Let me start with the bad news. It is not even news anymore; it is simply bad. Graduate education in the humanities is in crisis. Every aspect, from the most specific details of the curriculum to the broadest questions about its purpose, is in crisis. It is a seamless garment of crisis: If you pull on any one thread, the entire thing unravels. It is therefore exceptionally difficult to discuss any one aspect of graduate education in isolation. Questions about the function of the dissertation inevitably become questions about the future of scholarly communication; they also entail questions about attrition, time to degree, and the flood of A.B.D.’s, who make up so much of the non-tenure-track and adjunct labor force. Questions about attrition and time to degree open onto questions about the graduate curriculum and the ideal size of graduate programs. Those questions obviously have profound implications for the faculty. So one seamless garment, one complexly interwoven web of trouble.
In the humanities, when we talk about the purpose of graduate programs and the career trajectories of our graduate students, the discussion devolves almost immediately to the state of the academic job market. For what are we training Ph.D.'s in the humanities to do, other than to take academic positions? Graduate programs in the humanities have been designed precisely to replenish the ranks of the professoriate; that is why they have such a strong research component, also known as the dissertation. But leaving aside a few upticks in the academic job market in the late 1980s and late 1990s, the overall job system in the humanities has been in a state of more or less permanent distress for more than 40 years.

Since 1970 doctoral programs have been producing many more job candidates than there are jobs; and yet this is not entirely a supply-side problem, because over those 40 years, academic jobs themselves have changed radically. Of the 1.5 million people now employed in the profession of college teaching, more than one million are teaching off the tenure track, with no hope or expectation of ever winding up on the tenure track. Many of them do not have Ph.D.'s: According to the 2004 National Study of Postsecondary Faculty (the last such study conducted), 65.2 percent of non-tenure-track faculty members hold the M.A. as their highest degree—57.3 percent teach in four-year institutions, 76.2 percent in two-year institutions (many holding more than one part-time position).

Clearly, something about the structure of graduate education in the humanities is broken. Or, more precisely, the system has been redesigned in such a way as to call into question the function of the doctorate as a credential for employment in higher education.

There is no doubt that the study of the humanities is more vibrant, more exciting, and (dare I say it) more important than it was a generation ago.

It is a dispiriting subject, to be sure. It was long ago, in 1994, that Cary Nelson, a professor of English at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, and I wrote a polemical essay for The Chronicle, "Graduate Education Is Losing Its Moral Base." We argued that many graduate programs had become little more than sources of cheap teaching labor for low-level undergraduate classes, and that some programs should be reduced in size or eliminated altogether. Many of our critics responded that we had failed to understand the "apprenticeship" model of graduate education. But we had not failed to understand that. On the contrary, we noted that in the apprenticeship model, which dates back to the days of the guilds, the apprentices got jobs.

That model was no longer relevant to the conditions of the academic job market. Our critique eventually led to a more radical critique of the system by Marc Bousquet, now a professor of English at Emory University. He argued that, for many students, the Ph.D. marked not the beginning but the effective end of a career in teaching. Bousquet is not entirely right. Many Ph.D.'s who fail to land tenure-track jobs do wind up on the non-tenure-track career path—as adjuncts or full-time untenured faculty. But his argument that the Ph.D. is actually the "waste product" of a system designed to produce cheap teaching labor was—and remains—a bracing and necessary response to colleagues who believed that the apprenticeship model was still viable.
More recently, in 2011, Anthony T. Grafton, then president of the American Historical Association, and Jim Grossman, AHA executive director, declared that henceforth nonacademic employment for history Ph.D.'s would not be considered a Plan B: "Alternative" careers should have as much legitimacy as the traditional Ph.D.-to-tenure-track trajectory. The alt-ac option, as it is widely known, has generated much debate in the humanities, but so far little sense of what the viable "alternatives" to academic employment might be. The situation is vastly different in the arts, where M.F.A. or Ph.D. holders typically expect to find employment in a far wider array of cultural institutions than humanists—orchestras, dance companies, design companies, museums, theaters, nonprofits. But of course, the cultural institutions to which degree holders in the arts aspire are often in states of distress similar to those affecting universities, albeit for different structural reasons.

So here the debate stands: We need to remake our programs from the ground up to produce teachers and researchers and something elses, but since it is not clear what those something elses might be, we haven't begun to rethink the graduate curriculum accordingly. (Anyway, we're not trained to do that! All we know how to do is to be professors!)

