

SPECIAL FEATURE / CONTRIBUTION SPÉCIALE

Written Symposium on *The Ph.D. Trap*†

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*The Ph. D. Trap* is a critical appraisal of North American doctoral programs. It is a surprise best seller which, in a period of sixteen months, has had three printings and a second edition. This book has struck a chord among the public and has triggered a nerve in academe.

Wilf Cude exposes "inflexible, cumbersome, restrictive and deplorably wasteful" practices. He traces the history of the Ph.D. degree, marshalls the limited available data, documents the particularly acute difficulties in Canada, and persuasively suggests that we cannot light the lamps of learning, research, and excellence unless and until our own lamps are burning.

Three major problems are identified. Doctoral programs are too long, successful candidates too few, and rewards for the Ph.D. are not commensurate with the expenditures of time, energy, and money. The Ph.D. has become "a trap for the candidate and a sinkhole for intellectual resources."

The crisis situation in higher education is particularly evident in the social sciences and humanities. Cude states that variant methodologies may be the reason some students successfully complete doctoral studies, whereas others become doctoral dropouts (ABDs). In science, medicine, and engineering, where the methodologies are relatively precise, the success rate is high, and it is possible to complete a doctoral program in three years. In the humanities and social sciences, however, methodologies are indeterminate. A committee of average scholars, uncertain about appropriate methodology, must reach a consensus. Therefore, a doctoral program can be prolonged indefinitely while the candidate attempts to divine the psychology of the committee.

Cude maintains that current Ph.D. programs are rigorous and demanding, but they may be undermining excellence in scholarly research. The values and skills most emphasized in doctoral programs are endurance, obedience, caution, memory, diplomacy, and conformity to the intellectual status quo. His is not an isolated opinion. For years, graduate students in the humanities and social sciences have been voicing a similar complaint, that they are getting a degree in "followership." He concludes that the best students figure this out, choose another alternative, and vote with their feet. Canadian universities, therefore, lose their most able and productive candidates.

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Recommendations are offered for students, faculty, and the public. Some are valid; others are debatable, but all merit serious consideration.

Wilf Cude is a change agent who has been widely heard and seen. He was featured on the television program *The Fifth Estate*, on radio, and in personal appearances. In advocating institutional change, he reveals a sincere love for scholarship. He has issued the challenge for academic reform. Shall we accept it, reject it, evade it, or ignore it?

It was my privilege to arrange this symposium on *The Ph.D. Trap*. Several scholars were invited to provide commentary about the contemporary educational issues which are raised. Most, or all, are new contributors to CJHE and merit introduction:

*Jacques Boucher* is Dean of the Faculty of Graduate Studies, Université de Montréal, and president of the Canadian Association of Graduate Schools (CAGS). He is also Professor in the Faculty of Law and a member of the Quebec Bar.

*Sheila Brown* is Vice-President (Academic) and Professor in the Department of Commerce at Mount Allison University. Her teaching and research interests are in marketing, especially consumer behaviour, with a particular interest in consumer decision making and marketing in the non-profit sector.

*Richard Chait* is Professor of Higher Education and Management at the University of Maryland (College Park) and Executive Director of the National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance, a federally funded research center. He was previously the Mandel Professor of Non-Profit Management at Case Western Reserve University, Associate Provost of The Pennsylvania State University, and an Assistant Professor at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. He has published articles and books on academic personnel policies, most notably, *Beyond Traditional Tenure* (Jossey-Bass, 1982).

*Anne Innis Dagg* is Academic Director of the Independent Studies program at the University of Waterloo. Her most recent book, co-authored with Patricia J. Thompson, is *MisEducation: Women and Canadian Universities* (OISE Press, 1988).

*Andreas Schroeder* is a writer, teacher, translator, editor, and journalist. He has taught in the English or Creative Writing Departments of the University of Toronto, University of British Columbia, University of Victoria, and the University of Winnipeg. He is the author of four collections of poetry, four works of fiction, and one of non-fiction; his most recent novel is entitled *Dust-Ship Glory* (Doubleday, Ballantine, 1986/87).

