Episode 69 – The Other Cornell Report

Welcome to Grad-post! I'm your host, Brian S. Mitchell, and we're here to talk about all things related to graduate school and advanced degrees.

I started writing this episode before the most recent news of sexual violence on the campus of Cornell University returned to light. Given the importance and sensitivity of that story, I struggled with whether to continue analyzing a less weighty report that came out of that institution or whether to shelve it for a later date. But just as teaching, learning, and research continue at Cornell while controversy envelopes the campus, I decided to continue with this episode because it is timely and the contents of this "other" report on the future of the American university have as much to do with Cornell's campus climate as any other findings. After all, graduate students walk the same sidewalks, eat at the same establishments, and attend many of the same social events that undergraduates do. Yes, there can be a hierarchy in the classroom where graduate student instructors have the same teaching and learning opportunities and responsibilities with undergraduates that full-time faculty do, but in off hours they are much closer to the campus social environment than are the faculty. Graduate students are subjected to sexual harassment and Title IX policies just like undergrads, and campus safety is of utmost importance to everyone in the community. That shortcomings in equity and belonging still exist mean that any attempt to reform the future American university must include them alongside issues of cost of attendance, jobs of the future, the research advisor-advisee relationship, and how graduate education is evaluated and reformed. Today's topic focuses on those more mundane issues, while those of sexual violence on our college campuses play out in very public spaces. It's my hope that Jane Doe finds justice and closure and that the American university can learn as much or more from her allegations and how they are dealt with (or not) than the report I'll discuss today.

The "other" Cornell report I'm referring to comes from an *ad-hoc* committee convened in 2025 that was asked by the university president to review the "disruptive forces" confronting higher education. You can read the full charge to the committee and its composition on Cornell's website. The committee's output was a report in September of this year with the ominous quotation from Edmund Ezra Day - the fifth president of Cornell - emblazoned across the title page:

"… controversy should be regarded as an invitation to move in, not a warning to keep out."

I take these words to heart and move in with my own critique of this report through the lens of graduate education.

What makes this report especially interesting is the uniqueness of the institution from which it is born: a research intensive, land grant, part private part public institution that as part of the Ivy League competes with and compares itself to some of the most elite private institutions of higher learning in the world yet has the explicit mission of extension and public service that the others do not. As such, it has a perspective on research topics that ranges from agriculture to xenophobia, from the practical to the profound. That makes Cornell equally able to comment on factors impacting higher education at NYU as well as SUNY Canton. Were a report coming from a "Committee on the Future of the American University" at any other institution I would probably roll my eyes at the presumption that one institution could speak

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for all. But Cornell comes as close as any in its ability to fill this role. There are others – The University of Michigan and The University of California-Berkely come to mind – but they didn't issue a report. To be fair, UC-Berkeley did hold a symposium on "An Open Systems Approach to the Future of U.S. Universities" in 2021, but I don't put the opinions of three speakers – as qualified as they may be – on quite the same level as a well-researched committee report. Having said that, there is no presumption on my part that any report coming from a faculty committee contains anything useful or new when it comes to graduate education. But, let's have a look.

Despite the report's title, it's never really clear if these recommendations are being made just for Cornell or for the "American University" writ large. Immediately in the Preface, we find opposing assertations, first with the authors anthropomorphically stating that "This report asks how the university must adapt to honor its quietly revolutionary purpose in American life," followed later by the assertation that "Its recommendations, in contrast … are addressed to one institution … and sized to what Cornell specifically can do." As I look back through their recommendations and my analysis thereof, I'm inclined to side with the former rather than the latter; that is, what's good for Cornell is probably good for the industry more broadly.

There's obviously a lot in this report and as we are finding out, a lot not in it, but insofar as graduate education is concerned there is an entire chapter devoted specifically to it. Chapter Six on Professional and Graduate Education is nestled in the middle of this 200+ page report, wholly separate from Undergraduate Education as it should be, yet separated from chapters on Research and Scholarship, and Community Engagement which it probably should not. Nevertheless, this metaphorical elephant that is graduate and professional education must be drawn and quartered in some fashion, so it is to our convenience that it is presented as its own organ rather than part of a larger metabolic system.

