Episode 58: Doctoral Futures: An Interview with Treviene Harris

Brian Mitchell: Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and I'm delighted to have with me today Dr. Treviene Harris of the American Council of Learned Societies to talk about their Doctoral Futures Project. Treviene, welcome!

Treviene Harris: Hi, Brian, thank you so much for hosting me today.

Brian Mitchell: Why don't you start by telling us a little bit about ACLS and its mission?

Treviene Harris: Sure. So, the ACLS stands for the American Council of Learned Societies, and it's a non-profit organization of national scholarly societies, and they all center advocacy for academic freedom and humanistic scholarship. The organization's core mission is to improve the human experience through the creation and circulation of humanistic knowledge, and we operate from the core principle that knowledge is a public good. In the field, ACLS might be best known for its fellowship competitions - its annual fellowship competitions - that provide opportunities for scholars in the humanities and the related social sciences at all career stages. So that includes graduate students, advanced scholars, distinguished professors, and independent scholars. Beyond the fellowships, ACLS, collaborates with other thought leaders from institutions, associations, and individuals to strengthen what we think of as the evolving infrastructure of humanistic scholarship. If you've been following the news lately, you'll see that the organization is also active on policy matters, and recently filed a motion for summer judgments alongside the American Historical Association and the Modern Language Association, which are two of their member societies. They are seeking to restore the National Endowment for Humanity's previous functions of funding, making sure that those funding opportunities can be reinstated to support the kind of scholarship that we want to advance.

Brian Mitchell: How did the Doctoral Futures Project start? What's your role, and who are some of its early champions?

Treviene Harris: So, in 2024, the ACLS won an open competition that was sponsored by the NEH [in] their program of the Office of Challenge. Our grant was oriented around efforts to reform graduate humanities education. The focus was on system-wide improvements in coordination with our stakeholders, these groups that don't normally work together. So, it's professional associations, administrators, scholars from our research consortium or associate members, institutions or organizations like the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and the Council of Graduate Schools, and also includes graduate students in this project. And essentially what we are trying to do is create a space for convening and collaboration between these groups that do not normally come into contact with each other. The idea for the product was in response to ongoing funding and other kinds of reduction in institutional support. The guiding focus of the project is to bring concrete recommendations to decision makers and try to persuade them to adopt the reforms that we come up with. This was in 2024, so obviously the project was conceived before 2025, and it just so happened to coincide with the kind of upheaval we've experienced since the most recent administration. And so while it was initially taken up by the NEH, after the NEH funds shuttered - some of the programs were

shuttered - the Mellon Foundation picked up the mantle and we were still able to move forward with the project.

Now, the project is in collaboration or in coordination with three of our member societies, the American Historical Association, the Modern Language Association, and the Society for Biblical Literature. What we've devised, or what we've put together, is like a three-pronged approach to thinking about reforms at different stages of graduate study. So, we think about preparation and inclusion, which includes admissions and recruitment challenges, and creating pipelines from undergrad to graduate study. The Modern Language Association, their committee is focused on graduate programs. That includes stuff like, curriculum reform, and thinking about innovative scholarship, what different forms of a dissertation could look like. That's not the traditional proto-monograph. The third function, or the third committee, the American Historical Association, is focused on post-degree pathways and essentially trying to think about how can we have, a more close alignment with graduate doctoral students and the job market as it exists. Preparing students to be able to pursue different, career pathways with equal confidence. And so, although we have, like, three, separate committees, you'll notice that there's some kind of overlap between the work that they do. I imagine it as working through the entire life cycle of doctoral study. So, for example, we can't think about post-degree pathways without thinking about how we can reform the curriculum to support innovative study and more flexibility in what students can produce, producing work that is more legible, or is legible to different pathways other than academia.

In my role, I consider myself kind of like a node. I come into contact with all the different constituencies involved in the project. So this includes the higher ed leaders, the advanced scholars, administration, the grad students, media, and different kind of outreach, like our Medium website, and doing this podcast, for example. And I work with Stacey Hartman, who at the ACLS is the program officer for higher ed initiatives. And so, working under Stacey, this project is a part of a constellation of other initiatives that we're working on to kind of sustain or bolster higher education functions.

