

What do Model T Fords and a PhD degree have in common? Both are serviceable but obsolete by today's standards.

That, sad to say, is the truth. PhDs are about as valuable today as Edsels, Avro Arrows, and all the other mistakes of this technological age. And, just for openers, here are a few examples why:

(1) Last year, a college in California signed an agreement with the local plumbers' union that guarantees campus plumbers more than \$20,000 a year. The average faculty salary at that campus is about \$1,000 less. So far nobody has argued that this wage differential is unfair.

(2) Memorial University is located in St. John's, Newfoundland. Now it is a fact of life that most post-graduate students come from the major urban areas of the country - and they like to stay in those urban areas. So Memorial has traditionally been forced to take the dregs of the annual crop of new PhDs. But this year, some graduating PhDs from the University of Toronto, which is generally regarded as having the best economics department in the country, were not even able to obtain interviews for the few teaching vacancies in economics that Memorial was filling. And - surprise - economics is still considered to offer more opportunities for those with graduate training than most other academic disciplines.

(3) The traditional method for universities to hire new PhDs for faculty positions has been to offer a two-year introductory contract with another two-year renewal almost certain. Then, barring an act of God, the PhD could expect to be granted



# THE PhD SYNDROME

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Reprinted from "Today's Generation"

tenure (a lifetime contract). So what can new PhDs expect today? Most likely a one-year appointment to such centres as Brandon, Manitoba, or Fredericton, New Brunswick. Tenure? Oh, don't even mention that.

(4) Finally, just when the financial rewards for graduate studies seem bleakest, the Ontario government has jacked up tuition fees. A typical graduate student in Ontario paid \$485 in tuition last year. The Ontario government has graciously raised this figure by almost 100 per cent for the coming year (face it, students are politically vulnerable). At the same time, the amount of Ontario government fellowship money (the basic source of most students' grants) has been cut from \$5 million to \$3 million. Just for good measure, those students who do obtain fellowships are paying income taxes on those fellowships to the federal government for the first time this year.

In case you missed the point, a graduate student today has every right to feel that the cards are stacked against him. Most graduate students entered graduate school on the understanding that, while they might not be approached by would-be employers on bended knees, they would be in a favourable competitive position compared to the rest of society. Instead they find that the old joke about plumbers earning more than doctors is no longer a joke. (There are, to be sure, still some individuals who go to graduate school for the classic reason that more knowledge is a desirable state. But there are fewer and fewer people today who believe in the classical ideal of the well-rounded man. For the purposes of this article, these individuals are considered about as relevant to current conditions as the Neanderthal man.)

Most people today are aware that there are worms in the education apple. But it is doubtful whether anyone who is not actively involved in the training and hiring of PhDs could ever fully appreciate the advanced state of decay.

Sadly enough, the institutions which should be providing the information on employment probabilities for PhDs are abdicating their responsibilities. The government, which has the best over-all picture of employment prospects, has not actively publicized the falling ratio of demand to supply for PhDs. Perhaps the government is afraid of the political scandal that widespread publicity of the situation would cause. After all, how many people would approve of spending \$26,000 or more to train one PhD after the BA level simply to become unemployed?

But the universities are as much at fault as anyone. Even as the universities are experiencing considerable difficulty in placing their PhDs (it is considered good form for universities to place their doctoral graduates), they are actively recruiting even more grad students--and establishing new graduate departments. The whole plot is reminiscent of the Sorcerer's Apprentice.

Not that the universities are guilty of anything more serious than a natural human weakness. In Ontario, the provincial government pays the university operating grants of \$1,000 for each freshman student. By the time that freshman becomes a master's student, he is worth \$6,000 a year to the university. And, best of all, a doctoral student brings in the incredible amount of \$10,000 yearly. So what would anyone with a head for simple figures prefer - freshmen or graduate students?

Moreover, graduate students are a cheap source of labour. On average, some 40 per cent of all undergraduate teaching is conducted by graduate students. But graduate students are also versatile - they can mark papers, supervise exams, and do the legwork on departmental experiments, too. The grad student is, in so many ways, a departmental serf.