Chapter Six combines graduate and professional education as is often the case. The current list of what qualifies for "professional" degrees in the context of student loan overhauls notwithstanding, it's reasonable to lump these two disparate career paths together for the sake of this report. And there's plenty of background on both to justify the committee's recommendations, which I will jump to directly. The chapter concludes with five broad recommendations for Cornell in the realm of graduate and professional education:

- *Broaden doctoral and postdoctoral training for a more uncertain job market.*
- *Reconsider the dissertation and capstone.*
- *Develop a program in academic civics for graduate students and postdoctoral researchers.*
- *Bring the cultivation of judgment explicitly into stated learning outcomes.*
- *Build cross-field curricular and co-curricular infrastructure to improve training in pedagogy for students who envision careers in the classroom.*

I can't argue with any of these recommendations, but boy, some of them make me angry. Others strike me as potentially transformative, and still others are glaring in their omission. Short of droning on for the next ninety minutes on all of the recommendations, let me pick one from each of these categories: the maddening, the marvelous, and the missing.

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The maddening recommendation comes right from the first volley: "*Broaden doctoral and postdoctoral training for a more uncertain job market.*" This statement could be interpreted in several ways, but I'm taking it narrowly to mean that faculty should stop cloning themselves through their graduate students. I'm not mad at Cornell for making this a recommendation; I'm mad because it's a recommendation that has been made *ad naseum* in multiple reports from multiple sources for decades. Although reports from the Mellon Foundation in 2016 and Yale in 2021 are cited in this report's background review, the problem of increasingly-narrow doctoral training goes back even further. In reverse chronological order, here's Mark C. Taylor in a *Nature* editorial back in 2011:

"The academic job market collapsed in the 1970s, yet universities have not adjusted their admissions policies… [O]nce those students finish their education, there are no academic jobs for them."

The seminal CGS/ETS Report "The Path Forward: The Future of Graduate Education in the United States" from 2010 also broadened the conversation on an inherent problem in doctoral training:

"Obtaining an academic tenure-track position may be more difficult in the future, as universities are less likely to replace departing tenured faculty with tenure-track positions."

CGS reiterated this stance again fifteen years later – as if nothing had changed - in their 2025 report "Understanding and Supporting PhD Careers":

"Many of the students entering [PhD] programs today will do so with the intention of pursuing an academic career. As noted previously, however, it is likely that fewer than half of all PhD students will find themselves in a faculty position."

This last quotation is virtually identical to one from 2007 – nearly two decades prior – from the Carnegie Initiative on the Doctorate summary publication "The Formation of Scholars":

"Approximately one-half of those who receive doctorates this year will join the ranks of college and university faculty."

But the faculty cloning problem pre-dates even the most recent turn of the millennium. It originated with the apprenticeship model upon which the modern research degree is based and was further incentivized through government actions like the post-WWII graduate trainee funding models. Neither of those characteristics of doctoral training is by themselves a bad thing. They have led the United States to its global leadership position in research, scholarship, innovation, and creativity. But they have also led to a deeply entrenched method of training those scholars that is resistant to change. Now, with the advent of artificial intelligence and faculty worrying aloud if they will be replaced by bots, the job market is even more uncertain and broadening training of graduate students for future careers may be even more difficult than it was before. So, I'm mad that no one has listened to these calls for broadening career options for graduate students before and am skeptical that this report will change any of that. The committee said so themselves:

"…the most regularly confessed fear is that a year of sustained, sincere labor will simply be lost to indifference."

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Until faculty and administrators across the industry take note, or - more to the point - the incentive structure is changed, faculty will continue to train students for the jobs of the past, not the future. And I'll continue to be mad.

On a brighter note, the "marvelous" comes in the emphasis on academic civics that pervades the document but is of particular emphasis in the training of doctoral students. Chapter 7 is the most concise and articulate summary of what is right and wrong with the American university that I have recently read. If you only read one page of this report, read page 145 which is the Background section of Chapter 7. It lays out where we are, how we got here, and what forces are at play for our future.

Though this chapter focuses primarily on the administration-faculty-staff relationships, the role of students, particularly graduate students, begins to creep in towards the end of the chapter and appears explicitly in one of the final recommendations:

"Build a sustained, continuous academic civics curriculum spanning graduate education through ongoing institutional life."

