



Ethical Commitments, Professional Visions, and Intellectual Choices: Students Call for Changes in Graduate Education

By Rick Cherwitz, Sarah Rodriguez, and Julie Sievers

At a time when an increasingly diverse graduate student body is entering academe to pursue a widening range of careers, many graduate programs continue to ignore issues central to their students: the commitments and goals that motivate students to undertake graduate work, as well as the variety of avenues available to them as scholars and professionals.

Eight of the University of Texas' brightest graduate students recently urged universities to correct this problem when we convened them to discuss graduate education as part of our "Citizen-Scholars" project for the local newspaper.

www.utexas.edu/ogs/rc/citizen_scholars.html

From different disciplines and at different stages of their degree programs, all spoke to a fundamental issue: their ethical commitments as scholars and global citizens, and the innovative ways they are building those values into their academic and professional work. Collectively, they called for the creation of more ways for students to work out their professional visions and career choices.

In this essay, we share their stories and argue that twenty-first century graduate schools must provide opportunities for students to tackle these critical issues. We urge universities to build cross-disciplinary initiatives that take to heart the philosophy that graduate school is a place for students to discover their values and goals and to devise innovative career paths for themselves.

When Sylvia Gale arrived on the University of Texas campus to begin her Ph.D. program, she was taken aback by her department's orientation for new students. The faculty spoke of the program as a set of difficult trials to be overcome, hoops to be jumped through in a programmatic sequence leading to a predictable career path. Yet Gale--intelligent, mature, and self-directed--did not consider herself a circus lion to be put through the paces. Instead, she insists, "For me being here is about making choices along the way that keep my goals in the foreground." If it were up to her, new students would be oriented to the idea that "academic development is a path, not a system that you plug yourself into. That would be a fundamentally different way of thinking about graduate school."

Gale's experience highlights a pressing problem facing graduate educators. While most graduate programs were founded on pedagogical models of apprenticeship, many of today's brightest

students bring their own goals and commitments to their programs. Instead of allowing themselves to be molded into "the paradigm," as Gale calls it, or put on "the escalator," as biology Ph.D. candidate Wendy Gordon jokes, they seek the resources to become the agents of their own scholarly and professional lives.

Consider Christine Beier, a fourth-year graduate student in anthropology, for whom academe was the answer to the long-asked question, "What can I do with my talents, my skills, my wealth as a North American, that doesn't just accrue to me?"

Fourteen years ago that question stopped Beier in her tracks. About to pursue a Ph.D. in English literature, she realized she didn't have an answer. She then devoted ten years to social justice issues, working odd jobs to pay the bills, until she finally found her purpose. And when she did, it led her straight back to school.

"I realized that I alone wasn't going to change everything I thought was wrong with the world. Furthermore, who was I to say what was wrong?" she asks. Therefore, "I got involved with indigenous issues in Peru--human rights, language rights, autonomy, and small communities. I deeply believe that by understanding questions and understanding problems you might actually create practicable solutions as opposed to jousting windmills like I did for a decade." Now four years into her program, Beier has translated her ethical goals into a rigorous academic program of study. "I have done so little in an orthodox way since I got here, and I just can't believe the success I've had."

Like Beier, Jessica Hester, a fifth-year Ph.D. student in theater, discovered new professional goals when she married and became a stepmother. Rather than remaining "obsessed with academics," she says, "motherhood made me want to do more community-based work. Now I want to teach in a school that has primarily working class students to create a program so that those theater students have a way of doing their own work." Hester is inspired by her new direction: "I'm much more excited about what I do than I was four years ago."

To encourage rather than squelch such discovery, Beier insists that universities must foster cross-disciplinary spaces where graduate students can discuss personal ethics, professional commitments, and strategies for pursuing their goals.

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Matthew Green, a mechanical engineering Ph.D. student who develops basic technology for poor rural communities abroad, agrees. As a master's student, Green found that following his ethical commitments meant choosing research that didn't quickly yield funding. "I was a teaching assistant for two years, which I enjoyed, but it slowed me down. The graduate coordinator called me into his office and said 'We expect students like you by this point to be a research assistant.' Thankfully I did get a fellowship allowing me to pursue the Ph.D." Since then, his advisor has wished him luck, but Green would have liked more help figuring out how to tackle such obstacles.

Likewise, sixth-year psychology Ph.D. candidate Josh Duntley believes his Internet site, which provides support to stalking victims, is as important as his scholarly publications on the subject. Yet, notes Duntley, "When I apply for jobs one day and want to continue the work I've been doing, they're not going to give me a reward for-hey, you've had ten million hits on your stalking help website, good for you, you're hired! It's frustrating."

Rather than giving up, Duntley, Green, and other students seek ideas about how to solve these problems. Civil engineering Ph.D. student John Walewski, a recent Fulbright recipient, formulated the question on everyone's minds: "Is there a course, or is there a forum, where you have a way to say, 'I want to get to a certain kind of work, but I have all these ethical difficulties getting there as a graduate student'? Can we actually sit around a table like this and talk about it, look at the overall process and all the bumps in the road?" Like others, Walewski had hoped that such a forum would form a central part of his graduate education. "I realize that, to a large extent, it is for me to figure out. But I would like to have the opportunity to work through it with other people."

We concur: there ought to be such opportunities. Graduate schools have an obligation to facilitate the kinds of discussion that took place with these students.

At UT, we are beginning to hear such powerful voices because students are participating in classes and projects run by the Graduate School's Intellectual Entrepreneurship program, in addition to coursework in their traditional academic units.

[\[www.utexas.edu/ogs/development.html\]](http://www.utexas.edu/ogs/development.html)

The program joins students from multiple disciplines--and often members of the Austin community--into a vibrant intellectual community. For the first time in many students' careers, they are asked to reflect upon their passions and life goals, using their answers as the impetus for making educational and professional decisions.

This initiative is only one example of how to meet the needs expressed by these students. Yet what is clear from our "Citizen-Scholars" discussion is that institutions need more, not less, cross-disciplinary, flexible spaces that promote learning and discovery valuable to students, to universities, and to the communities outside them. For today's best students, graduate education is about more than accumulating discipline-specific

knowledge. They desire to become members of communities that transcend disciplinary geographies and institutional boundaries, communities that raise ethical and professional questions and provide resources for students to incubate their ideas and strategize solutions.

We join our students in urging graduate schools to take the pulse of their students, creating opportunities for the discussion of ethical commitments and professional development. Rather than exclusively serving to certify degrees and enforce rules, graduate schools must exert intellectual leadership, becoming the campus site where ethical, professional and academic matters are articulated and integrated.

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