Ph.D. Alumni “talk back” to MSU about their training and careers

How do you now judge your decision to come to MSU?

This is one of many questions posed to MSU Ph.D. alumni in a revealing survey recently conducted by The Graduate School. The answer to this question was one of the “most promising results” of the survey, according to MSU political science graduate student David Lektzian who was the lead researcher of the study. The results show that 87.5% of alumni polled from 11 different departments (see facing page for list of departments) thought it was an excellent or good decision to get their Ph.D. from MSU.

Interestingly, this assessment matches the responses that these same alumni gave in their exit survey administered by the Graduate School at the time of graduation, in which more than 88% thought it was an excellent or good decision to come to MSU. Although the scope of this survey encompasses the views of only 500 alumni across the humanities, natural sciences and social sciences, the striking similarities and universal themes which emerged from this cross section of the MSU alumni population suggest there are lessons that can be applied to all programs at the University and in higher education in general.

This study of MSU graduates, entitled “1997-98 MSU Ph.D. Alumni Survey,” is the first of its kind. It was modeled after a study completed by Maresi Nerad at the University of California, Berkeley called “Ph.D.’s: Ten Years Later.” However, the MSU alumni survey is unique in several important ways. While the Berkeley study focused on alumni from six departments across 38 AAU institutions from 1983 through 1985, MSU’s survey added five more departments and expanded its time frame to cover the years 1982 through 1993.

Another key difference is that MSU’s survey focuses exclusively on its own alumni. Consequently, the survey results allow Graduate School dean Karen Klompares, director of the study, to gauge the education and career satisfaction and experiences of MSU’s recent graduates. Furthermore, information gleaned from the study will help shape the education and support services offered to current and future generations of MSU graduate students.

In shaping the study, the Graduate School staff, under the direction of former dean Gary Crawley, focused its attention on Ph.D. alumni from 11 departments selected as representative of the natural sciences, social sciences and humanities. Since the questionnaire was administered between October 1997 and June 1998, respondents had completed their doctoral degrees between 4 and 15 years earlier.

Lektzian was pleased at the high response rate to the survey—500 of the surveys were returned, making a total of 67.5% of alumni contacted responding. He credits this successful percentage rate to the positive associations that graduates hold toward MSU, as well as the fact that alumni were given the option of responding to the survey either on the World Wide Web or on a paper copy mailed to them.

The survey asked alumni to report on their current and former employment history, their present location in the United States and Michigan, and to evaluate their education in light of their career experiences. The results show that graduates from the social sciences and

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The survey also asked graduates to rate how well their departments prepared them to succeed in their careers. When asked to assess how the training in their doctoral program compared to the skills they needed to be effectively trained in their field or career, alumni across departments felt the amount of emphasis placed on the breadth of training in discipline, depth of training in discipline, and depth of training in area of concentration was about right and only a little less than needed.

The emphasis placed on research and publishing and the emphasis on academic positions compared to what was actually needed was also about right for most respondents.

This same set of questions, however, also pinpointed three areas in which all alumni felt that their programs were found to be lacking compared to what is needed to be effectively trained for the careers: breadth of training outside discipline, emphasis on developing teaching skills, and emphasis on non-academic positions.

The one area that alumni felt was emphasized too much compared to what they needed was the time it took to complete the degree.

The MSU survey identifies the same issues—the need for graduate training that encourages expertise in a broader range of skills beyond research and scholarship—that are emerging from

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live in Michigan. “This is important since it indicates to us that we have many of MSU’s graduates right here in Michigan contributing to the state’s economic well-being,” Klomparens said.

Klomparens and Letkizan found the most telling and informative results in the portion of the survey which asked alumni to assess how well their graduate programs prepared them for their careers.

First, the survey inquired as to how much their departments emphasized each of several aspects of their graduate training and then asked them to indicate how important each of these was to getting their first job and to their careers.

Notably, alumni from across all departments who landed their first jobs in education felt that their degree programs underemphasized the importance of teaching skills. Furthermore, all alumni surveyed reported that in terms of finding that first position and succeeding in their careers, their graduate programs underemphasized the importance of oral and written communication skills, computer skills, professional networking and teamwork skills, regardless of whether that first job was in education, government or the private sector.

The “1997-98 MSU Ph.D. Alumni Survey” polled a sampling of graduates from these MSU departments:

- Biochemistry
- Computer Science and Engineering
- Economics
- Electrical and Computer Engineering
- English
- History
- Mathematics
- Mechanical Engineering
- Physics
- Political Science
- Psychology

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A 1942 Alumnus Recalls MSU Experience and Offers Recommendations

It may surprise you to learn that the essential skills for success after graduation have not changed over the decades, according to 1942 alumnus Arnold C. Ott.