### **Jacques Boucher**

Insistez sur les tares, les abus, les effets pervers, les mesquineries et les injustices. Choisissez quelques exemples particulièrement croustillants, quelques histoires d'horreur et laissez entendre qu'il s'agit là de phénomènes courants, quasi quotidiens. Trouvez des bourreaux, dénoncez-les avec conviction, éloquence,

passion. La recette est efficace mais peut-être trop facile. Il est dommage que monsieur Wilfred Cude l'ait choisie pour faire le procès du Ph.D. dans son *PH.D. Trap* et pour préparer sa propre réhabilitation.

Notre pauvre Ph.D. aurait tellement de vices et de difformités, surtout dans le domaine des humanités et des sciences sociales, il serait si peu valable selon l'auteur, qu'on ne peut s'empêcher de se demander pourquoi nos étudiants sont à ce point inconscients en continuant de s'inscrire par milliers dans nos programmes de doctorat.

Le Ph.D. a besoin d'être repensé, réformé comme toutes les institutions. Il a des défauts nombreux, mais ces défauts ne sont pas, comme le prétend l'auteur, le résultat du harcèlement de professeurs ou d'administrateurs rétrogrades et figés dans leur corporatisme, qui s'acharnent sur les pauvres étudiants qui ont le malheur et la naïveté de leur tomber sous la main. D'ailleurs, en utilisant la méthode de l'auteur, mais à l'inverse, on pourrait, à partir d'exemples réels et de témoignages authentiques, dresser du Ph.D. un portrait idyllique qui, lui non plus, n'aurait rien de commun avec la réalité.

Le Ph.D. tout entier est bâti autour de la relation entre un directeur de recherche et son étudiant. Cette relation est personnelle, quasi exclusive, comme au temps du moyen âge, entre le maître et l'apprenti. Cette relation intense, souvent quotidienne, dure plusieurs années. Un grand nombre de ces relations sont couronnées de succès et se terminent de façon harmonieuse, par l'obtention du diplôme, le plus souvent dans un climat quasi euphorique.

Quelques rares cas se terminent dans les pleurs et les grincements de dents; dans une université comme la mienne, il s'agit d'un ou deux cas par année sur 160 diplômés au doctorat environ; le règlement prévoit alors qu'il faut former un deuxième jury composé en majorité ou en totalité de membres extérieurs à l'Université et qui prennent leur décision à la majorité des voix.

Un trop grand nombre d'étudiants, enfin, ne peuvent terminer leurs études. Le grand responsable de ces échecs est rarement l'intolérance des professeurs ou les incertitudes méthodologiques comme le prétend monsieur Cude. Les problèmes financiers des étudiants et des universités sont au coeur de la question: adultes, nos étudiants de doctorat ont des besoins et des attentes qui rendent pénible et même intenable un style de vie qui se situe souvent en deçà du seuil de la pauvreté. Mais il n'y a pas que les problèmes financiers. La complexité croissante des disciplines, la recherche du "chef d'oeuvre" et de la perfection, l'isolement de l'étudiant surtout dans le domaine des humanités ou des sciences sociales, voilà des facteurs majeurs qui expliquent l'allongement des études de même qu'un très grand nombre de difficultés et d'échecs.

Certes, les études sont trop longues, le taux d'abandons est trop élevé, l'encadrement n'est pas toujours aussi suivi qu'il devrait l'être et l'objet d'une thèse de doctorat n'est pas de faire la découverte du siècle ou de régler les problèmes que ni Marx, ni Freud, ni Jésus-Christ n'ont su régler. Certes, le doctorat doit s'adapter aux exigences de la démarche scientifique qui évolue constamment, aux besoins du marché, à la diversité des connaissances, à l'interna-

tionalisation du savoir, au besoin de mobilité et de versatilité que l'on va exiger de nos futurs diplômés. Les doyens d'études supérieures, l'Association canadienne des doyens d'études avancées (CAGS/ACDEA), les autorités universitaires et les professeurs en général continuent à consacrer beaucoup d'énergies à cette question cruciale. Les progrès sont réels mais la nature du Ph.D. et l'encadrement aux études supérieures nous interdisent de rêver à un changement qui se produirait du jour au lendemain.

