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## **Surviving the Doctoral Years: Critical Perspectives**

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### **Abstract:**

This article probes the implications of neo-conservative public education policies for the future of the academic profession through a detailed examination of critical issues shaping contemporary doctoral education in U.S. and Canadian universities. Institutional and social factors such as financial retrenchment, declining support for affirmative action, downward economic mobility, a weak academic labor market for tenure-track faculty, professional ethics in graduate education, and backlash against women's progress form the backdrop for analysis of the author's survey of current doctoral students' opinions about funding, support, the job market, and quality of learning experiences.

### **Introduction**

In the 1990s, universities in the U.S. and Canada are expected to experience the first massive waves of retirements among faculty who were initially hired during the 1960s and 1970s (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992; Bowen & Schuster, 1986; Bowen & Sosa, 1989). The question of whether there will be a growth in job opportunities for Ph.D. recipients from the 1990s is still hotly contested, but at this point little evidence exists that a "window of opportunity" is just around the corner for doctoral recipients. The prospects instead point to continuing tight budgets, declining job opportunities in tenure-track university faculty positions, and a widening gap

between rich and poor segments of U.S. and Canadian society (see American Association of University Professors, 1995, for an update on the current "status of the academic profession" in the U.S.).

During the 1950s and 1960s, higher education throughout North America expanded for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was to absorb the children of the "baby boom generation." Universities were riding a wave of prosperity that defined the "American century." With the growth of the economy in the immediate years following World War II, American universities provided broader access to U.S. citizens than ever before in history, particularly for individuals from lower- middle-class and minority groups (Bowles & Gintis, 1976; Ryan & Sackrey, 1984).

As the data provided in "Pursuit of the Ph.D." have shown, doctoral degree recipients matched the overall expansion in higher education enrollments until the late 1970s, when the first signs of economic downturns across the nation and diminished budgets for campus hiring of new Ph.D.s were evidenced. The economic recessions of the mid-1970s and early 1980s, accompanied by a rising mood of fiscal conservatism among many sectors of American society, led to declining public support for higher education and other public services and programs (Shor, 1986). Questions of cost began to dominate public discussions about who should attend American colleges and universities, and by the 1980s, the cost of a university education became increasingly difficult for students from modest-income backgrounds to afford. Loans replaced grants as the principle source of student financial aid, and increasing numbers of students graduated with large debt burdens.

Since the 1970s, universities and colleges across the U.S. have faced increasingly tight budgets and several new economic recessions, resulting in a recognition that the professoriate is "an occupation in crisis" (Bowen & Schuster, 1986; OISE Higher Education Group, 1985). What exists in the 1990s is clearly a "brave new world of academe" (Kerlin, 1992) where institutions are forced to do more with less resources but where demand for postsecondary education access remains high (Zusman, 1994).

In spite of diminishing funds and declines in tenure- track faculty job opportunities for Ph.D. recipients, universities have continued to offer a wide range of programs at the doctoral level. Most have consistently avoided making the tough decisions about whether there are too many Ph.D.s being granted in many disciplines. However, the evidence is mounting that campuses will soon be forced to make significant decisions about which graduate programs they cannot afford to preserve and about how to reduce costs for programs they wish to retain, as well as whose interests these retained programs will continue to serve (see University of Washington, President's Task Force Report, 1994).

There is reason to believe that within a few short years, the current system of mass public graduate education may be replaced by a smaller, more selective system, based on more realistic concepts of the value and purpose of the Ph.D. to the society as well as to individual recipients. According to the latest data from the annual "Almanac" issue of the Chronicle of Higher Education (September 1, 1995), graduate student enrollments are expected to decline slightly from their 1995 figure of 1.825 million students to around 1.811 million by the year 2005. Total production of master's degrees in U.S. universities is expected to decline by at least 9 percent during the next ten years while doctoral degrees will show little or no change during the same period. By comparison, bachelor's degrees are projected to grow by 7 percent--a figure which matches anticipated growth in overall undergraduate enrollments during the next ten years.

### **Individual Stories, Common Dilemmas**

The headline in the April 6, 1995 edition of the campus newspaper caught my eye. "As Clock Ticks Away, Grad Students wait for Final Say on Cuts." This particular article was from The Daily of the University of Washington, but could have been from any university in the U.S.

or Canada. It focused on the uncertainty felt by doctoral students in the UW's Department of Speech Communications, which was targeted for elimination along with the departments of Applied Mathematics, Slavic Languages and Literature, Institute for Environmental Studies, and the University's program on Higher Education (Seattle Post-Intelligencer, December 1, 1994). Forced by the citizens' passage of a state tax limitation measure in 1993, the proposed cuts resulted from the UW's latest round of belt-tightening which has included budget reductions of more than 10 percent since 1990 (University of Washington University Week, 12 (4), p 1). Although the University of Washington administration later decided to retain the Speech Communications program, the department's budget was still cut by 40 percent as part of a campus budget reduction package that upheld the closure of the Environmental Studies Institute and department of Slavic languages and literature (Seattle Times, April 8, 1995).

Unquestionably, many contemporary doctoral students are living with a great deal of uncertainty. The dilemmas they are experiencing need to be understood on both individual and broader, systemic levels. Some challenges, such as confronting and overcoming self-doubt, completing the dissertation, and developing greater self-confidence in one's academic abilities, are relatively normal products of the doctoral experience. Others, such as conflicts with departmental faculty, unanticipated loss of financial support, departure of an adviser for another university, or closure of one's department due to budget cuts, can hardly be anticipated ahead of time and often introduce great discomfort into the doctoral process. The quality of a student's doctoral experience is inevitably clouded if negative events overshadow the positive accomplishments, leading at least some to question the purpose of continuing their careers within the academic profession. With the current oversupply of Ph.D.s in the marketplace, universities may not be concerned about this population of disaffected young scholars, but in time, it may become counterproductive to the continued vitality of the profession. While there is no certain way of measuring what portion of Ph.D. student dropout is due to overall dissatisfaction with the quality of the academic experience, there is reason to believe that as institutions continue raising the costs of graduate tuition, these levels of student dissatisfaction may well increase, with concomitant rises in attrition levels.

In their own assessment of factors shaping the contemporary labor market for Ph.D. recipients, Kirk and Todd- Mancillas (1991) refer to critical "turning points" in graduate student socialization that may leave lasting impressions on students. Many students who go through the doctoral process report significant impact on their self-esteem and self-confidence. Numerous students experience a clinical form of "post-traumatic stress disorder" following their departure from the doctoral years, in some cases requiring specialized treatment (1). Negative consequences from the doctoral years-- whether related to traumas incurred during the doctoral process or just the accumulated impact of stress, tight resources, and limited post-doctoral job opportunities--often include post- withdrawal depression (regardless of completion or non-completion), burnout, and divorce (Moore, 1985; Sternberg, 1981). Additionally, career and personal challenges face both men and women who are dual-career couples with hopes of remaining together and pursuing academic careers after completing the Ph.D. (Magner, 1994). Sternberg (1981) recommends that students obtain some form of therapy upon departing from their doctoral years, as a way to overcome the accumulated stresses and strains related to their educational experiences.

Students often describe the doctoral process as more "political" than intellectual in nature. A number of respondents to a survey I conducted commented that they entered the doctoral years with hopes of being intellectually nurtured, only to experience a kind of "hazing process" in which they were subjected to rules of conformity and compliance that had never been made explicit ahead of time. Sometimes these rules were rationalized by faculty as "part of the department's way of doing things", and sometimes they were unarticulated and arbitrarily or capriciously applied by individual faculty or advisors. But if the application of these rules has the

effect of sabotaging the student's progress or belittling him or her, inevitably the impact upon the student and the academic profession is negative. More than a few of my respondents referred to the doctoral process as "basically an endurance contest" in which students had to jump through endless "hoops". Whether this process contributes to more effective learning or intellectual development seems, according to my respondents, never to be questioned by the faculty applying the rules.

Indeed, Peggy Hawley, Professor Emeritus from San Diego State University, has recognized this phenomenon. In her 1993 book *Being Bright is Not Enough: The Unwritten Rules of Doctoral Study* Hawley acknowledges that in order to succeed at completing the doctorate, students need to be "street-smart"-- shrewd, sharp, cunning, and perceptive--and that this ability is in fact one form of "intelligence" that the doctoral process tests (Hawley, p. 12-13). Hawley advises students:

in order to advance your ideas and carve out your own professional niche, you must be sophisticated enough to 'play the game' according to the rules of the particular setting in which you find yourself. In this respect, doctoral study shares many of the characteristics of the 'real' world outside of academia where problems do not come artificially in orderly progression, each building logically upon the one before. Instead, problems come helter skelter, often before you as a problem-solver are fully equipped to deal with them.

In other words, from Hawley's perspective, students must learn to adapt to the learning environment of their doctoral programs and adjust their behaviors accordingly. In a sense, Hawley is offering advice on how to "survive" the process. But what if the process is not a rational one, with predictable rules or norms (Smith, B., 1995)? What if the learning environment is highly chaotic and unpredictable, and faculty are seriously disgruntled with their jobs or their employers? This is a common characteristic of organizations undergoing fiscal crises (Kerlin & Dunlap, 1993). And what if a student breaks one of the "rules of the game" without knowing it at the time, only to find out later through a casual conversation with students or faculty in one's department?

