

# University explosion

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subject. This is regarded by some as a grave deficiency which should be remedied by formal training. However, members of Education faculties are not conspicuously better teachers than their untrained colleagues in other faculties; neither is it necessarily true that if they really know their subject they can teach it. Perhaps neither graduate nor teacher training as currently practised is relevant to acquiring ability as a teacher.

On the other hand, it has been shown that many Ph.D.'s are turning out to be neither productive scientists nor dedicated scholars. Some never do anything after their Ph.D. research, while others turn out worthless trivia. *The product is defective and ill-designed.*

Studies further show that graduate training and consequent Ph.D.'s are being given in subjects devoid of scholarly or scientific content in which genuine intellectual research cannot be pursued. This criticism is justly made of many American institutions and is true also in Canada. No doubt you can all recall appropriate examples of this *unfair competition from inferior products deceptively labelled and packaged.*

The contrary criticism is also made, namely, that the standards for the Ph.D. are unrealistically high, thus leading in many cases to failure or prolonged delay in attaining the degree. *The product is a luxury item too expensive for the mass market.*

All the above criticisms are heavily documented in the literature on the subject, but for the most part the critics have directed their attention to the reform or the revision of the Ph.D. system. In my view, the point is not to change the system but to destroy it.

The most radical criticism of the Ph.D. system was made by William James as long ago as 1903, when by today's standards graduate studies had hardly gotten off the ground. In an essay entitled "The Ph.D. Octopus," James wrote,

*America is thus a nation rapidly drifting towards a state of things in which no man of science or letters will be accounted respectable unless some kind of badge or diploma is stamped upon him and in which bare personality will be a mark of outcaste estate. It seems to me high time to rouse ourselves to consciousness and to cast a critical eye upon this decidedly grotesque tendency. Other nations suffer terribly from the Mandarin disease. Are we doomed to suffer like the rest . . . As it actually prevails and grows in vogue among us, it is due to childish motives exclusively. In reality it is but a sham, a bauble, a dodge, whereby to decorate the catalogues of schools and colleges. Our universities should never*

*cease to regard themselves as the jealous custodians of personal and spiritual spontaneity . . . They ought to guard against contributing to the increase of officialism and snobbery and insincerity as against a pestilence; they ought to keep truth and disinterested labor always in the foreground, treat degrees as secondary incidents, and in season and out of season make it plain that what they live for is to help men's souls and not to decorate their persons with diplomas.*

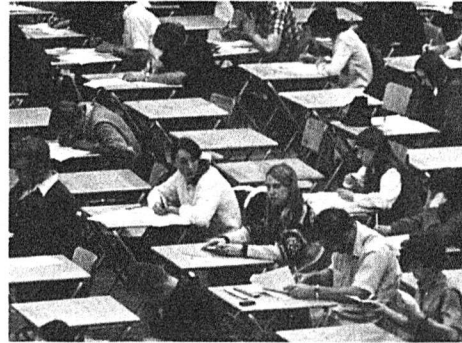
The insights made in James' trenchant essay can be elaborated and extended. The present system of graduate studies culminating in the Ph.D. is inimical to original inquiry. As James pointed out, it substitutes unworthy title-seeking for the appropriate and proper motives for research.

It continues the formalities of undergraduate years into the sphere of graduate study, blurring the essential difference between the two. Thus, it persists in maintaining the link between intellectual enquiry and the examinations, tests, courses, curricula, and all the rest of the red tape of academic life.

The Ph.D. system puts a premium on imitiveness. It destroys the student's independence. A mediocre or even bad piece of work done by the student himself would be better than the streamlined synthetic construction which he usually produces in collaboration with his supervisor.

Not only is the Ph.D. system bad for the intellectual development of the student, it frequently wastes the time of the supervisor and prevents him from doing his own research. Professor C. D. Broad of Cambridge once expressed his dissatisfaction with the Ph.D., perhaps with some understandable exaggeration, by remarking that it is a device whereby the time of someone capable of research is taken up in supervising the work of those who never will be. The late Ludwig Wittgenstein had something of the same sort in mind when he succinctly advised one of his American students "Don't be a professor!" Both men felt that there was a fundamental incompatibility between doing original thinking and putting Ph.D. candidates through the hoops.

In spite of William James' warning in 1903, the octopus grew, and now has us all in his tentacles. Why did this happen? Chiefly because the academic world increasingly became dominated by the "ethics" and ideology of the business world. Graduate study became a business with Doctors of Philosophy as the product. Notice how appropriately the revisionist criticisms of



the Ph.D. system can be expressed in business terminology! Notice also that as so often is the case in business, the product *may* be useful but *need* not be, for skillful advertising can create demand for a worthless product. Thousands of students are completing graduate programs which have little real relevance to their abilities or their future activities and employment, because they know that the possession of the Ph.D. will increase their earning power. A demand has been created for Ph.D.'s, but we probably need Ph.D.'s as little as we need cars with tail fins and chrome fittings. Advertising has certainly entered the field of higher learning. A stream of attractive brochures pours across the continent every year—from Alberta to Texas and from California to Nova Scotia—advertising rival graduate schools, each trying to lure away potential graduate students from the others. From the point of view of education this competition is largely irrational. If it is a healthy educational institution a university should develop its own scholars and researchers and by and large, although not exclusively, its advanced studies should be pursued by its former undergraduates.

In some circumstances there are good reasons for graduate migration, but the movement that prevails at present extends far beyond this reasonable amount. The transfer is often disturbing to the person concerned and is wasteful and uneconomic for all. To some extent it favors the large long-established and well advertised universities as against their smaller or younger counterparts.

In this aspect of business as in others Canada is a subsidiary of the United States. Our best undergraduate students tend not to stay with us for advanced study but rather to go to the better advertised or

wealthier universities across the border. In return we get their lesser students who are thus farmed out on our universities. We are engaged in a process of exchanging the best for the second rate, although there are many exceptions to this and the process may be to some extent modified by the effects of the American military draft.

Post-graduate study and research should be separated from the competitive and commercial framework within which it is imprisoned and which we have unwisely accepted from our neighbors.

What can we hope to do about this? Not much, I fear, of immediate significance. Some look to the reform of university administration and rest their hopes upon the emergence of universities run by academics instead of businessmen and government appointees. Desirable as this may be, it will not of itself affect the system of graduate study. Most academics are more committed to it than are the businessmen or the board of trustees. After all, most of them have invested a great deal of time, money and energy in acquiring a Ph.D. Why should they do anything to disturb its prestige or its monetary worth? In fact younger faculty members who have recently emerged from the system are often the most vigorous in perpetuating and extending the system. If university reform will not bring about a change, then perhaps revolution will; perhaps the current student unrest and revolt will lead to a breaking up of the rigid and conformist framework of graduate studies. I think this is unlikely since most students are busy working their way through the system, and the most we can expect from the others are abortive "peasant revolts" which are so disorganized and lacking in rational motivation that a period of disruption is usually followed by a return to the status quo.

The most we can look for, metaphorically speaking, is the formation of "guerilla bands" to attack the Ph.D. system and a long period of "guerilla warfare."

Those of us who care enough to resist the commercialization of research and intellectual enquiry should withdraw from so-called graduate work and divide our time between undergraduate teaching, our own scientific or scholarly work, and informal and unorganized communication with advanced students.

If enough of this happens, eventually the present organization of graduate studies around the production of Ph.D.'s will collapse under the weight of its own futility and mediocrity.

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