En somme, ce qui gêne dans cet ouvrage, ce n'est pas d'abord ce que monsieur Cude dénonce mais plutôt sa façon de le faire, les explications qu'il donne de la situation et, par voie de conséquence, les remèdes qu'il propose (bien que ce ne soit pas là son premier propos).

En terminant son livre, monsieur Cude fait quelques recommandations qu'il juge positives. Il propose que la maîtrise devrait suffire pour donner accès à la carrière de professeur d'université. A la maîtrise s'ajouterait une année d'internat où l'apprenti professeur, sous la direction d'un professeur sénior, apprendrait son métier de pédagogue. C'est une fois entré dans la carrière que le professeur, par des publications dans des revues ou chez des éditeurs reconnus, pourrait et devrait faire sa marque. J'avoue que je comprends mal comment cette mesure pourrait, mieux que le système actuel, garantir la compétence, la créativité, l'innovation des professeurs et des étudiants. Je comprends mal comment, avec quatre ou cinq années d'études et de réflexion en moins par rapport à leurs collègues des autres secteurs de l'Université, les professeurs des sciences humaines et sociales éviteraient de devenir des collègues manifestement de seconde classe dans des secteurs notoirement sous-développés.

En effet, la maîtrise ne vise pas à former des innovateurs et des créateurs. Malgré ce que prétend l'auteur, le doctorat réussit à en former un bon nombre. Engager un professeur d'université qui n'a jusque-là donné aucune preuve, même imparfaite, d'aptitude à la recherche et à l'innovation, ce serait courir de bien grands risques.

### **Sheila Brown**

Wilfred Cude, author of *The Ph.D. Trap*, sees several problems with Ph.D. programs. His first concern about the length of programs is shared by others, like the deans of Canadian graduate schools who have suggested that a Ph.D. should generally take four years. Currently, doctoral programs in the sciences typically take four to five years but average duration is considerably longer in the humanities and social sciences, typically taking four to eight years, and in some cases longer.

The second concern is with low attainment ratios which are based on comparisons of degrees awarded to enrolments. These ratios must be interpreted with extreme care because they reflect both withdrawals and length of time to complete the program. It is impossible with the statistics available to separate these two phenomena. Moreover, several reviewers of the book have apparently taken enrolments to mean students, thereby exaggerating the problem considerably.

Nonetheless, many students who enrol in doctoral programs do not complete them, at a cost to the students, the universities and the public. It is interesting to note variations in attainment rates among programs, on which Cude comments, and with gender, on which he does not. In the sciences the ratio of degree attainment to total enrolment is markedly higher than in the humanities and social sciences, a finding inseparable from the question of length of time to complete the program. Also of interest are the lower enrolments and attainment ratios of women than men, causes for concern when women are already underrepresented in many Ph.D. programs, particularly in the sciences and engineering. One American commentator has recently suggested that with an impending shortage of scientists, it is important that women be better represented in scientific degree programs, universities and industry for reasons of national interest and not just equality. In 1985, 33% of doctoral students in Canada were women, ranging from 7% in engineering to 49% in education. Only 26% of doctorates were awarded to women, ranging from 6.5% in engineering to 42% in humanities.

While sharing some of Cude's concerns over the two points above, I cannot share his interpretation of the relevance of the doctoral degree to university teaching. He argues that the program does not prepare people for university teaching, and as a corollary, there is little relationship between teaching and research. He argues that undergraduate teaching is primarily custodial and involves only the transmission of "received opinion". But teaching need not and should not be merely custodial. Undergraduate *as well as* graduate instructors do bring research into the classroom, sharing illustrations of a theory or concept drawn from their own work and that of others, giving the topic an immediacy and interest to which students willingly respond. Moreover, students can stimulate the instructor to further thought about research propositions. Teaching and research are mutually supporting.

