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**REPORT ON "CHANGING GRADUATE EDUCATION:
THE SIXTH NATIONAL CONFERENCE ON THE EDUCATION AND
EMPLOYMENT OF GRADUATE TEACHING ASSISTANTS,"
MINNEAPOLIS, MN. 6-9, NOVEMBER 1997**

Sitting in O'Hare Airport, waiting for my connecting flight to Minneapolis, I was struck by the multiplicity of roles I have taken on. I am heading to the TA conference for at least three professional reasons. As a scholar, I am looking for research which compliments my own on how people learn to be professors, as an instructional consultant who works both with TAs and academic departments on preparation for and improvement of teaching, I am looking for innovative ideas which I can bring back to my home campus. And now, as a journalist with an assignment for *WORKPLACE*, I am looking at how this gathering fits into the picture of academic labor.

A word of background before I discuss the 1997 conference. The first National Conference on the Employment and Education of Graduate Teaching Assistants was held in 1986 and focused on institutions' responsibilities for the teaching of their TAs. While I wasn't there, the proceedings suggest to me that this was a gathering of instructional support people, talking about how they could persuade the public that the fact that classes were taught by TAs rather than professors was not a failure by universities and also what they could do for and to graduate students to help them be "better" teachers.

By the second conference in 1989, some things had changed. The Pew Charitable Trusts had taken an interest in these issues and funded "Teaching Leadership Awards" to allow graduate students to attend the conference. No longer was the focus on what could be done for or to TAs so much as what TAs, faculty and support staff could do together. This meeting and the next one in 1991 seem to have provided much of the impetus for the Preparing Future Faculty programs sponsored by Pew and AAHE, programs which seek to address the many roles of faculty which graduate education may or may not be addressing. Even so, much of the attention was still on teacher "training."

I attended my first of these conferences in 1992. The theme of this meeting was "Engaging the Disciplines," and representatives of many of the learned societies including the MLA were in attendance. Many of the sessions addressed the ways in which centralized instructional support units like the Teaching Resources Center I work for could work in partnership with academic departments to improve the support which TAs received for their teaching.

In 1995, the conference was abuzz with reports on PFF; the universities which had received Pew/AAHE grants were in their second year of the program and had developed and were testing some interesting ideas. Most focused on broadening the definition of graduate education, on offering more than a piecemeal approach to preparation for the multiple roles of faculty: scholarship, teaching, and collegiality and service.

Also, these PFF programs try to address one of the fundamental difficulties of our system of graduate education as a preparation for the professoriate. That is: all graduate education in North America happens in fewer than 300 research universities, but most of those new PhDs who are lucky enough to find academic employment are hired by the more than 3300 colleges and universities which do not offer doctoral studies, whose missions and cultures are often quite different. The PFF programs seek to bridge this gap by forming partnerships between the doctoral institutions and other colleges and universities in their neighborhoods, placing some graduate students in these institutions for a semester or two to learn about what faculty life in such a place is like. These programs also regularly bring faculty from the partner institutions to the research campus to meet with graduate students.

Reports on these programs featured presentations by faculty from the research universities and the partner schools, but most persuasive were the testimonials of the graduate students who had participated. The programs are not available at all graduate schools, nor even to all students at the universities which sponsor such programs, but they seem to make a huge difference in the confidence and professional expectations of the students who do participate.

This year, the sixth conference in the series was advertised as focusing on "Changing Graduate Education." Quite a tall order.

In keeping with this theme, the consensus of opinion at the conference seemed to be that in the ten years since the first meeting of this group, there has been a great deal of improvement in the programmatic support of graduate students in developing teaching skills, at least at the institutions represented at the conference. Nobody was reporting still the kind of "throw 'em in the deep end" situation which I experienced as a new TA in 1982, discovering that I would teach my own class only two weeks before the term began and receiving a copy of last year's syllabus as my only guide for what to do.

Instead, while the focus of many sessions at this conference was still on reports of teaching support programs, many others shifted their attention to preparation for professional roles other than teaching: mentoring, the job search, and awareness of the differing institutional culture of non-research universities were three that I attended.

Also of special interest to me were reports on two research projects on the enculturation of future or new faculty, studies which parallel my own work. One project, funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts and carried out by Jo Sprague at San Jose State and Jody Nyquist, Don Wulff and Laura Manning of the University of Washington, is a qualitative, longitudinal study on graduate students' experiences across the years of their graduate study. This study is about half way through its four year program of interviews, but some themes are already emerging:

TA preparation is embedded in a larger context. Factors which affect progress toward professional goals include:

departmental and life responsibilities,
both formal and informal professional development activities,
and feedback.

Change is not linear nor do individuals experience it in the same way. Professional preparation is neither systematic nor consistent. Opportunities for reflection are important, yet the interviews for this study were often the only such opportunity mentioned.

The other study, by Linda Worley and Christy Halbert of the University of Kentucky, conducted surveys of two groups: faculty and administrators from 30 post-secondary institutions were asked what they want from newly hired faculty and newly hired faculty at UK were asked to rank the relative importance of many aspects of their careers and the preparation they received in graduate school. Hiring institutions seem to value an interest in and experience with general education more than specialist knowledge, collegiality and team spirit.

