

## Doctoral Education: National Issues with “Local” Relevance

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Although doctoral education in the United States is highly regarded and commands international respect, it is now under close scrutiny from a number of perspectives. Those who aspire to the doctorate (the students) and those who prepare doctorates (the faculty) have often offered their opinion on the quality of their experience and suggested changes to the process. Other interested parties are now weighing in as well, such as those who fund doctoral programs, those who hire doctoral graduates, and those who seek to influence the quality of higher education (Nyquist, 2002). The purpose of this article is to examine the national trends and the issues that have emerged, to review the research on doctoral education with an emphasis on doctoral preparation in the field of education, and to consider the implications of the recent work for the doctoral program in the College of Education, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa.

### National Trends in Higher Education

It is probably the case that higher education has been under scrutiny more often than not during its history, but the current situation does seem to hold greater consequence for doctoral education. Three general issues permeate the academic literature as well as the popular press: the increased cost of higher education (Trombley, 2003), the decreased contributions of states to their public institutions (Hovey, July 1999), and the increased entrepreneurial activity on the part of both institutions and individual faculty (Slaughter & Leslie, 1998).

Increased cost and decreased state subsidy have resulted in substantial increases in tuition and fees charged to students (Farrell, 2003). The trend of passing the cost on to the students is also evident as the federal government has shifted from grant-based aid to loan-based aid (Hearn, 2001). As tuition has increased and students have had to incur greater debt for their education, many doctoral programs have cut enrollments (Magner, 1999). Many departments are enrolling fewer students and attempting to give them full or substantial support. The rationale is that fewer, better funded, students means more competitive students and a better chance of job placement. Although this strategy has long been the case at prestigious private institutions,

it seems to be gravitating to more public institutions as they grapple with budget shortfalls. The strategy has also been a reality in science and engineering programs where funding has always been more plentiful, but programs in the humanities and social sciences are now moving to the “smaller but better-funded approach” (Magner, 1999, p. 1). It is a commendable goal to have graduates with less debt and higher job prospects, but clearly the cuts to enrollment mean greater competition for fewer slots and less access in general for those who aspire to doctoral education.

The third, and related, issue, increased entrepreneurial activity, also has implications for doctoral education. As traditional funding sources are constrained, research universities and their graduate faculties are pressed to engage in efforts to increase their extramural funding, and such efforts carry both advantages and disadvantages for doctoral students (Gumport, 1999). Increased funding for research and training often means increased funding for graduate assistantships and stipends, but the pressure on graduate faculty to produce quick results can also mean that these positions are more like employment and less like the mentoring relationships desired in graduate education. The increased efforts of graduate assistants to engage in collective bargaining suggests that they view their situations less as part of their education and more as potentially exploitive (Smallwood, 2003).

Clearly these general higher education issues are relevant to the current climate for doctoral education, but direct scrutiny of doctoral education is also on the rise. One list of criticisms includes the overproduction of PhDs; the narrowness of the training provided; the emphasis on research over teaching; the use of students to meet institutional needs at the expense of sound education; and the insufficient mentoring, career advising, and job placement assistance reported by numerous students (Association of American Universities [AAU], 1998). Even more recently, various national studies indicate that doctoral study

- ❖ is intensive, rather than rich training;
  - ❖ is too long, too narrow, and too campus-based;
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- ❖ does not attract underrepresented minorities and, in some fields, women;
- ❖ is a disconnected specialization;
- ❖ does not encourage interdisciplinarity;
- ❖ has attrition rates that are too high;
- ❖ does not produce the competence needed in all positions of leadership throughout society;
- ❖ does not appeal to the best and brightest. (Nyquist, 2002, p. 14–15)

Such criticisms have come from a variety of sources: those who hire PhDs including universities and colleges, business and industry, non-profit organizations and government; those who fund programs, such as government agencies, business and industry, foundations, and universities; and those who monitor and influence higher education, such as accrediting associations, educational and professional associations, and governance boards. These stakeholders have much to offer to discussions on the reform of doctoral education, and their views deserve to be taken seriously by the academic community.

