

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2016

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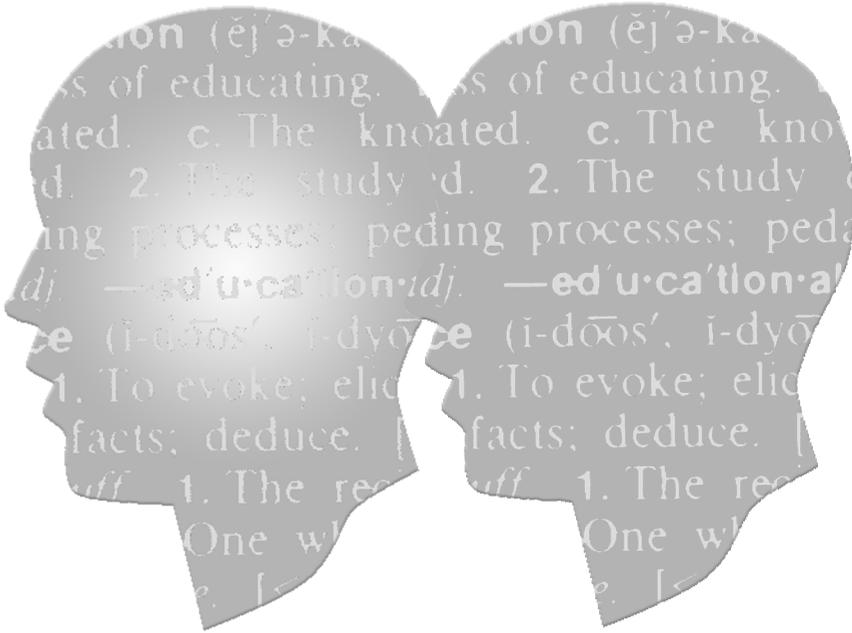
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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# INSIDE THE GRADUATE SCHOOL MESS

## An Interview with Leonard Cassuto

*David Brown, coeditor of the Higher Education Exchange, spoke with Leonard Cassuto, a professor of English and American Studies at Fordham University and author of The Graduate School Mess: What Caused It and How We Can Fix It (Harvard University Press, 2015).*

**Brown:** Your work critically examines the assumption that “graduate school is a specialized training ground for future professors” and that such “training leads graduate students to a narrowly specialized course of study that is, at best, impractical and, at worst, destructive.” Why can such an assumption be “destructive”?

**Cassuto:** Assumptions become destructive when they shape—or even create—harmful behavior. If we assume, or allow prospective students to assume—or worse still, teach them to assume—that graduate school is simply a training ground for future professors, we lead those prospective students to behave in ways that will serve them poorly and make their lives harder. That’s one of the main reasons why we have to change how we teach graduate school: because the curriculum conveys those very assumptions.

**Brown:** Could you provide some examples of how the curriculum conveys those assumptions? What changes should be made?

**Cassuto:** The graduate school curriculum is built around a particular outcome: that graduate students will become professors at research universities. Everyone knows that’s an unlikely outcome, but the shape of graduate education privileges it nevertheless. In the humanities and the humanistic social sciences, for example, that means a beginning focus on research papers (produced in seminars) that students should seek to turn into articles, followed by a detailed dissertation proposal for a thesis that aspires to become a book. Not everyone will write those articles, and most dissertations don’t become books, but the assumption is that the student will hope for, and typically seek, those outcomes. Teacher training takes a back seat before this rigorous research apprenticeship—but most academic jobs, for those who are fortunate enough to get them, are teaching-centered. And for those who don’t become professors, the ability to teach, broadly speaking, is a thoroughly valuable and marketable skill.

**Brown:** Could you say more about how those with “the ability to teach” can market that skill beyond academe?

**Cassuto:** Teaching, broadly conceived, is part of a collection of communications skills that most graduate students acquire and hone. Presentations are a form of teaching. All successful TED talkers teach, for example. Graduate students have advanced skills in analyzing information and assessing audience, and then presenting complex material in an audience-appropriate way. They should make these skills into an important part of their self-presentation to any non-academic (or academic!) employer.

**Brown:** You say that “graduate programs need to revamp their curricula, structures, and standards in a way that prepares today’s graduate student for a wider range of employment, not just academe.” Are graduate programs equipped to do that?

***We haven’t lifted our heads up to question the underlying assumption that the professor’s agenda matters more than the students’ needs.***

**Cassuto:** Certainly. It will require a willingness to learn some new approaches, some of which I outline in *The Graduate School Mess*. But professors are professional learners, so that’s well within the range of possibility. It will also require reaching out in the direction of existing resources like offices of career services, which need to be invited into the lives of graduate students much earlier in students’ careers.

