

**2016 Annual Meeting of the Society for Classical Studies  
San Francisco, California  
Presidential Panel: ‘The Spring from the Year’: Contingent Faculty and the Future of  
Classics  
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**‘So Happy a Versatility’: The Uses of Advanced Training in the Humanities  
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I am honored to be speaking today at the invitation of John Marincola and to join my fellow panelists in discussing this very important issue. I followed John’s lead in pulling the title of my remarks from an oration attributed to Pericles: “so happy a versatility” comes from Richard Crawley’s translation of Thucydides 2.41, where Pericles speaks of the versatility and equanimity instilled in Athenians by virtue of their democratic political education.

But I draw on that phrase not to make any Periclean claim to exceptionalism, in this case for us as classicists or in general as humanists, but rather because I think the phrase aptly describes an attitude we all should take toward the humanities PhD, that is, that we should acknowledge the broad utility, indeed the versatility of advanced training in the humanities. For decades, this versatility has been hidden behind rigid patterns of thought that prevailed in both academic and non-academic communities. This mindset deemed as a failure the PhD who leaves the academy, or who does not find a fulltime, salubrious position within the professoriate. It is long past time to retire that lazy narrative of failure, but especially urgent now, when the crisis of employment that has been building over the past four decades could be, as John suggested, the new normal.

Now, if the only appropriate application of doctoral education in the humanities is a classroom career, then many graduate programs could shrink. Perhaps they will. But if, on the one hand, the substance of humanistic knowledge is positively important, and on the other hand, the capacities developed in designing and executing a dissertation research project have practical value, then it follows that there should be many venues outside of the academy where a humanities PhD can add value and thrive. In my remarks today I will share the experience we have had at ACLS in testing that proposition through developing and expanding our Public Fellows program, which places recent PhDs in non-academic jobs in government and the nonprofit sector. I would also like to point to a few of the great initiatives that learned societies and universities have since launched to explore and validate alternative career paths for PhDs.

But before I go any further, I should note that I do not mean to suggest that programs promoting non-academic careers for PhDs are in themselves solution to the crisis of hiring, or to the many issues facing

contingent faculty. This can only be a complementary approach to the important work of advocating for better pay and status for instructors, and an overall rehabilitation of the teaching profession in higher education. My colleagues at the Modern Language Association put it succinctly: the working conditions of our college instructors are the learning conditions of our students.

At the same time, by acknowledging that some percentage of humanities PhDs always have pursued non-academic careers by choice rather than circumstance, and by finding ways to support graduate students as they look warily at their postdoctoral options, we have the potential to ameliorate the dismal job situation at different levels of scale. At the micro level, we can help by broadening the possibilities for individual PhDs considering what kind of career, in some cases what kind of life, they would like to have after receiving their PhD. Those considerations are valid and important. At the macro level, touting the multiple ends of PhD education, even those beyond the academy, can foster a renewed sense of value for the work that humanists do in colleges and universities. The work of communicating the value of humanities training to multiple audiences is especially important to this reevaluation.

ACLS created the Mellon/ACLS Public Fellows program in late 2010 with both the macro and the micro goals in mind. In some ways the new program represented a departure from our traditional fellowship model, which typically makes possible a supported leave for humanities scholars pursuing a significant research project. The Public Fellows program was instead designed to expand the reach of doctoral education in the humanities by placing recent PhDs in two-year positions at an array of nonprofit and government agencies. In other words, Public Fellows is not so much about knowledge creation – though it certainly is about that as well – as it is about knowledge circulation, the movement of deep humanistic understanding and expertise into different areas of society.

Each fall, ACLS reviews proposals from a broad range of nonprofit and government organizations to build a roster of 20 diverse placement offerings. The following January, we host a national competition for recent humanities PhDs, who submit applications for their positions of choice. To date, ACLS has placed five cohorts, for a total of 82 fellows, with up to 21 new fellows to be selected in 2016. As the ranks of fellows and partners have grown, so too has interest in the program itself. We measure this in a number of ways, including the number of applications from recent PhDs, the media attention that our fellows generate through their high-profile work, and the ever growing number of organizations that request to host a fellow.

We have partnered with a variety of host organizations in the government and nonprofit sector, including the US Departments of State and Health and Human Services, USAID, the Smithsonian, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the ACLU, the Institute of International Education, and over 80 other

organizations in fields such as human rights and international affairs, public policy, arts management, media, and finance.

Our ever-expanding network of organizational partnerships is an important feature of the Public Fellows program at this stage in its life. On the one hand, we are building a network of organizations that now have a window into what advanced humanities education entails. But on the other, we hope this diversity of organizations and roles helps us demonstrate to even broader audiences that the humanities PhD has serious practical value.

The reason I say “humanities PhD” instead of “classical studies PhD” is that the Public Fellows program is predicated on the usefulness of the general set of capacities that all humanities PhDs hone in the course of their doctoral training. As my colleagues and I have observed over five competitions, a candidate’s research specialty rarely comes into consideration in the selection process. We have seen the State Department and microfinance organizations choose literature PhDs; public policy agencies select historians; art museums pick anthropologists; and environmental agencies bring on classicists. Among the general capacities our fellows bring to their work are strong communication skills, including the ability to write persuasively and digest and present complex material to non-specialist audiences; sharp analytical capacities; project management skills; and linguistic and cultural competencies.

