

THE CHRONICLE OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Faculty

January 6, 2014

## Historians Grapple With How to Get to the 'Malleable Ph.D.'

By Audrey Williams June

Washington

The term "malleable Ph.D."—in heavy use lately by the American Historical Association—is all about thinking of a doctoral degree as a credential that can open the door to any number of careers, in addition to one in the professoriate. But a panel discussion at the association's annual meeting over the weekend called attention to how the path to broader employment for history scholars isn't clear and how graduate students are left largely on their own to explore other avenues to put their degrees to good use. And, speakers on the panel said, most graduate programs aren't set up to train and support history Ph.D.'s who don't want to become professors.

"I don't doubt that individual graduate students or groups of graduate students can find the means" to pursue a life outside of the academy if they choose, said one panelist, Walter M. Licht, a longtime professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. But Mr. Licht said he remained skeptical that there would be a widespread effort by universities to help, in part because placing students in tenure-track positions at top research universities is widely seen as a marker of a graduate program's success.

Yet members of the panel, "Getting to the Malleable Ph.D.," were a testament to the kinds of employment opportunities open to those with doctoral degrees in history. Mr. Licht was joined by Elizabeth M. Covart, an independent scholar and onetime adjunct; Ramona Houston, a former assistant professor who left

academe and now heads her own consulting firm; and R. Darrell Meadows, director of the division of research and interpretation at the Kentucky Historical Society.

## **Marketable Skills**

Ms. Houston, who earned a Ph.D. from the University of Texas at Austin, began her postgraduate career as an assistant professor—and enjoyed the work, to a point, she said.

"I wasn't totally fulfilled as a professor," said Ms. Houston, who specializes in 20th-century American history, with a focus on African-American and Latino history and relations.

Ms. Houston said academe didn't allow her to fully use one of her key skill sets: project management. She also wanted to bring her knowledge of the two communities she studies to a wider audience. That led her to work in local-, state-, and federal-government positions and ultimately to start Kalirah Inc., an educational consulting firm based in Atlanta.

Ms. Houston urged the nearly 50 people attending the session to do a "personal assessment" to determine their skills, interests, and expertise, and to identify advocates who could move their careers forward.

"Identify the spaces and places that need what you do," Ms. Houston said.

"Figure out how to commodify your expertise. You have to just keep moving until you get where you want to be."

But sometimes figuring out where they want to be—and what they want to do—is part of the struggle for graduate students.

"I didn't know my Ph.D. was going to be malleable," said Ms. Covart, who earned her doctorate in 2011 from the University of California at Davis. But after nearly eight years in graduate school, she realized she wasn't going to do

what she had thought she was going to do—become a professor on the tenure track. She has since become known as an independent scholar and does freelance writing about early American history as she figures out what her career as a historian will eventually look like.

### **'All Sorts of Possibilities'**

Mr. Meadows, who earned a Ph.D. in social and cultural history from Carnegie Mellon University, said during the panel that he had met graduate students who have no idea "what they have to offer if they don't get a tenure-track job" — despite having honed transferable skills such as research, writing, and project management during their graduate-school years.

Some institutions, however, are working on that. Jacqueline Jones, a professor of history at the University of Texas at Austin who led the panel, said that each year graduate students there hear from history Ph.D.'s who work outside of academe.

"We realize that graduate school might open up all sorts of possibilities for students and all of them might not be in the academy," said Ms. Jones, who is vice president of the association's professional division.

After the panel, she said that students often tell her they now "feel free" to think about careers outside of the professoriate.

At a time when the academic job market for history Ph.D.'s is long on adjunct positions and short on tenure-track jobs, it's only natural that some graduate students will cast a wide net in their search for employment. Just last week, the association said in its annual job-market report that the number of positions inside and outside of academe listed with the group in 2012-13 had fallen 7.3 percent from a year earlier.

"The malleable Ph.D. is here to stay," said Ms. Jones. "The most important thing we can do is help our students discover what they love to do."