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The Master's as the New Bachelor's

By LAURA PAPPANO

William Klein's story may sound familiar to his fellow graduates. After earning his bachelor's in history from the College at Brockport, he found himself living in his parents' Buffalo home, working the same \$7.25-an-hour waiter job he had in high school.

It wasn't that there weren't other jobs out there. It's that they all seemed to want more education. Even tutoring at a for-profit learning center or leading tours at a historic site required a master's. "It's pretty apparent that with the degree I have right now, there are not too many jobs I would want to commit to," Mr. Klein says.

So this fall, he will sharpen his marketability at Rutgers' new master's program in Jewish studies (think teaching, museums and fund-raising in the Jewish community). Jewish studies may not be the first thing that comes to mind as being the road to career advancement, and Mr. Klein is not sure exactly where the degree will lead him (he'd like to work for the Central Intelligence Agency in the Middle East). But he is sure of this: he needs a master's. Browse professional job listings and it's "bachelor's required, master's preferred."

Call it credential inflation. Once derided as the consolation prize for failing to finish a Ph.D. or just a way to kill time waiting out economic downturns, the master's is now the fastest-growing degree. The number awarded, about 657,000 in 2009, has more than doubled since the 1980s, and the rate of increase has quickened substantially in the last couple of years, says Debra W. Stewart, president of the Council of Graduate Schools. Nearly 2 in 25 people age 25 and over have a master's, about the same proportion that had a bachelor's or higher in 1960.

"Several years ago it became very clear to us that master's education was moving very rapidly to become the entry degree in many professions," Dr. Stewart says. The sheen has come, in part, because the degrees are newly specific and utilitarian. These are not your general master's in policy or administration. Even the M.B.A., observed one business school dean, "is kind of too broad in the current environment." Now, you have the M.S. in supply chain management, and in managing mission-driven organizations. There's an M.S. in skeletal and dental bioarchaeology, and an M.A. in learning and thinking.

The degree of the moment is the [professional science master's](#), or P.S.M., combining job-specific training with business skills. Where only a handful of programs existed a few years ago, there are now 239, with scores in development. Florida's university system, for example, plans 28 by 2013, clustered in areas integral to the state's economy, including simulation (yes, like Disney, but applied to fields like medicine and defense). And there could be many more, says Patricia J. Bishop, vice provost and dean of graduate studies at the University of Central Florida. "Who knows when we'll be done?"

While many new master's are in so-called STEM areas — science, technology, engineering and math — humanities departments, once allergic to applied degrees, are recognizing that not everyone is ivory tower-bound and are drafting credentials for résumé boosting.

“There is a trend toward thinking about professionalizing degrees,” acknowledges Carol B. Lynch, director of professional master's programs at the Council of Graduate Schools. “At some point you need to get out of the library and out into the real world. If you are not giving people the skills to do that, we are not doing our job.”

This, she says, has led to master's in public history (for work at a historical society or museum), in art (for managing galleries) and in music (for choir directors or the business side of music). Language departments are tweaking master's degrees so graduates, with a portfolio of cultural knowledge and language skills, can land jobs with multinational companies.

So what's going on here? Have jobs, as Dr. Stewart puts it, “skilled up”? Or have we lost the ability to figure things out without a syllabus? Or perhaps all this amped-up degree-getting just represents job market “signaling” — the economist A. Michael Spence's Nobel-worthy notion that degrees are less valuable for what you learn than for broadcasting your go-get-'em qualities.

“There is definitely some devaluing of the college degree going on,” says Eric A. Hanushek, an education economist at the Hoover Institution, and that gives the master's extra signaling power. “We are going deeper into the pool of high school graduates for college attendance,” making a bachelor's no longer an adequate screening measure of achievement for employers.

Colleges are turning out more graduates than the market can bear, and a master's is essential for job seekers to stand out — that, or a diploma from an elite undergraduate college, says Richard K. Vedder, professor of economics at Ohio University and director of the Center for College Affordability and Productivity.

Not only are we developing “the overeducated American,” he says, but the cost is borne by the students getting those degrees. “The beneficiaries are the colleges and the employers,” he says. Employers get employees with more training (that they don't pay for), and universities fill seats. In his own department, he says, a master's in financial economics can be a “cash cow” because it draws on existing faculty (“we give them a little extra money to do an overload”) and they charge higher tuition than for undergraduate work. “We have incentives to want to do this,” he says. He calls the proliferation of master's degrees evidence of “credentialing gone amok.” He says, “In 20 years, you'll need a Ph.D. to be a janitor.”

Among the new breed of master's, there are indeed ample fields, including construction management and fire science and administration, where job experience used to count more than book learning. Internships built into many of these degrees look suspiciously like old-fashioned on-the-job training.

