

# Investigation in Administration: Reflections on the Case of Mexico

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## Abstract

The importance of academic research on Administration in Mexico is revisited in this paper. Firstly, we trace the most significant antecedents of Administration in our country, from the Independence period to the repercussions of the current public policy of evaluating academic activities in public universities. In the same way, we place the administrative discipline within the framework of social sciences and within the university setting. We then present a characterization of its limited development in academic research. Administration in Mexico has a long way to go, but this path will not be traversed without the development of research focused on local issues.

**Keywords:** administration, educational public policies, development of local administrative research

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## INTRODUCTION

The main objective of this work is to highlight the importance of research in Administration. To achieve this, the first section will trace some of its most significant historical antecedents, from the late nineteenth century to the present. In a second section, relevant elements of the current state of research in Administration will be presented within the framework of the Social Sciences. Finally, some discussion points will be presented aimed at raising the level of research in this discipline.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF ADMINISTRATION

It is necessary to point out the significant relationship between socio-cultural aspects and economic development. In this sense, Weber's analysis has undoubtedly been masterful in relating the Protestant ethic to the spirit of capitalism. The Protestant ethic succeeded in moralizing and giving spiritual meaning to mundane activities such as the pursuit and attainment of economic benefit. However, as Weber himself notes, it is in the United States, the birthplace of Administration, where, after experiencing enormous splendor, it will quickly be relegated to oblivion<sup>16</sup>. The triumphant capitalism, Weber remarks with dismay, lost its way by losing its religious spirit and surrendering to obscure forces of "mechanical bases." The mechanical metaphor, attempting to synthesize rationalist progress, will become one of the foundations of the development of Administration (Barba and Solís: 1997).

The first indications of Administration, as we know it today as a specialized discipline, can be traced back to the second half of the last century in the United States. Indeed, the construction of the railway in that country, starting in 1860, will make a landmark in the development of this activity. The significant capital concentration, combined with the need to establish remote control devices, the diversity of services, and the large number of workers, implied the need to develop administrative systems that addressed this organizational configuration, unique at that time. This is the first precedent of the so-called Managerial Revolution - or directors - involving the arrival of a specialized group in the operation of these organizational configurations (Chandler: 1977).

The stream of Systematic Administration, which began to take shape in the 1880s, had as its central concern to confront some of the negative effects of the advancement of the division of labor. Indeed, while this division brought significant productivity increases, it also generated a series of major problems, among which the horizontal and vertical fragmentation is noteworthy. Both questioned the foundations of harmony and order upon which productivity was built and established the need to create coordination mechanisms to reduce this issue. The response mainly came from the field of Engineering. Let's remember the significant role played by the famous American Society of Mechanical Engineers, founded in 1880, and the foundational role of Frederick Taylor in incorporating Administration into the scientific domain.

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<sup>16</sup> In Weber's own words: "In the United States of North America is where the fervent desire for profit took root most vigorously, now stripped of its ethical and religious sentiment." (Weber:1991:112)

In Mexico, the early indications of Administration date back to the Independence period. In 1845, the Commercial Institute was founded, a precursor to the School of Commerce and Administration of the National Polytechnic Institute. During the reign of Maximilian of Habsburg, this institute would become the Imperial School of Commerce. The students' ages ranged from 12 to 24 years, and the curriculum consisted of four subjects: a) writing, spelling, and commercial geography, b) arithmetic and accounting, c) English, and d) French. The institute was closed in 1847 and reopened in 1854. Students were required to have primary education, and the curriculum expanded to four years, incorporating 11 subjects, becoming the Special School of Commerce. Graduates had preferential access to positions in the Public Administration.

On another note, it's interesting to recall that the National University - a direct predecessor of UNAM - was closed in 1865 by Emperor Maximilian, reopening only in 1910, under Justo Sierra's direction. However, Sierra prohibited the teaching of disciplines related to the industrial world, especially Economics, Chemistry, and Commerce<sup>17</sup>. It wasn't until 1929, when the University gained autonomy, that the National School of Commerce and Administration was founded, eventually becoming the Faculty of Accounting and Administration. The short courses offered included Expert in Public Accounting, Bank Official, Industrial Official, and Commercial Engineer. In the same period, the Higher School of Accounting and Administration offered courses such as Broker and Bookkeeper, Cashier, Calculator, Traveling Agent, Publicist, Display Manager, Stenographer-Secretary, Stenographer-Parliamentarian, and Consular Agent (Lazarín: 1996).

