

Selecting a Student Affairs Graduate Program

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Master's Programs

Is graduate school right for you? The most important question is whether or not you really need a graduate degree in student affairs. It is rare for someone to become successful in middle or upper management in student affairs without a graduate degree. Be aware that education and skill requirements for student affairs jobs tend to increase over time. What may not require a graduate degree now may require one later. Graduate school requires significant time and effort and you should consider education as an investment.

How do you select the right graduate program? Making a selection among the many student affairs graduate preparation programs is a personal and complicated task. There are many issues to consider that are shared by most people, and each person has a unique set of issues to consider. Getting information about programs is becoming easier and easier each year.

How can I learn about graduate programs in student affairs? This *Directory*, the [ACPA Professional Preparation Commission](#) web site, the [NASPA](#) web site, [StudentAffairs.com](#) and [gradschools.com](#) are all good starting points for information.

Can I find program information on the Internet? Nearly every program has a web site, sometimes they are easy to find, and sometimes not, but every web site is worth visiting. The web site is one way for you to learn about the curriculum, application requirements, assistantship opportunities and practicum experiences. While web sites are impersonal, pay attention to the kind of information available, and the way in which it is presented. Web sites usually reflect an academic program in important ways. Once you get preliminary information from these sources, make direct contact with the program coordinator or lead faculty and request an information packet, a graduate catalog and application materials. Because of rising printing costs and shrinking

budgets many programs have all their program materials on-line so don't be surprised to be directed to a web site instead of getting something in the mail.

Should you get an MA or MS? The clear distinction between an Master's of Arts and Master's of Science has been lost over time. Traditionally the degrees referred to academic disciplines but now the degree offered by a specific program is a matter of tradition.

Should you write a Thesis or not? A Master's thesis generally requires two course equivalents or six semester hours. There are good arguments for writing a thesis, and good arguments for using the semester hours in other classes. Some Ph.D. program admissions committee members prefer students who have the research experience from a thesis, since the Ph.D. is a research degree, and others do not.

Should you attend full-time or part-time? Many student affairs programs are designed for full-time recent college graduates. Most programs also take part-time students who need to work and can only take one or two classes each semester. This is a personal decision based as much on economic interests as on anything else.

Should you pursue an on-campus education or use distance education? Now that student affairs classes are becoming available using distance education (DE) technologies, students have a choice to go to campus, or to stay at work and take classes. Most of the evidence to date on distance education indicates that there is no difference in educational outcomes between on-campus and distance education. The experiences for the learner are quite different though. The interaction, mentoring and human element are quite different in distance education programs than in traditional on-campus programs. Using E-mail and the telephone to keep in touch with class mates and faculty may not be what you want. On the other hand distance education can offer you education that is available and convenient. Some entire programs are offered using distance education, and many programs offer specific classes using distance education. Distance education requires the student to make time for class work without the reminder of attending class and is not for everyone DE is a different educational experience than an on-campus education.

How many hours should a program be? Graduate programs in student affairs run from 33 to 60 semester hours and are no reflection of program quality. Typically

graduate programs reflect the ACPA standards and take two academic years to complete.

How many programs should you apply to? If you were to ask six graduate admissions professionals this question, you would probably get six answers. The easy answer is "Enough". If you can more then you should consider multiple applications but only apply to programs that you are willing to attend if you are offered admissions.

How do I make sense of program differences and the application process? The quest for information and the application process requires organization. Some people use folders, some use spreadsheets and some use checklists. Different pieces of the application may need to be sent to different addresses. For example the Graduate School may require your transcripts, fee and a general graduate school application, while the Department requires a separate application, essay and letters of recommendation. You may want to include a self addressed stamped post card so that the department can let you know that it has received your application. Organization is essential in tracking the application process.

How do I choose between graduate programs? Your criteria for choosing the right program should reflect your educational and career goals. Described below are several kinds of criteria that are common considerations when selecting a graduate program. The criteria suggested here for choosing between programs are only a guide.

- **Program Ranking**

While the media makes it appear easy to rank undergraduate programs, the criteria they use are open to lots of discussion, and these criteria have stimulated some important student affairs research. One method that students have used successfully to rank programs on their individual criteria is a spreadsheet or a chart plotting program features. This organized information is used to compare programs on the criteria you believe to be important. This can be an effective decision tool and can reduce the confusion.

