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Cutbacks in Enrollment Redefine Graduate Education and Faculty Jobs
Enrollment cutbacks redefine curricula as well as faculty jobs

By Robin Wilson

Over the past decade, the University of Maryland's department of art history and archaeology has admitted up to a dozen graduate students each year. But when Caroline J. Dubinsky and Jessica Williams arrived on the College Park campus last fall, they were the department's only two new Ph.D. students.

Like many graduate programs in the arts and humanities, Maryland's department is slimming down: Since 2005 its graduate-student population has fallen by a third, to a total of just 42.

Some of that is the result of an extra push to get longtime graduate students to finish up and get out the door. But universities are also purposefully shrinking graduate programs because they are reluctant to continue flooding the already swamped academic job market with more Ph.D.’s, and because institutional budget problems have reduced fellowship money for students.

"We are trying to right-size, given resources and the job market," says Elizabeth Bergmann Loizeaux, associate dean of Maryland's College of Arts and Humanities. "For most programs in the college, that has meant smaller graduate programs." Since 2009, graduate enrollment in the college has shrunk by 10 percent.

The cuts are being made not only in art history, but also in English, history, comparative literature, and foreign languages. And they are happening even in top programs at institutions like Harvard University and the University of California at Los Angeles. The result? Changes in the very nature of graduate education, and in the shape of faculty jobs.

Universities are canceling or recasting graduate seminars—the
cornerstone of graduate education—and struggling to maintain a lively intellectual environment for students with fewer peers. Professors who have long counted the training of graduate students as a prized role are competing for the dwindling number of students. And as training graduate students becomes a smaller part of their jobs, professors are being forced to focus elsewhere, including on undergraduate teaching.

"The only place I can really use some of the research I have is at the graduate level, and now I don't have someone to impart it to," says Anthony Colantuono, an associate professor of art history at Maryland, whose department held a retreat this month to talk about how to maintain a vibrant graduate program while admitting only a couple of students a year.

Like many scholars in his field, Mr. Colantuono knows several languages. While undergraduates do not need to know them, he says, graduate students performing fieldwork do. "You want to pass that on; otherwise it could be lost for good," he says. With fewer graduate students enrolling, that loss is a real threat. "We are all terrified by this," he says, "because as researchers we're committed to graduate teaching."

Uneven Decline

The Council of Graduate Schools reported last fall that new graduate-student enrollment dropped in 2010 for the first time in seven years. Enrollment of new graduate students overall fell by 1.1 percent from 2009. But the decline was not equal across disciplines. Doctoral programs in the arts and humanities saw a drop, while the number of students in some Ph.D. programs—physical and earth science, health sciences, and business—actually rose.

The biggest programs have seen the greatest declines. The graduate program in English at Ohio State University, traditionally one of the country's most robust, will trim its new enrollment for the next academic year by half compared with 2009-10, to around 20 master's and doctoral students. In the early 1990s, the program admitted as many as 60 students a year, says Frank Donoghue, a professor of English there.

Indiana University's graduate program in English used to bring in as many as 70 students a year, says Patricia Clare Ingham, who is director of graduate studies there. "IU was one of those large,
factory Big Ten programs," she says. But starting in the mid-1990s, the department began restricting enrollment to 19 to 25 graduate students per year, and last academic year it took another dip, to 14.

The history department at the University of Wisconsin at Madison cut its new graduate admissions in half this past fall, to just 21 students. "Why train people if the outlook for professional historians is not nearly as good as it was five years ago?" asks Laird Boswell, director of graduate studies in the department.

Pennsylvania State University's history department has gone even farther, dropping entire subfields in which graduate students were once invited to specialize and keeping only those in which it has a good track record of helping graduates find jobs. As of this academic year, it is no longer admitting students who want to write dissertations in 20th-century American history, modern European history, or medieval history. In the process, it is hoping to cut overall graduate enrollment by around 30 students—to a total of 40—in two years.

"This is the way of the future, and we're way ahead of the curve here," says Michael Kulikowski, chairman of the history department, which was featured at this year's annual meeting of the American Historical Association as one of 10 departments doing innovative things. "People have been talking about the oversupply of unemployable Ph.D.'s in the humanities for several decades, and I think we've found a part of the solution. We are concentrating on areas where we can place students competitively."