The devil is in the details, as they say, and though it is not the charge of this committee to articulate exactly how the curriculum in academic civics for graduate students is to be scaffolded or delivered, it should be noted that these same faculty are the ones that push back against professional development activities for their graduate students. Nevertheless, I'm in favor of it. Perhaps my enthusiasm for academic civics training is completely self-serving since I grew tired of having to explain to even fellow faculty members what a Provost was, but I think the implications are broader than that. Graduate students will feel more a part of the community. They will understand the role of faculty committees and their place in the research and scholarship enterprise. Will it curb the "us versus them" ethos that leads directly to graduate student unionization? Probably not. Nor should it necessarily. But it will help graduate students better delineate their dual roles as learners and teachers.

I don't think academic civics training for graduate students as envisioned by this committee goes quite far enough, however. The premise that universities are unique organizational structures complete with their own cultures and procedures is what in part leads to the ivory tower syndrome that walls them off from the communities in which they reside. Mention is made of public service, and a call is made to include seats on the Board of Trustees from the Ithica community, but the need to educate the public on how the university impacts them is missing from this narrative. Which leads us to what else is missing from this report.

There are a number of topics missing from these recommendations, or at least not explicitly enumerated in Chapter 6. These pressing topics include creating a more diverse graduate student community in the face of rising inequalities; promoting equity in opportunities for graduate students from underrepresented groups; enhancing the advisor-advisee relationship including mentorship training; complying with new accountability standards, and discovering new ways to bring value to advanced degrees in the AI age. Let me focus on this last topic as it is actually an extension of the academic civics recommendation just discussed.

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Aside from those in part-time master's level programs, most graduate students come from away for their advanced degrees. Statistics are hard to come by for currently-enrolled students, but my sense is that most graduate students are at an institution different from their undergraduate one, not just in name or private/public designation, but in geography as well. Those relocated graduate students need to be trained not just in academic civics, but in community civics. Otherwise, the ivory tower thrusts ever skyward. The students may be more aware of how things work in the university, professional societies, and funding agencies, but they will remain clueless when it comes to how those institutions are revered and reviled in their own communities.

I've told this story before here, but I'll tell it again. In the post-Katrina era of the institution I worked at in New Orleans, we learned that it was not enough just to be **in** a community; rather, the university had to be **of** the community. That hard-learned lesson led directly to the establishment of a Center for Public Service and a service learning requirement at the undergraduate level. Unfortunately, we did not have the foresight to establish a similar requirement at the graduate and professional level, but we should have. I won't go into how service learning would work at the graduate level – I'm saving that for an upcoming podcast – but just like at the undergraduate level it is more than community service or outreach. It is a skill-building activity at its core. There is an entire chapter in this report devoted to Public Impact and Community Engagement which insightfully recognizes the limitations of university structures when it comes to connecting scholarship with evidentiary public good. But it doesn't go far enough from a scholarship standpoint and it doesn't make the direct connection to graduate education. Service learning can bridge that gap.

Service learning may be the AI safeguard graduate programs are looking for. We are fast approaching the day when AI will generate the research project, perform the literature search, suggest and execute simulated experiments, analyze results and write the publications and dissertation for graduate students. Trainees will still need to demonstrate proficiency at the skills they are expected to build, but the societal impact those people can have will continue to be called into question. In fact, the benefit of advanced degrees specifically and institutions of higher learning more generally may be called further into question. Unless graduate programs find an effective way to connect with their communities from the local to the global while providing measurable non-AI skills to trainees in their programs, they will continue to do nothing more than clone faculty. We've come full circle on the three recommendations I chose to highlight.

Insofar as the others recommendations related to graduate education are concerned, see Episodes 65 and 67 for my take on how to "reconsider the dissertation and capstone," and see my monograph "A Research Agenda for Graduate Education" on how learning outcomes should be part of every advanced degree program. Reports from organizations like the Wisconsin Center for Education Research and CIRTL have the final recommendation on improving training in pedagogy covered. But, as I said earlier, it's worth reiterating these points in a broad overview of graduate education.

My final thought is I wish there was some way to broaden the readership and impact of reports like this. Even with wide availability and delivery, committee reports are not high on anyone's reading list, especially for busy faculty. I'm not sure I have a specific recommendation here – heck, my viewership is

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small, too. But we have to try. I've always felt that the key to reform in graduate education was through professional societies. Some are better at this than others. There must be ways to reward faculty for taking these broad based recommendations directly to their disciplines. That's where most of the change occurs.

Thank you for joining me today. Visit my website at grad-post.com for more information to help you plan your adventure for an advanced degree, and check back for more episodes on theses and dissertations.

Every recommendation, every finding, and every accusation should get appropriate consideration. It will ensure that every degree counts.

Links

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