

Questionable Graduate Programs for Teachers and Administrators

By Rodney Clifton and Michael Zwaagstra

Executive Summary

- Recent reports written by Arthur Levine, the former president of Teachers College Columbia University in New York City, called into question the quality of most graduate programs for school teachers and administrators in the United States.
- Levine found that most of these programs had low entrance standards, unmotivated students, unproductive faculty members and courses that were irrelevant to the real challenges facing teachers and administrators.
- While the situation does not appear to be as bleak in Manitoba, there are signs that the University of Manitoba is making some of the same mistakes outlined in the Levine report.
- As in the United States, for every additional year of university education completed, Manitoba teachers and principals receive a salary increase from their school divisions. Surprisingly, the courses do not have to be relevant to their current jobs.
- This type of economic incentive encourages teachers and principals who would otherwise not be pursuing graduate work to do so.
- Almost 90 per cent of the graduate students in Education programs (M.Ed., Ph.D., and P.B.D.E.) are enrolled on a part-time basis. This means that most of them work full time, which leaves little time for in-depth academic work.
- Two 6-credit-hour summer institutes offered by the Faculty of Education are evidence of the low academic standards since these courses are compressed into two weeks.
- The Faculty of Education also offers a number of off-site courses to teachers and principals from individual school divisions. Courses offered away from the main campus are more likely to be of lower academic rigour.
- Entrance requirements for the M.Ed. program need to be more rigorous because they are considerably below the standard for graduate programs in other faculties.
- If these trends continue, the Levine reports will become as applicable to graduate programs in Manitoba as they are to programs in the United States.

Introduction

Since teachers are responsible for educating the next generation of citizens, they hold an important position of responsibility in society. Thus, it is extremely important that those responsible for educating children are well educated themselves. This should be even more essential for those who assume positions of leadership in schools and divisions — notably principals and superintendents. As such, one would expect graduate programs for teachers and administrators to be rigorous, challenging and relevant to their working lives.

Recent reports written by Arthur Levine, former president of Teachers College Columbia University in New York City, called into question the quality of most graduate programs for teachers and administrators in the United States. Levine found that most graduate programs in education had low entrance standards, unmotivated students, unproductive faculty members and courses that were irrelevant to the challenges facing teachers and administrators. To make matters worse, the quality of graduate education programs in the United States is declining.

In light of these disturbing reports, it is important to examine whether or not the same criticisms are true for graduate programs for school teachers and administrators in Manitoba. Although the situation does not appear to be as bleak, there are signs that the University of Manitoba is making some of the same mistakes outlined in the Levine reports. Unless this trend is halted, we are going to see the decline of graduate education programs in Manitoba, which would be to the detriment of the many teachers and administrators who rely on the University to provide them with solid training in their fields.

The Levine Reports^{1 2}

In 2005 and 2006, the Education Schools Project published reports entitled *Educating School Leaders* and *Educating School Teachers*. The author of these reports, Arthur Levine, identified a litany of problems with the graduate education programs in the United States. While other authors have been critical of these programs and education faculties,^{3 4} generally, the fact that these reports were written by the former president of one of the most prestigious teachers' colleges in North America gives them credibility and makes it more difficult to dismiss his assessment as being an uninformed diatribe.

Levine's reports characterizes educational programs for teachers and administrators as ranging from inadequate to appalling. He gives a number of reasons for coming to this

¹ Arthur Levine, *Educating School Leaders*, The Education Schools Project: March 2005.

http://www.edschools.org/reports_leaders.htm

² Arthur Levine, *Educating School Teachers*, The Education Schools Project: September 2006.

http://www.edschools.org/reports_leaders.htm

³ Rita Kramer, *Ed School Follies: The Miseducation of America's Teachers*, Free Press: 1991.

⁴ Heather Macdonald, *The Burden of Bad Ideas: How Modern Intellectuals Misshape Our Society*, Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2000.

striking conclusion. One of the most significant is the perverse incentive system that allows both teachers and administrators to take university courses in order to receive salary increases. With the exception of accumulating more years of teaching experience, the only way for teachers and administrators to receive a raise in salary is to complete additional university courses, usually from faculties of education. As a result, most students in graduate education programs are more interested in completing courses as quickly as possible than in-depth academic learning. To keep these students satisfied, professors often make their coursework relatively easy, painless and unobtrusive.

