

Theses on Professionalization¹

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1. Academia is unlike other professions in that the pre-professional period of training—which includes coursework, dissertation research and writing, and teaching assistantships—is not akin to an apprenticeship. Accordingly, there is no direct linkage between the accumulation of credentials and admission to the profession, no necessary relationship between feeling oneself to be qualified and the ability to obtain full time employment as a university professor.
2. A Ph.D. is awarded not only as a mark of intellectual competence and disciplined method but also as a professional credential that signals ones eligibility for employment as a researcher and teacher within academia. Although these two aspects of the degree can complement one another, they can just as easily conflict, as in when ones research expertise fails to overlap with ever changing employment needs.
3. Pursuing a Ph.D. purely for the “love of learning” is one among many legitimate reasons for graduate studies. Pursuing such studies for both intellectual stimulation and eventual employment requires candidates to be as intentional as possible about opportunities to increase their competitiveness on the job market.
4. Applying for full-time employment prior to being awarded the Ph.D. degree (i.e., when, after successfully completing comprehensive or general exams, one holds the status known as ABD [All But Dissertation]) is not uncommon; however, failure to gain employment at this stage must not undermine ones confidence. Apart from extraordinary circumstances (e.g., the so-called “fit” between your expertise and a Department’s needs), the doctoral degree remains a necessary condition for entrance into the profession.
5. Whether as an ABD or after having been awarded the Ph.D., some candidates accept year-to-year work as a full-time Instructor or Lecturer (sometimes also called a Sessional position or a Part-time Temporary Instructor). Such positions often entail teaching loads that are heavier than tenure-track or tenured faculty members and, depending on the salary offered, may necessitate supplemental teaching (e.g., evening or summer courses) for one to earn sufficient income. Although the benefits of teaching experience and an academic home can be invaluable to an early career person, the costs such temporary employment entails for ones ability to carry out research and writing can be high.

¹ Too many graduate students seem unprepared for what awaits them once they complete their dissertations. Sadly, in many cases their professors seem not to have considered it to be their responsibility to provide them with some of the tools necessary for navigating the job market. It is into this gap that the following theses—which have benefited from the comments of a variety of people at different career stages—are offered. I do so with a deferential nod not only to Martin Luther’s ninety-five and Karl Marx’s twenty-one, but also the thirteen offered more recently by Bruce Lincoln (“Theses on Method” in Method & Theory in the Study of Religion 8 [1996]: 225-7).

Navigating these costs/benefits is no easy task; for instance, one might learn that, sometimes, time is more valuable than money.

6. Although it is necessary, the doctoral degree alone is hardly a sufficient credential for being admitted to academia as a full-time employee because most of the other applicants also possess this credential (i.e., it is the level playing field onto which ABDs have yet to be admitted). There was a time, prior to the early 1970s, when the job market was such that merely possessing a Ph.D. would lead to multiple tenure-track job offers; in the Humanities that time has long past.

7. For some of those who will be judging candidates' credentials to determine their admission to the profession, the reputation of the school from which they have earned their Ph.D. plays a significant role in assessment of applicants' skills and future promise as colleagues. Although ones alma mater does communicate with whom one has trained and what traditions of scholarship one may pursue, for yet others the reputation of candidates' schools is secondary to the quality of their current research, the places where they have published their work, and the experience they have had in the classroom.

8. Like all institutions, academia provides a case study in the complex relationship between structure and agency; for, although there are a variety of things that one can do to increase ones competitiveness, job candidates must recognize that there are also a host of factors of which they are unaware and which are therefore beyond their control (e.g., the unstated needs, interests, goals, and even insecurities of the hiring Department; the number of other candidates qualified at any given time in your area of expertise; the impact of world events on the perceived need for scholars in your subject area, etc.). Success likely requires one to learn to live with the latter while taking control of the former.

9. A structural element that must be taken into account is that Departmental search committees often fail to entertain the difficult questions in advance and, instead, go on "fishing expeditions" by defining their open positions far too broadly and vaguely, such as looking for "the best qualified" applicant. Making explicit their implicit and often competing preferences may strike members of a Department as being too costly an exercise. It is into this mix of unstated disagreements and longstanding rivalries that job applicants can be thrust, affecting such things as how their letters of application are read, their credentials judged, and their performance during campus interviews measured. While one cannot control such factors, when representing oneself one at least ought to be aware of their potential presence and impact.

10. Whether working at a publicly or privately funded institution, professors are comparable to self-employed entrepreneurs inasmuch as they can increase their social capital (i.e., reputation) by seeking out new books to read and review, unique topics on which to research and write, novel and timely courses to develop and teach, and different professional service opportunities to provide them with additional experience as well as new national and international contacts. Graduate students are in much the same position and the additional qualifications that result from their entrepreneurial pre-professional

activities can serve to distinguish one job applicant from another. Documentation from such activities, as recorded on ones c.v., communicate to the hiring committee that one is already skilled at participating in the many aspects of the profession that will surely be required of a tenure-track Assistant Professor.

