



## Keeping the Value in Education

### Part 1: Graduate School

#### **Interview with Joan F. Lorden, Ph.D. – May 2002**

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**Interviewer:** At the Merrill conference in June 2001 you talked about staying true to our values when we, as institutions of higher learning, evaluate the quality of education. Each university has a variety of ways to measure success in research and graduate education. Evaluation systems don't usually include information from students about what they learned. Even the pivotal report by the National Research Council fails to take into account the student experience. It relies on reputation to rank programs. Why this serious omission?

**Joan Lorden:** Any measure of educational effectiveness must include feedback from students, but this requires a good deal of effort. It is much easier for an academic program to simply report numbers – the number of students in the program, the number of Graduate Teaching Assistants, etc. But we can secure input – through surveys or exit interviews. Several national groups have created student surveys and their reports are available online. The Sloan Foundation financed an online survey by The National Association of Graduate-Professional Students. The Pew Charitable Trusts sponsored a survey on doctoral education and career preparation. This is all useful information and it begins to give students a voice in their education.

**Interviewer:** In your position paper with NASULGC you recommend surveying students five years after they complete graduate school. Why wait so long?

**Lorden:** Exit interviews are very different from surveys of graduates who are established in their careers. You get different kinds of information because you can ask very different questions. An exit survey asks: Have you been treated well? Did your advisor meet with you regularly? Did you have access to the right equipment for your research? In other words, an exit survey evaluates satisfaction. When a graduate is established in a career, the survey can ask other kinds of questions: Did you receive a good foundation? Did graduate school help you develop a career?

**Interviewer:** Who at the university should collect this kind of information?

**Lorden:** In some places, a central location like the graduate school is the most effective. But an individual program or school will ask questions that are important too –

it is much easier to be specific at this level. Every school should follow its own graduates.

**Interviewer:** What is the value of knowing student outcomes?

**Lorden:** The University of Alabama at Birmingham recently surveyed its graduates because we hadn't previously done exit interviews at the Graduate School. We began with graduates 5 years ago and went as far back as 1980. We discovered some things about ourselves that we were able to correct. We hadn't realized how important it was for students to have a process for resolving academic grievances. We also saw the impact of program growth over the past 15 years. We could see from their comments that students had a more personal experience when our programs were smaller. Generally, our graduates expressed satisfaction with their education and this is useful information also.

**Interviewer:** What outcomes do we expect from doctoral education?

**Lorden:** This is a good question. It depends on who you ask – students, the faculty, the sponsors of graduate training, or employers. All of these groups have a different take on it. For the majority of faculty, the goal is to have students well placed at other academic institutions. This reflects positively on the faculty who train them. For students, a satisfying career is the best outcome – regardless of where that may be. More and more we find that students are thinking about the quality of their lives and this has driven some students out of academia. They can see the incredible pressure we place on entry-level faculty. Or they realize if they work in industry they may get better pay, newer facilities and be able to obtain the resources they need without engaging in a constant quest for grant support. Employers in business want some of the same qualities that faculty also seek when hiring colleagues: flexibility and breadth of training. All employers want people with good communication skills. This is especially true in industry, where an employee must be able to talk to all kinds of people and make a case.

**Interviewer:** What about the taxpayer – from this perspective, what is the best outcome of graduate education?

**Lorden:** Taxpayers of course fund the federal agencies that are trying to develop a scientific workforce. The National Science Foundation and the National Institutes of Health want to develop a sufficient number of scientists and engineers to sustain continued growth in our economy because we are so dependent on technology. Having people with advanced degrees is important in so many areas. Taxpayers may not realize they have an important stake in graduate education. At the state level, undergraduate students are often the focus of public discussions. But it is the people with advanced degrees who train our future teachers – their impact is felt all the way up the line.

**Interviewer:** You just published an article in *Change* magazine about postdoctoral fellows and those training years following the Ph.D. You express concern that academia is driving some people out of science. Tell us more.

**Lorden:** We need well-educated people in every sector. It is a good thing to have policy makers and business leaders who are well educated in the sciences. But it is not OK to lose talent we could retain in academia because we've made the environment unwelcoming. Of biggest concern is the way we may be driving out women and minorities. This is reinforced by Chris Golde and Timothy Dore in their study for the Pew Charitable Trusts, "At cross purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education." Look at the demographics. The number of women earning Ph.D's has grown – especially in the biological sciences – but the number of women in academic positions is small as you move up the ranks. In order to attract women into academic careers, we need policies that are family-friendly. In fact, this is important to many young professionals both male and female. A lot of attention is given to parity of salaries, but other things are also important – parental leave, child care on campus, etc. Somehow we must get beyond a situation where it isn't feasible for people to try and balance family life with a career in academia.

**Interviewer:** What attracted you to academic life when you were in graduate school?

**Lorden:** I received my training at Yale in Psychology. There were very few requirements and my advisor gave me the leeway to develop my own projects with my own research agenda. Self-reliance was a value my program cultivated. I got a taste for the freedom and challenge of academic life. Where else can you determine what you will study, and pursue it as you see fit? This is an attractive feature of academic life and I hope students don't lose sight of it. My program emphasized learning how to ask questions and analyze problems. I was challenged to find problems that were interesting and important to work on. Years later, I forgot many of the lectures, but I held onto these other experiences. Looking back, a deficit in my program may have been career planning. I was on my way out the door before anyone talked to me about the next step. In today's highly competitive environment, we must give students information about career development early on. We should also encourage them to strive for breadth in their training and not just drill down in one particular topic.

***Interview with Joan Lorden by Joy Simpson, a member of the National Association of Science Writers. Dr. Lorden is currently the Provost and Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte.***

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