Another group with much at stake includes those preparing for the PhD. Students have probably been surveyed more often than other groups regarding their satisfaction with their programs, but typically these surveys are institutionally-based. In 2001, the National Association of Graduate-Professional Students solicited on-line feedback from 32,000 graduate students and recent PhDs representing 1300 doctoral programs. Despite specific criticisms, an overwhelming majority of respondents reported positive doctoral experiences:

- ❖ 81 percent are satisfied with doctoral programs.
- ❖ 86 percent are satisfied with their advisors.
- ❖ 80 percent would recommend their programs to prospective students.

The criticisms, on the other hand, have much to do with career concerns. For example,

- ❖ 45 percent are satisfied with their preparation for teaching.
- ❖ 38 percent are satisfied with career services.
- ❖ 30 percent reported receiving graduation rates as part of the application process.
- ❖ 35 percent received information on job placements of recent graduates.

Other concerns were expressed by women and underrepresented minority students who were less satisfied with their overall experience than their white male counterparts. Twenty-eight percent of the women and 40 percent of the minority students reported that the environments of their programs were not supportive.

The study concluded that the following factors increased student satisfaction overall: involving graduate students in the policy and program decisions that affect them, providing them with more information about program outcomes, and providing greater breadth in graduate training. Certainly such concerns reflect not only the level of support provided to students by programs, but also the uncertainty of the job market in tough economic times. Nonetheless, these concerns need to be addressed by those who prepare PhDs: the graduate faculty who are not without their own criticisms. Much of the research and writing on doctoral education has been conducted by graduate faculty, and they have emphasized a number of inherent tensions.

### **National Tensions—Preparing Scholars vs. Preparing Employees**

There is an underlying tension within doctoral programs about the essential purpose of doctoral preparation. Preparing doctoral graduates for a range of employment opportunities is not always congruent with upholding the rigor of research in academe. Although doctoral students are usually trained to work at a research university, the employment trend shows that doctoral graduates are increasingly seeking employment outside of the academy, such as in business and industry (Fechter & Gaddy, 1998). After World War II, more opportunities outside of the academy became available for doctoral graduates in the fields of business, industry, and the government (LaPidus, 1995). The percentages of doctoral scientists and engineers in business and industry have been increasing from 1973 through 1989, and the trend seems to continue in the 1990s. Overall, however, the data indicate little change in the proportion of PhDs who are employed in academe (58 percent of the 1979 graduates compared to 57 percent in 1995) (AAU, 1998). LaPidus (1995) argues that the role of doctoral education is not to prepare people for any specific job or career, but is an opportunity to extend and deepen their education. The challenge for doctoral graduates may be to capitalize upon the intellectual richness of their doctoral experience and translate that experience into marketable skills. Since there has been an increase in the employ-

ment of PhDs in the business and industry sector, programs that consider the implications of this fact in the education and training they provide will be serving doctoral students better than those that ignore it.

Ironically, Austin (2002) found that the doctoral socialization process does not prepare graduate students for faculty employment either. This is critical since new faculty members are performing with tighter budgetary constraints, meeting the expectations of more constituents, and facing higher research productivity requirements. In a qualitative study interviewing 79 doctoral students at two doctoral-granting institutions, Austin reported that students lack systematic professional development opportunities, receive minimal feedback and mentoring from faculty, and have few opportunities for guided reflection to discuss their goals, careers, and development with their own faculty members. They also receive little guidance about academic careers in different types of institutions or outside of academe. Collectively, these results suggest that doctoral students are not engaged in experiences that enable them to seriously consider and explore their career aspirations.

