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Why Do So Many People Leave Graduate School Without a Ph.D.?

BY JENNIFER JACOBSON

MOST LITERATURE on why students leave doctoral programs asks what's wrong with the student. Barbara E. Lovitts, a former graduate student herself, turned that question on its head and asked instead, What's wrong with the structure of graduate programs?

Ms. Lovitts should know. She left two doctoral programs before finishing a third one, in sociology, at the University of Maryland at College Park in 1996. The experience prompted her to write *Leaving the Ivory Tower: The Causes and Consequences of Departure From Doctoral Study* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2001).

"I knew that my experience was not unique, that about 50 percent of those who start Ph.D. programs leave without the degree, yet we were isolated from one another," Ms. Lovitts writes in her preface. "There were no support groups, no networks. No one cared about us. We were outcasts."

INTERVIEWS AND SURVEYS

The book is based on interviews with and survey responses from 816 students, 511 who completed graduate school and 305 who did not, all members of the 1982 and 1984 entering classes at two universities (identified by pseudonyms) in nine departments.

Reasons for leaving included dissatisfaction with a course of study or not doing well academically or financially, but students most often cited personal reasons for their decisions to discontinue their studies.

Attrition rates for law school and medical school hover around 10 percent. But at the universities Ms. Lovitts studied—one rural, one urban, both among the top 40 Ph.D.-granting institutions in the country—attrition rates were more than three

times that. At the institution identified as Rural University, the combined attrition rate for nine of its departments was 33 percent; for the one called Urban University, that rate was 68 percent.

Rural's music department had the highest departmental attrition rate, 44 percent, while the highest attrition at Urban University was in the English department, with 76 percent.

Humanities disciplines usually have the most students leaving before earning a Ph.D., Ms. Lovitts says, because research is typically done in isolation, leaving fewer opportunities for students to interact. "In

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labs, people tend to interact and hook up with an adviser earlier than people in the humanities, which is important in getting people through the program," she says, as is a sense of community, which may be stronger in the sciences than in some humanities and social-sciences departments.

Those departments that provide a communal atmosphere—brown-bag lunches, colloquia, and student lounges—she says, have fewer students leaving school.

In her book, she implores graduate schools to offer social support for students and to regard them as more than just bodies who teach classes faculty members don't want to teach.

But Robert Weisbuch, the president of the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, disagrees with many of Ms. Lovitts's criticisms. "Overall shibboleths—graduate education is wonderful, graduate education is terrible—are worth-

less," he says. "They just don't get us anywhere."

Mr. Weisbuch, who has not read Ms. Lovitts's book, says her use of only two universities is too narrow a sample.

Instead of playing "the blame game" Mr. Weisbuch says, his foundation has created the Responsive Ph.D., an effort in which the foundation will help 14 universities, public and private, improve doctoral education.

And unlike some students interviewed in Ms. Lovitts's book, he trusts the good faith of graduate-school professors. "Most faculty are good people," he says. "They

want their programs to flourish for their students, as well as for themselves."

"WASTING STUDENTS RIGHT AND LEFT"

But when Ms. Lovitts asked faculty members how they would reduce attrition, one said "admit fewer students . . . but we haven't because we need the teaching assistants." She found such statements show "complete disregard to the hopes, dreams, and aspirations these people brought with them," she says. "Graduate programs are wasting students right and left."

Some universities have sought to end such a practice. Earl Lewis, vice provost for academic affairs and dean of the Horace H. Rackham School of Graduate Studies at the University of Michigan at Ann Arbor, says the graduate school's history department cut its enrollment in half between 1994, when 47 students were admitted, and 2000, when 22 were admitted.

Mr. Lewis, chairman-elect of the Council of Graduate Schools' Board of Directors, says the university made the move in part so that "students could be better looked after" and complete their Ph.D.'s in five to six years.

It will take nearly seven years, however, for Noreen T. O'Connor to earn her Ph.D. in English from George Washington University. Ms. O'Connor, the president of the Modern Language Association's Graduate Student Caucus, is a 35-year-old new mother who enrolled in the doctoral program in 1993.

Since then, she has thought about leaving several times and took a leave two years ago when the university stopped her support. "You just can't make ends meet," without full financial aid, she says, which is why she worked for a year as a technical writer.

LEAVING QUIETLY

Ms. O'Connor has watched other students quietly leave their programs every year. "It's rare for somebody to go out publicly and noisily because it's a personal decision . . . because there isn't so much communal support," she says.

But Robert E. Thach, dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences at Washington University, says students often leave graduate school silently, not because of feeling uncomfortable within their departments, but because they're embarrassed.

"They tried something and perceived they failed," he says. "It didn't have to do with the institution not taking care of them. The discipline just didn't grab them. I hear that all the time."

Since receiving her Ph.D., Ms. Lovitts has not returned to academe. She does education research for a government contractor in Washington.