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Sailing Away on the SS Academe: A Discussion of Current Graduate Student Experience in Leisure

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ABSTRACT

Navigating the roles and responsibilities of graduate work is a complex, and often confusing business of workflows, labor (emotional and physical), and moving in several different directions. As graduate students, we find solace and compassion in the words and (mostly) shared experiences of our colleagues, and challenges in the desires, requirements, and “this is your life now” statements of our supervisors and faculty mentors. To be a trainee in the academic context of leisure studies is to make an already complex work of personal development and intellectual labor even more complicated. Building on personal experience and the collective experiences of my colleagues, this paper will discuss PhD student experiences in leisure, and the deep influences that structural and social changes are having on those same students. It will explore our perceptions of post-PhD horizons, the challenges of student lives, and the complexities of being both a professional and a novice at the same time. As graduate students, we navigate these issues using the tools at our disposal (both traditional and modern), all-the-while wondering if we are doing any of it the “right” way. Enlisting the attractive metaphorical spaces of sailing and the crew of a tall ship, this paper explores the academic seas as a trainee on the SS Academe.

KEYWORDS

Student experience;
graduate student;
complexity;
neoliberal; sailing

The tall ship Academe sits tucked away in a hidden corner of a Canadian port world-famous for sailing, but the historically-styled three-masted barque is unique. The curvature of the hull, the rise of the masts and the 1,000 m² plus of sail conjure visions of adventure, discovery, and exploration. Even in dry dock, hidden away, the ship is formidable, and as you step onto the lacquered deck, you step into your own daydreams of what it means to sail on the high seas.

It is on this lacquered deck that we first meet Oli. Oli is new to the ship, but already looks the part. Their shoulder-length dreadlocked hair is complemented by a style that is at the same time bohemian and roughneck, combining beaded hemp jewelry with always-kind-of-dirty workpants and fingernails. Oli had joined the crew near the end of the ship’s last voyage and was staying on over dry dock to sail next year—a kind of formational training time which involves learning the ropes (both literal and figurative), and practicing some of the skills they would need as they became a “real” sailor.

Through Oli, we meet the others on the crew. Some of them had moved through the same kind of training program as Oli on this ship, and others had landed here ready to head out on the ocean. Wally is a boatswain and had been sailing for a few years. He trained aboard another ship, and brings a larger than life demeanor to the team. Chuck spent years working as a mechanic before pickup up sailing, and is rebuilding the ship’s engines over this winter docking. She doesn’t really care for the politics and people management of keeping the ship afloat, but is happy enough to toil

away on the engine if it means that she can swim in waters all over the world. Christine and Caomhan are an Irish couple who can navigate the ocean and the pub. They trained on the Academe, left for a time, then returned to make careers. The captain is a true “man of the sea” type, with the stoic nature and crass corrective approach befitting the stereotypical image of the salty sea captain. His priorities are split between the wellbeing of the ship and that of the crew; equally likely to dole out quiet praise or harsh criticism when he inspects work. Oli can, and will, try anything if asked, and often does so with impressive confidence, even if their best efforts meet with failure.

These individuals make up the crew of the tall ship Academe. Each play a role in its upkeep and success, and each have their own story. All but Oli are already sailors, with steady roles and the benefits of that stability, and each will play a role in the lives and learning of trainees who would come aboard the ship.

For a brief time in my life, I had the opportunity to work on a tall ship in Nova Scotia, Canada. I never sailed on the ship—it was in port for the winter undergoing refitting for the around-the-world voyage to begin the following spring—but I worked with the captain and crew, learned about the hierarchy of the sea, and the adventure of traversing territories for the first time. Each member of the crew held individual and shared expertise, and new sailors like Oli were mentored by more experienced crew in a *quid pro quo* where everyone benefits in one way or another. The structure, deference, and hierarchy observed by the crew held a fascinating foreignness for me, and I spent as much time as I could with them, learning different things and hearing different stories. Most of the more experienced sailors made a point to teach the less experienced, and mentored them in a craft that was actively changing with time and technology.

Many years later, after working in private and not-for-profit enterprise, I entered graduate school with the expectation that I would find the same kind of deep commitment and reciprocal learning I had experienced with the crew of the tall ship. Not knowing at the time, I had seen the model for what I believed graduate school should be. As a graduate student, and especially in my PhD, I have experienced that deep commitment to knowledge generation, and the reciprocal learning of knowledge mobilization, but I have also experienced anxiety, struggle, and defeat.

