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Locating Financial Support for Graduate Students

by Barbara B. Schoenfeldt

During the past fifteen years student financial aid has become a major source of financing for undergraduate higher education. According to Jenson (1983) this has resulted in an enhancement of educational opportunities for undergraduates by having a positive impact on access to higher education, institutional choice, and persistence in college. Information as to the effects of financial aid for graduate students, however, is not generally available in the literature. In fact, "when attempts are made to research and acquire knowledge of what is really available at the graduate level, the answers cannot be found. We cannot ascertain how many graduate fellows there are each year, the active needs of the graduate population, or the resources and the various fellowships and assistantships that are going to this population." (Robison, 1977, p. 490).

While departmental assistantships and fellowships are frequently available for graduate students, they are often of such limited monetary value that many students need to find additional sources of aid to help them attend graduate school. The fact is that even though graduate students are apt to have more financial obligations, they receive far less campus-based aid, and less from federal programs than undergraduates.

When graduate students go to look for extra financial aid they frequently are confronted not only by the lack of this aid, but by financial aid offices that can provide little if any information as to what off-campus sources are available. It was therefore felt that a survey of existing services and facilities throughout the United States would be useful. Hopefully, results from such a survey would provide a description of what was presently being done to help graduate students; it might indicate what possible solutions to providing such a service have already been found; and, once this information was obtained, it could provide recommendations that might be used to create a model graduate scholarship information office employing the most efficient methods of helping graduate students.

Method

In order to sample the various facilities and services presently available through financial aid offices for graduate students, a survey questionnaire dealing with this topic, along with a cover letter and an addressed stamped envelope, was sent to the director of financial aid at the state university of each of the 50 states. After two months a follow-up letter was sent to all non-replying institutions. The questionnaire was one page in length, and required brief responses to six questions. Scholarship aid was defined as externally sponsored (off-campus) scholarships, fellowships, grants and loan programs. It specifically excluded departmentally controlled scholarships or fellowships.

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Results and Discussion

Completed questionnaires were received from 35 states. The non-respondents were geographically scattered around the country. Twenty-five of the responses were received in the first mailing, ten in the follow-up.

Most of the universities that responded indicated a felt need for, and therefore have set up, some kind of a campus office to provide scholarship information for their graduate students (only 6% of the respondents provide no such service). These services were not found to be centrally located. Instead they were most typically located at either the financial aid office and/or the graduate school, as well as in various academic departments, or at the library.

The information about scholarships that is available is most frequently found to be organized and/or kept in file cabinets, by directories, in reference book cases, or on bulletin boards. Several universities (17%) have moved or are moving to automated systems (such as microfiche or computer) in order to provide for easier access and upkeep.

Soliciting scholarship information and keeping it current is a problem for many of the institutions. Several of the universities report they depend more on what happens to come in than on soliciting information. Only about 24% of the universities actively research data or somehow obtain current and updated information on a regular basis.

Thirty-four percent of the institutions produce some kind of yearly brochure or bulletin publicizing their service and the available funding sources. Other common techniques of publicity are newsletters, bulletin boards, and news releases in the school paper. Some of the more innovative ideas reported included seminars for department advisors and secretaries, letters to students, inclusion in the college catalogue, information given at entrance interview sessions, workshops, and radio announcements. Several of the universities, however, said that they use only word of mouth, and a few said that their students tended to get the information only when they happen to "stumble over it."

Of particular interest from the responses in the comments section of the questionnaire is the fact that several universities have felt a need to computerize scholarship information for easier access. The popularity of a microfiche system or a computer system was also indicated. Noted, too, was the importance of coordination and communication among the various offices involved (especially the graduate school, academic departments, and financial aid). Difficulties and problems that were mentioned in relation to operating a graduate information office included: more having been done for undergraduates than graduates, lack of space, lack of personnel, and the problem of getting application deadline information to students. Several universities mentioned they had plans to increase their services.

The problem of matching an individual student with the scholarship for which he or she might be uniquely qualified was not directly approached in this questionnaire. From comments on the survey and through personal experience, however, it is felt that the best solution is computerization. Computerization provides easy, centralized access for students while it makes all appropriate matches. The process of setting up such a system in a university has been described in detail by Drew & Norris (1982). They indicate how a computer system involves the initial obtaining and coding of all possible information, as well as the need for continuous updating. John Drew of the Graduate School of the University of Washington, plans to offer this search service to individuals and institutions on a fee basis. Use of this service should be of particular interest to those institutions that do not have the computer capability, expertise, budget or personnel to establish their own program.

Recommendations and Summary

The problems of lack of publicity, the difficulty of gathering information, of providing deadline information, and of matching students to appropriate aid all seem to have been solved by one or the other of the surveyed universities. A summary of some of the better ideas that might be used in establishing (or upgrading) an office to help graduate students locate financial support include:

(1) Either establish a computerized (or microfiche) system to organize the information, keep it up-to-date, and provide easy access for individual students, or contract for regular printouts through the University of Washington or some other such source. Reference texts are not adequate as they quickly become out-of-date and they are difficult to use effectively.

(2) Increase publicity (note that a modification of many of these ideas could also be applied toward advertisement of undergraduate aid) by:

- a) having information appear in the graduate catalogue
- b) including information about the service in materials sent to applicants for graduate admission
- c) including service information in the graduate student orientation packet given to new graduate students at the beginning of the school year
- d) sending newsletters on a regular basis to each graduate department for posting on bulletin boards
- e) putting notices and/or news articles in the campus paper as to the availability of information about scholarships in general, as well as using such articles to notify students of the availability of new scholarships
- f) sending yearly publicity (i.e. a brochure) to each department and to each academic advisor. This would include undergraduate advisors so that seniors who are considering applying to graduate school can avail themselves of the service.

(3) Get application deadline information to students. The problem is publicity and the solutions include:

- a) having a regular newsletter which stresses deadlines
- b) issuing timely bulletins in the campus paper, or even on the campus radio station.

An information office need not be located in the financial aid office, but it does need to be in communication with that office, as well as with graduate admissions, and the graduate school. Each of these divisions needs to know what the other is doing in order to coordinate their efforts.

While an office using the ideas described in this article cannot solve the problem of the lack of financial aid generally available to graduate students, having the most up-to-date and easily accessible information available for students means they will be able to apply for some of the existing scholarship programs. In addition, generation of more interest and knowledge in this area may also prompt graduate schools to create badly needed new sources of financial support for their graduate students.

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