The Generational Compact: Graduate Students and Germanics

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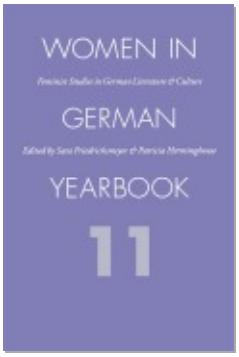

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Perhaps the major component of our professional lives is the preparation of those who will come after us. Hardly a controversial statement. The controversy begins, however, when the discussion becomes more specific: just exactly how is it that we can best fulfill this portion of our role? The ensuing debate takes place not just within departments and universities, but within the professional organizations that support our discipline as well.

It is tempting to say that academic life used to be simpler. When Women in German was founded two decades ago, many of us who now find ourselves with titles and tenure were living our lives as graduate students or junior faculty. In general, we were taught by academics who defined their job—if indeed it were thought to warrant definition—as providing us with a body of knowledge that they in turn had absorbed from teachers before them. In retrospect, that tacit agreement between generations seemed to revolve around the maintenance of continuity. Given everything that has happened at universities within the past few decades, including the much-discussed "graying" of the professoriate and the more recently remarked upon "feminization" of the profession (Nollendorfs), it is not surprising that this pattern too has changed. Responsible professionals today see their roles not just as imparting knowledge. They also find themselves engaged in preparing students to teach language *and* literature *and* film *and* culture, to prepare materials for publication, to manage the stresses of conferences, and, perhaps most importantly, to interview. In short, how to get a job and keep it.

The generational compact of the 1990s then is more complex than its predecessors. And as with most compacts, this one is not being shaped by easy consensus. One of the touchiest issues to emerge recently revolves around graduate student participation at conferences and their submissions to professional journals. Increased student participation, it is argued—and the argument is based on there being a finite number of annual journal articles and conference sessions—limits the opportunities for professorial participation. In addition, so goes this line of reasoning, the prestige value of conferences and journals when graduate students share space

with faculty is diminished. Strangely, this discussion, as far as we can tell, is not one preoccupying colleagues in other disciplines. Perhaps there are more major conferences and possibilities for publication in other disciplines, perhaps job openings are especially tight in Germanics, or perhaps the expectations of those doing the hiring in other fields do not include conference presentations and/or publications. Disciplinary differences certainly exist. We, however, are less interested in the reasons for those contrasts than in how we deal with this potentially damaging issue within our own discipline—in our departments, at our conferences, within our organizations, and in our professional journals and yearbooks.

There are those who view the graduate years as best devoted to the kind of acquisition of knowledge that students will presumably need in their own academic careers, which, they point out, will quite naturally include publishing and conference presentations, but all in due time. They have a point, especially when one considers the almost exponential expansion of what today can be included as a topic of study within a German department. Writers are being discovered and rediscovered, the emergence of theory and theoretical debates presents on-going challenges to old paradigms, film studies and culture studies are being added to the curriculum, and bibliographies grow longer every year. The counter to this position comes from those who believe that the best possible training is the "hands-on" kind; according to this logic, graduate students should be learning by doing, ergo, they should be publishing and presenting papers. This too is hard to refute, as long as student participation offers exposure and training and is not understood as a proving grounds.

Both these positions then have obvious merit; they can also be carried by theoretical arguments untainted by the vagaries of Germanics or the mission of the academy in the USA; advocates of both can base their arguments on the shibboleth of "quality education." But their contentions are swept aside by the pragmatists among us. The realities of the job market in Germanics, they insist, is such that without publications and at least some conference activity, a candidate will not be taken seriously when applying for a job.

As most would agree, this predicament is part of a complex of problems extending far beyond the kind of activities engaged in by graduate students. It is a consequence of the current general crisis of the humanities in this country and is intertwined with the alarming fact that while increasing numbers of students who do not find employment after their undergraduate years are studying for graduate degrees, the number of jobs for which they can apply is decreasing (cf. Holub, Huber, Magner, Nelson and Bérubé). Within the past few years, the ante has been raised so that graduate students who do not want their applications to be discarded immediately know the merits—indeed necessity—of having published work and conference presentations listed on their vitae. Even those

professors who are dubious about graduate student *participation* at conferences acknowledge the importance of graduate student *attendance*. But most departments have funding contingencies based on participation. Thus if the already exploited graduate student wants financial support, she or he needs to participate. Some national conferences structure graduate sessions into their programs, and within larger departments we have seen recently the creation of graduate student journals and even the founding of entire graduate student conferences to enhance the possibilities for student participation. But whether we view such steps as attempts to ghettoize and marginalize graduate students or as important ways to facilitate networking among them, we need to acknowledge that they do not alleviate the increased pressures under which graduate students are being forced to labor.

