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**The Part-Time Ph.D. Student**

***Is it an idea whose time has come—again?***



*Image: Marta Antelo for The Chronicle*

By Leonard Cassuto

My department recently graduated two Ph.D.'s of rather, ahem, mature vintage. Kristina Harvey entered our Ph.D. program with an M.A. in hand 10 years ago. Jacqueline Grindrod spent four years as a master's student and 12 more in the Ph.D. program before her successful defense.

Two more disgraceful examples of grotesquely elongated time to degree?

Not exactly. Both students went to graduate school part time.

Part-time graduate students in the humanities and related fields used to be a common sight on the U.S. educational landscape. Not so much anymore. As Ph.D. programs increasingly move to small models enrolling full-time students with full financial support, part-time students are gradually being squeezed out.

That is a historic change. I was surprised to learn that part-time students made up the majority of American graduate students from 1967 until 2000. According to statistics collected by the Department of Education, part-timers represented about 55 percent of the total graduate-student population through the 1960s and 1970s. But there's been a marked shift since the millennium. Full-time students now make up significantly more than half of all graduate students. In 2010, part-time students amounted to only 44 percent of the total, a swing that essentially reverses the ratio of the previous generations. And that movement shows no sign of abating.

My department's graduate program followed the national trend in its shift to an exclusively full-time model. We admitted our last part-time student about five years ago. The two part-timers who just graduated are among the last on our rolls.

The national shift away from part-time graduate-school options has some eminently reasonable motives. Most prominent programs are shrinking because they want to pay tuition and stipends for more of the students they admit. They also don't want to overproduce Ph.D.'s for employment markets that can't accommodate them. The movement away from part-timers results from a general downsizing that reflects a responsible approach to economic realities.

But when we eliminate part-timers, we may be throwing the baby out with the bathwater. After all, most part-time students already have jobs, so they don't necessarily need protection from a bad market. Harvey and Grindrod, my department's recent graduates, worked all through graduate school at the jobs they still have.

Harvey is a high-school teacher. She says she's better at her job for having gotten a Ph.D. That makes sense for her, and also for everyone else: The nation's secondary-school teaching improves when teachers get more training, so it follows that we should support the efforts of schoolteachers to earn doctorates. Both elementary and secondary schools suffer when Ph.D. programs restrict their enrollments to a small number of full-time students and thus exclude working teachers.

But Harvey didn't go to graduate school for vocational enhancement—at least that wasn't her main reason. "I come from a family of scholars," she wrote in an e-mail. "I have always loved critical analysis and literary interpretation, so it was a natural step to enroll in a Ph.D. program," even though she was working and raising a family during her doctoral-student years. Despite the extra work, she said, "I never tired of reading and refining my own argument in conversation with other critics."

In other words, Harvey went to graduate school because she enjoyed it. So did Grindrod, her fellow part-time student.

"I love to read," wrote Grindrod in an e-mail. A lawyer by training who has long worked in politics, she began her M.A. in 1996. "I always had a suspicion that I had taken a wrong turn after college by not pursuing the dream job of being an English professor," she said. "I decided I wanted to have a piece of that dream come true in some form or another." So she went to school after work, taking one course each term for many years before advancing to her dissertation, which took years more.

Of her time in graduate school, Grindrod said, "All my intellectual pistons were firing. I was surrounded by people who thought differently than the people in my workaday world. These new people and these instructors enlarged my view of humanity." Because of her studies, she said, "I became a better person."

What better testimony to the value of the humanities than that?

Both Grindrod and Harvey talk of love when they describe their time in graduate school. They speak the language of vocation—literally, calling—rather than of job. Shouldn't there be a place in graduate school for those who love it?

Dave Colander thinks so. Colander, a professor of economics at Middlebury College, argues in a forthcoming article in *Pedagogy* that graduate school ought to be presented not only as job training but also as a "luxury consumption good." Departments, he says, ought to distinguish between students who enroll in search of a job afterward and those who attend for the sheer love of the subject, a category that includes many part-time students.

