

## Switching Degrees

### To the Editor

The very good piece by Philip Katz on the history MA degree, published in the January 2004 issue of *Perspectives* focused on “switching” and thus unintentionally downplayed an important aspect—the academic importance of the MA degree. After properly disagreeing with Theodore Hamerow’s arch and arrogant dismissal of the MA as “almost entirely psychological and ceremonial” (mine, for instance, was anything but ceremonial), Katz mentions briefly the various uses, practical and intellectual, to which an MA can be put. But the implied dismissal (by Hamerow et al., not Katz) of the intellectual validity of the MA is troubling and needs further examination.

I have long been puzzled and annoyed by the elitist attitude of so many PhD programs. Historians, who are frequently vocal advocates of opportunity and access, often create closed programs where students are expected to go seamlessly from college studies into their comprehensive PhD operations. One of the nation’s most prestigious PhD programs declares, as a pious policy, that all students shall be funded. That sounds wonderful, but means in practice that students who have already earned an MA degree are, in fact, at a disadvantage in the competition for limited funding. Why do they need funding, the argument [may run] runs, they already have a degree, and besides, what good is a degree from X-university? It all smacks of the distasteful, class-structured European system of slotting young people into career tracks based on their performance in their early teens, long before they were able to make mature judgments.

Small, stand-alone MA programs provide an invaluable service, and should be defended and promoted by any person who believes that American education has a responsibility to provide opportunities to succeed. Such programs allow late “vocations” to develop and give an opportunity to the students to test their skills and to experience the rigor and excitement

of “doing” research-oriented history. The MA program gives aspiring students the chance to refurbish their credentials in order to gain admittance to a PhD history program. Arguably, students with some practical life experience will, in fact, be better prepared to perform good historical analysis than someone who has spent an entire life in the ivory tower, albeit at the lowest rungs.

What the directors and faculty involved in PhD programs should be doing is to promote (indeed demand, as a basis for admission) higher standards in the MA programs that can, and should, feed into the highest levels of history education. Switching is less the issue than quality. Dismissals by PhD programs of the MA as “ceremonial” are an admission of failure on the part of such programs to impose, and hence promote, high standards.

These arguments are just as valid for the admission to PhD programs of qualified part-time students, many of whom have done brilliantly in our profession. But that elitist prejudice against part-time education is for another letter.

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