

# WIDENING OUR HORIZONS

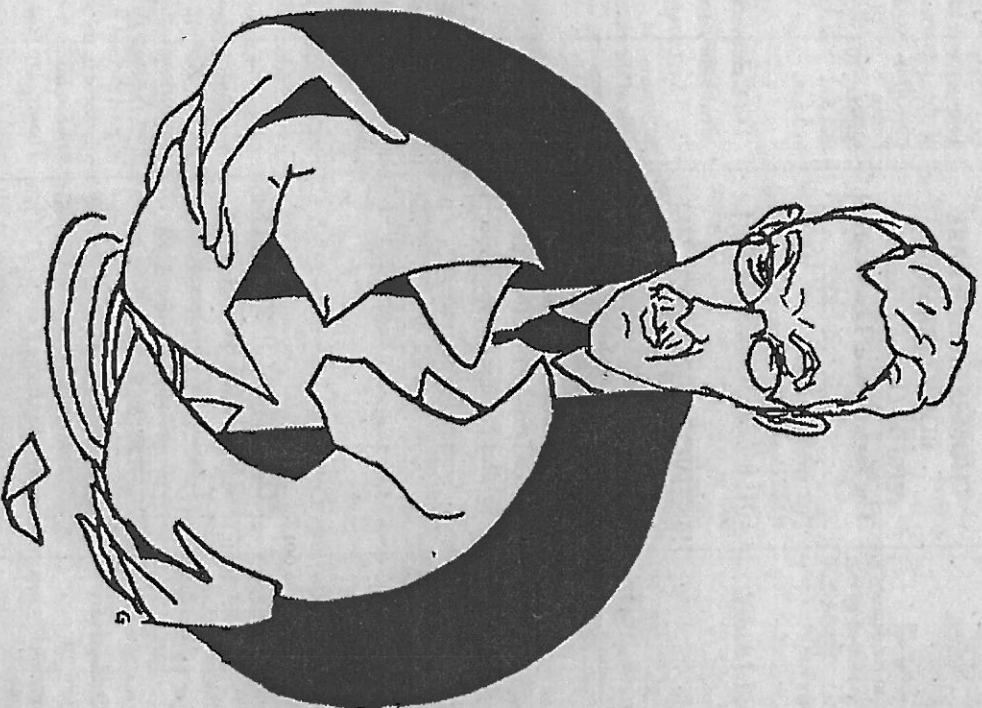
*PhD students should be encouraged to look beyond the academic job market*

By JONATHAN MALLOY

LAST SPRING THE COUNCIL OF ONTARIO Universities (COU) released a report on predicted university enrolments over the next decade. The report forecast a considerable increase in undergraduate numbers, particularly when members of the "double cohort" — the students who began high school last year and those starting this fall — jointly graduate from those high schools in 2003 when Ontario eliminates Grade 13. COU argued that this surge warrants the hiring of between 11,000 and 13,000 new professors in Ontario between now and 2010.

Unfortunately my hometown newspaper, the *Kitchener-Waterloo Record*, mistread the press release. Its front-page, above-the-fold story proclaimed that Ontario universities *will* be hiring thousands of new professors — not *will* like to, but *will*. The story predicted dire shortages and bidding wars for new and imminent PhD graduates like myself. Consequently all summer long I have been correcting relatives and friends — all of whom seem to be very active newspaper readers — that, no, I am not a hot item. Deans are not phoning. I have not hired an agent. No signing bonuses are coming my way.

Like most veteran graduate students, I didn't pay much attention to the COU report. We've heard it all too often — the coming hiring binge due to enrolments, retirements or some other happy prediction in the demographic crystal ball. It's true that the academic job market is improving as government budget cuts are ending and the generation hired in the 1960s is beginning to retire. The University of Toronto's



Instead it is larger structures and attitudes that must be modified to grapple with the reality of the academic job market.

First, departments and divisions need to assess where their graduates are ending up right now. My own department of political science has taken the initiative on this, collecting extensive data on its recent doctoral graduates and making realistic assessments of how well its PhDs are actually doing in the academic job market. But to the best of my knowledge most departments at U of T or elsewhere have no systematic data on how their PhDs are doing. This information needs to be collected and shared with current and incoming students so they know what they are likely getting into. Some may object to this, saying it will scare away the best prospects. But if a person is considering doctoral work solely because they hope to get a good job out of it, that person is not really suited for the life of academic inquiry. The best people will not be scared off — just better equipped for reality.

Second, graduate students need to be encouraged to seek internships and other temporary work related to their academic program. Instead they are penalized for this by being forced to keep paying tuition and yet forfeit even small scholarships if their paid workload exceeds 10 hours a week. Many students could benefit from a six-month break to allow them to get out of the library or lab, exploring and applying their research in the outside world. Most PhDs, however, are only allowed to really figure out how to merge their academic work with the job market once they've graduated.

