



SYRACUSE UNIVERSITY

MAXWELL SCHOOL OF CITIZENSHIP AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS *OFFICE OF THE DEAN*

October 14, 2014

Susan L. Marquis
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Vice President, Emerging Policy Research and Methods
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Dear Susan,

Thank you for the opportunity to spend time with the faculty, staff and leadership at the Pardee Rand Graduate School (PRGS) and the chance to share with you my assessment of the state of the School. As I told you and Mike at the conclusion of my visit, it was particularly interesting for me to have the opportunity to see the evolution of the program since I had the opportunity to teach there some 25 years ago!

Overall, I was very impressed with the program. The students in particular were smart, articulate, highly motivated and enthusiastic about their experiences, although naturally with ideas for areas of improvement. The faculty was committed and involved, and represented some of the finest thinkers at RAND. The staff's level of engagement with the students clearly made a difference in sustaining a sense of community and concern.

PRGS' program, both in the curricula content and especially the role of OJT, makes PRGS a unique and uniquely valuable PhD program in policy studies—combining the rigor of traditional academic programs with the real world orientation of professional masters' degree programs. This is an objective which some of us would like to see more widely pursued, and thus PRGS provides not only a real benefit to its students, but a laboratory for others.

That said, OJT also represents one of the greatest challenges to the program. One of the difficulties – matching students with valuable and engaging work opportunities to allow them to meet their requirements – seems to have benefitted considerably from the more structured support system you have developed, including the involvement of other students. Inevitably the value of the experience will vary – just as it does in PhD mentoring in more traditional programs, but your new feedback mechanisms for evaluating the experience should help students, project directors, and the PRGS leadership monitor this and allow timely mid-course correction.

The greatest tension seems to come from the intersection of OJT requirements and the thesis requirement. Particularly in light of your desire to improve time to degree, there are enormous incentives for students to base their dissertation around OJT work, rather than undertake an unrelated dissertation topic. This seems not just to be factor of time available, but also because the mentoring resources of the faculty are much more obvious and available if they are connected to project work, since that is the main focus of the faculty themselves. Your fellowship program has partially eased the time trade-off problem, but the fact that few faculty are conducting research outside their projects means that there are not on-going lines of inquiry/research to which the student can attach in formulating and carrying out a thesis (common in more traditional PhD programs), leaving it to the students both to identify a suitable topic and then find a mentor.

This problem could be alleviated if at least some of the faculty were relieved of RAND project responsibility for a period of time to pursue their own research – research which would require the involvement of the PhD students. In effect, it would be the equivalent of faculty fellowships. This of course would have collateral benefits for RAND, by making RAND attractive to scholars who want to be able to pursue independent research and contribute to knowledge generation that ultimately would benefit project work, but of course would have resource consequences for RAND, which only you can evaluate.

Related to this problem is student advising. You have put in place what appears to be a strong program for first year advising, but I got the impression that this became more hit or miss after the first year, heavily dependent on students finding an OJT supervisor who can also provide mentoring and support for the broader PRGS experience. You might consider extending out your more institutional approach of the first year to advising to later years.

On curriculum, the basic program of the core is strong, though heavily focused on economics and math/stats-oriented courses. I agree with Alan on the importance of a strong macro-economic component to the economics sequence, a set of issues with broad implications for many policy fields even though few students from PRGS are likely to become macro-economists. There is some attention to qualitative methods, though it was not entirely clear to me how much emphasis was being placed on some of the innovative work in this area – such as we are pursuing through our new Center on Multi-Method and Qualitative Inquiry. More significantly, it's clear that you have realized the importance of exposing the students to the methodologies and perspectives of other social science disciplines, but there seems to be broad based dissatisfaction with the current SBS course. One suggestion is to explore ways to integrate multi-disciplinary perspective in substantive course work, rather than offer a separate, rather cursory and unconnected review of the disciplines themselves.

On the electives, the process you are undertaking to ensure that important electives will be regularly and consistently offered is a creative approach, but it's not clear to me what criteria are being used to decide what is in this group of "core" electives (beyond student demand – which is tricky because it's hard to know how students can make the judgment about what is most valuable without some guidance). One way to get at this is to explore whether it be worth identifying some soft "clusters" for

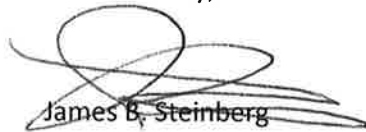
students to pursue (which could either be methodological or substantive – e.g. energy and environment, health and social policy, national security) and then identify the key electives for each cluster. I recognize that there is a lot of diversity among students' interests, so the clusters need not be mandatory, but they can help shape curricula decisions as well as faculty selection. The clusters might also help prospective students understand better some of the program's focus.

In this regard, I very much appreciate the discussion we had over dinner, and your subsequent email about the goals and objectives of PRGS, particularly in terms of the outcomes for students. Because PRGS is such a unique program, I think it would be valuable for you to consider developing a formal statement of just what the objectives are for the program, in terms of what skills and capabilities you expect to emerge from the courses, OJT and related activities, and what career paths you see for your graduates. This can be of considerable value, in helping you make choices about courses and co-curricular activities, in evaluating your own success in meeting your objectives, and in conveying to key constituencies – prospective students, employers, donors – just what the program is all about. In developing such a definition, I would encourage you to reach out to your alumni and regular employers to get their feedback on what aspects of the program are most and least valuable in terms of subsequent professional success.

Clearly, outstanding research skills are at the heart of what distinguishes PRGS graduates. But I also think that a little more attention could be given to some of the less tangible skills, especially related to leadership and professional ethics, which are vital to almost any career path, and can often make the difference between an individual with superb technical skills whose broader contribution is limited, and one who can truly make a difference. Professional ethics – both narrowly defined as research ethics and more broadly defined as the social responsibility dimensions of policy – are critical and I urge you to consider formal engagement on these issues early in the program. Some leadership skills can be developed in OJT, but as students are inevitably the most junior on the team, this will largely be by observation, not actual practice, so incorporating leadership exercises – simulations, group activities – into the curriculum, the skills can be more reliably developed.

I hope this is helpful. Please let me know if you'd like any further clarification of the points in this memo or on other topics. Again congratulations to you for leadership in continuing to strengthen the program and to Mike and everyone at RAND and PRGS for devotion to the students and for making PRGS such a valued contribution to good policymaking and analysis to the benefit of us all.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "James B. Steinberg". The signature is stylized with overlapping loops and a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Dean

cc: Alan B. Krueger