These pervasive financial incentives, in fact, artificially create demands for graduate programs, which has led to an explosion in the number of faculties of education offering graduate studies. In fact, more than 500 institutions in the United States offer degree-granting graduate programs for teachers and administrators, and this number continues to increase. Consequently, the competition for students has driven many faculties of education to enter a race to the bottom. Entrance requirements have continued to decline, since with so many universities offering graduate education programs, potential students can always enrol at a competing institution with lower standards. Faculties with higher entrance standards find themselves losing potential students to those with lower standards.

The rush to please the teachers and administrators has also led education faculties to make concessions that threaten the academic viability of their courses and programs. Many courses are being delivered off campus to make it easier for teachers and administrators to enrol. Unfortunately, this has caused education faculties to rely heavily on poorly qualified adjunct professors at many of these off-site locations. To further accommodate the needs of full-time teachers and administrators, courses are often compressed and delivered over very short time periods instead of over the traditional semester. Not surprisingly, the amount of work completed outside of the classroom has become minimal. In turn, the standards for graduation have been substantially relaxed, and in many programs students are simply moved through the courses in order for them to graduate with a degree and to receive their pay raises as quickly as possible.

In short, Levine found that teachers and administrators are often very poorly served by the graduate programs in faculties of education. Even those who have criticized Levine's reports have admitted that significant problems exist with these programs.⁵ Levine, in fact, notes that most graduate programs in education are beyond repair and should be closed down immediately. To strengthen the remaining programs, universities need to take more control of their faculties of education and governments need to end the perverse incentives where teachers and administrators are financially rewarded for completing Mickey Mouse courses that are unrelated to their responsibilities in schools. Essentially, Levine suggests that a radical overhaul of the system is the only way to make the necessary changes.

⁵ Michelle D. Young, et al., "An Educative Look at 'Educating School Leaders,'" *University Council for Educational Administration*, Spring 2005 Vol XLVI Number 2.

Education Graduate Programs in Manitoba

Considering the dismal status of graduate education programs in the United States, it is important for external agencies, such as the Frontier Centre, to examine the graduate education programs in Manitoba to see whether the situation is any different. While three universities (Brandon, Winnipeg and Manitoba) have education faculties, only the University of Manitoba offers graduate programs. Students have the option of completing a Master of Education (M.Ed.), a Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree, or a Post Baccalaureate Diploma (P.B.D.E), which is not really a graduate program but allow teachers and administrators to obtain higher salaries. As illustrated in Table 1, in 2007-08, there were 302 M.Ed. students, 46 Ph.D. students and 411 P.B.D.E. students in the Faculty of Education. Since the M.Ed. is the graduate program of choice for most teachers, it will be examined in greater detail than the Ph.D. program.

Students enrolled in the M.Ed. program have the option of specializing in educational administration, adult education, social foundations, guidance and counselling, inclusive special education, or in a curriculum speciality. To receive a M.Ed., students must complete either 30 credit hours of coursework and write a comprehensive examination or complete 18 credit hours of coursework and write a thesis.⁶ Not surprisingly, most education graduate students choose the comprehensive examination route.

Fortunately, there are some significant differences between graduate education programs at the University of Manitoba and those offered in the United States. One of the most significant is that while principals in most states are required to hold a masters degree, the M.Ed. is not required for principals in Manitoba.⁷ As a result, unless their school divisions pressure them, principals are not enrolling in M.Ed. programs simply to keep their jobs. Nevertheless, over 40 per cent of the graduate students in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Manitoba, have enrolled in the administration program where fewer than 40 per cent of faculty members teach.