11. While higher education is organized so as to train ever increasing specialists—a process that begins with surveys and broad course work, examines candidates on their knowledge in general areas, and then culminates in writing a dissertation on a highly technical topic—eventual full-time employment can just as easily depend upon ones ability to contribute lower-level, so-called Core or General Education introductory courses to a Department’s curriculum. Because many Departments of Religious Studies justify their existence not simply by appealing to the number of their majors or graduates, but also the number of Core or General Education courses that they offer to students pursuing degrees in other areas of the University, gaining early experience in such courses as a Teaching Assistant is an important step toward being able to persuade future employers of ones ability to be a colleague who helps to teach their Department’s “bread and butter” courses.

12. Many doctoral students do not realize that finding authors willing to write book notes, book reviews, etc., is sometimes difficult for journal editors. As a first step in professionalizing themselves, graduate students should become aware of the journals in their field and write to their book review editors, suggesting that the journal allow them to write and submit a review (especially for books that they are already reading for their courses or research, thereby minimizing on work additional to their class and dissertation research). Besides providing experience in writing and a much needed line on ones c.v., one never knows who will read the review or what other opportunities might follow upon it.

13. Because there is no direct relationship between seniority and the quality of ones writing, ones familiarity with the literature, or the novelty of ones ideas, graduate students ought never to refrain from submitting their work to a scholarly journal for possible peer review publication simply because they understand themselves to be novices. Even if rejected, the comments that result from the blind review process will be of benefit to students who have so far only received feedback from professors already familiar with their work.

14. Depending on the type of institution into which one is hired (i.e., its teaching load, service obligations, emphasis on research, sabbatical opportunities, etc.), the dissertation may constitute one of the few, or quite possibly even the last, opportunity a candidate has to devote an extended period of time to one, focused project, free from the many obligations routinely expected of an Assistant Professor. Given the pressure to publish that, for some time, has attended academic careers, graduate students would be wise to write their dissertations while keeping in mind their eventual submission for possible publication—whether as a monograph (which, depending on a Department’s “Tenure and Promotion” requirements, may be preferable) or as separate peer review essays.

15. Having successfully defended the dissertation, the manuscript does candidates no good in their desk drawer. However, before making revisions (unless they are dissatisfied with its argument or quality), graduates should create a prospectus containing a brief cover letter, annotated table of contents, and sample chapter (e.g., the Introduction) and submit it to a select number of top tier publishers in their area of expertise. Obtaining an outside experts' assessment of the manuscript—a step often essential to a publisher's process of evaluation—provides the best place to begin ones revisions of a manuscript with which one is intimately familiar and, perhaps, too closely tied.

16. Apart from professionalizing themselves through research and publication, candidates should consider the cost of regularly attending regional and national scholarly conferences simply as the price of being a graduate student. Waiting until one is on the job market is therefore too late to consider attending and trying to participate in such conferences—especially when one learns that being placed on the program of such annual meetings often comes about gradually, over the course of several (or more) years. Whereas regional meetings are often useful places to try out ones research, become accustomed to speaking in public, and learn the rituals of the question/answer sessions that follow the presentation of papers (knowledge especially important during on-campus interviews), national meetings play a crucial role in efforts to integrate oneself into networks of colleagues at other institutions who share ones interests.

17. National scholarly conferences and professional associations often host on-site job placement services and publish employment periodicals. Becoming thoroughly aware of such services and resources, long before actually being on the job market, may not only assist ones decision-making when it comes time to select an area of expertise (i.e., judging national employment trends over time may shed light on areas likely to require staffing in the coming years) but also prepare one for the eventual time when one is on the market and seeking campus interviews.

18. Despite being the primary, and sometimes even the exclusive, focus of candidates' attention during the last years of their Ph.D., once hired into a tenure-track position a variety of other just as time consuming tasks compete for their attention. Learning to juggle many balls simultaneously—knowing which will bounce if dropped and which will break—is therefore an essential skill for early career professors who wish to continue carrying out original research while also teaching a full course load and serving the needs of their Departments and the profession at large.

19. Although it can be intellectually stimulating, developing new courses is time consuming. Depending on the needs of their Department, teaching multiple sections of the same course provides early career professors with fewer course preparations, helps them to quickly establish their area of expertise in the curriculum and among students, and allows them to gain teaching competencies far quicker, thereby enabling them to devote more time to their research and writing.

20. Despite what some maintain, teaching and research are complementary activities, inasmuch as teaching, somewhat like publication, constitutes the dissemination of

information gained by means of prior research. Based on ones strengths, candidates can understandably emphasize one over the over, but declining always to carry out both, integrating them together when possible, is to shirk ones responsibilities as a scholar.

21. As with the effort to enter any profession, a price must inevitably be paid—economic as well as social—in terms of the other activities and goals one might instead have worked toward and possibly attained. Candidates must therefore not only be as deliberate as possible in determining which costs they are willing to pay and which they are not, but they must also learn to trust their own judgments when, regardless how their job search turns out, they someday look back on the decisions they once made.²

² These theses are forthcoming in Mathieu E. Courville (ed.), *Next Step in Studying Religion: A Graduate's Guide*. London: Continuum.