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Thomas More is No. 1 in physics Ph.Ds

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Thomas More College is producing more graduates that go on to earn Ph.Ds in physics than any other university in Kentucky, according to a recent study.

The study, published in the Journal of the Kentucky Academy of Sciences, said, "Western Kentucky University and Thomas More College, institutions primarily devoted to undergraduate education with relatively limited resources and relatively smaller enrollments, have assumed leadership in the production of intellectual capital, respectively, in chemistry and physics."

The article found that between 1978 and 2002, 20 Thomas More graduates went on to earn their doctorates in physics. The University of Kentucky produced 14 future physics doctorates, and two graduates from Northern Kentucky University went on to do the same.

The report finds the results surprising given the fact that Thomas More is not a research university and has 1,500 full- and part-time students. UK has about 25,000 students.

The article did not state a reason for Thomas More's achievements, but Bradley Bielski, Thomas More's dean of academic affairs and a former chemistry professor, said it's a result of the culture of the school.

"When a student begins as a science major, they are instilled with a sense of this being the first step in completing their education," Bielski said. "This concept is a tradition in the sciences at Thomas More College."

Christian Poweleit, a 1989 graduate and now a researcher at Arizona State University, said Thomas More students may go on to get their doctorates because of the school's reputation for academic excellence, a perceived need by students to be competitive by getting an advanced degree and demographics. Primarily, he cited the faculty.

"I was always around professional teachers at Thomas More in all my classes," Poweleit said. "Their motivation was to ensure that you worked to understand the fundamentals of the subject. They were not asked to be grant-producing researchers while trying to teach a full academic class load."

Terry Flesch received his bachelor's in physics from Thomas More in 1970, then a doctorate in astronomy from the University of Florida before returning to become a physics professor at Thomas More. He also credits the college's history and culture for the study's results.

"The success of our graduates began back in the '50s and '60s with the work of Fr. John Schuler, Sr. Eleanor Fox and Dr. George Miner," Flesch said. "These individuals set the tone and philosophy of what it meant to be a physics major at Thomas More College."

The same study also found that Thomas More College ranked sixth in producing the most future biology doctorates and 12th in producing future chemistry doctorates.

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