Colander focuses his analysis on English departments, but it's easy to generalize from his conclusions. Part-timers, he suggests, "might be organized into an 'Executive English Ph.D.' program" with "a more convenient schedule for working students, just as Executive M.B.A. programs have."

Some graduate students, Colander points out, already treat graduate school as a consumption good. "Studying English can be highly intellectually fulfilling," he notes, adding: "It is amazing how the current structure of the programs suppresses this intellectually enjoyable aspect of the study in the attempt to prepare students for an academic research job."

Colander's point—and also mine—is that one blueprint should not be used to design all graduate programs. Too much of the training that graduate students receive fits the template of the research-university career that we all know is available to only a comparative few.

The same goes for admissions. Why should we admit only full-time students seeking a faculty career when graduate study also fits the lives—and desires—of other groups of people who would benefit from going part time? Making a place for those students looks like a win-win, for them and the institutions. That isn't a disguised desire to pad enrollments and generate tuition dollars to stuff the university's pockets. Instead, it's a matter of reaching out to a neglected constituency that the university once served well, and that now needs attention.

Doctoral programs in education already provide an example of what productive part-time study looks like. Education schools have the highest doctoral time to degree of any field, but the numbers inspire less alarm than elsewhere because so many education students work full time as teachers and administrators while they pursue Ph.D.'s. Part-time graduate students in education are not being impoverished by the graduate-industrial complex. They have professional lives, and they're living them.

Some might contend that the cost of graduate school is an unfair burden to part-timers, who often pay their own way. Would-be graduate students don't always know what's good for them, this argument goes, and universities should not become complicit in soaking them for heavy tuition costs over many years.

That argument applies most readily to private universities. Public institutions not only cost less but also have a broader mission: to serve the public. Shouldn't that service include part-time doctoral study?

The problem is that many public universities think less about the public and more about the private universities that they're trying to emulate. For example, the Graduate Center of the City University of New York recently announced a plan to reduce graduate admissions and raise fellowships across the board for those admitted—a move to a leaner, full-time model offering students full financial support. The idea, said William P. Kelly, who was president of the Graduate Center when the plan was unveiled (he's now interim chancellor at CUNY), is for doctoral students to graduate in five years. Certainly that is a laudable goal.

But Kelly added an unpleasant subtext when he described this policy as a move away from graduate school as a "roach motel," where "you check in and don't check out." Kelly caught a lot of flak for describing his own graduate students as vermin, and justly so. But more to the point, Kelly said that if anyone doesn't finish in five years, "that will be principally a function of life decisions and life choices."

That whole thought process renders the part-time student invisible. Kelly's pejorative tone suggests that any "life choices" that lead to part-time study must be bad ones.

But CUNY should be just the kind of place that encourages part-time Ph.D. students. Chase Robinson, a former provost and now interim president of the Graduate Center, linked the new fellowships to the recruitment of star faculty members, who will, in turn, attract better and better students—and on whirls the familiar prestige-driven carousel. Many students protested, saying that that aim was inconsistent with CUNY's historic mission to serve the less privileged.

The question of the larger mission of institutions like CUNY invokes a wider debate, of course, about the diverse purposes of different graduate programs. It's a debate [I've already joined.](http://chronicle.com/article/Were-Not-a-Hierarchy-Were/137461) But let's look at it from the perspective of part-time students. If we are to make it possible for part-time students to pursue graduate degrees, then public institutions should lead the way.

Jim Grossman, executive director of the American Historical Association, says that public universities have public obligations, including to part-timers. "If you're a teacher," says Grossman, "you ought to be able to get a Ph.D. at a public university at an affordable price."

If teachers can do it, the door should be open for professionals from other sectors as well. With part-time offerings, universities can serve the public, the professions, and society at the same time. True, part-time doctoral options may not qualify as "elite" or help move a program up the national rankings. But isn't it time that we were motivated by something other than such invidious comparisons?

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<http://chronicle.com/article/The-Part-Time-PhD-Student/142105/>