One of the "rules" with which many doctoral students seem to struggle is the exact purpose of the dissertation--what form of tone and content is "acceptable" to the faculty within the department (or the doctoral committee) and what abilities it ultimately is intended to demonstrate. Page Smith's (1990) description of his encounters at Harvard with the "cult of dullness" pervading the doctoral process provide a somewhat humorous, yet ultimately provocative, impression:

Not only is the Ph.D. dissertation constrained by the requirement that it be original (in the sense of dealing with material never dealt with before) and dull; it must also conform to the prejudices of the examiners. In other words, it must not be too original. Especially on the theoretical side, it must be compatible with the current 'thinking' in the field. It must not be too advanced, and it must have no truck with notions now considered obsolete (although in fact these obsolete notions often return in time as the latest findings). It thus manages the not inconsiderable feat of being both stultifying and capricious. (Smith, 1990, pp. 110-113).

I would add that the process of completing the doctoral dissertation is perhaps as challenging, and unpredictable, as a first trip up a tall mountain. Often the terrain is rugged and dangerous, and the climate is unpredictable. Students count on faculty advisors to "lead" them at least part of the way up, but not every attempt (just like in real mountain climbing) is successful. As the literature on mentoring points out, faculty advisors' and other department and committee

faculty behaviors toward students have a major impact on the quality of students' learning experiences. When abusive behavior toward students or sabotage of students' progress is part of the "political process" of doctoral socialization, it introduces an unnecessary level of stress and discomfort that does not contribute to better learning or productive outcomes for the academic profession. It is therefore important to ask how students are affected by departmental politics and how they subsequently respond to them if we are to adequately understand the causes and cures of doctoral attrition.

### **Moral and Ethical Issues in Graduate Education**

In the past year there has been an increased discussion about ethical and moral issues in higher education. Some authors have explored the ethical issues pertaining to graduate student education and socialization (Anderson, Louis, & Earle, 1994; Swazey, Louis, & Anderson, 1994). These researchers conducted a nationwide survey of 2000 university faculty members and 2000 doctoral students in the fields of chemistry, civil engineering, microbiology, and sociology. Asked to indicate which of 14 areas of help they receive from their "most supportive" faculty, only one out of 14 ("expresses continuing interest in my progress") was answered in the affirmative by more than half of the student respondents. Also, 53 percent of the student respondents said they feared retaliation if they reported misconduct by a faculty member. Additionally, Anderson et al. (1994) noted that the climate of academic departments was the strongest predictor of academic misconduct. The departments in which there was highest observation of misconduct on research, employment, and personal levels were characterized as highly competitive (especially in regards to scarce resources) with an emphasis on individualism rather than collaborative efforts among students and faculty. The authors conclude:

between exposure to misconduct and the absence of opportunities to discuss these issues openly future researchers are being socialized in an environment that may create ambivalence about basic values of the academy, namely, the obligation of the scholarly community to uphold the highest standards of research behavior and to enforce the values of the broader society regarding the behavior of professional employees.

Other researchers express concerns that graduate education is losing its moral base (Nelson & Berube, 1994). They argue, "We need to recognize that the collapse of the [academic] job market makes the logic of graduate apprenticeship morally corrupt." Pointing out that the job market in many disciplines is glutted with new Ph.D.s searching for any teaching jobs they can find, Nelson & Berube confront their tenured colleagues for condoning retrenchment within their institutions while refusing to recognize that the real victims of retrenchment are new Ph.D.s unable to obtain jobs within the same academic system that is educating them.

Among proposed reforms in graduate education, these authors urge the following: (1) substantial reductions in the numbers of new graduate students admitted by many academic departments; (2) closure of "marginal" academic departments; (3) development of legally sound early-retirement incentives for faculty who are no longer productive scholars nor effective teachers; (4) professional associations finding better ways to monitor hiring practices in academic departments to assure that departments hire new Ph.D.s into tenure-track positions rather than temporary or part-time positions; (5) significant increases in the wages and benefits given to graduate assistants; (6) the provision of serious career counseling to graduate students early in their training so they can explore non-academic options to graduating and facing unemployment; (7) a refocusing by universities toward emphasizing both the intellectual rewards and marketable skills of graduate education; and (8) sincere efforts by departmental faculty to assist graduating students in pursuing employment both inside and outside the academic sector.

Nelson & Berube are to be applauded for their courageous effort to confront the challenges facing today's doctoral students and Ph.D. recipients head-on. Their recommendations are a start in the right direction, but they focus on only one part of the dilemma facing graduate students today: individuals' personal and professional career challenges and an unpredictable marketplace. In the next sections, I discuss broader social and systemic issues confronting doctoral students and all of higher education.

### **Female Doctoral Students: Making Progress, or Facing Backlash?**

In the 1990s women are still significantly underrepresented among the full-time faculty of U.S. and Canadian universities and colleges when compared with the proportions of female students (typically more than 50 percent of undergraduates and many graduate classes as well). This fact is particularly true when faculty rank is taken into consideration (Caplan, 1994; Touchton & Davis, 1991). Females are disproportionately employed at lower ranks, especially assistant professor and instructor/lecturer positions.

Fox (1995) points out that female faculty are most scarce in research universities (averaging less than 21 percent of full-time instructional faculty in 1987) where they are most needed by female graduate students as mentors and role models. Females are most prevalent among the faculty "at risk" of being laid off due to budget cutbacks (Kerlin & Dunlap, 1993) and more likely to remain unemployed after completing their doctorates or to wind up taking part-time teaching positions (Heath & Tuckman, 1989). As part of her assessment of women's impact on the academic profession, Lomperis (1990) states,

The feminization of Ph.D. output in the United States has been fueled by (1) the large increase in the number of women eligible to pursue doctoral education, not an increase in the tendency to do so, coupled with (2) the significant decline in the tendency of men to earn doctorates from a relatively stable pool of male college graduates eligible to do so.

Men continue to earn two-thirds of Ph.D.s, however, because although fewer men than women are earning baccalaureate degrees today, such men are one and one-half times more likely to complete the doctoral training than women. The higher Ph.D. output rate of men is probably also a function of the higher attrition rate of women in many Ph.D. programs (except Education, for example), as other researchers have found (Lomperis, 1990, p. 646-7).

Conditions for women within the academic profession mirror trends in the larger society. On one hand, their sheer numbers have grown substantially in the civilian work force during the past 20 years. "Professional women" (i.e. those employed as doctors, lawyers, professors, teachers, clergy, social workers, librarians, managers, and nurses) represent approximately one-fifth of the entire female workforce in the U.S., numbering about 10 million employees in the 1990s (Kaufman, 1995). However, when the demographics of these professions are examined over the course of the 20th century, most have remained dominated by members of one sex or the other, leading to many forms of "sex stereotyping" within the professions. In colleges and universities, females still represent a distinct minority of professors, but have reached nearly 41 percent in 1993--a 12 percent increase over 1970 and the highest percentage in any period of the past 100 years.

Paralleling most other male-dominated professions, women's paths of professional development and advancement in higher education have depended upon building collegial relationships with men (and the relatively small numbers of women) who are already established within the profession. For females pursuing the Ph.D., many have been socialized within

departments where males represent the majority of teaching and advising faculty, and this factor has been at least partly accountable for the higher rates of attrition among female doctoral students from many programs. As Heinrich (1991) and others have pointed out, relatively few women in graduate programs report they have had highly positive educational experiences when working with male faculty members as their chief advisors. The reasons for this are many, but may well boil down to a "male-dominant work environment", characterized by ethics of competitiveness, individualism, aggressiveness, and a "win-lose" mentality. Female students who do not emphasize these characteristics may feel pressured to conform to the dominant values in their programs in order to receive needed support for their career advancements, only to experience a personal sense of betrayal of their own values.

As the academic profession becomes more "gender- balanced" in terms of proportional enrollments in graduate programs, will gender differences become less significant an issue for future doctoral students? Can we expect higher education to enter a period where women and men will be seen as "full equal partners" in the academic enterprise? Most evidence suggests otherwise, and not always for the most predictable reasons. Just as there are men within the academic profession whose behaviors have blocked women's growth, there are others who do support full equality for women and who have made great efforts to remove barriers to women's progress, both inside the profession and elsewhere (Kimmel, 1995). By the same token, the presence of female faculty within a doctoral program may ease the obvious gender imbalances among role models for women students, but not every female professor makes a positive difference in the success of students--be they females or males (Heinrich, 1995). As Bobbi Smith (1995) observes, behavioral dynamics within graduate programs are complex and often unpredictable. When gender differences combine with power differences between faculty and student, there is always the potential for disagreement or conflict, and not all differences are resolved to the mutual satisfaction and benefit of the individuals involved.

Are women making progress or are they facing backlash in the academic profession? Evidence suggests "both.", and far more research is needed at departmental, institutional, and professional levels. One thing is clear, however: gender issues will continue to dominate the evolving academic profession as it approaches the 21st century.

### **Retrenchment: Implications for Doctoral Students and the Academic Labor Market**

Higher education is under siege everywhere, but not as a result of drastic declines in student enrollment; indeed, the widespread perception that more credentials are a prerequisite for larger numbers of occupations combined with the recession [of 1990] helped swell the student populations at universities and colleges throughout the country. What is at stake in the budget cuts is linked to the fact that in a technologically advanced economy, the 'marketplace' dictates the need for fewer professional and technical categories. (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994, p. 263).

