settings, such programs can only be of limited use if their focus is on workshops to develop résumés and provide informational interviews. The biggest barrier to outside employment is practical experience: employers outside academe are skeptical about hiring humanities graduates in no small part because they usually haven't worked anywhere except in an academic institution. Some kind of outside employment not only builds up the kind of skills that might be useful in a job in a nonuniversity setting but also shows an employer that the student in question is interested in working outside higher education in the first place.

In the same way that employment beyond academe builds experience, it also creates a network that graduate students can draw on. Graduate programs don't typically provide many networking opportunities outside higher education. I've heard from plenty of faculty members that graduate students looking for employment in different industries should draw on their networks, but many of us don't have scads of college buddies who can act as springboards into those industries. Most of mine are either teachers or in the hard sciences, and since I'm a history Ph.D., they can't help a whole lot. More

often than not, those networks have to be created, and one of the best ways to do that is through work.

Moreover, from what I've seen and heard, these rules are inconsistently enforced. If anything, there's a tacit acknowledgment in some graduate programs that students can take on work on the outside but are not supposed to admit they do. Moonlighting is tolerable as long as it's in secret, but this approach benefits no one. Having to work in secret makes it more difficult to do so effectively -- students who are interested simply can't talk about it. Moreover, it limits the amount of networking that students can do.

Opening up opportunities for nonacademic work has its limits and risks. Students have to be able to manage their time effectively to juggle work and their graduate commitments. Advisers should at least be aware of outside obligations so that they can give best advice about an appropriate workload. And within graduate schools, ending these rules should not become an excuse to pay graduate students less. Outside employment is no substitute for the stipends graduate students should be paid for the work that they do at the institution or for benefits like health insurance. At the same time that students take on outside work, we should also be fighting to unionize graduate students and contingent academics.

None of this means that graduate departments should stop training their students for academic careers or that they need to become career resource centers exclusively. And, in many ways, allowing students to pursue outside employment would demand little of departments except to acknowledge that earlier ways of preparing students for postgraduate life aren't producing the best outcomes. Rather, given the precarity most of us young academics face, letting people take outside jobs would give us a leg up on the "alternate" careers most of us will have.

Bio

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