This September, hundreds of talented, hard-working, highly motivated people entered doctoral programs in the humanities at universities across Canada. The competition to get into these programs, especially the top-ranked ones, is intense. Those offered spots represent less than a quarter of all who applied for admission.

And the overall number of doctoral students is growing. A 2012 study commissioned by the Canadian Association of Graduate Studies (CAGS) and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) found that enrolment in PhD programs over the past 45 years across all disciplines has increased as much as 450 percent. This upsurge easily outpaces Canada’s population growth (about 75 percent) for the same period. The increase testifies to wide interest in and enhanced access to higher education among recent generations. It is also a consequence of a proliferation of graduate programs across the country, itself a reflection of the growth in interest but also of institutional dependence on provincial funding structures that tie support to enrolment and thus encourage program expansion.

This pattern of increase holds true for doctoral students in the humanities as well. A number of recent studies of graduate education in Canada paint a troubling, if still incomplete picture of what lies ahead for this year’s matriculating class. The 2012 CAGS/SSHRC study suggests that if they follow paths similar to those of their recent predecessors, half will drop out before completing their degrees. And the other half, newly minted PhDs, will face a brutal academic job market.

Statistics on placement rates are incomplete and somewhat inconsistent, but nevertheless they suggest that just 20 to 30 percent of graduates will find employment at colleges and universities in their chosen fields. Several decades of increased enrolments have been coupled with a decline in the number of tenure-track positions. One cause of this decline is bottom-line strategizing about hiring practices and priorities, which has resulted in major shifts in the balance of tenure-track and nontenured positions and has contributed to an increased use of adjunct professors.

Most of the thinking about humanities graduate education over the past 15 years has focused on the institution of the academy and the academic labour market. Assessments of placement rates focus almost exclusively on placements within the academy, with tenure-track positions assumed to be the benchmark for “success.” The 50 percent attrition rate (double that of the sciences, according to the same 2012 CAGS/SSHRC study) remains something of a dark figure: we do not have a good grasp of why people leave programs or what they do after making the decision to abandon the degree.

Neither do we have solid data on the careers PhDs who do not become professors build for themselves. Anecdotal evidence suggests they do quite well, but it does not tell us...
whether humanities PhDs are able to develop worthwhile nonacademic careers because of or in spite of their doctoral training, or how effectively they are able to translate their academic skills to other contexts.

Doctoral programs that regularly lose half their students before completion and ultimately see only 10 to 15 percent of the total incoming cohort achieve the principal goal for which the programs are designed must be acknowledged to be experiencing some level of systemic failure. These shortcomings are related to the academic culture of the humanities, which remains wedded to the idea

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that doctoral training equips students for academic careers and academic careers only. The dominant assumptions within the academy have contributed to the widespread view, held even by new PhDs, that high-level humanities education makes people unfit for work outside the academy.

The greatest challenge therefore has to do with changing the culture of the academy. We believe that it is in the power of the university to transform the humanities PhD into a program able to train young scholars for a multiplicity of fulfilling careers, contribute formatively to the public good and strengthen the academic institution of the humanities itself as a participant in the political world.

The social, political, institutional and intellectual contexts of postsecondary education have changed significantly in the last century, but humanities doctoral programs have not kept pace. To be sure, new fields of inquiry have emerged, and new theories and methods have been developed. But while the questions asked by scholarship might be new, the process by which scholars earn that all-important credential — the PhD — has not changed.

In programs across the country, students take a series of advanced courses, write some form of candidacy exam intended to confirm mastery of a particular field or fields and complete a book-length dissertation that makes a significant, original contribution to scholarly knowledge. In the seven years it typically takes them to meet these requirements, students immerse themselves in a largely insular academic culture that encourages them to consider their doctoral training as preparation for a lifetime in the academy.

This is true despite the fact that enrolments have increased well beyond the academy's capacity to provide lifetime academic careers to every graduate. A 2012 Statistics Canada study indicates that as many as 86 percent of students entering PhD programs in the humanities at Ontario universities do so with the intention of pursuing academic careers. Moreover, students are often discouraged from pursuing non-academic interests, or they fear that such interests will slow their time to completion. Some believe that openly exploring nonacademic career options will make them appear less serious about their academic work.