In my specific role, I manage all the project-related activities, like logistics, coordinating the three committees, and the advisory group, communication, I document the activities that we put together. I assist our research consultant as needed. I've attended annual meetings, specifically the MLA, Modern Language Association annual meeting, where I facilitated focus groups. I plan and I'm planning upcoming town halls in April to gather more information and kind of give an update on where the project is more broadly. And I work with ACLS internal communications on strategy and planning, and external communications with our partners on additional outreach prospects. I also work with the Director of Member Services at the ACLS, in bringing other societies up to date with the work that we're doing. I mentioned we have the three core societies - or not core, but the ones that we're partnered with - and we want to incorporate feedback and guidance from the broader group that we work with. I mentioned it was, like, 81 scholarly associations, so I work with Director of Member Services to kind of disseminate information there for them to continue to push out information to their particular communities as well.

Brian Mitchell: That's great. You mentioned the committee structure. How else is the project organized? Your website, for example, lists different phases. Do those go concurrently? And how are some of the listening sessions structured that feed into those phases?

Treviene Harris: Okay, so we have, on the website, we've organized the project in three phases. Phase one, which is going to be research, or which has been research that we started with in July, August. That transitions into Phase 2, which is, preparing the recommendations, and then Phase 3, we call it the persuasion phase, where, like, we take the show on the road, basically.

Although we have identified - similar to the structure of the committees - although we've identified, like, three phases, there is, some of the work in Phase 1 and Phase 2, Phase 2 and Phase 3 will be entangled. So, in Phase 1, we've done our landscape assessment, we've conducted our research. We're in a better position to think about what recommendations we can put forward. But as we work through those recommendations, we'll still need to do additional research to kind of refine what it is we arrive at. We are currently transitioning into the recommendation period, into the recommendation phase, using the information that we gathered.

Our research was twofold. It was based on analysis by our research consultant, Katina Rogers, putting together and distilling information about what has been done along the lines of graduate reform over how many other decades. What models are in place, what kind of initiatives have been put forward that might be ongoing or has been shuttered? And so we have that bulk of information, and we also incorporate the voices of people who are currently embedded in the system. So, we spoke to faculty, we spoke to administrators, we spoke to graduate students about the particular roadblocks that they're encountering in the structure as it is right now. So, we kind of took a retrospective look and we're coming all the way forward into the present moment and moving from or you might call discourse analysis around the problem, to speak directly with people who are involved in graduate study right now.

Brian Mitchell: What are some of the major findings to date? You published an article last month in Medium.com that listed some of the factors and the gaps. Can you elaborate on that a little for us?

Treviene Harris: Sure. So that Medium article was centered on the listening sessions that we conducted during fall of 2025. We identified six factors that kept recurring as being essential to doctoral student success. They are the advisor relationship - students very much weighed this as critical to their success in going through and in successfully completing the program. And they described the essential nature of advising as being around emotional support, intellectual support, and practical support.

We also identified funding, and the ways that insufficient funding kind of limits the full experience of graduate study. For example, having to choose between paying one's rent and attending a conference where that's a professional development opportunity, right? Trying to think more practically about the term fully funded, and the ways that it might exclude certain information. So, fully funded means that funding is tied to teaching. with no time protected for research, and so there's this sense of competing values, either teaching or research. And so, what is required for actual funding? Teaching, grading, holding office hours, preparing lesson plans and all of that kind of undercuts the research and writing

that is needed to complete the actual degree. So, what kind of funding mechanisms are there that is solid structural support throughout the program.

We also identified peer communities as being important and essential to successfully completing studies. What was shared by the students was programs showed invest intentionally in community building. A lot of the times developing peer communities are left to the students, like creating their own writing groups, partnerships, supporting each other. It's largely on their own initiative that they create these communities, and they talked about if something as critical to their success as this could be more institutionalized, that they don't have to be doing a lot of the cognitive labor around structuring these communities.