Vying for Seminars

But while many deans and department heads say cutting back is wise, not everyone is embracing the trend. Some professors point to ways that a smaller student population is altering the culture of graduate education, for both students and faculty members. With fewer students, departments are winnowing the number of graduate seminars, which means that professors may teach graduate students only once a year, or even less.

Ohio State's English department, which has 80 tenured and tenure-track professors, is reducing the number of its graduate seminars next year from 57 to 43. "I gave every field one seminar per semester, which means if you have six faculty in your area, they may get one every two to three years," says Marlene Longenecker, an
emeritus professor who does course scheduling for the department.
"We've had a lot of moans and groans."

Mr. Donoghue, the English professor at Ohio State, has written a forthcoming article for the journal Pedagogy about the phenomenon. "The privilege of teaching a graduate seminar every year, or at least every two years, long ago came to become an expected perk of faculty teaching jobs at Ohio State," he says. "It clearly can't be anymore, but who gets seminars and who doesn't has become an increasingly significant factor in faculty morale."

To keep graduate seminars well populated as enrollment shrinks, some departments are broadening the territory covered by the courses and allowing undergraduates as well as graduate students in other fields to sign up. Some professors and students applaud the move as making graduate education more interdisciplinary, but others say it waters down the intellectual conversations that should take place. It may also prompt faculty members to "make up sexy or bogus topics" to compete for students, says Mr. Colantuono, the art historian at Maryland. This spring his seminar on spirituality in the arts in the 17th century is one of five graduate courses the department is offering that enrolled three to seven students each. A sixth seminar was turned into an undergraduate class when not enough graduate students signed up.

"From now on," he says, professors might think, 'I'm going to choose topics designed to arouse attention rather than things people need to know, so I will attract people in other fields." For example, if one of Mr. Colantuono's colleagues were teaching something racier than a course on 17th-century altar pieces in Dominican churches, he might "trump something up"—like 17th-century images of vampires—to bring in more students. "Because I'll have people in other fields, I will have to change the curriculum and decrease the specialization. It will create a lower level of graduate education."

'The Soul of What We Do'

Clifton Crais, a professor of history at Emory University, says professors are upset about the changes because they threaten a key way in which faculty members define themselves. "Training graduate students is part of the soul of what we do," he says. Emory's history department has cut the number of graduate students it accepts by more than half, from a high of 16 in 2008-9 to
just six this year. "For many people, they are defined by their ability to train grad students in a particular model," says Mr. Crais. "And without that, it is causing people a great deal of anxiety."

James Van Horn Melton, director of graduate studies in history at Emory, has sometimes borne the brunt of that anxiety. As head of the committee that decides which students to admit each year, he gets angry e-mails from faculty members, who also complain to the dean when graduate applicants in their own fields are not among the handful of new students each year. "The kind of pressure I feel has grown noticeably more intense," he says. "Some faculty members see how many Ph.D.'s they train as an index of their standing in the profession."

In a sign of just how important graduate students are to professors, one historian at Emory agreed to pass up an outside job offer after Emory made a counteroffer that included allowing the history department to admit a few extra graduate students in 2010. That year the department admitted 12 students, says Jeffrey Lesser, chairman of history. (He wouldn't identify the faculty member.)

Mr. Donoghue, at Ohio State, worries that with the decline in the amount of time that professors devote to training graduate students, administrators at research universities will find a reason to increase teaching loads, which have traditionally been kept low so professors could perform scholarship that they impart to graduate students. Indeed, one thing research-university professors may be doing more of is undergraduate teaching, particularly in departments like Ohio State's, where there are about 1,000 undergraduate English majors. "There are going to be a few people who really don't get enough graduate teaching, the meaty stuff," says Ms. Longenecker. "So every so often they will have a year where they will teach more composition than they ever wanted to."

State legislators and some higher-education analysts have argued for years that tenured professors should spend more time with undergraduates. But William L. Pressly, who heads the department of art history and archaeology at Maryland, says substituting undergraduate teaching for work with graduate students isn't going to go over well with professors. Indeed, while faculty members at research universities like Maryland understand that their jobs must include some undergraduate teaching, and some embrace it, many
were hired with the understanding that they would focus on scholarship and training graduate students.