What Aronowitz & DiFazio argue in *The Jobless Future* (1994) is that technological change and shifts in the nature of capital formation and accumulation have profoundly reduced the creation of high-paying jobs throughout the western capitalist world during the 1980s and 1990s. Indeed, higher education institutions across the U.S. and Canada have witnessed significant reductions in their operating budgets and in many cases, mandated reductions in course offerings, programs, faculty positions, and student financial assistance at the same time that the societal demands for academic credentials continue to grow (Cameron, 1991; Giberson, 1995; Kerlin, 1992; Kerlin & Dunlap, 1993). However, the costs of higher education are beginning to exceed many modest middle-income pocketbooks, especially because real family incomes among working-class and middle-class members have grown little since the 1970s



(Bernstein & Adler, 1994; Danziger & Gottschalk, 1993; Levy, 1987; Newman, 1994; Peterson, 1994; Rifkin, 1994; Rubin, 1994), and there is growing evidence that the cost/benefit ratio of advanced graduate study may no longer be affordable for increasing numbers of prospective students.

The cultural reverence for universal access to some form of higher education has been a major symbol of the ideology of upward mobility and middle-class professionalism that has motivated each new generation of college-bound students in the U.S. since the 19th century (Bledstein, 1978). As Larson (1977) points out in his study of the rise of professionalism in the U.S., many of America's public universities arose during the post-Civil War years in response to the massive accumulation of surplus industrial capital. In turn, graduate and professional schools emerged "at the top of the educational hierarchy" (Larson, 1977, p. 136) and allowed the professions to receive "a most powerful legitimation for their claims to cognitive and technical superiority and to social and economic benefits." However, the marketplace that allowed industrialization and higher education to expand in the U.S. during the 19th century is now causing massive down-scaling and "proletarianization" of many professions including those of "the knowledge class" (Aronowitz & DiFazio, 1994, p. 173).

Aronowitz & Giroux observed in *Education Under Siege* (1986) that higher education has always been the arena in which contradictions between democratic ideals of universal access to a middle-class life and the economic realities of resource inequality, class distinctions, and marketplace priorities have created conflicts between expectations and outcomes. In spite of serving a goal of universal access, academic institutions have also carried out the function of mediating between broad access and narrower positive student outcomes through a type of "sorting process" in which only the "best and brightest" are designated as "fit" for continuing to higher levels of education. Burton Clark, in his aptly-titled classic study of community colleges (1959), refers to this as the "cooling-out function" in higher education, whereby students' academic fates are ultimately tied to the labor market's demands for graduates and to the standards of "success" upheld by the faculty.

If too many students receive training for occupations in which positions are unattainable, a crisis of "overproduction" may occur, leading to a large segment of graduates remaining unemployed or being permanently underemployed. In the academic profession, there have been modern periods in which huge oversupplies of Ph.D.'s were produced relative to the needs of the academic labor market (Abel, 1984). Smith & Hixson (1987) observe that in the mid-1970s, there were nearly two and a half times as many Ph.D.'s granted as there were full-time positions available for hiring them. Additionally, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (cited in Smith & Hixson) in 1984 predicted a minimum 13 percent decline in full-time faculty positions in U.S. colleges and universities during the following decade. Nevertheless, as the statistics in "Pursuit of the Ph.D." demonstrate, the rate of doctoral production by U.S. universities continued to grow through the 1980s--taking a significant increase after 1988--and shows little sign of letup in the 1990s in spite of dismal job forecasts.

The oversupply of workers in specific occupations is sometimes referred to as a "reserve army of labor" that serves the needs of employers for a ready supply of accessible workers (Szymanski & Goertzel, 1979). Aronowitz & Difazio suggest that the economic trends of the 1990s will lead to more permanent forms of work force displacement among the unemployed, creating circumstances where growing numbers of professionally-educated workers will be hired only in less stable, part-time, or temporary positions with more marginalized status in the "second tier" of academic institutions as well as in other professions (see Knutson, 1995, for an interesting commentary on being an "academic peddler"). Others, including the American Association of University Professors (1992), recognize that increasing numbers of Ph.D. recipients are being forced to enter this expanding "second tier" of academic employment in the 1980s and 1990s due to shrinking institutional budgets and tight academic labor markets (Abel,

1984; Barker, 1995; Kuchera & Miller, 1988; Lauter, 1991; Rosenblum & Rosenblum, 1990, 1994; Scott, 1983; Smith & Hixson, 1987). As this report has pointed out, there is much evidence showing that women and minority group Ph.D. recipients have historically been more likely to be hired in these second-tier positions than in "first-tier" tenure-track positions.

During the early 1980s and again in the early 1990s, recessions have brought about significant reductions in many academic institutions' operating budgets, creating what Barbara Scott in 1983 first termed "the new academic stratification system". Scott argued that the economic scarcity afflicting the U.S. public sector since the late 1970s has manifested in a widening financial gap between the prestigious, well-funded universities and the broad public sector of higher education (see AAUP, 1995, for a current discussion of this phenomenon in regard to faculty salaries). In turn, other authors have recognized that the academic labor market for university faculty is shaped by a kind of "prestige game" (Conrad & Eagan, 1989) in which new university faculty job opportunities are most available to doctoral recipients from prestigious private institutions (Burke, 1987; 1995) while large numbers of Ph.D. graduates remain unemployed (Brodie, 1995; Magner, 1994).

Although the prestige factor has always been at work, much evidence suggests that in the 1990s and beyond it will be a key indicator regarding which universities will be graduating the majority of Ph.D.s who will be the university faculty of tomorrow. While Burke's 1988 research on academic labor markets recognized the impact of prestige of the doctoral-granting institution as a determining element in the academic career outcomes of Ph.D. recipients, what is changing now is that with the declines in job opportunities in public universities brought on by the retrenchment years of the 1990s, fewer public university doctoral recipients will likely find stable post- doctoral employment within U.S. universities and may be forced to accept employment in other types of educational institutions or in other employment sectors outside of academia. This observation appears consistent with the statistical data provided by the National Research Council on the post-education plans of many 1993 doctoral recipients (NRC, 1995).

The arena of public higher education in the U.S. is where the greatest impact of declining budgets and institutional restructuring has been felt (Blumenstyk, 1991; Clayton, 1992; Phillip, 1995), even though this arena is where the vast majority of Americans have pursued their college education since the 1950s (Karen, 1991; McGuinness, 1994, p. 158). In 1992, public universities granted 69 percent of all doctorates awarded by United States universities (Council of Graduate Schools, 1994). And McCloskey (1994) points out that the "elite 10" doctoral-granting universities (seven of which are private universities) that are the subjects of Bowen & Rudenstine's 1992 book represented only 12 percent of total doctorates received in U.S. universities in 1989. Yet in tight labor markets, it is quite possible that a much larger proportion of future university faculty will be graduates from these top-tier institutions. This area deserves more research in the years ahead.

It is arguable that the non-elite public institutions of higher education are also where the greatest efforts have been made to provide access for historically underrepresented demographic groups: women, minority groups, working class and first-generation college students, and where the bulk of college and university faculty were hired during the "golden age of higher education--1960 to 1980" (Ryan & Sackrey, 1984). So in many regards, if this sector bears a disproportionate impact of the economic crisis in higher education as Scott suggests, then this definitely would seem to place the future professional goals of today's female, minority, and lower-income college graduates who are pursuing doctorates disproportionately in jeopardy, simply on the basis of economic circumstances alone.

As we ponder the current political debates about public higher education and social services expenditures in the U.S. (see Chronicle of Higher Education, January 13, 1995; Phillips, 1990, 1993, 1994), we can recognize an analogy between the university's financial problems and the mushrooming costs of the U.S. Medicare/Medicaid and Social Security benefits systems (see

Henslin, 1994, pp. 49-55). Cash-strapped public universities, increasingly dependent upon student tuition dollars and relatively inexpensive (and easily expendable) graduate assistant labor in the face of declining public tax dollars, are inclined to continue accepting large numbers of graduate students in order to maintain a cash flow (as the Ohio example regarding a 40 percent growth in public university doctoral enrollments since 1990 confirms). Meanwhile, demand for graduate education has remained high because many individuals in the highly competitive professional job market have felt their options (and income) are too limited by possession of the bachelor's degree in a downwardly-mobile economy and are turning to graduate schools as an alternative to remaining "locked in" to dead-end, low-income jobs.

There is substantial evidence that current graduate students in American and Canadian universities are bearing much of the brunt of the budgetary declines through substantial tuition increases, mounting financial indebtedness, and diminished job opportunities after completing the Ph.D. But graduate students are also experiencing an overall erosion of the quality of their educational experiences at the same times that their educational costs are skyrocketing. As the members of the university community with the smallest numbers and the least organized power, graduate students are especially vulnerable to the arbitrary and capricious uses of power in academic departments and institutions.

### **Social Darwinism in the Academy**

It needs to be said openly: The people who run the United States--create its jobs, expand its technologies, cure its sick, teach in its universities, administer its cultural and political and legal institutions--are drawn mainly from a thin layer of cognitive ability at the top. It matters enormously not just that the people in the top few centiles of ability get to college (almost all of them do, as we described in Chapter 1) or even that many of them go to elite colleges but that they are educated well. (Herrnstein & Murray, 1994, p. 418).

