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## **Unresolved Problems of the Graduate Student Role**

The role of the graduate student has received scant attention in educational literature. It is the intention of this paper to suggest that the multifaceted nature of this role, while necessary and stimulating preparation for professional status, may well be highly dysfunctional for both student and university.

The structure of higher education in Canada, influenced by the egalitarian ethos of the United States, encourages large graduate departments. Relatively liberal financing facilitates graduate work on a full-time basis. In return for this financial assistance, graduate students must assume multiple roles as students, researchers, and neophyte scholars. They are obliged to complete course requirements, a dissertation at the doctoral level,<sup>1</sup> and are usually expected to take some undergraduate teaching responsibilities. The teacher/learner dichotomy, a somewhat individualistic approach to learning, and the inevitable tensions of departmental politics result in an ambiguity of role expectations for the graduate student.<sup>2</sup>

One major ambiguity arising from the multiple roles of the graduate student is the duality of the student/teacher role. Undergraduates perceive graduate students as faculty members whereas faculty are not willing to concede this collegue-ship to graduate teaching assistants. Graduate students perceive themselves as having similar teaching duties and responsibilities as faculty members without the accompanying privileges of status and salary. That faculty members have difficulty in recognizing the diverse roles of the graduate student is related to their more limited role set.

The problem of role ambiguity is highlighted when graduate students feel it is necessary to step outside the traditional role of student as apprentice. The expanding graduate schools of the sixties and the shrinking job markets of the seventies have placed pressure on students to acquire qualifications other than "good grades and excellent references." In order to compete for the limited number of jobs students may well feel impelled to acquire experience in research and to write for publication.<sup>3</sup>

However, as Borg and Gall<sup>4</sup> have noted, field research has both advantages and disadvantages for the graduate participant. He may receive (1) financial support, (2) opportunities to take part in a larger, more sophisticated study of complex design, and (3) the learning experience of a team approach but at the same time suffer (a) a loss of autonomy, (b) the relegation to busy work, and (c) research peripheral to his own interests.

Despite the nature of the research, students are eager to participate because opportunities to gain practical experience are limited. Moreover, a refusal on the legitimate basis of lack of time and/or interest is open to misinterpretation with resultant strained relations. It is even more difficult for a student to refuse when the invitation is issued by a thesis committee member. In any event, graduate students may feel that any opportunity to join a research team must offer them a chance to try out research techniques of which they have only theoretical knowledge.

Graduate students themselves are reluctant to ask that their role in the research team be clearly defined because they fear they might transgress the indefinable, but nevertheless real, social distance which separates them from faculty. The corollary is that staff perceive research assistants as "working for" rather than "working with" faculty: from such role ambiguity arises conflict. The faculty member sees himself as the final arbiter and gives only academic consideration to any other process of decision-making. Students are frustrated by the ritual of being asked to give opinions and endure long discussions in which they are powerless to sway the preconceived "good" judgment of the faculty director. If the faculty director lacks initiative, competence or leadership qualities, this situation can become intolerable.

Graduate students may bring with them an expertise that

could make a meaningful contribution to the project. However, opportunities to exercise initiative are infrequent; their expertise in research methodology is not called upon. In consequence, the involvement of graduate students may be reduced to nothing more onerous than returning books to the library, locating documents, writing rough drafts of letters, coding questionnaires, and collecting computer print-outs. Graduate students are expendable; these tasks could be done more efficiently (though somewhat more expensively) by competent secretaries.

If the tasks are of this order, theoretical courses in statistics and research methods appear to have no practical application. Students are aware from their course work of the multiple uses of the computer and of the variety of available statistical techniques and methods. The faculty member, a product of a less sophisticated era, may produce poor research designs which either apply high-powered techniques to low-level data or are simply inappropriate for computer analysis. Because of these shortcomings, the educative experience for the research assistant turns out to be less than it might have been. Graduate students, seeing no significance in the trivia that is their part of the research project, may feel that they would be better employed in research for their own theses.