Using the tall ship and its crew as a sort of viewmaster,¹ this paper will explore how PhD students in one recreation and leisure studies department feel about their perilous journeys into academic waters.² This paper employs data collected from unstructured interviews with six PhD students and three faculty (one full professor, one associate, and one assistant) from the same institution. Participants were volunteers recruited through convenience sampling and word of mouth, with students having completed between four months and five years of PhD study. The combination and variety of students and faculty was purposeful as it provided a wider breadth of participant experience. Included in the analysis are my own experiences and observations as a PhD student, reflexive of my life experience as a working professional prior to graduate school and my five years of study at the same institution (Mauthner & Doucet, 2003). Interviews were designed as elicitation interviews, where authentic accounts of inner experience are sought, including emotions and feelings, along with actions (Silverman, 2015). This type of interview was developed as a way to “elicit people’s social realities” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017, p. 1), and although they may begin with a common framing question (Patton, 2015), they are conducted as conversations with interviewees and questions are generated as responses to interviewee statements (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2017). Thematic analysis was used for this project, using a modified stepwise approach to theme development (Silverman, 2015), and guideposts for comparative analysis (Rapley, 2016).

I will describe and theorize on how our experiences as graduate students and novice academics reflect our social reality—a reality that is different from that of our mentors, even if our mentors are early career academics. This work is meant to provide a kind of academic nautical chart that names the more obvious hazards for students training to be academics today, like the narrows of

precarious work or the shoals of uncertain futures, and illuminates less obvious dangers like the cape of lost souls, dropouts, and mental illness.

Before I continue, it is important to address the use of sailing and sailing metaphor/imagery in the writing and thinking about this paper. In the early stages of writing, a colleague cautioned me that using sailing might alienate some readers, either because they lack sailing knowledge, or simply do not care. They also commented that by choosing a sport/leisure activity generally associated with elitist wealth and power (at least in North America),³ I may have made the thoughts, feelings, and relatability of the text accessible only to those who, like me, happen to be lucky enough to have sailed in their lives. Although these critiques are fair, the association with elitism, pomp, and inaccessibility is exactly why I chose sailing, and particularly tall ships, as a way to frame, give narrative life to, and animate this paper. As academics, we embody the types of minority power and privilege we might associate with sailing—the types of exalted classism that maintain the image of the ivory tower are similar to those of high seas adventure when we step onto the deck of a ship. The world of sailing is simultaneously historic and modern, simple and complex, gritty and glamorous, and remarkably insular. It provides an ideal simile to the jargon, complexity, and insider-outsider dichotomies generated by enmeshment in academic discourse. Gaining entrance into the private society of either sailing or academia requires specific knowledge, mentors, training and testing, and the entrances are guarded by gatekeepers, trials, and tribulations. If you are unfamiliar with sailing and the jargon I might use in this paper, I hope that these moments of lost context and definition will encourage you to think more deeply about the inaccessibility of your own work and language.

The difference between crew and trainees

It would be easy enough to mistake Oli for a professional crew member on the Academe. They certainly look the part, and to the uninitiated always sound like they know what they are talking about. But, Oli will be the first to tell you that “nothing is for sure.” When pressed about what they mean, Oli will shrug the kind of dismissive shrug we sometimes give when asked to explain something we think is self-evident, tell you they still have a lot to prove, and that “lots of good sailors don’t get a crew spot.” It is hard to secure a crew spot in a world with fewer and fewer tall ships to work aboard. Crewmembers get paid, they have better accommodations, more responsibility, and more respect—lots of ships hire people for single voyages, not many are hired full time. To be crew means something special, and it was clear that Oli really wanted it. “But none of that really matters” they will say before turning the conversation to a less difficult topic, “there might not be any crew jobs left when I’m ready anyway.”

In 2007, Susan Gardner and Benita Barnes wrote about the study of graduate work in the US that:

high rates of student attrition, excessive time to degree, inadequate training for teaching and research, limited academic job market in some fields, and lack of attraction to pursue the professorial career in other fields, as well as funding difficulties, riddle the commentary and research on doctoral education today (2007, p. 2).

In this reflection on the existing literature about graduate students almost 15 years ago, Gardner and Barnes highlight issues, like attrition, limited job markets, and perceived lack of training, that despite two decades of research attention, remain issues today (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Badenhorst et al., 2015; Baird, 1993; Huerta et al., 2017; Nyquist et al., 1999). Academic discourse around graduate student experience does not seem to have changed very much during that time. The landscape for PhD students is changing, but not because of the calls to action or critical work on student experience (Jordan & Christie, 2017). PhD students are caught in a changing academic world, and their experiences matter.

