The Academic Elite in Library Science: Linkages among Top-Ranked Graduate Programs

Jeffrey H. Bair and Janice C. Barrons

In a national survey of deans, top administrators, and senior faculty, the ten top-ranked graduate programs in library science were substantially linked to one another by hiring one another's graduates. It is suggested that this linkage helps these programs to maintain and enhance their prestige.

Webster noted that in some disciplines in the social sciences, such as economics, psychology, and sociology, the rankings of the leading graduate programs are published often.[1] The rankings of graduate programs leading to careers in major professions, such as engineering, law, and medicine, also are published often. However, in most other fields, including library science, rankings are published infrequently. According to Webster, "in the increasingly important health-related fields, in areas other than medicine, no methodologically sophisticated ranking has ever been published for most of the programs."[2] In March 1996, *U.S. News & World Report* helped remedy this oversight by ranking the leading graduate programs in library science for the first time. Today, there are fifty graduate schools of library science in the United States, and since 1988, the number of students receiving master's degrees in library science has increased by 33 percent and the number receiving doctoral degrees has increased by 67 percent.[3, 4]

The authors investigated the extent to which top-ranked graduate programs in library science might tend to maintain and enhance their reputations by hiring their own and one another's graduates. Top-ranked law schools were substantially linked to one another in this manner, as were top-ranked doctoral programs in mathematics and the physical sciences, the social sciences, chemical engineering, psychology, and social work.[5-10] The extent to which top-ranked graduate programs in library science also might hire their own and one another's graduates was assessed in the present study.

Method

A ranking of the most highly regarded graduate programs in library science was presented in *U.S. News & World Report*.[11] That ranking was based on a survey of deans, top administrators, and senior faculty of the accredited schools in library

Jeffrey H. Bair is a Professor in the Division of Sociology and Anthropology at Emporia State University; e-mail: bairjeff@esumail.emporia.edu. Janice C. Barrons is a Library Assistant II in the William Allen White Library at Emporia State University; e-mail: barronsj@esumail.emporia.edu.

science. Respondents were asked to rank the reputations of accredited schools by placing them into tiers of academic quality, taking into account each school's scholarship, curriculum, and the quality of its faculty and graduate students. The response rate was 73 percent.

The ten top-ranked graduate programs in library science are listed in table 1.[12] The names of the faculty members in these ten programs and the universities from which the faculty members had received their doctoral degrees were obtained from the Internet, graduate school catalogs, and *Dissertation Abstracts International.*

Results

The number of faculty members in each of the ten top-ranked library science programs, the percentage of those who had obtained their doctoral degrees from that same university, the percentage of those who had obtained their degrees from one of the other ten top-ranked programs, and the overall percentage of those who had obtained their degrees from the ten top-ranked programs are presented in table 1.

These data indicate that 84 (59.2%) of the 142 faculty members in these ten programs had graduated from one of the top-ranked schools. The University of Texas had the highest percentage of faculty from among the ten top-ranked programs (83.3%) and the University of Wisconsin at Madison had the lowest (40%).

These data also indicate that some of these programs tended to hire their own graduates. The University of Pittsburgh and Rutgers University had hired the largest proportions of their faculties from among their own graduates (38.5% and 35.7%, respectively). However, the University of North Carolina had not hired any of its own graduates, and the other universities had hired from between 10 and 27.3 percent (median = 19%) of their own graduates. Finally, these top-ranked schools had hired from between 7.1 and 66.7 percent (median = 38.25%) of their faculties from other schools among the academic elite.

Discussion

These data suggest that a small number of programs (ten in this case) tend to maintain and enhance their reputations by hiring their own and each other's graduates. Although highly rated programs might find that the best candidates for positions tend to come from their own and other elite programs, such a tendency would not account for the marked degree of inbreeding that these data document. Approximately 60 percent (59.2%) of the faculty members in these ten programs had graduated from one of these same ten programs. These ten

TABLE 1
Number of Faculty in Elite Programs and Percent of Faculty from Same Programs, Other Elite Programs, and All Elite Programs

