

Dissertation 'syndrome' impedes graduates

By Michael Hosmar
Of the Emerald

Like a marathon runner who hits the wall at mile 20, graduate students may hit walls when it comes time to write their dissertations.

Almost 60 percent of the graduate students who finish their preliminary studies and comprehensive exams never finish their degrees, according

to a recent story in the Seattle Times newspaper.

"Graduate students make typical progress from their one year of residence to comprehensive exams, but slow down when it comes to the dissertation," says Shirley Menaker, dean of the graduate school. She says some people call it the "Oh, but the dissertation syndrome."

"It's a well-known trend from the last two decades," Menaker says. She says graduate students in the science fields finish faster because they are a little more competitive than students in other fields. Social science and English graduate students can take longer to finish their degrees because those fields get more financial support for a longer period of

time compared with the sciences, she says.

There is no direct economic advantage for a graduate student to stay in school, even though fees are lower when the students are writing their dissertations, Menaker says.

Some students have been pulled away from graduate school by job offers from junior colleges, she says, because junior colleges will hire graduate students without degrees.

Some institutions are taking measures to create more incentives for graduate students to

an agreed-upon period of time, or the work contract will be taken away from the student.

"The reason people (graduate students) stayed enrolled so long was because there was so much research available," says Benton Johnson, head of the sociology department. In the past, students were more inclined to put off their degrees and get involved in research, he says.

"Now days, people are worrying about how to make ends meet," Benton says.

One sociology graduate student (who prefers to remain

'Sometimes the idea you start out with doesn't pan out. The number of experiments that have to be done — even if things go smoothly — takes a long time.'
—George Sprague

finish their degrees on time, says Menaker.

In the past, students at the University had to retake comprehensive exams if more than three years passed between the time the student took the exams and the time the student finished his or her dissertation, Menaker says, adding that the policy was too often appealed by students.

That policy was recently changed. Now graduate students have seven years to finish their degrees, allowing only one extra year between taking the exams and completing the dissertations, she says.

"(The policy) has tended to speed things up," Menaker says. She says the program helped to motivate people, while remaining sensitive to the needs of the individual.

Graduate students can also be hired on a conditional basis, Menaker says. The student must finish his or her degree within

anonymous) has been enrolled as a graduate student at the University since 1971, and says he has not finished his degree because his research has "turned into a full-time job."

He says he went through the first part of his degree quickly, but slowed when he got to his dissertation because of research opportunities.

Graduate students could become professors in the past, but such a market currently doesn't exist, he says. He sees some students going to work for the government or into the business field as an alternative to a degree.

"Having a student finish in four years... is awfully rare," says George Sprague, assistant professor of biology. He says five years is the average time it takes students to finish a doctoral degree in the biology department. The bulk of that time is spent doing research for dissertations, Sprague says.

He says biology students at the University don't have too much trouble finishing their degrees on time. If problems do arise, it's usually in the research portion of the biology degree, Sprague says.

"Sometimes the idea you start out with doesn't pan out," he says. "The number of experiments that have to be done — even if things go smoothly — takes a long time," he says.

He believes the "Oh, but the dissertation" syndrome was not caused by any single reason, but rather a combination of factors. Although graduate students get tired of school, "that's not the general problem," Sprague says. He adds that students may be taking longer to finish their dissertations since more is being asked of them today than 15 or 20 years ago.

Correction

Classical pianist Adam Kapuscinski will perform a benefit recital for the Oregon Natural Resources Council, Saturday at 7:30 p.m. at the Hult Center — not Sunday night as was reported in the Emerald Thursday. We apologize for any confusion caused. For concert ticket information call the Hult box office at 687-5000.

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