For at least 20 years, 40–50% of individuals who have begun PhDs have not finished (de Valero, 2001; Geven et al., 2018; Lovitts, 2002; Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). Those who do complete their degrees make up less than 2% of the total population (1.8% in the U.S. and less than 1% in Canada (OECD, 2018a)). The Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) reports that for all citizens with tertiary education, the unemployment rates in 2017 were about 2.5% in the United States and a slightly higher 4.5% in Canada (OECD, 2018b). Specific to social sciences, the American Sociological Association (ASA), using National Science Foundation data, shows that Doctorate holders in social and behavioral sciences have consistently had an unemployment rate below 3% since at least 1997 (American Sociological Association (ASA), 2016). However, these numbers do not track where graduates are employed, and so while these numbers seem encouraging, they tell us little about the academic job market. When we explore the numbers specific to academic employment, we find that more and more faculty jobs are what Darrin Murray (2019) calls “contingent faculty,” with only about 27% in tenure-track faculty positions. So, while these graduates may be employed by the numbers, not all academic jobs are created equal (Pettit, 2019).

Deeper consideration of whether PhD attrition of 50% is appropriate notwithstanding, discussions of the PhD student experience should be essential for any field, especially recreation and leisure. In addition to the research presented in this paper, Fernandez et al. (2019) have just published work on graduate student experience in the field, identifying challenges and providing strategies for success derived from a survey of The Academy of Leisure Sciences Listserv users, and Katherine Ann Jordan and colleagues are currently working on their own project exploring doctoral student experiences, including student-faculty relationships, student empowerment, and experiences of discrimination and bullying, through a qualitative survey of graduate students. The project presented in this paper contributes perspectives of PhD students at various stages of degree completion as a way to help better frame our discussions about graduate students in the entrenched neo-liberal reality of North American post-secondary education.

Sailing into dangerous uncharted waters?

Throughout my years in graduate school, I have consistently (and sometimes overwhelmingly), felt the push to publish, participate, and engage to bolster my prospects of getting a tenure-track job. It turns out that I am not the only one who feels this way. Each graduate student believes that our work as students *should* help us get a job, but we rarely understand *how* that works. Much like sailing, navigating the roles and responsibilities of graduate work is a not-often-straightforward business of workflows, labor (emotional and physical), and maintaining multiple pathways at the same time (Cassuto, 2013; Fernandez et al., 2019). As graduate students, we find solace and compassion in the words and (mostly) shared experiences of our colleagues, and we find challenges in the desires, requirements, and “this is your life now” statements of our supervisors and faculty mentors. To be a trainee in the academic context of leisure studies is to make an already complex work of personal development and intellectual labor even more complicated. The field is small, enigmatic, and always seems to be in crisis. There are many of us, and few jobs. There are politics, personalities, and positionalities that work in opposition to one another. We are trainees who learn by doing, and are simultaneously judged for how we perform.

The process for each graduate student is different. That difference notwithstanding, every student I interviewed was feeling lost about *what* they are doing, *why* they are doing it, or *both*. This feeling of entering uncharted waters is, we are told, integral to becoming the kind of independent and productive scholars needed in a diverse field like leisure. However, it produces in students feelings of precariousness, confusion, and questions of personal and professional relevance. When you are sailing, you must always think about what is coming next, and the correction that you make for the issue in front of you can have significant implications for whether you

wind up a wreck or back in calm waters. The same is true in our work as graduate students, as we are always thinking about our precarious futures while trying to navigate a complicated and confusing present.

Confusing presents

When you ask people who are already sailors what it is like to be a trainee, you can get some wildly different answers. Wally, who had been sailing for a while, would tell you that being a trainee is about going through the motions, learning the basics, having a good time, then crewing on ships to really learn your stuff. Simple and easy. Younger members of the crew, like Christine, would disagree, saying it might have been that way when Wally was a trainee, but now it was hard work during training and you were expected to be able to crew almost before you stepped aboard a ship.

When new trainees start, it seems straightforward to them. Join the junior crew, learn the skills, perform the tasks, become sailors. Simple. Direct. Satisfying. But it isn't really that way at all.

Right from the beginning trainees are in competition with one another. Always measured, they are compared to each other and judged in reference to their peers. When they peel potatoes in the galley, speed seems to matter as much as consistency or quality, even when poor performance means dirt in their food. When climbing a mast, who goes highest and fastest is what counts, even if they don't know what to do when they arrive at the top. They are scored on everything—a cryptic accounting of their performance with finite numbers but little context. Some learn to play the game, others resist and choose to leave the ship, and still others try their best to ignore the system altogether—they also leave the ship, but not always because they choose to.

“You would assume that your grades matter right? It is school. Nope! Literally nobody gives a shit unless you are applying for a scholarship.” (DD)

A consistent theme within the group of PhD students was the confusion about what was evaluated, and what really counts during our degrees and after. Where each of us is working toward being successful students and getting a job, being unsure about what really counts is particularly unsettling. Graduate students are subject to a variety of metrics, some of which make us feel like students (grades—see DD's comment above), and some that we are already working professionals (manuscript deadlines—“I remember one hellish week trying to get a manuscript in for a special issue with [supervisor] and with no parenting help. It was awful and I got maybe 2 hours of sleep a night” (EE)). We see grades, publication, professional involvement, student evaluations, networking, and relationships as ways we are measured as we progress through our degrees and the intangible nature of how they are valued challenges us the most. DD's statement above, although crass, is an example of how this confusion manifests, especially early in PhD work. Suddenly, after years of post-secondary where grades are important, their value fades away (provided they are above a C), and leaves students wondering why we are given grades at all?