With the publication of their controversial book, *The Bell Curve*, Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray (1994) have reintroduced the notion of "natural selection" based on innate IQ levels for determining who should enter into higher levels of education within society. The authors suggest that these IQ differences account for differences in social class and race within society at large. Further, they argue that affirmative action programs in academic institutions work against this "natural" process of sorting members of society according to innate levels of intellectual ability, thus allowing many students of "inferior" intellectual abilities to enter and graduate from academic institutions. Advocating that affirmative action as it currently exists in higher education should be scrapped, the authors state:

fewer Blacks would be at Berkeley or Yale... But admitting half as many Black students to Yale does not mean that the rejected ones will not go to college; it just means that they will not go to Yale. For some individuals who are not chosen, this will be a loss, for others a blessing, but it is a far different choice from 'college' versus 'no college.' (pp. 476-77).

That Herrnstein & Murray ignited a firestorm of debate through the publication of their book is unquestionable. But their thesis has far-reaching implications for the practice of higher education (The Nation, April 17, 1995). As Stephen Jay Gould argues in an essay published in *The Bell Curve Debate* (edited by Russell Jacoby & Naomi Glauberman, 1995), Herrnstein & Murray have reintroduced the notion of social Darwinism into contemporary discussions about race and class and expose the real agenda of *The Bell Curve*, which is less focused on scientific accuracy than on advocacy of a political position-- one that rationalizes the denial or reduction of

our society's resources to the poor in favor of giving more to the "intellectually gifted." Gould argues,

We must fight the doctrine of *The Bell Curve* both because it is wrong and because it will, if activated, cut off all possibility of proper nurturance for everyone's intelligence (Jacoby & Glauber, 1995, pp. 13).

What is dangerous about the ideas purported by Herrnstein & Murray is that they give further fuel to political efforts across the U.S. for gutting affirmative action programs (see Chronicle of Higher Education, April 28, 1995). Already, Regents of the University of California have eliminated affirmative action practices in hiring and enrollments, while the citizens of California have chosen to place an initiative on the 1996 ballot which, if passed, would effectively eliminate affirmative action in other state public institutions (Adler, 1995). Further, national and regional politicians have increasingly adopted platforms opposing affirmative action (Thompson, 1995). What could be expected to replace gutted affirmative action programs in universities that already have small numbers of minority doctoral students? What kind of academic climate would exist on predominantly white university campuses in which affirmative action was no longer sustained as a goal in faculty hiring and promotion decisions? And perhaps equally significant, with elimination of affirmative action as a goal, how will individuals from other underrepresented groups (working-class, gays and lesbians, international students) be affected?

In American social thought, theories about biologically- determined human abilities have come and gone, as Carl Degler points out in his book, *In Search of Human Nature: The Decline and Revival of Darwinism in American Social Thought* (1991). The concept of "survival of the fittest" first developed in the United States during the years following the Civil War as a manifestation of the massive growth and evolution of industrial capitalism (Duboff, 1989) and the expansion of the competitive business ethic into the realm of governmental social policy and the broader society (Axinn & Levin, 1982; Heilbroner, 1984). Social Darwinism, as an outgrowth of Herbert Spencer's application of Charles Darwin's theory of evolution to social theory, served as a rationale for social and economic competition as a desirable end in itself (Kolko, 1984).

Heilbroner states,

In the hands of the English sociologist Herbert Spencer, Darwin's theory became interpreted as a process that chose the "better," as well as the tougher or stronger, among competing individuals or species. Thus the competitive struggle of business was viewed as a contest in which the survivors were the "fittest"--not merely as businessmen, but as champions of civilization itself... Hence Social Darwinism became a means of excusing as well as explaining the competitive process from which some emerged with power and some were ground into poverty. (Heilbroner, 1984, pp. 155-6).

Although this description was most apt in characterizing the nature of laissez-faire industrial capitalist expansion in the late 19th century U.S., we can recognize parallels in the environments of many universities across the U.S. and Canada. As resources remain scarce and the costs of doctoral education continue growing faster than the rate of inflation or income, students will experience greater effects of competition and growing levels of stress within their departments. Intensified financial pressures will doubtless cause some students to drop out of advanced graduate studies or to avoid enrolling in graduate programs altogether (Hartle, 1994). As the political waves of backlash against the gains of women and minorities are fanned, there is

danger that these individuals will be especially vulnerable to conservative attacks that seek to remove "preferential treatment" from hiring and recruitment efforts within colleges and universities.

In doctoral programs, faculty are positioned as "gatekeepers to the professions", determining by one or another process "who wins and who loses" at the Ph.D. game. This places them in highly influential positions in relation to the future academicians of our colleges and universities. By virtue of the reigns of power they hold, graduate faculty are indeed determining which students are going to be able to replace them when the massive waves of retirements begin in the late 1990s (Bowen & Sosa, 1989). However, as this study has shown, some faculty and programs may "cool out" students who offer great promise to the academic profession because of unclear or shifting standards about what capabilities should be judged, and which individuals deserve to be recognized as "successful students."

It is quite possible that some doctoral students will begin to question a system of diminishing returns on their investments in graduate degrees unless there are significant improvements in the academic labor market in the years ahead. The supply of new U.S. citizens willing and able to enroll in doctoral studies may significantly decline if (1) student costs continue outpacing the ability to pay or borrow; (2) universities and colleges continue cutting budgets and programs; and (3) it becomes clear that the prospects for a late-1990s "jobs boom" in the academic labor market for recent Ph.D. recipients are unlikely to materialize. It is also quite possible that a new wave of organizing efforts among graduate students and teaching assistants' unions may be over the horizon on a number of campuses.

My greatest concern here is that in the environment of political and economic entrenchment within U.S. society, there is increasing danger that the "norms" of academic institutions regarding who "belongs" (i.e. who is admitted to doctoral programs) within the academic profession may be shifting toward narrower standards which may be used as rationale when programs are inevitably forced to reduce future enrollments. Will these standards be based more on students' gender, race, and class backgrounds than upon fair and effective measures of academic potential? What steps can institutions take to assure (and improve) the diversity of students within their doctoral programs? What procedures do programs have for assuring fairness in doctoral admissions and equitable outcomes for students from diverse backgrounds?

## **On Competition and Hard Walls**

Different cultures depend on competition to different degrees in structuring their economic system or schooling or recreation. At one end of the spectrum are societies that function without any competition at all. At the other end is the United States... Not only do we get carried away with competitive activities, but we turn almost everything \*else\* into a contest. Our collective creativity seems to be tied up in devising new ways to produce winners and losers. It is not enough that we struggle against our colleagues at work to be more productive; we also must compete for the title of Friendliest Employee... No corner of our lives is too trivial--or too important--to be exempted from the compulsion to rank ourselves against one another. Even where no explicit contest has been set up, we tend to construe the world in competitive terms (Kohn, 1986, pp. 1-2).

As a culture, we Americans seem to thrive on competition; we reward winners and turn away from losers. For two centuries, our educational system has been based upon competitiveness and the laws of survival. With very few exceptions, we do not teach our kids to love learning--we teach them to strive for high grades (Aronson, 1988, pp. 192-3).

Competition is no stranger to the world of academia. Indeed, higher education's very identity is tied up with the ethic of competition. Institutions compete with one another in the prestige game. Individual faculty compete within their own departments as well as their professional disciplines for recognition and financial rewards. Students, in turn, compete for scarce financial assistance, for faculty members' time and recommendations, for favors from their departments. Undergraduates who dream of pursuing graduate studies tend to learn early (if they are to be successful) in their academic careers that admission to the "right" graduate schools has great bearing upon where they will ultimately be hired after their graduate work is finished.

Particularly in U.S. universities, competition is embedded in the learning process. Students aspiring to obtain the Ph.D. are, in many ways, both products *and* sources of this competitive ethic. To gain admission to doctoral programs, individuals must demonstrate to admissions committees that they have "exceptional" capabilities. If they are accepted into a doctoral program, students must then "prove themselves" to faculty as capable of performing doctoral-level research. A series of stages precede the dissertation-writing phase of the doctoral process, including course work, comprehensive or qualifying examinations, and writing (and gaining acceptance of) the dissertation proposal. Each step requires that students recognize the expectations of faculty and strive to meet or exceed them--to earn stature within the department as a "successful" student. Competition becomes nearly inevitable when the size of entering doctoral cohorts is large in relation to the numbers of departmental faculty available in doctoral programs

Similarly, competition takes place among students who seek financial assistance while pursuing graduate studies. Fellowships and assistantships are scarce in many disciplines, leaving the majority of students to fund their education out of their own pockets--either savings, loans, or income from their own or their partner's jobs. When it comes time to enter the academic job market, a Ph.D. candidate must be willing--and able--to fund presentations of his or her work at academic conferences, to pay for job interview trips (unless funded by the employing department). And to obtain scarce teaching positions in the academic labor market of the 1990s, the Ph.D. recipient must be willing to compete all over again--this time against invisible others... Only through continued competition, or so it seems, can a student in pursuit of the Ph.D. truly become successful.

But what is the price of this relentless competition to succeed? How does it affect the departmental climate in which doctoral students are educated? Does competition bring out the best in graduate students--does it encourage better scholarship?

