

## Book Review / Compte rendu

**Cassuto, Leonard. (2015). *The graduate school mess: What caused it and how we can fix it*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press. Pages: 309. Price: \$29.95 USD (hardcover).**

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There are several problems currently facing graduate schools in Canada and the United States. Lack of future academic positions, slow student progress, tightening university budgets, and mental wellness concerns challenge graduate students, their supervisors, and their institutions of higher learning (Allum, Kent, & McCarthy, 2014; Bok, 2015; Charbonneau, 2013). It is in this turbulent atmosphere that Cassuto (2015) has written his timely book calling for reform of graduate school systems. Knowing his audience of tenured professors can not be coerced into reform, Cassuto appeals to the reader's sense of decency: advocating for humane treatment of graduate students, with a focus on meeting students' needs, respecting their time, their financial concerns, and their need to prepare for careers that might lie outside of academia.

Cassuto is a professor of English at Fordham University. While he has edited books and written journal articles, his main qualification for writing this book may be his column for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled "The Graduate Adviser" where he explores many of the issues encountered with graduate education. It is these explorations that led to the writing of *The Graduate School Mess*.

Cassuto begins the book by laying out some of the problems with the current state of graduate schools. Historically graduate programs, particularly at the Ph.D. level, have been training for an academic career. The availability of these positions has dwindled, however, and graduate schools are not necessarily meeting the needs of students who wish to seek work outside of academia. Given the breadth and depth of skills typically developed during the Ph.D. process, Cassuto argues that with appropriate advisement and training, this set of transferrable skills can be identified and honed.

Chapter one describes the gatekeeping role played by the admissions process. This chapter takes a historic look at the traditional bias towards knowledge production over teaching, the bias towards research institutions, and the focus on placing the needs of researchers over the needs of their students. To address this imbalance, Cassuto suggests,

faculty need to take a broader view of scholarship that includes more than publishing, admissions to graduate programs should be reduced, and a diverse range of goals for students should be promoted.

The classwork chapter suggests responsibilities that professors should take on in their role of teaching graduate students. While teaching graduate school is considered the pinnacle of teaching, not enough thought is given to the needs of graduate students where their learning and professional futures are concerned; too often students are left to learn on their own and from each other. To improve the current situation, Cassuto suggests that graduate schools need to prepare students for jobs outside of academia, include explicit writing instruction, and focus on skills.

The third chapter focusses on the comprehensive exam. Again, based on a historic review, Cassuto considers the role of the comprehensive in identifying students who should or should not carry on with their current studies. Cassuto argues the exam format does not lend itself to retention and transfer of information and suggests a more developmental process with more authentic assessment as a more useful format. Exams based on a student and committee developed reading list, a synthesis paper based on the student's research, a portfolio, or a dissertation proposal, are presented as more meaningful comprehensive projects.

The next chapter covers the complexities of advisor-student relationships, noting advisors must now prepare themselves to be able to support students who are likely to choose a job outside of academia. Cassuto provides notes on supporting students to complete their writing, helping students to recognize when it might be time to change educational paths, and helping students who are stuck.

Degrees are the subject of chapter five. Universities and departments need to question what the dissertation should be and how long it should take to write. Here Cassuto argues for flexibility in the dissertation, suggesting that it should be of use in the job that the student plans to undertake after its completion. The dissertation could take the form of a suite of essays, web-based projects, or collaborative projects, for example. The chapter concludes with some examples of master's degrees that are innovative and designed to meet the demand of both industry and students.

Professionalism and the job market are the topics of the next two chapters. Here the author discusses the pressure students experience to publish early and graduate as fully-formed researchers, much earlier than was expected in the past. Students who complete their degrees in a timely fashion might not have the opportunity to publish or teach as widely as students who take longer to complete. Conversely, students who take longer to graduate are often faced with increased debt but may be more likely to be hired if they have an established publishing and teaching record. Again, the reader is encouraged to consider the need to broaden professionalization, preparing students to do more than academic careers. Universities are encouraged to track their graduates' career paths after graduation and present alternate academic and non-academic options for their students.

The book concludes with a call for universities to connect with the public and to teach doctoral students how to engage the public with the goal of regaining a trusting relationship. One suggestion is to adjust university policies to include public projects as a factor in tenure decisions and faculty evaluations. Another suggestion is to invite students to a Ph.D. communications course where students consider the needs of diverse audiences and how to engage them.

*The Graduate School Mess* presents a thorough snapshot of the current situation in universities in the United States, with a focus on the humanities. As a graduate student in my first year of doctoral studies, I found this book to be particularly eye-opening and an encouragement to question some of the entrenched practices in academia. I appreciated the author's admonitions to take a realistic look at the job market and his focus on fair, compassionate treatment of graduate students.

As a student at a Canadian university in a program where much thought is given to student success and individual student needs, however, I felt that the book made several assumptions that were not always applicable. While most universities still retain some vestiges of the traditional graduate degree system, many are making changes in the directions identified by Cassuto. The author identifies some examples in the text such as the Mellon Foundation's program to encourage history departments to prepare their students for a variety of careers and the Stanford University custom of having Ph.D. students co-teach with professors. It would be interesting to learn about more innovations that are being attempted.

The book is useful reading for university faculty and staff who are interested in improving the state of graduate school, improving outcomes for graduates, and addressing time-to-completion problems. It is also valuable for graduate students who are interested in taking a wider look at the system they have entered. The author brings thoughtful expertise to the topic and does a masterful job of bringing together commentaries from a variety of sources. It is an important topic area for keeping universities, and particularly graduate education, relevant when higher education appears to be confronted with the need for change. 🍁

### References

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