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The 2016 CGS Project on the Master’s Degree: The Future of 1.27 Million Master’s Candidates

Master’s education occupies its own space within the graduate enterprise, one that is diverse, accessible, and very large. Consider some of these figures from the most recent CGS/GRE Survey of Graduate Enrollment and Degrees (Allum & Okahana, 2015): 68% of all applications to U.S. graduate schools in Fall 2014 were for master’s degree programs; 73% of all graduate students were master’s students in the Fall 2014; and 83% of graduate degrees awarded in 2013-2014 were master’s degrees. Moreover, 78% of master’s students were enrolled in doctoral institutions, and 68% graduated from doctoral serving institutions. Such mass, while not necessarily new, has been growing and evolving. As this article will describe, these circumstances warrant new attention and the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) has launched an initiative to do just that.

The Value of the Master’s Degree

The breadth of participation in master’s education creates a thought provoking and compelling narrative about the current and continuing impact of the master’s degree on graduate education. Ultimately, it is the degree’s value within the economic and educational sectors of communities where the degree’s real transformational potential is realized. Vibrant cities and townships benefit from access to health care specialists, educators, counselors, historians, writers, business leaders, scientists, computer specialists, engineers, and other professionals with the advanced competencies acquired through a rigorous master’s education. Both the private and public sectors invest in the future of their communities by recruiting and hiring master’s-level employees. The continued increase in the number of individuals seeking admission to the workforce-focused master’s degree is well aligned with advancing knowledge in both traditional and emerging disciplines. The growth in master’s participation is a contributing factor to the long-term evolution of the degree in the United States and abroad. Its potential is creating optimism about how this degree can further advance innovation and economic prosperity.

Demand for the master’s degree was highlighted in 2012 by Snyder and Dillow who arrived at two important observations regarding the popularity and growth of the master’s degree. The first observation was that 8% of the population 25 and older holds the master’s degree as the highest degree. The second observation—from perhaps the most thought-provoking data on the master’s degree—revealed that the master’s degree grew by 110% between 1990 and 2009, making it the fastest growing component of graduate education. The documentation of continuous growth further reinforced the essential role of the master’s degree in enhancing the expertise needed in both traditional career sectors as well as in emerging economies. The National Science Foundation (NSF, 2011) reported that master’s degree holders have lower unemployment rates and higher earnings than those with only a baccalaureate degree.

Master’s degrees have also been important pathways toward advancing opportunities for racially and ethnically underrepresented populations as well as women. Extending the observations of Snyder and Dillow, for example, the National Science Foundation (2011) showed that 14% of master’s degrees in science are earned by underrepresented groups. Similarly, Bell (2011) reported a 60% participation rate among women in master’s education for a five-year period, a trend that has held steady since that time (Allum & Okahana, 2015).

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Additional acknowledgement of the value and future potential of the master's degree came from Francis, Goodwin, and Lynch (2011). Francis et al. concluded that the demand for professional science master's (PSM) degrees reflected the highly responsive nature of the master's degree to new workforce expertise. They further reinforced the NSF's findings that the master's degree has attracted the most diverse group of graduate students. Allum (2013) found that PSM degree holders were highly employable and highly likely to be employed in the field in which they were trained. As a capstone for the exciting potential of this degree, Gallagher (2015) and the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2013) found that 46% of college freshmen plan to earn a master's degree as their highest degree. These findings accentuate the master's degrees' importance as a crucial professional credential. Moreover, these findings confirm that employers prefer or require the master's degree for a large proportion of essential job openings in a complex job-skills economy. Gallagher's research underscores the important competencies that master's-level employees bring to the workforce and to the environments in which they develop their careers and become leaders.

**Challenges to the Value of the Master's Degree**

Demand for the master's degree is being challenged by some, despite evidence of its value and potential. Carey (2014) argued that the master's degree in general may no longer be necessary for acquiring workforce skills. Carey observed that the competencies associated with a master's degree may be acquired with less time and cost through "user experience" courses offered by some employers. According to Carey, universities are not held accountable for ensuring baccalaureate competencies. As a result, some institutions promote the master's degree as remediation for lapses at the bachelor's level. Carey further claims that new approaches developed by employers are more efficient and less costly than a degree program.

In support of Carey, Everson (2015) reported that employers seek specific skill sets in new hires. While many of these skills have been aligned with completion of a master's degree in the past, current trends may guide employers to offer online "tool kits." The tool kits allow employees to acquire the desired skills more quickly and less expensively than a master's degree. Everson encouraged employers to replace the tradition of seeking employees with a master's degree with the practice of seeking employees who acquire essential skills through position-focused training models.