It wasn't until 1943 that the Monterrey Institute of Technology was inaugurated, establishing the School of Business Administration in 1947 and creating the Business Administrator career. In 1957, the Ibero-American University established the Bachelor's degree in Business Administration, followed by UNAM in the same year. This approval was not easy; among the obstacles it had to overcome, three types of criticism can be mentioned: a) it was a foreign discipline, originating from the United States, unrelated to national needs and conditions; b) it was a discipline that sought only material economic objectives, detached from ethical and social values; and c) due to its pragmatic nature and the absence of a scientific method, it did not fit into the university environment (Ríos and Paniagua: 1985). Finally, in 1977, the Doctorate in Administration was inaugurated.

Twenty-five years ago, the Autonomous Metropolitan University was founded, incorporating the Bachelor's degree in Administration and making the Theory of Organization one of its fundamental formative axes, especially at the Iztapalapa Campus. Two important characteristics of this institution are placing the study of Administration in the context of the Social Sciences, attempting to expand interdisciplinary spaces, and emphasizing the connection between research and teaching. In 1995, the Master's and

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<sup>17</sup> A similar idea had been expressed by *El Imparcial* in 1907, as noted by Bazant (1993): 'It was concluded that this school (preparatory) prepared not for a specific profession but prepared for life. (...) The fields of industry, commerce, and administration did not necessarily require professional men, but rather, fighters prepared with the teachings of the ENP.'

Doctorate programs in Organizational Studies were inaugurated, immediately being included in the National Council of Science and Technology's Registry of Excellence in Postgraduate Programs.

In the 1980s, a public policy aimed at evaluating higher education institutions began in the country, significantly influencing research efforts. The National Program for Public Education 1984-1988 (PRONAES) and the National Commission for the Evaluation of Higher Education (CONAEVA) were established. The National Association of Universities and Higher Education Institutions (ANUIES) adopted the general guidelines outlined in the Program for Educational Modernization and defined the evaluation process in three general areas: a) Institutional Evaluation, carried out by each institution, including both academic and administrative activities; b) System Evaluation, aiming to diagnose higher education as a whole, assigned to specialists; c) Interinstitutional Evaluation, focusing on specific academic programs and projects, entrusted to institutional peers.

Evaluation has been primarily conducted through indicators, leading to unexpected calculability schemes by various interested parties, sometimes deviating from the initial objectives. The indicator ceases to be just that, as it is reappropriated and becomes another means for stakeholders to achieve goals sometimes divergent from the true institutional principles.

The Evaluation as a public policy has had a significant impact due to the considerable economic resources it involves. Crozier *et al.* (1990) initially proposed dissociating the allocation of financial incentives from the evaluation task to prevent this type of reappropriation. At the institutional level, evaluation can represent a significant portion of the income received from the State, while at the individual level, it constitutes a necessary supplement to the income of academic workers. This dual nature has led to both institutional and individual reappropriation, resulting in loosely coupled processes that seem to follow their own logic, sometimes disconnected from the true objectives of the institution (Montaña: 1999a).

## ADMINISTRATION IN THE CURRENT MEXICAN ACADEMIC CONTEXT

In this section, we will position the discipline of Administration in the academic context, first within the framework of the Social Sciences and then in a broader university setting. To do this, we will rely on two recent surveys. The first, conducted by Béjar and Hernández (1996), covered 292 research centers from a universe of 353 (83%). Of these, 10 corresponded to Administration, compared to 45 in Education and 43 in Economics<sup>18</sup>. For analysis, we will only consider the most prominent disciplines in the research field.

At first glance, the number of centers conducting research in Administration seems relatively significant, representing 3.4% of the total. However, when examining its relative distribution, the importance decreases significantly since the number of researchers in Administration is quite low compared to other disciplines. Administration represents 1.93%

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note that the Department of Economics at the Metropolitan Autonomous University-Iztapalapa Campus did not participate in said survey.

of researchers, while Education contributes 18.59% and Economics 15.26 (Table 1). Furthermore, researchers in Administration are generally younger, with 26.76% being under 34 years old.

