

'Small Is Beautiful' for Its Ph.D. Programs, Washington U. Decides

With fewer students, grants are bigger and degrees take less time

BY DENISE K. MAGNER

WHEN UNIVERSITIES cut enrollments in their Ph.D. programs, they usually keep quiet about it. The move could be seen as a sign of money problems, they reason—or of graduates' faring poorly in the job market.

Neither is true of Washington University, which has nonetheless been scaling back its doctoral programs. The university enrolled 187 new doctoral students last fall, down from a peak of 229 in 1992.

Accepting fewer students is only part of Washington's new approach to graduate education. It is also recruiting more selectively, and it is providing every student with full financial support for six years.

"We're trying to educate people that small is beautiful," says the chancellor, Mark S. Wrighton.

The university's new philosophy cuts against the grain of conventional wisdom about doctoral education—that a larger program is more prestigious, and that competition among students for money is healthy. It is not unusual for universities to offer their best students full support—typically, tuition remission and a stipend. But very few support *all* of their Ph.D. candidates for six years of their training.

The architect of Washington's new plan is Robert E. Thach, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences. When he began considering the change, in 1993, his motive, he says, was simply to increase face-to-face contact between students and professors. "We decided the way to do that was to reduce the number of graduate students admitted to our programs.

"We didn't know whether faculty would

sign on," he says. "But when we packaged it with providing support in the fifth and sixth years, and sometimes in the seventh and eighth, there was not much faculty resistance at the time—and today, even less."

NOT ENOUGH TEACHING ASSISTANTS?

Professors do have concerns about the new policies. They worry about their Ph.D. programs' becoming too small and about a possible shortage of teaching assistants. But many here say their willingness to go along is not surprising, given the weak academic job market in the 1990s. It is hard to justify enlarging Ph.D. programs these days.

"It's sort of like forcing you to take medicine you know you should take," says Richard J. Smith, chairman of the anthropology department. "The job market makes clear this is an important direction to go in, but you try to resist it, thinking that your department is different. But you know it's good medicine."

Since the fall of 1994, virtually every doctoral student in the graduate school has received tuition remission and a stipend of \$10,000 to \$16,000 a year for living expenses. To afford this, Washington has slowly cut back on admissions, even in some of its top-ranked departments. For instance, the anthropology Ph.D. program—which ranked 16th among 69 in a recent National Research Council study—has reduced admissions for next fall to seven students from nine.

In the early '90s, the university enrolled about 125 graduate students each year in the humanities. Since the fall of 1994, that

figure has dropped 29 per cent, to an average of 89 new students a year. New graduate enrollment in the social sciences is down 14 per cent and in the physical sciences, 12 per cent. The exception is in the biological sciences, where the average class size has increased 8 per cent since 1994, to about 64 new students a year. Dean Thach says the ratio of graduate students to professors was already low in the biological sciences, so there was no reason to reduce it further.

The shift in philosophy, he says, "has been a godsend for a lot of reasons we hadn't anticipated." For one thing, the university has become more attractive to the best students. "Word got out," he says, "and we started enrolling students we might have had difficulty attracting previously." This academic year, applications to Washington's Ph.D. programs are up 19 per cent. And entering students' scores on the Graduate Record Examination have jumped 40 to 50 points in recent years, on a scale of 800.

IMPROVED RETENTION

What's more, the time it takes students to earn their Ph.D.'s at Washington has been dropping. From 1988 to 1992, the average for a Ph.D. candidate in the humanities here was 9.8 years; now it is 7.4 years. In the social sciences, the average is now 6 years, down from 8 years.

Retention has improved as well. "From fall '94 to fall '95," the dean says, "we saw a 30-per-cent decline in the number of students who left after a year of study. That's easy to understand—a determinant in early attrition is financial support."

Under Washington's new system, Ph.D. candidates are supported in their first year with fellowships or positions as teaching assistants. In the middle years of their study, they work as teaching or research

"enlightened." He adds: "Having been in the job market for a few months now, it's extraordinarily difficult to get a job. It does no one any good for Ph.D. institutions to simply admit as many people as possible."

