

GRADUATE STUDY IN THE CONSUMER FIELD  
Report of an Open Forum at the ACCI  
Meeting in Dallas, April 15, 1972

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At the Dallas ACCI meeting, about fifty people mostly professors, administrators and graduate students, rapped for about two hours exchanging views on graduate study in the consumer field. Out of a welter of comment, some of which is reported below, several ideas emerged. Because there was no attempt to summarize during the meeting, one can not say any statements represent consensus, however, the following can be viewed as one interpretation of the record.<sup>1</sup>

1. There is no single preferred route to a graduate degree that will reflect competency in the consumer field. Several programs are achieving that end.
2. A graduate program that prepares people to work in the consumer field will be stronger if it has roots in one or more of the traditional disciplines.
3. Graduate study as usually prescribed in the traditional social science disciplines is probably too narrow an approach for a consumer specialist.

Graduate study in the consumer field certainly faces dilemmas - the "fixed menu" vs the "cafeteria line" approach to program planning; or the overly specialized theoretical Ph.D. who is neither people nor problem oriented vs the dilettante who has sampled everything in his rush to be multi-disciplinary. It is fair to say that most of those present regarded these dichotomies as poor solutions to what remains a very real problem. "How should graduate study in the consumer field be organized?"

Comments

Abbreviated comments taken from the tapes provide an indication of the range of ideas put forth.

- . the unique characteristics of the consumer field are yet to be identified, a single graduate field would be premature.
- . consumer education is really a conglomerate of:  
academic experience, independent study, internship.

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\* Professor & Chairman of Consumer Economics and Public Policy, New York State College of Human Ecology, Cornell University. A set of discussion questions had been circulated prior to the session to a few colleagues in several institutions. Because the attendance at the meeting far exceeded anticipation we did not adhere to the question format for the session. A copy of the original questions has been attached as an appendix.

<sup>1</sup> Summary has been prepared from tapes of the session. Individual speakers are not identified with the abbreviated comments because it was not possible to identify everyone who spoke. In abbreviating comments we tried to keep the central core of meaning intact. We request indulgence if your ideas have been misquoted, mutilated or ignored. A verbatim transcription would have been horrendus!

- . but graduate study demands research tools.
- . the consumer should be the core of our concern. Different disciplines can be brought to bear on the problems.
- . "a broad background with a focus".
- . but the generalized approach presents hazards. People can redesign the wheel many times.
- . the distinguishing features of graduate study are independent pursuit and basic research. This requires solid grounding somewhere preferably in one or more disciplines.
- . a major discipline provides direction.
- . discipline people are overly protective of their subject matter - research skills not the sole property of a discipline.
- . the university has become a collection of local franchises, we need mergers.
- . what about a professional degree?
  - "There ought to be one"
  - "No, there can't be"
- . societal issues pose a field of opposing forces - problems need a general approach but effective research requires specialization.
- . too many monopolists in academia
- . too much emphasis on individual research and sole solutions to problems.
- . information is a key word - communication essential - must open up the system.
- . designing graduate study in the consumer field is not simple - more than a communication problem.
- . schools and departments have vested interests.
- . consumer education involves an acquisition of values - who teaches this?
- . consumer courses are too narrow; need macro as well as the micro approach if we are to cope with public policy issues.
- . health care, taxation and income maintenance are consumer issues.
- . should we be packaging consumer education at any level? We may be doing it for the wrong reasons, i.e., to save time for administrators in locating staff or in placing students.

Back and forth, the comments kept on coming. Even after the meeting adjourned, small knots of people continued discussing with colleagues the problems faced in their own institution.

The session provided neither alpha nor omega to what will undoubtedly be a continuing discussion among leaders and graduate students concerned with consumer questions. We believe it did open up many questions and for some it was comforting to know that others, too, were questioning the stance they had taken.

#### Addendum

As the person responsible for suggesting the open discussion of graduate preparation for the consumer field, I feel some need to let our readers know where I stand. The following paragraphs have been prepared instead of trying to summarize the many excellent points made throughout the discussion.

When one approaches consumer study at the graduate level several dilemmas appear. Whereas the term consumer education may be most appropriate to describe an instructional process for students at the elementary and secondary level, the term itself does not suggest an appropriate program of study for persons undertaking advanced degree work. Should consumer study at the graduate level remain a loosely identified field in which an individual who has met the standards of scholarship in a discipline area, be it in economics, sociology, psychology or law, can apply the teachings of his field to some aspect of the broad spectrum of consumer problems? Or should we be developing a professional program in consumer studies that would be interdisciplinary in content, people oriented and problem centered?

It was to these three questions that most of the participants were directing their remarks at the Dallas session. Most of their remarks centered around the degree to which higher education for work in the consumer field should or should not be discipline based.

