Fact or Fiction: The Truth Behind Degrees from the Same Institution

As busy M.A. students bustle about attempting to send off their final Ph.D. applications on time, first-year Ph.D. students Natalie Szymanski and Rory Lee look on with relief. Last spring, both Natalie and Rory hurried about sending off their applications. And both of them chose to apply to FSU. However, rumbles in the field contend that receiving both M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from the same institution might affect future employment opportunities.

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“I can certainly see the benefits of working in multiple universities and experiencing multiple programs; however, for me, the benefits of staying much larger,” Natalie said. “Working with faculty members who know your interests and work ethic helps you transition smoothly between your Master’s and Ph.D. work. Furthermore, I do not have to start out back at the bottom of the ladder in terms of professional opportunities. Rather than working for two years and then being offered assistantships, here at FSU I have four full years to take advantage of those opportunities.”

“I think it depends,” Rory said. “If I had gotten my undergraduate degree at FSU as well as my M.A., then I would certainly have left, for that, I believe, is still frowned upon—earning all three degrees at the same university, that is. ‘Academic incest’ is the way someone once phrased it for me.”

As Rory and Natalie considered Ph.D. programs, FSU was always an option. Natalie attributes her decision to the “rock star professors.”

“There is nothing better than being pushed by some of the most respected minds in the field,” she said. “Their dedication and enthusiasm is infectious; consider me bitten by the bug.”

Rory agrees.

“We get the personalized attention and interaction with professors, but we also get to be involved in some incredibly valuable assistantships and internships,” he said. “We avoid becoming cogs in the larger academic machine; rather, at FSU we have the opportunity to be right there on the ground floor, adding our ideas and building new programs and initiatives with the administrators and faculty.”

Rory also attributes his decision to pursue his Ph.D. at FSU to his overall familiarity with the program.

“Having been here for two years, I learned a lot,” he said. “I knew the faculty, the classes that were offered, the student body, and the expectations as both a student and a teacher. Perhaps most importantly, I knew the outside perception of the program. I always thought we had a great program at FSU. Those thoughts weren’t confirmed, however, until I started hearing people praise our program at conferences. Then, to see how well we were represented at various conferences—and more importantly, how well (at least in my opinion) we did at these conferences—really spoke volumes.”

This past fall, as a first-year Ph.D. student, Rory took on the role of Co-Director of the Digital Studio.

“Since I had been here for two years, the faculty already knew my interests,” Rory said. “They also knew whether I was capable of handling the job, whether I was responsible enough to be put in that position. I highly doubt I would have had a similar opportunity at another university.”

For Natalie and Rory, it seems as though they made the right decision. We look forward to watching their progression in the program and the field.

Jessica Jackson is a first-year M.A. student in Rhet/Comp. She received her B.A. in English/Creative Writing in 2002. She is currently a reader for the Southeastern Review, on the interviewing committee for Rhet/Comp speakers, and is looking forward to chairing a session at her first CCCC conference in March. She finds teaching first-year composition a rewarding experience, and after obtaining her M.A., Jessica hopes to complete a Ph.D. and pursue a career in composition at the collegiate level.

When she is not at school, Jessica spends much of her time with her honor-roll-achieving thirteen-year-old daughter, Travia. Jessica describes juggling single parenthood and school/career as simultaneously demanding and rewarding situations that result in a constant realignment of priorities. With any spare time, Jessica dreams of traveling, singing, and writing. She loves seafood and saxophone music. She considers herself a true night owl, one most motivated to work around midnight.

Jessica Jackson

Student Spotlight
Chuck Bazerman, Professor of Education at the University of California, Santa Barbara, recently visited FSU as part of the Rhet/Comp Speaker Series. He is interested in the social dynamics of writing, rhetorical theory, and the rhetoric of knowledge production and use. During his talk he discussed writing research, specifically: What does it add up to? Where is it heading? What is visibly missing? What is invisible? Who has the eyes to see it?

“Writing studies as an organized field of research is new and dispersed,” he says. “Within the existing agendas there are many unanswered questions and uninvestigated sectors, but also the outlines of our interests allow us to guess at what is on the other side of the silhouette. What we ultimately come to see depends on how we prepare ourselves to look.”

Graduate students also had the opportunity to meet with Bazerman in a more social setting at lunch and a potluck at Dr. Yancey’s house. Second-year M.A. student Leigh Gruwell received advice for her own research. “He very helpfully put my thesis into perspective, helping me to see modern connections to my work on 19th century visual rhetoric,” she said. “He really has a staggeringly intelligent mind.”