

Letters

The Ph.D. Market

I am disturbed about the attitudes toward doctoral programs and doctorate holders expressed in the article "The future market for Ph.D.'s" by Dael Wolfle and Charles V. Kidd (27 Aug., p. 784). Wolfle and Kidd propose that the national need for persons trained to the doctoral level has been met and that there is now a surplus of people with doctorates. Moreover, it appears that the production of doctorates will continue to increase for some years, as will the disparity between the number of jobs and the number of doctorate holders. The implicit assumption is that such a situation is bad, one to be avoided at some cost.

One major ideological strand subsumed in manpower studies is what might be called the licensing approach to higher education. A degree is viewed both as a license to practice a particular trade or profession and, especially for the Ph.D. holder, a near guarantee of a job.

Clearly, from this point of view, the number of people who hold doctorates must be commensurate with the number of positions available. Since the number of available positions is determined by factors outside the universities, nonacademic agencies often attempt to change the content of academic programs. These are, in effect, attempts to make the university more responsive to external economic pressures. We have seen the gross abundance which resulted from the infusion of federal funds in massive quantities. Now we feel the pinch. Wolfle and Kidd hint (p. 792) that our own self-interest and other intangibles will make the problem worse.

Another strand of ideas that has always been implicit in the American approach to higher education was made explicit by Stephen K. Bailey, a regent of the State of New York, when he noted that the purpose of higher education is not so much to prepare people for occupations as it is "to make joyful persons" (1). In other words, there are reasons for earning an academic degree that may be quite unrelated to those assumed in manpower surveys.

Graduate faculties have an obligation to let students know what the job market is like, so they can make wise decisions about pursuing advanced degrees. But the decision ought to be left to the student. There is little reason why graduate departments should function as filters for the professions. There are good reasons for limiting enrollment, but a shortage of positions, it seems to me, is not one of them. Nor is it a good reason for limiting the number of graduate programs available in the nation.

Some students who are now entering graduate programs seem to understand the situation. One of our new students explained that if he had not gone to college, he would have retired to the mountains of Pennsylvania and become a cabinetmaker. Now he expects to have a Ph.D. when he opens his cabinet-making business in the Pennsylvania mountains. My guess is that both he and the rest of us will be better off for his having a doctorate.

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Reference

1. S. K. Bailey, address delivered at the inauguration of Marvin A. Rapp as third president of Onondaga Community College, Syracuse, N.Y., November 1968.

Because I received my Ph.D. last June and was fortunate enough to find a good job, I may have something to add to the article by Wolfle and Kidd.

A large part of the overproduction of Ph.D.'s is due to a disease, now quite widespread in the professional community, known as "publish or perish." Most professional scientists are pressured to publish so that they may secure salary and status raises. To publish a scientific paper requires research, analysis of data, and organization of the data into a form suitable for publication. These tasks should be done by professionals in laboratories, but they are usually too time consuming and too expensive. The only answer is to hire more and more graduate students to collect the data and write a large percentage of the papers.

A lot of graduate students are not-

ing more than glorified technicians. After years of dedicated work and trying to live on salaries that approach poverty levels, they are awarded the highest academic degree, a Ph.D. I wonder how many of the new Ph.D.'s have a real love for science and scientific investigation. Advisers to graduate students should ask themselves whether they are producing professional scientists or professional technicians.

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The main purpose of our article was to present and compare the forecasts of supply and demand of Ph.D.'s that have been made by the most competent people. Our intent was to help all who are concerned with graduate education to consider the adjustments that must be made when the number of Ph.D.'s is increasing more rapidly than the number of positions generally considered suitable by Ph.D.'s. Neither Pia nor Rolek considers this point. Our article was intended to supply information that would help students and others make those decisions.

Clearly the graduate student is not the only person whose decisions are or should be involved. Pia's example of the cabinetmaker quite overlooks the legitimate question of how much society wishes, or can afford, to share the cost of the most expensive level of education. Pia makes earning a Ph.D. wholly a consumer good, desired by the recipient but of no value to society. Desire by the recipient is certainly one legitimate value of the Ph.D., but if it is all that is involved, society might well ask the recipient to pay all of the costs.

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Environmental Quality Standards

In his article "Sanity in research and evaluation of environmental health" (12 Nov., p. 662) H. E. Stokinger calls for a "realistic" evaluation of environmental problems and suggests seven "commandments" to guide us. Many unfortunate statements by overzealous