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How to Make the Case for Graduate Education

By Vimal Patel

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After her talk to a packed room on Thursday, Janet Napolitano, president of the University of California, asked audience members to raise their hands if they planned to meet with members of Congress or their staffs while here in Washington.

Only about a half-dozen or so hands shot up in a room full of some 700 graduate-school administrators attending the annual meeting of the Council of Graduate Schools.

"I just defined the echo chamber," Ms. Napolitano said, referring to the tendency of graduate-education leaders to preach to the choir rather than make an effective case for support to lawmakers and the broader public.

Ms. Napolitano and other administrators at the conference emphasized that universities need to better explain how graduate students benefit the public good.

Ms. Napolitano, who oversees a 10-campus system that is home to more than 50,000 graduate and professional students, and produces 7 percent of the nation’s doctorates, stressed the economic payoff.

"For those who see no connection between graduate education and the economy at large," Ms. Napolitano said, "we can cite the 640 start-up companies that are based on UC inventions alone—inventions that exist, in large part, because of graduate research."

In an era of tight government budgets, Ms. Napolitano, who has served as governor of Arizona and more recently as secretary of homeland security, told the crowd to use anecdotes about research that has improved lives and livelihoods to counter the "often extreme and generally unfounded" stories that often frame the debate over graduate education, such as the barista with a Ph.D.

**Tracking Students**

There were no Ph.D. baristas, or any other recent graduate students, at the meeting to discuss how real such issues may be. But many of the graduate-school deans and other administrators at the meeting acknowledged that graduate education faces major challenges today.

Students worry about job prospects as tenure-track jobs dwindle, and often want universities to do more to prepare students for careers outside academe. They also want universities to better track Ph.D.-placement data, which more institutions in recent years are trying to do.

Mark A. Sheridan, a biology professor and dean of the Texas Tech University graduate school, said placement data would help make the case for graduate education as a public good, as well provide prospective students with data they ought to have.

"In addition to anecdotes about the kind of work students do today, we need to also know how their careers unfold longitudinally so we can show the long-term impact of their education," said Mr. Sheridan in an interview. "Universities need to become better at collecting that kind of information."

His own university’s record on placement data has been spotty. Departments now ask students to fill out profiles before they leave that ask for permanent contact information and future plans. That will make it easier to track them, he said. He has hired a pair of undergraduates who use social-media sites like LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter to track down past graduate students. "Our stalkers," Mr. Sheridan jokingly called them.

**Meetings With Lawmakers**

In addition to improving tracking data, administrators urged universities to better educate lawmakers.

Five years ago, graduate deans and graduate students from all of the University of California campuses began spending a day each year meeting with state lawmakers and their staffs.

Kim Barrett, dean of the graduate division at the University of California at San Diego, said legislators would often have no idea about the rigors of doctoral education. One, she said, believed a Ph.D. took about two years to complete.

"We explain how the university is really an incubator for ideas and innovation that drives economic prosperity in the state," Ms. Barrett said. "It’s really been gratifying to see over time how their understanding of graduate education has increased."

Ms. Napolitano also gave tips for graduate students, saying they should be careful in how they title their dissertations. She said there’s a "dangerous tendency" among critics of academic work to try to discredit research based on its title. "We shouldn’t lead with our chin," she said.

For her part, Ms. Napolitano left the conference early to meet with members of Congress. "I’m actually going to the Hill today," she said of her plans to meet with Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, Democrat of New York, and Sen. Lamar Alexander, Republican of Tennessee and presumptive chair of the Senate committee that oversees education. "I guess I’ll be lonely."

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