They also talked about clarity and flexibility. Understanding the purpose of the different requirements of the program, and what it takes to fulfill them. And the idea students talked about was, like, if they see the purpose and understand how this is leading them through the program, it makes more sense. So instead of grappling with or trying to figure out, why am I doing this if my project says that? So, there's more kind of alignment with what they're being asked to do, and what they're being asked to produce at the end. In terms of flexibility, flexibility around innovative projects that they have more institutional support to create things that are not traditional. To have outputs that are not traditional. So, for example, if someone... I've seen a couple of people produce websites or podcasts for their dissertation. That should be able to stand alone, but they have to do supplemental work, like writing. So they essentially have to produce the protomonograph and the innovative object that they've created for their dissertation. And this takes a lot of time, and kind of undercuts their ability to move through the program efficiently. So, can we think about - in terms of flexibility - can we think about the different kinds of output and start, creating seriously ways to assess these forms of work, instead of having students also have to write something to make it, quote-unquote, make sense, right? And we also thought about flexibility in terms of personal life structure, you might want to think about call it. So, not everybody's coming in from undergrad. People come in with full families, people come in having to support, aging parents, their students with disabilities. What kind of support structures are embedded in the program that can accommodate these different, life formations, or personal life formations. That will help students; that won't hinder student success.

We talked also about career preparation, and making that be more in line with what the job landscape actually looks like. I don't have the specific data, but we do know that a lot of people who graduate with humanities PhD do not go back into the academy. They do not go back into tenure track roles. So, there's this real shortfall between what students are prepared for and what they end up confronting when they graduate, and thinking about ways to make that more closely aligned and more realistic. And also, having that conversation earlier in the program, and not waiting until year 5, 6, where, you know, you're operating from a place of full-blown panic, as opposed to maybe, like, year two, where you're really nurturing a curiosity and trying to isolate from your degree program what it is you enjoy doing, and how that can be used in other spaces outside of academia.

And the final factor that we came across was identity and belonging. This related specifically to, like, first generation or underrepresented students, or just some other students in general, navigating what

we think of as hidden curricula and not having guidance in how to make sense of the program that they're going through. Underrepresented students talks about having to explain their project to, like, professors who are not familiar with their work, and not having the kind of support to understand what it is they're doing, and having to do things like, validate or justify what their research is, because of the structure of faculty that may not have similar faculty members to support students who are coming through with different ideas for scholarship and research. There are other instances in talking with one of those student groups where students who are coming through who don't know, for example, what a comprehensive exam is. They don't know what an oral exam is. And being kind of hesitant to ask for clarification on these things because it might appear as though they're not sophisticated enough and they shouldn't be in a program. So, these are some of the things that we found kept recurring, that are kind of the framework on which students imagine as successful progress and successful completion of a program.

The things that... the two issues that did not arise as much, or at all, in our conversations was around admissions. And so, with the current issues that we're having in higher ed - the funding restrictions where universities are having to reduce cohort sizes - so thinking about admissions in terms of, how we might still be able to accommodate a diverse range of students and research interests, even though we're reducing, for example, from, like, a five-member cohort to, like, a two-member cohort. So rethinking admissions in terms of trying to sustain a kind of richness in the research prospects of a department or a university. And thinking seriously about what it means to kind of start cultivating undergraduate students for graduate study earlier, right? Having that be more symbiotic.

The issue of pedagogy also did not arise as much as we anticipated. Students expressed the need to have more support around figuring out, like, learning how to teach, right? A lot of their experience is kind of by osmosis. They are taught, so they teach. Students wanted more structural support around theories of pedagogy. How to be an effective teacher. So, pedagogy in terms of how they teach their undergraduate classes, and understanding how their professors teach them as graduate students, and having the space or the capability to replicate what they see their professors do for their own classes, if they understood what it was that their professor was doing, or how they structured that class, right? And so, pedagogy in terms of more practical, experiential learning and collaboration between students that builds out skills that is not only associated with, like, you might think of this as content delivery to students. We find that in a lot of the skill set that is developed, or skill sets that are developed in pedagogical training are more broadly useful around... you might think about effective communication, for example, things like, planning strategically. And this is not what we call it, but, like, effective communication, strategic planning, modes of assessment, these are all things that are kind of embedded in pedagogical training, and students would feel more comfortable having, like, a structured ... having more structure around, thinking about pedagogy. So admissions and issues around pedagogy were two of the gaps that we found that we wanted to kind of re-center into what we're thinking about as we work through reforming graduate studies more broadly.

Brian Mitchell: Were any of the factors or gaps related to the international student population? Did that come up in your listening conversations?