Again there's an easy objection — that once PhD students

going to change this significantly, particularly for new gradu-

between 80 and 100 new hirings in the next five years and calls this special "a wave of faculty hiring at the university unmatched since the late 1960s and early 1970s." In its Jan. 19 issue the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported a "modest upswing" in hiring across all disciplines and forecast further improvements over the next few years.

Despite all this enthusiasm it is still far from a job-seeker's market. Any tenure-track opening attracts a deluge of strong applicants, numbering in the hundreds in some disciplines. The number of available jobs is still considerably outweighed by the number of new graduates entering the market annually. U. of T. alone, for example, awards over 500 doctoral degrees every year. Newly minted PhDs entering the job market also quickly discover that they are not just competing against each other but with the army of doctoral graduates who have been shut out of the job market in previous years. The academic job market has been so bad over the past decade that this new hiring is simply advancing PhDs' job prospects from awful to merely terrible.

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MANY STUDENTS AND FACULTY, HOWEVER, STILL BELIEVE that the market will imminently transform into a graduate student's dream. Deans will beg us to come teach for them. We will be able to relax and pick out the city and university of our choice, rather than desperately moving to any place that will hire us for an eight-month sessional appointment. Even as others lose faith, this belief is constantly transferred to new students. I recently talked to a woman starting her MA who hopes to continue on to a PhD and academic career. I brought up the issue of lousy job prospects but she solemnly informed me that this would no longer be the case. "Don't you know about the double cohort?" she asked, open-eyed and without a trace of skepticism. "There'll be lots of jobs when I get out."

How could I tell her that, despite the happy demographics and planning documents, she is still likely to graduate into a life of driving up and down Highway 401, teaching stipend courses at a handful of universities? Far from weighing competing bids, PhDs take whatever they can get, whether or not it has anything to do with their professional and personal hopes and aspirations. The "modest upswing" in hirings is not

the newly available jobs.

Despite the last 20 years of massive oversupply of PhDs for available academic positions, doctoral students are still constantly given the message that they should just hold on. The jobs are coming — the demographic crystal ball says so. And what else can the vast majority of graduates do? They have been overwhelmingly trained, directed and encouraged to focus on the academic job market. While a few fields like computer science or my own area of public administration have some employment prospects in the outside world, most PhD graduates are both too overspecialized, and too acclimated to the academic environment, to find jobs other than in universities.

This makes me think that rather than waiting forever for a great hiring binge to appear, we need to rethink the relationship between the PhD and the job market. Even if the job market does improve dramatically, universities must work to

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ensure that their graduate students have serious and viable options outside academia. I realize I'm hardly the first person to say we need to "rethink the PhD," but I'm not talking about drastic program changes or cutting enrolments. Rather my hope is simply that graduate students be encouraged to think earlier in their programs about job prospects outside academia and given the help and incentives to find permanent and satisfying employment before their 35th birthday.

How to do this? I have three suggestions, none of which have anything to do with academic content such as program requirements, courses, comprehensive exams or dissertation topics.

dust forever. This is a less likely scenario for internships and other fixed-term contracts where students can plan absences and their return. But even if dissertations are never completed, so what? I think it's preferable that people find interesting and rewarding things to do with their lives than feeling they've failed because they never finished their doctorates.

A third and final suggestion is primarily one of individual attitudes. Professors are probably correct in assuming that PhDs want to become professors as well since nearly all doctoral students aspire to a life of the mind, working with ideas in a place of scholarly freedom and support. But faculty must stop the largely unconscious assumption that academic employment is the only game in town and that anything else is a distraction and waste of a doctoral education.

It's true that the world is not exactly clamouring for more PhDs, at least in the humanities and most social and natural sciences. But graduate students must be given the encouragement and freedom to consider other opportunities and to shape their work in ways that will help their post-graduation prospects. I'm not talking about trying to pick "hot fields" or "practical topics," which never seem to deliver the expected rewards anyway. I am simply suggesting that professors talk more frankly with their students about the latter's hopes and preferences, rather than assuming students can't even imagine life outside academia. Faculty must signal to students that it's okay not to jump on the sessional roller coaster. Students should be allowed to follow their own dreams and to choose topics and strategies that reflect their personal and professional aspirations.

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TO CONCLUDE, THE "MODEST UPSWING" IN HIRING MAY turn into a genuine hiring surge someday, but it's ridiculous to place all our hopes on the demographic crystal ball. Faculty and students alike need to rethink the career options of PhDs based on the long-standing reality of massive oversupply. Academia is also not the only fulfilling career in the world and this message needs to be given much more explicitly to graduate students.

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