The value of grades is just one example of PhD student confusion about place and value. This confusion is tied to three essential elements: grade inflation and credential erosion; the professionalized and quantified nature of the academic self and its backwards creep into the lives of students; and the perception of uncompensated labor required of students to become full participants in academic life.

The inflationary principle

Widely studied since the 1970s (Bachan, 2017; Birnbaum, 1977; Goldman, 1985), grade inflation has effects beyond the undergraduate level, and is changing graduate level education by reducing the quality of qualified candidates (Bachan, 2017; Kostal et al., 2016). These erosions are exacerbated by the push in North American institutions for increased numbers of graduate students across all fields, even as students struggle with the precarious future of uncertain job prospects.

The dismay expressed about this by PhD students is centered on the fact that our degrees and work feel devalued and undercut by a glut of graduate students.

Not to disparage the people that have chosen to do the coursework option but ... we have now created undergrad level two ... a fifth year undergrad where you can just—if you were a decent undergrad student and you were willing to pay they will give you a fucking master's degree and it's infuriating (EE).

What EE is expressing here is a true frustration with the process of credential inflation within the university system and society at large (Collins, 2002). The business-focused expansion of the university system, says Collins, coupled with a tacit social understanding that a university degree (any degree) was a ticket to a prosperous future, continues to drive over prescription of tertiary education. More recent work in this area draws that argument specifically to graduate level education (Deming et al., 2016; Fernandez & Umbricht, 2016; Jordan & Christie, 2017; Stark & Bakker, 2017; Støren & Wiers-Jensen, 2016). Perhaps then, EE's frustration with the dilution of graduate degrees with alternate formats, and simpler means of acquisition is not misplaced, as their own credentials might be devalued before their very eyes. Why should a one-year student who enters a course-based program with different requirements, different expectations, and different outcomes be granted the same degree as a multi-year, research-intensive, thesis-based student? That seems unconscionable, especially if you are the thesis student. I (and EE) agree with Kostal et al. (2016), that “considerable harm over the long term is possible [where] students enter career fields for which they are unsuited” (p. 11), and graduate degrees—especially from practitioner-heavy fields like recreation and leisure studies—are widely devalued in the process.

Counting beans

Publication has also suffered at the hands of the inflationary principle in academics. Discussion on this statement and the inflationary principle more broadly in academe began in earnest in the 1960s (London, 1968), continues in current major academic journals (Loomba & Anderson, 2018; Sarewitz, 2016), and is widespread internationally (Gasparyan et al., 2016; Martin-Sardesai et al., 2017; Seeber et al., 2019). Although each of the faculty I interviewed exited their PhDs with at least one publication, none of them spoke about consistent or persistent feelings of pressure to produce as they completed their studies. Contrast this with unanimous and vociferous lament about the need to publish by current PhD students, and we have the next part of our confusing present.

The process of publication seems like it should be simple, and a straightforward way to measure success. Except, without knowledge of the nuances of journal quality, internal politics, valuation of formats, navigation of open access requirements, open data, fee structures, embargo, understanding that reviewer two is not (always) out to get us, and a developing predatory publication culture, the calculus of publication becomes a lot more challenging for graduate students (Kurt, 2018). Admittedly, at the early stages of a career, any publication is likely a good publication (with some exceptions (Beall, 2015)). But after the first (or maybe the second ... or third?) peer reviewed paper, we are encouraged to begin thinking about journal tiers, impact factors, sole authorship, and other ways of measuring our work. We also, increasingly at the PhD level, talk about how many publications we have each year—a far cry from the low pressure-to-publish pasts of some our mentors, where one publication at the end of your degree was often enough. The full professor I interviewed explained: “I never felt pressure to publish [during my PhD] ... I had way more intrinsic need to to get this stuff out right. It just, it was fun.”

The phenomenon of feeling deep pressure to publish is perhaps exacerbated by more young scholars moving (or being moved) to the so-called Scandinavian model of dissertation, where the document is manuscript-based and the doctoral candidate is preparing publication even as they try to engage with the purposeful, deep thinking they are meant to use to complete their degree. Each of the publication evaluation metrics I listed above are meant to help us understand both

the quality and reach of our published academic work. However, as graduate students, the very existence of that work holds value, both as a learning exercise and a validation of the hours and energy spent getting it “just right”—even if it is far from perfect. Our first works, our training works, our first tries at the monkey’s fist, are evaluated using the breadth and variety of metrics we use for all publications. Even as we learn, we are asked to be near-perfect.

