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Holding Pattern in the Humanities

Postdocs are becoming more common, but do they help new Ph.D.'s get jobs or merely keep the planes circling?

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On a recent Monday evening at Stanford University, Robert C. Jones stands at a green chalkboard under fluorescent lights and introduces a class of freshmen to one of philosophy's perennial dilemmas: If the universe is deterministic, is human freedom possible?

Brushing aside a curly lock of black hair from in front of his glasses, Mr. Jones begins by sketching the landscape of possible positions: first, the metaphysically morbid (everything is determined and no one is free); then, the metaphysically romantic (nothing is determined and everyone is free); and last, the complicated middle ground (maybe there is determinism *and* freedom).

But the students themselves, amid strained references to Michael Crichton novels and requests to visit the toilet, seem most attracted to a shadowy fourth option seldom advanced by philosophers: Everything is random and no one is free.

The teacher dealing with these fits and starts of freshman intellect is not a professor. Nor is he a graduate student working as a teaching assistant while dreaming of the life of the mind. Nor, for that matter, is he an adjunct toiling for a few thousand bucks a course at multiple campuses. In the current landscape of possible positions in the humanities, Mr. Jones himself is a kind of shadowy fourth option: a postdoctoral fellow. Specifically, he is one of about 40 postdocs hired to lead discussion sections in Stanford's freshman Introduction to the Humanities, or IHUM, curriculum.

With a stack of 45 papers to grade by week's end, six of his nine weekly teaching hours still to go, and the word "lecturer" typed across his contract, Mr. Jones's situation may seem a lot like that of many other contingent teachers in academe. A few details, however, set him apart. He gets an academic quarter off for research in the last two years of his three-year appointment, plus a flurry of perks geared toward professional development: job-interview coaching sessions, $750 a year for conferences, and reimbursement for application-season mailing expenses.

In other words, in the eyes of his university, Mr. Jones is not just another academic wage earner stuck in career limbo. For a brief time after completing his Ph.D. (which he did last summer, with a dissertation on

animal cognition and moral consideration), the postdoc gives him one more chance to be regarded as something else: a scholar on the rise.

The question is, Does it give him enough, beyond the power of suggestion and a few months off from an exhausting teaching load, to actually rise?

In the last generation, postdoc positions became standard in the sciences. Only in the past decade have the humanities followed up with their own version of the phenomenon. Despite that recent growth, postdoctoral fellowships in the humanities remain a remarkably ill-defined category of academic labor. On some fronts, postdocs seem to constitute a genuine new phase in the scholarly life cycle -- a seasoning process for junior humanists fresh out of graduate school. Elsewhere, they look like just one more way to supply institutions with a newfangled supply of relatively cheap, young, high-quality classroom labor.

No matter what form they take, postdocs in the humanities have become a kind of life preserver, keeping young scholars afloat as the dry land of tenure keeps receding and receding.

Gold Standard

While Mr. Jones is busy orienting freshmen to the pros and cons of causality, two other postdocs across the Stanford quad are discussing a different kind of human freedom -- their own.

Phil Ford and Angus Fletcher are part of the university's other postdoc program, the Stanford Humanities Fellows. With teaching requirements limited to two self-designed courses per academic year, and the rest of their time dedicated to research, writing, and "spitballing ideas back and forth" (Mr. Ford's phrase) with the other fellows, the two can scarcely keep from rhapsodizing about their scholarly liberty.

"It's about learning to use your autonomy productively," says Mr. Fletcher, a neuroscientist turned English scholar who researches the literary history of cognition. "What this postdoc allows you to do is realize the dream of the academy -- which is freedom of thought, freedom of expression."

Mr. Ford, a musicologist who writes about the aesthetics of hipness, agrees. "I have a feeling we're all going to look back on this period of our lives as kind of a golden and blessed interlude," he says.

While it is a little more than a quarter the size of the IHUM postdoc program -- and even more rarefied when thrown in relief against the whole range of postdocs available in the academy today -- the Stanford Humanities Fellowship is what many people would call a "true" postdoc.

That is largely because it is one of several high-profile postdoc programs financed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, the organization that has done the most to establish a standardized definition of postdoctoral fellowships in the humanities. All Mellon postdocs look roughly alike: They work a half-time teaching load; they spend the other half of their time on research, often with the aim of burnishing their dissertations into books; and they are paid 85 percent of their home institution's starting salaries for assistant professors.

This formula for the humanities postdoc sprang up in force in the mid-1990s, at a point when the Mellon Foundation was reviewing its grant-making strategies.

"We had spent a lot of money trying to help graduate students in the humanities get their doctoral degrees in

some reasonable period of time, and also to reduce attrition," says Harriet Zuckerman, senior vice president of the foundation. "There we were, having supported all these new Ph.D.'s, and they were entering a job market that was really fierce."

Since then, Mellon has thrown its weight into financing postdoctoral fellowship programs -- about 25 of them. In 2001 the foundation published a report that outlined its rationale for the programs in broad terms.

