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New York Times 9/28/89

The Phantom Ph.D. Gap

By Lynne V. Cheney

WASHINGTON

Many researchers have been predicting faculty shortages for the late 1990's and beyond, but a recent study has added a twist.

William Bowen, head of the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Julie Ann Sosa, a student at Oxford, predict that the real crunch will come not in physics or math, as one might suspect, but in the humanities and the social sciences.

Primarily because of faculty members retiring, dying and otherwise leaving the academy, there will be more job openings in the late 90's and beyond, they say, than there will be new Ph.D.'s to fill them.

Mr. Bowen and Ms. Sosa recommend that the Federal Government help fill the gap by increased support for graduate study. In the humanities and social sciences, the new stipends they recommend would cost $40 million a year.

To arrive at their projections, Mr. Bowen and Ms. Sosa had to make a number of highly debatable assumptions. They assumed, for example, that the number of new Ph.D.'s going into college teaching will continue to decline, as it has during the last decade.

Lynne V. Cheney is chairman of the National Endowment for the Humanities.

But the humanities and social science Ph.D.'s have been driven into nonacademic jobs by the scarcity of academic ones. As college and university positions become more plentiful, it seems reasonable to assume that a greater — not a smaller — share of new Ph.D.'s will take them.

Mr. Bowen's and Ms. Sosa's projections are also affected dramatically by the way they define the hiring pool for full-time job openings in the humanities and social sciences. As they see it, the pool consists only of new Ph.D.'s. But that overlooks the 39,000 holders of doctorates who are working outside the academy as well as thousands more who now work at colleges and universities part-time.

The assumption that deserves most attention concerns student-faculty ratios. Ms. Sosa and Mr. Bowen point out that between 1977 and 1987, while enrollment in the arts and sciences was dropping by 14 percent, faculties were growing by 16 percent. As a result, colleges and universities, which used to have one faculty member for every 16 students in the humanities and social sciences, now have one for every 10.8 students.

Allowing this ratio to return to former levels would decrease the number of faculty members required by one-third, effectively eliminating projected shortages. Even if the ratio of students to faculty recovered to only half the 1977 level, the results would be dramatic: 20 percent fewer faculty members would be required.

But Mr. Bowen and Ms. Sosa, judging these unlikely scenarios, base their principal projections on the 1987 ratio of one faculty member to every 10.8 students.

Certainly, it is no easy matter to raise student-faculty ratios once they have been cut. An obvious result of the lower ratio is that many faculty members are teaching less. Two courses a semester at major research universities is the norm now, when three used to be the rule.

These lighter teaching loads have become embedded in the expectations of tenure and promotion committees, which are now making unprecedented demands for publication. Even at small liberal arts colleges, it is not unusual for a junior faculty member to be expected to produce a book and several articles before the first tenure decision.

An overwhelming majority of faculty members — 72 percent in a recent poll — say their primary interest is in teaching rather than research. But it is hardly realistic to expect them to be enthusiastic about more classroom hours when the system rewards them primarily for time spent in the library. When research and publication are the keys to advancement, people will look for ways to spend time on those efforts rather than on distractions like teaching.

Universities need to reemphasize teaching, and not just to affect the student-faculty ratio. Imagine the results if undergraduates in humanities and social science courses saw scholars clamoring to teach them rather than negotiating ways to avoid them. That would do more to attract students to the profession than would any Government subsidies. □