

Below is a speech Jerry Gaff, Vice President, Association of American Colleges and Universities, gave on February 14, 2001, at the University of Missouri at a recent symposium on Graduate Education. It contains information about a good deal of research and other projects on change in doctoral education.

### **Reforming Graduate Education**

Address at the 11th Annual Teaching Renewal Conference

I am very pleased to be here at the University of Missouri and to speak at your conference on the renewal of teaching. As a friend of the University, I have been impressed from afar with several of your initiatives in undergraduate education: the award-winning general-education program, freshman-year programs, and learning communities. So when Suzanne Ortega and Jim Groccia shared their ideas for improving graduate education and invited me to speak today, I was delighted to accept. Yesterday and this morning, I have been able to meet several of your colleagues to hear of their experiences and aspirations.

On the advice of Suzanne and Jim, I intend to talk about two topics:

- a) the reform of graduate education and
- b) a national initiative that I direct called Preparing Future Faculty, a particular professional development program for doctoral students interested in the professoriate.

In preparing my remarks, I was taken back to the early 1990s when we held the first talks with The Pew Charitable Trusts about funding the Preparing Future Faculty program at the Association of American Colleges and Universities and Council of Graduate Schools. Bob Schwartz, the head of education for the Trusts, kept talking about reform, restructuring, and re-engineering graduate education, and some of us winced at his "re-" words. Eventually, one of us asked him what kind of resources he could bring to this task. He said, "We give three-year grants." Everyone laughed. We all knew that three years is too little time to make any significant change in a university. Well, we can laugh again because I don't expect to see the reform of graduate education in my lifetime. Nor do I think it is called for. We are actually doing many things very well. There is always room for improvement, and I'll try to lower the rhetoric and talk about ideas for improving graduate education.

It might be useful for you to know that I have spent most of my career seeking to improve undergraduate education. I have been a faculty member, a researcher into the quality of education, a director of national projects on faculty development and the curriculum and an academic administrator. In all of these roles, I have relied on a scholarly literature about good, and poor, practices and on multiple kinds of educational innovations and experiments. Recent years have been a particularly fertile time for rethinking traditional practices and exploring better ones. As I mentioned, this university has contributed its share of fresh educational thinking and practice in undergraduate education.

When I started to focus on graduate education, I was struck by the contrast. Compared to the richness of resources for understanding undergraduate education:

- The scholarly literature is thin.
- Few empirical studies are available on best practices or factors associated with student success and failure. Institutional research is limited to track the progress of graduate students and feed the results back into programs to make changes.
- Studies of alumni are few, and graduate programs are deprived of a feedback loop to know how their programs relate to the actual careers of their alumni.
- There is little innovation to test out alternative educational practices.

But these conditions are starting to change. Let me mention just a few new initiatives I have run across in the last few weeks. The report of the survey of doctoral students by Chris Golde and Timothy Dore (2001) was released. They draw two important conclusions:

The data from this study show that in today's doctoral programs, there is a three-way mismatch between student goals, training and actual careers. Doctoral students persist in pursuing careers as faculty members, and graduate programs persist in preparing them for careers at research universities despite the well-publicized paucity of academic jobs and efforts to diversify the options available for doctorate-holders. The result: Students are not well-prepared to assume the faculty positions that are available, nor do they have a clear concept of their suitability for work outside of research. (Golde and Dore, 2001, p. 5)

Further, they noted an "information deficit" among many students:

"Students reported that they decided to enter a doctoral program without having a good idea of the time, money, clarity of purpose, and perseverance that doctoral education entails." (Ibid., p. 29) Both kinds of problems can be fixed, and many doctoral programs are working to correct these problems.

I attended the AAHE Forum on Faculty Roles and Rewards about two weeks ago. One session titled "Paradise Lost: How the Academy Converts Enthusiastic Recruits into Early Career Doubters," consisted of three research reports on graduate students and new faculty. Ann Austin, in a project on The Development of Graduate Students as Teaching Scholars, cited four concerns of students about their current experience in doctoral programs:

1. Lack of systematic, comprehensive programs to help them learn to teach.
2. Little feedback and mentoring.
3. Little attention to understanding the range of possible careers.
4. Discrepancies between doctoral education and realities of faculty work.

Cathy Trower, with Harvard University's Project on Faculty Appointments, studied advanced graduate students and faculty members in their first two years of new full-time, tenure-track jobs. She found:

1. New Ph.D.s are ambivalent about tenure and tenure-track positions; few of these are available and are difficult to get.
2. Nontenure-track positions carry a stigma against them.
3. For many, the nature of the work, location and quality of life are more important considerations than tenure or tenure-track positions.

Mary Deane Sorcinelli, in a project called *Heeding New Voices: Academic Careers for a New Generation*, found three major concerns:

1. About tenure, expectations are not clear; faculty receive little feedback, and the process is mysterious.
2. Most desire intellectual community but experience much isolation and loneliness; they report receiving little mentoring.
3. They seek a balanced and integrated life but confess that they are overworked and have many competing responsibilities, especially those with families.