- **Program Prestige**

Prestige has more to do with notoriety than actual quality of education (Astin, 1985). Asking student affairs professionals to rank graduate programs would generate a list

based more on name recognition and perceived prestige, than on educational excellence. Asking student affairs professionals about educational excellence in graduate preparation programs will result in helpful criteria.

- **Accrediting and Published Criteria**

The **ACPA Professional Preparation Commission** has promulgated four criteria and gives program recognition to those programs meeting the four **ACPA Professional Preparation Commission** criteria. These programs are recognized specifically as such in the [Directory](#).

1. Program has at least one full-time faculty member.
2. Program has at least four content courses about student services/affairs/development and the college student/environment.
3. Program is at least two academic years in duration.
4. Program has at least one student personnel practicum opportunity for students.

The [Council for the Advancement of Standards](#) (CAS) has a set of criteria for preparation programs in student affairs available from the [Professional Preparation Commission](#) web site. CAS is composed of representatives from professional associations in student affairs and Higher Education and has developed criteria for many areas in student affairs and higher education.

The CAS Standards for student affairs preparation programs call for two years of full time study "All programs of study must include 1) foundational studies, 2) professional studies, and 3) supervised practice. Foundational studies must include the study of the historical and philosophical foundations of higher education and student affairs. Professional studies must include (a) student development theory, (b) student characteristics and the effects of college on students, (c) individual and group interventions, (d) organization and administration of student affairs, and (e) assessment, evaluation, and research. Supervised practice must include practica and/or internships consisting of supervised work involving at least two distinct experiences. Demonstration of minimum knowledge and skill in each area is required of all program graduates." (CAS Standards, 2002)

The **Committee on the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs**(CACREP) has standards for student affairs programs that are based on counseling programs. Neither ACPA nor NASPA currently has representation on CACREP nor direct input in the promulgation of standards. Currently CACREP accredits 11 Student Affairs Professional Practice programs under the 1994 Standards and one program under the 2001 Standards. The **2001 CACREP Standards** provides criteria for student affairs programs requiring 48 semester hours. There are no student affairs sub areas in the 2001 CACREP Standards as there were in the 1994 Standards. CACREP requires course work in 8 core areas (Professional Identity, Social and Cultural Diversity, Human Growth and Development, Career Development, Helping Relationships, Group Work, Assessment, Research and Program Evaluation), a 100 hour practicum, a 600 hour internship and specialized course work in the Foundations of Student Affairs, Contextual Dimensions of Student Affairs and Knowledge and Skill Requirements for Student Affairs Professionals.

The **Council of Graduate Schools** provides a collection of information on all aspects of graduate education and their material is worth examining.

- **Program Curriculum Emphasis**

Student affairs graduate preparation programs range in focus from counseling to higher education administration. Historically student affairs programs came from Counseling programs. Over the years counseling has become a licensed profession in the majority of states, and counseling licensure generally requires 60 semester hours of graduate preparation in specific areas, along with an extensive internship in counseling. Higher Education master's programs sometimes include student affairs as a specialty area within the curriculum, and it is not uncommon to find programs listed combining Student Affairs and Higher Education in the program title. Many programs list themselves specifically as Student Affairs, and within that area contain a range of curricular emphases.

Programs will quite often identify a curriculum emphasis in their materials. Student affairs preparation has always linked theory to practice and a curriculum may emphasize one or the other, or may integrate them into the coursework. Examining class titles, coursework and typical assignments will help you to ascertain program emphasis placed on theory or practice. Historically programs identified a curriculum

emphasis reflecting the 1994 CACREP standards that contained a Professional Practice Emphasis and a College Counseling Emphasis. Another set of curriculum descriptors that you will see are Administrative Emphasis, Student Development Emphasis and Counseling Emphasis, categories that came from the student affairs literature.

- **Program Pedagogy**

How the courses are taught is an important consideration in selecting a graduate program. While this can be difficult to discern from a distance, contacting students currently in the program will help determine if the classes are based on lectures, discussions, distance education, case study, project based learning or seminar format. Assignments in a graduate program typically reflect the program pedagogy and you should learn about the kinds of assignments that are typical. Are there many content based papers? Are there many individual and group projects? Are there many exams? Are students expected to make in-class presentations? Can students develop alternate formats for papers like web sites?

- **Program Location**

Location often determines the types of undergraduates encountered on campus. While graduate student culture is removed from undergraduate culture on a campus working with undergraduates is integral to the learning process in student affairs professional preparation programs. Program location will determine the kinds of experiences that you will get on campus. Many graduate programs are situated near other campuses and you should learn of assistantship or practicum opportunities exist on nearby campuses.

