

# BOOK REVIEW

## THE NEW PHD: HOW TO BUILD A BETTER GRADUATE EDUCATION

REVIEWED BY

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Cassuto, Leonard and Weisbuch, Robert (2021). *The New PhD: How to Build a Better Graduate Education*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press. Pages: 400. Price: 32.95 USD (hardcover).

Doctoral education, write Leonard Cassuto and Richard Weisbuch, authors of *The New PhD*, "...has changed little in more than a century since it was introduced in the United States" (p. 4). Change-versus-tradition texts are now legion in the higher education field. In both camps, some lament while others eagerly anticipate. With substantial experience between them, including as scholars of higher education, departmental and faculty leaders, and presidencies, Cassuto and Weisbuch know the landscape. They eagerly anticipate change. Their book is an attack on isomorphism, with the research-intensive Ph.D. programme in the crosshairs. And they deliver with a practical, evidence-based monograph that is a toolkit for revamping doctoral education.

The fundamental premise of *The New PhD* is the persistence of traditional structures and processes that waste talent and energy. Cassuto and Weisbuch focus mainly on the arts, humanities and social sciences but write: "We've written this book to help...fix graduate school in the arts and sciences" (p. 3). Evidence is drawn from comprehensive coverage of the literature including other (surprisingly frequent!) reviews and prescriptions for change. A basic sequence of facts is their call to action. About half of all American doctoral programme entrants never finish. Among the half who do finish, about half again or 25% of all graduate programme entrants may realise an academic appointment, increasingly in teaching-based appointments across the US college spectrum. Eventually, perhaps, about one in eight are

appointed in a R1 (Carnegie "highly active") research-intensive institution. When the numbers are framed in this way, the reader appreciates the loss of time, resources and talent in doctoral programme milestones and outcomes wrapped around the rare few who succeed, but doing little or nothing for the vast majority.

American readers perhaps more than Canadian will be interested in the details of "two reform eras" starting around 1990 (chapter 1). Whereas the first era, lasting to 2006, involved national-scale organisations (e.g., Mellon Foundation), the period since 2013 has seen more active engagement by the disciplines (e.g., American Historical Association). More important in recent years, the authors argue, is dedicated attention to career diversity. Chapter 2 is where the reader begins to see the toolkit that is *The New PhD*, advising the reader on how to initiate discussion on reforms (e.g., empower the graduate dean, typically less resourced than mainline disciplinary deans). Chapters 3 through 9 take the reader through reform "challenges," namely: seven programme elements (public scholarship, admissions and attrition, student support and timelines, curriculum, advising, pedagogy, the dissertation) and two programme outcomes (programme oversight and data/assessment). Finally, Cassuto and Weisbuch devote Chapters 10 and 11 to furthering public scholarship and step-by-step guidance on planning for change. A coda was necessitated by just-in-time arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic as the book went to press.

Two features of *The New PhD* are worth noting. The logical arrangement described above scaffolds a book that is helpfully the sum of its parts. Chapters may be accessed by the reader with specific targets. The administrator, for example, can dive right in for pointers (even hypothetical conversations!) on how to get started within their own programme or institution. Taking their cues from David Grant's *Social Profit Handbook* on successful group dynamics, Cassuto and Weisbuch offer advice in Chapter 2 on how to listen to students (a growing expectation of them) including about their preferences for courses, their work outside of programme (e.g., part-time jobs) and their career aspirations (pp. 93-5).

In another important respect, there is benefit to reading *The New PhD* from cover to cover for its treatment of racial, ethnic, socioeconomic and gender diversity. "Because diversity is a multifaceted high-stakes issue, we will treat it throughout the book rather than isolate it artificially....To address questions of racial, ethnic, and gender justice requires rethinking all aspects of a program..." (p. 27). Thus, each substantive chapter features discussion of diversification. Consider an example in Chapter 4, Admission and Attrition: Recruitment and retention are outlined through articulation between two institutions, one (Fisk) historically black university and a nearby R1 school (Vanderbilt). The bridge is made with student support services including counseling and formal mentoring by peers, faculty and staff (p. 165). Similarly, Chapter 10, From Words to Actions, identifies a renewed role for national organisations to incent and reward "Innovative recruitment strategies to achieve a more diverse student cohort, by collaborations among academic institutions and through additional funding opportunities on both a need and racial/ethnic/gender basis" (p. 342). This integration elevates the book to more than the sum of its parts. It also brings out the foundational motivation that we ought to do right by students.

Because *The New PhD* is a toolkit for change rather than a historical or theoretical tome, the language is straightforward and accessible. For some, the book's light treatment of pedagogy will be a weakness, but that may well be a critique of apples for not being oranges. The authors wish to spur change programmatically from the grassroots. Certainly, more could have been written about the master's degree beyond a few passages. Overhaul of the doctorate surely has upstream implications for the master's. More, too, could have been made of similarities and lessons from STEM and other disci-

plines. STEM-related career diversification is baked into doctoral education on that side of campus. It is now common for industry research scientists to hold a doctorate. The authors note this. Tracing those developments and transferability would have been worth a deeper dive. There are indeed other examples of reimagined doctoral education such as the Ed.D. (doctorate in Education). The Ed.D.'s emphasis on organisational management and change reaches well beyond traditionally cloistered and insular research doctorates.

If you allow the apparent contradiction, *The New PhD* can be described as "obvious stealth." Frank language and nuts-and-bolts prescriptions belie a revolutionary core: that change in doctoral education should spring *sui generis*, from within institutions and programmes. Earlier reforms failed to breach campus gates. The message, instead, is that institutional, discipline-based grassroots are the way forward. Cassuto and Weisbuch say their target audience is "[American]... university departments, ... administrations and national organisations, individual faculty members, and yes, graduate students too" (pp. 29-30). However you relate, if you are concerned about outmoded programmes that hemorrhage talent and resources, then you should read this book.