### **National Tensions—Preparing Researchers vs. Preparing Generalists**

The quality of research training is frequently addressed in the doctoral education literature. Johnson, Lee, and Green (2000) explore the changing trends of how people approach research. They explore ideas of autonomy and the independent scholar that underpin traditional practices of post-graduate pedagogy. For example, the traditional approach promotes the role of an independent researcher, who is rarely socialized to meet the demands and rigors of an academic scholar engaged in the full range of faculty responsibilities. Some argue that the new scholars need to shift from the emphasis on independent thinking to collaborative work between institutions and agencies (Johnson et al., 2000). Caffarella and Barnett (2000) suggest that graduate students usually do not write like scholars, and that this is especially true of students in professional programs who work full-time. They recommend a doctoral writing program that prepares students for academic publication. In a similar vein, Duke and Beck (1999) argue that traditional dissertations do not serve future researchers well in preparing them for academic research nor in making contributions to knowledge. They suggest that dissertations are not widely read by scholars in the field, and that the format does not conform to the type

of writing needed for an academic career. They recommend that alternatives to the traditional dissertation be considered, such as generating papers ready for submission to scholarly publications.

In addition to Duke and Beck's (1999) argument on the inappropriateness of the format of dissertations, research training also affects the time to completion for a PhD degree. Leatherman (2000) and de Valero (2001) explain that the lack of completion of the dissertation is the primary reason for the lack of completion of doctoral degrees (the so-called ABD or "all-but dissertation" predicament). De Valero (2001) examined departmental factors that may have implications for the completion of dissertations and graduation rates for doctoral students. These factors include departmental practices, advising practices, and climate. Many students engaged in writing their dissertation work entirely in isolation: they are not enrolled in classes or seminars, nor are there mandatory or formal meetings with advisors or committee members. If the student doesn't initiate contact with their advisor, there may be no contact. If students at this level are struggling with their work, they may not know when or whether it is appropriate to ask for help. Leatherman (2000) reviewed a variety of strategies to help students with their dissertations. These efforts included a weeklong writing boot camp, dissertation fellowships provided by the campus, and personal writing coaches. The quality of research training affects doctoral students in terms of their ability to conduct their own research, the timely completion of their dissertation, and their preparation for the rigors of faculty research and productivity. The literature critiquing the quality and nature of research training is extensive, and some institutions have addressed this area by offering strategies to help their students finish their dissertation.

### **National Tension: The Responsibility for Attrition in Doctoral Education**

Golde (2000) eloquently describes the problem: "Paradoxically, the most academically capable, and most carefully selected students in the entire higher education system—doctoral students—are the least likely to complete their chosen academic goals" (p. 199). The overall rate of doctoral student attrition is around 50 percent—a figure that has been fairly consistent since the 1960's (Lovitts, 2001). Faculty have mixed reactions to such a figure; some express disbelief that attrition could be that high (Golde, 2000), and others speculate that given the concern about over-production of PhDs in some

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fields, perhaps that level of attrition serves an appropriate function (Lovitts, 2001).

There is no doubt, however, that attrition rates do contribute to the cost of education. When departments and colleges recruit, select, admit, and enroll students into a program, they have already expended resources on those students. If they have provided financial assistance, the commitment is even greater. Doctoral education is the most expensive education provided in system of higher education. To have students begin programs, proceed through to the dissertation stage, and then leave the program, is an enormous waste of resources. The personal toll the process may take on the individual who doesn't finish the degree may be even greater; non-completers have described the experience of deciding to leave as "gut-wrenching," an experience that left them "shell-shocked, disappointed, and depressed" (Lovitts, 2001, p. 6).

Those who leave doctoral programs may be largely invisible to the program faculty, and exit interviews are rarely conducted. The limited research conducted in this area does suggest, however, that while students leave for a wide variety of reasons, the extent to which the organizational culture and structure of the academic program fostered integration plays a significant role in retention (Lovitts, 2001). This is consistent with work at the undergraduate level, which contends that academic and social integration are key factors in students' willingness to persevere and complete their degree (Tinto, 1993). Apparently, graduate students respond to similar conditions and opportunities. Golde's study (2000) also emphasized the importance of academic integration, particularly the power of a supportive advising relationship. The quality of the relationship between a doctoral student and his or her advisor can be the make-or-break factor for many students. Lovitts (2001) argues that it is the single most critical factor in determining who stays and who leaves. Many faculty advisors relate to their students much in the same way their advisors related to them—which may or may not be a good thing. Many of these advisors may have no idea the impact their advising and mentoring—or lack thereof—has on the students who are working with them.

