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A Degree and Job Skills Too

Heading off to grad school? You'll find a brave new world

By Christopher J. Gearon

If the price tag of an even higher education has you hesitating about that master's or Ph.D., consider the potential payoff: Median earnings of people with a grad degree today run $71,220 a year, about $19,000 more than what those with only a bachelor's command.

And the news gets better. As students have started looking harder at value, and as employers have inspired a sharper focus on job skills, grad schools have been shaking up and enhancing their offerings. Sneha Shah, 29, says the cutting-edge professional science master's degree she earned at Rutgers University in January is "the sole reason" she landed her job as a biotech and drug industry analyst at a New Jersey health care research firm. Originally "hellbent" on getting her Ph.D., Shah first spent two years supervising others in

Abasi Ene-Obazig came to Keck to add business chops to his Ph.D.
a research lab and discovered a knack for management. Her Rutgers degree, officially called a Master of Business & Science, offered a way to move in that direction by combining business course work with biotech and genomics. “I was able to tailor my PSM to drug discovery,” she says – and nab a mid-five-figure starting salary.

Invented to better arm graduate students with the technical and practical skills needed in the science, technology, engineering and math (STEM) fields, the professional science master’s is a hybrid that layers management, policy and law onto the math and science, with an emphasis on communication, project management and other employer-desired skills.

“It has grown exponentially” since its early days a decade and a half ago, says David King, dean of graduate studies and research at SUNY-Oswego and former president of the National Professional Science Master’s Association. Today, more than 300 PSM programs are in place, at Rutgers (whose more than 20 concentrations range from actuarial science to sustainability), American University in Washington, D.C., the University of Miami, Oregon State, Rice University in Houston and 134 other institutions. The PSM comes in many flavors, but all include hands-on experience (Shah worked in Rutgers’ technology transfer office) and many a capstone project (Shah’s team developed a business plan to market a noninvasive blood glucose meter in the U.S.). Two-thirds of graduates make more than $50,000 annually, and 41 percent earn $70,000-plus.

The success of the professional science master’s has opened the door to similar degrees in a multitude of other fields as well. Georgetown University, for example, now offers master’s of professional studies degrees in emergency and disaster management, real estate, and sports management, among other disciplines. The options at Pittsburgh’s Point Park University include communication technology and journalism and mass communications.

Meanwhile, as the number of tenure-track jobs in academia has shrunk – half of Ph.D.s now land jobs outside academia – doctoral students, too, have been beefing up their job-market creds by adding classes or workshops in professional development, completing internships, and by layering on certificates or stacking up so-called digital badges that prove they’ve mastered certain competencies. “There is no question that enhanced professional skills are critical to career services,” says Debra Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. “All employers tell us this is important.” CGS has prodded graduate schools to do a much better job of helping students obtain practical and soft skills and transfer them to the workplace.

“I attended tons of workshops [and] seminars and did six certificates,” says Urska Dobesek, 31, a fifth-year Ph.D. student in sports psychology at Florida State University who hopes to land a tenure-track job but is preparing a backup plan. She has earned certificates in teaching and measurement/statistics; one that focuses on communication, teamwork and ethics; and others focused on instructional excellence, program evaluation and preparing future faculty. “I see them as very valuable,” says Dobesek. Certificates can be had often with one or several extra courses; in addition to a statistics course she took as part of her doctoral work, Dobesek took three more to gain her measurement/statistics certificate, for example.

Traditionally associated with blue-collar occupations, certificates are rapidly carving out a place in postgraduate education; in fact, more than a few people are choosing them in lieu of an advanced degree. In the 2011-12 school year, grad schools awarded nearly 32,000 certificates, 19 percent more than the previous year; a decade ago, they were rare. Auburn University in Alabama boasts two dozen graduate-level certificates; Texas Tech University’s 40-plus certificates include one called Authentic Leadership and Entrepreneurship for the Family Business and another in Equine-Assisted Mental Health. SUNY Binghamton’s
array includes forensic health and medieval and renaissance studies. Northwestern University's new certificate program for people who already have advanced degrees features information systems security, advanced data science and public policy, to name a few.

At both the master's and Ph.D. level, internships and cooperative education programs, which typically alternate a paid term or two in the workplace with academic instruction, are increasingly a part of the program. "Most employers are looking for people who’ve had hands-on experience," says SUNY-Oswego's King. "We've seen less emphasis on the thesis and more emphasis on experiential learning." Most of SUNY-Oswego's 800 graduate students now take part in experiential learning through research projects and work assignments at places like the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, medical device manufacturing companies and local school systems.

Other grad schools with robust experiential learning pathways for both master's and doctoral students include the University of Cincinnati's engineering program, the University of Tennessee-Knoxville's energy science program (which sends doctoral students on internships to Oak Ridge National Laboratory), Columbia University's Teachers College (which pairs master's students with experienced teachers in New York classrooms) and Brigham Young University's Marriott School of Management, which sends accounting, MBA and other grad students into large companies as part of its field studies program.

