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Of Time and the Doctorate

The idealized picture of a new Ph.D. in science is of a student who had his course well charted in advance and who was aided by assistantships and fellowships to earn the doctorate in approximately 4 years. As a matter of fact, only about one student in ten gets through that quickly. The typical one finished college without expecting to go on for the doctorate and without clear plans for any graduate work. In the B.A.-Ph.D. interval he spent 9 months in military service, worked a couple of years, usually as a college teacher or in other professional work, was enrolled in graduate school for more than 3 years on a full-time basis and for another year and a half part time, and finally got the doctorate nearly 8 years after the B.A.

These data are from a new study* that adds considerable descriptive and interpretive detail to the information on B.A.-Ph.D. time lapse previously published by the National Academy of Sciences-National Research Council and others. The study surveyed recipients of the doctorate between 1950 and 1958 in 16 fields, from 23 southern universities. Some factors may differ by geographic region, but in terms of B.A.-Ph.D. time lapse the sample was generally representative of the country as a whole.

Both the Ph.D. recipients and their mentors were asked whether the usual delay could or should be shortened. About a fourth thought not, but the large majority suggested ways of reducing the time lapse. Much emphasis was given to changes in organization and planning. Students and teachers both recommended that more and earlier counseling be given graduate students, that program planning be more systematic, that students be given a clearer understanding of their own responsibilities and of institutional and departmental expectations, and that faculty advisers provide more continuous monitoring of student progress.

Science departments already appear to do better on these points than do others. The graduate deans and professors explained the shorter average time lapse in the sciences (and particularly in chemistry, the "fastest" field of all) largely in terms of the tighter structuring of graduate work in science. But the respondents thought there was room for considerable improvement in most science departments.

These recommendations merit serious consideration. They would probably work, and shortening the average time for the next few years would be the equivalent of increasing the number of successful candidates. Yet caution is in order. Too much guidance, structuring, detailed program planning, and the like could change the character of the Ph.D. degree even if its level were not intentionally or appreciably changed. While some change in character may be appropriate for the nonresearch degree that is being considered in some quarters, the independent research characteristic of the Ph.D. surely should be preserved.

Graduate faculties seem therefore to be presented with a nice problem of balancing objectives and techniques. The task is one of identifying and encouraging good candidates earlier, and of imparting a clearer understanding of what is expected of them while still leaving them ample opportunity to stumble, to profit from their own errors and successes, and to develop scholarly independence.—DAEL WOLFLE

* *Of Time and the Doctorate*, by Kenneth M. Wilson. Atlanta, Georgia, Southern Regional Education Board, 1965, ix + 212 pp.