Treviene Harris: Yes, the gaps themselves, the only thing we considered around the gaps would be admissions and the problems that we're encountering with student visas. And those are largely, like, legislative problems that we as yet don't have too much influence over, but there was a recognition that what would it mean to a university community if we're not able to admit international students? And this kind of touches on the problem of shrinking cohorts, you know. What does a university research program look like without international scholarship added to it? So, it is an area for concern. I don't think we have figured out how to resolve that particular issue, but it is something that looms large over the work that we're doing anyway.

Brian Mitchell: You mentioned the NEH funding that you had to work through at the beginning of the project, and you resolved that issue. Were there any other barriers that you faced in implementing the project to date?

Treviene Harris: No, I mean, apart from trying to coordinate meetings with busy academics We haven't encountered anything that undermines or threatens the integrity of the program. I think we're anticipating most of our hard work to be during the last phase, the persuasion phase, when we have to show people what it is we've done, and try to get buy-in for uptake, trying to get people to adopt some of the recommendations that we've made. I think that might be the most, not necessarily challenging, but that is where most of our labor will be, because a lot of what we're doing, and a lot of what our research presents, is that the questions that we're grappling with are not new. They're decades old. This has been talked about quite a bit. And so, embedded in what we're doing, we're trying to figure out where is the deficit? Where's the shortfall? What have been barriers to uptake? Thinking about that as we move through to Phase 3 is going to be, I think one of the more challenging parts. How to bypass what has already, fallen by the wayside, or how to reanimate older projects that people kind of let slide.

Brian Mitchell: Yeah, in my opinion, faculty are one of the barriers to implementation. So, what do you think faculty should take away from this project as some of the findings emerge? What would they find of most use?

Treviene Harris: I think they would be able to recognize what it is they can do to improve how they mentor students, by knowing exactly what students want or need from a mentor, what they consider necessary to be successful. If we back up some more, I think this might also rely on administrative intervention. So, kind of prioritizing mentorship training of faculty. Apart from implementing institutional requirements for mentorship and training, also incentivizing it. Have systematic things in place to ensure advisor quality. And I think, faculty can also probably think more about pedagogy, how their pedagogy shapes their grad students as pedagogues, and be more intentional about how they communicate to students, like, why it is they've scaffolded a class or a course the way they have, or even something as simply as narrating why they've done what they've done on a syllabus, so students can understand how that works. Related to that, how they can support or offer ideas for institutionalizing peer communities as alternate sites of support. Because we know that faculty are busy. So maybe everything that a student wants from an advisor is not possible, so how can we have alternative structures of support in peer communities for students? Thinking about ways to cultivate that without it encroaching too much on what faculty has to do already.

Brian Mitchell: What about prospective students? What might they take away from the project as they think about entering a doctoral program in the humanities?

Treviene Harris: Mentoring and advising and sufficient funding. So there's the prestige of the university, right? Everybody wants to go to a top university. But thinking seriously about who it is they want to work with, and if that person will have the time to nurture them in the way that they need it. And alongside that, if that person might not be always accessible, who else in the department can support me if a mentorship relationship falls apart? So, thinking carefully of, will I have the support, will the person be there for me? Is there a scholarly network in the department or in the institution more broadly that will get me through the program? Funding in terms of, will I have sufficient support to do this thing, and support in all the ways that you might need. This is not just tuition remission and stipends, but funding for, like, conferences and other kinds of fellowships that might be available as you move through the program. Both of these, advising and mentoring and funding are tied, I think, to the time, to degree. How long will it take me to complete this? Will I have the mentoring support to complete it in the required amount of time? Is the funding that I will get realistic enough to have me complete this in the set amount of time? A lot of PhD students incur debt once their funding runs out around a limited amount of time. So, am I going to have a mentor that's going to push me through, you know, support me and push me through the program in the required amount of time, so, like, I don't run out of money and I can get to produce the thing I want? The same quality of thing I want to produce at the end of the program. So, thinking carefully about advising/mentoring and funding, I think, are two key essential points for undergrads considering, PhD study.

Brian Mitchell: Why did ACLS and the partner organizations focus on the doctorate as opposed to the master's? I assume that in talking about the PhD or the doctorate, you're including terminal masters like the MFA and things like that. But there are some standalone master's programs. Was there thinking around why you focus specifically on the doctorate?