The most obvious means for an academic program to ascertain the culture or climate experienced by their students (current and former) is to ask them. Determining what experiences are important and available to students is a first step in addressing those issues that matter. Surveys,

interviews, focus groups, and exit interviews can all be used to assess the institutional climate; the national findings discussed in this chapter provide a basis from which to begin such an assessment. Faculty members represent those who persisted to the degree; while they may have their own horror stories about the experience, they did finish. They need to hear from those whose experiences were not worth continuing.

### **Doctoral Preparation in the Field of Education**

The tensions described as "national" in this article are certainly relevant to most doctoral programs in the field of education, but education colleges have challenges that are unique to their professional school status. Colleges and schools of education are perennially under pressure to "prove themselves." Academic critics question if educational research holds the same status as research-based disciplines, such as the social or natural sciences. The relatively high proportion of part-time students in education is often seen as evidence that the students are not as committed to their studies and that the traditional academic norm of 'immersion in the discipline' is less honored. Since schools and colleges of education are professional schools, they come under close scrutiny as the primary source for preparing educators; such close scrutiny undermines the perception of education scholars as autonomous thinkers and contributors to their discipline. Tierney (2001) suggests that the low status of the professionals that are produced in education contributes to the lack of status of those who prepare them. The public disaffection with the performance of educators in general has escalated to calls for reform or even the elimination of schools and colleges of education. Levine (2001) recommends that schools and colleges of education reform themselves before the government intervenes in response to the public outcry. Such an intervention would further contribute to the perception that education scholars are less respected and are not to be accorded the same degree of autonomy as their peers in the academic disciplines. These ongoing critiques of the field of education may be directed primarily at teacher preparation, but ultimately the criticism may well affect the regard in which the doctorate in education (whether it is labeled the EdD or the PhD) is held. The name and nature of the degree has long been an issue, and will continue to haunt educators as long as both are awarded and distinctions are made.

### **Tension over the Nature of the PhD and the EdD**

In 1893, the first formal Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) degree in the field of education was instituted at Teachers College at Columbia University (Dill & Morrison, 1985). Twenty-seven years later, the first formal Doctor of Education (EdD) degree was established at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University. Osguthorpe & Wong (1993) described the EdD as a degree for students who were preparing to serve as educational practitioners, while the PhD was for those planning to emphasize research and become faculty members. Carpenter (1987) examined the differences between the EdD and PhD programs in higher education, and found minor differences, including (1) slightly more credits required for the EdD; (2) slightly more work outside the education field for the PhD; (3) more problem-centered research for the Ed D dissertation; and (4) more employment in post-secondary settings for PhD recipients, and more employment in K–12 public education for those with an EdD. Although scholars (Carpenter, 1987; Courtenay, 1988; Dill & Morrison, 1985; Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993) disagree about the future of the different types doctoral degrees in education, many argue that the field needs two types of doctoral preparation (and two degrees): one to meet the need for better prepared administrators, and the other to prepare educational researchers. Others (Deering, 1998) argue that in order to eliminate the confusion and misperceptions surrounding the two degrees, the field would be better served if it eliminated the EdD, and reallocated scarce resources to strengthening the PhD programs.

### **Tension regarding Research in the Field of Education**

The debate over the quality of research produced in professional schools is a long-standing source of irritation to many graduate faculty members in the field of education, even though they themselves often criticize the work produced. In January of 2004, *Education Week* published an article entitled “The Skills Gap” (Viadero, 2004), which questioned whether education schools are up to the task of preparing capable researchers. The diversity of approaches to research, the multiple missions of education schools, and the wide variation in curricular and programmatic requirements are cited as evidence of the lack of consensus regarding the optimum training of first-rate education researchers.