Cude also asserts that professors typically teach nine hours a week for half a year, spend little time in lecture preparation and grade assignments and examinations with minimum effort. Many, if not all, spend considerable time in lecture preparation, assignment and test design and grading to give feedback not only on the content of the work but on the effectiveness with which it has been communicated. To suggest otherwise is to be very misleading.

Cude argues for a teaching internship which, in conjunction with a Masters, would prepare students better for a career in university teaching. He reacts negatively to suggestions that teaching preparation be incorporated into doctoral studies and largely ignores the many worthwhile faculty development programs on teaching enhancement, evaluation and recognition within our universities.

On the requirements for the doctoral degree itself Cude argues that publication of work in reputable journals should be treated as equivalent to a dissertation and universities should grant the doctoral degree on this basis. This proposition misses the point that a doctoral dissertation is a demonstration of the student's thorough familiarity with existing work in the discipline and its basic research tools and his or her ability to carry out original work. The standards by which the work is judged are those of the university granting the degree and not the journal.

Focusing on institutional rather than student factors affecting doctoral progress, Cude does not address the case of those students who enrol in doctoral programs for which they are ill-suited, fail to recognize their own inadequacies once enrolled, undergo changed personal circumstances or simply make alternative choices.

Nonetheless, problems with doctoral programs should be addressed. First, program reviews are an important part of maintaining quality in doctoral programs. During the process of both internal review and external appraisal questions should be asked about the content of programs, the quality of instruction and the outcome for graduates as well as such matters as withdrawal rates and length of time to complete. Secondly, more research is needed on the factors which affect doctoral progress. Research studies have examined factors such as choice of field, financial support and student and faculty characteristics. Some of the statistical information referred to earlier may be explained in part by the findings of such research. For example, faculty members serve as role models and mentors for graduate students, socializing them into the discipline. Studies also indicate that women doctoral candidates know fewer faculty members and are less likely to be treated as junior colleagues than men. This may be a result of fewer women than men in many disciplines and the fact that people may feel more comfortable in same gender mentor-student relationships.

In short, in criticizing the doctorate, Cude has all but dismissed a program critical to the development of university professors and fostered an artificial distinction between university teaching and research.

### **Richard Chait**

I have been asked to comment upon *The Ph.D. Trap* with particular regard to higher education in the United States where 330 universities offer the doctoral degree<sup>1</sup> and more than 3,000 institutions offer postsecondary education, conditions which make generalizations necessary and, at the same time, risky.

If the many hoops and hurdles of doctoral programs are, as Mr. Cude argues, designed to ensnare would-be graduates, then American universities are still rather inefficient. In the decade from 1974-75 through 1984-85 about 33,000 students a year slipped through the nets and earned a doctorate. These numbers do not deny Cude's contentions about the waste that results from protracted study (about 10 years on average from baccalaureate to doctorate) or from attrition (data not available).<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the data do call into question the existence, or at least the effectiveness, of any professorial plot to keep the gates to the doctoral heavens only slightly ajar.

Cude's criticisms of doctoral programs and higher education more generally are not without merit or supporters in the United States. In fact, Secretary of Education William Bennett has accused the same suspects of the same crimes, although without the conspiratorial twist, on numerous occasions. And while Cude and Bennett are equally prone to hyperbole, elements of truth often underlie the exaggerations.

Despite the touted diversity of American higher education, in reality we adhere

to a single paradigm, the prestigious, selective research university where 85% of the faculty hold doctorates. Thus, most other four-year institutions aspire to a similar profile even though their faculty are primarily teachers. (Fewer than 3 in 10 American professors have ever published or edited a book and fewer than one in two have written an article in the last two years.<sup>3</sup>) By contrast, at community colleges, an important segment Cude overlooks, the research university paradigm has a weak grip and thus 80% of the faculty have a master's degree or less. Followers of Cude's counsel to "forget the doctorate and look for a job," would, therefore, do well in the U.S. to focus on two-year institutions.

