



Council of Graduate Schools

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Message from the President of CGS

Graduate Education and the Public Good: Making the Case in Turbulent Times

With current newspaper headlines predicting dismal economic trends, many of us in higher education are wondering how universities will contend with a multi-year slowdown. In many ways, the budget cuts of our member universities would seem to telegraph the future before us. The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities reports that 27 states plus the District of Columbia are facing mid-year budget deficits for FY 2009 that total more than \$12 billion (or 4% of budgets).¹ Seventeen states already project shortfalls totaling more than \$18 billion for fiscal 2010 (which in most states begins July 1, 2009.) Given the rate at which states' revenue bases are deteriorating and the history of prior recessions, the total 2010 state budget gaps will likely reach \$100 billion. While some states are reporting counter-cyclical trends, especially the mineral-rich states like New Mexico, Alaska and Montana, there is no doubt that the nation as a whole, including its universities, will feel the economic downturn. At least 17 states have already implemented cuts to public colleges and universities.

In this turbulent and uncertain context, many leaders of US graduate schools are wondering whether the "master narrative" of graduate education in America still holds for graduate deans and all graduate education stakeholders. In literary theory, the master narrative is the "big story" from which all other stories in a particular domain are derived.² In graduate education, the term might be used to describe the story that unites universities for a common purpose. Until now, the master narrative of graduate education has gone like this: America's graduate schools produce the people with the advanced knowledge, skills and abilities essential to guaranteeing the country's economic and social prosperity. Fostering, nurturing and improving graduate education and graduate programs ensures a healthy future for our country. America's graduate schools produce the "breakthrough" thinkers—creative, innovative and committed to pushing the boundaries of their fields. We graduate people who can understand, use and develop methodologies of inquiry and research; people able to synthesize complex information within their own field and across related fields; scholars and professionals who routinely demonstrate and exercise critical analytical judgment. And with these core skills and abilities, graduate degree-holders create new ways of understanding, allowing us to solve the complex, compelling issues of our times.

As we face a seeming financial meltdown in the US economy, I would propose that this master narrative should remain central and compelling. The business and popular presses often overlook this story, however, focusing on the ability of Americans to compete in a knowledge-

based global economy without giving due attention to the source of professional training—the institutions where talent is grown. It is crucial to recognize that slashing our investment in graduate education would directly reduce our capacity to compete in the one arena where we now have a comparative advantage. We must continue to compete strongly if we are to come out the other side of this downturn as a lead player in the global economy of the 21st century.

While our broad argument remains sound, it is clear that graduate education will need to adjust to new economic realities. Our graduate deans will face new challenges as they strive to improve and advance graduate programs on their campuses. For state institutions, structural deficits in state budgets due to entitlements will wreak havoc on revenues, since decreased state tax revenues mean fewer dollars generated to feed the entitlements. For publics and privates the availability of student loans will exert pressures on university-controlled loan pools. For private universities in particular (but increasingly for publics as well) a chill in the climate for private giving will reduce a robust source of graduate student support. All of these trends will doubtless lead to a heightened demand for a clear metric for accountability in spending as well as pressures to trade off quality for quantity. But perhaps the greatest threat comes in the form of diminished willingness on the part of universities to take risks as they think about the formation of graduate programs going forward.

At the same time, the new reality, however daunting, presents new opportunities. David Breneman recently reminded us that the Pell grant program was initiated at the beginning of a recession in the early 1970s while the Hope Scholarship programs followed the recession of the early 1990s.³ In both cases economic hardship helped focus energy and attention on what needed to be done. Likewise it is possible that the unmet financial need for graduate study will be ever more visible: as we know, a new population is returning to graduate school in an effort to cope with economic downturn. When this trend is combined with the demographic transformation of the graduate school-bound population, a group significantly more financially burdened than prior generations, the depth of need for graduate support will be magnified. Surprisingly, in this time of financial crisis, the national need for a new National Defense Education Act of the 21st century may be more compelling than ever before. We are now seeing the signs that the government will support programs it has never supported before—as its current investment in banks illustrates.

Clearly graduate deans will need to make adjustments as they collaborate with other administrators and faculty to deal with budgetary contingencies. 2009 will bring challenges as well as opportunities. We at CGS will be carefully reviewing all aspects of our programming to ensure that we provide real value to you and your university in these difficult times. One newly created session at the CGS annual meeting will provide a forum for sharing this fall's responses to the crisis on our campuses.

But the key message I want to share today is that it is now more important than ever before to articulate the public good of graduate education. Obviously I cannot possibly know how the current conditions shape the landscape on your individual campuses. But I write to invite you to consider that now may be the time to make the “case for graduate education” with renewed energy at your university. At the macro level the path forward for America hinges on talent development, but it is at the micro level, it is in each of your graduate schools, where that talent is actually cultivated. If our economy is to remain competitive—and indeed increase its competitive edge—it will do so in significant part because of the work of our universities, and in particular of our graduate schools. We look forward to hearing from you, to seeing you soon in

Washington, and to working closely with you through 2009 as you grapple with both the challenges and the opportunities that lie ahead.

¹ <http://www.cbpp.org/9-8-08sfp.htm>

² http://journalism.nyu.edu/pubzone/weblogs/pressthink/2003/09/08/basics_master.html

³ David W. Breneman, "What Colleges Can Learn from Recessions Past," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, October 10, 2008, p. A112