At the present time there is a considerable demand for persons with research capabilities and advanced degrees to staff teaching and government posts in the general area of consumer work. The field itself is for all intents and purposes wide open and presently has many able spokesmen who come from disciplines as diverse as law, economics, psychology, sociology, and physics.

The job market, student interest and professorial leanings are moving us toward more defined consumer programs. Hopefully these will be rooted in or related to an established discipline area.

Majors have been defined in consumer economics and specialties are appearing in consumer law. In the first of these it is crucial that programs include a solid footing in graduate level economic theory and statistics, a knowledge of social and institutional developments, and familiarity with an extensive research literature particularly empirical consumption studies. On such a foundation one can add special courses in consumer organizations, consumer motivation, and consumer legislation. Without a foundation, consumer courses provide a thin educational experience. With it, they open up an avenue for continued study and exploration.

The same general principle holds for work rooted in other disciplines such as psychology, sociology or law. The graduate program must be defined in the basics of a field, consumer specialization can follow.

Because of the nature of the consumer field, students who elect to work in this area will generally be rather broad gauged individuals -- they may well elect supporting course work in related subject matter that will give them more than one handle to the complex problems.

Persons directing graduate work in consumer related studies need to be well aware of the twin hazards that tempt the graduate student. Over specialization in a narrow problem area in any discipline is as dangerous as is over diversification. Both are very real concerns to the consumer field. Because the nature of consumer work calls for a multi-disciplinary approach, the student is often tempted (and sometimes advised) to himself become multi-disciplinary, with an end result that he is familiar with the jargon and has modest research skills across several areas but in reality is not prepared to carry out meaningful research in any field. The students need to be prepared to work with scholars from other disciplines on common problems, but they should be prepared to make a solid contribution in one area themselves. The standards of scholarship within the basic discipline should not be eroded because the student desires to concentrate on what at first appears to be the familiar and simple problems of consumer behavior.

Hopefully social scientists will be discussing alternative approaches to consumer studies and proposing new attacks on problems at more annual meetings than most of us will attend. Only, if this happens, can we say that the consumer field poses a viable area of study. One of the hazards currently facing the field is that some group may attempt to define a curriculum prematurely and establish a professional degree sequence that spells out its own rigidities. This I view with considerably more alarm than the so called inflexibilities of the traditional disciplines.

The fact that single traditional disciplines have failed to provide solutions to complex societal problems is not because of the inflexibility of the discipline, but of its practitioners. The scholar who fails to recognize that he holds only one key to the problem, or refuses to cooperate outside his field in a search for solutions may "lose out" as one of the participants suggested. However, if we attempt to make multi-disciplinary generalists of our students, we may end up providing them with no keys at all.

Hopefully we can define a middle road. Students who wish to enter the consumer field can continue to acquire a solid footing in either economics, psychology or sociology. Out of this they can build a research level major in consumer economics, consumer motivation or consumer organizations, with some understanding of the other areas and their problems. They will have a specialization in one area and hopefully can contribute to solutions to the problems of their generation. That is the most we can do.

## Appendix

### DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

Distributed prior to ACCI Session on Potential for Graduate Education

1. Is the consumer field an area substantive enough to support a graduate degree program in its own right? Yes or No? (i.e., a degree in consumer studies?)
2. If YES to number 1,
  - a) What do you see as its major dimensions? Its discipline bases?
  - b) Are there any course levels (i.e., introductory graduate level in sociology, economics, etc., or advanced graduate level theory courses) that you see as minimal that a program should contain?



- c) How much competence in quantitative methods is desirable?
  - d) If you do not believe one can spell out minimal course requirements, are there any other quality or content criteria that we can expect graduate students to have if they come up with a degree titled consumer studies?
  - e) One hazard in any degree program in an applied area is that the student will have to master two or three graduate degrees to really have access to what the problem area needs. How do you feel about this?
  - f) An equally serious and perhaps even more likely hazard is that one produces only dilettantes. Is this something we should be concerned about?
3. If NO to number 1,
- a) Should consumer specialization be achieved through thesis research projects in other fields?
  - b) What fields (or disciplines) do you see holding the most promise as a base for consumer-oriented research, i.e., government, psychology, economics, mathematics, communications, education, law?
  - c) Do applied fields offer more promise than do traditional disciplines as places where one might pursue a graduate degree with emphasis on the consumer?
4. How do you perceive the role of the summer workshop, the short course, or the special seminar in graduate education for people in the consumer field?
5. If you were hiring professional staff for work in the consumer field either in government, industry or academia, what kind of degree training would you see as most useful?
6. Are there any particular accomplishments you would look for in the subject-matter area?