Honoraria for research projects are usually low but nevertheless supplement the limited stipend which graduates receive. Lack of experience and insufficient information regarding the project from staff members leaves them unaware of hidden expenses which may be involved. At best, reimbursement for meals and travel is given at the completion of the project; at worst, not at all. If the project is to be completed during the summer months it may prevent students from taking well-paid employment.

The problems of students who attempt to write for publication rather than concentrate solely on their degree programs have been explored by Cortada and Stone.<sup>5</sup> They suggest that conflict may ensue when students actively compete with younger faculty members who as yet have few publications to their credit or with older professors who favor "teaching" rather than "research."

The attitude on the part of graduate students toward participation in research projects which brings with it the potential for publication, if not concealed from the faculty

members, may in itself raise difficulties. Faculty members may well feel affronted or threatened by students. Rightly or wrongly, some faculty members feel that students should recognize that they are to be suitably deferential in their apprentice roles and they should have no motive other than to contribute, under the name of the faculty leader, to the body of educational thought.

Although many students may concur with Altbach's<sup>6</sup> view that faculty treatment of graduate students in the research setting is tantamount to exploitation, most graduate students make little formal protest and complain only to their peers. They will not willingly jeopardize their future prospects in the department and so continue their programs in a state of "resentment." They fear that uneasy relations with faculty members may restrict their opportunities for scholarships, summer session teaching duties, and entrée to positions after graduation.

From the general university standpoint, the demands implicit in the recognition of the graduate students' multifaceted role serve to accentuate the boundaries between faculty and students. Interaction at all levels tends to become political. When the focus is on the department structure, the educational content becomes a secondary consideration. Energies dissipated in "politicking" may lower the prestige of a department, contribute to student attrition rates, and reduce academic productivity.

If conflict between graduate students and faculty is seen as endemic, then the de-institutionalization of power or the use of power to maintain the functioning of the university department are ever-present possibilities. The first possibility relates to the restriction of the graduate role: specifically, the elimination of full teaching responsibilities. It is suggested that allocating ancillary tasks would reduce the status of the graduate student and hence minimize one source of conflict. The development of ideological consensus among the faculty as to the role of the graduate student would provide a second possible alternative. With dialogue built into departmental structure, the complex role set of the graduate student might be legitimated.

The issues which have been raised in this paper suggest that the basic problem of graduate student role ambiguity remains unresolved because its source is in the lack of trust and respect between *people*. Paradoxically, university decision-making, which is largely concerned with people, seems to

have overlooked the importance of this human relations dimension.

## notes

1. Many universities in Canada offer a non-thesis Master's program.
2. It is suggested that while all graduate students may be confronted with these problems, women graduates face "the additional hurdle of their sex." See P. Altbach, "Commitment and Powerlessness on the American Campus: The Case of the Graduate Student," *Liberal Education*, LVI: 4 (1970), 562-82.
3. J. Cortada and J. Stone, "Publication and the Graduate Student — Some Negative Considerations," *Educational Forum*, XXXVII: 2 (1973), 179-81.
4. W. Borg and M. Gall, *Educational Research: An Introduction*, New York: David McKay Company, 1971, 2nd ed., pp. 39-40.
5. Cortada and Stone, *op. cit.*
6. Altbach, *op. cit.*
7. C. Nordstrom, E. Friedenbergl and H. Gold, *Society's Children: A Study of Ressentiment in the Secondary School*, New York: Random House, 1967, p. 8.

W. F. Hitschfeld

*Comments on "Unresolved Problems  
of the Graduate Student Role"*

One wonders whether there is here anything other than the obvious — that people are apt to treat each other with less than the tact and the wisdom which are needed to bring out the best in a relationship; or that some professors lack initiative, or competence, or leadership, or — I may add — interest. But when all this is granted, would it be reasonable to prevent students from being teaching assistants or research assistants while they are students, in the interest of simplifying their status, so that their professor would appreciate their problems? Is not