Can we Get A Pub From This? Reflections on Competition and the Pressure to Publish While in Graduate School

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ABSTRACT

It is widely acknowledged that graduate students feel increasing pressure to be academically productive in measurable ways, notably through peer-reviewed publication. Many suggest that the drive for measurable productivity responds to changing structural constraints. In these reflections, we indicate that an unsupportive culture of graduate study is also shaped by our everyday actions. Our practices maintain and exacerbate the competition through which the drive to demonstrate propensity for academic productivity has arisen, and it is therefore at the level of practices that this culture might be changed. Through intra- and inter-university communication, we might alter the expectations within which we work, and foment a collective movement against the drive to compete with our peers and for mutually supportive graduate study.

Key Words: competition, graduate students, higher education, publishing

While still in the early stages of writing this paper, we revisited the journal’s call for manuscripts and caught sight of some language we had initially overlooked. “A call for short papers for a roundtable,” it read, which set us to questioning:

A roundtable? What’s that? Are we submitting for inclusion in the journal or for some kind of symposium? Can we get a pub from this? Should we spend our time on this short paper when we still need to publish from our MA theses, prepare for upcoming field research, organize lectures for next week’s classes, and distribute minutes from yesterday’s committee meeting?

We agreed to e-mail the Editor. Collegial correspondence confirmed that papers accepted in response to the call would indeed be collected for the journal. Assured that our
efforts might amount to a sought-after “pub,” we decided the writing from our MA theses could continue to wait, as could IRB applications and correspondence with research contacts. And lectures: well, last term’s were okay, and meeting minutes could be sent out before dinner. We continued to write.

Self-reflection and research suggests that our hesitation arose from anxieties now characteristic of our position in higher education (Rogers 2011). Uncertain job prospects, and uncertainty even about how to become a competitive candidate, are the topic of everyday conversation in our offices and at happy hours with fellow graduate students. We and our peers are now devoted almost single-mindedly to forms of productivity that can be captured in line items on our CVs. Requests for volunteers to fill service positions are accompanied by reminders that it will “look good on your CV,” and department events are often venues for celebrating such measurable accomplishments. The peer-reviewed publication is ultimate among these. Although we are in the beginning stages of a career during which we should explore and experiment with the topics and methods of the discipline, it feels as though our reading and writing must always be directed towards a short-term material outcome that will appear on our CV, rather than towards establishing a foundation upon which to become innovative academicians (Cassuto 1998), learning to do the job we enjoy, and hope to continue doing in the long term.

More than a decade ago, Reis (1999) wrote in The Chronicle that students must take a “next stage approach” to their professionalization: “Now to move up you must demonstrate that you can be successful in the next job for which you want to apply by actually performing in advance some of the activities and responsibilities that are part of that job.” Today, graduate students are apparently all drawn into the logic of Reis’ “next stage,” feeling pressure to produce as though already early-career faculty members. And this pressure has only become more intense. Today’s junior faculty members are also expected to produce more than they would have in the past. Even in 1998 the pattern was becoming clear; Cassuto (1998) wrote that, “today’s junior hires often begin their new jobs with more publications to their credit than many of their senior colleagues.” Our hesitation to complete this short paper without some hope that we might see it published is just one concrete example of how we constantly engage in “next stage” thinking.

If there was a time when, as Rogers (2011) writes in The Chronicle of Higher Education, “it was enough to have a few published reviews and some papers presented,” then something has clearly changed. Noel Castree (2011) notes that certain structural constraints like cuts in public funding for higher education, the application of “benchmarking” in university governance and pressures to attract private funding are now being made more forcefully felt than ever before (see also Rice 2011). And in a recent issue of the AAG Newsletter, Ken Foote, Past President of the Association of American Geographers, suggests what we who are still in graduate school already know, that our recently graduated colleagues are now often likely to secure only short-term contracts as adjuncts (Foote 2011). Although recently minted PhDs are often happy to take these positions, their employers frequently require a load of teaching that hinders the adjunct’s ability to submit sufficient publications to become a strong candidate for more stable employment. So for we junior academics, subsumed by a drive for measurable productivity that has resulted from and continues to be propelled by our efforts to compete with one another for an apparently shrinking pool of permanent positions, there seems little choice other than to accept whatever job we can get, while continuing to work towards the “next stage.”

