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ABSTRACT

Discussed is a survey of 235 institutions granting Ph.D. degrees. Findings showed that since 1975 the proportion of recent doctorates on the full-time faculty of 5 representative science and engineering fields has dropped by one-fifth. The number of full-time doctoral faculty increased by over 14% between 1968 and 1978, but the number of recent doctorates (defined as degrees held seven years or less) decreased by 39%. Data are presented on the professional activity of the recent doctoral faculty. (RE)

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SCIENCE RESOURCES STUDIES

HIGHLIGHTS

NATIONAL SCIENCE FOUNDATION • WASHINGTON, D.C. 20550 • FEBRUARY 12, 1978 • NSF 79-301

Decline in Recent Science and Engineering Doctoral Faculty Continues into 1978

These Highlights are from a survey sponsored by the National Science Foundation and conducted by the Higher Education Panel of the American Council on Education. The Higher Education Panel conducts an ongoing survey research program—primarily supported by Federal funds—based on a stratified sample of 760 of the more than 3,000 universities and colleges in the United States. This survey used a sample of 25 institutions to represent the total of 288 Ph.D.-granting institutions. Heads of doctoral-level departments in 16 science and engineering (S/E) fields were asked to provide information. Responses were received from 86 percent of the institutions surveyed.

Assessment Highlights

- The role of recent doctoral faculty¹ in the academic community is considered by many to be an important factor in the vitality of the academic enterprise. The ages of the recent doctoral group generally range from the midtwenties to the midthirties. The proportion of recent doctorates in the full-time faculty of 16 representative S/E fields was 24 percent in 1978—down from 28 percent in 1975—and 42 percent in 1968. Since 1975 the proportions of recent doctorates have dropped by one-fifth or more in biochemistry, biology, botany, electrical engineering, and physics.

- The total number of full-time doctoral faculty increased by over 14 percent between 1968 and 1978 but the number of recent doctorates decreased by 39 percent during this same period.

- In the opinion of university S/E department heads, about three-tenths of the doctoral faculty should be recent doctorates. Applying the department head's standard to the total S/E doctoral faculty of approximately 36,000, the composition should have included about 2,100 more recent doctorates in 1978. The greatest differences were in physics and chemistry. The only field that had a sufficient proportion of recent doctorates was economics.

- Recent doctoral faculty were more active than their senior colleagues in submitting research proposals during the 1976-77 period. They submitted slightly more than one proposal per person compared to .86 per senior doctorate. The greatest differences were observed in botany, chemical engineering, and sociology, with the recent doctorates in these fields

being approximately 70 percent more active than their senior colleagues.

- In general, according to department heads, recent doctoral faculty were more likely to apply for independent research support now than five years ago. This opinion was expressed by 47 percent of the department heads surveyed, while an additional 38 percent said that there had been no change.

- For all fields combined, the recent doctorates were experiencing about the same success as their senior colleagues in terms of proposals that had been funded as of the time of the survey—55 percent compared to 59 percent. For both groups, decisions had not been made on about 12 percent of the proposals submitted.

Introduction

Since at least the midsixties, there has been concern about balance in the age composition of university and college faculty. The higher education community first began to give serious consideration to the implications of the declining number of births in this country at a time when there still was very rapid increase in faculty, especially young faculty. Now, in almost all fields there are fewer recent doctorates than desired by university S/E department heads. For the near term, the prospects are not promising for attaining a faculty age distribution considered desirable by these department heads.

The widespread belief that the proportion of recent doctoral faculty is directly related to the vitality of the academic enterprise is based largely on impressions rather than results of systematic investigations. In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Thomas S. Kuhn stated, "This generalization about the role of youth in fundamental scientific research is so common as to be a

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cliché. Furthermore, a glance at almost any list of fundamental contributions to scientific theory will provide impressionistic confirmation. Nevertheless, the generalization badly needs systematic investigation.² Recent studies by Stephen Cole and Nancy Stern have concluded that a scientist's age is not significantly correlated with productivity or with the quality of work published.³ From their evidence, however, it can be argued that young scientists are at least as productive of quality research as their older colleagues.

