The Next Great Thinkers
What does it take to create a new generation of the professoriate?

They come to Pitt hungry, eager to read, write, and debate. They train with professors who have spent their careers pushing the boundaries of human understanding. They live on Indian food and coffee and spend copious amounts of time in the library. And when it is over, they are ready to train the next generation of scholars.

They are Pitt’s PhD students, a group whose achievements and sheer numbers have grown in recent years, as Pitt has surfaced near the top of the 400-plus schools in the nation that offer doctoral education.

Across the nation, PhD education has received increased attention, including a recent study by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, an independent policy and research center. Three Pitt entities—the Departments of Chemistry and English, and the Center for Neuroscience—were among 84 nationwide asked to participate in the study because of their achievements in doctoral education.

“We were really impressed by the energy at Pitt,” says Chris Golde, associate vice provost for graduate education at Stanford University and research director for the study. “The faculty we worked with showed a lot of energy and enthusiasm in doing the really hard work at looking at their own practices.

“Doctoral education is vitally important,” adds Golde. “It’s the crown jewel of all higher education systems. It’s where the best minds are honed and trained and prepared. It’s these folks who advance societies and civilizations.”

A Leader in Doctoral Education
At Pitt, the numbers of PhDs bestowed by the University have risen by 30 percent since 1995, to more than 400 per year. That ranks Pitt 18th among public institutions and 29th among all universities and colleges in the number of PhDs it produces.

Perhaps more impressive is where those PhDs end up—more than half obtain faculty positions at other colleges and universities and most of the others receive postdoctoral fellowships, often the initial step on a path toward tenure or key positions in government or industry.

“The University is clearly a major player on the national stage in terms of doctoral education, and I see only continued improvement in the years to come,” says Pitt Provost and Senior Vice Chancellor James V. Maher. “That’s what great universities do: They produce the next generation of the professorate for other universities, and, as a great institution, Pitt is committed to producing the next generation of thinkers and scholars.”

To make it all work, University officials say, Pitt adopts a stem-to-stern approach to attracting and training young scholars. “This doesn’t happen by accident,” says Maher. “We begin by recruiting the best students in the country and setting the bar high. Then we give our students the chance to work closely with some of the best faculty in their
fields and make sure the students have all the support they need to become strong, independent thinkers.”

“Good mentorship isn’t just holding students’ hands and walking them through the process,” says Nicole Constable, associate dean of graduate studies for the School of Arts and Sciences, the school that produces the largest number of the University’s PhDs. “It’s teaching them to be independent scholars, individuals who, when they’re finished, are prepared to be full-fledged academics.”

Supporting PhD education is expensive, but Pitt provides competitive support packages to its doctoral students because it’s fundamental to the University’s mission, says Constable. “We are investing in the future of the professoriate. Getting a PhD is a full-time, all-consuming pursuit. You’re basically saying, ‘I’m going to fully understand my discipline. It’s academia as a way of life.’”

Two areas where the University has consistently excelled in doctoral education are the Department of Philosophy and its sibling program, the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS). Their faculties are consistently given “Top Five” rankings by rating services like The Philosophical Gourmet Report, and both departments attract some of the best students in the country. Their approach to recruiting and training as well as placing PhD students are good examples of best practices in doctoral education at Pitt.

Looking for a Special Imagination

The excellence of the graduate program in the Department of Philosophy starts with finding and attracting the best students. But how do you find hidden talent amidst the sea of applications every year?

Robert Brandom, Pitt Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, says he and his colleagues look for students with “a special imagination” when deciding which of the 250 applicants will fill the department’s six to eight slots annually.

“You’ve got to be able to ask a question other people won’t ask, and find a productive way to pursue an answer. That’s not the same thing as intellectual candlepower,” Brandom says. “You’ve got to be able to read something that hundreds of other people have read and think something no one else has thought about it. That’s what we’re looking for.”

Very often these applicants will be fielding offers from other “Top Five” programs like those at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Harvard, Princeton, and New York universities. So showcasing the department’s strengths go a long way in convincing students to come to Pitt, says Laura Ruetsche, a Pitt philosophy professor and the director of graduate studies for the department.

Joining a Community of Scholars

When Shawn Standefer was finishing up an undergraduate degree in philosophy at Stanford, he paid a visit to Pitt to see firsthand one of the PhD programs he was considering for graduate school. His Stanford professors had told him about Pitt’s excellent reputation for producing original, high-quality scholars.

Standefer was not disappointed by what he found. “One of the other grad students put it well,” says Standefer. “When you’re looking at graduate programs, it’s kind of like looking at different families and deciding which one you want to be born into. You get a sense from visiting different schools that each program has a different personality. There was something about Pitt’s atmosphere that meshed with my own interests.”

Standefer, now in his second year of the PhD program, has taken courses on Wittgenstein, Kant, and Aristotle with some of the most highly regarded scholars in the country. He’s also become involved in the University’s philosophical community: This spring, he helped organize a graduate student conference run by students in philosophy, HPS, and Carnegie Mellon University’s philosophy department.

Pitt’s philosophy department hosts a prospective students’ weekend—a kind of show-and-tell where faculty interact with the applicants who’ve been accepted. Students also get to hear a faculty member give a work-in-progress talk. This year’s presenter was University Professor of Philosophy John McDowell, whose work in linking the analytic and humanistic strains of philosophy has made him a major figure in contemporary scholarship.

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—Chris Golde

Pitt PhDs Awarded Since 1995

Pitt ranks 18th among U.S. public schools in the number of PhDs it produces.
think it’s going to be where you’re looking? How will we know when you’ve bagged it?”

