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What a Difference an MA Makes

Gina Brandolino

When I received an email from Anne Bartlett asking me if I would like to participate in a roundtable discussion about MA programs at the M/MLA convention, I immediately felt some trepidation: though I consider myself a generally content, happy, and even pleasant person, every conference session Anne has ever invited me to participate in has somehow, through no fault of my own and certainly through no fault of Anne's, compelled me to produce a paper that brings out my angriest, most bitter self. When Anne told me she was in need of someone for the roundtable discussion who could talk about the experience of going from a terminal MA program into a PhD program, this conference session did not seem to hold the promise of being an exception. I earned my BA in 1994 and my MA in 1997, the same year I entered the PhD program which I am still finishing. I am currently working on the second chapter of my dissertation, which focuses on Middle English religious narratives. No one would say I am really trucking through my graduate school years, and it is not difficult, and not really inaccurate, to blame the terminal MA for some of my slowness.

Not really inaccurate, but a bit unfair, because without the terminal MA, I would not be in a PhD program at all right now. I decided in the middle of my freshman year of college that I wanted to earn a PhD in English and become an English professor. This was a goal I pursued with quite a lot of zeal—I participated in undergraduate conferences, signed up for every leadership post the English department at my college offered, and took every English course available. I won a great many awards and graduated *summa cum laude*, but things did not go very well for me when I applied to PhD programs. I am from a working-class background and am a first-generation college student. My mother, who was raised in a house attached to the tavern her parents owned and operated, is a hairdresser, and my father, who immigrated to the US with his parents in the 1950s, works in a factory in my hometown, so I did not have a lot of academic resources to draw on when it came to the application process. Certainly, my family was encouraging and very proud of me for wanting to continue my education, but they lack academic knowledge and experiences, so the help they could provide for me was limited. The college at which I earned my BA is very small; the English department had a grand total of six professors, and while they helped me immensely as I was choosing schools to apply to and writing my statement of purpose, in the end I simply could not compete with students from more intellectually

savvy backgrounds and more prominent schools. I received more rejections than I care to remember, two acceptances, and no offers of financial assistance, which posed a great problem for me. To make a very long story short, things did not work out for me at either school which accepted me.

Frustrated that the single career plan I had, which I had pursued with such vigor and determination, was proving out of my reach and embarrassed that I could not hold my own against other PhD applicants, I applied to a terminal MA program. I figured that it was graduate school, but not a PhD program, which my application experience had made me afraid of; and it was close to home, so I could commute to school and back, keep my job, and pay for tuition; and most importantly, it accepted me. So I went. And in this MA program, I thrived: I did incredibly well in my course work, realized that I could match wits with my peers, found great professors willing to mentor me, and graduated with distinction. Then I reapplied to PhD programs, and I got letters (plural!) of acceptance. In fact, two schools which had previously rejected me made offers and counter-offers of financial support. Feeling like I had won the lottery, I picked one and went.

As you can imagine, I went singing a high hosanna to the terminal MA, and now you're thinking that all the bitterness and anger present in this paper is behind us. Not quite. When I met with the director of graduate studies to determine what classes I would take during my first term in my PhD program, I found myself in the midst of a discussion about which of my MA classes would transfer—as in, of course, they would not all transfer, and I essentially would be re-taking some courses I had completed in my MA program. I found myself talking my way out of being enrolled in another introductory “professionalization” course. I had taken one for my MA program, but incoming students, whether in possession of a BA or MA, were encouraged to take this course in my PhD program. And in general, I found myself feeling that, aside from getting me in the door, my MA did not really do me a lot of good, and in some ways, it set me back: some of the time I had spent in course work (as well as the money I had spent) would have to be re-spent. This feeling intensified as I watched my fellow students who entered with BAs only—students to whom I was technically senior—leap-frogging past me: They would do two and a half years of coursework, while I, counting my MA coursework, would do four. They would be finished with their degrees and get jobs before they turned 30, while I finished my doctoral exams when I turned 30, streaks of gray starting in my hair. These youngsters currently sprint past me on the library stairs while we are there together researching our dissertations, while the arthritis starting to settle in my joints prevents me from giving chase.

Okay, the arthritis part I made up. And the truth is that once I was out of course work, my frustration over feeling set back by having completed a terminal MA program faded. In fact, now that my focus is on my dissertation and my teaching, I find myself increasingly grateful that I completed an MA before entering a PhD program. The benefits are more subtle than the drawbacks, but I find them infinitely more valuable than the drawbacks ever seemed debilitating. For example, I feel like I really have a firm grounding in literary history—and I should. Having gone through the cycle of historical survey courses once for my BA, again for my MA, and having redone parts of it when I entered my PhD program, I have more notes on, have researched more papers about, have seen the approaches of more professors to, and have done more reading in any given period of literary history, British or American, than anyone could hope for. This has proven immensely useful to me as I put together my own syllabi and lesson plans. Another benefit also connected to teaching is that I find I am capable of relating to and assisting a wide range of students. Other graduate students for whom the road to higher education was easy and assured might not be as familiar as I am with the fears, concerns, and problems of students for whom a college education is not a given. I have been this student, and I am as capable of and comfortable teaching her as I am teaching students whose backgrounds dispose them to being more at ease and successful in college. This is particularly important to me, because, having had my share of problems with higher education because of my own background, I want to help make the university more accessible to this less-privileged student.

But the advantages of having gone through a terminal MA program are not just about teaching. I have the benefit of being familiar with the faculty of two graduate programs: I have two groups of mentors to whom I can go for help and who keep me in mind for conferences (despite my bitterness and anger, apparently) and other professionalizing opportunities. And, though I exaggerated my age when I referred to those young upstarts who beat me up the stairs at the library, I do often feel like I am, not so much more mature, but perhaps more experienced. In any event, out of necessity, I have demonstrated more persistence than some of my colleagues who have been able to take a more direct route through graduate school. Though it is true to some extent of all graduate students, it is particularly true of me that I have not made it this far by accident.

When I was still doing coursework, one of my professors told me that, as she saw it, an MA is something you earn for fun; the PhD is when things get serious. I have met other professors and students who share this opinion, and I can see how it may be true in some cases, for some students. But it has been my experience that, for students who have the desire and ability to pursue an academic career but whose backgrounds

make such a career path look difficult or even impossible to follow, the MA is where the serious work begins, and it can make all the difference. When terminal MA programs serve this function—as my MA program did for me, acting as the less-privileged student’s stepping-stone to the academy—they help let some fresh air, new faces, and new experiences into the ivory tower. This is an invaluable service to provide for both the student and the tower. And I am sure you will all be happy to hear that, as someone who has benefited from this service, I find in the end that I really have no business being angry or bitter.

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