Challenges to the master's degree have even emerged within the field of education itself. For example, Miller and Roza (2012) argued against the master's degree as a factor in teacher compensation. Miller et al. suggested replacing the practice of earning additional compensation after completing a master's degree with an approach that aligns compensation with classroom performance factors such as improved learning outcomes and increased student engagement. This approach echoes the call to provide "skill sets" for business professionals. The authors downplay the competencies associated with a master's degree while promoting the acquisition of individual skill sets. Such skill sets would then lead to the documentation of improvements in student learning as a route to additional compensation instead.

**Response to the Challenges**

These and other challenges to demand for the master's degree underscore the urgency of documenting its impact and value. The graduate community must conceptualize a plan to provide evidence, both to universities and policymakers, affirming the master's degree's current and future potential for advancing knowledge. Furthermore, the plan's overall design should document how the master's degree enhances the cultural, economic, educational, and scientific assets of regional communities, states, and the nation.

As a convening authority on issues relevant to graduation education, CGS launched the 2016 Project on the Master's Degree. CGS has invited two groups of graduate deans to lead the project. The first group includes the Master's Committee composed of nine seasoned graduate deans who hold leadership roles across every type of master's granting institution from master's focused through doctoral. The committee includes Maria Cowles Green (Hood College), Jack DeRochi (Winthrop University), Cynthia Forehand (University of Vermont), Paul Gemperline (East Carolina University), Kent Holsinger (University of Connecticut), Jack Kirby (Fairmont State University), Kathleen Kito (Western Washington University), Sheryl Tucker (Oklahoma State University), and Jerry Weinberg (Southern Illinois University Edwardsville).

The Master's committee will review the literature and databases to create a current conceptual framework for the degree that can be validated with data. Assisting the Master's Committee is the nine-member Research Advisory Group to the Master's Committee. The members include Beth Bozum (University of Louisville), Joan Ficke (Montclair State University), Dennis Grady (Redford University), John Kiss (University of Mississippi), James Marshall (California State University, Fresno), Cosmas Nwokeafor (Bowie State University), Mary Owens Southall (Coppin State University), Troy Terry (Furman University), and Nan Yancey (Lewis University). The Research Advisory Group will collaborate with the Master's Committee to develop the research questions and data collection that will validate the emerging conceptual framework for the degree and consider the project's value to potential funders with both the interest in collaborating with CGS and the resources to finance the research. Project outcomes may include policy statements and promising practices, technical workshops, and journal articles, as well as CGS publications and presentations that will shape the master's degree and master's education for the twenty-first century. Members of the CGS staff guiding the project include Jeff Allum, assistant vice president, research and policy analysis; Bob Augustine, senior vice president; Edelman Huntley, CGS dean-in-residence; and Kenneth Polishchuk, best practices associate. Beth Buehmann, vice president for public policy and government affairs is guiding the project's public policy research and planning elements.

Project initiation began with establishing a research framework for three fundamental constructs aligned with the master's degree: the definition of the degree, the outcomes/competencies related to the degree, and the standards of excellence identified for offering the degree. To address each fundamental construct three research teams were created and include the Definition Team, Outcomes/Competencies Team, and Standards Team. The team members were drawn from the Master's Committee and the Research Advisory Group. Each team is composed of six members; three members of the Master's Committee and three members of the Research Advisory Group. The teams began their work in Fall 2015 by reviewing publications and position statements related to the definition, outcomes/competencies, and standards for the master's degree. The teams convened via conference calls in October and November of 2015 and held their first joint meeting during the CGS.
Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington, on December 5, 2015. The meeting served as a catalyst for advancing the project toward meeting 2016 goals that are summarized later in this article.

