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Passion, Joy and Graduate Education (Really)

At the beginning of a discussion on “closing the ‘passion gap’ in graduate education,” audience members at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association were asked whether they were graduate students or professors. The audience was lopsided grad students.

But judging from the discussion, professors in a number of programs are aware and concerned about the “passion gap” — enough to be rethinking some policies. One consensus on the panel was that even though undergraduates who pursue graduate degrees have fallen in love with doing history research, that is oddly missing from the first years of graduate education.

Tyler Anbinder, a professor at George Washington University, said that one of the things that has “gotten lost in the shuffle” of graduate programs is the experience of doing sustained history research (prior to the dissertation). Much of the writing in early years of a graduate program will be reviews and critiques and comparisons, not actual research, he said.

George Washington has dealt with this by adding requirements that graduate students do two original research papers in their first three semesters. “It’s getting students back into the archives ... probably what got you into graduate school in the first place,” said Anbinder.

Graduate students are also encouraged to present their findings to the entire department, he said, so that even early in their programs, they are getting feedback from a broader community of scholars, and not just one professor.

David Bell, dean of the arts and science faculty at Johns Hopkins University and a historian there, said Hopkins has similarly focused on the research process for new doctoral students. Graduate students and faculty have a weekly seminar where either a graduate student or professor presents a paper for critique. And there is a new requirement of a major research paper by the end of the first year of the program.

John R. McNeill, a professor of history at Georgetown University, said that another reason to engage graduate students with research early in their careers was to help shape dissertation topics. He said he doesn’t see the “passion gap” other panelists identified, but is concerned about a “courage problem.”

Too many graduate students have “a tendency to create dissertation topics that are insufficiently

ambitious,” he said. He encourages them to be more ambitious both to keep their excitement alive during the process, but also to better prepare them for the job market, where a dissertation with more heft will help them.

One reason graduate students may lose passion for their topics and momentum and writing may be the impact of historiography courses, said Elise Lipkowitz, a graduate student at Northwestern University. Historiography courses can have “a paralyzing effect on writing a dissertation,” she said, as graduate students deconstruct what is wrong or limited about various historical works. “The ability to find the shortcoming is so overdeveloped by graduate school coursework,” she said, that “it’s so easy to talk oneself out of an argument before your hands ever touch the keyboard.”

Several on the panel and in the audience agreed, although after the session, one professor qualified the discussion by saying that the problem is historiography that focuses only on bad history as opposed to offering examples of great history that might inspire or be illustrative for grad students.

It fell to another panelist (notably from a public university) to raise an issue that resonated with many in the audience: money. “Financing of graduate education is a problem,” said Kristin Stapleton, a historian director of Asian studies at the State University of New York at Buffalo. Graduate students “don’t lose the passion, but are pulled by family concerns or the fact that they can earn money” elsewhere, she said.

Stapleton’s point reflects the reality that while a number of leading private universities have [significantly upped stipends](#) for graduate students, most public universities have had a tough time keeping up. In the question and answer period, many of the questions were in fact more practical (money and family obligations) than research oriented.

In her talk, Stapleton also spoke about issues related to graduate students’ intellectual development. For example, she suggested that graduate programs think more about how faculty members with expertise in languages other than English can work with graduate students who primarily work in English to broaden their perspectives.

But in informal hallway talk after the session, several graduate students (at public universities) said that Stapleton’s point about money was the key one. These graduate students generally praised all of the ideas discussed on the panel, but said that without some basic economic security first, grad students could only have so much passion — however exciting a colloquium series for their fellow graduate students might be.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

*The original story and user comments can be viewed online at
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