Ott recently provided his perspective to the Graduate School as part of their 2000 Ph.D. Survey of College of Natural Science Alumni. Ott took his MSU degree in bio-organic chemistry and currently works as a business consultant and president of his own company, Rivertree Limited.

Ott’s comments about his experience as a student support some of the same information gleaned from the more extensive survey in which recent alumni report that graduate students need to be trained as more than researchers in order to be effective in whatever career they choose.

In reflecting on the most useful aspects of his doctoral education, Ott cites the valuable advice provided by his major professors, urging absolute honesty in one’s work and advocating for the ability to write “with clarity, yet interestingly.” Ott also praises his program for giving him the skills to “evolve a persuasive, yet brief, business plan.”

On the question of what additional professional training would have been useful to him as a graduate student, he suggests that a doctoral education ought to focus on “the critical skills of leadership,” to emphasize thinking outside the boundaries of one’s discipline, and to teach the art of communicating clearly.

Ott’s words of wisdom suggest that regardless of their graduation date, the unique perspective of each alumnus can contribute to an expanded view of the past and future of graduate education at MSU.
**MSU recognized as national leader for undergraduate mentoring program**

The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy recently announced the winners of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Science, Mathematics, and Engineering Mentoring (PAESMEM), placing MSU and the Committee on Institutional Cooperation (CIC) members within a select list of 10 institutions to receive this distinction. MSU was honored with this award, along with other members of the CIC, in recognition of the success of its Summer Research Opportunities Program (SROP).

The SROP at MSU runs in conjunction with the Ronald E. McNair Post-Baccalaureate Achievement Program and the joint program is known as McNair/SROP. The combined program provides an excellent opportunity for college juniors and seniors, coming from universities around the U.S. and representing diverse disciplines, to acquire the skills to succeed in the competitive graduate school admissions process.

Students also develop research skills, with guidance from a faculty mentor, which are critical to their future success in graduate school. According to Nettavia Curry, coordinator of MSU’s McNair/SROP Scholars Program, one measure of the SROP’s success is the increase in the level of competency that participants experience as a result of the program: “Assessments of the program indicate that students gain the necessary confidence to tackle the rigorous graduate school admissions process and effectively transition from undergraduate to graduate education.”

The PAESMEM honor bestowed upon the CIC for its SROP program is an annual award administered by the National Science Foundation and includes a commemorative Presidential certificate and a $10,000 grant to the individuals and institutions to continue their outstanding mentoring activities.

Curry believes the award will “open the eyes of a lot of undergraduates—both SROP candidates and graduate school applicants—who will now view MSU and the other CIC schools as national leaders in the area of science, mathematics and engineering research.” Thank you to all the MSU faculty who lead the way!
Educators Gather to Begin “Re-Envisioning the Ph.D.”

MSU participates in national project to re-conceptualize doctoral education

How can we re-envision the Ph.D. to meet the needs of a society of the twenty-first century?

This is the central question taken up by educators, administrators and business leaders across the country who are engaged in a two-year study entitled “Re-envisioning the Ph.D.” Sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts, this project is aimed at fostering a national dialogue that will in turn spark initiatives to shape the future of doctoral education.

Earlier this year, the University of Washington in Seattle hosted an invitation-only conference also entitled “Re-envisioning the Ph.D.” The conference brought together nearly 200 representatives from institutions, agencies, corporations, and organizations concerned with doctoral education.

From primary schools to traditional four-year colleges to businesses, government and industry, the conference attendees came together to collectively address the reconceptualization of doctoral education as it exists today and offer specific recommendations for future change.

MSU was represented at the conference by Dean Wendy Wilkins of the College of Arts and Letters, Dean Karen Klomparens from the Graduate School, and Dr. Ann Austin, Associate Professor of Higher, Adult, and Lifelong Education in the Department of Educational Administration.

What prompted this call for the radical “re-envisioning” of doctoral education? Traditionally, graduate programs have focused exclusively on churning out future generations of scholars, yet in recent years employers complain that Ph.D.s are often unprepared for work outside their narrow disciplines. Additionally, the growing concern for the improvement of undergraduate education is prompting many institutions to reexamine the quality of their teaching and teacher training.

University of Washington’s Jody Nyquist, Principal Investigator of the “Re-envisioning” project, along with a 21-member Advisory Board, convened the national meeting to engage conference attendees in four key tasks: to share promising practices that represent current efforts to enhance doctoral education; to develop meaningful dialogue within and across the sectors; to identify what each sector will contribute to moving forward on improving doctoral training; and to establish commitments from each sector for planning and executing a set of actions.

At the conference, Dean Klomparens participated in the dialogue by featuring some of the “promising practices” from MSU. The dean shared details of the Graduate School’s Certification in College Teaching Program and the conflict resolution program entitled “Setting Expectations, Resolving Conflict,” as well as the College of Natural Science’s professional master’s program. Each of these forward-looking programs helps address the current concerns of graduate educators.