**Brown:** You argue that too much “course design . . . starts with what professors want to do instead of trying to figure out what students need.” Why does peer oversight allow that to happen?

**Cassuto:** Because almost everyone learned in teacher-centered courses like that, so we accept them as the norm. We therefore haven’t lifted our heads up to question the underlying assumption that undergirds that practice, namely that the professor’s agenda matters more than the students’ needs.

**Brown:** What kind of oversight is needed, assuming that oversight is needed, in an academic culture that does not encourage it?

**Cassuto:** “Oversight” is a tension-filled keyword in an academic culture that is rightly concerned with freedom of inquiry. I prefer to look at it this way: we need to realize that the flip side of academic freedom is academic responsibility. In this case, the responsibility is to our students, who need an education that corresponds to the reality that they face. What I’m getting at is that the first and most important level of “oversight” is personal: each of us needs to face our responsibility to our students, and how we fulfill that responsibility

through our teaching. That said, graduate program directors, who plan a program's course offerings each year, need the authority to demand from their faculty colleagues a balanced menu of student-centered courses that graduate students need, rather than the sorts of esoteric offerings that often predominate, especially in the humanities.

**Brown:** From whom does a graduate program director acquire such authority?

**Cassuto:** That depends on the governance structure of the department, program, or school. But a program will fare best if it arrives at the necessity for these changes in open discussion, perhaps including graduate students themselves. I visit a lot of universities these days, and I talk to a lot of graduate students and faculty. The students are virtually unanimous in their wish for a graduate education that is consistent with the reality that they know is waiting for them afterwards. Not all faculty members are aware of this. Students, faculty, and administrators should spend more time talking to each other about their respective wishes and needs.

**Brown:** You note that “if professors know that their graduate students may head toward public administration, government, or some similar non-academic direction,” they can “adjust their teaching to embrace those possibilities.” Aren't you assuming that such professors know enough about such public venues to make their adjustments credible to their students?

**Cassuto:** Nope. I know that many do not. But back to my earlier answer: I am assuming that as professional learners and professional analysts and problem solvers themselves (skills that help make PhDs saleable outside the academy), professors can do what's necessary to serve the needs of their students.

**Brown:** In your concluding chapter, “In Search of an Ethic,” you summarize some of the current problems of “old-fashioned and incoherent course offerings, bloated time to degree, high attrition, a distorted academic job market, and a failure to prepare students for alternative employment.” Of those problems, which ones are more ripe for change, more doable for those who seek change?

**Cassuto:** During his recent term as president of the Modern Language Association, Michael Bérubé compared the problems facing the graduate school enterprise to “a seamless garment.” Tugging on one thread causes the whole thing to come undone, suggesting that all of the problems are connected. I tend to agree with him; you can't talk about what form the dissertation should take without time to degree entering the conversation, and from there, you get to students' preparation for academic jobs, and so on. Some of us who would change what we do will prefer to start with one problem: how to run a graduate

seminar so that it serves students who will become professors as well as those who won't. Others will start in a different place. But everyone's path will meet eventually.

**Brown:** You note that the “German-inspired [research] model explicitly conflicts with the homegrown American idea that the purpose of higher education is to produce citizens.” Can the research model be reconciled with the producing-citizens model? If so, how?

**Cassuto:** American higher education began with English colleges whose stated mission was to educate people so that they could serve church (especially at first) and state. The “age of the college” as it has been called, lasted more than two centuries, until a couple of decades after the Civil War. Then the research universities came. Their mission, inspired by German models but adjusted to fit the culture of the rapidly industrializing United States, was to produce new knowledge. “The work of instruction,” wrote William Rainey Harper, the first president of the new University of Chicago, was held “secondary” to that of “investigation.” Scores of public and private universities were founded in the decades surrounding the turn of the twentieth century, and many of the venerable colleges—like Harvard and Yale—built universities around their undergraduate nuclei. The American higher education landscape took on its distinctively hybrid identity: public and private colleges coexisting alongside, and also within, public and private universities, and the mission of producing educated citizens coexisting with the mission of doing new research.

We've reconciled those two models for generations. It's only becoming hard to do so now because of diminishing resources in general and the related lack of academic jobs in particular. For reconciliation to be possible in today's more straitened circumstances, I think that there has to be mutual respect. Right now the mission to produce productive citizens (call it the Jeffersonian model) respects the research mission, but that respect is not reciprocal. The values of research culture rule our workplace from the top down, and that regime hurts both the public image and the reality of life in American higher education.