Accordingly, the game is to expand one's graduate department to the greatest extent and still convince the government that the student

quality is high. Several schools now have well-organized recruitment drives that send professors (at public expense, as all university costs ultimately are) to various parts of the country to entice new graduate students. Until recently, it was even considered fair play to recruit foreign students (hence the very high proportion of Asian and African students in Ontario graduate schools); but the Ontario government yelled foul and refused to subsidize all foreign students, though a certain number are still allowed under various treaties and scholarship plans. Not all schools, or all departments in the schools that do, are guilty of these ploys, but the practice is sufficiently widespread to be disturbing. Another aspect of the recruitment game is to use a portion of the government grant to provide a subsidy for students. It is any wonder that the graduate school business is booming?

For all that, however, the schools do not go out of their way to make it easy to be a student. The popular image of the carefree grad student who would rather sit in the coffee shop than work is a depressingly unfunny joke.

A PhD degree involves a minimum of three years of university study following graduation with a bachelor's degree. More often, it works out to four or five years - and several of the physical sciences can require even longer, depending on the progress of one's research. During that time, the course of study makes remarkably little provision for wine, women, and song (although no small number of grad students turn to the wime and related products as a means of maintaining their sanity).

The first year typically leads to a master's degree (an MA in arts or an MSc in sciences). Most master's degrees require five year-long courses or four courses and a thesis. The master's thesis is declining in favour among faculty (and was never particularly popular with students) because supervising a thesis is more demanding than teaching a course.

Very few people who are accepted into a master's program fail to earn the degree, so if you really want an MA, don't worry about the outcome. The catch is that the year is spent in weeding out those students who don't have what the faculty believes is necessary for a good PhD (generally a combination of a good analytical mind, the blind obedience of a dog, and a total lack of imagination). Imagine the thrill of writing an examination and knowing that the slightest slip means the end of one's scholastic career. Here they call it education but the Geneva Convention undoubtedly prohibits the use of such psychological warfare.

O.K. Perhaps you are one of the 30 to 40 per cent of the master's students who will be accepted into a PhD program. And here's where the real fun begins. The normal course requirements are two, and they are a formality - nobody ever fails a PhD level course. Offsetting this unusual show of compassion, however, North American universities have devised a cunning scheme known as comprehensive examinations (known far and wide as comps). And you haven't lived until you've written your comps.

The idea is that, after seven years of university study beyond high school, the student is given a set of written and oral examinations that can cover anything in the student's field. Anyone who fails twice (and it is easy to fail solely because of mental pressures, despite a good understanding of one's field) is dismissed from the school. Liquor stores love comps because they increase business. Psychiatrists love comps for the same reason. Students hate comps.

After the course work and comps are completed only a thesis stands between you and the right to call yourself "Doctor" (and get phone calls in the middle of the night asking if you make house calls). What is a thesis? Nothing much, just "an original and important" contribution to the subject. What's important? Try a study of the Easter Island beetle nut industry.

But wait. The worst is yet to come. After all, you only spent a minimum of seven years in university because of the understanding that

when you finished employers would be lining up with offers. Perhaps \$1,500 a month to start, executive title, liberal vacation and retirement allowance. Well, we've already settled that that isn't how it works anymore.

There have been instances of students who were offered jobs after completing their master's degrees. They declined, only to reapply for those same jobs after completing PhDs. The employers no longer were interested; "overtrained" is a very significant word for the PhD in today's world.

"Overtrained" is an ambiguous term with two meanings. On the one hand, it means most jobs would be too boring for the individual with ability to obtain a doctorate (though, by foregoing doctorate training, anyone can cover up this undesirable excess of ability). Employers know that most PhDs become restless after a brief stay in most private-sector jobs, which are generally below their abilities. On the other hand, after seven or more years of constant studying and living on small incomes that do not allow for extensive social contacts, PhDs require no small amount of time to adjust to working with people.

So the PhD turns to the government and becomes a civil servant. (Question: is the government expanding rapidly just to absorb the amount of high-priced talent that it has trained?) But, even at the incredible rate at which government has been expanding, there are no longer enough jobs to go around. Once the government cannot accommodate any more PhDs, wifé will they to? To drive taxis? It is a very real possibility.

In the meantime, the students who are unsuccessful in the job market stay in school and stretch out their theses, living off the subsistence-level fellowship incomes. And wonder about a system that pays more for plumbers than doctorates.