And since it is not clear what those something elses might be, the alt-ac discussion also tends to be conflated (reductively and mistakenly) with the DH discussion—that is, the emergence of the digital humanities, onto which, in recent years, we have deposited so many of our hopes and anxieties. Somewhere we expect the digital humanities to revolutionize scholarly communication, save university presses, crowdsourced peer review, and provide humanities Ph.D.'s with good jobs in libraries, institutes, nonprofits, and innovative start-ups. And the digital humanities will do all that by sometime late next week.

The revolution in scholarly communication has consequences for the future of the dissertation, as the former MLA president Sidonie Smith has been arguing for the past few years. Smith's work follows in the wake of, and extends, the 2006 report of the MLA Task Force on the Evaluation of Scholarship for Tenure and Promotion, which urged that the relevant criterion for peer-reviewed scholarship be the intellectual quality and originality of work, not the container it comes in. There is one overwhelmingly obvious implication of that argument: If we have all these new forms of scholarly communication, why are we asking our graduate students to write proto-monographs for a system that no longer supports monographs? (I am referring, of course, to the reduction or elimination of subsidies for university presses and university libraries.)

It might help to remember, though, that the alt-ac debate has a history, at least in the MLA.

In 1998, then-MLA President Elaine Showalter decided to promote the idea of alternative, nonacademic careers for humanities Ph.D.'s. The backlash was intense—and it came chiefly from the MLA's Graduate Student Caucus, led by Bousquet and William Pannapacker, now an associate professor of English at Hope College, in Holland, Mich. Bousquet replied with his "waste product" theory of graduate education, and Pannapacker has since written many columns in The Chronicle urging people not to go to graduate school in the humanities at all. Both, in different ways, have come to regard the enterprise as a shell game, and both, 15 years
ago, construed Showalter's call as a disingenuous suggestion that people who had trained for a decade to be humanists could suddenly switch gears and become secretaries and screenwriters. One lesson I took away from the bitter battles of 1998 is that the people who feel most betrayed by the idea of "alternative careers" are the people closest to finishing their dissertations and going out on the academic job market. I suppose that is unsurprising. But at first, I had imagined that the most entrenched opposition would come from tradition-minded faculty and deans who regarded nonacademic careers as deeply undesirable postgraduate trajectories for humanities Ph.D.'s.

That is also the opposition imagined in Grafton and Grossman's "No More Plan B" essay, where they suggest that the problem with the rhetoric of "alternative" careers leads students to internalize the values of tradition-minded faculty who regard nonacademic careers with disdain: "We should not be surprised when students internalize our attitudes (implicit or explicit) and assume that the 'best' students will be professors and that for everyone else ... well, 'there's always public history.' Even those who happily accept jobs at secondary schools, for example, describe themselves as 'leaving the academy' or 'leaving the historical profession,'" they wrote.

According to a talk Grafton gave at a conference I recently organized at Pennsylvania State University, part of the betrayal that A.B.D.'s and almost-Ph.D.'s in the humanities feel has to do with the fact that many of them have spent their 20s and their early-mid-30s in graduate programs hoping for tenure-track jobs; they have spent their youth in the lowest reaches of the tax code, and some of them have put off having families. Grafton therefore endorses arguments that seek to reduce time to degree on the humane grounds, or the slightly more humane grounds, that it is easier for Ph.D.'s in the humanities to contemplate switching tracks at 25 or 26 than at 32; additionally, one hopes, students who earn their Ph.D.'s in their mid-20s would have considerably less student-loan debt to worry about.

The problem lies in figuring out how to get people out of Ph.D. programs by the age of 25 or 26; apparently we knew how to do that 40 years ago but have forgotten. My predecessor as MLA president, Russell Berman, has argued that time to degree in the humanities—currently an astounding 9.5 years—should be cut in half. But should there now be two doctoral tracks, one hard-core, old-school research with a traditional dissertation, and another more like a rigorous four-year M.A.? I think that is a solution few will want to pursue, because it opens onto yet another thorny issue, namely the fact that we have in effect already created such a two-tier system in the academic labor market, where we have a relatively small cadre of tenured faculty doing research and a much larger cohort of professors who are basically on a teaching track. It seems a mistake to institutionalize that division of labor still more emphatically by building it into the structure of doctoral education.