Elsewhere faculty are, as Cude notes, too conservative to produce significant change. In the late 60's and early 70's the United States experimented to no avail with the Doctor of Arts degree to prepare college teachers. The innovation, scorned by traditionalists, has all but been abandoned, a story that hardly bodes well for Cude's proposed second masters. To be even gloomier, regional and professional accreditation agencies in the U.S. also press relentlessly for more doctorally qualified faculty.

In light of the conservative, even arrogant, nature of the academy, any changes seem more likely to occur as a result of external forces. Campuses are not immune to the laws of supply and demand. The doctorate was not a requisite credential in the 60's as enrollments soared and may not be again early in the next century when there will be substantial turnover of faculty. Similarly, public institutions, which enroll some 80% of American collegians, are not immune to pressures, especially when linked to appropriations, to assess and upgrade undergraduate education. These economic and political forces are likely to have more impact than impassioned pleas for reform by an embittered ABD.

As we labor to streamline the Ph.D. process, to improve the quality of instruction, and to stimulate slothful faculty – all worthy endeavors – we might remember that higher education in North America is the envy of the world. Certainly as the United States endeavors to be more competitive and to regain lost markets, industry has turned toward, not away from, the research university, the very target of Cude's polemic.

*The Ph.D. Trap*, while intended as an attack on the producers of doctorates, serves better as a caveat to consumers and employers. Prospective doctoral students should consider whether the circuitous, sometimes tortuous, path to a Ph.D. will prove to be a dead end or, at best, an unnecessary excursion. Colleges and universities without substantial research agendas should consider whether the doctorate, as currently constructed, really makes sense as a requirement for appointment, promotion, or tenure. If and when these consumers and employers reach Cude's conclusions, then – and only then – will some research universities think about building a better mouse trap, as it were.

## NOTES

1 Syverson, Peter D., and Robinson, Dawn S. *Council on Graduate Schools Annual Survey of Graduate Enrollment. 1986 Report*. Princeton, NJ: Educational Testing Service, 1987.

- 2 Center for Education Statistics. *Trends in Bachelors and Higher Degrees, 1975-1985*. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1987.
- 3 Bowen, Howard R., and Schuster, Jack H. *American Professors: A National Resource Imperiled*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.

### **Anne Innis Dagg**

When I first read *The PhD Trap* I was entranced. It documented many of the unformulated suspicions I had carried with me for years. I immediately ordered three copies which I planned to lend to free-thinking deans and professors who I felt were open to new ideas; I knew better than to believe the majority of academics would read it. Actually, to my astonishment, (for I am an idealist), even my chosen deans and professors had no time for the book. Several returned it to me by mail without comment, while others refused even to borrow it, claiming to be too busy with other things. What are we coming to when top scholars at universities, the publicly-funded supposed centres of academic thought in our culture, refuse to consider criticism of the way they function?

I am grateful to Cude not only because he sparked my thoughts about academic process, but that they were sparked to consider not only graduate students as an entity, but women and men graduate students separately, something that Cude does not attempt. It seems generally true that an institution that is insensitive to the concerns of one specific group of people is usually insensitive to other groups as well. It is no surprise, then, that universities which treat some graduate students in a cavalier manner should treat women badly, and put many women graduate students in double jeopardy.

If we consider three main problem areas discussed by Cude, it is soon apparent that women fare even worse than men in each. In one Ontario university, for example, attrition statistics released (and soon withdrawn again) by the administration showed that in the arts faculty, of those enrolled in doctoral programs during the preceding five years, the men were twice as successful as the women in earning their degree. The graduate student who unearthed these data also indicated why – women had fewer women professors as role models, they were often subject to sexist comments and to sexual harassment from their professors and peers, they were less likely to be chosen to work closely with their supervisors to complete research and publish papers, and they were not part of the “old boys’ network” that would have facilitated their careers (Haley, 1985). For these reasons also, women tend to be slower than men in completing their doctorate, and this is particularly disconcerting, since Cude’s book documents the excessive length of time the doctorate takes all candidates.