For many of us, added to these pressures to accelerate our academic productivity is a demanding personal life. Even those of our graduate student peers who immediately began their graduate studies after completing their bachelor’s degrees are in their late twen-
ties by the time they finish school and begin racing against the tenure clock. Most of the rest of us will be in our early thirties to mid-forties—still very young to be sure, but also past the age at which many of our peers are earning decent salaries, beginning families, and saving for retirement. Those graduate students who have begun to do those things while still enrolled in school are under enormous pressure to maintain a healthy family life and still graduate. Meanwhile, those of us without children and other financial obligations are still often subject to challenges of caring for aging parents and grandparents, addressing family emergencies, and spending time and money on family-related travel and the weddings of friends. As graduate students, we are in a “liminal” position, captured well in literature on young people and the geographies of aging—an “in-between space” of both adult-like self-sufficiency and child-like dependence (Skelton 2010).

From this liminal position, we strive to demonstrate our propensity for academic productivity. But in absence of certainty about what it takes to become a professional, or even whether we can expect to maintain funding as graduate assistants, an unsupportive competitiveness emerges. No doubt some of this arises from the previously mentioned structural constraints, seemingly disembodied and monolithic—imposing themselves on junior academics from afar. But an unsupportive culture of graduate study may also be shaped by more local conditions including but not limited to alarmist conversations with faculty, staff, and students who may themselves not know how to most effectively adapt to a changing job market. Encouragement simply to publish, for instance, is unlikely to contribute to the formation of a more supportive culture in graduate study. In part, this is because—without experience of publishing, and through exposure only to the polished outcomes of months or years of research and writing by more seasoned academics—this advice will compel us only to act as though we have already passed onto the “next stage,” even if we are still unsure about how to get there. This kind of advice operates to further naturalize competitiveness. For this reason, we suggest that a different dialogue on publishing could discourage our tendency to look over our shoulders and ensure that—among our peers—we are not the least qualified and therefore most likely to fall through the cracks.

That the constraints within which we labor are changing was confirmed by the faculty panelists for a recent Postgraduate Forum Annual Conference Training Symposium at the 2011 Annual Conference of the Royal Geographical Society (with the Institute of British Geographers). The panelists acknowledged that one’s demonstrated desire and ability to publish peer-reviewed work is of capital importance to department hiring committees. Further, the increasing application of “benchmarking” in university governance will, if anything, subject job candidates’ publishing records to even more scrutiny. But the panelists unanimously qualified their encouragement to take publishing seriously. All suggested that graduate students write for quality more than a given quantity of publications. One panelist suggested that students who aspire to faculty positions should consider developing detailed plans for future publications, including titles, argumentation and the journal to which one might submit, rather than churning out sub-par work. We suggest that such detailed plans would not only demonstrate one’s commitment to research but would also function as a channel through which to relieve competition-inducing anxieties.

Of course, individual solutions only go so far, and might be reasonably criticized for their accommodation of structural constraints. So, while we advocate practices like the above for the sake of maintaining sanity in graduate school, we also suggest that an alteration of the expectations within which we all work would demand collective action. Each individual’s practices maintain the competition through which has arisen the drive for measurable productivity, but any one of us would be hard-pressed to refuse that so-
cially felt imperative. For this reason, and towards assembling a collective movement for mutually supportive graduate study, a more robust conversation about our shared realities is now necessary. Conversations within and beyond our departments should be initiated with more frequency, including at the meetings of our professional associations. They must leave our graduate student offices and happy hours to circulate across boundaries of seniority, because relationships that maintain unsupportive competitiveness exist at all levels of the discipline. It is only through intra- and inter-university communication that we might hope to foment a collective movement against the drive to publish towards competing with our peers and adding to our CVs. Perhaps our reflections and the other contributions to this “roundtable” can help facilitate just that.

REFERENCES