For the good of the many

Another intangible metric and valuation of the PhD student is that of service work—sitting on committees or participation in student organizations. Graduate students sometimes take on these service responsibilities out of interest, but other times do so more strategically. I was asked recently to sit on a committee within our department. I agreed, feeling good about being given a “shoulder tap” for the role and knowing that it would be a good addition to my CV. I remembered only later the emails that must have gone unanswered (by me as well) searching for a volunteer. And why should any graduate student volunteer? Although my role on this committee is no different from my faculty and staff member colleagues, their participation in administrative and service roles is part of their employment. A pessimistic view of student participation on university committees might see it as paying for the privilege to have a voice where others are paid. While the research on the value of having student input and giving students a voice at the table in university decision-making is extensive (e.g. Taylor & Robinson, 2009; Testa & Egan, 2014), not every student is able, and the merits of doing so are largely opaque.

The service work as described is meritorious in different ways for graduate students and faculty (at all stages of career), and there is a lack of clarity about how this work might contribute added value to students’ degrees. Even discussing this issue speaks to the meritocratic underpinnings and neoliberal understandings of value in academic pursuits (Jordan & Christie, 2017), and the solution to this problem might be as simple as treating this volunteer participation the way we might any other, as a graduate student’s use of their free time, rather than a sub-category of job performance as it is for faculty: service to the university they pay to attend is not the job description of the student.

Much like the concept of impact factor as a measure of scientific value (Loomba & Anderson, 2018), the meritorious accounting of giving of one’s time, while simultaneously giving of one’s money, energy, intellect (and soul?), to the institution as a graduate student serves to demean our value as students and people. It also privileges those who can afford the time and energy to devote to these unpaid periods of work, as I have been able to. I can afford to spend my time discussing and re-discussing the vision of our department, while others work hard to keep themselves fed and housed. For example, one participant in my interviews maintains an assistantship, another job at the university, and a nonacademic side business to make ends meet. Faculty, and especially sessional (Canadian for adjunct) and early career (pre-tenure) faculty are not immune to this monetization and de-humanization, but they, at least, are paid for their work.

In Canada, as in the United States, this neo-liberal change to a valuation and accounting of higher education has been written on the wall for some time. In 2008, Magda Lewis explained how the election of a neoconservative government in the province of Ontario in 1995 ushered in “an ideology of deservedness/undeservedness that persists ... and a series of reviews of higher education were undertaken as the basis from which the transformation of Canada’s long-standing publically supported post-secondary education was led” (p. 51–52). These reviews, among other things, began what Lewis calls a “rhetorical turn” away from a language that positions tertiary education (and arguably all education) as a public good, and repositions it as an investment in private and personal value. The implication is that there is little public good in an educated populace; in addition to the idea that all citizens have necessarily equal opportunity (Brodie, 2008). The push in these directions in Ontario has been renewed with the election of the Ontario Progressive Conservative government in 2018. Significant, and sometimes retroactive, budget cuts

have increased measurement pressure on faculty and students, and a singular focus on STEM at all levels of education is threatening all other departments. The pressure felt by the students I interviewed to always be building and bettering created real uncertainty, about their degrees and what might come after. It also deeply challenged their engagement within a leisure studies department where they did not feel empowered to live the well-rounded lives expounded in leisure theory—“she was in a leisure studies program and she looked at how stressed everyone was and just thought if we are a program that is to promote leisure, why are we not living this?” (EE). Many of us find ourselves asking “just what exactly am I doing here?” (AA), and is the work I am doing for my own good, the good of the many, or just for a line on the CV?

Precarious futures

Oli and other trainee sailors are always sort of worried that they will get rejected from the crew, or that the ship might sink some day. Sharing broom-closet sized quarters that house two (or more) bodies, trainees know that in some ways there are so many of them so the ship can manage attrition and stay afloat. It is sometimes fun, but mostly makes them truly feel their place on board. More seasoned crew seem much more comfortable living as sailors. Along with larger and better appointed quarters, they work and sleep confident in the idea that there will always be a ship to sail, even if it looked a little different from the Academe. None of them seem at all concerned that they will have to give up sailing altogether. This isn't a feeling shared by newer crew, and each of them has a back-up plan of some kind for if their time as sailors runs out. Some plan to use their skills as sailors in other fields (trainees who were like Chuck could always fix diesel engines), and for others it would be back to old jobs they did before sailing, potentially forsaking their time at sea.

