

Study of social science PhDs recommends changes for 21st century

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The first multi-disciplinary study to examine the status of doctoral students in the social sciences at least five years after receiving their degree concludes that doctoral programs need to be brought into the 21st century.

The report, "Social Science PhDs -- Five+ Years Out" was conducted by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education (CIRGE) at the University of Washington (UW) and financed by the Ford Foundation. The center is the first in the U.S. devoted to the study of doctoral education.

"PhD programs should move out of the 19th century and into the 21st century by bringing professional competencies from the margin to the center of doctoral education," the report says.

A national survey was administered at 65 doctoral-granting universities, and 3,025 individuals responded, making a 45% response rate.

"Doctoral education in the U.S. is still structured, for the most part, as if all students were destined to become university professors," says Maresi Nerad, director of CIRGE and associate dean for research in the UW Graduate School. "There is little recognition that working conditions have changed and that the demographics of graduate students have changed." In this large sample, for example, about half of the respondents were women, and about a third did not have faculty positions.

Most social science PhDs report that they have obtained satisfying positions. They feel they have received excellent education and training in traditional academic areas such as critical thinking, analysis and working with data. But they also report being underprepared for the modern workplace, both inside and outside the university. The report suggests that career preparation should begin early in doctoral programs and should include issues such as job search strategies and how to address the tensions of dual career couples.

The average graduate student is not an "unencumbered young man," the report states. Schools need to confront the work-family tension that exists in doctoral careers, both for men and women, more than half of whom are married and in their early to mid 30's by the time they receive their PhD. Women reported making more compromises in juggling work and family than men.

The report also finds that men and women were equally likely to begin their careers in a tenure track faculty position, but that women were slower to earn tenure.

Relatively few students in the study attained a tenure track position immediately after receiving a doctorate, instead finding work in one or a series of temporary academic positions. Indeed, six years after receiving their doctorates, some 17 percent were still in temporary or part-time jobs of some kind.

Nearly 20 percent of doctoral recipients ended up in careers outside of academia, but they received little information about the career realities and scant preparation for careers in business, government, and non-profit sectors, according to the report.

More than half of respondents gave low marks to their graduate programs even for some tasks essential for academic success, such as

writing and publishing reports and articles. Fewer than half of graduates received formal instruction in teaching, or formal evaluation of the teaching they did.

The environment for those who enter academic life has changed dramatically, the report notes. "PhD graduates today increasingly need to write proposals for funding, work collaboratively, work in interdisciplinary contexts, and manage people and budgets." Consequently, "PhD programs should examine whether they are preparing students for scholarship in a world in which multiple researchers from a variety of disciplines collaborate in research and writing," commented CIRGE senior research scientist Elizabeth Rudd.

"Doctoral education in America needs to undergo a paradigm shift so that it better serves the needs of our students and their prospective employers," says Nerad. "We have done an excellent job providing students with in-depth knowledge of their fields and the ability to do original research. But we have much work in front of us, if these highly skilled individuals are to realize their potential in positions both within academia and in society at large."

Source: University of Washington

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