**Brown:** Do the respective “silos” of the research culture, which reflect the preference of academics to be left alone, have less to do with the substance of their work, and more to do with their personal dispositions that led them to seek a kind of refuge in that culture in the first place?

**Cassuto:** Surveys show that most academics were originally inspired to go to graduate school by teachers they had in college. That's not a particularly surprising finding—it certainly matches my own experience—but let's consider that it means would-be professors are inspired by teaching, a social and interactive

activity, rather than an image of the solitary researcher. We should also keep in mind that research in many fields, especially the laboratory sciences, is not solitary at all. The silos of research culture result from the movement toward specialization, which has many causes. One of those causes is the development of academic departments, an early twentieth-century development that had less to do with research than with the need for administrative organization of the expanding institution. All of which is to say that while professors may have professional inclinations toward narrow specialization, it's not necessarily their personalities that lead them there.

**Brown:** In what specific ways can “the research culture of the graduate school” be realigned with the “public work” that “originally sustained” it—“restoring the partnership that once existed between town and gown”?

**Cassuto:** We could start with a sense of history. American higher education has always required social support—it can't pay for itself without it. In the postwar era it has required the support of the middle class, who provide students and funding together. There used to be more mutual trust between the university and society at large, and higher education received support as a public good. However, that trust began to break down beginning in the late 1960s, and not only did support for higher education become politicized as never before, but higher education also came to be seen as an individual investment rather than a public asset. If we understand why things happened, we can think more clearly about how to change them.

**Brown:** In a *Chronicle* piece, “We're Not a Hierarchy, We're an Ecosystem,” you argue that “An intellectual in one niche of the market is not ‘better’ than another, no more than a bird is ‘better’ than a squirrel or a tree. So why do we persist in trying to understand everything in terms of top-down rankings? Can we change?” Well, can we change?

**Cassuto:** I don't know, but I hope so. The problem is not so much that colleges and universities compete as that they do so on the same terms, and because those terms are dictated by research culture, they set the research university as a yardstick. I'm not against research; I do plenty of it myself. But our ecosystem ought to promote its own diversity. Instead, you see countless high officers of colleges and universities declare that their agenda centers on boosting more faculty research. We do our system no good when everyone within it aspires to look the same, and goes about it in the same way.

**Brown:** If many graduate students entertain ambitions and self-fulfillment that lie outside or beyond the research culture they encounter, why don't graduate schools, in their own self-interest, do more to accommodate such students?

**Cassuto:** Graduate schools are caught in a rut. They all want to move up in the rankings because that will bring them more prestige, and with it better chances for grants and more competitive students. But the rankings themselves are dictated by criteria that are based almost entirely on research. Administrators say that they feel constrained by those criteria, but if we dig a bit deeper, we see that those ranking criteria are actually set by administrators themselves. It's fine to have research-based rankings, but they shouldn't be the only way that graduate programs are assessed, or how they assess themselves. Actual and prospective students are

looking for something more than that, so we should have systems of classification and assessment that measure all of the things

***Graduate schools are caught in a rut. They all want to move up in the rankings because that will bring them more prestige.***

that graduate programs need to do well—including preparing all of their students for the world, not just the few who go on to research university professorships.

**Brown:** Who currently, in fact, can, or is willing to, revise such a system?

**Cassuto:** All of us! No one is suppressing such efforts, and if you look at the sorts of progressive initiatives that the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Mellon Foundation are lately funding, I can even imagine their support for such an effort. We need to build the sorts of assessment mechanisms that we need. Which programs provide the best teacher training, combined with sensible time to degree? If we collect and publish that information, prospective students will pay attention to it. They're already much more concerned with outcomes than they were a generation ago, and programs are responding by gathering more data on their graduates. Once we have alternative systems in place, as faculty and administrators, we will face the task of persuading ourselves and each other to pay attention to those assessments in the way that we rank and compare ourselves to our peers.

**Brown:** In his recent book *In Defense of Liberal Education*, Fareed Zakaria asked Jeff Bewkes, the CEO of Time Warner, "What skill was most useful in business that wasn't taught in college or graduate schools?" Bewkes replied, "Teamwork. You have to learn how to work with people and get others to work with you. It's probably the crucial skill, and yet education is mostly about solo performances." Since so many students go on to a variety of nonacademic pursuits in the not-for-profit and private sectors, to what extent do graduate schools encourage "group" work rather than solo performances?

