Of School and Adventure

by Stephen Brockmann

A plaintive, ironic note from inside the walls of graduate school.

WHEN I graduated from college and decided to go on to graduate school, most of the wise people I knew told me that I was crazy or, at best, naive. Didn’t I know that thousands of unemployed Ph.D.s are sweeping floors in grocery stores? Didn’t I know how many Germanic philologists end up selling insurance?

The best piece of advice I received was that I should go on to graduate school only if going on was something that I wanted.

STEPHEN BROCKMANN is a fellow in the German Department at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.
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Sometimes, however, naïveté pays. The situation from inside the walls of graduate school doesn’t look the same as it did from outside. It seems that overwhelming numbers of my fellow graduates heeded the dire warnings about low pay, limited job opportunities, and crushing competition for the few jobs and honors that remained. They sensibly pursued careers in business, law, and medicine; no doubt they’ll be paying substantial taxes to support me, should I ever join the ranks of unemployed Ph.D.s.

But that doesn’t seem quite so likely anymore. Suddenly, graduate schools have begun to complain about declining enrollments, fellowships have been set up to lure the best students back from business and into academe, and people are actually predicting a shortage of qualified professors by the 1990s. Who’s going to teach the new wave of college students, if all the best-qualified graduates become corporate executives?

This is where I come in. My job prospects, though certainly not rosy, aren’t nearly as bleak as I was told they’d be when I made my naïve decision to pursue graduate studies. In fact, I’ve been told that, in the last few years, everyone who has earned a Ph.D. from my department has managed to find a job somewhere. Now, “somewhere” may not mean Harvard or Stanford, and it’s true that the pay is often quite low, but at least my fellow philologists aren’t sweeping the floor at the corner store. Besides, who ever went into teaching to make money?

There’s another side to the coin, however. Job prospects may be markedly better now than they were 15 years ago, but graduate school is supposed to provide one with more than a job. At least, that was my assumption at the beginning, since finding a job was the last thing I expected. Yes, I entered graduate school without any hope of financial reward, but, in my naïveté, I did expect fierce intellectual competition, intense confrontations with philosophy and literature and ideas (not to mention Germanic philology), and, above all, intellectual ferment.

Instead, I find that I’m very lonely. Ironically, the same factors that make my job prospects better also mean that there are fewer and less talented graduate students. With whom is one to have intense intellectual confrontations when most of the best students are in business and law? True, I now have easier access to fellowships and to the attention of my professors, but a large part of the graduate school experience has always been interaction with other young scholars. And everyone else abandoned the sinking ship just as I was walking on board. Now the ship doesn’t appear to be sinking any longer, and I feel I have it pretty much to myself, but something is missing—something important. Instead of idealism and naïveté, there is . . . competence: a lot of adequate people doing their jobs, but precious few graduate students of high quality.

This situation doesn’t necessarily endanger the security of the United States, of course. One fewer professor of German here and there will mean very little to our overall global strategy or to our ability to compete with the Japanese. Still, a weakening of the liberal arts lowers the quality of life and culture in any country.

And so a demographic problem becomes a personal one, and the idealism that led me to seek refuge in academe seems to be missing, after all. Those of us who remain seem more concerned with jobs than we do with great ideas. We’re acutely aware that we may be the reason why so many graduate schools have begun to complain about the quality of their students. Our futures may be financially secure, but we’re left feeling strangely ambivalent and unsatisfied. So much comfort seems slightly alien to a path that promised to be paved with rigor and high moral and intellectual rewards.

I once turned my back on careerism and comfort and came to academe seeking intellectual excitement and adventure. Instead, I found something that looks suspiciously like a job.