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Section 2

January 17, 1990

OPINION

Universities Must Lead the Effort to Avert Impending National Shortages of Ph.D.'s

By John H. D'Arms

PRESIDENT BUSH, at his education summit with the nation's governors last September, missed an unusual opportunity to connect the present crisis in the nation's schools with a potential future crisis in the nation's colleges and universities. The parents of today's school children, already worrying about how they will be able to afford the college tuitions of the 21st century, should be worrying still more about whether there will be enough college professors to teach them. Yet neither Mr. Bush nor the governors so much as mentioned this issue.

The evidence pointing to impending national shortages of Ph.D.'s, both for faculty positions and for non-academic jobs, is considerable and convergent. Equally important, the evidence embraces virtually all intellectual fields and territories. A study commissioned by the National Science Board projects a decline of more than 1,500 Ph.D.'s in the natural sciences and engineering by 2000, owing to a shrinking pool of 18- to 24-year-olds, retirements, deaths, and movement out of the country; it projects a national shortage of 8,000 such Ph.D.'s by then. Business schools are projecting thousands of vacant faculty jobs.

And William G. Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa, in *Prospects for Faculty in the Arts and Sciences* and in subsequent studies, argue that even with the most conservative assumptions, the number of available positions projected for humanists and social scientists will considerably exceed the expected number of candidates, beginning around 1997. In short, there are already imbalances in all academic fields, and supply is not increasing fast enough to keep pace with demand.

We still have time to make the adjustments needed to correct these anticipated shortages, but only if the people and institutions responsible for shaping national policy in higher education now step forward together and act thoughtfully and with resolve. I cannot emphasize this too

strongly. Unlike the period of enormous expansion of numbers of Ph.D.'s in the 1960's, when (despite projections by Allan M. Carter) we failed to foresee the impending glut of Ph.D.'s, we have the solid data and careful analyses that policy makers need, if only they will heed the messages. The real danger is that we again will mis-time our response and wait to act until shortages become acute. That would be tragic: The Ph.D.'s needed by the late 90's should be entering graduate schools now, so as to be ready when market forces begin to exert their pressures.

Many actors are needed in this drama. Universities, business and industry, private donors, foundations, state legislatures, and the federal government all have a stake in securing a strong future for graduate education because of its conspicuous benefits for the larger society. Today's talented and highly motivated graduate students will become the faculty members of

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tomorrow, generating the new ideas that have always fostered growth within our society and provided the basis for college and university teaching. Outside the academic sector as well as within it, strong doctoral training is powerfully linked to the quality of the nation's research effort in nearly every field.

Universities should be leading the effort to avert the impending faculty shortages. But our own houses need to be set in far better order than they are at present. The steps that academics should take are both small and great. At the easier end of the

scale, faculty advisers should be familiarizing themselves with the projections of shortages and should be encouraging more of their able undergraduates to seek Ph.D.'s.

A FAR MORE DIFFICULT imperative is the redoubling of our efforts to diversify the membership of the academic profession. By building upon good ideas and pilot projects that really work, we must recruit more of the talented young Americans from minority groups who are currently not even participating in higher education, let alone planning for faculty careers.

The humanities and social sciences, where Bowen and Sosa project surprisingly large shortages, require special attention; it is time for some plain speaking here. In graduate education in these fields, deans, other administrators, and especially members of the professoriate must step up to three challenges of major proportions.

FIRST, we need to reduce the number of years our graduate students take to achieve the Ph.D.: The median time in all fields of the arts and sciences increased from 7.2 years in 1970 to an alarming 9.5 years in 1987; for the humanities, the figure is still higher.

Second, we must try to bring down the high rates of attrition in many programs: Precise data are lacking, but the national figure is something close to 50 per cent.

Third, especially in the large public universities, we must reduce the time that graduate students now typically spend away from their research teaching undergraduates: All available indicators suggest that graduate students are teaching more students for more hours for more years than was the case even as few as five years ago.

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THIS SET of interconnected challenges is especially vexing because the primary instigators of real change will have to be our faculty colleagues in the humanities and social sciences who construct the graduate curricula and set the degree requirements. They must be persuaded that their behavior needs to change. Faculty members make three main arguments:

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- That the specialized character of graduate education, and the sheer quantity of new theory and method that young doctoral students must master, will, and even should, work against rapid progress towards the degree.

- That short cuts always threaten to undermine quality; as one of my highly respected colleagues puts it, "The historic excellence of [our] graduate programs is the result of high standards, not high speed."

Now, of course more fellowship support is needed; of course new quantities and configurations of knowledge and methodological advances must be exploited; and of course programs must make appropriate allowances for interdisciplinary work, field experience, and mastering difficult languages—all of which have an impact upon the time it takes to earn the Ph.D. But I confess that I wonder why a talented B.A. in 1990 who couldn't reasonably expect to earn a Ph.D. in philosophy or anthropology or the history of art within seven years would not wish to pursue other career options instead.

Surely better balance and equilibrium, as well as a brisker and more efficient pace, could be achieved by bringing some countervailing mechanisms into play in graduate education.

As a beginning, I believe that faculty members in the social sciences and the humanities (among whom I include myself) could profitably ask ourselves the following questions:

- Given the resurgence of national interest in broader undergraduate education, with emphasis upon differing approaches to knowledge and critical thinking, are not many of the Ph.D.'s emerging from our

programs so specialized in their academic focus that they are really too narrowly trained to be effective in teaching undergraduates?

- When we incorporate new material into our graduate curricula, is it appropriately integrated or simply added on to already existing requirements? In our graduate seminars, do we balance our attachment to our own research topics against the academic needs of our students? Is our battery of course sequences, specialized

recent years. Progress could help members of Congress and state legislatures to understand better the role of graduate education in future economic and technological progress. Improved performance by universities could also be instrumental in persuading federal agencies, such as the National Endowments for the Arts and for the Humanities and the Departments of Education, Energy, and Defense, to follow the examples of the National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health,

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research seminars, and examinations being thought through coherently and freshly, with the best interests of our students constantly in view?

- After students pass preliminary examinations, are we in departments providing enough direction as they search for dissertation topics? In the life sciences, physical sciences, and engineering, where the time required to earn a doctorate is far shorter, graduate students are typically engaged in research alongside faculty members from the outset of their graduate careers. To what extent is this more collaborative research environment a model that can be adapted to faculty/student interactions in the humanities and social sciences?

- The steadily lengthening time needed to earn a degree, while imposing psychological and financial burdens on students, is also costing taxpayers more; further, it reduces (as the economist Howard P. Tuckman and others have pointed out) the

number of potential years of productive effort that highly educated individuals will have in the work force. Have we not, as university faculty members and administrators, but also as citizens, some broader responsibility to society to reduce the time required to earn the doctoral degree?

I believe that progress *within* academic institutions, on all of these fronts, will be critical in generating greater support for graduate education from *outside* them. Progress could help persuade some of the leading educational foundations to resume the financial support of graduate education from which they have largely retreated in

which in all of their activities have begun giving higher priority to graduate education.

IN SHORT, educational policy makers—starting with those of us in universities—have an unusual opportunity to put aside parochial interests, defensiveness, and panic, and to collaborate in a positive and organized fashion to confront the coming shortages by renewing our national investment in human capital. President Bush could exert real educational leadership by encouraging these efforts. But those of us in higher education must not wait to be prodded; we should step up to our own responsibilities now.

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