This data contrasts with Anthropology and Education, with percentages of 14.29 and 17.14, respectively. In the case of Administration, it can be considered that research activeness is much more recent and is partially undertaken by young researchers. However, these young researchers have been less integrated into these centers. Only 62.16% maintain contracts for more than 30 hours, while Sociology and History represent higher percentages, 85.39 and 84.26, respectively. Regarding formal studies, there is a significant number of master's degrees in Administration in the country. Therefore, it is not surprising that a significant portion of academics in research centers hold this degree (21.67%). However, at the doctoral level, the participation in Administration decreases considerably, with only 5% holding such a degree, in contrast to more traditional research disciplines in the country, such as Sociology and History (23.21% and 14.29%, respectively).

The limited research output in Administration is reflected in its participation in publications. This discipline contributes only 0.55% of the total published books and 4.03% of journals. The publication of books is mainly concentrated in History, contributing 31.68%, followed by Anthropology with 13.26%. In the case of journals, there is a greater dispersion: Economics is the most active discipline in this field, with 27%, followed by Education with 18.39%. It is interesting to note that, within the publication practices, Administration shows the least academic rigor, as indicated by the practice of peer review. Only 25% of publications undergo peer-review, which contrasts significantly with History (72%) and Anthropology (64%). Regarding worldwide publications, Administration is also at a disadvantage, as only 17.30% of researchers have made at least one international publication in recent years, compared to 48% in Anthropology and 44.86% in History.

If we consider the characteristics of the projects, we can note that the Administration conducts its research mainly through institutional projects, not related to other institutions (87.80%). History takes the first place this time with 88.19%, and Administration comes second. Regarding the number of projects per center, considering the low number of researchers affiliated with the Administration, it has the lowest average number of projects (2.69 projects per center). At the same time, History and Sociology stand out with high numbers (16.69 and 14.52, respectively).

**TABLE 1. ADMINISTRATION IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL SCIENCES. SOME GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS. (%)**

DISCIPLINE	PER.	< 34y/O	> 30 H	MA	PH.D.	BOOKS	JOURNALS	PEER-REVIEW	INT. PUBLICATIONS
Administration	1.93	26.76	62.16	21.67	5.00	0.55	4.03	25.00	17.30
Anthropology	10.52	14.29	83.17	21.43	12.50	13.26	12.00	64.00	48.00
Economics	15.26	25.25	79.18	18.59	11.56	5.71	27.00	56.57	37.35
Education	18.59	17.14	75.07	16.67	4.87	6.63	18.39	32.35	21.95
History	10.26	21.67	84.26	15.27	14.29	31.68	14.36	72.00	44.86
Sociology	11.41	22.42	85.39	11.90	23.21	8.83	11.34	52.63	43.97

Other	32.03				33.34	12.88			
DISCIPLINE	PROJECTS W/O COLLAB (%)	AVERAGE PROJECTS	MET	ELEC. MEANS	CONT. TO KNOWLEDGE	CONT. TO TEACHING	MA STUDENTS	PH.D. STUDENTS	SNI
Administration	87.80	2.69	Surv: 35.48	46.15	17.07	12.19	16.923	83	28
Anthropology	78.57	10.12	Obs: 23.21	46.30	56.86	7.19	171	246	246
Economics	81.67	12.55	Cen: 37.76	69.08	42.63	4.74	2.104	158	165
Education	82.46	11.63	Bib: 20.14	41.09	27.68	18.09	10.455	668	98
History	88.19	16.69	Arch: 58.19	43.02	69.96	3.16	454	206	357
Sociology	81.90	14.52	Int: 20.99	73.47	58.71	3.67	603	342	191
Per: Affiliated Personnel by Discipline					Ave Projects p/Center: Average number of projects per center				
< 34 y/o: Personnel under 34 years old					Met: Main Methodology Used: Surv: Surveys; Obs: Observation Records; Cen: Censuses and official data; Bib: Bibliographic material; Arch: Documents and archives; Int: Interviews				
> 30 h: Personnel working at least 30 hours per week at the center					Elec: Use of electronic means for information processing				
MA: Personnel with a Master's degree					Cont. to Knowledge: Contribution to knowledge as the main objective of research				
Ph.D.: Personnel with Ph.D.					Cont. to Teaching: Contribution to teaching as the main objective of research				
Books: Book production					MA Students: Students enrolled in Master's program, 1997. Absolute numbers.				
Journals: Journal production					Ph.D. Students: Students enrolled in the Ph.D. program, in 1997. Absolute numbers.				
Peer-Review: External peer review					SNI: Members of the National System of Researchers, 1998. Absolute numbers.				
Int Publications: International publications in the last five years									
Projects w/o collab (%): Projects carried out without collaboration with other centers									

