

Anne J. MacLachlan  
Center for Studies in Higher Education, UC Berkeley

GRADUATE EDUCATION:  
THE EXPERIENCE OF WOMEN AND MINORITY PH.D.S AT U.C. BERKELEY,  
1980-89  
ABSTRACT

This is a study of the graduate school experiences of women and minority students who received their Ph.D.s from U.C. Berkeley between 1980 and 1989. It examines the experiences of all ethnic groups by gender and discipline area within the context of their graduate education as a whole. It builds on earlier studies of U.C.B. and is linked to larger studies in which Berkeley participated, arguing that the Berkeley experience is more characteristic of graduate training at large American research universities than unique to Berkeley.

Interviewed were 338 Ph.D.s including 53 Asian Americans, 95 Blacks, 49 Chicanos, 5 Filipinos, 72 Latinos, 12 Native Americans, 91 Whites. In proportion to the total 6377 Ph.D.s 2% of Whites, 15% Asian Americans, 63% to 100% of other groups were included. A standard questionnaire was used in telephone interviews made in 1989 and 1991 which asked about background, educational history, progress through the graduate program, sources of support, family status and responsibilities as well as placement and career path. Specific questions were asked about relations with advisors and departments and respondents were asked to rank their answers to specific aspects from 1 (highest) to 5 (lowest). Most provided ranked answers to these questions and around half volunteered commentary.

Advisors were ranked with a 1 or 2 by 100% of Native Americans going down to 73% for Chicanos. Women were somewhat more critical than men in every respect, but the most dissatisfied with their advisors were Asian Americans, followed by Whites and Chicanos. Advisors, however, were widely praised for their support, although praise was tempered with remarks about distant support and the need for the student to become self-reliant as a result. Specific aspects of advisor behavior received more critical responses with respect to finding financial support for students, for (not) encouraging or assisting students to publish or give papers or for introducing students to other scholars in the field.

Departments were criticized more heavily than advisors with Asian Americans also the most critical along with women from all groups. Students from all disciplines made substantial commentary. The chief issues raised by half those interviewed were isolation from other students and faculty, an unstructured curriculum, lack of teaching opportunity and training, lack of orientation and less than rigorous standards(15%). Departments were also the chief locus of the issues discussed below.

Without prompting students raised issues of sexism, racism, classism, a star system, and "the hidden curriculum." While made by a small number of respondents, the remarks point to an unwelcoming climate, outright hostility to gender and ethnic intellectual interests as well as to persons, resulting in an inefficiency in student progress through the program. Specific recommendations were made about how improvements could be implemented. Of all groups, Chicanos were the most unhappy with their experience followed by Asian Americans and Whites.

The commentary was made by those who succeeded in mastering the system and obtaining their Ph.D. Since specific questions were not asked about issues of sexism or racism, underreporting is suspected of issues which drove others from the program. Despite very serious criticism which suggests that the system of graduate training could be improved in several respects--particularly in the private sphere of the student-advisor relationship, it documents the experiences of the successful.