In his book *Modern Madness: The Emotional Fallout of Success*, Douglas Labier (1986) points out that our adaptation to professional life in which competition is embedded may find that "successful" adaptation provides an opportunity to "get ahead" and to develop our intellectual abilities while receiving a significant material reward. However, he adds, adapting to such an environment can also bring out the "negative side of normalcy," including feelings of guilt over self-betrayal or of trading off too much. Labier observes,

These feelings underlie the rage, depression, anxiety, and escapism found among many otherwise successful careerists. All of these are psychiatric symptoms. But when found among people who do not have neurotic personalities, these symptoms represent the emotional effects of too much compromising and trading-off to get ahead, even though we do those very things to succeed and therefore be considered 'normal.' (p. 4).

Doctoral students experience a myriad of emotions related to their experiences and often find powerful incentives within their programs to compete, at all costs. But as Labier and other humanistic psychologists have recognized, the personal consequences for "buying in" to the competitive ethic can have lasting negative effects for the student and those with whom they live

and work. How does competition affect different students? Do women and men differ in their approaches to competition in graduate school? And perhaps most significant, when students are educated in highly competitive environments, what sorts of personal characteristics result, and what are the long-term consequences for the academic profession?

### **Survival in Dysfunctional Learning Environments**

The troubled times for American higher education (Kerr, 1994) have contributed to a diminished academic labor market for recent Ph.D. recipients in spite of optimistic forecasts by Bowen & Sosa (1989) and Bowen & Rudenstine (1992). Faculty morale has suffered in many universities as a result of financial retrenchment (Kerlin & Dunlap, 1993; Lewis & Altbach, 1994; Zusman, 1994). In turn, deteriorating working conditions and declining faculty job satisfaction have a profound impact on the commitment of today's faculty to their institutions and the future of their profession.

What results in times of budgetary distress--to organizations as well as to families--is that an atmosphere of crisis often pervades. In such an environment, there is increased potential for the administration in a financially retrenched academic institution to adopt autocratic modes of decision-making (Handy, 1993) purportedly "in the name of cost reduction" or other forms of "managerial authority" (Simpson, 1993). Maintaining power and control often becomes the ultimate goal in such organizations, regardless of the costs to employee well-being and morale (Morgan, 1986; Weisbord, 1987). The increasing centralization of power and control has a sort of "trickle-down" effect to the lower levels of an organization, whether it is a business or a university. Stress levels also tend to be high, trust levels are extremely low, and the quality of work life for faculty and staff and of education for students usually suffer when academic institutions enter a period of fiscal crisis or high financial uncertainty. From the perspective of organizational health, the learning environment tends to become dysfunctional and unbalanced.

There is ample evidence that during times of retrenchment and fiscal crisis, cooperation and collegiality suffer in academic institutions as well as in other kinds of organizations (Kerlin, 1992; Rhoades, 1993). Graduate students, who depend upon the faculty for career guidance and professional mentoring, find they are less able to receive support when faculty are preoccupied with matters such as eroding departmental budgets, power struggles with other faculty or between faculty and administrators, or the need to save their departments from the budget ax. As Kerlin & Dunlap found when faculty lost their jobs at a public research university, an atmosphere of bitterness results when faculty and programs are cut. In this type of climate, graduate students' learning experiences quickly deteriorate, and the goal of enabling graduate students to serve as "junior partners" to faculty (Nerad & Cerny, 1993) is often replaced by autocratic faculty and committee behaviors and students feeling they have little "voice" in the process of their education.

One way of understanding the behaviors within the university is to recognize what Caplan (1994) describes as the "gendered nature of the academy" in which many of the rules are unwritten and in which women students and faculty are often made to feel "helpless, displaced, alienated, singled out, conspicuous, unfeminine, excluded, trapped, deserving of blame, distanced, out of place, chosen as target for anger and resentment" (p. 189). Interestingly, these feelings have also been shared by many male doctoral students I've interviewed, suggesting that we may need to examine whether broader notions of power and powerlessness are ultimately the root cause of the feelings described by the women in Caplan's research. Perhaps in many ways male graduate students share common experiences with females in the academy (both students and faculty) in relative levels of such powerlessness; if so, it reinforces the notion that men should seek common alliances with women in the interest of balancing power differentials and striving to make the academy a more humane place to work and to learn.

Management theorists are generally in agreement that the real challenge facing modern

organizational leaders is to create an environment in which teamwork and cooperation are the natural outcomes (Weisbord, 1991; Worthy, 1994). It is also essential to create learning and working environments in which people not only are aligned with a particular leader's vision, but also are attuned to one another's needs and emotions. Promotion of dignity, genuine caring, and respect for others' well-being is critical in every organization (Harrison, 1983; Herzberg, 1995), yet it is painfully absent from many of the organizational environments in which people are educated. Instead, students are often "trained to survive" the educational process.

Some organizational and career consultants have recognized the genuinely pathological aspects of modern careerism and the dark side of organizational life (see LaBier, 1986; Schaefer, 1988; Schwartz, 1995) and others have attempted to extrapolate these to the academic profession (Machell, 1988). In many ways, the university has undergone fewer structural changes than the corporate sector and at least some writers have argued that the university has sacrificed "quality" in recent times in order to promote "equity" and that a return to more promotion of quality may be at great expense to students unable to afford the price tag (Hansen & Stampen, 1994; Kerr, 1994). In many colleges and universities, the buzz words of "total quality management" (Teeter & Lozier, 1993) and "outcomes assessment" have been heard increasingly in recent years, yet often are greeted with skepticism by faculty in spite of the fact that when conducted jointly among students, faculty, and administrators they may result in highly significant improvements in educational delivery and student satisfaction.

It could be argued that every student deserves to have a quality education--though we may differ on how we define "quality"--but quality should not have to be at the expense of equity. By many indicators, doctoral students across the U.S. and Canada are becoming increasingly concerned about the inadequate quality of their educational experiences and outcomes. Low morale among faculty members is a cause for great concern, but low morale among our potential future faculty is equally serious, and potentially an irreversible loss to the long-term health of the academic profession. In many ways, the principles of total quality management, in order to be effective and acceptable to faculty in a higher education setting, need to focus on the quality of the educational interactions between students and faculty, the quality of the programs of study offered to doctoral students, and the quality of support that students can count on receiving from their faculty. In turn, these all are affected by the efficient and fair uses of scarce institutional resources.

In many ways also, academic institutions are set up to conduct better research on the quality of education for doctoral students than many of them are currently accomplishing. Few universities publish goals and objectives for improving graduate student retention, even when they conduct specialized studies on the status of graduate students and graduate education (see University of Oregon Task Force on Research and Graduate Education, 1991; Washington Higher Education Coordinating Board, 1991; University of Washington, 1994). Much more collaboration is needed among graduate administrators, faculty, program coordinators, and institutional studies or research offices to measure and assess the quality of doctoral education programs, as well as the quality of students' experiences.

Finally, institutions need to take steps to better understand the issues affecting their students' progress and completion of doctorates, as well as their continued success in the years following the pursuit of the Ph.D. Graduate students have a bounty of wisdom to offer institutions that are striving to measure and improve the quality of doctoral experience and the factors influencing students' rates of attrition, progress, and graduation. And as academic institutions increasingly ponder the new paradigms of "student-centered learning", it is to be hoped that graduate studies programs, many of which contain large numbers of students in their 30s or older, will adopt more effective principles and practices of adult learning theory toward the ethical and moral training of their students. Through allowing students to have genuine "voices" in the process of learning and participating in their own education, universities will truly



aid their doctoral students to be more effective and enlightened members of the future academic profession.

## **STUDENTS' PERSPECTIVES ON SURVIVING THE DOCTORATE**

Whether they complete the doctorate or withdraw before graduation, many doctoral students emerge from the educational process with a range of strong emotions, from feelings of humiliation to feelings of pride, accomplishment, and success. In this section, I explore the perspectives and reflections of students themselves who have pursued and, in some cases recently completed, the doctorate.

In 1994, I conducted a survey of doctoral students via Internet as a pilot study for my plans to create an Internet electronic discussion forum on graduate studies issues (see appendix for details on the AERA-GSL Graduate Studies Discussion List). During February and March I posted advertisements on the ASHE-L and AERA Internet discussion lists for doctoral students interested in completing a written questionnaire I had developed. More than 50 doctoral students (currently enrolled or recently graduated) expressed interest in receiving the questions, and 31 (18 women and 13 men) returned completed responses (see below for a list of questions contained in the survey). While in no way is the sample of students who participated in my study "representative" in any statistically meaningful manner, these 50 individuals provided a useful starting point in further research I have conducted as co-moderator of the AERA-GSL discussion forum and a separate discussion list for graduate students only (GRADTALK) during the past 18 months. A majority of my survey participants were enrolled in doctoral programs in the fields of educational policy and administration, higher education, or public policy. What follows is a summary of my respondents' answers to open-ended questions in four crucial areas: (1) support; (2) financial circumstances; (3) the academic labor market; and (4) factors affecting the quality of their doctoral experiences. I have taken great steps to preserve the spirit of my respondents' feedback, but all names are fictitious, in keeping with my promise to preserve anonymity.

