

Challenges and Opportunities for PhD Education in I-Schools

Ping Zhang
Syracuse University
School of Information Studies
1-315-443-5617
pzhang@syr.edu

Barbara B. Moran
University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill
School of Information and Library
Science
1-919-962-8067
moran@ils.unc.edu

Allison Druin
University of Maryland
College of Information Studies
allisond@umiacs.umd.edu

Allen Renear
University of Illinois at Urbana-
Champaign
Graduate School of Library and
Information Science
renear@illinois.edu

David Phillips
University of Toronto
Faculty of Information
1-416-978-7098
Davidj.phillips@utoronto.ca

Karine Barzilai-Zahon
University of Washington
The Information School
1-206-685-6668
karineb@u.washington.edu

ABSTRACT

In this roundtable discussion, we will identify challenges and brainstorm opportunities for PhD education in the new i-school movement.

Keywords

Doctoral education, program management.

1. INTRODUCTION

PhD students are the future for academia and the importance of PhD education is well recognized. PhD education has its own challenges, compared to undergraduate and Masters levels education. Along with the i-schools movement, PhD education can also have its unique opportunities. In this roundtable discussion, the panelists will report their experiences and visions, and invite audiences to join the discussion.

2. CHALLENGES

Although each program may be different, several of us identified the following challenges we face in our PhD programs. Some of these are related to the nature of PhD education, some are related to the changes brought by the i-movement, and some are related

to the broader economic environment we are experiencing. There can be other issues that are not listed here and we are looking forward to hear about them at the conference.

2.1 Attracting Applicants from a Broad Range of Disciplines

It is well understood that i-Schools are inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary. It is thus desirable that the applicants to the PhD programs should represent a wide variety of different disciplines. Some programs have seen this happening, although the majority of the applicants came from the traditional library and information science programs. The challenge is how to represent the i-schools to a wide range of disciplines to attract their best students to do PhD in the i-schools. This would require a unified effort from all i-schools.

2.2 Program Size

Some programs have many students and some have less. The question is: what might be the appropriate size. Too large a size poses many issues such as lack of funding, lack of faculty time, etc. Closely related to Issue 2.9 below, is there a limited need for PhD graduates from i-schools, and is there a danger that if too many graduates are being produced by our programs, there will be a problem for placement?

2.3 Financial Support

With the downturn in state and sponsored research funding, the financial support for PhD students becomes an important issue. Some programs have to count heavily on the university or school's support for the students.

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

Conference '04, Month 1–2, 2004, City, State, Country.
Copyright 2004 ACM 1-58113-000-0/00/0004...\$5.00.

2.4 Being Interdisciplinary in Study

The inter-, multi- and trans-disciplinary nature of the i-schools require that a PhD student may need longer time to get acquainted with necessary thematic knowledge and research approaches. On the other hand, there are a good number of reasons we expect our students to finish as soon as they can, or use much shorter time than what it takes right now. In addition, there can be situations where a student's interdisciplinary work may pose a challenge of finding qualified committee members.

2.5 Length of Study

In some of the PhD programs, students take an average of six or even seven years to finish. Besides the inter-disciplinary nature of the study as mentioned earlier, there can be other factors. The challenge is: should we be concerned about the length, and if so, how to shorten it.

2.6 Publication Requirement during Study

Some faculty may think that publications may distract students from their study; other may think that being able to demonstrate the ability to publish should be an important indicator of quality PhD education. To make students more marketable, should they be encouraged or required to publish during their study?

2.7 Residency Requirement

Some programs allow students to take a full time job once they become PhD candidates. There can be benefits such as the work is directly related to the students' research. There can be situations that make part time the only way to finish a PhD degree (financial situations or work commitment). The negative consequence is that it would take them longer to finish, or in worse case, some of them never finish.

2.8 Faculty Mentoring

PhD students are much more demanding on faculty's time and expertise than other students. In many programs, faculty's involvement in PhD education is "off-load", meaning they do so on their spare time. This can cause a series of problems. For example, some faculty become burned with supervising too many students thus their own research, teaching or professional service may suffer; some faculty do not feel that it is worth spending too much time on mentoring PhD students. What might be an effective way to encourage more faculty participation in PhD education?

2.9 Placement

With the interdisciplinary nature of the i-schools, our graduates may be placed in a variety of disciplines. What might be the challenges they would face? Is it possible that some students may be considered not deep enough in a certain area if they going to work in that area? Should we only consider i-schools as the placement outlets for our students? How does the preparation of i-school PhD students compare with that of students working on similar research programs but in other department or schools? Will our students competitive?

3. OPPORTUNITIES

Addressing the challenges can reveal opportunities in PhD education, which is the primary goal of the roundtable discussion. For example, we want to know how does interdisciplinarity of i-schools present challenges (some are identified above) as well as opportunities for PhD education? Can large sized PhD programs reduce the burden on faculty by using secondary effects such as more peer-to-peer learning, more intense focused research culture, and more in-house research assistants in faculty specialty areas?

Permission to make digital or hard copies of all or part of this work for personal or classroom use is granted without fee provided that copies are not made or distributed for profit or commercial advantage and that copies bear this notice and the full citation on the first page. To copy otherwise, or republish, to post on servers or to redistribute to lists, requires prior specific permission and/or a fee.

Conference '04, Month 1–2, 2004, City, State, Country.

Copyright 2004 ACM 1-58113-000-0/00/0004...\$5.00.