Although the stakes are far less dramatic, professors too are working under increasing pressures; that fabled ivory tower has all but disappeared. All but the most obtuse are daily aware of the pressures of the job market and the precariousness of our discipline. And just at the point where women students are becoming the majority in our field, ethical constraints require us not to encourage graduate study and to point out clearly and emphatically to those who come to us the realities of a job market where many of them face a future as underpaid part-time and temporary workers—the segment of our profession where women have long predominated. And the preparation for the job market of those who do persevere is fraught with its own contradictions. It is possible, but extremely difficult, to buck the trend when hiring and consider for our job openings candidates with fewer lines on their vitae. But to minimize the urgency of these activities for our own graduate students would be criminally negligent. This conundrum will not resolve itself quickly or easily. We seem to have created our own academic Catch 22.

So what about Women in German? Do we have a "position"? If so, how does it relate to our discipline and the profession as a whole? In part as a response to the intensity with which the issue has been discussed elsewhere, Women in German has raised and deliberated the matter of graduate student participation in several forums: in its Steering Committee, in the *Yearbook*'s Editorial Board, at our annual conference, and most publicly, in the electronic media—on our Women in German-List.

In Women in German, the development of graduate students into professional peers has been and continues to be an integral, even conscious, component in the structuring and governance of the organization. In over two decades of its existence, in two decades of conferences, and one decade of the yearbook, graduate students have always been a valued constituency. And that for many reasons, including the indispensable role of graduate students at its very inception. It was students and faculty together who, largely because feminist concerns were elsewhere being

ignored, recognized a need for the formation of Women in German and worked to make it a reality. Even in the 1990s, those same needs impel many graduate students to join Women in German.

Women in German members have worked hard to make newcomers to the organization feel welcome. But perhaps there is more to it. If graduate students and professors in various stages of their careers feel comfortable together, perhaps it is also because the inclusion of graduate students has never been dealt with hierarchically. There is no sense that the dominant reason for our togetherness is so that "we" can help to train "them," or that "senior" professors should be accorded special attention. On the contrary, there has been a general accord within the membership that faculty of all ranks can learn from graduate students too—that the sharing of information, techniques, and perspectives as well as new ideas and ways of dealing with literature, culture, and language is not dependent on rank or status. The benefits, it is clear to most, can be mutual. Additionally, it is presumptuous in any large organization such as ours to assume that most people attending a conference or perusing a professional journal teach in a graduate department. This will, in fact, be ever less the case. Even having a faculty position can mean vastly disparate things. Contact with graduate students from around the country can be one way for all of us to share the satisfactions of preparing the next generation and staying in touch with cutting-edge trends.

Although there is nowhere an articulated policy, the ramifications are clear: at Women in German conferences, graduate students do present; in the *Yearbook,* they are usually represented. We have heard stories about professors encouraging entire seminar sections to submit their papers to designated journals. Highly questionable professorial advice, to be sure, and fortunately, this has not happened to us. But if we were to be suddenly inundated, we would read the manuscripts as we do all papers sent to us; we would determine whether they merited being sent out to the two anonymous readers our guidelines require and proceed as we would for other submissions. We are aware that, by remaining open to graduate student participation, we too can be seen as helping to create the problem of increased expectations. Nevertheless, some graduate students are ready to present their ideas publicly and, given the present situation, we feel obliged to offer them space to do so. For our part—we are interested in quality and originality. And if the graduate students we are educating are so good that blind evaluations do not detect the origins of their papers, their articles, or their conference proposals, then perhaps we should acknowledge that as a good sign, as something that can reflect positively on us all.

There is, of course, no "solution" to what some view as the "graduate student" problem. But we can hope that a public discussion of the issue forces us to recognize that *we* have created the problem and that only *we*

can begin to change the rules under which graduate students function. Doubtless, attempting to deal conscientiously with the predicament will continue to entail enormous amounts of work for job search committees, conference organizers, and—yes—journal editors and the referees upon whom we rely. To fault students or penalize them for a situation that we have all helped to create misses the point. Rather than attempting short cuts such as setting quotas, we should be pressuring our institutions to accord commensurate recognition to those working on these issues, instead of, as we have heard it expressed, evaluating that service about as highly as membership on a parking committee.

As we look back on the recent history of our discipline, it is clear that many of the issues to which we and our various organizations have responded have taken on a different complexion over time. There is every reason to believe that the next decades will bring even more substantial changes. For the moment, the responsibility for our discipline, indeed for our profession, rests with the faculty. As we ponder the issues before us, we would do well to remember that, regardless of our individual positions on the appropriate spectrum for graduate student activities, responsibility for their future belongs to us all. Through our public discussions we can help prepare them to participate in the debates with which they will be confronted in their professional lives. They will have their own issues to resolve; they will surely have their own generational compact with their own graduate students to forge. We must transmit this generational obligation to the graduate students of today. The future of our profession demands it.

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