For those who get their Ph.D. only to find that they've missed out on these developments, a professional postdoctoral master's (PFM) might be an answer. After getting a Ph.D. last spring in cancer biology from the University of London, Abasi Ene-Obong, 28, moved his wife and newborn daughter to California so he could complete a nine-month $26,000 PFM in bioscience at Keck Graduate Institute in Claremont. Ene-Obong, who felt prepared by his Ph.D. to continue working in a lab but not in business, is counting on the 4-year-old master's program to help him nab a senior management position at a life sciences firm or start an entrepreneurial venture. The Mayo Clinic in Minnesota offers a two-year postdoctoral master's in clinical and translational science, and Fairleigh Dickinson University in New Jersey offers a 10-course postdoctoral M.S. in clinical psychopharmacology, among other examples.

The drive to pile on additional postgraduate capabilities collides head-on with the impetus to bring cost (and time out of the workforce) down. Result: the rapid spread of online degrees (story, Page 106) and a move toward accelerated programs. Keck aims to take its PPM online to provide more flexibility – and perhaps even drop the price tag – so that Ph.D.s around the world can enroll. Geor-
garia Tech has made headlines for turning its massive open online courses (MOOCs), which typically are individual enrichment offerings free to anyone interested, into an online 18-month master’s degree in computer science—which, at just $6,600, costs a fraction of the $20,500 in-state students must pay ($44,500 for out-of-staters) for the on-site version.

Freddi Rokaw, 51, of Burbank, Calif., opted for Purdue University’s online M.S. in education focusing on learning design and technology. The degree cost her about $20,000, or half of the traditional version, and allowed her to dovetail her studies with her job at Apple as a creative strategies trainer. “You have more control, and you can [work] at your own speed,” says Rokaw, who finished in 18 months. She’s since left Apple to search for a job with an organization educating children about the arts.

Rokaw earned several digital badges as part of her Purdue coursework; one, for example, shows that she is adept at facilitating study. The Mozilla Foundation has been instrumental in creating an ecosystem for badges, including building the technical foundation and creating standards that support the authenticity of nearly 300,000 badges that participate in the Mozilla system. Through Mozilla’s Open Badge Infrastructure, Purdue professors, just like Scout leaders, can award these recognitions telling the world (i.e., potential employers) about the concrete skills and achievements of students in their classes, from writing HTML code to holding leadership positions.

A big advantage to students is that when course work and projects are conceived with specific objectives in mind, they “no longer have a vague notion of what they will be learning in a program, but instead an exact map of what competencies they will be gaining and the sequence,” says William Watson, an associate professor of learning design and technology at Purdue who helped to devise the system and uses it in his graduate courses. Coastal Carolina University and Indiana University are among others using or experimenting with stackable badges.

Since time is money, some graduate and professional schools also are finding ways to move people through faster. Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore hopes to make it easier for Ph.D. students in the social sciences and humanities to wrap up their studies in a timely fashion by offering a “significant” boost to the current $30,000 annual stipend and year-round funding for five years, says Katherine Newman, dean of Hopkins’ School of the Arts and Sciences. Previously, there was no summer support. The new funding packages also limit teaching duties to three years. “We hope this will put an end to the need for students to seek jobs unrelated to their research,” says Newman. Stanford University has also encouraged its humanities programs to keep time to degree to five years. This fall, City University of New York’s Graduate Center will award up to eight humanities fellowships (including a two-year postdoc fellowship to develop additional professional credentials) to entering doctoral students so they can complete their degrees in five years. During that period, fellows get tuition covered, subsidized health insurance and a $30,000 annual stipend; they will teach one course per semester only in years three and four.

“It really checked all the boxes for me,” says Markus Scott, 30, who got his MBA in 2013 through a one-year accelerated program at Northwestern University’s Kellogg School of Management intended for candidates with substantial previous business education. The choice saved him about $40,000, he calculates, plus the “huge opportunity costs” of not working for an additional year. Scott, who had a bachelor’s in finance and a master’s in accounting, was working at a private equity firm when he “caught a bug to be an entrepreneur.” The one-year program allowed him to skip core offerings he already had under his belt, and concentrate on entrepreneurial classes and other electives that gave him the skills and confidence to start Lighthouse Equity Partners last year. The firm aims to buy a company with revenue of $5 million to $35 million that Scott would run.

The one-year MBA has grown more popular, along with a host of specialized one-year business master’s degrees (story, Page 20). Although Northwestern’s option is not new, enrollment is up about a third in the last couple of years to 106 and is expected to reach 160 students annually (about one-third the size of its traditional MBA offering). Northwestern also offers a three-year J.D.-MBA program, which has students taking a year of law school followed by a year at Kellogg, and then splitting the final year between the two. Yale and the University of Pennsylvania offer similar accelerated J.D.-MBA programs.

Law schools have been experimenting with acceleration in other ways, too— even before President Obama’s pronouncement last year that three years of law school could be clipped to two. Drexel University rolls out its “Fast Forward” two-year J.D. degree this summer, joining similar programs at such schools as the University of Dayton in Ohio and the University of Vermont. Pepperdine University’s two-year program, launched last year, is described by the school as potentially “a good choice for motivated students willing to work at a faster pace.” Meanwhile, New York University’s School of Medicine now offers a three-year track, plus entry to its residency program, geared toward those who already know what type of physician they want to be. Mercer University School of Medicine in Savannah and Texas Tech School of Medicine in Lubbock both offer three-year fast tracks in family medicine.

For anyone considering an advanced degree, what’s the bottom line? A careful exploration of all of the latest options could get you significantly more mileage than you’d have managed in the past—a degree plus work experience plus invaluable professional savvy. And it could shorten your road to a payoff.