Treviene Harris: Terminal master's degrees are usually not funded. So, it doesn't create, as much stickiness for an institution to think about, you know, what it means to continue this program, where there is an output when it comes to PhD students, and trying to not justify or validate why we should pay for this, but here are the good reasons why we should probably think about sustaining this part of the institutional culture, this part of institutional history. We're starting to do work on undergrad programs and terminal master's programs, but we center PhD study because that's where knowledge creation happens, and we want to keep that part alive. Whenever there are funding cuts in a department, this is usually the stage of study that gets gutted, or is thought of as, not priority. People usually focus mostly on undergrad curriculum. How do we keep them coming? And we want to kind of make more clear the relationship between cultivating a PhD program and how that bears on undergraduate study and undergraduate recruitment as well.

Brian Mitchell: Yeah, many of those factors are applicable across a wide range of disciplines, so do you think there are any of your findings that can be broadly applied to other disciplines outside of the humanities?

Treviene Harris: Funding is emerging as something that STEM fields should think about. With the cuts that we've witnessed over the last year or so, funding is now as critical to STEM fields as it has always been to humanities fields. So thinking about how to make funding sustainable in STEM fields, how to attract students with more attractive funding packages and so on that will ensure that they complete their programs. There are things that we also borrow from STEM, or things that STEM does really well that we're trying to incorporate into the reforms or the recommendations that we come up with, and that is the lab model of training, where students work more collaboratively, share more research, and this might reduce the burden students have on producing "original stuff." So that is one thing that we look at, and there's something I think both STEM and non-STEM fields can pay more attention to, and that is effective career preparation. I think STEM more has a culture of being open to looking at non-academic fields, but making that more institutionalized. In the humanities field, changing the culture around thinking people who pursue non-academic careers are not serious scholars. So that's a cultural shift for the humanities. For STEM, I think it's more, practical, having students aware of what fields they can transition into outside of academia.

Brian Mitchell: So, what's next for the Doctoral Futures Project? What do we have to look forward to?

Treviene Harris: So, we are at the recommendations phase right now. We're putting together, case studies and models of existing initiatives that are underway, that have been underway, and trying to trace how well they've performed. In Phase 2, we're looking at packaging our recommendations, we're looking at ways to start disseminating the information, whether this be town halls, or an online clearinghouse, or popping up at annual scholarly association annual meetings. So, the committees are preparing to shift from reflection to action. And as we're moving towards developing recommendations, we're going to still continue research to kind of get ideas more refined. We're focused on presenting models, or gathering models that we can show as examples. We have a panel at the Grad Futures Forum that's put on by Princeton, so Stacey Hartman and myself will be hosting a panel trying to engage graduate students specifically around some of the information that we gathered from the listing session. Talking to students more about what is your feeling, or how can we improve your ability to create peer communities, for example. What kind of help do you need in pedagogy? So that will be taking place next Monday, the 23rd. It's a virtual panel between 3 and 4 at the Grad Futures Forum.

And then in April, we have three town halls scheduled, over the middle 3 weeks in April, again, focused on the areas that came up in the Medium article. So, we have the first one on April the 7th. That's going to be focused on small cohorts and how they impact programming. Focused on admissions, curriculum and career preparation, how having smaller cohorts might impact how programs put together these different parts of our PhD program. The second Town Hall will be on April the 15th, and there we're talking about pedagogy in all the respects I mentioned before. And then on April the 30th, the focus there will be on peer communities as well. So immediately, that's what we have coming up.

We will see how the recommendation phase put gets put together. We have a meeting scheduled for October of this year, where we hope we will be kind of closer to the end of Phase 2, and then we'll start, ideating and considering what can Phase 3 look like.

Brian Mitchell: Well, I look forward to that information coming out, and I hope you'll come back at a later time and kind of update us on the progress of the project.

Treviene Harris: Yeah, sure, and if anybody's interested in tracking the project, you can visit our website, acls.org/doctoral-futures, sign up for our newsletter. We drop a newsletter, I think, once per quarter; everything condensed nice and neatly about what's happening in the project.

Brian Mitchell: This has been great. Thank you for joining me today, Treviene.

Treviene Harris: Thanks for having me, Brian.

Brian Mitchell: Please join me again in two weeks for the next episode of Grad-post. Remember, all of the links provided in my podcast are available on my website at gradpost.com. That's G-R-A-D dash P-O-S-T. There, you'll find more information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree.

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