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Notes on (Graduate-Dean) Camp

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Boston

Last month, about 225 graduate deans from across the country got together here to talk shop, trade information, and generally discuss the future of the higher levels of higher education. The setting was the annual Summer Workshop for Graduate Deans, held by the Council of Graduate Schools, the main national clearinghouse for research and debate on postbaccalaureate education.

Over the course of a long weekend, the deans' discussions ranged from distance education, to doctoral attrition rates, to the teaching of research ethics. But the main theme — at times, the anxiety — that asserted itself was graduate education's weighty, shifting role in keeping the United States economically competitive.

Graduate-School Rankings Finally in the Works

A more immediate concern for the deans in Boston, however, was the question of how their respective graduate programs stack up against one another.

For the past five years, the council has been holding sessions on the "upcoming" Assessment of Research-Doctorate Programs by the National Research Council — a much-vaunted, rigorous federal study that many consider the gold standard of graduate program rankings. The first such report came out in 1982, and the last one came out in 1995. The forthcoming study was originally slated for publication in 2005, but budget shortfalls set in before the National Research Council could even begin collecting data. Since then, the date of its release has been pushed back year by year for lack of money.

At the summer institute, Richard P. Wheeler, chairman of the Council of Graduate Schools' board of directors, finally had some good news about the study. "Now it seems to be 'upcoming' for real," he told a crowded room of anxious deans during an afternoon session on the mechanics of the assessment. (The final results of the study are due to be published at the end of 2007.)

The study's money problems have recently been resolved, although somewhat controversially. While federal agencies had paid the bills for the previous studies, this time the universities have to pay what is essentially a subscriber's fee to be rated. As Mr. Wheeler was speaking, the first data surveys for the study were traveling through the mail to the deans' offices.

Of course, the data collection could pose its own problems.

According to Mr. Wheeler, who is also dean of the graduate college at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, the report's conclusions will be based on survey data on faculty members and students within their given academic programs. "That all seems really straightforward, until we realize we don't know what a faculty member is, what a program is, or what a student is," Mr. Wheeler quipped.

In the 11 years since the rankings last came out, academe has become flush with "emerging fields," many of which go by different names on different campuses, Mr. Wheeler explained. At the same time, higher education has deepened its romance with all things interdisciplinary, making it harder to categorize some professors in one discrete field.

Meanwhile, the time to completion of a degree, an important statistic in the ranking scheme, is hard to figure, given that some students come into Ph.D. programs without master's degrees, some arrive with them, and some belong to programs that skip the master's-degree step altogether.

Finding the Rosetta Stone to account for all these variations has not been easy. (Complaints from deans during the hour-and-a-half session in Boston alone resulted in a couple of tweaks to the survey forms.)

According to Jim Voytuk, a senior program officer with the National Research Council, the designers of the study have tried to keep graduate deans from gaming the system by listing their star professors all over the academic map. At the same time, they have also had to leave some room for the disciplinary looseness that reigns in today's universities.

Expanding Alternatives to the Ph.D

Traditionally, a master's degree in the hard sciences has been just a step along the way to a Ph.D — and not much of a meaningful degree on its own. At the same time, a bachelor's degree is usually not enough for a career in science. Given such limited options for aspiring scientists, the Council of Graduate Schools and the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation have recently been promoting something called the "professional science master's degree" — a kind of middle road leading students to jobs in industry instead of academic research.

According to Carol B. Lynch, a senior scholar-in-residence at the council, part of the appeal of these degrees is that they promise to bring Americans back to science. In recent decades, the number of foreign students enrolled in science doctoral programs has more than doubled, while the number of Americans has fallen slightly. Ms. Lynch said another goal of the programs is to give women, who have long gone underrepresented in the sciences, another avenue into the field.

So far the gambit seems to be working on at least one of those fronts. At a session on the new degrees, Eleanor L. Babco, a senior consultant at the Council of Graduate Schools, said 108 professional science master's programs have been started around the country since the Sloan Foundation began pushing them in 1997. The programs offer degrees in fields like forensics, bioinformatics, and industrial physics, and they have sent graduates on to jobs, often locally, at places like Novartis, Mayo Clinic, and NASA. Graduates have earned starting salaries ranging from \$45,000 to \$62,000. Seventy percent of the students enrolled in the programs have been American citizens, she said, and 40 percent have been women.

By comparison, in 2004, only 52 percent of doctoral recipients in the United States in mathematics, sciences, and engineering who reported citizenship were U.S. citizens, according to the national "Survey of Earned Doctorates." But so far, the gender breakdown in professional science master's programs is not much of an improvement over doctoral programs: In 2004, 39 percent of Ph.D. recipients in math, sciences, and engineering were women.

The professional science master's programs also do seem to be attracting students who are looking for something less than a Ph.D. When Michigan State University set up a professional science master's program in industrial math eight years ago, half of the first class was made up of defectors from Ph.D. programs, said Karen L. Komplarens, dean of the graduate school there.

"Now they're off earning big bucks," she said.

The council's efforts are now focused on collecting data and figuring out what works best in professional science master's programs, while at the same time urging universities and lawmakers to support the creation of new ones. The ultimate goal, according to the council on its Web site: making such degree programs "a regular feature of graduate education."

Entrepreneurs and Academics

Perhaps the strangest sight at this summer's meeting was that of a ballroom full of deans assiduously taking notes during a PowerPoint presentation delivered by a man named Jay Littlepage, a vice president at Sun Microsystems. The topic was "Entrepreneurship and the Contemporary American University," and the mood was hushed and enthusiastic.

"Adapt," Mr. Littlepage said. "Have a cause. Make money." He recommended "synergies" and "mash-ups." He was bringing the fast, buzzy terms of the information economy to the slow, reflective world of academe.

Mr. Littlepage came to the attention of Ms. Lynch years ago, during the technology boom, when she heard that he had hired an anthropologist to bring a fresh perspective to a team at Sun Microsystems.

Indeed, what was surprising to the deans about Mr. Littlepage's presentation was not his suggestion that engineers and computer scientists should be taught entrepreneurial habits, but that social scientists and humanists should be taught them, too. After all, he said, entrepreneurialism is more a set of wily character traits than a set of business skills.

This dovetails with the council's attempts to find a part for the humanities in its case for graduate education's contribution to national competitiveness. Of course, this raises the questions: Do scholars in the humanities want anything to do with national competitiveness? Will entrepreneurialism seem like apostasy to them?

"My initial response to this was not positive," said Mr. Wheeler, the council's board chairman, who is a former English professor. But he has gradually come around. At the same session, Mr. Wheeler described a new "Academy for Entrepreneurial Leadership" at the University of Illinois, which encourages professors to "bring a kind of entrepreneurial edge into their teaching." Though he was initially wary of the "overblown rhetoric," Mr. Wheeler said, he was eventually, cautiously won over by some of the ideas that have come from the center, including an art course called, "The artist-designer as inventor, entrepreneur, outlaw."

Then he mentioned one of the largest student clubs on campus, the Chinese Entrepreneurial and Professional Club. "They take entrepreneurship very seriously," he said, adding drily, "as does their nation."



Richard P. Wheeler, chairman of the board of directors of the Council of Graduate Schools, said he was won over to the idea that the humanities can contribute to U.S. global competitiveness.

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Section: The Faculty

Volume 52, Issue 48, Page A8