Questions which I included in the on-line survey included the following:

1. In your years as a doctoral candidate and graduate student, what have been the greatest challenges you have faced?
2. How have current academic labor market trends affected your personal career development objectives?
3. What has been the impact of your graduate education on
  - (a) your emotional and physical health;
  - (b) the quality of your relationships with other close friends and family members; and
  - (c) your financial circumstances?
4. Generally speaking, how would you rate the quality of your graduate educational experiences? Why?
5. What is most lacking OR most outstanding in your present life, which has the single greatest impact on your commitment to finishing your doctoral work?
6. What sustains you during the ups and downs of the doctoral process, and do you have it in sufficient supply?

7. If you could change one thing about your graduate experience to make it better, what change would you make, and why?

## Survey Findings

### "Running on Empty:" Support for Doctoral Students

Perhaps the item of most critical importance during the doctoral years is support. Support takes many forms: departmental (especially from faculty and advisors, but also from support staff), mentoring (by faculty or other significant people in the individual student's life), family (especially spouse or partner), and collegial (particularly from other classmates). It also can come from individuals outside of a student's immediate sphere, such as through communications from faculty at other institutions who express an interest in the student's research or promoting students' research at regional or national conferences.

A number of respondents in my study discussed their efforts to cope with less-than-ideal support in their doctoral programs. Sharon, an older student now enrolled at a public university, said this about her previous graduate experiences:

In my first year of graduate school in 1976, I had a great faculty mentor who made sure we were well supported, both financially and intellectually. After getting my M.A. and going to USC a year later, I found that this type of support was the exception, not the rule. I discovered a faculty that was willing to take advantage of graduate students to further their own interests... I intended to return to finish my doctorate, but ended up getting sucked up in a very lucrative market for educators who had some technical background, and ended up working for 12 years in industry. The problem of finding time to finish my Ph.D. became the major issue--and as the years passed, I found myself wanting the degree even more. Ultimately I looked for programs that would be able to accommodate my needs as an adult student.

Another female student, Mary, age 43, noted that the demand for good faculty in her program meant that graduate students often had to compete for the precious time available from their advisors:

I am at a point in my life where I am not willing to waste my time and money on courses that are not useful. Some of the required courses in the program are useless and are taught by professors who haven't done anything in years. These professors are being protected by the tenure system. The department doesn't necessarily need more faculty, it just needs better faculty. I have respect for very few of the faculty I have encountered. It has also been a challenge to gain access to good faculty. The department has been pressured to accept far more graduate students than they can handle. Most students, including myself, find out pretty fast, which faculty have something to offer, consequently those few faculty have up to 40 graduate advisees at a time. It's almost impossible to talk directly with them, and even harder to get them to read something you've written in a timely way. They have been placed in an impossible position, and so have we!

Paul, a younger student enrolled at an east-coast public university, also commented about program size and quality:

Now that I am married, the more difficult challenge is the pressures of non-academic life (i.e. lost wages due to full-time studying, time conflicts with my wife and work,

etc.). In addition, my program is fairly large and my classes have been too big to be effective (20-25 people). We all have different interests and that makes much of the discussion difficult and frequently unpertinent to my area of study. I am hoping in the future to have smaller more focused classes (this is my first year). Finally, I am having difficulty connecting with faculty to act as mentors. Numerous factors complicate this (large program, retiring faculty, lots of sabbaticals, etc.). One of my immediate goals is to get to know faculty better, and work to join them on some projects to continue my professional development outside my coursework.

Moral support and respect for the unique talents of each individual is a critical component of meaningful experiences for graduate students, yet many of my respondents seemed to feel as Trish, who is enrolled in a public university educational technology program:

No one seems to understand that I (and my fellow students) came here with several years experience in the workplace. I've managed several businesses and I don't need busy work to keep me focused. There doesn't seem to be any respect for what I have already accomplished. I'm just supposed to throw it away and act like I'm a clean slate...

We have projects and papers and homework and so much busy work that there really isn't time to reflect or go beyond the surface of any topic. And if you make time then you don't have time to sleep or socialize or eat or exercise or earn a living. Fortunately, I don't have a family that makes demands on my time. But that in itself is bad because I feel emotionally isolated most of the time. Every other week I wonder why I am doing this. I keep thinking that if I can just get past the coursework, I'll be able to do what I want to do which is truly learn and understand these phenomena which are fascinating to me.

Some students found the learning atmosphere suffered from overt forms of mistreatment of students. Patti, who earned her doctorate in higher education administration from a southeastern public university in December 1993, said:

For the first time in my educational career I was faced with blatant sexism from faculty. The first time I was subjected to a disagreeable "dumb blonde" joke I approached the prof after class and explained that I found such humor unfunny...and that I knew (?) that he didn't mean it to sound the way that it did. His response was that I needed to "lighten up". While his attitude was not the prevailing one among the faculty, the department chair and the rest of the faculty never restrained his comments to women and minorities.

Support is a critical dimension in sustaining doctoral students' interest and commitment to completing their course work, advancing to candidacy in a timely fashion, and ultimately completing their doctoral requirements. However, many of my respondents clearly have struggled with inadequate supplies of personal and professional support.

### **"Brother, Can You Spare Ten Thousand?": Doctoral Student Finances**

Just as intellectual and emotional support play essential roles in doctoral students' educational experiences, so do finances. Many of my respondents commented about being forced to manage inadequate financial circumstances while pursuing their doctorates. In some cases, debt loads in excess of \$30,000 were reported. Further, family and health care needs contributed

to the demands on graduate students' meager incomes and savings accounts, often forcing students to work at part- time or full-time jobs while trying to complete their dissertations.

Typical of the comments to my question on financial circumstances was this response from Larry, a Ph.D. student in Education and Human Development from a private university:

I can say without equivocation that my finances are in shambles. In part the graduate degree investment makes sense because of the promise of higher future earnings. At this stage the financial fruits have yet to ripen. While my tuition was largely covered by the university, I have acquired a fair amount of living expense debt--due in large part to a variety of medical expenses. The monthly stipend I have received for my research and teaching work has been welcome but doesn't provide much security beyond minimum living expenses.

Lisa, who completed her Ph.D. in Special Education from an eastern public university last year, had this to say about finances:

[The greatest challenge has been] Money. I know I raved about the support, but it still takes a lot of creativity to live on about \$700 a month in the Washington, D.C. area! The student loan process has been extremely frustrating--so much so that I am just biting the bullet this last year and not taking out more loans. Last year, for example, I had four different award letters, each for a lesser and lesser amount. And so, I live on what I have, thank goodness for a large credit limit on my mastercard, and am glad that the grocery stores take credit cards. Basically, I'm in a pretty good routine now: The stipend pays for my rent and bills, and the money I make calling square dances pays for my food. When I graduate, I'm looking at a \$16,000 debt for my education-- this includes undergrad, master's, and doctoral studies. I'm thankful for a great mechanic who keeps my 1986 Escort going! It will need to last at least till a year after I'm done.

Patti adds:

Financial... totally in debt!!! This degree cost me about \$42,000 in student loans.

Janice, a Ph.D. candidate in higher education administration with plans to graduate in 1994, said this about her financial circumstances:

Not great. In fact, I gave up my vital assistantships when I attained candidacy, just because I needed the time. I was fortunate to get 1 year of research grant support while I conducted the data-gathering portion of my study. After that it was free-fall. I tolerated relative deprivation for a year, then made the mistake of accepting a full-time job. Three years later, my data was still in a heap, and analysis had not begun. I have now left that job and am devoting myself full-time to thesis completion. But cold data is less malleable than it might otherwise have been. And committee identity has drifted. Real financial support could have made a big difference!

Financial strains take their toll on family relationships, marriage, health, and lifestyle, as Sylvia, a 1994 Ph.D. recipient in higher education from a midwestern public university conveys:

...Seriously, since I started the program in Spring Quarter of 1989, I have lost my appendix (and \$2000 in related expenses that weren't covered by student health insurance), my husband (turns out that wasn't such a great loss, except for the

financial ramifications), my house, and probably half the friends I had when I started the program.

And what about the income lost through pursuit of the Ph.D.? Consider this statement from Ben, a 1994 Ph.D. recipient from a midwestern public university program in educational policy:

As for financial circumstances, it's fortunate that financial considerations aren't a high priority for me, since the impact there has clearly been large and negative. I've never added this up before, so this should be interesting. Let's see, the year before I returned to school, my earnings were approximately \$42,000. Add 7 years of inflation (assuming no major promotions, and investment income limited to the rate of inflation), and that's about \$55,000 in 1993 dollars, times 8 years in school is \$440,000. Instead, my actual earnings plus fellowship support over the last 8 years totalled about \$90,000 in current dollars, for a loss of \$350,000. Add another \$15,000 in tuition costs and we're up to \$365,000. Now suppose I take an assistant prof position at \$35,000. That's \$20,000 less than \$55,000. If we assume the lag remains fairly constant, I would lose another \$20,000 for every year I work. So I'm already down by \$365,000, and if I retire at 65, that'll be another \$620,000, for a grand total of \$985,000. Damn, just missed a million. Clearly one does not go to grad school to get rich.

### **"The Job Market Blues": Is There a Future in Academia?**

Not only do Ph.D. students have to contend with limited finances while they are enrolled, they face a bleak academic job market upon graduation (Brodie, 1995; Horwitz, 1994; Magner, 1994). This realization may play a significant role in the extended length of time to the degree, as students anticipate the "triple whammy" of (1) increases in housing costs, particularly if they are moving out of student housing upon graduation; (2) student loans coming due upon expiration of the usual six or nine-month "grace period"; and (3) an end to continuing sources of student financial aid, necessitating the pursuit of a position with good pay if the student was not gainfully employed during the doctoral years.

