

MODULE 5

Changing Departmental Culture through Curriculum

Introduction

Changes in departmental culture and curriculum are among the most challenging but also the most necessary. Neither culture nor curriculum can be changed by administrative fiat or by the work of one or even two or three dedicated faculty members. Change in department culture around issues of career outcomes requires convincing both faculty members and graduate students, and curricular changes often must be agreed upon by all faculty members.

However, changes to both culture and curriculum are worth working toward because they are likely to be the most influential and long lasting. They will not vanish immediately when a particularly active student graduates nor when a vocal faculty member moves on to other interests. Although every section of this tool kit focuses on changes that, when taken together, will result in culture change, this section focuses specifically on curricular and structural changes that departments can consider making.

Adapting Current Course Offerings

Graduate seminars—including proseminars and pedagogy courses—offer faculty members the opportunity to change curriculum in small ways that benefit graduate students' learning, thereby contributing to departmental cultural change.

Graduate Seminars

Take a few minutes of class time and ask students to reflect on how their work in this course is contributing to their professional development and broader identities as humanists. Consider alternatives to the twenty- to twenty-five-page paper (a proto-dissertation chapter) and the twenty-minute in-class presentation (a proto-conference paper). Offering an array of writing assignments creates opportunities for students to develop skills that will be useful to them both in and outside the academy. Such assignments might include:

- An annotated syllabus on a topic related to the course
- A book review of a new work in the field
- A suite of blog posts or journalistic pieces related to the topic
- A proposal for a public humanities project related to the topic
- A proposal for a digital humanities project related to the topic

Consider inviting other faculty or staff members at the university to speak to your students, such as faculty members from creative writing or the journalism department to talk about creative nonfiction, staff members from the university museum to talk about creating exhibitions, and educational technology specialists to talk about the digital humanities. Drawing on outside expertise gives your students the scaffolding they need to be successful in new kinds of assignments and increases their networks within the university.

Pedagogy Courses and Proseminars

Formal professional training already takes place in departments through pedagogy courses and proseminars, which provide opportunities to introduce activities that prompt students to think more broadly about their identities as humanists and the types of expertise they are developing.

In a pedagogy course, students could be asked to expand their thinking about teaching and classroom life to consider how teaching happens outside classrooms—at the university and beyond. Are there places outside the university where their area of interest is being taught? What audiences are being reached? What pedagogical practices are being used?

In a departmental proseminar, students could be asked to think more broadly about themselves as professional humanists who are part of a humanities workforce that exists across a wide variety of sectors. What are the forms of humanistic expertise and modes of thinking students could be aiming to develop? What is the role of humanistic critique and cultural commentary outside the academy? Where is it happening?

Proseminars also offer spaces where faculty members might invite outside speakers to share their expertise with students. **Alumni** might visit in person or by *Skype*. Faculty members can offer an orientation in collaboration with **career services** for students to recognize their career options and available campus resources. The **Career Exploration Activity Packet** could easily be done in a proseminar with the facilitation of a faculty member.

Module 3 of this tool kit discusses the importance of alumni tracking. Pedagogy courses and proseminar courses offer departments the opportunity to delegate some of the work of tracking down alumni to their graduate students. This is fairly easy to do with a list of names and *Google* and *LinkedIn* ([linkedin.com/alumni](https://www.linkedin.com/alumni)).

In a pedagogy course, students could be asked to track down three alumni of their program who are doing some form of teaching (not limited to those teaching at four-year institutions). In a proseminar course, the assignment could be broader, requiring students to find three alumni who are working across at least two different sectors. In both cases, the assignment can have students contact the alumni and do informational interviews with them—by *Skype* or in person. Students can then present their findings in the proseminar and give the contact information to the department.

Students will gain valuable contacts and insight, and the department will gain knowledge about and contact information for its alumni.

Helping Students Be Thoughtful and Deliberate about Their Curricular Choices

In [Preparing for Life Outside the Academy: A Primer and Resource Guide](#), Spanish PhD Sarah Goldberg makes a number of recommendations to graduate students about how they can gain a broad array of skills and experiences during their course of study. Many of these opportunities involve simply tweaking or building upon activities they are already engaged in. Among Goldberg's suggestions to graduate students are:

In teaching: Create connections with local cultural sites and institutions. Use technology in the classroom. Mentor undergraduates.

In research: Develop new technical skills. Manage your dissertation thoughtfully to build project management experience. Apply for grants to build grant-writing skills and demonstrate success in this area.

In service: Plan events and lead meetings.

Goldberg also recommends that graduate students make a work schedule for managing their time on a day-to-day basis and create an Individual Development Plan (IDP) for managing the months, semesters, and years allotted to them in graduate school. Working backward from an anticipated date of graduation, students can decide well in advance when they intend to submit an article for consideration in a journal; when they will need to apply for a particular fellowship; when they intend to submit a dissertation prospectus; and what they would like to do during their summers, either funded or unfunded.

An IDP is a valuable tool for helping students define and accomplish their graduate school bucket list. Encouraging your students to make one and to update it with you every quarter or semester will also make advising more efficient and effective for you as their faculty mentor.

Admissions Practices

The 2014 [report](#) from the MLA Task Force on Doctoral Study in Modern Language and Literature recommends that “departments should develop admissions practices and policies appropriate to the changing character of doctoral education and the broadened range of career opportunities.” Departments might review their admissions criteria and practices in the light of their alumni employment record, with an eye to diversity in graduate cohorts that matches the career diversity of alumni.

The Dissertation

Students and faculty members often ask whether the dissertation—the distinguishing requirement of doctoral education—might change in response to a broader understanding of humanities careers. If the dissertation does change, can it remain a deep, sustained, and original piece of scholarship? Can it be driven by the intellectual problems that interest the student and at the same time function as a step to careers beyond postsecondary teaching? Many students, regardless of career ambition, are likely to continue to write dissertations that take the form of proto-monographs. Others may want to pursue projects that incorporate the digital or public humanities, different forms of media, original translation work, or pedagogical research, to name only a few possibilities.

Faculty members should prompt students to reflect on the dissertation process and to ask themselves, In what ways is my dissertation expanding my capacities? How is it requiring me to stretch as a scholar? How is it contributing to the development of my humanistic expertise? And finally, how are the interests and issues informing the dissertation manifested in the wider world?

Doctoral Experience Is Work Experience

It can be difficult for graduate students and faculty members to remember that graduate students—while they are indeed students—are also professionals. In their research, teaching, and service, they are humanists at work. What they do in graduate school counts as work experience, and through it they develop humanistic expertise, tangible skills, and professional identities that are critically important to their success.