Source: Compiled based on Béjar and Hernández, 1996; Conacyt, 1999; Anuies, 1998.

Methodology is a central element that characterizes every research process; it relates to the conceptualization of the object and the ways of questioning it. Each discipline favors a particular methodology. History stands out for its use of documents and archives, adhering significantly to this procedure; 58.19% of the research is characterized by the use of these instruments. On the other hand, the Administration concentrates 35.48% of its methodological efforts on surveys. These surveys, as we know, are generally translated into scales, such as Lickert or others, and processed using computer devices. In fact, 46.15% of the research in Administration relies on this electronic data processing. Sociology, which privileges interviews, albeit in a more diversified manner, 20.99%, is the one that uses electronic means the most, followed by Economics. Economics, by prioritizing the processing of information from censuses elaborated by specialized institutions, INEGI, Banco de México, and others, resorts to electronic means in 69.08% of cases.

What is the object of research? The answer to this question conditions the work itself. The contribution to knowledge guides, for example, the efforts of historians, 69.96%, and

sociologists, 58.71%, while it has less importance for administrators, 17.07%. For the latter, teaching is relevant; as a result of research, it represents 12.19%. Only Education, for obvious reasons, presents a higher percentage, which is 18.09, while for the other disciplines, teaching has less importance, 3.16% for History and 3.67% for Sociology.

The training of researchers has, as one of its fundamental mechanisms, doctoral studies. Administration has been characterized by being oriented toward teaching development rather than research; therefore, master's degrees have seen significant development. The number of students enrolled in master's programs in Administration is close to 17,000, a figure that is very high when compared to the 170 in Anthropology. The relationship is reversed dramatically when we observe the number of doctoral students: 83 in Administration, and 246 in Anthropology. All of the above leads to the fact that the number of researchers recognized by the National Researchers System is reduced to only 28, while in History, there are 357, and in Anthropology, 246.

Furthermore, the research conducted by Gil *et al* (1994), which covered 3,764 surveys, allows us to place Administration in a broader disciplinary context. In addition to Economics and Education, considered in the previous case, we have included Medicine and Surgery, Biology and Ecology, Physics, and Electrical and Computer Engineering. There are disciplines where the correspondence between training and affiliation is high, such as Medicine (88.9%); however, the other disciplines show an intermediate level, with Administration presenting the highest dispersion, as the correspondence is only 46.3%. We know, in fact, about the "interdisciplinary" nature of Administration: it involves social disciplines such as Economics and Psychology, or "hard" disciplines like Mathematics (Table 2).

The formal education of parents, contrary to popular belief, is not related to the scientific nature of their children's studies. The most outstanding case in this survey is Physics, where it is observed that in only 27.3% of cases, the parents of academics have higher education. In the case of Administration, this percentage is 32.6. Doctorates, on the other hand, are associated with the type of discipline. Only 2.4% of administrators have a doctorate, compared to 32% of physicists and 16.8% of biologists.

Regarding inclinations toward the type of work to be done, Administrators preferentially lean towards teaching (13%), while biologists lean towards research (7%), and physicists towards professional practice (5%), although the latter engage in a greater number of combinations than the former. Physicists are the most numerous academics in terms of full-time positions (82%), while those in Education represent the other extreme, with 21%; administrators hold an intermediate position (45%). Moreover, academics in the fields of Medicine, Education, and Administration simultaneously practice their profession (82%, 72%, and 71%, respectively). However, in the field of research, we can observe that biologists are the relative group that is most involved in research tasks (93% of the total), closely followed by physicists (90%). In contrast, the group least associated with this work is precisely administrators, with only 25%.

