

ABD for Life: Mired in the Margins or Finding Freedom at the Fringes?

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Sixteen years ago, as an “all but dissertation” (ABD) PhD candidate with two young children, I began a one-year replacement position in the small liberal arts college where my spouse had a tenure-track job. I had been adjuncting, so it was great temporarily to have more security, even if it meant starting my newborn in daycare at six weeks old. Far in so many ways from the major research university where I’d been doing my doctoral work, and unlike anything I’d previously experienced in my education outside the United States, I loved the human element of a liberal arts college, the emphasis on teaching, engagement with students, collaboration with colleagues. I was sold.

I quickly realized that, at least for me, engaging actively in the college community was key to success. First of all, being an active and visible presence on campus is, in the absence of tenure, good for job security. By teaching whatever needed to be taught, attending campus events, participating in faculty development workshops, even serving on committees, I became less dispensable. Not only was I doing necessary work, but people knew me. Students filled my classes; faculty and staff colleagues recognized my hard work and commitment. Although I was working beyond my job description, I was making myself an integral part of the college.

It was also good for me personally. I was able to put my expertise and skills to good use, and I was able to continue to grow and develop as a teacher and a scholar. I made friends, and developed collegial collaborations in teaching and scholarship. I challenged myself; I grabbed opportunities and took on new responsibilities; I had fun.

But none of that was good for the dissertation. Even as I learned and grew and took my research in new directions, I did it all under the heavy weight of my unfinished doctorate. It took me ten more years to disengage fully

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from the PhD program. By then I was permanent faculty; teaching a full course load each semester, doing too much college service, and even occasionally publishing, particularly, but not only, in the scholarship of teaching and learning. It was an incredibly difficult decision finally to acknowledge that I would not finish, and not one I made lightly. By the time I formally withdrew from my graduate program, I was confident that not finishing was the good and appropriate choice for me for many reasons.

And yet, I had only begun to know the price of this decision. Aside from the not-insignificant financial costs of staying in academia without a doctorate—I get paid considerably less for doing the same job as others—I’ve also paid a heavy price in terms of career advancement and opportunities. The PhD matters.

The PhD matters in the academy. As academics, our job, arguably, is to question core assumptions, critique unjust power structures, and disrupt the status quo; and yet the structures of higher education are incredibly hierarchical. You need only read the news to see that, at least in common public wisdom, research universities take priority over teaching colleges; STEM fields take priority over the humanities; it doesn’t only matter that you have a PhD, but where it comes from and in what discipline. The PhD credential will always outvalue expertise and experience. I am not arguing here for a lowering of standards. Completing a dissertation, while an important rite of passage, does not in itself make one a good teacher, or even necessarily a good researcher or writer. Over half of the faculty in higher education today are contingent



The author teaching a class on Islamic traditions. Photo by Paul Pearson

faculty, many of us without PhDs, hired because we are excellent instructors with the necessary knowledge and training to teach well. We are already here; we are doing the work and doing it well.

The PhD matters to (some of) my colleagues. I am confident that it does not matter for many—I'd like to believe most—of my colleagues who consider me a full and equal member of the faculty, and would gladly see me and my fellow lecturers receive more equitable pay, sabbaticals, and other benefits. However, from others I face marginalization and exclusion. It is particularly disappointing when I am marginalized by colleagues who claim to speak loudly for the disenfranchised, and by those whom I consider friends.

Finally, and most ironically, the PhD matters to the world. We are in a moment when higher education is under siege, and pundits decry the irrelevance of the academy, particularly the humanities. Yet, when you want to burnish the prestige of your board of directors or to call in an "expert" to back up your case, that PhD looks good.

And still here I am, teaching a full course load and doing service and research like all of my colleagues. I have made my status a benefit. A bit more under the radar and with less to lose, I've chosen to be outspoken, to take chances, and, as much as I am able, to take advantage

of opportunities when they are available. Of those many opportunities, I am particularly proud of two: the work I have done to improve the status of lecturers at the college and my organization of a very successful campus-wide teach-in, "Understanding Trump's America," organized quickly following the Muslim ban in 2017.

It is June 2020, and I am writing this amid the Covid-19 pandemic and the Black Lives Matter protests against racism and police brutality. In many ways, my concerns here seem petty. I am very privileged, and arguably I have been very lucky. I have a stable position at an institution that treats its contingent faculty relatively well. I have been able to teach and to undertake research in new directions that interest me. Still, while I have found opportunities, there are many that have not been available to me. And the loss is not mine alone; there are at least a few things for which, had I the "right" credentials, I would have been able to do the job, do it well, and make a more significant difference. Perhaps it is time we reassess the hierarchies of higher education in America to make space for those arriving by different paths.

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