Mary Deane spoke for the group when she said, "We know what we need to do," calling for: a) consistent, reasonable expectations clearly communicated; b) flexible career tracks; and c) self-reflection and dialogues about the kind of lives and work we want and about how to make those aspirations happen.

Barbara Lovitts and Cary Nelson published an article in *Academe* (2001) titled "The Hidden Crisis in Graduate Education: Attrition from Ph.D. Programs." Based largely on Lovitts' study of nine academic departments in two highly ranked research universities, as well as several others, they report that:

- a) "The long-term attrition rate [from Ph.D. programs] nationwide is about 50%."
- b) There is little difference in measures of academic quality of completers and noncompleters; the difference is not what they bring to their programs, such as differences in academic quality, but what happens to them in doctoral programs;
- c) Graduate students who fail to complete their degrees are less integrated into the professional and social life of the department (e.g., knowledge of expectations, information about how the department's strengths and emphases match their own career goals, informal interaction with faculty or peers and availability of an office);
- d) Not surprisingly, degree completion is related to financial aid. Teaching and research

assistants were the most likely to complete because, the authors theorize, they are more integrated academically into their programs. Those most likely to drop out are those with no financial support. More surprising, those receiving graduate fellowships, typically the best and the brightest, abandon their programs in greater numbers than those with assistantships. In effect, students with fellowships are free to remain disconnected to the department. This latter finding is why some universities, including Syracuse and Howard, have restructured their fellowship programs to provide more professional development and more academic involvement for students.

A couple weeks ago, my colleague, Anne Pruitt-Logan, spoke at a conference of the project on Quality Education for Minorities (QEM). This is one of a number of initiatives based on studies showing that graduate students and college faculties do not look like America. QEM, like the Compact for Faculty Diversity with whom we work closely, seek to increase the number of minorities pursuing an academic career. This task is both an access issue and a professional development issue, and it is timely.

As large numbers of faculty members are retiring, this is a historic opportunity to diversify the faculty, so that we are better prepared to educate the more diverse student body we will surely have in the future.

These recent efforts are important additions to the scholarly literature that is starting to develop in graduate education. Let me mention three more that are in process:

Maresi Nerad and Joseph Cerney studied Ph.D. alumni 10 years after they received their degrees. Several articles (1999, 2000) have been published indicating that large minorities of alumni report that they received little or no career counseling from their faculty; wish they had acquired more skills in writing, collaboration and professional presentations; and would have benefited from more attention to teaching. The authors are writing a book on their findings. Jody Nyquist's massive collection of views and activities of multiple constituencies about doctoral education under the rubric "Re-Envisioning the Ph.D. Degree." Last spring, a conference by that same name was held, bringing together representatives from graduate students, graduate faculty, disciplinary associations, fellowship funders, business and industry, educational associations, and primarily undergraduate colleges and universities that hire new Ph.D.s. They discussed what each group could do to improve graduate education. Their rich material can be found on their Web site ([www.depts.washington.edu/envision](http://www.depts.washington.edu/envision)). Finally, the Web-based survey of about 35,000 graduate students, conducted by the National Association of Graduate and Professional Associations, is currently being analyzed. Soon it will be released, and based on the results of the pilot and conversations with the leaders of this effort, it will provide more evidence from graduate students about steps, some quite simple and inexpensive, that can be taken to improve the education of graduate students.

Let me return to my list of events in the past few weeks and mention two new action initiatives. The Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation has just announced a new initiative it calls "The Responsive Ph.D." It plans to assemble a group of doctoral institutions to hold a series of forums to devise ways to create a doctorate that is more responsive to changes in three areas: new paradigms (including interdisciplinarity and scholarship that addresses national and community issues), new practices (including professional development and pedagogical training)

and new people (including service to more diverse populations and diversifying the American intellect).

The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching just announced a new program of research and collaborative initiatives to enhance doctoral education. Lee Shulman is quoted in the press release announcing this initiative, "We believe those who prepare the nation's future teachers and researchers are ready to take a long, hard, positive look at the existing strengths but also at the underdeveloped opportunities in doctoral education, and that certainly includes a review and reconsideration of how these programs prepare their students to explore, explain and apply the fruits of scholarship."

By now, it should be apparent that the old, familiar patterns in graduate education are being questioned. I am confident that several traditional practices will not stand the scrutiny of these studies and experiments. These developments beg for conversations among graduate deans, department chairs, directors of graduate studies, graduate faculty and graduate students.

Several common themes are emerging that suggest specific actions that this university and those departments offering graduate degrees might take to improve the education of your students.

## References

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Nyquist, J.D., [Re-Envisioning the PhD](#) at the University of Washington.