Another difference is that there has not been an explosion of M.Ed. programs in Manitoba as there has been in the United States. These programs are only offered at one university — the University of Manitoba. Essentially, this means that the university does not have to be concerned about losing students to programs at other universities if it chooses to raise admission standards. Moreover, most of the graduate courses are taught by full-time faculty members on the main campus. It is, in fact, impossible to complete a M.Ed. entirely by distance education or by taking off campus courses, and this requirement helps to ensure that graduate students regularly interact with each other and with their professors. These are important differences between the programs in Manitoba and in they U.S. which makes it easier for the University of Manitoba to maintain a higher level of integrity in its graduate programs.

⁶ University of Manitoba, *2007-2008 Calendar & Registration Guide*.

⁷ Manitoba Education, Citizenship and Youth, Professional Certification, <http://www.edu.gov.mb.ca/ks4/profcert/level12.html>

While these differences from the U.S. system are positive, we must not become complacent. Although teachers and principals are not required to enrol in M.Ed. programs to keep their jobs, the same perverse economic incentives evident in the United States are also in place in Manitoba. All school divisions give salary increases to teachers and principals who complete additional university-level courses regardless of whether or not they are relevant to their work.⁸ As such, the salary scale must be changed to prevent both administrators and teachers from taking courses solely for the sake of receiving pay raises.

Not surprisingly, at the University of Manitoba almost 90 per cent of M.Ed. students are part-time students.⁹ This means that most of these students are full-time teachers and administrators. To appease these busy teachers and administrators, who are also part-time graduate students, the Faculty of Education has a strong incentive to reduce the workload to make it possible for them to complete their courses and degrees in a timely fashion. Not surprisingly, there are clear signs that this is happening. For example, over 70 percent of the graduate students in education receive grades of A and A+.¹⁰

Beginning in the summer of 2005, and every year since that time, the Faculty of Education has offered two 6-credit-hour summer programs for P.B.E.D., M.Ed. and Ph.D. students. One of these was entitled "Issues in Inclusive Special Education for School Administrators" and the other was entitled "Education and Democracy." Unlike standard summer school programs, each of these was compressed into two-weeks consisting of ten sessions lasting 6.5 hours each.¹¹ In standard university courses, students are expected to spend at least three hours studying and doing homework for each hour of class time. However, in these condensed summer programs, it is impossible for students to put in anywhere near this amount of time; there is simply not enough time in a day. This form of academic erosion needs to be stopped before further damage is done to the credibility of the Faculty and the University.

Another sign of weakening standards is the fact that the Faculty of Education has begun offering increasing numbers of courses off campus to cohorts of teachers and administrators from specific school divisions.¹² This trend is disturbing since one of the key weaknesses of U.S. education graduate programs identified in the Levine reports was that education faculties increasingly offered many courses off campus. Once courses are delivered away from campus, the university has more difficulty maintain control over the content of the program. It also leads to a higher number of less qualified instructors, often teachers and administrators, because of the difficulties of convincing tenured professors to teach courses away from campus.¹³

⁸ Frontier Centre for Public Policy, *A Merit Pay Plan for Manitoba's Teachers*, January 2003, http://www.fcpp.org/main/publication_detail.php?PubID=514

⁹ Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba, *Faculty of Education Annual Report 2003-2004*, <http://www.umanitoba.ca/education/med/research.shtml>

¹⁰ University of Manitoba, 2005-2006 Institutional Statistics.

¹¹ University of Manitoba, *Summer Session 2005*.

¹² University of Manitoba, *2005-2006 Calendar & Registration Guide*.

¹³ Arthur Levine, *op. cit.*

Year	M.Ed.	Ph.D.	P.B.D.E.
2007	302	46	411
2006	303	30	379
2005	323	37	417
2004	311	35	409
2003	253	32	360
2002	224	29	318
2001	193	30	292
2000	188	26	264
1999	182	29	150
1998	218	28	145
1997	242	29	152

Table 1: Enrolment of Graduate Students in the Faculty of Education: 1997-2007¹⁴

The data in Table 1 also illustrates that over the last 11 years, the number of M.Ed. students has increased by almost 25 per cent (from 242 to 302), the number of Ph.D. students has increased by almost 60 per cent (from 29 to 46), and the number of Post Baccalaureate Diploma (P.B.D.E) students has increased by more than 170 per cent (from 152 to 411). Surprisingly, during this period of time, the number of faculty members has decreased by about 7 per cent (from 45 to fewer than 42).¹⁵ In other words, while the number of graduate students have increased, the number of faculty members have decreased.

