Description

The Academic Bubble

As a graduate student seeking a position in a doctoral research program, your field of vision may not extend too far beyond the end of your nose. You have found work that you love and that you're good at (or at least good enough to warrant active consideration for the PhD program). It's easy to understand why your research proposal takes top priority, with the prospect of post-doctorate employment left on the back-burner, to be dealt with after many, many hours of studious research over the next few years.

The academic bubble allows you to do that. Fees are covered by loans and maybe even a scholarship or two, and living expenses are covered with part-time work and a resigned acceptance of the quasi-nutritional value of instant noodles and macaroni and cheese. Paying back those loans and covering all of life's other expenses won't become a reality until immediately after the ink dries on your diploma.

The Business of Education

Doctoral credit hours are priced at the top of the academic menu and can therefore be very attractive to institutions looking to balance their costs with their revenues. Welcoming eager young doctoral students to continue their academic careers is easy to do when you have no obligation to provide them with gainful employment at the end of the program.

Since the incoming class has no relation to the number of available employment positions at the end, class size simply becomes a matter of having enough space and available faculty to supervise them all. Top-tier research institutions are able to attract the top candidates and usually have no problem finding gainful employment for them, but once you step-out of the top-tier, the world can become a lot more challenging.

Federal and State Oversight

The Department of Education and State regulatory bodies are paying increasing attention to graduation rates from both traditional and for-profit institutions, and they have taken action in some cases where outlandish promises of employment potential never had a chance of being met. Most institutions offer some form of career services, but those tend to meet the needs of undergraduate and graduate students more than doctoral candidates. The more specialized your area of research, the harder it can be for a general career services department to help you.

An Ethical Obligation

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In a December 2014 interview with Times Higher Education, Dame Athene Donald, professor of experimental physics at Cambridge University and fellow of the Royal Society, called for “honest andup front” admissions on the part of academia that “There are far more PhD students in training thanthere are faculty positions for them to fill.”

She goes on to state that “If they don’t find out until quite late, they can be quite angry…One of the key things is to make sure right from the outset that students know that they are not walking into a job for life.”

Following this line of argument, it would seem logical that traditional career services departments should develop programs for doctoral students that include more transferable skills to prepare those who don’t achieve academic job as faculty or research positions to build successful careers outside of academia with foundations or any number of federal agencies. That may not be the first choice of the newly minted Doctor of Philosophy but those loans will be coming due any time now.

Category

1. Career Corner
2. PhDs & Postdocs

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