WHAT IS THE 2-4 PROJECT?

Earlier this spring, Dean Jon Butler announced* that Ph.D. programs at Yale would be redesigned in response to a national study by the Woodrow Wilson Foundation entitled "The Responsive Ph.D."** According to the report, casualization has significantly depressed academic career prospects for most graduate students. At best, the report posits, only 3 out of every 10 humanities Ph.D. recipients will succeed at finding a tenure-track job. Given this fact, the report argues that graduate education ***must*** undergo significant changes to respond to the new realities of the job market, making the following recommendations to schools nationwide:

- Promote public scholarship that applies academic expertise to social challenges largely in the financial, technological, and political world;
- Reinvigorate efforts to open the doctorate to new populations, particularly from underrepresented minority groups;
- Strengthen the authority and administrative capacity of graduate deans;
- Foster a dialogue among doctoral programs, their alumni, and leaders outside the academy; and,
- Alter expectations of employment outcome of graduate education for most faculty and students. Students and faculty need to understand careers outside the research university are desirable and often better than academic careers.

The Response: Changes to Years 2 through 4

In response, Dean Butler has proposed the following changes to graduate education at Yale:

- Streamlined qualifying exam process,
- Reduced foreign language requirements,
- More written evaluations by faculty members,
- Teaching in the second year, framed as "flexibility of financial package,"
- Dissertation seminars/departmental or field colloquia,
- Chapter conference deadlines,
- Professional workshops, and
- Reduction of time-to-candidacy.

These recommendations provide both opportunity for positive change and reasons for serious concern.

THE PROBLEM

No one would argue that the Ph.D. track is perfect. In fact, GESO members have historically called upon the University to expand resources that make us competitive candidates on the academic job market. However, students are questioning whether Dean Butler's recommendations actually achieve this goal. While nobody wants to stay in school longer than necessary, reforms should enable us to produce quality dissertations, rather than restrict intellectual ambition, if they are to best prepare us for good jobs after graduation.

Rather than addressing the root of the academic job crisis - the erosion of tenure - the 2-4 project asks students to lower their expectations during graduate school to prepare for diminished opportunities afterward. Members of GESO have challenged many of these proposals from the Woodrow Wilson report and Dean Butler's subsequent communications with faculty and graduate students because these proposals:

- lower expectations of and institutional obligations to students to secure good jobs *in* the academy;
- set rigid standards for tracking graduate student progress that ignore the specific needs or demands of individual scholarly projects; and,
- reflect a desire to centralize graduate education (the report was made with no input fron non-administrative faculty) and put *more* decisions in the hands of top administrators, stripping departments and faculty of their local autonomy.

The proposed changes by the Graduate School have already directly affected graduate students at Yale, as students are being rushed through qualifying exams, denied upper-year registration, and/or advised to scale back the scope of their dissertations to fit in the "six-year" degree time frame. This process therefore raises serious questions about Yale's commitment to quality graduate education and the future of scholarly inquiry at the highest levels.

HOW WILL CHANGES BE IMPLEMENTED?

Dean Butler originally proposed to appoint a committee to oversee and implement this review, meet with students, and arrange full departmental meetings to discuss issues raised in this review process. Already, he has altered this plan, now relying instead on an e-mail survey, rather than actual discussion, to gauge support for proposed reforms. There are many reasons to believe that graduate students will not have meaningful ways to influence decisions about overhauling our education and work.

Is it too late?

Graduate school deans from 14 universities have been meeting for five years, with very limited faculty and graduate student involvement. Seeking input from faculty and graduate students now simply puts a veneer of democracy on predetermined policy changes .

Reforms have already been proposed or implemented at universities across the country, and at Yale, in the Departments of Political Science, American Studies, History, Sociology, and in the Languages and Literatures programs.

OUR PROPOSALS

Graduate students have, themselves, generated numerous ideas for alternative forms of institutional support to facilitate our movement through the Ph.D. program, including:

- Incentives for faculty mentoring, e.g. coarseload reduction;
- More senior faculty;
- Sixth-year funding;
- Portable fellowships and teaching waivers that would allow students to travel for dissertation research in years 3 and 4;
- Flexible 10-year registration, in keeping with the Harvard model;
- Expanded medical/family leave policies; and,
- Affordable daycare to free up time for graduate parents.

ON THE GROUND

"In my department, new dissertation chapter deadlines have been implemented, the prospectus date has been moved up significantly, and the oral exam proces is being totally streamlined. Once revered as a cherished opportunity to read deeply in our fields, orals is being transformed into a chance to skim book reviews. Many reforms seem innocuous at first, but taken as a whole, they strip faculty of their autonomy to make judgments about our academic progress. Most disturbingly, these changes rely more on punitive deadlines rather than on much needed support to move graduates through our Ph.D. program."

- Evan Cobb, sixth-year graduate student, Department of Germanic Languages and Literatures

REFERENCES

* Dean Jon Butler announced the proposed changes of the "2-4" plan in an e-mail that was sent to all faculty and graduate students in the spring of 2006, titled "Renewing the Ph.D. . . . [sic] at Yale: The 2-4 Project."

** For copies of the Woodrow Wilson report, "The Responsive Ph.D.," see: http://www.woodrow.org/responsivephd/index.php.

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FACTS ABOUT THE 2-4 PROJECT

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