For scientists holding full-time faculty positions at universities, there are other important reasons for concern about the proportion of recent doctorates.⁴ In most universities, new faculty are evaluated for tenure after a probationary period of usually five to seven years. Those who receive tenure, presumably the more productive in teaching, research, and public service, are retained on the faculty. Department heads have indicated that, on average, approximately 30 percent of the faculty should be recent doctorates.⁵ Presumably, this level enables the tenure evaluation to provide the desired quality control.

Trends in Proportion of Recent Doctorates

The 1,809 departments surveyed in 16 representative S/E fields had 35,962 regular full-time doctoral faculty in 1978 (table 1). This number is about 68 percent of the total estimated number of full-time S/E faculty of all degree levels at all doctorate-granting institutions for that year.

Beginning in 1968 the National Science Foundation has conducted several studies of the proportion of recent doctoral faculty in doctoral-level S/E departments. This proportion has dropped from 42 percent in 1968 to 24 percent in 1978 (chart 1).

In all fields except economics, the proportion of recent doctoral faculty is now below the level considered desirable by department heads in a 1975 NSF-sponsored survey.⁶ The greatest disparities are in biochemistry and physics which have only about one-half the desired percentage of recent doctoral faculty (table 2). In 12 of the 16 fields surveyed, the 1978 proportions of recent doctoral faculty are below the levels that the respondents to the 1975 survey expected

Table 1. Full-time doctoral faculty and recent doctoral faculty in selected doctoral-level science/engineering departments: 1978

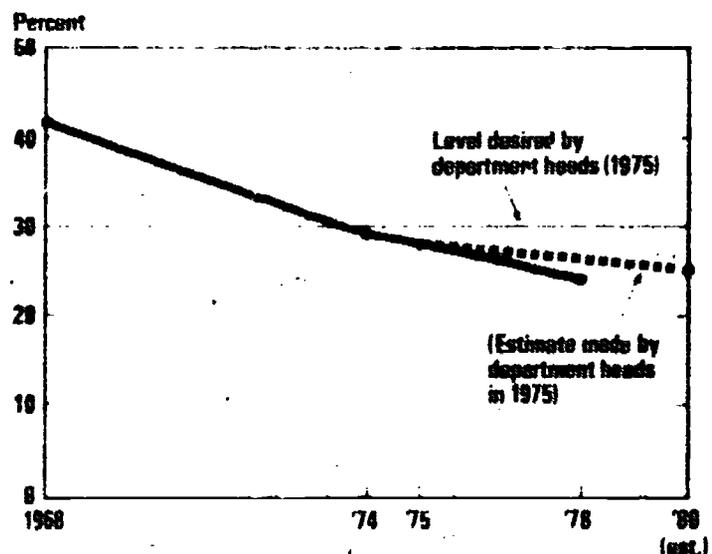
Field	Number of departments	Total full-time faculty	Doctoral faculty	
			Number	Percentage
All selected departments	809	47,862	35,962	75
Biochemistry	129	1,346	794	59
Biology	131	1,112	724	65
Botany	67	1,044	399	38
Chemical engineering	6	262	206	79
Chemistry	103	4,052	4,061	100
Economics	117	1,328	64	5
Electrical engineering	114	1,115	479	43
Engineering	9	1,079	61	6
Mathematics	111	1,041	1,206	116
Microbiology	122	1,011	325	32
Mining & metallurgical engineering	11	108	1	1
Physics	66	1,176	466	40
Physiology	103	1,101	111	10
Psychology	114	4,144	1,012	24
Sociology	111	2,149	111	5
Zoology	67	1,081	179	16

Note: The percentage of recent doctoral faculty is based on the number of full-time doctoral faculty who received their doctorates in the 5 years immediately preceding the survey. Source: American Council on Education.

to be reached by 1980. Since 1975 the proportions of recent doctorates have dropped by one-fifth or more in biochemistry, biology, botany, electrical engineering, and physics.

