INTRODUCTION

Toward a More Sustainable Model of Humanities Graduate Education

This tool kit offers faculty members and departments strategies and resources to help students understand the versatility of doctoral training and the broad range of occupations available to PhDs in the humanities. It takes as its premise that faculty mentors and advisers want their doctoral students to succeed and to put their learning and experience to work in satisfying, rewarding, and meaningful careers. For many students, this will be in tenure-line faculty appointments. For other students, it will be in occupations outside postsecondary teaching. Students whose doctoral programs impart a lively sense of the broad reach of humanistic study and whose experience of doctoral education builds a secure confidence in the value of the intellectual work they have done will have a significant advantage, and more options, in a competitive job market both inside and outside the academy.

The idea of humanities PhDs working outside the academy has drawn some controversy. But the facts are undeniable: humanities PhDs work outside the academy and will no doubt continue to do so. Although the reality of PhDs finding their way to employment outside the academy has a long history, the issue has taken on particular urgency since 2008, given the depressed state of the academic job market, the adjunctification of the academic labor force, and the persistent undervaluing of humanistic study and scholarship. Programs that successfully support the diverse career ambitions and outcomes of all their students and that can articulate the broad contributions of doctoral study will be demonstrating the public value of humanistic study and contributing to the creation of a more sustainable model of humanities graduate education.

This tool kit is a product of Connected Academics, an MLA initiative funded by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to help prepare doctoral students to use their humanistic training in a broader range of occupations than doctoral programs have, up to now, typically acknowledged and valued. It is motivated by the knowledge that PhDs in our fields have always made careers in a wide range of fulfilling, secure, and well-compensated occupations and by the belief that people with humanities PhDs are national assets who apply their specialized expertise in significant ways that benefit our society and economy.
Humanities Doctoral Education by the Numbers

It will come as a surprise to few that the academic job market in English and other modern languages has suffered since the financial crisis of 2008. At the same time, the number of PhDs graduating from humanities doctoral programs in the United States has continued to rise. Figure 1 below shows the 2015 Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) counts for PhD recipients in English and other modern languages from 2005 to 2015 against the trend lines for ads for full-time assistant professors in the MLA Job Information List over the same years.

But these numbers do not tell the entire story. Figure 2 presents findings from an MLA study of employment outcomes for 2,214 modern language PhDs who received their degrees between 1996 and 2011. The study found that half hold positions as tenured or tenure-track faculty members or as deans, provosts, or presidents (who presumably have tenure). Thirty percent hold nonfaculty positions or work outside higher education. The remaining twenty percent hold postsecondary faculty positions, teaching off the tenure track.

People who earn PhDs in the humanities find jobs. Though the data make clear the strong orientation for working in higher education in some capacity, they also document how PhD recipients in English and other modern languages are dispersed across many parts of the economy. Doctoral education in the humanities leads to careers of many different kinds and success in many different forms.

Most programs still fall well short of making sure doctoral candidates understand the range of occupations their studies might lead to or prepare them for. Many graduates who land outside the academy struggle through the transition in isolation, cut off from their programs and their peers. The idea behind this tool kit is that this need not—indeed, should not—be the case.

Humanistic Expertise

The numbers tell a story of humanities PhDs finding careers in and outside the academy. Programs should acknowledge the social value that accrues from having professionally trained humanists making use of their expertise in a variety of workplaces.

Since 2008, with the support of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the American Council of Learned Societies has placed humanities and humanistic social science PhDs in nonprofit and government organizations through its public fellows program. In 2017 the ACLS convened a panel of supervisors of ACLS public fellows at the MLA convention. Several of these supervisors said that the PhDs they had hired through ACLS were excellent writers and communicators and had actually transformed their organizations. One supervisor said that his organization’s ACLS public fellows had come in, “read” the organization, and made recommendations that fundamentally changed the organization for the better.

PhDs bring to their careers skills other than those related to their academic work (although their academic skills are important); they also bring perspectives and insight characteristic of humanistic modes of thinking. These forms of expertise are undervalued when presumed to be of use only inside the academy. When PhD career paths are tracked, we discover just how valuable intelligence derived from humanities training is in settings outside the academy. Work remains to be done in defining this humanistic expertise and specifying how it contributes to a variety of careers. But humanists are certainly skilled practitioners of interpretation, oral and written. Their listening comprehension is keen, and they can read documents accurately and, when necessary, with impressive concentration. Listening and reading well underlie the ability to write clearly, expressively, and gracefully, a prime mark of humanistic expertise. Humanists also have the ability to move easily between theoretical and applied models, to identify and critique underlying assumptions that others see as commonsensical, and to imagine multiple perspectives from which to grapple with the world and its problems.

Implicit in the idea that a humanities PhD can and should lead only to an academic career are a number of other assumptions: that the expertise students develop in the course of their educations will not be valued elsewhere, that any work humanities scholars find outside the academy must hold little intellectual interest and betray their values and their training, and that humanities scholarship has little or no public value.

In contrast, Connected Academics affirms that humanities expertise is valuable and desirable outside the academy and that humanists are well suited to move between and among organizations and sectors. If humanities scholars are to argue for their fields’ durability and relevance, then they must take seriously the range of work that those who hold the most advanced degree in these fields are doing in the world.
Overview of the Tool Kit

This tool kit is designed to help you advise your students, speak to your colleagues and administration, and, over time, change the culture in your department around career preparation for doctoral students. It recognizes that while no one faculty member can do everything, actions taken by a single faculty member can have a ripple effect.

The first module, Mapping Your Resources, asks you to take stock of what resources are available to you locally, both on campus and off. There are many wheels that you need not reinvent, and this module will help guide you to them.

The second module, Engaging Your Most Valuable Resource: Alumni, contains suggestions for tracking and leveraging your program’s alumni. Although many PhDs who leave the academy lose touch with their departments, this module will help programs keep alumni engaged.

The third module, Starting the Conversation with Students, contains concrete suggestions and sample language for starting and sustaining a conversation with your students about their career path, from recruitment day to the dissertation and graduation.

The fourth module, Starting the Conversation with Faculty Members and Administration, tackles the critical but often daunting task of beginning a conversation about PhD careers with colleagues and contains suggestions for managing conversations with deans and other administrators.

The fifth and final module, Changing Departmental Culture through Curriculum, addresses larger issues around long-term change, including admissions practices, current course offerings, and the dissertation.