

## Ten Ways to Begin

I hope that all readers feel inspired by the importance of career diversity in humanities PhD programs, and empowered to pursue the pathway that inspires them and support their students to do the same. As a final takeaway, here are ten suggestions for how to begin building a university that is truly worth fighting for, both at the individual and structural levels. Whether you are a student, faculty member, or administrator, there are things you can do right now.

### **1. Make space for exploration and reflection.**

Graduate school can be all-encompassing. Despite—or perhaps because of—that, it is also deeply valuable to seek ways to stay connected with skills, interests, and communities that are not necessarily reflected in traditional academic work. Students, think about the things that energize you, that you're willing to make time for, that help you feel grounded; these can be useful indicators of what may one day become a fulfilling career path. Making space for priorities outside the university can bring greater perspective to your scholarly work. Consider developing a reflective practice in which you actively look for patterns among the areas of your life that build you up or that create stress, and allow those patterns to be signposts for possible future pathways.

Faculty members and administrators, you can make space for this kind of reflection by encouraging students to lead balanced lives. One way to do this is by asking questions—from the very earliest stages of graduate school—that make it clear that it is a good and normal thing to have commitments outside of the department. Ask open-ended questions and help students to see possible connections between their emerging scholarly interests

and the things that motivate them in other ways. For instance, you might ask about how a student's research topic might be of use to a particular community group, or whether a student is involved in a relevant nonprofit. While talking about personal information can be delicate, sharing a bit about your own outside commitments can also be valuable. It can help students imagine their own futures if they know the professors they admire have lives outside the university as well.

## **2. Expand the notion of what constitutes meaningful scholarship—and how it can be evaluated.**

Peer-reviewed journal articles and scholarly monographs are not the only way to share research—far from it. Graduate students and faculty members have many opportunities to push the boundaries of how to meaningfully share research (though the amount of risk an individual can take on varies widely). Students, it is important to find faculty who will support you if your dissertation falls outside your department's usual parameters, and be ready to point to examples of similar project. In addition, embrace flexibility with your approach; systems and requirements do not change overnight, and some measure of compromise might help you to avoid getting stuck.

If you are in a position to do so, help pave the way for more junior scholars to work creatively. Lobby for the acceptance of nontraditional dissertations that allow students to assemble and present their research in a way that makes sense for their future goals, and for the nature of their particular project. Train faculty in how to evaluate innovative work by drawing on tools developed by scholarly societies like the Modern Language Association. Support tenure cases for scholars who take risks, engage with different audiences, and connect with varied communities. Since prestige remains the coin of the realm for universities, finding ways to formally value public-oriented work and reintegrate that work into scholarly conversations is essential—both to reward scholars' work and to signal that creative applications of research are meaningful.

## **3. Build partnerships outside the university.**

Which organizations and industries are important to the community where your institution is located? Consider finding ways to connect with them, either formally or informally. Think about public-oriented project ideas that align with your or your students' research interests and would also benefit a community-based organization. Rather than simply making the organization an object of study, invite them to join as collaborators and cocreators. From single projects, work toward longer partnerships that are mutually beneficial. Over time,

these connections could evolve to offer internship opportunities, networks of knowledge and resources, and new ways of understanding the potential public impact of scholarly work.

As a corollary, be open to learning from many different sources—not just those that are formally academic in nature. Spending time listening to and learning from local communities, nonprofits, activist groups, journalists, and many, many others can give scholars a more balanced and grounded perspective on research. Building stronger public outreach and engagement also helps communities beyond the university to glimpse the work being done by researchers and teachers, and forges stronger respect and connection between the two.

#### **4. Find small ways to incorporate professional development from the earliest days of the graduate school trajectory.**

Professional development often comes too late, when expectations for a future trajectory are already set and anxieties are high. A better approach is to bring the topic into advising conversations, departmental events, and classrooms from day one. For instance, rather than evaluating students exclusively on their writing, develop collaborative project assignments that allow students to work together in a variety of roles and to communicate their findings to an array of audiences. Advisors might make a conscious effort to talk with students about past experiences and future plans. Help students develop translational ways of thinking about what they do in order to learn to reframe skills and interests for different contexts. And students, if you are not getting the support you need, ask for it—both individually and collectively with your peers.

#### **5. Seek outside resources.**

Sometimes the best resources may take a bit of digging to find, so students and faculty alike can apply their research skills in looking for support. Get to know the career center at your institution, especially if there are counselors who focus on graduate students. Explore online resources and toolkits from professional organizations. Investigate early so that you have ideas and resources ready at hand when you or your students need them.