The student’s prospectus is so important because of its impact on the quality of the dissertation he or she will write, says Ruetsche. This, in turn, has a direct impact on students’ job prospects after graduate school.

“In academia, people don’t ask in a job interview about a paper you wrote for a seminar your second year in graduate school. They ask about your dissertation,” Ruetsche says. “It’s the credential that’s most central to your appointment on a faculty.”

As they finish their dissertations, students begin looking for a job. To support that effort, Pitt faculty put the students through mock interviews and mock job presentations. “The faculty’s job isn’t over until each student has a job,” Brandom says.

For alums like Boyle, the intellectual voyage launched at Pitt will last a lifetime. “My own feeling is that philosophy satisfies some fundamental human impulse. We’re rational animals. We have this power to think about things, and philosophy is the purest expression of that power.”

Making the Scholarly Life

Most PhD programs at the University of Pittsburgh have the same recipe for success: highly competitive screening, rigorous training, access to great faculty thinkers and researchers, participation in an intellectual community, and detailed preparation for the academic job market. But it all starts with having great students.

As in the philosophy department, this approach is embodied in Pitt’s Department of the History and Philosophy of Science’s PhD program, which attracts some of the country’s top young scholars.

When Bryan Roberts was deciding on a possible school for obtaining a PhD degree in philosophy of science, he knew Pitt’s HPS department had an excellent reputation. It wasn’t until his campus visit, though, that he knew he’d choose Pitt over the other schools on his shortlist, which included Oxford University.

“Everybody knows the department has a world-renowned faculty, but the thing that really convinced me, having visited different places, was the intellectual community. They were people I wanted to work with,” says Roberts, who completed bachelor’s degrees in math and philosophy at the University of Washington-Seattle and is now a second-year PhD student at Pitt. “Here you’re surrounded by people thinking hard about really interesting questions.”

HPS is regarded as one of the best of its kind in the English-speaking world, says Sandra Mitchell, chair of HPS. In 2006, the program had an unprecedented “10 for 10”—all 10 of its graduating students received either a tenure-track faculty position or a prestigious fellowship. “When you have 10 people on the market, getting all 10 into jobs is a dream. It’s an acknowledgement of the quality of the students coming out of this program,” says Mitchell. And like Pitt’s philosophy department, HPS boasts some of the finest faculty in the field, not just names in a catalogue or on a Web site, but active participants in the intellectual life of the program.

Students also help each other, says Holly Andersen, a sixth-year HPS student who is writing a dissertation in the philosophy of science. During her first month in the program, Andersen participated in the student retreat at a nearby state park. Over bonfires and games of Frisbee®, the more senior students explained to the newcomers what would be expected...
of them, says Andersen. “It’s nothing the upper-level students officially have to do, but it’s very helpful having someone walking you through every step.”

Andersen, who received a master’s degree from The London School of Economics in philosophy of science before coming to Pitt, says the energy students bring to the program is palpable. “I’ve never had as stimulating and interesting conversations as I’ve had in this program,” she says. “The day-to-day life of the philosopher is the life I’ve always wanted to live.”

A good place to find these kinds of conversations is the weekly grad student lunch inside the Center for Philosophy of Science on the eighth floor of the Cathedral of Learning, a kind of magnet for visiting scholars from around the world. Over cans of soda and sandwich plates, students and faculty chat about quantum mechanics, the possibility of time travel (“Actually, it’s possible,” as one student asserted at a recent lunch), and the role of probability in scientific reasoning.

**Setting the Bar High**

HPS students in their third year must write two comprehensive papers in both the history and philosophy of science. Each paper must be given a pass from two professors. The goal is to simulate the publication process of peer-reviewed journals, but it’s a process that evokes winces from those who have gone through it.

“It can be brutal,” says Jim Tabery, who received his PhD degree from Pitt last year. Tabery, whose dissertation focused on the ‘nature vs. nurture’ debate, eventually had both of his comprehensive papers published in peer-reviewed journals.

“I have this memory of my professors saying, ‘What’s your contribution to the field? How is it different from what other people have said?’” says Tabery. “I realize now they were pushing me for a reason, so that I would become not just an adequate philosopher of science, but someone whose writings other people in the field are expected to read.”

“Comps” are probably the main reason why some HPS students don’t finish their degrees, says Mitchell. In the “publish or perish” world of academia, the process ensures each graduate of the program is ready for what lies ahead.

“Comprehensive exams are big hurdles,”

says Mitchell, whose own work focuses on the growing field of the philosophy of biology. “If they pass those, that’s a training for what it’s like to be in the profession. You need to show you have the ability to do independent work and that you can work through an argument. It’s better for them to find out sooner rather than later whether they have what it takes to make it in the profession.”

Like their counterparts in the philosophy department, HPS students finishing their dissertations prepare to “hit the market” by participating in mock interviews and giving mock job talks.

“The practice interview is designed to be much more brutal than the actual job interview ever will be,” says Tabery, who is now an assistant professor in the University of Utah’s Department of Philosophy.

Tabery says he uses some of the same techniques that helped him land a position to prepare his students for entering the job market. “They’re training you to look for a job from the time you walk in the door. Publishing papers and teaching courses puts you in a position to hit the ground running when you’re finished. By the time that sixth or seventh year rolls around, you’re already doing what professional philosophers do.”

Proof of the University’s accomplishments in doctoral education lies in what alumni like Tabery and others do every day, says Maher. Pitt PhDs include a Nobel Laureate, Guggenheim fellows, members of the National Academy of Sciences and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and dozens of university presidents, deans, and named professors.

“When we produce PhDs,” Maher says, “we want them to generate the new ideas that will drive the contributions of that discipline or profession. These are people we’re counting on to further human understanding.”