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Letter to the Editor

Letters to the Editor will be confined to discussion of papers which have appeared in the Journal of Official Statistics and of important issues facing the statistical community.

On the American Way to Train Federal Statisticians in Survey Methodology

These comments concern the recently published article “The Role of the Joint Program in Survey Methodology in Training Federal Statisticians” by Richard Vaillant et al. (Vol. 26, No. 3, 427–441.) The article gives an insight into the Joint Program in Survey Methodology (in the following abbreviated JPSM) carried out to train employees of U.S. federal statistics agencies. This contribution has great relevance, since it describes a possible and very particular way to provide advanced training for federal statisticians. The programs used being based on different types of collaboration between federal statistical agencies, universities and other related institutions, widely exceed both the conventional vocational training and the installation of so-called trainee programs. Worth particular mentioning is the creation of a dynamic interface between federal statistical agencies and the scientific community.

The JPSM is directed to employees of the U.S. federal statistical system and also to those of cooperating institutions. On the one hand, the programs fill methodological gaps commonly observed in the case of graduates coming from applied sciences like economics or social sciences, and the JPSM additionally attracts potential staff with less experience in empirical data analysis, for instance graduates with degree in mathematics. On the other hand, the programs provide manifold vocational training for nongraduates and hence the opportunity for mid-career federal employees to earn advanced degrees (called “citation programs,” with an impressive number of about 670 persons doing them during the academic year 2005/2006). The setting of incentives for employees, particularly those working on the middle grade levels (possibly the greatest numerical fraction in an agency), is known to be an important task. In this context, in my opinion there is no detailed evidence of the success of these programs (for instance, by providing a diagram comparing the number of promotions in the period 1993–2007 within the GS-5 through GS-11 grade level groups to the numbers in former years).

Moreover, the JPSM encourages individuals belonging to none of the previously mentioned groups. Particularly, individuals without the required academic background who performed well in undergraduate courses are given serious consideration for admission to the degree program. It remains to be seen in the future whether the corresponding “certificates” are valuable references supplementary to a diploma or other school-leaving certificates.

The JPSM follows two types of collaboration: “between organizations” and “disciplinary relationships.” The first type does correspond to some financial support by an agency, as well as to some idealistic support, e.g., the provision of lecturers or organization of summer schools.

The motivation for disciplinary relationships is to bring together statistical and social science disciplines. For instance, to solve the problems arising from nonresponse, there is need of both methodological knowledge (e.g., methods of imputation, Bayesian analysis, density estimation and other related topics) and knowledge on the relevant social science concepts (interactions between

interviewers and respondents, the structure of questionnaires etc.) helping to detect the origins of nonresponse or to detect inconsistencies, respectively. The authors justly point out that the selection of contents is a very difficult task. In my opinion, an additional challenge consists in an appropriate adaption of the contents to the different degrees of prior knowledge and when experience of the participants. It is not least a question of financial support to avoid redundancies generating the list of topics. Furthermore, there remains justified doubt as to whether the whole of the courses listed by the authors can be provided in a reasonable time interval.

The JPSM allows its participants to treat specific problems arising from conventional statistical disciplines. The participants have the opportunity to gain a deep insight into the processes and needs of the federal statistical system. It seems very likely that the cooperating universities are responsible for the academic education. In my opinion, the main merit of the JPSM is that they have found a balanced combination of theory and practice. In general, the concepts of life-long learning and dual education on any grade level are very topical (vocational schools, vocational colleges etc.). For instance, in Germany in recent years the lack of statistics in the curriculum of social science studies has been subject to controversy and painfully observed in official statistics. Thus, the idea of supplying what the authors call "short courses" adapted to the specific needs of their participants is worth imitating.

Over the years, the JPSM has periodically re-evaluated its programs. It would be of interest to get further information on the re-evaluation procedure (further remarks on the duration of a period, who has the responsibility for re-evaluation and so on). Does the financial support of the program (and hence its continuation) depend on the results of re-evaluation? Moreover, to bring in internationally recognized experts seems to be connected with some (nonnegligible) financial expenditure.

As a whole, the article is a very interesting contribution to the general context of life-long learning, dual education and the harmonization between federal statistics and empirical sciences. The convincing measures of the Joint Program in Survey Methodology widely exceed ordinary conventional vocational training and other existing approaches like trainee programs, the latter consisting mainly in an agitation of their participants through the departments of the employing institution. Last but not least, in the long run efforts like the JPSM essentially improve the reputation of federal statistics among both the general public and the scientific community.

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