Review of the Book *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.*

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Review of the Book *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.*

**Abstract**

[Excerpt] When William Bowen, the President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (formerly the President of Princeton University), and Neil Rudenstine, the President of Harvard University (formerly Executive Vice President of Mellon), combine to write a book on doctoral study in the arts and sciences, the academic profession must take notice. And well it should. Building on Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa's (1989) predictions of forthcoming shortages of Ph.D.'s in the arts and sciences, *In Pursuit of the Ph.D.* provides a detailed analysis of the propensity of American college graduates to enter doctoral programs in the arts and sciences and of doctoral students' completion rates and times-to-degree. Bowen and Rudenstine also carefully analyze the role that labor market characteristics, financial support patterns, institutional characteristics, and graduate program policies play in influencing these outcomes. Finally, they both implicitly and explicitly lay out an agenda for future research. *In Pursuit* is thus a "must read" for faculty and administrators involved in graduate education and for economists interested in higher education and academic labor supply issues.

**Keywords**

higher education, doctoral study, completion rates, graduate programs, academic labor supply

**Disciplines**

Higher Education | Labor Economics | Labor Relations

**Comments**

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the states of supporting higher education by cutting their current "tuition subsidies," while simultaneously federalizing the costs of higher education for lower-income students. This proposal would reduce the pressures of higher education costs on ever-tightening state budgets. At the same time it would produce an equal dollar increase in pressures on the steadily ballooning federal deficit. Whether the federal government would relish taking on this additional burden is not discussed. Nor is there any discussion of the willingness of states, after having been burned in the past, to enter into what might be considered a new form of federal revenue sharing.

The McPherson-Shapiro proposal, while intriguing, fails to offer a convincing rationale for expanding eligibility for student aid. The authors maintain their proposal will encourage enrollment of students from lower-income families, which they earlier defined as those with incomes of less than $20,000. The actual proposal, however, broadens eligibility to include students from families with incomes of up to the median of $45,000. Certainly lower income students would be helped, but in what sense are the goals of equity and efficiency achieved by expanding eligibility to embrace 50 percent of the population? It is possible, of course, that this kind of price must be paid to gain political acceptance for a program that distributes federal student aid subsidies more broadly, to include a considerable part of the middle class.

A further difficulty is that currently more than half of all Pell grants go to independent, as contrasted to dependent, students. Unless the proposal were very carefully crafted, virtually all independent students would qualify for substantial grants. Dependent students would have an obvious incentive to be reclassified as independent students. If any appreciable number did this, the federal costs of student aid would escalate well beyond that envisioned in the proposal.

Notwithstanding these caveats, this highly informative and provocative volume is accessible to a wide audience. So much so, that I plan to use it in a course for economics majors. I am certain it will spark lively interest.

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I Health, Education, and Welfare


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When William Bowen, the President of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation (formerly the President of Princeton University), and Neil Rudenstine, the President of Harvard University (formerly Executive Vice President of Mellon), combine to write a book on doctoral study in the arts and sciences, the academic profession must take notice. And well it should. Building on Bowen and Julie Ann Sosa’s (1989) predictions of forthcoming shortages of Ph.D.’s in the arts and sciences, In Pursuit of the Ph.D. provides a detailed analysis of the propensity of American college graduates to enter doctoral programs in the arts and sciences and of doctoral students’ completion rates and times-to-degree. Bowen and Rudenstine also carefully analyze the role that labor market characteristics, financial support patterns, institutional characteristics, and graduate program policies play in influencing these outcomes. Finally, they both implicitly and explicitly lay out an agenda for future research. In Pursuit is thus a "must read" for faculty and administrators involved in graduate education and for economists interested in higher education and academic labor supply issues.

Economists of my vintage and younger, who were taught that empirical research is best when it is based upon rigorous underlying maximization models and contains careful estimation of multivariate structural econometric models, may not initially appreciate how important a book In Pursuit is because they will not find such a research strategy employed here. If they read the book carefully, however, they will quickly learn that major contributions to knowledge can come from simple tabulations of relatively underutilized data sets and, more importantly, from careful collection of comparable data from a set of institutions (in this case graduate schools). The latter is, of course, often expensive to do, and the authors’ ability to obtain the data they needed was facilitated by the resources they had at their disposal at the Mellon
Foundation and by the fact that the graduate schools were themselves often recipients of support from the Mellon Foundation and thus had obvious incentives to cooperate.

Bowen and Rudenstine amassed data from a wide variety of sources. They obtained information on times-to-degree or drop-out and financial support patterns for all entrants into Ph.D. programs in six arts and sciences fields over a 25-year period from the graduate deans at ten major research institutions. The National Research Council’s Doctorate Records File provided data on times-to-degree. Knowledge of the names of winners of prestigious public and private national fellowship programs (e.g., National Science Foundation, Woodrow Wilson Foundation) when matched with the Doctorate Records File data permitted estimates of the effectiveness of these programs. Surveys that they conducted of recipients of fellowships from some of these national programs, along with prior evaluations of the programs, also aided their analyses. Finally, studying the content of graduate catalogs at different points in time for several humanities graduate fields provided evidence on how the content of humanities Ph.D. programs has changed over time.

