New Study Calls for 'Paradigm Shift' in Social-Science Graduate Education

By RICHARD BYRNE

Doctoral education in the social sciences requires a "paradigm shift" that takes into account significant changes in the job market and uncertain early career prospects, according to a new study that tracked the experiences of recent Ph.D.'s in six social-science disciplines.

A report on the study, "Social Science Ph.D.'s: Five+ Years Out," will be published today by the Center for Innovation and Research in Graduate Education at the University of Washington's College of Education.

The study surveyed more than 3,000 recent Ph.D.'s in anthropology, communications, geography, history, political science, and sociology about their education and early career experiences.

The investigators' recommendations in the report focus largely on creating awareness of the changes in the job market and setting up structured avenues for career development within Ph.D. programs.

"Career preparation," they write, "should begin at the beginning of a doctoral program."

Late-Blooming Doctorates

While the study found that most of those who receive a Ph.D. in the social sciences do eventually find full-time jobs in their respective fields, many struggle in the period immediately after earning their doctorates.

The researchers found that only 42 percent of those surveyed had obtained a tenured or tenure-track position six months after attaining their doctorate. The proportion rose to 50 percent after one year, and reached 75 percent only three years after receiving a Ph.D.

The study also found that while the job market remains tilted toward academe, a growing number of Ph.D.'s in the social sciences find work outside universities. While approximately two out of every three Ph.D.'s eventually become professors, 20 percent of those surveyed now hold positions outside of academe.

"It's a myth that all those who earn a doctorate in the social sciences become professors," said Maresi Nerad, director of the center and the principal investigator on the study. "It's also a myth that the career path is straight and smooth."

Elizabeth S. Chilton, an associate professor of anthropology at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, was one of those surveyed for the study. She received some preliminary data from the study last year and has used some of those findings in her role as chair of the anthropology department at Amherst.

She said that based on her experiences and those of her colleagues, the report was correct in "acknowledging the changing nature of doctoral education and the job market."

In particular, Ms. Chilton said, she was not surprised by the struggles freshly minted Ph.D.'s in the social sciences have in finding full-time positions. If departments "are not looking pretty precisely for what you're doing," Ms.
Chilton said, "it can take some time."

**Educating for a Changing Market**

The new study also found that while recent Ph.D.'s drew continuing value from the training they received in their respective programs (and the doctoral dissertations that they wrote), they also felt that the graduate educations they received did not sufficiently prepare them in areas in which proficiency was needed to cope with the changing job market in the social sciences.

Recent Ph.D.'s were largely satisfied with the academic rigor of their programs, with 66 percent of respondents ranking their programs as "excellent" in that area. The report also said that even among Ph.D.'s who took jobs outside of academe, 22 percent used specific knowledge relating to their dissertation "often" in their jobs, while 27 percent used it "sometimes." (Among those who chose to pursue a career in academe, the respective numbers were 54 percent and 32 percent.)

Yet the recent Ph.D.'s surveyed also criticized important aspects of their preparation for careers, whether inside or outside of academe.

For instance, despite a renewed emphasis on teaching in academe, only 53 percent of those surveyed said that they had been offered formal instruction in teaching or formal supervision of their teaching.

Recent Ph.D.'s also felt that their programs did not prepare them sufficiently in other key areas. While 66 percent of respondents rated "writing and publishing" skills as very important in their current jobs, only 35 percent of those same respondents rated their training in that area as "excellent." There were similar gaps in other areas of training. While nearly 83 percent of respondents ranked skills in presenting knowledge in their field as "very important," only 38 percent rated their program's training in that area as "excellent."

Ms. Nerad said she was surprised that teaching preparation had not improved more. She added that such findings suggest that while current graduate education in the social sciences is adequate, students "will best flourish when they learn and use all the skills necessary to a career." She also noted that the study demonstrated that "there are misconceptions about what skills and competencies are required for jobs outside and inside the university."

**Women's Roles Explored**

Another key finding in the survey was that despite major gains for women within academe in the social sciences, serious gender disparities remain in terms of employment and job satisfaction.

"Compared to men," the investigators write, "women doctorate holders in the social sciences were more likely to leave faculty positions, less likely to be coupled, more likely to forgo or postpone having the children they wanted, less likely to be geographically mobile, and generally experienced more work-family conflict."

For instance, the study notes that while "59 percent of partnered men reported their partner had moved with them to accommodate career advancement ... only 42 percent of coupled women pulled their partner with them to make a job move."

The study was supported with money from the Ford Foundation. The report will be available on the University of Washington center's Web site.