The Future of the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences PhD at Berkeley

(Left to right) Doctoral student Erica Lee, Provost Claude Steele, Graduate Dean Fiona Doyle, doctoral student Aaron Smyth, Assistant Dean for Professional Development Linda von Hoene, and Graduate Writing Center Director Sabrina Soracco at the 2015 ribbon cutting for the Center for Graduate Professional Services (GPS Center), which helps prepare advanced degree-holders to succeed in whatever careers they choose.

PhD training in the humanities and humanistic social sciences has strained to keep pace with accelerating changes in technology and the workforce, both within and beyond academia.

Led by Anthony Cascardi, Dean of Arts and Humanities at UC Berkeley, and Claudia von Vacano, Executive Director and Academic Coordinator of D-Lab and the Digital Humanities at Berkeley, this year-long Matrix Project Team aims to examines liberal arts doctoral preparation, with an eye toward engaging Berkeley PhDs with concerns beyond the university while encouraging their traditional focus on critical analysis.

This work is funded both by the National Endowment for the Humanities and Social Science Matrix. With the help of current graduate students, as well as professionals from non-academic institutions, the team is working to identify means to reform humanities graduate training at UC Berkeley, and find new ways to position graduates to become successful in different professional fields.

"In bringing together these various insights, our team has the advantage of seeing things from the vantage point of doctoral students 'in the trenches' of three current PhD programs, as well as the longer-term and institutional perspective of important campus officials," the researchers explained in their proposal. They wrote that their aim is to "advance meaningful curricular reforms that help to position Berkeley graduates at the forefront of reflection on, and critical participation in, emerging forms of labor and their cultural, social, and political contexts."

The Project Team's members intend to publish the findings of their investigation and possibly organize a conference, in addition to securing grant funding for future work. They aim to apply "evidence-driven reforms"—using data-driven methods from the social sciences—to understand the current state of the Humanities PhD programs. "Our plan is to bring together academic humanists and social scientists with extramural professionals in the thorough analysis of contemporary PhD training at Berkeley," they explained. "This research will allow us to formulate specific and significant changes to such professional development."
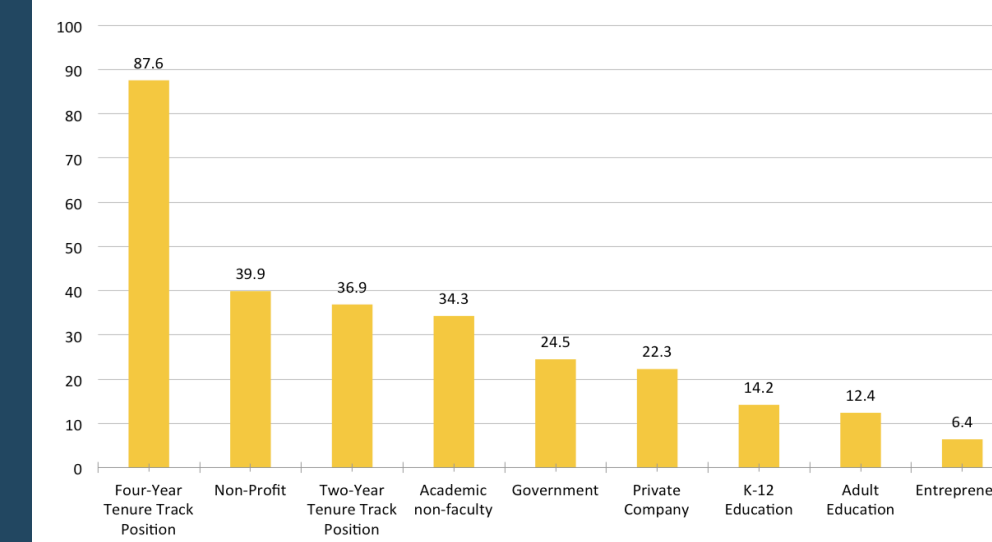
This comprehensive reform effort is the first of its kind at UC Berkeley, as past initiatives to revamp the PhD programs have failed to integrate sufficiently diverse perspectives and methodologies.

RESEARCH GOALS

- Evaluate and develop evidence-driven reforms of humanities and humanistic social sciences graduate apprenticeship at UC Berkeley.
- Draw upon diverse perspectives from within and outside UC Berkeley to identify new ways to position graduates to become successful in their chosen professional fields.
- Disseminate findings, foster further dialogue, and generate funding to support reforms to PhD programs in the Humanities and Humanistic Social Sciences at UC Berkeley.

