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Academic Quality

There is frequent occasion to ask, "How good is the department of X at the University of Y?" Answers are now available for 29 academic fields in the 106 universities that award some 95 percent of all Ph.D. degrees in the U.S. Allan M. Cartter, vice president of the American Council on Education, has tabulated the judgments of informed scholars in each field to answer two questions: How good is the quality of the graduate faculty? How effective is the graduate program they offer? (A fuller report of the study appears on page 1226.)

Clearly it is better to have valid and reliable answers to these questions than to depend on estimates of unknown quality. The reliability of the judgments is extremely high (average, .99). Ratings are essentially the same whether made by department heads, senior faculty members, or junior faculty members. There is a bit of disagreement, but still surprisingly good consensus, among judges in different geographic regions and with different past or present relations to the institutions judged. Correlations with other evidence of quality are high. All in all, the ratings are highly dependable statements of the quality of graduate departments as judged by informed peers.

Of the 1663 departments surveyed, in all 29 fields, 140 were rated as distinguished, 405 as strong, 288 as good, 328 as adequate, 451 as marginal, and 51 as insufficient to give satisfactory graduate training. There are, of course, still other departments, of varying quality, in the institutions that award the remaining 5 percent of Ph.D. degrees.

The tabulated departmental ratings can be used as the quality equivalent of a social register, or, to use a different analogy, as a kind of academic handicappers' manual. More seriously, they give any department a solid basis for knowing how far it has to go to get where it wants to be. And on a national scale the quality ratings, taken together with related information concerning salary schedules, budgets, libraries, and other characteristics, are highly relevant to the current effort to increase the number of first-rate institutions and to achieve a wider geographic spread of institutions of excellence. Comparison of this study with several earlier but less detailed ones indicates that some progress is being made. There are institutions (Arizona, Delaware) that have built up one distinguished or strong department, and others that have achieved several. Washington University in St. Louis now has four strong, nine good, and six adequate departments. The University of Washington in Seattle is an even better example of an institution on the move toward distinguished quality. It now has 15 strong, nine good, and one adequate department. Such examples provide welcome evidence that we are increasing the opportunity for graduate work of high quality and making it available on a wider geographic basis.

But the data also provide a sobering reminder that these goals cannot be achieved by any easy method such as a simple change in the geographic distribution of currently available research and fellowship funds. Large institutional grants to selected universities that already have some strong departments, that have salary schedules high enough to attract and retain men of top quality, and that have other advantages and are on the way upward will elevate some good departments to strong ones and some strong departments to distinguished ones. But much work, money, devotion, and sound judgment will be required to increase greatly the number of distinguished and strong departments.—DAEL WOLFLE