The conflict resolution program (http://grad.msu.edu/conflict.htm) fosters the development of graduate students by introducing them to the practice of interest-based thinking and negotiation skills and raising their awareness of issues of potential conflict in doctoral education.

“We are in our final year of program funding from FIPSE (U.S. Department of Education’s Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education) and have had support from the Hewlett Foundation,” said Klomparens. “The invited workshops we conducted at the the Council of Graduate Schools annual meetings sparked the interest of other schools across the country. More than 40 presentations of the paper have been made, including 12 outside of MSU and we have three partner institutions who are piloting our program: Penn State University, the University of New Mexico and Kansas State University.”

By enhancing students’ abilities to anticipate and negotiate the conflicts they may encounter in graduate school, the program improves communication between students and faculty, reduces attrition from graduate programs and shortens students’ time to degree. It also contributes to professional development efforts because conflict resolution is a skill that is important across many life experiences.
The Professional Master’s Degrees in Science programs (http://www.ns.msu.edu/prof_masters/Default.htm) contribute to the changing face of graduate education by serving as an attractive alternative to a doctoral degree for students who desire advanced training in a disciplinary area but are interested in more applied approaches.

The programs provide students with in-depth training in a science discipline accompanied by a college certification in basic business practice including communication and presentation skills. This dual emphasis on technical experience and business knowledge is an asset for students approaching the professional job market (see related article on page 14 of this issue).

These three initiatives demonstrate some of the ways in which MSU is answering the challenges posed by those who are calling for the “re-envisioning” of graduate education.

Also at the April conference, MSU’s Ann Austin presented findings from her national study entitled “The Development of Graduate Students as Prospective Teaching Scholars,” sponsored by The Pew Charitable Trusts and The Spencer Foundation.

Austin has collaborated with three faculty colleagues, Jody Nyquist and Don Wulf from the University of Washington and Jo Sprague from San Jose State University, as well as with several doctoral students, including Patricia Kenney Fraser from MSU.

Highlighting conclusions from the study, Austin noted that the development of graduate students does not follow a linear model, but is shaped by individual characteristics, background, socialization processes, and the disciplinary context of each student.

Austin advocates for programmatic changes in which graduate students have guided opportunities to reflect regularly on their individual progress, receive regular mentoring from faculty members to help them assess their professional and personal goals, and are encouraged to engage in ongoing conversations with peers and faculty concerning career options, disciplinary issues, and perspectives on teaching.

Furthermore, Austin joins other professionals in calling for colleges and universities to offer more systematic preparation of graduate students for the full range of faculty duties, including teaching, advising, service and outreach, as well as research.

“There is considerable consensus emerging from various studies that were highlighted at the conference concerning issues and concerns in graduate education, as well as strategies to enhance the graduate experience and prepare students more effectively for academic and other careers,” Austin said. “Good ideas, commitment to action, and energy pervaded the conference atmosphere. As universities around the country take up conversations about graduate education, I look forward to learning about new strategies for strengthening the graduate experience and preparing our next generation of scholars.”

Dean Wilkins offered her impressions of the concerns raised at the conference. “What surprised me was the amount of conversation about whether a Ph.D. program should be as narrowly focused as we in academe believe it should be,” she said. “While we believe in the narrow focus and depth of doctoral education, employers from the private sectors who hire our graduates questioned the narrowness of this preparation.”

The dean believes that broadening doctoral training might unfortunately lengthen students’ time-to-degree but that the issue is worthy of careful study. The conference also gave Wilkins an opportunity to hear recent Ph.D. graduates discuss the importance of mentoring to their success in graduate school. Many graduate students struggle to find the support and guidance they need from faculty.

“Becoming a faculty member doesn’t automatically give us the skills to be good mentors. We need to look at what graduate students need and then teach faculty how to meet those needs as mentors.”

College of Arts and Letters Dean Wendy Wilkins

For more information on the national “Re-envisioning the Ph.D.” project, visit http://depts.washington.edu/envision/
The Graduate School welcomes Yevonne Smith as Associate Dean of ALANA* Student Affairs

In June of this year, Dr. Yevonne Smith joined the staff of The Graduate School as Associate Dean of ALANA Student Affairs. Smith brings to Linton Hall a wealth of leadership experiences to draw upon in her new role.

She has been a member of the faculty in the Department of Kinesiology at MSU since 1990 and believes that her dual role as faculty member and administrator gives her valuable insights into multiple perspectives of departments, colleges, administrators, faculty, staff, and students on campus.

Smith’s diverse professional experiences will be particularly useful in her ongoing effort to evaluate graduate programs—determining when recruitment and retention efforts are effective for departments and students, or when they may need strengthening.

This priority reflects Smith’s commitment to “keep communication flowing at various levels within the University in order to help strengthen relationships that help students succeed.”