Walter Stroupe, a retired police first lieutenant and chairman of the department of criminal justice at West Virginia State University, acknowledges that no one needs to get the new master's degree in law enforcement administration the school is offering beginning this fall. In

fact, he concedes, you don't even need a college degree in West Virginia to become a police officer, typically the first step to positions as sheriff and police chief.

Still, Dr. Stroupe says, there are tricky issues in police work that deserve deeper discussion. "As a law enforcement officer, you can get tunnel vision and only see things from your perspective," he says. "What does a police officer do when they go up to a car and someone is videotaping them on a cellphone?" The master's experience, he hopes, will wrangle with such questions and "elevate the professionalism" among the police in the state.

These new degrees address a labor problem, adds David King, dean of graduate studies and research at the State University of New York at Oswego, and director of the Professional Science Master's Program, which oversees P.S.M. degrees [across the SUNY system](#).

"There are several million job vacancies in the country right now, but they don't line up with skills," he says. Each P.S.M. degree, he says, is developed with advisers from the very companies where students may someday work. "We are bringing the curriculum to the market, instead of expecting the market to come to us," he says.

That's why John McGloon, who manages the technical writing and "user experience" team at Welch Allyn, the medical device company, helped shape the master's in human-computer interaction at Oswego. He says employers constantly fear hiring someone who lacks proper skills or doesn't mesh. Having input may mean better job candidates. This summer, Mr. McGloon has three SUNY Oswego interns. "We plug them right into the team," he says. "Not only can you gauge their training, you can judge the team fit, which is hard to do in an interview."

While jobs at Welch Allyn may not require a master's, the degree has been used as a sorting mechanism. After posting an opening for a technical writer, Mr. McGloon received "dozens and dozens" of résumés. Those in charge of hiring wondered where to start. "I said, 'Half of our applicants have master's. That's our first cut.' "

Laura Georgianna, in charge of employee development at Welch Allyn, confirms that given two otherwise equal résumés, the master's wins. A master's degree "doesn't guarantee that someone will be much more successful," she says. "It says that this person is committed and dedicated to the work and has committed to the deep dive. It gives you further assurance that this is something they have thought about and want."

The exposure to workplaces, and those doing the hiring, makes master's programs appealing to students. "The networking has been unbelievable," says Omar Holguin. His 2009 B.S. in engineering yielded only a job at a concrete mixing company. At the University of Texas, El Paso, which is offering a new master's in construction management, he's interning with a company doing work he's actually interested in, on energy efficiency.

There may be logic in trying to better match higher education to labor needs, but Dr. Vedder is concerned by the shift of graduate work from intellectual pursuit to a skill-based "ticket to a vocation." What's happening to academic reflection? Must knowledge be demonstrable to be valuable?

The questions matter, not just to the world of jobs, but also to the world of ideas. Nancy Sinkoff, chairwoman of the Jewish studies department at Rutgers, says its master's, which starts this fall, will position students for jobs but be about inquiry and deep learning.

"I would imagine in the museum world, I would want to hire someone with content," she says hopefully. "To say, 'I have a master's in Jewish studies,' what better credential to have when you are on the market?"

"This will make you more marketable," she is convinced. "This is how we are selling it."

Whether employers will intuit the value of a master's in Jewish studies is unclear. The history department at the University of Central Florida has learned that just because a content-rich syllabus includes applied skills (and internships) doesn't mean students will be hired. "Right now, yes, it's very hard to get a job" with a master's in public history, says Rosalind J. Beiler, chairwoman of the history department, noting that the downturn hurt employers like museums and historical societies.

The university is revamping its master's in public history, a field that interprets academic history for general audiences, to emphasize new-media skills in the hopes of yielding more job placements. "That is precisely the reason we are going in that direction," she says.

"Digital humanities," as this broad movement is called, is leading faculty members to seek fresh ways to make history more accessible and relevant in their teaching and research. A professor of Middle Eastern history, for example, has made podcasts of local Iraqi war veterans in a course on the history of Iraq.

It may be uncomfortable for academia to bend itself to the marketplace, but more institutions are trying.

In what could be a sign of things to come, the German department at the University of Colorado, Boulder, is proposing a Ph.D. aimed at professionals. Candidates, perhaps with an eye toward the European Union, would develop cultural understanding useful in international business and organizations. It would be time-limited to four years — not the current "12-year ticket to oblivion," says John A. Stevenson, dean of the graduate school. And yes, it would include study abroad and internships.

Dr. Stevenson sees a model here that other humanities departments may want to emulate.

It does, however, prompt the question: Will the Ph.D. become the new master's?

Laura Pappano is author of "Inside School Turnarounds: Urgent Hopes, Unfolding Stories."