

Stakeholders in Higher Education Re-Think the Ph.D.

by Robert Roseth

A quick quiz about the state of doctoral education in America: According to the experts, doctoral education in the United States is

- (a) the best in world;
- (b) a series of delicate partnerships involving a variety of stakeholders;
- (c) a process that takes longer than it should;
- (d) greatly in need of changes to reflect the realities of the employment market;
- (e) lacking in developing the necessary collaborative skills and multi-disciplinary approaches that are needed within and outside of the academy.

Participants at a recent conference in Seattle found the correct answer to this quiz to be “all of the above.”

About 200 representatives from 150 different institutions and organizations gathered in April to discuss doctoral education, in an effort to set a course for its future. The gathering was the culmination of a two-year project entitled, “Re-envisioning the Ph.D.,” headed by Jody Nyquist, director of the UW’s Center for Instructional Development and Research, and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

While few careful observers would say that American doctoral education is broken, they generally agree that demands on the Ph.D. have expanded to the point where its fundamental premises need to be re-examined.

Changing doctoral education is tricky. In her research, Nyquist identified no fewer than nine parties with a stake in doctoral education, including academia, industry, government, foundations, disciplinary and educational associations, national graduate student organizations, K-12, and accrediting associations. “The Ph.D.” she says, “is the result of a loose but interdependent system of partnerships between a number of groups and it belongs to no one sector or constituency.”

Over the past two years, Nyquist has interviewed more than 350 stakeholders. One key finding is that American higher education has recently produced what some consider an oversupply of Ph.D.s, but this trend has occurred in response to important societal needs. Specifically, an expanded enrollment of undergraduates nationally, combined with diminishing or static resources, has resulted in a greater demand for graduate students to teach this expanded population.

Additionally, large-scale investments in publicly-funded laboratories have increased the demand for research assistants—but also has produced an oversupply of scientists in some fields.

Finally, in recent years, many institutions of higher education have come to judge their improvement by higher rankings in the Carnegie Classification System and in the National Research Council rankings, which are determined by faculty research—thus driving an increase in both the number and size of Ph.D. programs across the country. The NRC has promised that its new rankings of university departments, due in 2005, will include factors other than research dollars and reputations, such as satisfaction and success of recent graduates.

Students still acquire from their mentors the belief that, if they want to be regarded as at the top of their fields, their career choice should be academia; those who choose to work in the private sector are made to feel like second-class citizens. This “prestige culture” has persisted despite the fact that, in many fields, there simply aren’t enough jobs in academia and many promising career options exist in the private sector, Nyquist says. “We have an oversupply of Ph.D.’s for academia. We don’t have an oversupply of Ph.D.’s for society.”

Nyquist found little widespread agree-

ment about whether research alone is sufficient training for a doctoral student. Some in the academy believe an overemphasis on research leads to inadequate preparation for such responsibilities as teaching, collegial evaluation, curriculum planning and service. Moreover, leaders in business and industry would like to see more training in collaborative ways of thinking. But others insist that the Ph.D. is a research certification and that its primary purpose is, and should be, to prepare students as researchers/scholars.

Still, among the interviewees, Nyquist found substantial agreement on several points. The time to degree should be shortened. More diversity should exist among recipients of Ph.D.s. Doctoral students should be exposed to and prepared for a wider variety of professional options. The global economy and environment should be part of the educational experience.

These findings parallel the results of interviews with doctoral students and those who have recently completed doctoral programs. People in both groups generally were satisfied with what they had learned as researchers, but they often said that they had entered the program with little idea of what

getting a doctorate really meant. Many were frustrated by what they perceived as extreme specialization.

Is the apprenticeship model practiced by universities, in which faculty members end up producing researchers in their own image, outmoded? Many would say yes. Said one interviewee, “There is resistance to under-

standing that everyone who gets a Ph.D. isn’t going to be emulating the career of the mentor. What we as faculty need to do is be creative about allowing our students to see a broader range of life and career opportunities.”

The discussions that began at the conference will be continued at the website <<http://depts.washington.edu/envision/index.html>>. A detailed summary of the conference and ongoing post-conference information also will be available there. A volume representing the findings of the research and ideas for change is forthcoming. ■

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Jody Nyquist