It has been suggested that the “crisis” facing graduate study in the humanities is merely a consequence of overproduction, and that the problem therefore may be solved by cutting programs and reducing enrolments: fewer PhDs competing for positions will improve placement rates. This is a short-sighted response that forecloses on the possibility of innovative reform and fails to take into account the existing and potential social value of humanities graduate training.

It is not merely possible to make room for humanities PhDs in the modern world, it is essential that there be room for them and that people with humanities training at the highest level be integrated into the political fabric of the country. The kinds of knowledge born of the humanities can contribute to clearer, more historically informed and more ethical understanding of problems that face modern society. The humanities foster understanding across lines of national, ethnic, racial and gender difference, which is an urgent requirement in an increasingly global world.

Humanities research makes it possible to address — critically and historically — first-order questions about value, justice, ethical practice and the principles of human dignity that must guide policy decisions and technological development and implementation. They train people to think both deeply and flexibly, write persuasively and question productively.

The humanities also emphasize high-level research, interpretive and communication skills. They demand careful reasoning and the analytical ability to account for the whole and the part. They foster the capacity to write and speak persuasively and informatively to different readerships and audiences.

It is necessary to rethink and reform the PhD in the humanities, and especially to develop a reinvigorated program of graduate study that will benefit graduates, universities, employers and society as a whole. We propose that this new thinking be framed by three enabling features: publicity, collaboration and fabrication.

It is important that students’ work become more public and more oriented toward the world outside academia. Publicity confers a measure of relevance and permanence on the work
students do. Their most accomplished research should be able to move beyond the seminar room and the library. The work should, in principle, join with other work in ongoing conversations about matters of public concern.

Moreover, to encourage making PhD students’ work public is to recognize that these students are emerging experts in their own right who should be developing a public voice and a public role of their own. They should not wait until after graduation to begin speaking to members of the academy and to the world beyond the university. A worldly reorientation of humanities education will also expand the kinds of careers that graduates think about entering and for which their graduate programs will prepare them and will be seen to prepare them.

Knowledge in the humanities is by its character the work of many hands. Even the great singular works of scholarship turn out upon examination to be nested within extended networks of inquiry. Those kinds of examination do not diminish the greatness of achievements such as Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* or Northrop Frye’s *Anatomy of Criticism*, but they do correct an impression we might have about the solitariness of these scholars. While original contributions to knowledge should remain the standard for high-level humanities research (after all, we do not want to encourage mere restatements of familiar ideas or approaches), it nevertheless is valuable to foster collaborative teaching and research in new PhD programs.

The ability to collaborate and to take a leadership role in collaborative projects is equally valuable in the non-academic and academic workplaces. Collaborative work opens up ways of making research public beyond the traditional avenues of journal article and book publication. Interdisciplinary research tends to ask larger, more multi-sided questions than does individual research. Big, new questions are likely to appeal to people outside the university, leading to exchanges between researchers and students and teachers, community groups, reading clubs, government and nongovernmental policy experts, and so on.

Translating humanities research from its traditional form — the solitary scholar in the archives — into performance-based inquiry, design charrettes, online collaboration and publication of work-in-progress will open research to new perspectives and will encourage new participants to join in the work. PhD students can learn by undertaking internships or by doing studies in the field. They can do research in more creative ways than has been the usual practice in the academy.

All this is not to move away from a traditional humanities emphasis on deep, disinterested study and understanding (as opposed to instrumental kinds of inquiry, where researchers go no deeper and explore no more widely than is absolutely necessary in order to address a particular question). Rather it is a way to expand how humanities understanding can act in the world and with others, and how humanities research can take part in productive, public dialogue by way of different dissemination forms across a range of media platforms.

The challenges facing the 21st-century university in this regard have to do principally with shifting 85 to 90 percent of doctoral scholars out of their role as sacrifices to the institutionalized culture of the humanities. It means rethinking degree programs so that they address the interests, talents and legitimate career expectations of candidates, while fulfilling the obligations of the university to the well-being of society.

These new ways of doing humanities will help train PhDs who are intellectually nimble, conversant with new technologies, able to speak to different audiences and adept at telling the story of what they do and why it matters. Reoriented to face the multiple publics outside the academy, graduate education in the humanities will benefit graduate students themselves and will strengthen the capacity of humanities teaching and research to contribute to the future well-being of Canadian society.

We propose that new thinking about the PhD in the humanities be framed by publicity, collaboration and fabrication.