What we hear from employers of ACLS Public Fellows bears this out. In reading reports from supervisors and other institutional representatives, I came to see mention of skills and habits that I did not have in mind initially – and that PhDs may take for granted – that supervisors have found to be incredibly useful across a variety of employment contexts. One of these is what one employer referred to as the ability to “read into” organizational culture by processing and absorbing the full spectrum of publications, internal communications, and other work products from their agencies. The practice of searching out and reviewing a wide variety of materials, and evaluating not just content but style and presentation, is a habit that many humanities PhDs develop in the course of their dissertation research. We also learn about what skills and capacities are in demand among our partner organizations through a survey that each aspiring host completes as part of the proposal process. The top five responses are “research” (98%), “writing” (98%), “communications” (95%), “project development” (88%), and “project management” (88%).

The most requested skills, broad as they are, should be easily recognizable to faculty and graduate students who have undertaken major research projects (such as a dissertation) and have experience with public speaking and communications (like the kinds that obtain in the classroom). These are among the capacities that all humanities graduate students share, and I hope this data – and the 80-plus Public

Fellows who demonstrate this data in action – encourages doctoral students and faculty to rethink about the way we in the academy talk about the skills and capacities honed through graduate study in the humanities.

As I mentioned at the beginning of my remarks, I also want to highlight the work of other organizations doing good work in this space. Indeed, one of the more encouraging signs for PhDs seeking careers outside of the academic sphere is that scholarly societies, which often serve as clearinghouses for postdoctoral academic employment, are increasingly incorporating non-academic perspectives into their professionalization activities. One of the more obvious ways that this occurs is at the level of the annual meeting, some of which now devote program space to exploring issues related to non-professorial career paths for PhDs. In recent years, the American Historical Association has staged mini-conferences within their annual meeting that highlight the diverse career paths available to PhDs in history. And that is just one example of annual meeting sessions designed to draw on the expertise of "entrepreneurial" PhDs to help meeting attendees explore career possibilities in the media, business, government and nonprofit sectors. Other such sessions took place this year at the meetings of the MLA, APSA, ASOR, and many others.

Learned society efforts now also extend beyond annual meetings and related programs. The MLA and the AHA received twin grants from The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to pursue parallel projects that will track and highlight the non-academic careers of their members. The AHA's new program has begun to test a handful of new approaches to incorporating non-academic career orientation and skill-building within graduate programs in history at Columbia, UCLA, the University of Chicago, and the University of New Mexico. The MLA is working with partners at the University of California Humanities Research Institute, Arizona State, and Georgetown University to create workshops and other programming for current graduate students who are considering both academic and non-academic employment options. The American Academy of Religion this year launched a new program that partners with the State Department and USAID to place religious studies PhDs – including fulltime faculty members – in year-long positions in the federal government where they can contribute their expertise and specialist knowledge to US diplomatic efforts.

There are other such programs at the society level, and at ACLS we are working to foster greater collaboration among scholarly organizations active in this space. We will be keeping track of where those programs take them, and this year we will build out the ACLS website to include information on our member societies' efforts.

I would also like to talk about the efforts at universities, some of which have launched terrific programs, and for the sake of time, I'll name just a few: the University of Wisconsin-Madison's Public Humanities Fellowship, which embeds graduate students in one of twelve community organizations in the Madison area, where the fellows take up substantive projects that draw on the capabilities developed in the pursuit of their scholarly work; the University of Miami's UGROW initiative, which provides opportunities for graduates to take up positions in various administrative offices and cultural institutions on campus; and the University of Illinois' Humanities without Walls program, which hosts a summer workshop series for graduate students exploring ways to translate their humanities training and research skills for a variety of career paths.

UIUC's Humanities without Walls program portrays both academic research and non-academic career initiatives as two sides of the same coin. This fits with our thinking at ACLS about Public Fellows, who are chosen for both their scholarly accomplishments and their non-academic interests and experience. Indeed, we find the skills honed in writing a good dissertation to be indispensable to the successful profile of a candidate for the Public Fellows program.

To look at this connection from another angle: Graduate and department chairs that have participated in the AHA and MLA programs report that in the process of creating workshops for students that help build skills in areas like budgeting, communication, translating research for nonspecialist audiences, the chairs realized that those skills are just as important to the careers of faculty as well, who may take on a number of administrative roles in the course of their careers.

For those of you listening and wondering what you can do in your departments, I will close with a few suggestions. First, assure the visibility of your department's PhDs, wherever their paths may lead. Departments and universities need to track and account for their graduate student outcomes, and ideally, when they do, they need to present career paths with a greater sense of parity. If members in the audience think that their own departments are doing good work in this area, I would be interested to know more about it - please send your newsletters, links to webpages, etc. to me. My contact information is available on the ACLS website.

Second, learn about what your institution is doing in this area. Many universities have developed resources to support career exploration, and to track the outcomes of their doctoral programs. Failing that, there are a number of independent sites dedicated to guiding PhDs through the process of a non-academic search, including VersatilePhD, and PhDsatWork.

As our colleagues in the Modern Language Association and the American Historical Association have suggested, graduate programs may wish to consider modest curricular updates as well. Our Public Fellows program alumni have suggested that a quantitative research methods course, at least one that acquaints graduates with the basics of statistical methods, could be useful. A few fellows have even reflected on how useful that training could have been to their dissertation research. The statistics issue aside, most often our fellows discover that they have exactly the skills and capacities needed for success in their new careers, though some report that they have not spent enough time considering how they might represent their experience and translate practices they understood as purely academic for use in other fields.

I will conclude my remarks now with a reminder that humanists must avoid the trap of believing that our work does not have broad application to the world outside of the university, or the archaeological dig, or the archive. Whether they acknowledge it or not, humanities PhDs acquire good habits and hone skills that are advantageous to nonacademic careers. It is incumbent upon the scholarly community to acknowledge that fact, or else we run the risk of doing a great disservice to our field, and to a world that has very good use for humanists.