

Preparing Stewards of the Discipline

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Abstract: To direct attention to the expectations for leadership, integrity and responsibility of the doctorate, the author argues for the creation of a ritual ceremony of initiation for students entering doctoral education.

Essay:

In the first week of medical school at an initiation in front of family and friends that symbolizes entry into the profession, all new students receive a white laboratory coat, the standard "uniform" of a physician. In addition, they recite an oath committing themselves to the profession and its ethics, a powerful statement of the shared values and purpose of being a doctor. This "White Coat Ceremony" signals the beginning of the rigorous educational period that will eventually culminate in the conferral of the title "doctor." In this ritual moment, students shed old identities and begin to adopt the identity of "physician" that embodies new values, skills and knowledge. The ceremony is a tangible touchstone, reminding students throughout the many challenges they will face in their training of what it means to be a medical doctor.

The 40,000 individuals earning Ph.D.s each year in the United States also assume the title "doctor." And the educational process of becoming a historian, a chemist, a mathematician or a political scientist can be just as daunting and challenging as that of becoming a physician. Yet no equivalent ceremony of initiation exists for those entering doctoral study. Nor is there an oath or statement of shared purpose.

Those of us at the Carnegie Foundation who have examined doctoral education over the past five years think there should be. We maintain that the purpose of doctoral education is to prepare stewards of the discipline. And if we created a ceremony that initiates and celebrates an oath that defines and embodies the values of this stewardship, we would

both honor the commitment of these emerging scholars and create a touchstone to guide them through the rigors and challenges they will face along the way.

At Carnegie, we have defined stewardship as encompassing a set of roles and skills, as well as a set of principles. The former ensures competence and the latter provides the moral compass. A Ph.D.-holder should be capable of *generating* new knowledge and defending knowledge claims against challenges and criticism; of *conserving* the most important ideas and findings that are a legacy of past and current work; and of *transforming* knowledge that has been generated and conserved by teaching well to a variety of audiences, including those outside formal classrooms. Students should understand that the Ph.D., at its heart, is a research degree. It signifies that the recipient is able to ask interesting and important questions, formulate appropriate strategies for investigating these questions, conduct investigations with a high degree of competence, analyze and evaluate the results of the investigations, and communicate the results to others to advance the field. Conservation implies understanding of the history and fundamental ideas of the discipline, but recognizes that disciplinary stewards are aware of the shoulders on which they stand and must judge which ideas are worth keeping and which have outlived their usefulness, examining how their disciplines fit into the larger intellectual landscape. Transformation speaks of the importance of representing and communicating ideas effectively, and encompasses teaching in the broadest sense of the word. It also suggests that stewards must understand other disciplines, the differences between disciplinary views of the world, and how to appreciate and communicate across traditional boundaries.

The label "steward" also conveys a role that transcends accomplishments and skills; it has an ethical and moral dimension. Stewards have a responsibility to apply their knowledge, skills, findings and insights in the service of problem solving or greater understanding. Self-identifying as a steward implies adopting a sense of purpose that is larger than oneself. One is a steward of the discipline, not simply the manager of one's own career. By accepting responsibility for the care of the discipline, and understanding that one has been entrusted with that care by those in the field, on behalf of those in and beyond the discipline, the individual steward embraces a larger sense of purpose. The scale is temporally large, looking to the past and the future, and broad in scope, considering the entire discipline as well as intellectual neighbors.

While an expectation that a student would understand the complexities of stewardship might require an oath quite a bit longer than the medical students' oath, surely an enterprise as important as the formation of scholars requires both a ceremony and a stated recognition of understanding and commitment to service. Imagine an initiation at the start of the academic year in which all new doctoral students receive a six-sided velvet tam with golden tassel (one element of doctoral regalia), as a symbol of their entry into the disciplinary community. It would echo the graduation ceremony at which their advisor will place the velvet and satin hood around their neck. It would celebrate the decision to undertake the most rigorous educational experience available. It would provide an occasion to talk about the serious venture that awaits them, and the responsibilities for the generation, conservation and transformation of knowledge that they are assuming as

stewards.

Over the course of their education, students' identities will be transformed from history student to historian, from physics student to physicist. Along the way they will be assailed by challenges and doubts. An induction ceremony that celebrates a vision of stewardship can serve as a tangible reminder of their calling, a touchstone as they accept their role as stewards.

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