**Cassuto:** We have to observe disciplinary differences to start. The laboratory sciences (or “bench sciences,” as they’re also called) are built on collaboration. The graduate students in those fields are, along with postdocs, and sometimes advanced undergraduates as well, members of a lab that is directed by a faculty member. They work together on projects that are consistent with the interests of the professor, who is at least as much manager as scientist. The professor’s



name goes on all publications—and those publications are necessary, because they provide the basis for applications for grants, which fund more publications, which fund more grants, and so on. This system has become terribly stressed as grants and academic jobs have both become scarce, but it’s nothing if not collaborative. Graduate students in the humanities and humanistic social sciences have long worked according to the indi-

vidualistic model of the solitary genius who labors in the garret before emerging with an opus of singular brilliance. The model has never described reality all that well—all writing teachers know that writing is best done collaboratively—but it promotes a view of the dissertation that discourages group work. This is a lack that we can easily remedy, starting in our classrooms. Digital tools enable collaboration among humanists now as never before. For example, Sidonie Smith, an English professor at the University of Michigan and the author of the new *Manifesto for the Humanities*, has described how professors can actually assign collaborative writing to graduate students.

**Brown:** Do you think that Derek Bok, the author of *Higher Education in America*, offers one plausible explanation for why graduate schools do not do more to reduce the number of years to graduation? Bok argues that, “Departments may enjoy having a larger pool of graduate students available as teaching assistants to ease the burden on professors.”

**Cassuto:** Bok’s argument is familiar, and applies most readily to large state universities. I’ve spoken to deans at such institutions, and they will admit—always off the record—that their budgets depend on graduate students and other contingent laborers (i.e., adjuncts) to teach large numbers of lower-level undergraduate courses. This is an embarrassing reality because it amounts to the

fact that graduate students compete for fewer full-time academic jobs because the courses that would be detailed to these hypothetical positions are instead being taught by students like themselves.

**Brown:** Bok also argues that “to shorten the time to degree” means “limiting the scope of the thesis requirement in departments in which it has gradually increased over the years.” Why has it increased and what are the chances of “limiting the scope”?

**Cassuto:** Credentials inflation can take place in any field where competition is stiff for a limited number of positions. In a buyer’s market like academia, hiring departments can afford to demand increasing levels of accomplishment from applicants—and that’s how it has turned out. The upward spiral hurts the lives of graduate students by forcing them to acquire more attainments during their apprenticeship years, when they are poorly paid and without concrete job prospects. I talk about this harmful cycle in *The Graduate School Mess*. We can eject from it by substituting a belief in potential for the current demand for the long resumes that ought to be expected only when a young professor has a real job and a real salary. If a new PhD has written a brilliant dissertation, for example, why should we demand that she publish three articles before we’ll consider hiring her? Better to hire her first and let her publish those articles as an assistant professor. The way that we behave now is unethical. Professionalization is an ongoing process, not one that is reserved for when one is in graduate school.

**Brown:** I was interested in your chapter on “professionalism.” I have written that “It will take ‘enough others’ finding new ways of acting ‘professionally’ and discovering from collaborative learning, online or elsewhere, that knowledge is a social construct, not a form of property.” Do you think that there are “enough others” out there to bring about change in graduate education, the emergence of what you call “the presence of a [new] general ethic”?

**Cassuto:** I hope so. My optimism isn’t groundless, though. Witness the kinds of questions we’re asking today about graduate education. They’re the right ones. We’ve needed to have these conversations for decades, but we didn’t. Now we’re at a tipping point. The conversation that you and I are having right now is typical of others going on within universities, and they signal that more and more people are committing themselves to joining our students to face the realities of the world.

**Brown:** If we have reached a “tipping point,” does that mean substantial change is inevitable, that it’s just a matter of time before “the pond will turn over,” so to speak, in academe?

**Cassuto:** It would be nice if that were so, but I don't think that disordered ecosystems necessarily fix themselves within a given period of time. The ecological analogy I would prefer here is to global warming, meaning that if we don't keep the pressure on to change the way we do things, we'll reach a point of no return, and our culture will be replaced—not by us—with something much more hostile to intellectual curiosity and creativity. As with global warming, the warning signs are already clear to see.

**Brown:** So, again, this means that we may have reached “a tipping point,” which can mean positive and substantial change?

**Cassuto:** I think so, yes. And I hope we rise to the needs of our moment.

**Brown:** Thank you, Len.



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