The most consistent message shared by my student participants was the perception of a precarious future. Each person had invested time, money, and energy into their PhD studies, and each had the sense that their outcomes might not be the “romanticized academia” where they, as “the best and the brightest,” are rewarded for that work (AA). “Academia is more so about studying and knowing more about one niche topic than anyone else” (BB), and along with the niche nature of the work comes a precariousness associated with job security, social support, and legitimacy as a newly graduated PhD. These issues have all been discussed in the academic literature (Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Nyquist et al., 1999), and the popular press (Jellison, 2010; Kalish, 2013; Ruben, 2010). The precarious nature of life during, and especially after, being a graduate student weighs heavily on all of us. In particular, the financial pressures leave many PhD students wondering if the extensive time and emotional commitments required, on top of the deep financial implications of this pursuit, are really worth it.

The precariousness of graduate work, it's like a very strange thing but like—You work when you're in your PhD, you don't work enough hours to earn anything like EI [employment insurance] provided by your government, and then you move on to a postdoc which is the same, or you start doing sessional lecturers which is like a term by term basis. And like, when do you ever establish, like a job that helps you save for retirement or that's getting you benefits or ... If it's just by a term by term you don't know what's coming next. Right. So, in terms of future planning, it's impossible. (CC)

There is a consistent fear among PhD students that all we will find as academic jobs after we graduate are one-off, sessional roles. Our research will suffer, we will jump from here to there, and our families, relationships, and connections will all be hurt as a result.

We sometimes talk about these issues with one another and our supervisors. One student said “when I started my PhD [we] really sat down and kind of write out what I want to get out of my PhD. Like what are my main things I want to get out of it and then kind of work toward. How I'm going to get that ... what to expect ... what's the strategy?” (FF). Although supervisors and mentors might openly discuss some of the difficulties in the job market with their students (and

this isn't a sure thing), rarely are students exposed to statistics like as many as 71% of academic positions are non-tenure track (Murray, 2019)—a reality of their job search post-graduation. In 2014, the unemployment rate for PhD holders in Canada was about the national average (Ferguson et al., 2015). Although not terribly surprising or daunting for most graduates, the perspective shifts when you add that 38% of Canadian PhD holders are working in non-full-time positions, with the majority of those being nonpermanent as well (Ferguson et al., 2015). It is perhaps an unconscious understanding of these numbers, which lays bare to PhD students the precarious nature of their work. Curiously, for all that work and worry, a Canadian PhD holder makes less than 10% more on average than a Canadian with a Master's degree (Ferguson et al., 2015).

In this case, we are seeing the inflationary principle of academic production and the neo-liberal modeling of Canadian universities at work. As FF described, younger faculty are having early degree strategy sessions with new students to help plan out their studies, as well as where and when they might leverage those studies for publication and metric building. Only one of my faculty interviewees discussed a culture of (lab-based) publication in their PhD. Both the near-retirement and pre-tenure faculty made points of saying they had no pressure to publish.

Lifeboats

The solution, for many of us, is to have something else on the go, beyond what multiple academic projects we might be managing at a given time. For some it is consulting, for others it is community involvement and networking. For others still, it is having multiple avenues within the university to build their networks should they need to jump ship.

I also have tried to always be doing something in addition to my work, so whether it's teaching assistant positions, research assistant positions, I've also worked for [two centers on campus]. And for me it was always—that's always about thinking about the future. So I don't do those things because I want to do them necessarily. I would rather just do my PhD get in and get out. But I have to think about when I'm done: who are the people I know? and what are the skills that I have? and the jobs that I've had in addition to just the PhD work? and how is that going to help me get a job when I get out? And so, I'm always trying to think about people that I can make relationships and connections with, so that hopefully when I graduate if there's something in the area, then I can have an advantage. (BB)

For BB, these multiple avenues are like having several lifeboats, which will allow BB to move to other types of work if they need to. These kinds of backup plans came up for all the students, as ways of making sure that they would be able to feed themselves after completing their degree. I have them too—I have maintained a bus-drivers license in case this PhD does not work out.

Student's discussing backup plans was decidedly different from what faculty shared. For the older faculty I interviewed, none of these worries factored into their studies or their post-PhD job search; they sailed off into the unknown of faculty life without much thought about backups and second choices. For younger faculty, they talked about diversifying their experiences, not as backup plans, but rather as a way to expand their reach. All faculty I interviewed acknowledged that the landscape was different now for PhD graduates, even when they were not that far removed.

Lost souls

Waxing philosophical at the Knot Pub, Caomhan explains that “the greatest fear for a ship's crew member is being swept overboard in bad weather, or at night when they are alone on deck. Relative to the oceans, a person is infinitesimally small, and once lost from the ship the chances of being found in dark, rough, and open water are pretty much zero.”

