

ELITES, SOCIAL NETWORKS, AND THE HISTORICAL PROFESSION

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My research examines the role played by small groups of people working towards common ends. In other words, I am fascinated by elites. Having spent almost ten years of my life in several universities, I am also intrigued by the role of elites in academia.

In early December I came across a study which reported that a handful of graduate political science programs dominated hiring in that field in the United States. Robert Oprisko's research, published in preview in the *Georgetown Public Policy Review*, shows that just eleven programs account for over half of all tenure-track hiring by political science departments (or to put another way, the graduates of about 10% of all departments represent half of all new hires). Oprisko concludes that "there is a direct correlation between institutional prestige and candidate placement." Yet he adds: "Of course, this is somewhat expected given that the most prestigious programs are often also the ones that have the highest numbers of students. As we move forward with this project, we will control for institution size and output."



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I wondered about how the size of these elite departments may account for their preponderance in hiring. Using the historical profession in the Canada and the United States as roughly similar to political science, I did some quick-and-dirty calculations which I'd like to share. One result I found is that a small group of US universities supply most new history PhDs. I took data from the American Historical Association's on-line guide to Canadian and American PhD programs in history to

evaluate enrolment and graduation rates. I discovered that there are about 8700 PhD students in approximately 146 history programs in the US. The 29 departments in the top quintile based on size have around 3800 PhD students, or about 44% of the total. North of the border, I discovered that the five largest Canadian PhD programs (i.e. 20% of all Canadian PhD programs) account for about 43% of total number of PhD students. Thus, PhD training in Canada is very similar in distribution to the United States.

I would like to find further data that correlates graduation rates, program size, funding, and other variables for PhD history programs in Canada and the United States, and to see this data linked to a similar study as Oprisko's. I suspect that "elite" universities dominate history tenure-track employment because of their prestige and established social networks in hiring committees. But I also think that program size, graduation rates, and funding play a significant part as well in this overrepresentation. Current efforts at "internationalization" (i.e. a shift in new hiring away from North American and European history, towards other parts of the world) in many departments may also account for this trend, as larger departments seem to produce a relatively larger number of PhDs in non-European, non-North American specialties.

Elitism and academic employment is also linked to a potential research project I would like to undertake in the future (or someone else with strong quantitative data skills): a social network survey of the historical profession in Canada since the late-nineteenth-century. An inspiration is a project called "The History of History Tree" (<http://academicstree.org/history>) which attempts to trace the academic lineage of current historians back to the early pioneers of the profession (such as Ranke, Beard, Turner, etc.).

I thought a similar exercise might be interesting to apply to myself and other friends in my PhD program at the University of Guelph. I connected two of my colleagues, through four generations of advisors, to Donald Creighton. It was interesting to discover that I am a fifth generation "descendant" of J.M.S. Careless.

This raises other questions for me: are certain lineages more successful in replicating themselves in the historical profession? If so, what are the reasons for this success? Is it access to resources and the power of social networks across history departments? Are there other factors to consider? I've long been surprised that academics, who are otherwise very active in analyzing power relationships in society, have yet to fully investigate these patterns in their own institutions and professions. But it seems clear that new initiatives such as Oprisko's are underway to further understand such trends.