

Recapturing the Essence of the M.A. Degree

If we are seriously planning for the next century at WCU, we might consider re-examining some of our programs which are likely to stay in place and not likely to change radically due to various constraints like money. One of these I suggest we re-consider is our master's program. I am not familiar with a wide range of master's programs even at WCU much less across the country, but it seems to me that it has become the fashion elsewhere--unfortunately at many of the schools from which our faculty have received doctorates--to treat the master's degree as a consolation prize for those who for any reason cannot complete a doctorate. The result has been to denigrate the value of the master's degree even though historically it has had a special value (implied in the name) as a reward for the completion of a comprehensive degree program. At the beginning of our century the master's degree really suggested that someone was indeed a master of his or her special field of study. Maybe realistically it would be presumptuous for anyone to suggest that these days, but the ideal might still be worth shooting for and might provide goals that could give not just direction but even distinction to our own M.A. programs. I am not suggesting our programs all need change but that we might consider a renewed commitment to keeping our degrees truly comprehensive and not modeling them narrowly on the research-oriented PhD.

Writing in 1911, Paul Elmer More addressed the issue of the "grueling process" of obtaining a "doctor's degree," which seemed "to be specially designed to eliminate all who have any imagination or ideas." More was primarily concerned with the study of English but his advice seems generally applicable to any program of graduate study. He acknowledged that the usual form of research--"the relentless pursuit of some Anglo-Saxon word or the wild chase of some folk-tale through five medieval languages--has its own place and honor." But he attacked the "tyranny of the German doctorate" with arguments we all might profitably reconsider:

It may be that for many men the preparation of a thesis is the best training, as it apparently is for the teacher the easiest method of testing a student's proficiency. But the system is subject at least to grave abuses. Even supposing the student has advanced far enough to devote to the special research needed for a thesis a year or two years of time without heavy sacrifices in other directions, the emphasis laid on this kind of work tends to confuse the meaning of productive and creative scholarship and to establish wrong standards of excellence. It tends also to foster the particular sin of German scholarship which Professor Shorey brands as inaccuracy, but which we should prefer to call lack of mental integrity--the habit, that is, of erecting vast theories on a slender basis of fact, and so clogging the paths of truth. Only a huge illusion can hold that a student who by a satisfactory, even an admirable, thesis has added some small

amount to the sum of knowledge is in any true sense of the word a more creative mind than one who has thoroughly assimilated a wide range of ideas and prepared himself to hand on the judgments of time. At least along with the doctorate, we need to strengthen and raise the master's degree as a symbol of large assimilative study. Indeed, some of our universities have seen the value of this course, and are gradually lifting the MA into a sign of real distinction. One serious impediment now in the way of this reform is the belated ignorance of those presidents and trustees of colleges who insist on a PhD after the name of a candidate to their faculties, and so attach to the degree a fictitious commercial value. ("Scholarship of Ideas" in Education and History, 259-60)

There is much to consider in More's words, but I should like to emphasize for us here at Western, as we try to define our programs for the beginning of a new century, that we take seriously More's advocacy of the master's degree as "a symbol of large assimilative study." Realistically, we must recognize that for those students wishing to go on for a doctorate elsewhere the master's degree will be just a stepping stone and we must prepare such students for the programs they will enter. That, however, need not deter us from defining our own goals for our degrees--and for the number of students who will not seek the doctorate.

Our principal goal, I would argue, should be to help our students "thoroughly assimilate" that "wide range of ideas" of which More speaks. The master's degree need not be merely a small-time version of the "real thing," a petty imitation of the German doctorate. It can be a means of giving extensive breadth and depth of knowledge to graduate students whose undergraduate work is increasingly fragmented, undirected, and eccentric, if not downright quixotic. Our emphasis could be on giving the widest and deepest possible base to our students' understanding.

That means--among many things we might keep in mind--that in matters of curriculum we need not indulge every faculty member's whimsical "specialization" with more and more "boutique" courses; that courses which attempt to give broad surveys of the field of study be at the core of every students' program; that course requirements not be reduced in favor of more thesis hours; that students be encouraged to take courses in related fields to further broaden their understanding; that since most programs laudably call for "comprehensive" exams, we strive to keep them comprehensive--and not merely reexaminations of course work over which students have already been examined, or watered-down formalities which the faculty themselves do not take seriously; that, in general, we keep a healthy balance between research goals and the effort to try to "cover" a field with truly comprehensive guidance in coursework and in comprehensive exams that may well necessitate independent study on the students' part to fill in his or her personal holes.

My impression is that none of this is heresy, that most faculty might be in general agreement; but I offer these ideas to shore up our own agenda in the face of quite real pressures from outside to fall into line with programs at PhD-granting institutions. Each of our own programs may face special pitfalls and have unique constraints, but there can be no harm in insisting that an M.A. from Western be awarded only to those who have indeed mastered a subject and can demonstrate a broad range of knowledge--and not just the ability to jump over a few hurdles.

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