"Postdoctoral fellowships are standard in the sciences, but relatively rare in the humanities," the report said. "Yet current conditions -- the poor job market in the humanities, higher standards of accomplishment required for tenure-track appointments, the limited exposure to teaching that some graduate programs provide, and the contracting size of faculties -- make such fellows increasingly apt as a first stage in the scholarly life cycle."

In any given year, Ms. Zuckerman estimates, there are about 75 to 80 Mellon humanities postdocs -- a tiny number given that American universities award more than 5,000 Ph.D.'s in the humanities each year.

Parallel History

When Cary Nelson became an English professor at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign in the fall of 1970, his department consisted of slightly fewer than 100 faculty members and no postdocs. Two years ago, at the height of the English department's postdoc program, Mr. Nelson recalls with dismay, there were 50 faculty members and 50 postdocs.

And the funny thing is, he is the one who suggested creating the program.

At about the same time that the Mellon Foundation was hashing out its plans to set up postdoctoral programs nationally, Mr. Nelson was contending with the difficulties of finding jobs for his own graduate students in the slumping humanities market. He felt he had to do something to help them, so he "bullied the department," he says, into creating a postdoc program for its own unemployed Ph.D.'s.

It was hardly a luxurious appointment. A teaching load of three courses per semester, $3,000 per course, and health insurance were the essential elements.

"We couldn't guarantee a lifetime place in the profession," Mr. Nelson wrote in a 2004 essay called "The Postdoc Paradox," "but we owed *something* more than thoughtless, immediate dismissal to people who had taught well and cheaply for us for seven years."

However, something happened to the program that Mr. Nelson never expected -- nor desired. "It ballooned over a period of about five years," he says in an interview, "into a kind of regional postdoc appointment."

The program that Mr. Nelson had conceived as a safety net for Illinois Ph.D.'s became a magnet for young unemployed English scholars in the region who were willing to teach at a cut rate under the postdoc rubric -- and the university was more than happy to oblige them.

Let "casual labor get its foot in the door," Mr. Nelson says, "and very soon the door is perpetually open."

At Illinois, the definition of the postdoc has been watered down to the point where any provisions for research have been completely rinsed out. The object of the appointment, then, is not so much to get time to further one's scholarship, but just to have an outlet to stay alive in the profession -- and also, of course, to

teach. A lot.

"We probably shouldn't be calling them postdocs," says Dennis Baron, until 2003 the head of the English department at Illinois. "But we do -- because it's a phenomenon."

Just how much of a phenomenon is difficult to gauge. In 2003 the Modern Language Association set out to write an official statement on the national state of non-tenure-track faculty members, and its authors quickly found themselves forced to reckon with the newly prolific, difficult-to-measure category, the postdoc. They began by delineating two subcategories: external postdocs and internal postdocs. External postdocs, primarily Mellon fellowships, were self-regulated and highly visible. Internal postdocs, named for their propensity to turn alma maters into employers, were far more problematic. To begin with, while evidence of their proliferation was overwhelming, they were also stubbornly difficult to quantify.

The internal postdoc is rarely very visible, says Michael Bérubé, a literature and cultural-studies professor at Pennsylvania State University at University Park and one of the authors of the statement. "It's anecdotal, an item on a departmental spreadsheet," he says. "These things are not advertised."

The final MLA statement gave internal postdocs prominent -- and wary -- treatment.

Internal postdocs "pose a serious ethical question for the profession," the statement says. "The creation and maintenance of these job categories weaken the institution of tenure and effectively establish a second tier in the faculty, with higher teaching loads and lower pay scales than those of the tenure-track tier, thus providing administrators with a reserve army of the [non-tenure-track] that can be drawn on whenever budget constraints so dictate."

Though the Illinois postdoc program did shrink because of state budget cuts in 2003, it is still up and running. "I don't think we would eliminate them," says Mr. Nelson, citing logistical and financial reasons. "I don't think it's really possible to do so."

Meanwhile, for the individual job seeker, postdocs of either subspecies pose another kind of problem: They threaten to ratchet up the requirements for tenure.

"These programs are proliferating to make candidates more competitive," says Seth Lerer, who heads the Stanford Humanities Fellows program.

"The idea of a postdoctoral position in the humanities is becoming something that is expected rather than something that is exceptional," he says. "I generally believe that in 10 years the trajectory of a young humanist will look like the trajectory of a young scientist now: graduate school, postdoc, position."

However, Marc Bousquet, an associate professor of English at the University of Louisville and a frequent commentator on academic labor issues, is quick to point out the accounting error in that smooth progression.

"The number of postdocs keeps going up," says Mr. Bousquet, "but the number of people ultimately searching for tenure-track positions is not getting any smaller, and the tenure stream hasn't gotten any bigger."

Two Tiers

Still, some postdoc programs do seem more likely than others to improve young scholars' chances of

swimming in that stream.

The Stanford Humanities Fellows program not only has an excellent track record for landing its postdocs in tenure-track jobs, but it has also become an attractive leveraging tool for young academic stars who want to trade up in tenure-track appointments.