In fact, graduate faculties in education have been developing a number of strategies aimed at enhancing the

research training of their doctoral students. For example, Metz (2001) describes her experience in an interdisciplinary seminar that teaches students to seek a clear research question. The purpose of the seminar is to explore underlying research processes common to different kinds of educational research. Page (2001) describes the challenge in determining which type of research method is appropriate for what research question. The process and circumstances in which the faculty grappled with this issue while redesigning their doctoral curriculum is detailed. Page recommends a set of introductory, core courses of research methods to be implemented in the doctoral curriculum. Similarly, Young (2001) argues that researchers should be trained to use a variety of perspectives and methods. While education is a field that is influenced by everyday experience and politics, she suggests that educational scholars’ epistemologies are integrally linked to how to best serve children and students. Thus, Young argues that schools of education should prepare students to employ epistemological diversity. More specifically, Engstrom (1999) examines the influence of the doctoral experiences on the research productivity and writing of women faculty members in higher education and student affairs programs. She found that mentors, student peers, and structured opportunities in research, writing, and publishing were positive influences on the subsequent productivity and writing of faculty members. Similarly, Anderson (1996) found that the more collaborative the faculty members are among themselves within the department, the more likely the student is to have the short term benefit of a better work environment as well as the long term advantage of better preparation to conduct research. A similar finding underscored the importance of the general climate of an academic department on the socialization of doctoral students to the scholarly role (Weidman & Stein, 2003). Weidman and Stein suggest that the optimal climate is characterized by “a faculty who are accessible to students, who are actively engaged in scholarly activities themselves, and who clearly convey expectations and encouragement for students engaging in such activities” (p. 653).

### **Summary**

It is clear that the inherent tensions within doctoral education are national in scope; but nonetheless, the proposals for change are often specific to a particular discipline. Just as doctoral programs in engineering and philosophy demand distinct kinds of changes, so do doctorates in education. The

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challenge for those of us in schools and colleges of education is to take the criticisms to heart and make changes that are appropriate to the particular demands of our field.

### **Implications for Doctoral Education, College of Education, UHM**

The issue of centralization versus decentralization is a particular concern for the way the doctoral degree in education is organized at UH Mānoa. Though there is one degree, one set of core requirements, and one elected council which screens and selects faculty for membership to the Graduate Faculty in Education, there is a great deal of autonomy inherent in individual specializations: Administration, Curriculum Studies, Foundations, Exceptionalities, and Policy Studies. As a result of this autonomy, doctoral students may experience different norms and practices depending on their area of specialization. While differences are not in and of themselves a problem, it is difficult to determine whether there is a common experience or sense of community among doctoral students, or whether there are common or idiosyncratic issues to be addressed. One source of community building for the doctoral program is the College of Education Doctoral Student Association (COEDSA), described in an article by Lynn Tabata and Jamie Simpson in this issue. COEDSA sponsors a number of workshops and seminars that bring students and faculty members together around student-generated topics. Although this is a highly effective venue for addressing common issues, there is still much the faculty could do to attend to the issues raised in this article. The following recommendations emerge from the literature reviewed here.

**Examine the rate and causes of attrition.** It would be instructive to know how the attrition rate in the doctoral program in education compares to that in other doctoral programs, but it would be even more important to learn why those students who leave elect to do so. The rate of attrition may be a direct reflection of the effectiveness of the admissions screening and selection process. Faculty members devote considerable time and attention to admissions. Information regarding the relationship between student attrition and selection criteria would be of great value in informing the admissions process. In addition to admissions procedures, the reasons that students give for leaving the program will also provide important information about the doctoral experience. But data is important only to the extent that it is used to improve the quality of their programs.