"Working with graduate students keeps you on your toes," says Mr. Pressly. "We are a research institution, and it's very important for faculty to bring their research material to bear in graduate courses."

With undergraduate lectures, he says, "you stand up there and talk and you could be saying great stuff, but it just kind of washes over them."

A Different Kind of Education

Because faculty members are teaching fewer graduate seminars now, it is sometimes hard for students to establish relationships with them that lead to research collaborations. "It used to be that if you cultivated a relationship with a faculty member through courses, the relationship with the professor as a dissertation adviser would naturally follow," says Julia Voss, a third-year Ph.D. student in English at Ohio State. "But I had to ask a few professors first and then finally persuade my final adviser to agree to be my adviser, because I'd only taken one course with her."

Some professors and students also worry that with fewer students enrolled, graduate education—already a solitary endeavor—may become even more isolating. Students may find themselves without a critical mass of peers with whom to hash out problems and ideas. "With a larger graduate program, there is more discussion, argumentation, and contact," says Mr. Boswell, the history-graduate-studies director at Wisconsin.

Ali Behdad, chairman of English at the University of California at Los Angeles, says he's tried to ensure that graduate students feel a part of a broad intellectual community. The number of incoming graduate students in the department will be down by about half next year from the early 1990s, he says, and the department, which has been admitting as many as 14 students a year, now hopes to hold the line at 12.

Mr. Behdad invites distinguished scholars from off campus to give talks each month, with food and wine. "This creates an intellectual context for students and faculty to come together and creates a sense of community within the department," he says.

Clearly, there are some pluses to smaller graduate programs—
particularly for students. Ms. Williams, one of the two art-history students admitted this year at Maryland, took an English course last semester and is now friendly with several graduate students in that department. "You'd be less willing to branch out if you had a larger class in your own department," she says. "It's wonderful because they have a different perspective on art, and I have a different perspective on literature. We help each other."

Ms. Williams also says she gets special attention as one of only two new graduate students in art history. "The idea of going to a university where my adviser would have 30 students and not remember my name was very unattractive," she says.

Ms. Dubinsky, the other art-history student admitted to Maryland this year, says being one of only two chosen was a "confidence booster." What's more, she says, they do not have to worry about competing with a horde of other graduate students for fellowship money.

Still, when the art-history professors at Maryland gathered at a faculty member's home this month for their retreat, it was clear that they did not think the department could run a viable graduate program with just two new students each year.

So the faculty members talked about opening the graduate program up to students who want to earn just a master's degree to train for jobs outside academe—in museums for example. "Our goal is to accept five students per year," says Mr. Pressly, chair of the department. "It would maintain a critical mass that would make for a healthy program."

How 3 Graduate Programs Are Scaling Back

**OHIO STATE U.**

Department of English

**Number of graduate students:** The university plans to enroll 20 students in 2012-13, down from 30 this year.

**Number of graduate seminars:** 43 are scheduled for 2012-13, compared with 57 this year.

**Response to the decline:** The campus chapter of the English Graduate Organization has taken steps to preserve a sense of
community among graduate students even as their numbers shrink, holding colloquia where students present their work and organizing town-hall-style meetings on issues like what it means to be a teaching assistant.

**U. OF MARYLAND AT COLLEGE PARK**

Department of art history and archaeology

**Number of graduate students:** Two enrolled this year, down from eight last year.

**Number of graduate seminars:** 10 are offered this year, down from 11 last year.

**Response to the decline:** The department held a retreat this month at which faculty members talked about whether the graduate program can remain vital while admitting significantly fewer students.

**U. OF WISCONSIN AT MADISON**

Department of history

**Number of graduate students:** 21 are enrolled this year, down from 40 last year.

**Number of graduate seminars:** 35 are offered this year, up from 30 last year (seminar enrollment dropped this year to 346 students, down from 387).