Washington's offer of full financial support for six years was a deciding factor in Laurretta Conklin's decision to pursue a Ph.D. in political science here. She had already earned her master's from an Ivy League university and been admitted to its Ph.D. program, but without any financial aid, not even tuition remission. "Very few students were given funding," she says of the institution, which she declines to name. "It bred a lot of competition among students. There was a lot of posturing and pretense."

She has been at Washington since 1994. "The time I'd have spent worrying about money is now channeled into intellectual activities, which I think is what the point is supposed to be."

ADJUSTMENTS REQUIRED

It is clear, however, that many professors here are unwilling to cut enrollment much further. Doctoral programs in the humanities and social sciences have been the most affected by the dean's policies. These departments depend more on university money to support graduate students than do those in the physical sciences, which rely heavily on research grants.

One of the university's top-ranked Ph.D. programs is in Germanic languages and literature. The department admitted eight or nine students each year from 1993 to 1995, and five or six a year since then, in part because a federal grant it had won to support graduate education is no longer available. "What would alarm us," says Lynne Tatlock, the department chairwoman, "would be to go from five or six a year to three or four. Would it be a good use of faculty time to have graduate seminars with two or three students?"

Already, her department has had to make adjustments, offering required courses for the Ph.D. on a rotating schedule to insure sufficient enrollment.

While faculty members in the department "are worried we'll get too small," she adds, "they are very aware of the job market, which is extremely poor in German right now. And they are aware that our reputation depends on our ability to turn out good candidates who get good jobs." The department has had three Ph.D.'s on the market this spring, and all of them have found tenure-track positions.

Departments here are all wrestling with a key question: When is a Ph.D. program too small? Professors talk about the need for a "critical mass" of graduate students.

"I surely don't know what that number is," says Jack C. Knight, an associate professor of political science and director of his department's Ph.D. program. His department used to bring in 12 to 15 new doctoral candidates a year; now it enrolls 6 to 8. "I don't believe we can get smaller than we are," he says. "It may be one of those situations where I'll know it when I see it, but by then it may be too late."

In anthropology, Dr. Smith, the chairman, uses several markers to determine whether or not his department has enough graduate students. "It's whether there are enough people in highly specialized seminars for interesting discussion to take place. Then it's the purely subjective im-

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pression of the students—whether they have peers to interact with, whether they are lonely."

The presence of fewer graduate students also means more competition for their services. Dr. Smith's department is struggling with balancing the needs of its three subfields—cultural, physical, and archaeological anthropology—as it brings in only seven new Ph.D. candidates next year. "It was easy with nine students," he says. "Each field got three."

Some professors at Washington are nervous that the dean's new system may eventually lead to the elimination of some Ph.D. programs.

"I haven't heard anyone say, 'Our graduate program is already damaged to a significant extent by this,'" says Norris J. Lacy, chairman of the department of Romance languages and literatures. "What I have heard is worry that this might be the beginning of a process that might endanger some programs."

Not so, says Dean Thach. In fact, some professors say his ideas may end up protecting their programs from extinction. "This seems to be kind of an insurance policy against program elimination," says Richard J. Walter, chairman of the history department. "As long as you get good people in, and they finish in a reasonable time and get jobs, that's all you need."

The administration, he says, can't argue with success.

assistants. In their final year, students who have shown progress on their dissertations can receive a year-long fellowship from the university to concentrate on writing.

Jules B. LaPidus, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, calls Washington's approach "a pretty good recipe for success." But Washington has only 1,110 Ph.D. candidates on its campus, and he doubts that large, public research universities could duplicate its formula. "Many public universities concentrate on being as open as possible, admitting large numbers of students," he says. "If you were going to try to provide this level of support at an institution with 10,000 graduate students, I don't know any campus that could handle that."

Dr. Thach says the university is not seeking either to save money on doctoral good, but if you are going to have sex, use a condom. That approach "makes it sound like there are two responsible answers," says Dr. Lickona. "For unmarried teenagers, the right answer is to abstain."

VALUES AND SEX EDUCATION

Abstinence and the dangers of premarital sex are the focus of Dr. Lickona's most recent book, *Sex, Love, and You: Making the Right Decision* (Ave Maria Press, 1994).

Dr. Lickona's new focus on values and sex education troubles Alfie Kohn, an independent scholar on human behavior. In an article in the February issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, Mr. Kohn says that most character-education programs are "designed to make children work harder and do what they're told."

While Mr. Kohn supports the compre-