**Provide continuing orientation for the graduate fac-**

**ulty.** Every faculty member brings the benefit of his or her own experience to their work with doctoral students. Rarely do faculty members gather to discuss how they view the purpose of doctoral education or to share their perceptions of what a quality doctoral experience looks like. Faculty members may also benefit from hearing about different advising, mentoring, or committee models. It would be beneficial for all faculty members to give thought to their role as advisors—especially with regard to the ethics of their relationship with doctoral students, and their academic duty to doctoral training. The likelihood of achieving consensus on a shared purpose and process may be slight, but the discussion is likely to foster increased attention to such matters and could be helpful to new members of the faculty who are searching for the norms of their programs.

**Evaluate the quality of the research training in the program.** It has been several years since the inquiry core was established—sufficient time has passed to enable us to evaluate how well candidates are prepared to conduct research. How well prepared are they to analyze data, evaluate the quality of research conceptualizations, and choose appropriate methods for their line of inquiry? Many students complain that they do not know how to obtain research experience prior to working on their dissertation. The best way for students to learn to do research is to do it with a faculty member. Then, faculty members need to make these experiences available to students. Clearly, the ideal is to find a means to make such partnerships mutually beneficial. Students should gain adequate preparation in their coursework to enable them to apply their skills to actual research projects; faculty should be willing to commit their time to helping students develop their skills and expertise.

**Identify ways to sustain student work on the dissertation.** Formal seminars or writing groups may help students to maintain a connection to the faculty and their peers during the writing stage. It may be possible to offer such coursework across the specializations, thereby lessening the load on specializations with small numbers of faculty and students. Students should be encouraged to form support groups during the dissertation writing stage. Even when students have very diverse topical interests, they can encourage one another and provide the emotional support needed to get through what can otherwise be a lonely endeavor.

**Reconsider the role of the required internship or practicum in the doctoral program.** It would be helpful to learn how students perceive the internship requirement. If

they see it as helpful to sorting or achieving their career goals, there may be no problem. If they see it simply as another hurdle on the way to the degree, the problem may be in the way it is presented or framed within the program or the specializations. The requirement could be a holdover from the days that the degree granted was the EdD, thus, it is important for graduate faculty to have a shared understanding of the purpose and worth of this experience.

**Actively support the efforts of COEDSA.** Although it may be wisest not to mess with a good thing, the student leadership for COEDSA has continuously been challenged to find ways to involve the faculty in their activities. Doctoral students find it especially difficult to meet faculty members outside of their specializations and to learn about the research conducted in other specializations. Some specializations have very few faculty members associated with them, thus, it is critical for students to establish relationships with other faculty members as well as those in their specialization.

**Track the career choices of past recipients of the PhD degree in education.** Current students are intrigued with the career outcomes of those who have preceded them in the program. The information provided in this special issue is invaluable to those who are considering the career options available to doctoral degree holders. Maintaining a data base on graduates would not only be useful to current students, but would also provide the kind of data needed for program review and accreditation purposes.

**Make good use of the data in hand.** Surveys of doctoral student satisfaction have been conducted for the College as part of the accreditation process. The findings of these surveys can be useful to the graduate faculty as a whole as well as to the faculty members within specializations. The data have been disaggregated in a number of ways including differences by gender, race and ethnicity, age, and specialization. If there are differences in the experiences of graduate students based on such variables, efforts should be made to address disparities in the doctoral experience.

## Final Comment

The doctoral experience is not supposed to be a cakewalk; it is supposed to be a rigorous intellectual experience that results in a contribution to knowledge in the doctoral candidate's field of inquiry. The aim of this article is not to suggest that attrition rates and the level of student complaints should be addressed by lowering standards or reducing the quality of the training provided. It is to suggest, however,

that doctoral education deserves the critical attention of the faculty. No matter how extensive the concerns or the scrutiny from various stakeholders, doctoral preparation is the responsibility of the faculty. They have earned the international respect afforded US doctoral education, and they bear the responsibility for its shortcomings. Faculty members hold the key to the improvement of doctoral preparation; only members of the graduate faculty are in the position to model the highest of academic standards, to inspire and nurture the skills necessary to conduct first rate research, and to advise and mentor the next generation of scholars. Faculty members who respect their students demand the highest level of performance and provide the support students need to achieve the quality demanded.

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