The parameters of academic prestige reflect the values and orientation of the various disciplines. Thus, with few doctors in the field of Administration, academic degrees are not



a central element of prestige (8.1%). Professional recognition is the privileged element among these academics (23.2%). Publications also play a relatively unimportant role (6.1%). These indices contrast significantly with those presented by the group of biologists, a community much more anchored in the tradition of research. Their corresponding percentages regarding degrees, professional recognition, and publications are 10.8, 16.9, and 18.7, respectively. The latter group also has a significant number of doctoral students (589), far surpassing those in Administration (83). This group of biologists also has high participation in the National Researchers System, with a total of 973 members, compared to 83 in the Administration.

## RESEARCH IN ADMINISTRATION

As we have observed throughout this work, the Administration in our country has been characterized by a significant historical difficulty in research development. Its main task has been the transfer of knowledge generated in other regions, mainly in the United States. The textbook<sup>19</sup> has played a crucial role in this transfer, although it entails a series of serious limitations, as pointed out by Mills and Helms (1999):

TABLE 2. ADMINISTRATION IN THE SCIENTIFIC LANDSCAPE. SOME GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS. (%)

DISCIPLINE	CORR.	EDU.	PHD.	RESEARCH	TEACHING	PRO. PRA.	TIME	PROF.	ACA. RESEARCH	
Administration	46.3	32.6	2.4	3.9	13.0	3	45	71	25	
Economics	58.1	32.8	10.6	5.1	5.1	—	37	48	57	
Education	53.8	28.0	—	5.9	12.3	—	21	72	45	
Medicine and Surgery	88.9	35.9	2.9	2.4	3.7	1	27	82	52	
Biology and Ecology	57.1	42.0	16.8	7.0	—	—	58	29	93	
Physics	52.3	27.3	32.0	1.2	1.5	5	82	45	90	
Elec. and Comp. Eng	48.9	31.5	4.5	5.9	3.2	4	55	50	41	
PRESTIGE INDICATORS										
DISCIPLINE	AC. DEGREE	PUB.	LEAD.	PREF.	SCHO.	REC.	ADM. POS.	MA	PHD	SNI
Administration	8.1	6.1	8.5	15.5	19.3	23.2	1.5	16.923	83	28
Economics	10.7	19.5	7.1	8.4	14.4	7.4	1.1	2.104	158	165
Education	—	5.9	—	15.2	2.9	29.9	9.3	10.455	668	98
Medicine and Surgery	20.1	15.3	4.2	9.0	12.7	14.9	0.5	445*	91	410
Biology and Ecology	10.8	18.7	11.2	6.4	6.7	16.9	—	924	589	973
Physics	11.2	19.1	15.7	6.8	5.0	25.3	—	623	413	650
Elec. and Comp. Eng	14.7	6.0	10.1	23.9	11.3	11.6	4.4	3,092**	224**	143
Corr: Correspondence between training and affiliation					Pub: Publications					

<sup>19</sup> The fact that some texts are easily obtainable in supermarkets and newsstands speaks more to their popularity and ease of reading than to their seriousness and depth.



Edu: Higher education of at least one parent	Lead: Leadership among colleagues
PhD: Personnel with a doctorate	Pref: Student preference
Research: Inclination to perform only research	Scho: Scholarships or incentives
Teaching: Inclination to perform only teaching	Rec: Professional recognition
Pro. Pra.: Inclination to prioritize professional practice	Adm. Pos.: Administrative positions
Time: Full-time dedication	MA: Students enrolled in Master's programs, 1997. Absolute numbers
Prof: Percentage of academics simultaneously practicing their profession	PhD: Students enrolled in Doctoral programs, 1997. Absolute numbers
Aca. Research: Percentage of academics conducting research	SNI: National System of Researchers members, 1998. Absolute numbers
Ac. Degree: Academic degrees	* There are 6,714 students in the specialization
	** Includes Electrical Engineering

Source: Elaborated based on Gil, 1994; Conacyt, 1999; Anuiés, 1998.