Smith’s professional background reflects her commitment to serving students and educators alike.

As department head of Teacher Education Professional Laboratory Experiences at Grambling State University in Louisiana, she developed her skills as a college faculty leader, a resource person for faculty and students, and a university program planner and evaluator.

At the University of Michigan, Smith coordinated the Teacher Education Program in the Physical Education/Kinesiology Division where she honed her organizational behavior, human relationship and communication skills working inside and outside the university with students, educational faculty, school educators and administrators.

This fall, Yevonne Smith was awarded the University of Michigan Alumni Career Achievement Award from the Division of Kinesiology. This award recognizes an alumnus for making significant achievements and contributions within her career field, area of scholarship and profession.

Smith has given 30 years of service to educational institutions serving diverse youth, women, young adults, and university students throughout her career as a K-12 teacher, health educator, coach, university professor and administrator.

She has served on several research journal editorial boards in her field, served in leadership roles in national organizations and academies and is considered a leader and scholar in the area of Women in Sport and Women of Color in Sport and Physical Activity.

She consulted with and appeared in the ABC series “Women in Sport: A Passion to Play” and her class was videotaped for the MSU IDEA: Diversity in Curriculum series used for faculty and administrators’ development. “I am happy to be sharing my commitments and perspectives on diversity in academe through service in the position of Associate Dean of The Graduate School, Office of ALANA Student Affairs,” said Smith.

Smith approaches her new position with a keen understanding of the particular challenges that ALANA students often face when they arrive on campus: “Students may leave a supportive and caring home or cultural environment and enter a campus environment which is not always culturally sensitive and not constructed primarily to address their particular individual, social or cultural needs and perspectives.”

She conceives her office as a resource for University graduate education, recruitment and retention efforts. ALANA graduate students who are dealing with academic retention issues involving social support, recruitment conferences, research travel, and financial challenges related to graduate school attendance may make an appointment with the office to discuss their individual needs.

Smith will also promote and organize conversations and workshops to help ALANA students survive and thrive in a research-intensive environment. She plans to invite ALANA graduate student organization leaders to her office for meetings and will host “brown bag” discussions with graduate students where she can listen to concerns, needs, and interests as well as offer feedback.

In this way, she may better connect with them and offer academic and faculty
career guidance, as well as social support strategies. In her work with graduate students in the past, Smith found that “ALANA students want to be treated respectfully like every other student. Yet if the University wants to retain these students and help them finish their programs, we need to help them become more empowered by building a culture of academic and social support.”

According to Smith, her immediate task is “to review and strengthen existing programs in the ALANA office.” This is part of her wide-reaching effort to enhance communication among colleges, faculty, staff, administrators, and graduate student leaders concerning programmatic efforts and invite their feedback.

In her new position, Smith will revive the ALANA Advisory Committee, and serve on the CIC Access Panel and a number of University committees developing strategies and perspectives to enhance graduate education, recruitment and retention, and diversity.

As university professor, researcher and scholar, Smith has gained knowledge which will be valuable in her new role as associate dean. Smith’s research area examines intersections of gender, class, and race/ethnicity in the socialization and achievement experiences of youth and women of color.

She is interested in the psycho-social, sociological and social historical relational perspectives on the achievements of women in sport. Smith believes this connects well to a comprehensive focus and interest in ALANA students’ academic development and social support structures in higher education.

It suggests to her that it is important to make meaningful connections between students’ achievement orientations, the academic environment, social support structures and students’ success outcomes.

“There are many programs and opportunities within the Graduate School that support graduate students’ success. Therefore, I am pleased to have the opportunity to serve the Graduate School and graduate students by actively supporting and participating in these efforts along with Dean Karen Klomparens, Associate Dean Tony Nunez, my assistant, Evette Chavez, and the entire Graduate School staff. I commend the staff for their outstanding efforts, both present and past, in support of graduate students.”

By understanding the mission of the University, addressing the needs of diverse graduate students, staff, faculty, and administrators, and providing appropriate academic, financial and social support structures through the Graduate School and other campus structures, Associate Dean Yevonne Smith firmly believes that we can help to make a difference in the lives of all graduate students and graduate programs here at MSU.

*ALANA is an acronym for the four largest underrepresented racial/ethnic groups found at most colleges and universities: African American, Latina(o)/Chicana(o), Asian/Pacific American and Native American.

CORRECTION:
The second reference to Literacy Volunteers of America—Capital Area Literacy Coalition should have been “LVA-CALC” on page 10 of Spring 2000 issue of The Graduate Post. LVA-CALC is a Lansing-based nonprofit volunteer organization with more than 75 literacy tutoring locations in Clinton, Eaton and Ingham counties. The organization was mentioned in a feature article about MSU graduate students who volunteer their time to improve the quality of life in their communities.