Bowen and Rudenstine’s findings are numerous and provocative and space constraints, unfortunately, permit me to touch on only a few. First, the growth of both Ph.D. production and the propensity of undergraduates to pursue doctoral study that took place during the mid 1960s to early 1970s period appears to have been more related to “draft related” decisions induced by the Vietnam War than to changing academic labor market conditions. The supply of new doctoral students appears to respond only gradually to the latter. Hence, to avert projected shortages, policies to improve completion rates and reduce times-to-degree should be considered.

Second, the share of new doctorates awarded by the most highly rated long-established graduate programs has declined substantially over time. Many of the “newer” programs are not large enough to be efficient producers (many produce less than three doctorates a year) and, on average, times-to-degree are longer and completion rates lower at the less highly rated programs. Although Bowen and Rudenstine are too polite to explicitly say it, the implication is that resources for Ph.D. education should be more heavily concentrated in the elite research institutions.

Third, although times-to-degree have not actually increased by as much as published data grouped by year of receipt of degree suggest (see Bowen, Graham Lord, and Sosa 1991, for reasons why), times-to-degree have increased over the last 25 years. Moreover, patterns of doctoral student financial support, which have also changed over time, do seem to matter. Fellowships at appropriate points in students’ training appear to speed up degree time and increase completion probabilities. However, national fellowship programs, with their promise of multiyear fellowship support, have not been overwhelmingly successful in increasing completion rates or reducing times-to-degree.

Finally, comparisons of the contents of graduate catalogs (in the humanities) suggest that the number of courses has increased, formally stated expectations about degree progress have declined, and, more generally, the structure of graduate education has become more loosely defined. All of these factors tend to slow down degree progress and lead Bowen and Rudenstine to suggest that policies to improve the flow of doctorates must also be institutionally (and, more specifically, departmentally) based.

Bowen and Rudenstine conclude In Pursuit of the Ph.D. with a provocative set of policy recommendations directed at government, foundations, and doctoral institutions themselves. Implicit, and sometimes explicit, in the book is an equally provocative set of unanswered research questions. For example, will their findings, which often are based on simple comparisons of means, continued to hold in the context of more structured multivariate statistical models? Indeed, their findings on the importance of financial support patterns has already stimulated my own work which estimated “competing risk” models of doctoral students’ times-to-degree and drop-out (Ehrenberg and Mavros 1992).

I am compelled to conclude my review by informing the reader that I am not a totally disinterested party. I previously reviewed Bowen and Sosa’s book for this journal (Ehrenberg 1990), the Mellon Foundation partially funded the research that led to Ehrenberg (1992), and it is now partially funding a study
of historical black colleges that I am conducting (the latter was motivated by a reference in the preface to In Pursuit about topics that the book was not addressing). All these relationships grew out of the interest in doing research in the area that first Bowen and Sosa's book and now In Pursuit have generated. I believe my own growing involvement and that of others in research on graduate education is evidence of one of the major impacts these two books already have had.

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REFERENCES


J Labor and Demographic Economics


The public policy debate about child care has centered on its "accessibility, affordability and quality." The papers collected in this book attempt to recast the debate for policy makers in economic terms by presenting a clear analytic framework in which to consider child care policy. David Blau, the editor of this volume of papers, has chosen seven economists to write chapters that review the emerging economic literature on the supply of child care, parental demand for care, child care cost and quality and to discuss the implications of these analyses for public policy. The book succeeds in presenting that research in understandable terms to policy makers and serves economists as a useful review of the child care literature.

The issue of accessibility is discussed by James R. Walker in his chapter on "Public Policy and the Supply of Child Care Services." Affordability is addressed by Rachel Connelly in a chapter on "The Importance of Child Care Costs to Women's Decision Making." Ellen Kisker and Rebecca Maynard examine "Quality, Cost, and Parental Choice of Child Care." In "Child Care Policy and Research: An Economist's Perspective," Philip K. Robins presents an overview of current child care policy and its effects on costs, women's labor supply and the demand for child care. David Blau's introductory chapter does an excellent job of summarizing the issues and his final chapter, "The Quality of Child Care: An Economic Perspective," contrasts the economic and developmental models of child care quality. Comments by noneconomists on three of the chapters add perspective to the book.

One might assume that the policy concern about "affordability" reflects steeply rising costs for child care. However, as Walker points out, that has not been the case. Real weekly household expenditures for child care services have been remarkably constant over a period (1975 to 1985) that saw large increases in women's labor force participation, particularly among mothers of young children. This relative stability reflects a highly elastic supply of child care. Indeed, there appear to be few barriers to entry for unlicensed, family day care providers, who care for one or more children in a private house.

The prevalence of unlicensed, family day care for preschool children raises concern about the quality of care provided. There is general agreement about what constitutes high quality child care: low ratios of children to providers; small groups of children of similar age; caregivers with child development training; and structured activities and space. As Ellen Kisker and Rebecca Maynard point out, high quality care can be found in all types of settings—family day care as well as centers, licensed and unlicensed care. Although studies of child care centers cited by Kisker and Maynard show a positive relationship between quality and the cost of providing care, there is little evidence that parents pay more for high quality care. Waite, Leibowitz, and Witsberger, (1991) show that