Graduate Career Preparation Survey

What type of career do you plan to pursue after you graduate?
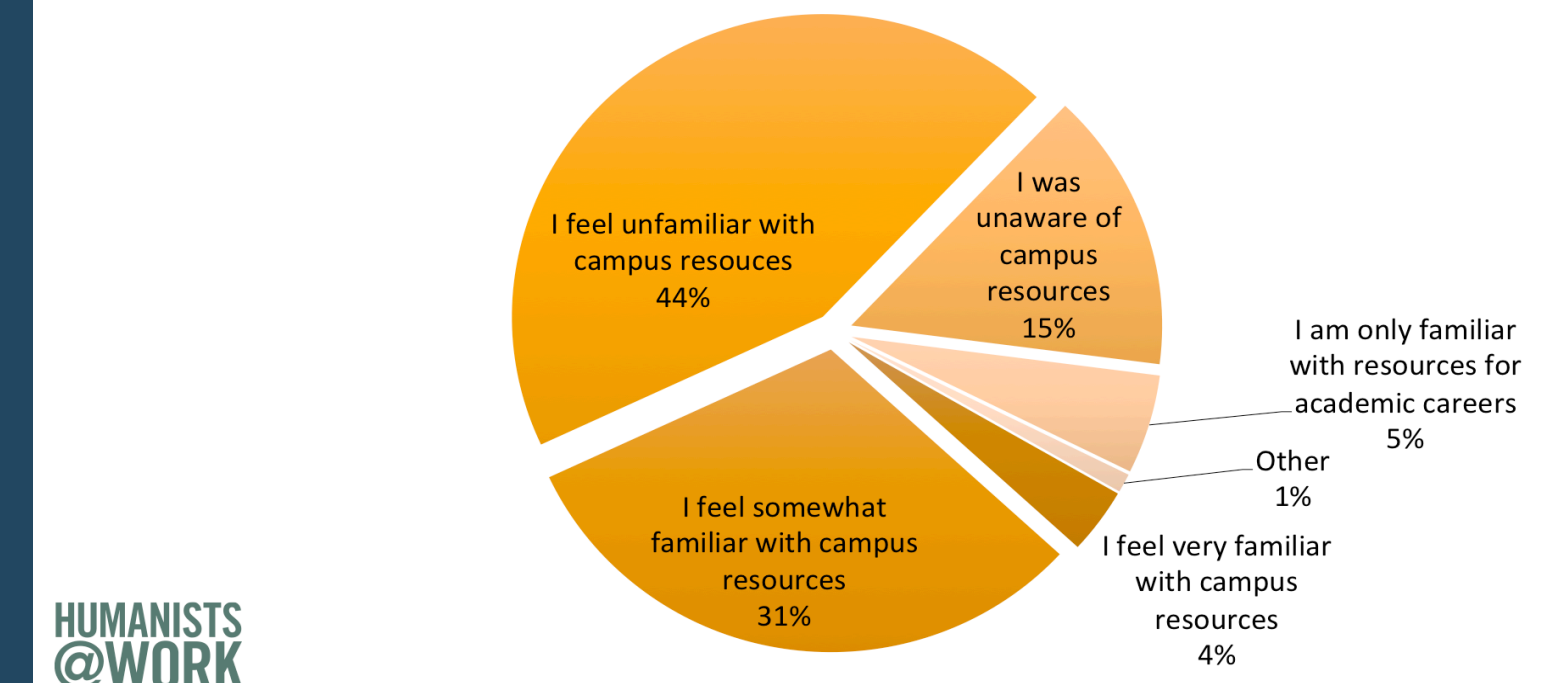

Respondents requested information and resources that recognized the skills they have and those they need.

Humanities PhDs need to be directed to resources which are specific to their skills, and don't presume high levels of scientific or quantitative training. I have been actively discouraged by the career fairs and advice to which I have been directed.

[We need] workshops and materials that match the skills of humanities and social science PhDs with specific career opportunities in the private sector.

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How familiar do you feel with UC Berkeley Career Preparation Resources?

I feel unfamiliar with campus resouces 44%

I was unaware of campus resources 15%

I am only familiar with resources for academic careers 5%

Other 1%

I feel somewhat familiar with campus resources 31%

I feel very familiar with campus resources 4%

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Graphs from "A Snapshot of UC Berkeley: PhD Career Development," based on a survey of 230 graduate students, approximately 17% of Humanities & Humanistic Social Science PhDs at UC Berkeley. Graphs courtesy of Humanists@Work.

"Humanists that have come at the 'PhD question' have often failed to assess PhD preparation relatively objectively through statistical analysis; social scientists that have approached the question have frequently failed to appreciate the significance of informal traditions that inform graduate student development," they wrote. "In both of these broad cases, academic analysis has not been supplemented by non-academic expertise and perspective."

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UC BERKELEY SOCIAL SCIENCE MATRIX