There is no universally accepted standard for the most effective proportion of recent doctorates in the full-time S/E faculty in these departments. In 1975 the heads of these departments indicated that this proportion should be 0.3. If one assumes that these desired proportions have remained constant over time, then the composition of the total S/E doctoral faculty—approximately 36,000—should have included about 2,100 more

Chart 1. Proportion of recent full-time doctoral faculty in selected doctoral-level science/engineering departments: selected years



NOTE: The lines connecting the points are intended as visual aids only. The values for years between surveys may not lie on these straight lines.

SOURCE: National Science Foundation and American Council on Education.

² Thomas S. Kuhn, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1970), p. 180.

³ Nancy Stern, "Age and Achievement in Mathematics: A Case Study in the Sociology of Science," *Social Studies of Science*, Vol. 1, 1978, pp. 128; and Stephen Cole, "Age and Scientific Performance," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXXXV, 4, 1979.

⁴ Although not all scientists and engineers are young enough when they receive the doctorate to join those who have held the doctorate seats in a university department for a long time, the average age of the faculty for new appointments in the United States is 42.1 years, according to the *National Science Foundation, Science and Engineering Resources in Higher Education* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1978), p. 11.

⁵ The 1975 survey of department heads was conducted by the National Science Foundation and the American Council on Education. The survey results are reported in the *1975 Survey of Department Heads in Higher Education: Panel Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1975), p. 11. The desired proportion of recent doctorates used by field heads is 30 percent of the total full-time faculty in each department.

⁶ The 1975 survey of department heads was conducted by the National Science Foundation and the American Council on Education. The survey results are reported in the *1975 Survey of Department Heads in Higher Education: Panel Report* (Washington, D.C.: National Science Foundation, 1975), p. 11.

Table 2. Difference between actual and desired percentages of recent full-time doctoral faculty in selected doctoral-level science/engineering departments: 1978

Field Rank ordered by column 1	Recent des- ired per- centage of total faculty	Percentage of recent doc- torates desired by department heads	Difference between actual and desired percentage	
			(1)	(2)
Sociology	26	1	-	25
Economics	24	11	-	13
Psychology	23	14	-	9
Mathematics	22	17	-	5
Physiology	21	14	7	-
Zoology	20	17	3	-
All selected departments	24	19	5	-
Mining & mineral engineering	24	12	12	-
Microbiology	24	19	5	-
Biology	23	17	6	-
Geology	23	19	4	-
Chemical engineering	21	12	9	-
Electrical engineering	20	17	3	-
Chemistry	19	19	0	-
Botany	17	17	0	-
Biochemistry	17	13	4	-
Physics	15	14	1	-

Table 2. *Actual and desired percentages of recent full-time doctoral faculty in selected science and engineering departments: 1978.* Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, Higher Education Panel Report, September 1978.

Source: American Council on Education, U.S. National Science Foundation.

recent doctorates in 1978. Physics departments alone account for one-fourth of this number (chart 2).

For the 333 departments that responded to each of the four surveys, the total number of full-time doctoral faculty increased by over 14 percent between 1968 and 1978 while the number of recent doctorates decreased by 39 percent. All of the growth was accounted for by the senior doctorates whose numbers increased by 54 percent over the 11-year period. Thus, over the period 1968-78 the number of senior doctorates in these departments has increased more than enough to offset the decline in the number of recent doctorates. Obviously, many of the senior doctorates came from the ranks of those who had been reported as new doctorates in earlier surveys.