Listen in on Twitter and in other informal online spaces. If you think you may need (or want) to develop a specific skill, like web design or a programming language, consider waiting to do a workshop or online tutorials until you have a project under way so that you have something concrete to work on as you learn. If possible, attend workshops and conferences in an area outside your usual field to build skills and develop a network. Sometimes different departments share different resources, so you might also consider organizing an interdisciplinary

professional development meet-up with other graduate students at your institution to share suggestions, frustrations, and more.

**6. Tune your program's curriculum to make the most of required courses.**

If your program has required introductory or research methods courses as part of its curriculum, take a close look at the skills, values, and paradigms that it introduces to new students. Consider reshaping such courses to offer opportunities to students to think in a translational way about their program of study. Without sacrificing rigor or content, embedding the course in a broader context that reaches beyond the discipline and even beyond the academy can lead to deeper connections down the road. The course can be even more powerful if it adds a public-facing or collaborative project component, as students will begin to learn the power of working together toward a common goal that has a clear potential impact.

**7. Recognize the importance of having good models.**

Universities value innovative work, but they also stand on precedent and tradition. To support work that appears risky or unusual, students and administrators alike need to be able to point to others who have done similar work or pursued a similar path. Each graduate student who is hired into a high-level position or something with a great potential trajectory is one more person who can be a voice for the importance of higher education. But for that to be true, those pathways must be visible and celebrated.

To establish strong models within a department, consider reaching out to alumni and featuring their achievements and pathways on the department website; inviting speakers who represent a wider range of expertise and possible futures to help students gain ideas and build their networks; or building collaborations with like-minded programs at other institutions. Staying connected with and highlighting the work of former students is one of the simplest and least resource-intensive things that a program can do.

**8. Work toward reform in multiple areas at once.**

A thoughtful and comprehensive approach to reforming graduate education and equipping students for a wider range of professional paths requires consideration of questions related to the changing landscape of higher education. Issues such as labor practices, public investment in higher education, changes and opportunities in scholarly communication and digital pedagogy, and broad social justice issues such as racism and gender bias all affect the training that

graduate students receive and the career paths they pursue. Strive to maintain awareness of the broader landscape of higher education and how issues in one area affect all other elements. All of these areas matter, but our energies are finite—so choose one thing that you care about and where you feel you can make a difference and start there. It is almost certainly connected to the broader aim of creating a healthy and sustainable educational system that is both rigorous and inclusive.

**9. Work against racism, sexism, and other forms of bias  
in individual and systemic ways.**

White scholars especially must learn to notice and work against systemic racism and sexism in our institutions and in the academy. Graduate students are under intense stress that can negatively affect physical and mental health, not to mention academic performance. This is even more true for students whose identities are historically underrepresented in the academy—women and non-binary people of all races and ethnicities, people of color of all genders, first-generation students, LGBTQ+ people, and more. Advisors can be a first line of support and can help students to thrive, reach their goals, and pursue a career pathway of their choosing.

Critically examining problematic tendencies within a program is an important first step to developing a more fully inclusive institution that welcomes diverse backgrounds, varied perspectives, and new forms of knowledge. The systemic racism and widespread bias that make it more difficult for people from marginalized communities to thrive mean that faculty, students, and the public are generally learning from those who are in dominant cultural positions. To educate students in the fullest sense of the term, universities must become places where people from all backgrounds can question, challenge, explore, and articulate new views without fear of retribution.

**10. Be a voice for change at the local level up to whatever  
is the biggest platform you can obtain.**

Higher education needs your support, so join others in working toward meaningful reform. Try putting your research and writing skills to use in new ways that allow you to go beyond your research area to articulate the value of your work—and that of your colleagues—in a broader context. What has your education enabled you to do, and what difference does your research make in the world? Write op-eds that connect to current events or local issues. Go to conferences and give presentations not only on your research, but on structural issues that you care about. Use opportunities for speaking and writing to lift

up the work of those around you. If you have a union, get involved so that you can get a sense of how your goals and concerns fit in with those of the broader institutional community. Speak up about departmental policies that may be problematic. Students, get involved in committees so that you can have a voice in the decisions that affect your trajectory. However you choose to get involved, and even if change is hard to see, know that your voice matters every step of the way. The time for change is now. Let's get started.