I asked my survey participants to comment about the impact of the current academic labor market on their plans for the future. Connie's situation was similar to that described by Janice above in that the necessity of increased income during the doctoral years forced her to accept a position before graduation:

I was in a wonderful program, rich in content and opportunities to do research (though perhaps too much for others and not enough for me) and I found a job before completing my dissertation. As a parent of two teenagers it was necessary to return to contributing to the family income as the children approached college age. After three years of teaching at the college level I remain ABD. The demands of full-time teaching and all the committee work required of us at an institution where budget constraints are very tight, means that I work a 50-60 hour week and, despite thoughts that I am avoiding, I just don't have the energy to analyze the data and write the dissertation. I feel wrung out in a situation that I find no way out of at this point. The workload here is not going to diminish, and the other obligations make a significant impact on my chances for tenure. I've managed to write at least one article for publication every summer and am hoping to coast on my publication record this summer and begin writing my dissertation. I suppose one of the worst things is that, as a person who before could take pride in managing all the competing forces in her life well, now there are times I feel like a lab animal in a maze. I have a hunch that

I'm not alone, but relaxed conversation is one of the first things to go.

Though the pressure to finish the doctorate is great, so is the pressure to find gainful income, often before completing the dissertation. For some students, it becomes necessary to enroll part-time in order to make an adequate salary while avoiding the pitfalls of part-time jobs in the academic "trenches". Mary said:

I chose between Anthropology and Adult Education. There just isn't enough money in academia to support anthropologists, so I chose Adult Education, which offers a great variety of career choices. I also chose Adult Education because the department is more willing to accommodate part-time study. I felt I had to keep my job. Although I would enjoy the luxury of studying full-time, I like to be a little more connected to reality, and less dependent on the whims of the faculty. Besides, I couldn't afford it unless I took a TA position. The TA's I know are glorified secretaries for faculty and they teach huge numbers of undergraduates for practically nothing. No thanks.

Paul acknowledged his reasons for pursuing the doctorate included a recognition of the limits of existing job opportunities for him and his wife:

One of the reasons I am a full-time student was that after 8 months of unemployment an opportunity for an assistantship arose. My wife, who is also in Higher Ed was unemployed in Michigan for 10 months before completing her search which moved from local to regional to national. I am fairly young to be working on my doctorate and am concerned that I will have education and not work experience to effectively "compete" (oh how I hate that word in higher ed contexts) to find a job once I graduate. I (actually both of us) ran into the problem of competing for positions (entry and mid-level) with people who had 10-15 years more experience in a functional area who were either laid off or looking to move horizontal and not upward for different reasons.

I am also concerned about the market price of many positions. After another four years of being poor and having bills and student loans stacking up, I am also concerned about being able to secure a position which pays terribly. I recently saw a position posted for an honors college assistant director, who is responsible for administration of freshman seminar, faculty recruitment and coordination and teaches five courses per year for a whopping \$28,000 in a very expensive metropolitan area.

Many students noted that they felt forced to compromise their intellectual interests in order to adapt to the whims of the academic marketplace. Cal, a midwestern public university doctoral candidate in higher education, recognized that his dreams of becoming a professor were constrained by the realities of limited teaching opportunities after graduation:

I would most like to find a faculty position after graduation, finding myself enamored of scholarship. Realistically, there just aren't that many faculty positions available in programs of higher education. Consequently, I have to use part of my program to establish administrative credentials, and hope to find an admin job that will support my "teaching habit." The problem is that a Ph.D. program does not last forever, and making room for admin means taking attention away from more academic activities (i.e. research assistantships, attending conferences, just having

those serendipitous conversations with faculty that build relationships and further one's thinking, etc.).

Louise, a 45 year-old Ph.D. candidate in Educational Leadership from a public university, remarked that being married to a college professor, she often found it challenging to be pursuing a career in qualitative research and wondered if she had made a wise choice in terms of future academic job opportunities:

My husband has been college professor for 20 years, teaching statistics and quantitative research methods. I have found myself drawn into qualitative research and foundations of education. The paradigm wars get fought in my living room! I find it hard to become articulate about my new field sometimes, it feels threatening to our relationship... I have chosen my field despite the knowledge that there are not many positions out there waiting for me. Methods departments are generally large, foundations departments, small. I believe that what foundations folks add to the programs of study that people follow in order to become teachers outweighs the paucity of positions I probably will face when I finally finish. As a matter of fact, if the institution where my husband teaches does not have an opening for me, then I will face a whole new set of problems.

Brad, a doctoral candidate and full-time member of the technical staff at a private eastern university, expressed this concern with returning for his doctorate after 12 years in industry:

[The academic labor market trends] Seriously changed my views on what I can do now (much more applied, if I want funding or support), and on what I think I can safely do later and support my family. I had thought that I would look for an academic position, or a corporate R&D position, but I'm beginning to realize that I'm going to be forced back into the job market for engineering jobs--perhaps with too much education and salary expectations to be competitive for these positions.

As for pursuing future careers in academia, some students expressed strong ambivalence. Trish found her opinion of the academic profession changed after a few years in pursuit of the Ph.D.:

I came into graduate school with the expectation of finding a faculty position. But I don't want to be on a faculty now because I don't have any patience with the endless, non-productive meetings or with perpetuating a practice that is outdated and unresponsive to the needs of the population it serves. I've been here long enough to see that junior faculty members come in with the best of intentions about not following "the format" but the cultural pressure is too much to go up against and in the end, conformity occurs (along with disenchantment). I do know that not all departments are like this, but I think it is the norm.

And Ben summed up his feelings about entering the academic labor market after graduation this way:

Am I or am I not going to pursue an academic career? I honestly don't know. I have an offer now from a non-academic institution, and it's going to take some effort to convince me to turn it down. I was struck, when I visited this institution, by the sensible and humane environment. Unlike universities, which essentially penalize junior faculty for collaborating ("how can we count that article towards tenure if we

can't be sure how much of it you wrote and how much your co-author wrote?"), the presumption was "of COURSE we work on our projects in teams, the results are much better that way." And unlike academic settings where people seem preoccupied mainly with proving how much smarter they are than you, and respond to evidence of talent as though it were a threat to their own standing, I found here that my potential colleagues were enthusiastic about what I might bring to the organization's work--what we might have to learn from each other. A most refreshing experience.

### **"Like a Roller Coaster": Surviving the Doctoral Ups and Downs**

Of all the issues raised by my respondents, I found it most enlightening to see how students coped with the inevitable highs and lows of the doctoral process. I asked what sustained students through their programs, and what had been the greatest challenges so far. I also was curious about what changes students would make in their programs if they could do them over again. In this last section, I will explore some of the joys and the sorrows my respondents conveyed. Students expressed a variety of challenges affecting progress toward completing the doctorate:

The uncertainty. Not being in control. Struggling with self- concept, my finances, and career choice. Going to grad school when other friends are starting to enjoy some of the perks and financial rewards of stepping up the career ladder. (Julie, public university doctoral candidate, Mathematics Education)

Self-doubt (I know I'm great and have accomplished thousands of things, so why can't I finish this lousy dissertation?). Lagging interest. Lack of job search strategy or assistance from my institution. Competing interests (my research assistantship has been a distraction). (Robert, private university doctoral candidate in public policy)

I think the challenges have been to me, in no certain order, trying to financially survive...making ends meet, dealing with feelings of doubt...will I get my studies done? Will I make it? Will I get a good job when I get out? Did I do the right thing giving up a full-time job to get the program done? Will I be able to ever recoup the lost dollars these years of training have taken away from fulltime employment? Finally...the last challenge... being able to handle stress...balancing multiple roles just like faculty: I am a teaching assistant, graduate assistant, multiple committee member...not enough is discussed about how GRAD STUDENTS BALANCE MULTIPLE ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES WHICH CAN BE MULTIPLE STRESSORS! (Jack, public university doctoral candidate in Educational Administration)

I feel that my greatest challenge has been navigating the post-coursework portion of my degree. After essentially 21 years in the student role, things suddenly changed. The timelines blurred, expectations became unspoken, and now I was the only one who would provide structure to my education process (with some dutiful assistance from my major professor, of course). Not only did this shift leave me with a sense of loss (of the process), but also I lost confidence in myself. I think this was mainly due to a feeling that somehow I should be able to fill the structural void and self-motivate better than I seemed to be able to do. (Larry)

In my program, as it was structured when I began, the greatest challenge seemed to



be that, for the first year at least, the faculty sort of 'tore you down' mentally (not in a degrading way, but to make you examine who you are, how you think, why you think the way you do, etc.), and so after a few weeks you really weren't sure WHAT you thought or whether you still believed some things. Also, the reading load was awesome. I remember being resentful of the fact that we had all these fascinating things to read, yet had no time to really get into them. Yet we were constantly told to 'engage the material.' HOW? That takes time, and time was the one thing we didn't have. (Sylvia)

Although economic hardship has been a major challenge, for me the most difficult challenge has been to be thrust into the role of 'suppliant' to those whose teaching and scholarship is in contrast to stated values of the program. Another very difficult challenge has been the racism and classism from my 'educated' professors. (Fran, public university doctoral candidate)