Success in Obtaining Research Support

Because of the general belief that young scientists have an important role in the Nation's research enterprise, there is, naturally, concern that they receive a proportionate share of research support. Operationally, this involves two questions: (1) Do recent doctoral S/E faculty submit proposals for research support to the same degree as their senior colleagues? and (2) Do recent doctorates enjoy success comparable to that of their senior colleagues in the competition for funding?

Information was sought for this survey on proposals submitted from July 1976 through June 1977. Necessarily, the analysis must account for the time lapse from submission of a proposal to its disposition by the

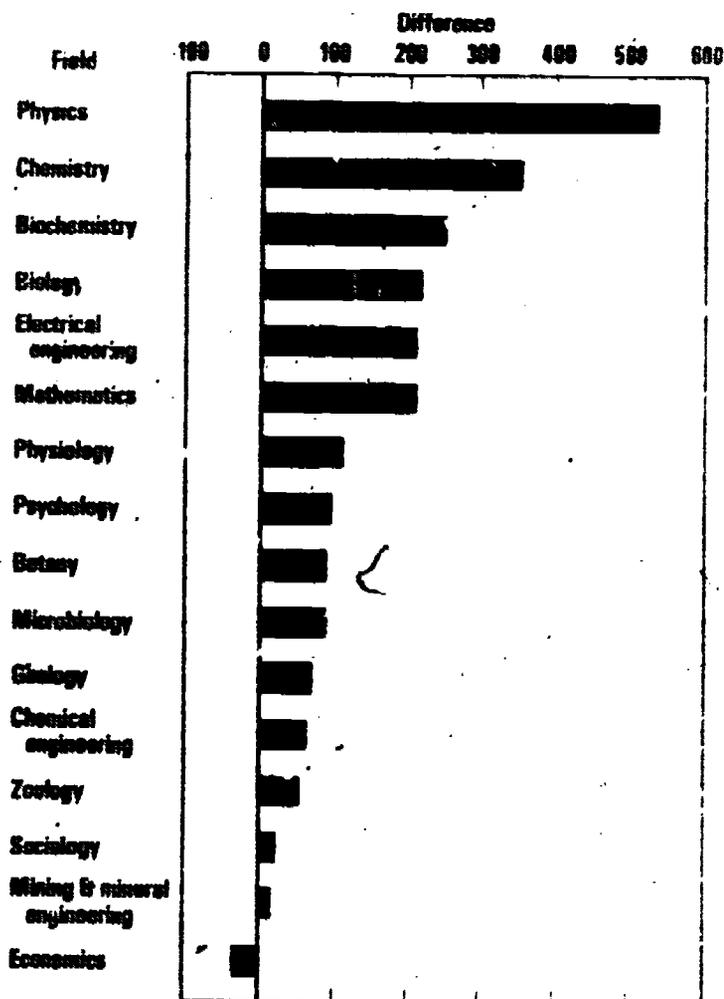
This analysis is sensitive to the assumption that opinions of department heads about desired proportions of recent doctorates have remained stable over recent years. A change of 10 percent for a 3 percentage points would produce a 30 percent change in the difference of recent doctorates in 1978.

funding agency. In all cases, at least 10 months had elapsed since the proposals had been submitted. Depending on field, decisions on funding had been made about 84 percent to 94 percent of the proposals.

In 1976-77 the recent doctorates submitted, on average, nearly 20 percent more proposals than did their senior colleagues, 1.02 proposals per recent doctorate compared to .86 per senior doctorate. The greatest differences by field were in botany, chemical engineering, and sociology, with recent doctorates being approximately 70 percent more active than the senior doctorates. Only in one field, electrical engineering, were the senior doctorates the more active group (table 3).