Lisa H. Cooper, a medievalist Humanities Fellow, turned down a tenure-track job at Florida State University two years ago to accept the Stanford postdoc. Now she has a more desirable job waiting for her at the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Mr. Fletcher also turned down an assistant professorship to come to Stanford. While he doesn't yet know whether he will have a job next year, he says interviewers have remarked that he has more publications than most of their other applicants -- thanks largely to his time at Stanford.

Of all the Humanities Fellows, Mr. Ford has a story that hews closest to the original idea of a what a postdoc should do for a young scholar's career. Though he has yet to hear back about job offers for the fall, the fellowship does appear to have bolstered his scholarly capital significantly. Unlike Ms. Cooper and Mr. Fletcher, who both have Ph.D.'s from Ivy League universities, he earned his degree at the University of Minnesota-Twin Cities. When he first went on the job market just before finishing his Ph.D., he wasn't invited to any interviews. This year, after two years of teaching and publishing as a Humanities Fellow, he was invited to three.

Placement rates for the more teaching-intensive IHUM fellowships, however, are considerably lower. According to a five-year self-study conducted by the program, about 45 percent of its fellows have gone on to find tenure-track jobs. That is only about five percentage points better than the MLA's overall tenure-track placement rate for new Ph.D.s.

That may have something to do with the odd mixture of opportunism and paternalism that underscores the logic of postdoc programs like IHUM. Years ago, discussion sections in the program were all taught by graduate students. Then, in 1997, the Stanford faculty senate decided to replace those graduate students with postdocs, thus raising the profile of the humanities at Stanford at a bargain price.

However, in exchange for extracting heavy teaching loads from the fellows, the university had to give something enticing -- and nurturing -- in return. "We needed to foster rather than simply exploit the people who came," says Orrin W. Robinson, the program's director.

The result is a sometimes uneasy hybrid between a teaching-heavy internal postdoc and a research-oriented Mellon postdoc. Like an internal postdoc, the program offers a disproportionate number of its fellowships to Stanford Ph.D.'s, and all fellows teach three classes at a time. Like a Mellon postdoc, the program gives its fellows time for research and guidance for professional development. (One of the research leaves even happens to be sponsored by the Mellon Foundation.)

At times, the burdens overwhelm the benefits.

"Research -- that's at the top of the pecking order," says Mr. Jones, the Stanford philosopher-postdoc. Heavy, low-level teaching duties, meanwhile, put a drag on both the prestige of the program and the young researchers' productivity. "I don't want to say there's a stigma, but there's a hierarchy, and a teaching postdoc -- there's certainly a kind of unspoken understanding that it's not the best."

Mr. Jones just finished his Ph.D. at Stanford last summer, and has yet to go on the job market as a postdoc.

Sean McIntyre, an IHUM fellow and a recent Stanford German-studies Ph.D., is now in the last year of his fellowship. "It's hard to know if this makes us more attractive for the job market, because it seems the job market is so arbitrary," he says. After three fruitless years, Mr. McIntyre is beginning to despair of finding a job. He has recently started applying for teaching positions at community colleges.

"I'm pretty actively pursuing that possibility," he says, sitting at an outdoor cafe on a blustery gray afternoon. "It's partly out of desperation that I'm looking at this. It's been kind of painful to consider."

Then, as he gets up to leave, a flash of resentment crosses his face. Since much of the work done in the academy looks a lot more like what IHUM fellows do than what the Stanford Humanities Fellows do, he wonders why it is that the other group fares so much better on the job market.

"Why does it seem that what we're doing," he asks before turning away, "doesn't mean a thing?"

A POSTDOCTORAL MENAGERIE

Postdocs play a well-established role in the sciences. In the humanities, however, the short supply of tenure-track jobs has caused a comparatively recent flourishing of postdoctoral appointments-- in many different forms. Here is just a hint of the variety of species that fall into the genus *Postdoctoral:*

At the **University of Michigan at Ann Arbor,** the Rackham Graduate School has negotiated safe harbors of employment for a handful of its recent humanities Ph.D.'s in the form of postdoctoral appointments at two regional liberal-arts colleges, Oberlin and Kalamazoo. In exchange, the colleges get to send senior professors to Michigan for research sabbaticals, plus a jolt of new teaching blood. The program is financed by the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, so the postdoc positions adhere to that organization's guidelines: half-time teaching loads and a salary equal to 85 percent of the starting salary for assistant professors at the host institution. The appointments last only one year-- shorter than most other postdocs.

Meanwhile, the English department at the **University of California at Davis** provides a home for its own recent graduates. As part of a plan to cut down on temporary lectureships, increase available funds for new tenure-track appointments, and look out for its own students, the English department in 2000 created several two-year postdoctoral positions for recent Davis Ph.D.'s.

Humanists who finished their doctorates less than five years ago are eligible to be "assistant professor/faculty fellows" at **New York University.** With half-time teaching loads and provisions for research, these three-year appointments function a lot like Mellon postdocs in their structure, but they come with an unusual perk: The time fellows spend at NYU may count toward their tenure clocks-- just not at NYU. In other words, depending on how you look at it, the appointment is either a supercharged postdoc or a research-intensive assistant professorship with a built-in expiration date.

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