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### The Three R’s of the PhD Workforce

I am the humanist of the bunch of us up here, and if we were working on the basis of stereotypes, I’d expect myself to say something about literature, philosophy, and values. I will do that, at least in a certain way. But first I want to talk about the nature of the PhD degree itself, or more accurately, the nature of the people who get PhD degrees. Then I’ll come back to the question of what employers want.

What do we know about the people who get PhDs? They represent what I call “the three R’s.” These are not the old misspelled *Readin’*, *Ritin’*, and *Rithmetic* from elementary school. Rather, when we talk about PhDs, we talk about *Risk-taking*, *Rigor*, and *Resilience*.

“What’s the risk?” you may ask. The fact is that most PhD students have chosen a path that does not come with the comfortable exit slide right into a specific job. Some people consider this not just risk-taking, but recklessness. Only about 50% of PhDs work in academia – the percentage is lower in the sciences, where there are more outside options, and higher in the humanities, where academia is the most significant “consumer” of PhDs. This means that a person with a PhD in mechanical engineering may end up as an engineering professor; or she may end up designing a new desalinization system for the city of Los Angeles; or she may end up as a college administrator and mentor for underrepresented students. It means that a person with a PhD Classics may end up as a Classics professor; but he may get a law degree and end up working for Sotheby’s Art Auctions; or he may end up writing a blog about art news. And it means that a person with a PhD in sociology may end up in academia; or she may end up designing a data-driven counseling program for a school district; or working for a hospital designing programs to help people stay on their medications.

Another, even more important area in which PhDs are risk-takers lies in the nature of their projects. Their task is to create knowledge, to find new ways of understanding the world, from the level of the atom, to the function of global relations, to the creative arc of art and literature. In funded fields, this level of daring depends largely on the PI and the grant that provides the basis for the student’s support. In unfunded fields, if the student can convince her or his dissertation committee that the project is worthwhile, any level of intellectual risk can be taken.

This leads to the second R – Rigor. PhD students must not only know the basics, they must dig deeply into their fields and do hard-nosed analysis. The list of operative words in concluding chapters of PhD dissertations does not include “almost,” “sort of,” or “oh, whatever.” Even in fields that are prone to “problematize” concepts on purpose, analysis must be grounded in sources and argued in a manner deemed compelling by the scholarly community. Another aspect of rigor lies in clear and persuasive communication. Other people must be able to understand the problem, the process, and the results. Without this rigor, the work is lost. It will be of no use to any employer, and of no use to the world.

And finally, the third R – Resilience. I do not know of any PhD dissertation that has gone entirely as planned. Experiments fail. Lines of thinking turn into blind alleys. Archives do not always contain the expected materials. Research sometimes needs to be recast, reframed, or even entirely rethought. There are times when the adjustments are minor, and times when they are so substantial that they knock the wind out of you, and you are left intellectually breathless on the floor. But whatever the level of adjustment, a person who has completed a dissertation has dealt with the vicissitudes of the genre, of the field, and of life.

These are more than transferable skills, they are transferrable *qualities*. And I'm not the only one who thinks so. Let me conclude with quotations from four people in the know:

- In article last year in *The Atlantic*, Victoria Blodgett, director of Graduate Career Services at Yale, was quoted as saying: “People who take their PhDs into other realms are not necessarily being hired for their content expertise, but for their process skills: the ability to do excellent research, to write, to make cogent arguments.” (<http://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2014/03/what-can-you-do-with-a-humanities-phd-anyway/359927/>)
- June Cohen, the Executive Producer of TED Media, is quoted in the *Times Higher Education Supplement* as saying that, however seemingly irrelevant the topic, anyone who has ever gotten a PhD has “learned stamina and focus and how to listen” – attributes that are always valuable to employers. (<https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/google-leads-search-for-humanities-phd-graduates/416190.article>)
- Damon Horowitz, billed as Google’s In-House Philosopher and Director of Engineering is described in the *Washington Post* as urging colleagues with absolutely purposeful provocation: “Quit your technology job. Get a PhD in the humanities. That’s the way to get ahead in the technology sector.” What this means is that Google needs both engineers and humanists, and people who combine the qualities of both, to be what it wants to be: a company that understands its consumers, a company that can communicate with its consumers, that is loved by its consumers; and a company that can step back and think about itself. ([https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-innovations/why-you-should-quit-your-tech-job-and-study-the-humanities/2012/05/16/gIQAvibbUU\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/on-innovations/why-you-should-quit-your-tech-job-and-study-the-humanities/2012/05/16/gIQAvibbUU_story.html); see also <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DBt9mVdgnI>)
- And finally, Francis Collins, the director of the National Institutes of Health, comments with a hint of impatience in *Nature* on the debate about academic versus nonacademic careers. He says: “These are not alternative careers, they are just careers.” (<http://www.nature.com/news/there-is-life-after-academia-1.15808>)

In point of fact, employers already know about the rigor, risk-taking, and resilience of PhD’s. Only 2% of PhDs are unemployed. But it is our job as graduate deans is to instigate a disruptive and beneficial cultural change, so that not only employers, but also congresspeople, presidents,

students, faculty, and the public at large, will understand the three R's that are the hallmark of the PhD workforce.