For Students Nearing Ph.D.'s, Scant Hope in Tight Market

By Audrey Williams June

Although the faculty-job market is notoriously tough, many graduate students are braving it with just a few dissertation chapters in hand—works very much in progress. The strategy, once reasonable, is now a long shot in some social-science and humanities disciplines. In today's market, there is more competition than ever from recent Ph.D.'s, tenure-track professors looking to upgrade, experienced postdocs, and visiting professors with plenty of teaching credentials.

Still, going on the market A.B.D.—"all but dissertation"—is a career move that many graduate students feel compelled to make, especially if their support is about to expire. Most are trying to maintain an income and their ability to do research. Waiting to complete a doctoral project would interrupt both.

Their hopes are fueled by success stories like Dino P. Christenson, who went on the market A.B.D. from Ohio State last year and landed a job as an assistant professor of political science at Boston University. He completed his doctorate before starting work this fall.

"What if somebody was looking for someone just like me, and I didn't apply?" says Maria W. Van Ryn, a Ph.D. student in sociology at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who expects to earn her degree in May 2011. "And honestly, if I waited, there would be a gap between when I finished and when I started working. If I'm not on the market, then what?"

A Dose of Realism

That optimism is nice but simply not realistic, according to search-committee veterans. "If you're going on the market A.B.D., it's unlikely that you're going to come out with a great tenure-track job," says Jason Mittell, an associate professor of American studies and film and media culture at Middlebury College. He has served on numerous search committees at the institution. "There are just too many great people out there that it doesn't make sense to take the risk."

Many on these committees see no reason to gamble that the A.B.D. candidates will actually complete their work. (Indeed, sometimes
offers can be rescinded if the candidates do not finish before arriving.

In some instances, hiring committees have so many choices that being A.B.D. "is an easy discriminator when you're looking at 200 or more CV's," says Arlene Taich, a career-development specialist for graduate students and postdocs at Washington University in St. Louis. She has also been a professor, a dean, and a university provost. "Anybody who has a Ph.D. knows how difficult it is to finish."

Sometimes A.B.D. candidates don't make the cut because search-committee members have long memories. David W. Rudge, an associate professor of biology education at Western Michigan University, admits that his view of such candidates has been tainted by a hire his department made about eight years ago.

"We decided that we would seriously consider someone who was A.B.D. because the pool was so small," Mr. Rudge says. "But every single conversation we had about whether to make the offer to this candidate started and ended with, Is she going to finish by the time she gets to campus?"

The candidate's references reported that she was on track to finish by the time her appointment began in the fall. But it ended up taking her until near the end of the spring semester. She didn't teach at all her first semester—other people had to pick up her classes—and she got a course reduction the next semester to accommodate her dissertation writing.

In retrospect, Mr. Rudge says, search committees shouldn't focus solely on verifying a candidate's completion date. "You need to ask, How much have you done? And then ask to see it."

An adviser lending a stamp of credibility to a candidate's progress is critical at that juncture. "If you're A.B.D., you need to make sure that your adviser puts in your reference letter that you can finish," Mr. Mittell says. "If the letter doesn't say that, I assume it's not true."

Skeptical Committees

Search committees are especially mindful of the time crunch facing newly appointed professors who still have to complete a dissertation. With the tenure clock running, A.B.D.'s have a steeper hill to climb than most.

"If you're spending your first year trying to get your dissertation done, and then you're trying to get publications your second year, and then you have three years to get your research going, you're not in a good situation," Mr. Mittell says.

Ellen Spertus, an associate professor of computer science, avoided
most of that situation. She got a delayed start as an assistant professor at Mills College because "I didn't finish in time," says Ms. Spertus, whose classes were covered by adjuncts while she was completing her degree during the fall of 1997.

Even so, she says, she would hire someone A.B.D. In fact, her department did just that, recently hiring someone as a lecturer until her degree was completed.

For Ms. Spertus, an A.B.D. candidate with extensive teaching experience is worth considering. But she would tell such a candidate to "just be prepared to have an answer about what remains to be done on your thesis."

Even a satisfactory answer is likely to give hiring committees plenty to discuss, says Andrew Greene, assistant director and Ph.D. counselor at the career center at the University of California at Berkeley.

"The internal dynamics of any given search committee can determine what happens to an A.B.D.," says Mr. Greene, who has faculty-search-committee experience. "The politicker on the committee can raise an A.B.D. up to the top. People still love that potential of the bright, not fully formed scholar."

Mr. Christenson, at Boston University, seems to be one of those. "I'd heard that it's a lot easier to get a job with a Ph.D. in hand," he says. He churned out enough of his dissertation so that in the months after applying for jobs, he was "touching up chapters"—a sure signal to search committees that degree completion by the time of appointment is more than a pipe dream, he says.

"I count myself as fortunate," Mr. Christenson says. "There are a lot of good candidates out there who for some reason or another didn't get a placement."

Anthony T. Grafton, a professor of history at Princeton who has led workshops for history graduate students on how to navigate the tough job market, says such hires prove that it's "very unpredictable how this will all play out on an individual basis. I was told long ago, when you're on the market, you can't worry about the other people who are also looking."

Practice Runs

Even if they don't get hired, A.B.D. candidates can still gain something valuable from going on the market.

"One of the nice things about going on the job market before you're actually ready is that you can learn the ins and outs of a job search," Mr. Rudge says. "For the most part, people who are in grad school have no idea what the job market is like."
Heather L. Scheuerman, a sixth-year Ph.D. student in sociology at Emory University, attended a job-market seminar that her department offers as a way of prepping students for the experience. A pertinent piece of advice she received has stuck with her: "You should be going on the market if you’re far enough along on your dissertation so that you know you can give a good job talk in November," says Ms. Scheuerman, who attended the August meeting of the American Sociological Association. Hiring committees there, true to form, questioned her about whether she was on track to finish by the fall of 2011.

Ms. Scheuerman is optimistic about landing a tenure-track job because she can apply for jobs in criminology and criminal justice in addition to social psychology. Some sociologists specialize in areas that give them fewer options. "I definitely have a lot more opportunities," says Ms. Scheuerman.

She has begun to write up the results from data she collected in June and expects to "have a good job talk ready in November—or even sooner—if I'm privileged enough to get an interview," she says. "I'm constantly working on my dissertation ... so I can make sure that I'm finished."

Ms. Van Ryn, of Chapel Hill, says she's run across few jobs that are "perfect fits," while some openings in her subfield are a reach. "I'm not confident that things will work out this year," she says. However, there's one thing about which she is certain.

"I absolutely will finish," Ms. Van Ryn says. "I have a graduation party planned."