Cude’s third theme is that even when a student finally receives a PhD, he or she can do little with it. This “little” applies far more to women than to men. Women are far less likely than men to be hired as professors, (women currently are 17% of the professors at Canadian universities, with few new doctorates of either sex being hired), yet this is the main occupation serviced by this degree. If women are hired, they earn less than men with comparable qualifications, are less likely to be

awarded tenure, and are promoted more slowly. Many women with PhDs (like some men) are unable to find any work at all related to their discipline. To spend perhaps twelve years at university and then be unemployable is a depressing but familiar scenario for men as well as women. We must be grateful to Cude for documenting it.

#### REFERENCES

Haley, E. (1985). *Exploratory study of factors affecting graduate students' performance*. Unpublished paper. University of Waterloo.

#### Andreas Schroeder

Lordy lordy – one might be forgiven the impression that Wilf Cude's book THE PHD TRAP has scored a direct hit on the wasp's nest that is Canada's graduate schools. Just the swarm of pious, self-serving, totally unconvincing protestations of offended innocence that have buzzed into the Letters columns of the nation's newspapers and magazines wherever the book has been reviewed attests to that. Once again, despite all its propaganda to the contrary, the university community seems bent on proving that as a group, it's no more intelligent, wise or able to handle criticism than anyone else.

What's galling about this is that we, the university community, all *know* Cude is right. If we've any objectivity left in us at all, we know he's right. I haven't spent 22 years in and out of universities deaf dumb and blind. I've seen what Cude describes, and I've seen it again and again. It's an insult to the intelligence of anyone who hasn't wilfully slept through the past several decades to pretend that our use of the PhD degree, and our system for granting it, isn't in serious need of some very serious re-thinking. Stacks of national and international studies, even in-house ones by the likes of the Canadian Association of Graduate Schools, have admitted as much for years. So why can't we just stop all this silly quibbling, accept what's been staring us in the face for longer than I care to remember, and get on with the necessary repairs?

I have nothing against meritocracies – God help us, I wish there were still a few of them around. But to pretend that lack of merit is what's keeping thousands of PhD candidates from earning their degrees, when the system we've set up to grant those degrees often seems to measure everything but, is absurd. Aside from the fact that the very pedantry of many of the Humanities dissertation topics we allow (even encourage) our graduate students to explore often virtually guarantees the outcome, it's been my experience that more often than not, when things have gone wrong, it was a messy cocktail of incompatible personalities, poor direction or midstream changes of topic, focus, advisor or committee that sank the boat. The mixed signals of a system purporting to ask for inventive, creative thinking while being too frequently disinclined to measure the results by that same yardstick. So: we've been getting what we asked for – and gagging on the result.

Then, just to show that the first botch-up was no accident, we've taken this mess and used it to mortar up the entranceways to sound teaching careers at the post-secondary level. The principle now implicit in all university hiring policies – that the doctorate is the best professional qualification for undergraduate teaching – is patent and utter bunk. We've all experienced that as students and seen it repeatedly as instructors. Only the lack of an objective mechanism for the appraisal of undergraduate teaching keeps this misguided principle operative in our schools. The proof is right there in the pudding, but our universities have been notorious for not being prepared to risk sampling that pudding – even (especially) when they've cooked it themselves.

We'd better begin listening to scholars like Cude – because they genuinely have our best interests at heart. Cude is no raving revolutionary, with a tourniquet around his skull and a gasoline bomb in his fist. He's a clear-headed, pragmatic and thoroughly reasonable reformer, and his criticisms are accompanied by lists of sensible, realistic alternatives. No changes will be easy, but they'll only become more and more difficult the longer they're delayed. As Cude points out himself: in a field like Education, the best decisions are rarely made with the decision-maker's neck under a politician's heel.