There are important safety measures in place to prevent this from happening on ships. People on board of the ship normally work with a buddy, checking in with each other, especially in bad

weather. Ships have a harness and guard system, which keeps sailors from being thrown overboard in dangerous weather. They train, a lot. But even with all of these measures in place, the worst still happens.

The Academe has its own stories of a lost soul. In heavy seas and big water, a young crew member was washed overboard in the dark and was lost to the sea. The safety mechanisms hadn't worked or weren't used, which, is still unclear. The Captain seems rather unemotional about the whole thing. Other than training for the possibility, no one really talks about why people are lost from the ship, but it is clear that everyone has considered the possibility. Would those safety nets be there for them if they needed them? or would they be another lost soul from the Academe?⁴

The final significant experience of graduate students I want to discuss is feeling lost, alone, and adrift in a vast and challenging landscape. A combination of our confusing present and the precarious nature of our futures makes each of us worry that we have been seduced by the “romanticization of the letters, even though it's not all it's cracked up to be” (FF). Having committed to and engaged with this emotional and intellectual labor of PhD study, the PhD student is always trapped in a sort of quitter's paradox where leaving is almost harder than staying. After all, less than 1% of the Canadian population holds a PhD (Brouwer, 2016), and about 1.37% of the U.S. population holds a doctoral degree (US Census Bureau, 2020). The social caché of having those letters after your name is such that even those who do not understand what you do, defer to you as some sort of “big deal.” So to leave, either by your own choice or at the behest of your department, imparts a deep sense of loss (Lovitts & Nelson, 2000). “Noncompleters” (sic), explain Lovitts and Nelson, were less likely to feel supported, less likely to have quality financial support, and far less connected to the climate and fit of their programs. Lovitts and Nelson's data, it is worth mentioning, was collected before email, VPNs, online education, and meeting through networked digital software became normal practices in academics. What have these technologies done to the personal and human connections that were so important to the PhD student experiences they mention?

From a more critical angle, those who end their PhD journeys without completing their degrees might look to the commodification of academics, and the inflationary principle that drives that phenomenon, as one of the ways of explaining their own attrition. It is perhaps the very mechanisms which might have helped them get into PhD studies which set them up for this failure (Austin & McDaniels, 2006; Jellison, 2010). Those students in my sample who discussed inflation and the need to always be doing more, were the ones who challenged the dilution of graduate education they saw happening around them. They are also the ones who felt the most unsure about what their futures held.

This discussion does beg the question of whether the metaphorical ship of academia should have safety systems like a real ship? Where being lost at sea has tangible (read: deadly) consequences for almost all who fall overboard, the consequences of not completing a degree are time and money lost, and emotional hardship. These are not intangible problems, and I believe there are measures we can take to mitigate them. Given all we have discussed, how much attrition is actually too much (Cassuto, 2013) and do we measure success in a field by bums in seats and tuition paid, or by the quality of the doctors we are making in the end?

Setting sail anyway

Oli sits at mid station on the main mast in the cool spring air of an April morning. The winter's refitting complete, the Academe had taken on a group of new trainees and preparation had begun for the ship's next voyage. Oli put into practice the special main sail tying technique Wally had taught them over the winter and descended to join new and old crew in final preparations. That summer, Oli sailed over the equator, shaved their head (as one is compelled to do when you cross the equator for the first time), and was made a full member of the crew of the Academe. Despite

the various challenges and pitfalls, the competition and complication, Oli made it as a crewmember, and was now one of those few who held the spot coveted by the trainees. But Oli was exceptional, received extra training and mentoring, and was able to live on the ship over the winter, feed and clothe themselves. Not every trainee has these advantages. I wonder if Oli is still sailing, and if anything about training and being hired as crew has changed?

My own time as a PhD trainee is slowly but surely (I hope), coming to an end. I honestly have no idea if I will get one of those coveted spots as tenure-track faculty. I have my mentors and my supervisor to thank for the wide-ranging opportunities I have been afforded during my tenure as a student. Even as one of the lucky ones, and I certainly consider myself lucky, I am still worried that what I have done, what I have written, and who I have met will not be enough to get me a job. Through the interviews and discussions for this project, I have learned that this deep-seated anxiety, impostor syndrome, questioning of self-value, and confusion are the hallmarks of our PhD experiences. Although I have had deep philosophical discussions, and I have learned a great deal, the core of my experience, and the experience of my peers, centers on the metrics, the accounting, and the strategy of decision-making. If you long for the intellectually enlightening experience of the 1940s salon of Gertrude Stein (as I did), or are old enough to remember your PhD as this kind of experience (as some of you might be), don't count on that happening in a PhD today.