My own view is this. Throughout the 1990s, I urged programs to reduce the number of students they admit, and to support more substantially the students they do admit. (At my doctoral institution, the University of Virginia, 76 students were admitted in 1983, my entering year; 126 were admitted the following year. It was explicitly an attrition system. When I arrived at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, in 1989, I found there were numerous Big Ten English programs with more than 200 graduate students.) I still think it makes more sense to limit admissions and to issue dire warnings to all applicants about the uncertainty of academic employment.
But over the past three years of discussions with my colleagues on the MLA Executive Council, I have learned that it is simply impossible to achieve a sufficiently broad consensus on that position. Many people in foreign-language departments fear, with good reason, that any blanket statement advocating the reduction or elimination of graduate programs will have catastrophic effects for their already tiny fields (if they are in languages other than Spanish). And without a sufficiently broad consensus on the council, we can't go ahead and make across-the-board recommendations for departments; we can only advocate rigorous self-study and the ethical treatment of graduate students and employees.

So for now, we are awaiting the report of the MLA Task Force on Graduate Education for further guidance. About reducing time to degree, I am curious to see what will develop from Stanford University's effort to encourage a five-year program for humanities Ph.D.'s; at present, I am agnostic, though I am convinced that our current time to degree locks people into a system of prolonged low-wage employment.

When it comes to rethinking the curricular content of our graduate programs, I think of something the late Richard Rorty used to say whenever he considered the future of philosophy: Take care of freedom, and truth will take care of itself. What he meant was that we do not have to secure the future of philosophy by staging a cage match in which the correspondence theory of truth (the idea that "truth" is adjudicated by a nonhuman "reality") dukes it out with the coherence theory of truth (the idea that truth is adjudicated by human belief systems) until one of them emerges the winner (though of course Rorty would have preferred that we stop thinking about truth in terms of correspondence). Instead we have to secure the future of institutions that permit freedom of inquiry and freedom of thought. That's the important task. If we do that, then we can let the debates within those institutions take care of themselves and wander where they will without any parameters set by our current concerns.

I think that way about the future of the content of graduate education in the humanities: Take care of the enabling conditions of graduate instruction, and the fields of expertise created and validated by the doctorate will take care of themselves. It is not a recipe for complacency, needless to say, because taking care of the enabling conditions of graduate education is an arduous and continuing task.

But I do want to say one thing about the fields of expertise we have created and validated in the humanities over the past 30 or 40 years. They have been, on the whole, pretty awesome. That's a technical term, so let me explain. I have never been among, and indeed I have never quite understood, the people who believe that the rise of the study of race, gender, and class represented a vitiation of the humanities. Nor do I see the rise of the study of sexuality or postcoloniality or disability as an indicator of a decline in the intellectual power of the humanities. Quite the contrary. Though I have not agreed with every aspect of every intellectual initiative of the past 30 or 40 years, I think there is no doubt that the study of the humanities is more vibrant, more exciting, and (dare I say it) more important than it was a generation ago.

And every year I think: This is what makes graduate study in the humanities so fraught, so full of contradiction for so many professors and students. The sheer intellectual excitement of the
work, whether it is on globalization or subjectivity or translation or sustainability or disability, is one thing. This work is so valuable—and it offers such sophisticated and necessary accounts of what "value" is.

And yet when we look at the public reputation of the humanities; when we compare the dilapidated Humanities Cottage on campus with the new $225-million Millennium Science Complex (that's a real example, from my home institution); when we look at the academic job market for humanists, we can't avoid the conclusion that the value of the work we do, and the way we theorize value, simply isn't valued by very many people, on campus or off.

The alt-ac community poses a timely and bracing challenge to that attitude. It asks us what graduate curricula might be most readily transferable to careers outside academe (perhaps curricula that include semester-long internships and/or administrative experience?)—and whether those careers will be honored and validated by deans and provosts, who remain likely to evaluate the success of graduate programs in the humanities by their placement rates, which are likely to continue to refer exclusively to placements in academic positions.

But in the face of that challenge, this is what I worry about: The department that most emphatically and open-mindedly embraces the idea of graduate training for careers outside academe might just find itself the department whose graduate program is eliminated in the next strategic plan. That is something that deans and provosts will have to consider before we can have any serious discussion about rethinking the purpose of the Ph.D. in the humanities.

Michael Bérubé is a professor of literature and director of the Institute for the Arts and Humanities at Pennsylvania State University and past president of the Modern Language Association. This essay is adapted from a speech to the annual meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools.