

THE FACULTY

Ohio State Gets Jump on Doctoral Evaluations

Some Ph.D. programs are identified early as choices for cutting

BY DAVID GLENN

PROVOSTS AROUND the country are anticipating—and some are surely dreading—the long afternoons when they will go over national rankings data for their graduate departments. No later than this winter, after many delays, the National Research Council plans to release its assessments of American doctoral programs.

Student-faculty ratios, time to degree, stipends, faculty research productivity, and citation counts: Those numbers and many others will be under national scrutiny.

But one university couldn't wait. Last year, prodded by anxious faculty members worried about low Ph.D. production, Ohio State University conducted a thorough review of its doctoral programs, drawing heavily on data that its departments had compiled for the council's questionnaire. The Ohio State experience provides a window on what may be coming nationally.

The evaluations had teeth. Of the 90 doctoral programs at Ohio State, five small ones were tagged as "candidates for disinvestment or elimination": comprehensive vocational education (a specialty track in the college of agriculture), soil science, welding engineering, rehabilitation services, and technology education. Another 29 programs were instructed to reassess or restructure themselves.

Some programs got good news, however. Twenty-nine that were identified as "high quality" or "strong" will share hundreds of thousands of dollars in new student-fellowship subsidies.

Many faculty members say the assessments provided a long-overdue chance for Ohio State to think strategically, identifying some fields to focus on and others that are marginal. But the process has also had its share of bumps. The central administration concluded that certain colleges, notably the College of Biological Sciences, were too gentle in their self-reports. And some people have complained that the assessments relied too heavily on "input" variables, such as students' GRE scores.

Despite those concerns, the dean of Ohio State's Graduate School, Patrick S. Osmer, says the assessment project has exceeded his expectations. He hopes it can serve as a model for what other institutions can do with their doctoral data. "The joy of working here," he says, "is that we're trying to take a coordinated, logical approach to all of these questions, to strengthen the university."

A FACULTY MANDATE

The seeds of the assessment project were planted in 2005, when a high-profile faculty committee issued a report warning



ANDY SNOW FOR THE CHRONICLE

Patrick S. Osmer, dean of the Graduate School at Ohio State, led the evaluation project: "We're trying to take a coordinated, logical approach to all of these questions, to strengthen the university."

that Ohio State was generating proportionally fewer Ph.D.'s than were the other Big Ten universities. "The stark fact is that 482 Ph.D. degrees ... granted in 2003-4 is far below the number expected from an institution the size and (self-declared) quality of OSU," the report read. (The 482 figure excluded doctorates awarded by Ohio State's college of education.) At the University of Wisconsin at Madison, for example, each tenure-track faculty member generated an average of 0.4 Ph.D.'s each year. At Ohio State, the figure was only 0.267.

The committee recommended several steps: Give the central administration more power in graduate-level admissions. Organize stipends, fellowships, and course work in ways that encourage students to complete their doctorates in a timely manner. Stop giving doctoral-student subsidies to students who are likely to earn only master's degrees. And distribute subsidies from the central administration on a strategic basis, rewarding the strongest programs and those with the most potential for improvement.

"One thing that motivated all of this," says Paul Allen Beck, a professor of political science and a former dean of social and behavioral sciences at Ohio State, "was a feeling that the university had not invested enough in Ph.D. education. Our universitywide fellowships were not at a competitive level. We really felt that we should try to do a better job of concentrating our university investments on the very best programs."

Ohio State officials had hoped to use the National Research Council's final report itself for their evaluations. But after its release was postponed for what seemed like the sixth or seventh time, they moved forward without it.

In September 2007, Mr. Osmer asked the deans of Ohio State's 18 colleges to report data about their doctoral students' median time to degree, GRE scores, stipends, fellowships, job-placement outcomes, and racial and ethnic diversity.

Many of those numbers were easy to put together, because departments had compiled them during the previous year in response to the council's questionnaire. But job placements—a topic that will not be covered in the NRC report—were something that certain Ohio State programs had not previously tracked.

"This was a huge new project for us and for some of our departments as well," says Julie Carpenter-Hubin, director of institutional research and planning. "But simply going around and talking to faculty took care of most of it. It's really remarkable the degree to which faculty members stay in touch with their former doctoral students and know where they are. I think we wound up with placement data for close to 80 percent of our Ph.D. graduates, going 10 years back."

DEFENDING THEIR NUMBERS

The reports that Ohio State's colleges generated last fall contained a mixture of quantitative data—most prominently GRE scores and time-to-degree numbers—and narrative arguments about their departments' strengths. The College of Social and Behavioral Sciences, for example, noted that several recent Ph.D.s in economics, political science, and psychology had won tenure-track positions at Ivy League institutions.

When they had to report poor-looking numbers, departments were quick to cite reasons and contexts. The anthropology program said its median time to degree of 7.3 years might seem high when compared with those of other degree courses, but is actually lower than the national average for anthropology students, who typically spend years doing fieldwork. Economics said its retention-and-completion rate, which is less than 50 percent, might look low but is comparable to those in other highly ranked economics departments, where students are often weeded out by comprehensive exams at the end of the first year.

In April 2008, a committee appointed and led by Mr. Osmer, the graduate-school dean, digested the colleges' reports and issued a report card, ranking the 90 doctoral programs in six categories. (See table on following page.)

The panel did not meekly accept the colleges' self-evaluations. The College of Biological Sciences, for example, had reported that it lacked enough data to draw distinctions among its programs. But the committee's report argued, among oth-

Some programs got good news—29 of them will share hundreds of thousands of dollars in student-fellowship subsidies.

How Ohio State U. Rates Doctoral Programs

Until recently, Ohio State University used a simple, quantity-based formula to distribute student-support money to its doctoral programs. In essence, the more credit hours taken by students in a program each quarter, the more money the program collected. But last year the university introduced quality-control measures. It used them to make choices about which programs to invest in—and, more controversially, which ones to eliminate.

MEASURES USED:

- Students' time to degree
- Students' GRE scores
- Graduates' job placements, 1996-2005
- Student diversity
- The program's share of Ph.D. production (both nationally and among Ohio State's peers)
- "Overall program quality and centrality to the university's mission"

RESULTING RATINGS:

- High quality: 12 programs
- Strong: 17 programs
- Good: 16 programs
- New and/or in transition; cannot be fully assessed: 11 programs
- Must reassess and/or restructure: 29 programs
- Candidates for disinvestment or elimination: 5 programs

WHAT THE RATINGS MEAN:

- Programs rated "high quality" and "strong" will share new funds from the central administration for graduate-student stipends.
- "Good" programs have been asked to make improvements in specific areas. Their support will not significantly change.
- Colleges with doctoral programs that were deemed in need of reassessment or restructuring were asked to submit new strategic plans this fall. Those plans are subject to approval by Ohio State's provost.
- The new strategic plans will also deal with programs deemed candidates for disinvestment or elimination. Those programs might be folded into larger degree courses, or killed outright.

er things, that the small program in entomology appeared to draw relatively little outside research support, and that its students had lower GRE scores than those in other biology programs. (Entomology and all other doctoral programs in biology were among the 29 programs that Mr. Osmer's committee deemed in need of reassessment or restructuring.)

The report's points about entomology—and about the general organization of the college—were controversial among the faculty members, says Matthew S. Platz, a professor of chemistry who became interim dean of biological sciences in July. But faculty members have taken the lead in developing new designs for the college, he says, to answer many of the central administration's concerns.

"I'm delighted by the fact that at the grass-roots level, faculty members have been talking about several types of reorganization," Mr. Platz says. "And I'm hopeful that two or three of them will be approved by the end of the year."

'UNACCEPTABLY LOW QUALITY'

The five doctoral degrees named as candidates for the ax have also stirred controversy.

Jerry M. Bigham, a professor of soil science and director of Ohio State's School of Environment and Natural Resources, says he was disappointed but not entirely surprised by the committee's suggestion that his program could be terminated. The soil-science program has existed on its own only since 1996; before that it was one of several specializations offered by the doctoral program in agronomy.

"In essence, we've had students and faculty members spread across three programs," he says. So he understands why the university might want to place soil sciences under a larger umbrella, in order to reduce overhead and streamline the administration.

At the same time, he says, several people were offended by the Osmer committee's blunt statement that soil-science students are of "unacceptably low quality."

The panel's analysis of the students' GRE scores was "just a snapshot, and I think it really has to be viewed with caution," Mr. Bigham says. "Even though we're a small program, our students have won university fellowships and have been recognized for their research. So I would really object to any characterization of our students as being weak."

The final verdict on the five programs is uncertain. The colleges that house them might propose folding them into larger degree courses. Or they might propose killing them outright. All such proposals, which are due this fall, are subject to approval by the central administration.

Jason W. Marion, president of the university's Council of Graduate Students, says its members have generally supported the doctoral-assessment project, especially its emphasis on improving stipends and fellowships. But some students, he adds, have expressed concern about an overreliance on GRE scores at the expense of harder-to-quantify "output" variables like job-placement outcomes.

Mr. Osmer replies that job placement actually has been given a great deal of weight. "Placing that alongside the other variables really helped our understanding of these programs come together," he says.

At this summer's national workshop sessions of the Council of Graduate Schools, Mr. Osmer was invited to lecture about Ohio State's assessment project and to discuss how other institutions might make use of their own National Research Council data. William R. Wiener, a vice provost at Marquette University who also spoke on Mr. Osmer's panel, calls the Ohio State project one example of how universities are becoming smarter about assessments.

"Assessments need to have reasonable consequences," Mr. Wiener says. "I think more universities realize that they need to create a culture of assessment, and that improving student learning needs to permeate everything that we do."

Mr. Beck, the former social-sciences dean at Ohio State, says that even for relatively strong departments—his own political-science department was rated "high quality" by Mr. Osmer's committee—a well-designed assessment process can be eye-opening.

"These programs just kind of float along, guided by their own internal pressures," says Mr. Beck. But "the departments here were forced to take a hard look at themselves, and they sometimes saw things that they didn't like."

The assessment panel's analysis of students' GRE scores was "just a snapshot, and I think it really has to be viewed with caution."



The Ohio State University • Graduate School
247 and 250 University Hall • 230 North Oval Mall • Columbus OH 43210-1366
Phone: 614-292-6031 • Fax: 614-292-3656 • Website: www.gradsch.osu.edu

