

IMPROVING GRADUATE PROGRAMS

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A critical shortage of research personnel exists today in vocational education; and it appears, at present, the shortage will continue into the foreseeable future. We have fumbled the ball on the one-yard line and may be able to rationalize some kind of justification for having done so; it is doubtful, however, if any justification about past failures makes good sense in light of present conditions. We fumbled, so let's see why and, in the process, see if we are still creating an environment for future fumbles.

Just for the fun of it, let's develop a graduate program that will produce a high percentage of ABD's (all but Dissertation) and BOOR's (burned out on research). First, the department should not be involved in research in cooperation with its experiment station, local research council, or any research facility either on or off the campus. It should, however, rely on graduate students to write thesis and dissertation reports in lieu of a purposeful departmental research program.

Departmental faculty members should be able to rationalize a lack of time to conduct research because of teaching loads and related responsibilities. Graduate students should be assigned to professors who work diligently to develop degree programs that will provide broad understanding of the field. Credit for research should be listed last on a degree plan because it can be altered to balance out the minimum number of hours or credits required by the graduate office for the degree.

Graduate students should be selected only from among successful teachers who have taught five years or more--they know what education is all about and can reap maximum benefit from education courses.

Research for the dissertation should be placed at or near the end of the degree program. It should, by all means, be enshrouded in mystery and serve as a "bogeyman" to frighten students as they approach it semester by semester.

When the end of course work is nearing, students should be told in no uncertain terms that they must find a problem if they expect to be granted a doctor's degree. At this point major advisors can begin to sense the achievement of their goal--an ABD or a BOOR. It is not certain yet which it will be, so students are told they should take a job when courses are completed and write a dissertation while employed. It is important that this group gets out so assistantships can be granted to another batch of potential ABD's and BOOR's. To be fair, they should be told it's difficult to do research while on a full-time job; but if

they really want the degree, they will find time to find a problem and attempt a solution. Also, the report must be written in a very formal manner and must be free from all errors to please the graduate dean.

Likewise, it must be pointed out that while on the job the candidate will not find it convenient to meet with his professor for advice about his dissertation; but when he has something written, he should send it to the professor. The professor then should write a critical review of the student's work--far more lengthy than the work submitted. Along with the written criticism, the professor should point out that the student's progress is good, but he is not sure the problem selected nor the treatment applied will be acceptable to all members of the student's graduate committee. After a few exchanges of this kind, the probability of an ABD rises; however, it is now certain that if this procedure fails to produce an ABD, a BOOR is insured (an ABD is to be preferred because he is less prolific in reproducing his kind).

By the way, a student's graduate committee should be composed of BOOR's who were hazed and who believe that hazing is a good thing for graduate students--one who has been hazed bears the mark of a scholar. A second and important consideration in the selection of graduate committee members is that they be good fellows and likely to accept the minimum required by the graduate dean for fulfilling degree requirements. Specialized competence should not be considered as a requirement for choosing a committee member.

The above system may not have been used, but some means has been highly successful in producing the critical shortage that currently exists for persons competent in educational research. Almost 100 percent of those who hold the doctorate have conducted enough research to write a dissertation, yet it is quite evident that this amount is inadequate within the confines of this group to produce the research competence needed at this present time.

Regardless of all the good things that might be said about our past doctoral programs, they have failed miserably. Therefore, let's admit we have fumbled; but let's also resolve to change our tactics to lessen the probability of fumbles in the future.

Perhaps the following should be considered to improve graduate programs:

1. Efforts should be made to identify persons at the undergraduate level who seem to possess research potential. Professional experience as a prerequisite for graduate study should be eliminated. Most persons possessing a high level of research potential are probably lost from the profession within five years.
2. Major advisors should be research oriented and should be involved directly in departmental research.

3. All students whose graduate programs require a thesis should become directly involved in research no later than the second semester of study. The first semester's study should involve research methodology, statistics, and research seminars.
4. Programs should be planned to provide opportunity for students to complete the thesis or dissertation when course work is completed or soon thereafter. A thesis or dissertation should not be an appendage. Adequate financial assistance should be provided to enable students to complete degrees before leaving campuses.
5. Adequate depth should be built into degree programs to allow students to achieve high degrees of competence in areas of interest. A little of this, a little of that, and a little of something else is inadequate to meet the specialized needs of today.
6. A student's graduate committee should be chosen on the basis of competence in relation to the student's objective, especially his interest in research.

While we are thinking about what ought to be, one more thing needs to be mentioned--or perhaps it's a question. What effort has been made at institutions offering doctoral programs with majors in agricultural education to achieve any degree of specialization? It seems logical to assume that each staff in agricultural education is not equally competent in all phases of education. Some, it seems, because of staff training, would be strong in research, another in curriculum, another in administration, and so on. It would be quite helpful to persons advising with graduate students to be able to recommend an institution that has a program especially suited to the interests and future educational goals of students. Are we mature and unselfish enough to do this now, or will it be necessary to wait a few more years until most of us BOOR's have retired?