The Definition Challenge

At the Seattle meeting, participant deans agreed that the most immediate need for the project is to create a current definition for the master’s degree. Over time, several definitions have emerged, ranging from the philosophical perspective of Irwin Buell in 1944 to the utilitarian definition by length of time to complete the degree (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2014). Other models exist: “stand alone” or “en route to the PhD” (CGS, 2010); levels of advancement such as “first post-baccalaureate level” (U.S. Network for Education Information, U.S. Department of Education, 2008); scope of knowledge such as “greater depth of content” (CGS, 2006); a matrix based on traditional research in contrast to professional and applied degrees (CGS, 2005); and a focus on function and mission as in “community-focused,” “apprenticeship-focused” (Haworth & Conrad, 1997). These create a philosophical foundation for defining the degree. Creating a current definition based on evidence from policy statements and data from degree programs will identify commonalities to address challenges. A definition based on evidence offers a current understanding of the degree and the potential to guide future development of the degree. Solving the definition challenge will provide deans with a master’s degree framework for strategic planning, program review, and degree innovation. Jack DeRochi and Beth Boehm lead the Definition Team. Their members include Maria Green Cowles, Sheryl Tucker, Mary Owens Southall, and Nan Yancey.

The Outcomes and Competencies Challenge

The second pressing challenge involves collecting data to verify the learning outcomes and competencies that master’s candidates acquire and bring to the workforce. As noted, there are arguments that skill-based training or outcomes-based training may be more effective than earning a master’s degree; however, recent evidence based on reports of what employers expect and associate with master’s degree holders and programs” (Gallagher, 2014) suggested that multiple competencies distinguish master’s candidates from baccalaureate candidates. The study noted that leadership, communication, critical thinking/problem solving, collaboration/teaming, and employee networks are the competencies that enrich the productivity of master’s candidates. Gallagher further noted that these competencies are acquired through integration of different degree requirements rather than through separate “skill set” training. Supporting Gallagher, CGS (2005) identified similar competencies associated with completion of a master’s degree. These included subject mastery, thinking logically, integration and synthesis of knowledge, currency of knowledge, communication, interdisciplinarian relationships, ethics, application of knowledge, and adaptation to workforce demands.

Jerry Weinberg and Dennis Grady lead the Outcomes and Competencies Team. Members of the team include Paul Gempeliner, Kent Holsinger, John Kiss, and Troy Terry. The team will begin identifying the outcomes and competencies associated with the master's degree by conducting a pilot review of available data on a selected number of programs at a selected number of institutions. The team will determine whether data on competencies can further inform development of new master’s degrees. Establishing competencies for the master’s degree provides a set of degree benchmarks for deans to consider as degree programs evolve and change over time. Outcomes and competencies consistently associated with the degree will serve as evidence that candidates who complete the degree have the skills desired by employers. These competencies may also guide a more longitudinal collection of data on the impact of degree completers on their areas of employment.

The Standards Challenges

The third challenge to understanding the value and impact of master’s education is documentation of the standards that are essential to the degree’s success that are embedded in master’s programs. These implied standards underlie identification of premier or signature programs. Unlike “skill-set” programs, master’s programs have been subjected to intense scrutiny prior to approval and typically undergo annual periodic reviews by peers who evaluate the programs against standards of quality. CGS’s Organization and Administration of Graduate Education (2004) noted that, “the graduate school should establish and articulate a standard for intellectual excellence that pervades all discussion and decisions about faculty, students, curriculum and research direction.” CGS’s Master’s Education A Guide for Faculty and Administrators (2005) outlined standards that contribute to the excellence and quality of a master’s program: selection of students, orientation, funding, faculty appointment, faculty advisory committees, research integrity, external review, external advisory committees, program delivery, enhancement of undergraduate education, and professional development. A key challenge to understanding standards of excellence at the master’s level is the lack of research identifying standards that define the best master’s programs.

Kathleen Kitto and Joan Ficke lead the Standards Team. Members of the team include Cynthia Forehand, Jack Kirby, James Marshal, and Cosmas Nwokeafo. The Standards Team will develop a plan to identify measurable standards and to determine the relationship between the standards and the competencies and defining characteristics of the master’s degree.

Your eighteen CGS dean colleagues are working toward a future-focused framework that will influence the master’s degree, a degree currently impacting the lives of more than 1.2 million master’s candidates. The teams have established a demanding series of conference calls from January through June to complete their action plans. They will reconvene to discuss their research at the 2016 Summer Workshop and New Deans Institute in Savannah, Georgia, in July. While there, they will engage in a discussion with you about the project during a Deans’ Dialogue. Their research will be shared on social media and through future CGS publications. Plan to attend the discussion and the opportunity to engage deeply in this important project! However, you do not need to wait until July.

We welcome your comments on the project now or at any time by forwarding them to Bob Augustine at raugustine@cgsonline.org.

References


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New Members
Regular:
California State University, Sacramento (returning)
College of New Rochelle (returning)
University of Texas at Arlington (returning)
University of Wisconsin Whitewater (returning)

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