At present, there are 3,258 graduates students registered at the University. Thus, the graduate students in the Faculty of Education represent about 11 per cent of that number, while the faculty members represent less than 4 per cent. Consequently, the average faculty member in Education has responsibilities for almost 9 graduate students while the average faculty member in the other faculties has responsibility for about 3 graduate students. At the same time, the formal graduate and undergraduate teaching responsibilities for professors in the Faculty of Education are almost 25 per cent higher than for faculty members in the other faculties. Not surprisingly, the Faculty of Education has one of the highest graduate student to faculty ratios in the University, and this is particularly true for students in the Ph.D. program.

Finally, while the Faculty of Education could choose to make its admission standards for graduate programs more stringent using, for example, Graduate Record Exams, like many other departments at the University, it has not done so. In fact, the Faculty admits students who have a Grade Point Average of only 3.0 (B) in their undergraduate courses.¹⁶ In contrast, the Faculty of Law requires applicants to write the LSAT exam, a rigorous standardized test, and it only accepts 101 students out of the 800 to 900

¹⁴ Rodney A. Clifton, *Graduate Programs in the Faculty of Education*, University of Manitoba, April 2008.

¹⁵ Rodney A. Clifton, *op. cit.*

¹⁶ University of Manitoba, *2007-2008 Calendar & Registration Guide*.

applicants. In addition, a GPA of 3.75 (B+) is required for applicants to be competitive.¹⁷ One has to wonder why an undergraduate program (law) has more stringent admissions standards than the graduate programs in education. Why do we expect so little academically from our school teachers and administrators at the major university in the province?

Conclusion

It is clear that, while graduate programs in education do not appear to be as bad in Manitoba as they are in the United States, there are some disturbing signs indicating that they are definitely moving in that direction. Unfortunately, we do not have a person of Arthur Levine's stature to rail against the low standards and to embarrass the Faculty of Education, and the University of Manitoba, to improve the graduate education for school teachers and administrators. Obviously, we need to ensure that teachers and administrators who take graduate courses enrol in programs that are rigorous, challenging and relevant to their work. In this respect, the University of Manitoba and the Faculty of Education need to show that they are serious about this goal by eliminating watered-down summer programs, ending the practice of offering off-site courses and raising the admissions standards for all graduate and P.B.D.E. students.

About the Authors



Rodney Clifton is a professor of Sociology of Education, in the Department of Educational Administration, Foundations, and Psychology, University of Manitoba. He has held academic positions at Memorial University in Newfoundland, the University of Stockholm in Sweden and the Australian Council For Educational Research, Melbourne, Australia. He has been extensively published in various academic and policy journals, including *Policy Options*, the *Canadian Journal of Education*, *Sociology of Education*, and the *International Encyclopaedia of Education*. Dr. Clifton is a native of Jasper, Alberta. He has a M.Ed. from the University of Alberta, a Ph.D. from the University of Toronto and a Ph.D. from the University of Stockholm.



Michael C. Zwaagstra has a B.Ed., a Post-Bachelor's Certificate in Education, and a M.Ed. in Educational Administration from the University of Manitoba. During his studies, he received numerous academic awards, including the Dr. A. W. Hogg Undergraduate Scholarship, the Klieforth Prize in American History, the Schoolmasters' Wives Association Scholarship, and the Aaron Bricker Memorial Scholarship. At present he is a high school social studies teacher in Manitoba. He has written a number of policy papers on Canadian education for the Frontier Centre for Public Policy in Winnipeg and the Atlantic Institute for Market Studies in Halifax. He is also a city councillor in Steinbach, Manitoba.

¹⁷ Faculty of Law, University of Manitoba, *Admissions Information*, <http://www.umanitoba.ca/law/newsite/faq.php>