

# MASTER'S OF THE UNIVERSITY

By Dan Stockman, *Western Herald*, Western Michigan U.

## Is grad school higher education, or just higher hibernation?

**G**raduating from school almost feels like a mistake. You take classes for four or five years, and suddenly — with no real buildup or counseling — you're shown to the door.

Considering the job market, it's no wonder more and more students are choosing to attend graduate or professional schools.

U.S. Department of Education figures show that in 1992, total graduate fall enrollment in the United States was 1,670,000 — up 13 percent from 1987 and up nearly 43 percent from 1969.

Are these growing numbers of students hiding from adult responsibility, or just trying to get smarter? For James "Fish" Christiansen, the answer is simple: He wants a better career than an undergraduate degree alone can deliver. "[Becoming] a teacher right out of school doesn't pay a heck of a lot," Fish says. After collecting a B.A. in history and a minor in anthropology this spring, he'll head for law school.

In his sixth year at Western Michigan U., Fish is still working on an undergraduate degree — but don't tell him he's afraid of the real world. He's happily married, works full time as a child-care counselor and has two children, with a third on the way.

For Ginger Strand, graduate school at Princeton U. was a big change. "I wish I had been better prepared, but I think everyone feels that way," she says. "I expected it to be hard, and it was."

Strand says that during her first few years in graduate school she had no choice but to be "full-time dedicated." She says, "My first two years I did nothing else. No movies, nothing. It's not a glamorous life."

Part of the reason, Strand says, is the difference in what

you're expected to know. Rather than doling out busywork, professors show you a stack of books and assume you know everything in them — then ask you what it means. "It's a whole different ball game — suddenly you need to be an expert rather than just a smart kid."

### Bettering the odds?

According to Carl Williams, U. of Alabama's director for graduate recruitment and admissions, people with graduate degrees are better off in the job market. "Employers now are looking for that little something extra — especially since there are so many people with undergraduate degrees," Williams says.

A graduate degree can be helpful down the

line, too, Williams says. "When it comes time for promotions, [employers] tend to go with who has the most training. Students now understand that to be competitive in the workplace, they have to have a graduate degree."

Want proof that an investment in graduate school pays off? Williams points to the College Placement Council's Salary Survey, a look at the national average for beginning salary offers.

According to the CPC, the national average for yearly salaries in 1993 offered to applicants with a bachelor's degree in business administration is \$24,555. For an applicant with a master's in business administration, it's \$32,792.

Of course, not every career field shows such dramatic salary increases. But according to the CPC, most show a difference of at least a few thousand dollars. In an extreme example, applicants holding a bachelor's degree in marketing/management averaged \$25,361 for job offers, while those with a master's degree commanded up to \$53,500. On the other side of the coin, from September 1993 to January 1994, the CPC says there were only three such high-paying marketing/management jobs offered.

Williams also points out that the CPC Salary Survey does not indicate which fields job offers are in. This means that of the salaries included, some may not be related to the applicant's degree.

What about getting work experience before applying to grad school? Williams says it depends on the program and notes that some programs actually require it.

"Research shows that only one in 10 students who say they intend to go to graduate school actually does so if they don't go immediately," he says. "I always encourage students to go straight on to graduate school if they can."

### Learning pays off

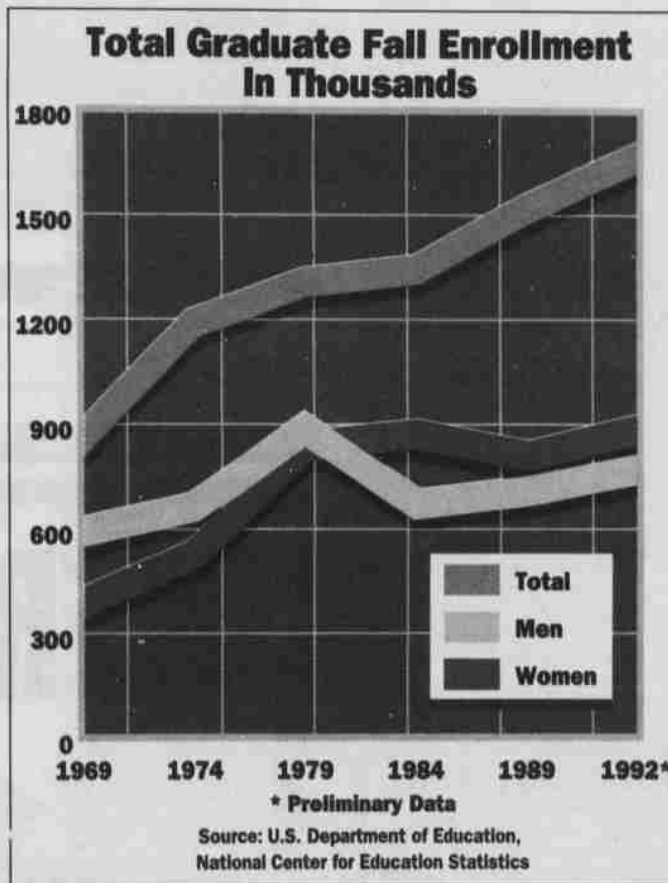
Still, many students take the undergrad-job-graduate school path. After graduating from Tufts U. in '91, David Hilbert tried the real world as a software engineer at the Jet Propulsion Laboratory, which worked on projects like the Galileo spacecraft.

"[Working] was cool and all, but I was just kind of uninspired," Hilbert says. So after three years at JPL, he started looking for a graduate school. He was accepted at Carnegie Mellon U. — which has one of the most prestigious software engineering programs in the nation — but turned it down to continue playing with his band, Ed's Too Short, in Pasadena, Calif., while studying in the graduate computer program at the U. of California, Irvine.

Having seen both, does Hilbert think grad school is a better choice than the real world? It depends on whether or not you're awarded an assistantship or fellowship, he says. These are deals in which a graduate school pays part or all of your tuition for teaching undergraduate classes, doing research or, if you have an embarrassingly high GPA, just attending class. "If you can get money for it, and you enjoy academics, it's great," Hilbert says. "They're paying you to learn."

They don't pay much, though, and that's one of the drawbacks of going back to school. The steady income from a "real" job usually stops. "I'm living like a student right now," says Hilbert, "and I didn't need to when I was [working] at JPL."

So which is it? In the real world you face — gasp — responsibility and stiff competition for jobs. Choose graduate school, and it's a few more years of Ramen dinners and all-nighters.



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