**Response to the decline:** The department added a sentence in its letter to accepted graduate students this year, warning them about the job market: "You should also know that a growing number of history Ph.D.’s will likely have to use their training to seek employment outside the academic world."
Sorry, but I think we all know that bigger cuts than these are necessary to make the job markets in the humanities and social sciences (I know less about the other fields) sustainable. My advice to undergraduates considering a Ph.D. in History or English at this point would be not to go unless they get into a top-five program with a funded TA position and tuition remission. Even then, they should expect less than a 50/50 shot at getting a tenure-track job and should be prepared for the possibility of doing work outside of academia where the degree may help, but also may hurt, their employment prospects.

We have a surplus of professors who enjoy working with graduate students, and a terrible deficit of good jobs for those graduate students when they complete their degrees. Time to cut not only spaces in programs, but programs entirely until the market is in balance again, probably decades down the line.

I can understand that graduate program directors will disagree with this, so I challenge them: adhere to a norm of posting the job placement results of EVERY graduating class 1 year, 2 years, and 5 years out from graduation on their department web sites. Grad directors, does that notion make you sweat? Stop deluding yourselves and your program applicants, then.

With undergraduate lectures, he says, "you stand up there and talk and you could be saying great stuff, but it just kind of washes over them."

I found this remark -- and the disdain for undergraduates that it implies -- dismaying. Although teaching graduate seminars is perhaps more gratifying to one's immediate interests than giving lectures in introductory surveys, there is clearly a need for both. Has it not occurred to you that it is in the introductory surveys that you have the opportunity to make a case to a large number of people that Art History actually matters?

The sense of entitlement of some of the professors quoted in this article disturbed me. Being a professor is ultimately a job; your job is to serve the university that you work at to the best of your ability in the ways that the university sees fit. That is what you are paid a salary to do. That departments should be guided by what will give professors the most intellectual and personal satisfaction rather than what is best for students in making policy decisions seems a ridiculous notion to me.

The simple fact is that there aren't enough jobs out there for the number of qualified, credentialed people. The only ethical to do is to start downsizing graduate programs; if that means professors don't get to work with graduate students as much as they'd like or that they have to teach undergraduate classes that they don't want to, so be it. We serve the university and the students, not the other way around. If professors were doing the job for free, that would be one thing, but a job is a job, and I can't think of any other field in which employees think that their professional duties should be tailored to their desires and wants, which seems to be the dominant attitude expressed in this article.

If professors are dismayed by this development, perhaps more of them should unionize and collectively bargain for universities to increase the number of tenure-track hires in the humanities, which would greatly improve the job market for graduate students and justify admitting more of them. Unfortunately too many tenured faculty didn't speak up for decades as the faculty workforce
was transformed into where it is today, a low-wage no-benefit sector composed of part-time faculty. Shrinking graduate enrollment in the face of today's job market was a long overdue step for many programs.

This was nearly a good article. Had it actually pursued the line it opened -- the link between the grad-program discussion and undergraduate teaching -- it could have become a good piece. In short, the problem, as at least one commenter below noted, is that undergraduates fund this entire endeavor, but are being taught by adjuncts and graduate students-going-nowhere. Let's get off the R1 train that clearly has been detrimental to my field (English) and many others in the liberal arts and humanities. Let's cut the grad programs to levels commensurate with job openings (and no, what you read here is not nearly enough). Then, let's put fully credentialed, actively researching, pedagogically competent professionals in front of the men and women paying grossly inflated sums to get a B.A. or B.S. And by the way, if one believes he or she cannot communicate his or her research to a bright, engaged sophomore, I would suggest that that's because he or she can't really teach.

Graduate education need not be about training students to become faculty members—or, at least, not the kind of faculty members we were trained to be. Humanities graduate education offers training in research, analysis, writing, and teaching, but it could, and in some programs does, offer more. Courses in public policy, grantwriting, coding, organizational behavior, cognition, and even entrepreneurship can supplement or, in some cases, replace some specialized coursework in the humanities discipline. A graduate program open to those possibilities could help graduate students to see both the value of graduate humanities education and the possibility of employment beyond traditional faculty jobs. It wouldn't, of course, solve the problem discussed in this article—that some faculty members are not getting to teach enough graduate seminars. But I'm a graduate of the Indiana "factory" system of the 80s, working at an undergraduate teaching institution, and so that's not a problem that keeps me awake at night.