Rank	Program	Number	Percent from Elite Programs		
			Same	Other	All
1	Univ. of Illinois	10	20.0%	50.0%	70.0%
2	Univ. of Michigan	17	17.6	35.3	52.9
2	Univ. of North Carolina	17	0.0	52.9	52.9
4	Syracuse Univ.	17	23.5	41.2	64.7
5	Univ. of Pittsburgh	13	38.5	30.8	69.2
6	Indiana Univ.	21	19.0	42.9	61.9
6	Rutgers Univ.	14	35.7	7.1	42.9
6	Univ. of Wisconsin, Madison	10	10.0	30.0	40.0
9	Univ. of Texas, Austin	12	16.7	66.7	83.3
10	Drexel Univ.	11	27.3	27.3	54.5

graduate programs undoubtedly are excellent; the authors certainly do not contend that they are not.

Several factors can influence the prestige rankings of graduate programs when those rankings are based on the ratings of deans, top administrators, and senior faculty. It seems reasonable that the graduates of elite programs, whether currently employed at elite schools or less prestigious schools, would tend to give high ratings to their alma maters. However, there are not enough graduates from elite schools to allow them to maintain the high status of their alma maters without some support from their nonelite colleagues. It seems that some nonelite have adopted the elites' definition that their programs are, in fact, the best. Elite programs have been accorded high esteem for decades, and these traditions typically have gone unchallenged. Elite programs maintain their status in part because it is relatively easy for them to acquire faculty from other elite programs and to place their own graduates in other elite schools.

Conclusion

Ultimately, this question arises: Are the highest-ranked programs the best graduate programs in library science, or do they comprise an elite that has a vested interest in perpetuating the notion that they are academically the best? Helmer's contention that the hierarchy of prestige is fundamentally a hierarchy of power receives strong support from these data.[13]

Two final comments seem in order. First, the authors contend that because of their subjectivity, current ranking systems are a detriment to the field of library science. They may impede professional mobility, reward status over achievement, and result in programs of lesser renown being bypassed, even though they may merit as high or higher recognition than do those of the elite. Second, the authors believe that current, subjective ranking systems incorporate serious distortions and misrepresentations. Because they have the potential to do as much harm as good, it is recommended that as they are presently constituted, subjective systems of program ranking should be routinely ignored.

Notes

1. David S. Webster, "*U.S. News & World Report*'s Complete Rankings of Graduate Programs in Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and Nursing," *Change* 26, no. 1 (Jan./Feb. 1994): 37–45.

2. Ibid.

3. "Best Graduate Schools," *U.S. News & World Report* 120, no. 11 (March 18, 1996): 100.

4. "Almanac," *Chronicle of Higher Education* 52, no. 1 (Sept. 1995): 20.

5. Jeffrey H. Bair and Myron Boor, "The Academic Elite in Law: Linkages among Top-Ranked Law Schools," *Psychological Reports* 68, no. 3 (June 1991): 891–94.

6. Jeffrey H. Bair, "Linkages among Top-Ranked Graduate Programs in Three Physical Sciences and Mathematics," *Transactions of the Kansas Academy of Science* 94, no. 1–2 (April 1991): 33–37.

7. Jeffrey H. Bair, William E. Thompson, and Joseph V. Hickey, "The Academic Elite in Six Social Science Disciplines: Linkages among Top-Ranked Graduate Departments," *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 15, no. 1 (winter 1991): 33–42.

8. Jeffrey H. Bair, "The Academic Elite in ChE," *Chemical Engineering Education* 25, no. 4 (fall 1991): 181–83.

9. Jeffrey H. Bair and Myron Boor, "Psychology of the Scientist: LIX. The Academic Elite in Psychology: Linkages among Top-Ranked Graduate Programs," *Psychological Reports* 63, no. 2 (Oct. 1988): 539–42.

10. Jeffrey H. Bair, Myron Boor, and Kendra E. Bair, "Psychology of the Scientist: LXIX. The Academic Elite in Social Work: Linkages among Top-Ranked Graduate Programs," *Psychological Reports* 76, no. 1 (Feb. 1995): 347–50.

11. "Best Graduate Schools," 100.

12. Ibid.

13. John Helmer, *The Deadly Simple Mechanics of Society* (New York: Seaburg, 1974).