Although recent doctorates generally outperformed senior doctorates in the submission of proposals, they were about as successful in terms of proposals funded. For all fields combined, 55 percent of the proposals submitted by recent doctorates had been funded as of the time of the survey compared to 59 percent for their senior colleagues. For both groups, decisions had not yet been made on slightly over one-tenth of the proposals submitted. Among the individual fields, the recent doctorates in biochemistry and botany were

Chart 2. Difference between actual and desired numbers of recent doctor. faculty in selected doctoral-level departments: 1978



SOURCE: National Science Foundation and American Council on Education

Table 3. Research proposals submitted by full-time recent and senior doctoral faculty in selected doctoral-level science/engineering departments: 1978

Field	Recent doctorate proposed activity index	Recent senior success ratio
All selected fields	1.19	94
Biochemistry	1.41	103
Biology	1.41	96
Botany	1.74	104
Chemical engineering	1.69	86
Chemistry	1.59	99
Economics	1.02	93
Electrical engineering	96	85
Geology	1.05	99
Mathematics	1.17	88
Microbiology	1.23	90
Mining & mineral engineering	1.08	73
Physics	1.21	98
Physiology	1.20	90
Psychology	1.22	90
Sociology	1.74	95
Zoology	1.39	93

In each field the number of proposals submitted per senior doctorate index was 1.00. Depending on the field, 6 percent to 16 percent of the proposals were not yet decided. In all cases at least 10 months had elapsed since submission.

Source: National Science Foundation and American Council on Education

experiencing slightly greater success in the proportion of funded proposals than their senior colleagues. The least success was experienced by the recent doctorates in mining and mineral engineering.

From the information presented above, it appears that recent doctorates are active in applying for research support. Independent confirmation of this conclusion was provided by department heads, who reported that, in their opinion, recent doctoral faculty are generally more likely to apply for independent research support now as compared with five years ago. This opinion was expressed by 47 percent of the department heads, while an additional 38 percent said that there had been no change.

Expected Full-Time Doctoral Faculty Hires for 1978-79

The heads of the 1,809 departments in 16 S/E fields surveyed reported that in 1978-79 they expect to hire 2,980 doctoral faculty, 8.3 percent of the 1977-78 full-time doctoral faculty (table 4). More than 70 percent of the expected hires, are expected to be assistant professors, most of whom may be expected to be recent doctorates. There is considerable variation among fields in the proportion of expected hires in the assistant professor rank, ranging from 84 percent in microbiology to only 39 percent in mining and mineral engineering. Approximately one-fourth of all the expected assistant professor hires are in mathematics and psychology, two fields that are only slightly below the levels of recent doctorates desired by department heads.

Table 4. Expected full-time doctoral faculty hires by academic rank in selected doctoral-level science/engineering departments: 1978-79

Field	Number	Percent by academic rank				
		All ranks	Pro- fessor	Assoc. prof.	Ass't prof.	Other
All selected fields	2,980	100.0	10.3	12.0	70.3	7.4
Biochemistry	177	100.0	14.6	14.5	67.9	3.0
Biology	202	100.0	9.0	6.8	83.0	1.2
Botany	73	100.0	7.3	9.9	80.4	2.4
Chemical engineering	144	100.0	16.0	12.4	71.5	0.0
Chemistry	228	100.0	11.7	11.8	67.3	9.2
Economics	256	100.0	15.1	11.9	69.2	3.8
Electrical engineering	257	100.0	8.1	18.6	71.0	2.3
Geology	95	100.0	15.6	10.4	70.1	4.9
Mathematics	998	100.0	6.1	5.8	62.3	25.9
Microbiology	198	100.0	7.0	8.9	84.1	0.0
Mining & mineral engineering	22	100.0	22.2	48.9	48.9	0.0
Physics	229	100.0	13.4	10.7	59.1	16.1
Physiology	139	100.0	7.0	17.6	66.6	8.8
Psychology	648	100.0	10.8	14.0	73.8	1.4
Sociology	225	100.0	7.6	12.7	74.1	5.1
Zoology	60	100.0	2.2	14.5	76.1	7.2

Note: Because independent weighting procedures were used for each field, detail may not add to total.

Source: American Council on Education

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