

LETTERS

HARDWORKING GRADUATE STUDENTS I

This letter is in response to the article by Norman Childers, "Are Graduate Students Taking More Time for Degrees?" [*HortScience* 26(9):1110-1111, Sept. 1991]. Childers implies that graduate students today work fewer hours or at a slower pace than in the past and that this limits the resources available to other potential students and hurts the industrial and professional sectors. Missing from Childers' article were several obvious reasons for the increase in time required to obtain a degree:

1) Financial support is less available now than in the past, and the cost of education is proportionally much higher. In 1991 at Cornell, for example, the pomology group had only one assistantship to offer the half dozen highly qualified students admitted to our graduate program. Several students came on their own funds. Another arranged a teaching assistantship in the Dept. of Biology, where the obligations involve 20 to 30 hours per week unrelated to her horticultural studies. Students are being encouraged to seek their own outside funding. In other words, compared to the past, students must spend more time seeking and maintaining their own financial support, thus extending the time required for completion of a degree.

2) Family structure has changed. In the past, a typical male graduate student worked exclusively on his research while his wife cooked, cleaned, and took care of their children. Today, most spousal relationships are different—both share in household responsibilities, and often both are graduate students. This inevitably reduces weekend or evening appearances in the laboratory. Most full professors experience the luxury of an income that can support both homemaker and children, and many cannot appreciate the added responsibility and time assumed when both partners work outside the home.

3) Technology has changed so that often 1 year or more must be allocated to mastering a technique before application or hypothesis testing can be conducted. In the past, many techniques could be learned in the process of conducting the research. Technology has also given us the computer, allowing graduate students to work at home on weekends and evenings while still accessing data at the university.

4) Expectations of graduate students have increased. Many pre-1950 PhD dissertations were excellent, but let's face it, many others would not meet today's standards for analysis

and presentation. Looking at our own cabinet of theses, it appears that a significant linear relationship exists between year and thickness.

5) Most importantly, there is a lack of incentive for students to rush to finish their theses. Where are the professional and industry jobs that Childers implies are waiting to be filled? We expect applicants for faculty positions to have several publications, yet two or more years of field data are usually required to obtain a single publication. More often the PhD candidate must look forward to another 2 to 4 years in a postdoctoral position after graduation. Even when faculty positions are obtained, salaries for agricultural scientists are among the lowest at universities. Finally, with 20 to 60 applicants for each tenure-track position, the standards for gaining tenure have been inexorably elevated, and most PhD candidates look forward with great trepidation to another 6 years of hard labor when they find employment.

Our impression of graduate students today is that they are bright and hardworking, but more thoughtful about where they want to go with their lives. Students today may feel that a healthy family life is as important as a fulfilling career, but this should be viewed as a welcome trend.

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HARDWORKING GRADUATE STUDENTS II

We are writing in response to the Viewpoint article "Are Graduate Students Taking More Time for Degrees?" [*HortScience* 26(9):1110-1111, Sept. 1991], in which Norman F. Childers presents the case that today's graduate students are taking more time to complete degrees than the graduate students of the 1930s to 50s. In doing so Childers implies that if graduates students in the 90s were more industrious, or if advisors "pushed" graduate students a little more, we could produce more trained horticulturists to fill the demands of a hungry job market. As the organization of graduate students in the Dept. of Fruit and Vegetable Science, Cornell Univ., we have a different perspective and would like to offer our observations on the realities of being a graduate student today.

Childers comments in his article that one can no longer see that "beehive" of activity in laboratories and offices that was evident in days gone by. The reality of the 90s is that most graduate students have access to personal computers at home, with which they can do statistics, write theses/dissertations, and in some cases even access the library. Certainly, physical presence alone cannot be taken as evidence of a change in work ethic. The modern age has also brought other technological advances that in themselves contribute to the longer time required to obtain a degree. Today's graduate student is expected to learn techniques and use apparatus that were not available during the 1930s to 50s. In fact, if one does an informal study of the theses on our department's library shelf (where Childers' own dissertation is housed), it becomes apparent that both the length and complexity of research required today is greater.

Childers also seems to glorify the "good old days" of living simply in dormitories on an inadequate income and working singlemindedly on one's graduate work. First, let us assure him that today's graduate student does not live the high life. Then, we would like to remind him that society today, and indeed the profile of the typical graduate student, is radically different than in the 1930s to 50s. The typical graduate student of the "good old days" was a single man or a married man with a wife to cook, clean, type, and look after his children for him. Today, the reality is that both men and women are graduate students, and those that are married share the family responsibilities with their spouses. Frequently, the spouse works outside the home or is also a graduate student. Single graduate students also have complex lives with diverse interests and responsibilities. There is certainly a case to be made that a well-balanced life is necessary for a healthy and productive career.

Finally, Childers states that if the time for obtaining degrees was shortened, more horticulturists would be trained to "meet professional and industry needs." The reality is that there is a very tight job market out there and that the wages for horticulturists with advanced degrees are notoriously low.

The context of being a graduate student in the 90s is quite different than it was 50 years ago. In our opinion, today's graduate students are no less industrious than Norman F. Childers' colleagues were, nor are they taking excessive amounts of time to complete degrees.

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