You might be tempted to wonder how PhD studies and the associated job hunt are different from any other work. "Aren't all people seeking jobs in the same state of existential difficulty about their futures?" No, I do not think so. The huge amounts of student debt for uncertain futures aside for the moment, the pressures faced by PhD students are different than any other student, and like when we engage with service work, we pay for the privilege to struggle. When you obtain a professional degree your job prospects are broad, and a medical degree almost certainly secures you a high-paying career. For academics, especially in the social sciences and humanities in a STEM-focused world, the prospects look different. This is not just for students and newly-minted PhDs—these are issues many faculty and academics of all stripes face. I will concede that it is incumbent on the individual to be able to articulate why their niche knowledge has value, but the valuation of knowledge and expertise in a field like leisure is dependent on cultural conditioning. Our work clearly has value and importance, as very few people are without leisure, and leisure is directly and inextricably linked to well-being (Chen, 2014; Janke et al., 2008). To argue that doing a PhD is just like any other vocational training program is to miss the important contributions more esoteric pursuits have made to the world, and smacks of the neo-liberal understanding of education, social, and personal responsibility.

What can ships and crews do to help?

This paper has carried a decidedly dower tone, and that tone was purposeful. Nobody ever told me that doing my PhD was supposed to be fun—in fact, I was mostly told it was going to be hard—but I always thought that the difficulty would come from the intellectual labor, not calculating whether I have enough first-authored, high impact publications to be eligible to apply for positions while I am still ABD. My point in all of this is that our experience truly does not need to be this way, and we have a model for how to do it better in the histories of those who mentor us.

Our department recently instituted a new-student buddy system where incoming PhD students are paired up with someone further along in the process. This allows the new student to learn about the department, but also the expectations of the field and scholarship that they may not have encountered. They also get a view of the student and early career landscape which is present and real; a perspective that cannot come from a near-retirement faculty member, even one with

good intentions. This program is relatively simple (especially for a field filled with programmers), and can go a long way to help new and seasoned students succeed.

Having a buddy and a good mentor are great, but the deep social pressures of completion and the romanticization of PhDs often keeps students working on degrees who, for whatever reason, should not be there. In this paper, I have tied this to the neo-liberal discourses of higher education, but it is also couched in our desire to believe that more people should complete these degrees. When we discuss attrition rates, it is often done in the context of believing that we should keep them down. Perhaps a better approach would be to carry a collective understanding that leaving a degree uncompleted is not failure, but rather could be the best decision for the individual.

Unfortunately, we cannot carry that collective understanding without considered push back against the meritocratic status quo in post-secondary education. The way we measure success, push to produce, and race to the top is not good for our health, and frankly affects the quality of the science we produce (Ball, 2016). Doing something about it is not incumbent on me as a student, just as changing the culture of sailing cannot be Oli's role; change must come from those with power.

If you chair a department, run a program, sit on committees, and/or have tenure, you have power—*use* it. I challenge you to think differently and push back (if necessary) against standardized metrics. Ask yourself: What metrics do you use in evaluation of candidates? Why do you use those metrics? and Do those metrics carry any real value for evaluation, research, knowledge mobilization, or research impact (for discussion on one set of metrics see Schultz et al., 2020)? It is easy to turn our lives and ourselves over to the whims of neoliberal politics and the changing nature of educational institutions. Especially in the social sciences (we are leisure scientists after all) we are particularly well positioned to make a stand (or at least a statement) about what is good and right for people, and what is good and right for the world. Should that power not be able to leverage better and more fruitful experiences for PhD students and those who are the “future of our field?”

I will close with the honest statement that I will not stop trying to ‘overachieve’. At the end of all of this I would like to get a job, and at this point the only way I know how is to build my CV every way I can. It shouldn't be quite like this, but this is how it is, and I would gladly work to change things if only I had the power to do so. Welcome to being a graduate student.

Notes

1. The Viewmaster is the best-known stereoscope, where you can see a series of images from places and activities as a way of experiencing them for yourself, and is a precursor to modern VR used for the same purpose. <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/View-Master>
2. This research was conducted, and this paper written, before SARS-COV-2 (COVID-19) rocked our personal, economic, and educational landscapes. While all of the elements discussed in this paper will be affected by these events, many of them are likely to be deeply exacerbated.
3. What I mean here is really white, upper (and maybe middle) class people who have enough money, time, and cultural capital to engage in a sport which is expensive, time consuming, and elitist to the highest degree.

I also say this with deference to the fact that these are not the only people who engage with sailing, and that populations all over the world sail, but when you think about going out on someone's sailboat, what do you envision?

4. I want to be very clear about the metaphor here, in that I don't mean to talk about graduate students dying or taking their own lives, but rather a broader idea of falling away from PhD studies and the academy. The issue of graduate student death and suicide is, however, an issue we should all be conscious of and account for in our lives as academics, peers, supervisors, and people (Di Pierro, 2017; Garcia-Williams et al., 2014; Luo et al., 2015).

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