Many of my respondents commented about factors that helped or impeded their progress in pursuit of the doctorate, and I scarcely can do justice for the wealth of insights their remarks provide. This section provides a glimpse of the range of concerns expressed by my participants when I asked, "What sustains you?":

Sheer determination to get the degree--to prove that I can jump through the hoops. My husband is constantly supporting me with wise advice--'Just shut up, do what they want, get the degree, and then do the work you REALLY want to do.' It's the thing that keeps me focused. (Sharon)

Money always remains a big challenge especially as a single parent. My children are my security and salvation. They keep me afloat. (Bell, public university doctoral student in Educational Leadership)

I believe that there are several things [that sustain me]; my fellow grad students, my instructors, and the knowledge that my husband is really trying to be supportive--in spite of the problems wrought by my 'doing' graduate school this particular way, in this particular program. What's most lacking now is the presence of my chair, the person I came here to study with. He has been a big part of that support over the past few years, and is sorely missed! (How dare professors have a life! :-)) (Louise)

There's another thing, for me, and that is my incurable cockeyed optimism and generally phlegmatic personality. I just tend to be able to cope with things and roll with the punches and have an awful lot of good luck. Example: my twelve-year old just called from school to tell me she could go on a field trip to Key Largo after all. Another space opened up. That means for four days during the last week of classes for me, my child will be out of town!! Now, of course I'm happy for her, but it also means I won't have to wonder if she'll need me for something just when I want to be working hard on my class project. Now, that's balanced of course with the human motherly worry that the bus will drive off a cliff and I'll feel extra awful, if that is possible, because I was glad she was away. (Karen, public university doctoral candidate in Education)

My major professor's absence, both physical and emotional, has been a major deterrent. However, I naively entertained expectations that there would be a collegiality in graduate school among students and faculty. My dashed hopes of such

an experience had a profoundly negative influence on my commitment to complete the degree. I'm just pulling out of my disappointed phase. (Janice)

Asked what she would change about her experience if she could, Janice replied:

I'd change the way my chair and I interacted just prior to my orals. I went to him then and told him how deeply vulnerable I felt. He used my admission to make a power play. I've never felt comfortable in his presence since that time. Our relationship is stilted--a game with unwritten rules and no mercy. Without saying so in so many words, he communicates to me resentment of time that is consumed with my visits to his office. He is impatient with my slow progress, but has no suggestions for speeding things up. We find it impossible to address the obvious, i.e. my FEAR of my own ignorance and my DREAD of failing... I'm not the easiest person to deal with, but neither am I a person who is truly deficient in my ability to make requests and respond to direction. The serious problems of over 8 years duration with my advisor are unique in my life experience. I refuse to take all the blame, but I do admit that I tend to regress when it is so very plain that he treats advising as an unpleasant task to be dispensed with as quickly as possible.

As enlightening as these comments were, I found those of Sam, a law school graduate who passed the bar before returning for his Ph.D. in an east-coast Ivy League university the most indicative of a trend I saw over and over again: Anxiety, and a commitment to survival, at all costs.

The doctorate pursuit is frighteningly vague and arbitrary in its goals, and outcomes sometimes. As I meet colleagues and I continually find more people who are ABDs and never finished the doctorate (some of whom I didn't know had ever attended grad school) it is frightening to think that it is possible to commit the amount of time and money involved and not come out with a finished or completed goal. For me, having a wife and kid and perhaps more on the way (kids, not wives) I'm always aware that at any moment something could change economically or otherwise where I would be unable to stay out of the full time job market. At that point I know I wouldn't finish the doctorate. Basically the uncertainties have been the most difficult. I don't want to adversely affect my kid's futures, etc. by continuing to burn time and money without achieving much. Fortunately, I don't think of myself as a quitter or loser, so I believe I'll finish but I still fear outside factors. What if my advisor were to accept another job as a college president? What if one of my committee dies (he's elderly)?

Asked what sustains him during the difficult times, Sam said:

I have done some difficult things before and that sustains me that I can find a way to negotiate the murky challenges and byzantine administrative structures in front of me. This is beginning to sound like a titanic struggle when it's really only a degree, but the forces and factors making it difficult to finish my dissertation do lend themselves to these ringing phrases... In fact, the old saying that the weak person finds excuses and the courageous person finds a way has really kept me going. I could actually be done and make some significant contributions with my research if the committee and committee on degrees would just get out of my way.

So I guess what sustains me and keeps my commitment is internal in some ways. My

parents expect me to succeed in anything I do. My wife is fearless and expects me to be able to succeed. Her support is the most important because if she showed any lack of desire for us to continue to finish this process, or impatience at our mean economic circumstances, I'd probably quit and get a real job. Beyond that internal factors make me think that if I am not equal to this challenge no one is. I have great self respect. You have to though because it would be easy to say after your committee critiqued your research proposal a bit too enthusiastically that you just don't have what it takes to get it past them to their satisfaction. Fortunately, I actually believe I can do it, it's just taking great pain and a lot of time.

Without getting new ageish or maudlin either I'm sustained by a religious faith which makes me believe I can accomplish worthy objectives if I work hard enough and think clearly and respond to intuition and inspiration. Also I always have baseball and the Red Sox have won the first two games of the season.

Sam, like a number of others who wrote to me, found that denial is a powerful mechanism for doctoral students in these times of great financial and professional uncertainty. Determined to see his program through to the end, his focus rests upon a simple belief system, grounded in the distinctly American ethos that the reward is there for those who persist to the finish line. What Sam sees is that his individual efforts are the most necessary ingredients to his outcomes--what he misses (as do many in the graduate trenches) are the structural ingredients in the changing academic labor market that may impede the ultimate success of even the most talented and gifted doctoral candidates.

### **Conclusion: Where do we Go from Here?**

What this study has tried to demonstrate is that the conditions of education for today's doctoral students are ineluctably tied to the broader condition of the academic profession in U.S. and Canadian universities. As institutional finances have stagnated and the labor market for new Ph.D.'s has deteriorated, contemporary doctoral students and those who aspire to doctoral studies have found themselves facing great uncertainty in their professional career paths and debt burdens growing at alarming rates. In spite of anticipated retirements of large portions of many university faculty, little evidence exists that financial conditions and future job opportunities for doctoral recipients will significantly improve, in spite of predicted retirements of many professors during the next decade.

Many universities persist in offering large numbers of enrollment "spaces" to doctoral students while delivering education that clearly holds diminishing returns for its recipients. This issue is critical for public policy makers to consider when discussing problems with diminished access for undergraduates. The costs of undergraduate education are typically much lower than for graduate studies, and as institutions seek to accommodate significant growth in high school graduating classes during the next 10 years, they may see increased merit in reducing graduate enrollments and programs.

In the years ahead, it is likely that financial conditions for most universities will not show noticeable improvements, while public pressure for educational reforms, cost cutting measures, and limits on tuition growth will dominate discussions at the institutional and program levels in graduate studies. Whether there are significant changes in policies of access and retention for doctoral students is as much shaped by marketplace considerations as by institutional or public mandates. Perhaps most important at the present time is a renewed public interest--much as existed in the early 1980s--in examining the learning conditions within the graduate enterprise and seeking measurable improvements in rates of student retention, graduation, financial assistance, and program quality.

## **Policy Questions for Further Consideration:**

- (1) Would the general public support continued provision of doctoral education to so many individuals if the costs as well as the diminishing returns--to students as well as society at large--were truly understood?
- (2) What procedures exist in universities currently for assessing the effectiveness of programs that serve doctoral students?
- (3) By what procedures and criteria do university doctoral programs determine the number of new students to admit annually? Do trends in the labor market for Ph.D. recipients have an impact on future program admissions?
- (4) How can doctoral programs better assist students who are nearing completion of doctoral requirements yet unable to obtain professional employment?
- (5) What coordinated efforts can be taken by universities-- through the graduate studies offices, institutional and academic researchers, and program faculty--to monitor student retention and attrition rates in doctoral programs and to take steps to reduce student dropouts?
- (6) Is there a clear process on campus or within the department by which doctoral students who are experiencing difficulties in their programs can obtain support or professional guidance?
- (7) Do most university graduate enrollments tend to grow during times of high unemployment and recession? If yes, should universities be held accountable for their failure to help graduate students obtain jobs when they graduate?

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## Notes

1. Personal conversation with Steven Walfish, Ph.D., practicing clinical psychologist who specializes in post- traumatic stress disorder, Seattle, WA, October, 1993.
2. An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco, California, April 18-22, 1995.

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## **Appendix**

### **American Educational Research Association Graduate Studies List**

**Co-Hosts: Scott Kerlin, Ph.D. Bobbi Kerlin, Ph.D. Candidate**

#### **An Invitation to Join AERA-GSL**

##### **WHAT IS AERA-GSL?**

GSL is an electronic mailing list devoted to the discussion of a variety of topics related to graduate study in American higher education at both the Master's and Doctoral level. Students, faculty, researchers, and other interested individuals from all disciplines of study are invited to participate in this on-line open forum.

##### **AERA-GSL LIST COMMANDS**

Two internet addresses will enable you to participate in AERA- GSL:

1. To join AERA-GSL send the message:

SUB AERA-GSL

To: [LISTSERV@asu.edu](mailto:LISTSERV@asu.edu)

2. To send messages to discussion forum use:

[AERA-GSL@asvm.inre.asu.edu](mailto:AERA-GSL@asvm.inre.asu.edu)

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