The recent PhDs were asked to rank items three ways: as personally important, as important to their career advancement, and how well their graduate experience prepared them to meet these demands. As I expected from my own research, publishing was the number one careers issue, followed closely by conducting research and professional presentations. Graduate school prepared them well for these activities, although publishing came in third rather than first in their preparation. However, their personal values differ; assessing students fairly, teaching well, and developing a personal teaching style top this list and publishing falls to number eight. We have all experienced gaps between "who we are and what we do to survive" as Jackson Browne put it ("The Pretender," 1977), but Worley and Halbert have begun to quantify the differences for academics.

The plenary speakers also reflected the broader focus on graduate education. Claudia Mitchell-Kernan, Vice-Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Dean of the Graduate Division at UCLA kicked off the conference Friday morning. An anthropologist by training, Professor Mitchell-Kernan looked at the socio-cultural system of higher education in a talk entitled "Disciplinary Culture and Graduate Education: Opportunity or Obstacle?" She pointed out that socialization of new members of any culture is a collective responsibility: "It takes a village." In the village of academe, this socialization is complicated by the complex geographic and trans-geographic structure of the profession, the slippery boundaries of disciplinary identities, the specialized missions of institutions, and the personal and political chemistry of various departments.

Mitchell-Kernan suggested that our conception of the teaching assistantship needs to be revised in order to promote ethics and responsibility in both research and teaching, to make explicit the informal socialization which many faculty assume will occur but often doesn't, and to provide mentoring on a broader and more flexible set of professional issues. She said that making these changes is the responsibility of individual faculty and departments, but that urging the changes and creating an environment supportive of such change is the responsibility of graduate school administrations. This sounds somewhat like the PFF idea. But exactly how we will negotiate this cultural shift from a system of graduate focused mostly on research to one which honors and supports teaching and other professional activities, however, was not entirely clear.

Friday afternoon, Donald Kennedy, former US Food and Drug Commissioner and ex-President of Stanford, spoke on "The PhD Octopus Revisited: New Challenges to Doctoral Education." Beginning with his own teaching autobiography, Kennedy reviewed the history of higher education since the ascendancy of the doctoral degree as the necessary credential for university faculty which William James characterized as "an octopus" in 190. The problem Kennedy identified is the one mentioned above as central to the PFF movement: all graduate education in North America happens in a research culture, but most new PhDs lucky enough to find academic employment are hired by colleges and universities that do not offer doctoral studies, whose missions and cultures are often teaching centered. He called this a "dysfunctional misalignment."

After reviewing the history and economics of the growth of PhD programs first to meet and then to exceed the needs of American higher education since 1945, Kennedy concluded that what he saw as "the overproduction of PhDs" is the result of a fundamental conflict of interest: as graduate students provide support for faculty research, both by serving as research assistants and by enrolling in specialized seminars, the very people who would have to agree to cut graduate enrollments have a vested interest in keeping them high (and are thus complicit in the underproduction of jobs).

In addition to praising the Pew/AAHE PFF initiative, Kennedy suggested reducing time-to-degree by requiring a shorter dissertation. In order to raise the value of teaching to parallel that of research, he would require the thesis be understandable to an educated layperson and to explicitly deal with the implications the reported research has for the teaching of the discipline. He also proposed that universities invite teams of senior TAs from several programs to design and teach interdisciplinary, upper-division courses in order to gain experience with course design, cross-disciplinary communication, and teaching a different student population. Kennedy finished his talk by praising those present, saying that over the past ten years, teaching and TA programs were the part of graduate education which had actually made improvements. He challenged the rest of graduate education to do as well.

The third plenary speaker was Jules LaPibus of the Council of Graduate Schools. Very soon after this conference, LaPibus published a "Point of View" essay in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* which took a tone which could easily be read as blaming the victim, graduate students, for the so-called "overproduction of PhDs." I won't take up the argument against this piece here; I simply mention it to say that when speaking to an audience of TAs and their advocates, he did not take that tone at all. Taking his title from a quotation found in the 1958 Italian novel by Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard*, LaPibus claimed that "If we want things to stay as they are, things will have to change." That is to say, if the nature of higher education and the role of the university in our society is to stay the same as it has been, the relationships between faculty, graduate students and administrators and the institutions of higher education will have to change. He spoke of the changes "forced upon us" by technology, distance education, and the challenge of such institutions as the University of Phoenix to the traditional, place-bound concept of education. He claimed that he did not believe that new technology would mean the end of faculty careers, but he did imply that the shape of such careers will likely be different than in the past.

LaPibus claimed that while the current model of graduate education is good at preparing researchers, it does not help them look at their work within the bigger picture of scholarship, nor does it prepare them very well for the transition to a career, either as faculty or in industry (noting that close to half of all PhDs have always gone to industry rather than higher education, ignoring disciplinary differences). He said that to remain relevant, graduate education change from the master/apprentice metaphor to one of intellectual collegiality; not only to prepare future faculty, but also future industrial researchers.

His tone was not accusatory, but his message was not hopeful. (For the full text of a version of this paper, see www.cgs.org).

As has been my experience at all three of these National GTA Conferences, the participants and presenters were far ahead of the big-name speakers on most of the issues facing graduate students as teachers and as people preparing for a professional career. The National Consortium on Preparing Graduate Students as College Teachers once again did an excellent job of bringing together its several constituencies-teaching support professionals, faculty committed to TA development, and activist graduate students-to share information and to build interest and energy for the continuation of efforts to assist TAs in performing the duties asked of them as graduate employees and also to change graduate school from simply a system of research training and credentialing into a broad-based preparation for many of the aspects of a faculty life, especially but not only, teaching.

The conference was sponsored by:

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