*"We will point out that the typical book on commerce or administration constitutes a narrative built around the reality of the white American male, with liberal ideas. This narrative lacks dynamism due to an extensive process of theoretical dispersion, imitation, and political timidity; which success, if any, is due to its ability to stimulate an anti-intellectual approach towards the study of administration, to separate theory from practice, and to legitimize a particular view of the business world."*

The transfer of organizational and administrative models begins with a double recognition, usually simultaneous: own weaknesses and external strengths. The transfer can consist of simply copying some devices –structures, or simple processes–; it can also involve the decoding of a theoretical model with a high level of abstraction. We have called the first relocation, the latter transfer (Montaño 1999b). In both cases, there is a process of resemantization, that is, resignification, and reappropriation, thereby generating hybrid models (Barba and Solís: 1997). However, theoretical elaboration often implies the generation of an ideal model against which to compare local possibilities of realization. Historically privileging transfer in the field of Administration has not only led to an inability to act but also to the emergence of a distorted image of our organizations, exacerbating the problems of constructing our own identities.

The organization is a diffuse object, with social boundaries that do not correspond to the physical and legal ones. The organization is not the result of environmental forces as it isn't of strategic desire. It is a multidetermined object, crossed by contradictory logics of action; complex, due to its diverse and dynamic nature, and incessantly changing. It is an object that is cultural, political, economic, and historical, far from the orthodox view that defines it as a transparent, monolithic, harmonious, orderly, and rational community in pursuit of efficiency. How to apprehend an object with such characteristics? What predefined methodology could account for such a reality?

Without aiming to answer this question, we could simply advance the following ten ideas for reflection:

1. Research is a social construction that, in the form of a paradigm, assumes a worldview and generates specific devices to interrogate it.

2. Research is always interpretation: proposing common meanings, it is not the truth but verisimilitude that characterizes it.
3. Research is an increasingly collective act rooted in the object rather than in discourse.
4. Research is different from consultancy. The "problem" is not defined a priori by institutional hierarchy.
5. Research is not aimed at approaching idealized models, overcoming obstacles, and resistances. Instead, it simply seeks a better understanding of reality.
6. The methodology is a construction derived from the aspects to be addressed.
7. Methodology does not consist of finding the best possible method, like Taylor's approach, but is always discussion and constant reworking.
8. The methodology does not lead to conclusions but provides connections.
9. The method does not guarantee an understanding of reality or define an academic discipline.
10. Interdisciplinarity, which characterizes Administration, comes from the nature of the object it applies to. Therefore, Administration should be one of the most rigorous disciplines in terms of study requirements and should enjoy significant social and academic prestige. Consequently, it should be at the forefront of discussions regarding research and methodology.

## CONCLUSIONS

Administration is a relatively recent discipline in Mexico with little tradition in research and is primarily oriented toward teaching tasks. Idealized models are generally taught—from optimization to excellence—representing the "hard," "scientific" part, relatively easy to transfer but challenging to operate. Administration is grounded in concrete organizations, distant from the ideal conditions of these models. The study of Administration cannot be abstract; it must always be referred to the specific conditions of the organizations applying these devices.

In Mexico, historically, little attention has been given to this issue, and the Administration has been focused, from an instrumental perspective, on solving problems—a process elegantly named decision-making—regardless of their nature. These are solutions in search of applications. The dignification of the discipline, from our point of view, involves investigative processes that find out both the complexity and particularities of our organizational forms and their management modalities.

Researching does not mean applying a specific method, generating many figures, or writing many pages. Research is a collective act that requires critical, respectful, and constructive confrontation, allowing the confrontation of hypotheses, findings, and doubts in an effort to build a scientific community that can coexist around consensus based on

ethical interpretations for the benefit of society. Being critical does not mean rejecting what comes from the outside; that is simply intolerance. Being critical means escaping versions of the world constructed from common sense, and perception, without reflective argument: observing what goes unnoticed in everyday life. The importance and difficulty of research lie precisely in the possibility of constructing from the invisible.

The administration in Mexico has a long way to go. However, this path cannot be traveled without the development of research. Research can provide not only functional but also ethical elements. Therefore, it is of utmost importance to focus our efforts on building a scientific community that learns not only from others but from itself and is open to interdisciplinary communication without losing its identity. Doctoral programs will undoubtedly be one of the most important mechanisms at our disposal, but they must be directed toward the training of young researchers. Doctoral studies should not be seen as an extension of master's degrees, a possibility for professional retraining, or a way to align one's academic career with new educational policies. Above all, they should be a breakout for those who dare to rediscover the old world.✍

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