- **Assistantships and Scholarships**

These professional experience opportunities are available in most graduate programs, but the work and compensation can vary tremendously between programs. Assistantships are work done in return for pay. Generally 20 hours of work per week is required during the semester. These are best considered as pre-professional work experiences and can provide a student with significant work experience. Some assistantships involve little more than office assistance work while others involve running a residence hall of 400 students. When considering a graduate program, closely examine what duties are required of a graduate assistant. In some graduate programs

assistantships are available on other campuses. In general, assistantships do not carry graduate credit and are generally considered taxable income.

According to a Council of Graduate Schools resolution "Students are under no obligation to respond to offers of financial support prior to April 15; earlier deadlines for acceptance of such offers violate the intent of this Resolution. In those instances in which a student accepts an offer before April 15, and subsequently desires to withdraw that acceptance, the student may submit in writing a resignation of the appointment at any time through April 15. However, an acceptance given or left in force after April 15 commits the student not to accept another offer without first obtaining a written release from the institution to which a commitment has been made. Similarly, an offer by an institution after April 15 is conditional on presentation by the student of the written release from any previously accepted offer. It is further agreed by the institutions and organizations subscribing to the above Resolution that a copy of this Resolution should accompany every scholarship, fellowship, traineeship, and assistantship offer" ([Council of Graduate Schools](#), 2002) (pdf download).

Compensation varies for assistantships even on a single campus. Some campuses will connect an assistantship with a scholarship, creating an attractive package. Some campuses will increase the assistantship amount, and expect the student to pay tuition. On some campuses, graduate assistants only pay in-state tuition, and on other campuses graduate assistants are no different than other students.

Scholarships are money given directly to you with no expectation of work, and scholarships are non-taxable income. On most campuses, scholarships cover the cost of in-state or out-of-state tuition depending on the student's status. On many campuses, there are additional "fees" that a student must pay that are not covered by a scholarship. It is to the student's advantage to find out in detail what assistantships and scholarships pay for and what costs the student will be responsible for.

- **Program Faculty**

Faculty are an integral part of any graduate program. Since you will spend most of your academic time with the faculty, getting to know them is important. This information may be available on-line, in the program material that is sent to you, through the professional organizations or through an on-line search. Not all of the faculty teach all of the time, so learn who teaches which course when, or you may be disappointed if you are expecting

to be taught by a specific faculty member. On many campuses student affairs practitioners may also teach in the program so it is important to find out as much as possible about the faculty.

As with colleges, faculty receive prestige through name recognition often based on publications. The relationship between research and quality of teaching is near zero. Brown and Mayhew (1965) concluded that "Whenever studies of teaching effectiveness are made as judged by students, no relationship is found between judged teaching effectiveness and research productivity." Feldman (1996) found that ". . . on the whole, scholarly accomplishment or research productivity of the college and university faculty members is only slightly associated with teaching proficiency." Good research and good teaching each take a substantial amount of time, to do both well takes more time than most faculty have.

- **Diversity**

Diversity among the students, program faculty and student affairs staff is important. In a program with a diverse student body, faculty and student affairs staff, at least on the dimensions of gender, ethnicity and social class, you will be able to share experiences with a diverse group and enhance your interpersonal skills. McEwen (2003) suggests seven areas of identity development (Racial, Sexual, Gender, Ability, Social Class, Religious and Geographic) and this list makes a good starting point to examine diversity among the students and faculty in a graduate program.

- **Graduation and placement rates**

Graduation rates are a standard undergraduate student outcome measure for college and are an important consideration in graduate programs. Retention in the profession is also important and information about how long program graduates remain in student affairs should be available.

How do programs choose successful applicants? Applicant evaluation criteria are generally consistent among programs; most graduate programs rely on similar pieces of information to decide who to admit. The decisions are complicated and generally involve multiple people or a committee. In many ways students self select and apply to programs where there is a good 'fit'. Using the available information, the admissions committee is trying to answer two questions.

1. Can this applicant succeed at the academic work? Grades and test scores are used to answer this question.
2. Is this the type of individual we want in our program? The application essay, letters of recommendation and student experiences are used to answer this question.

Listed below are some of the typical criteria that programs use in selecting successful applicants.

- **Standardized Test Scores**

Scores provide a number used to compare individuals from different educational backgrounds and predict their chances of academic success. Standardized admissions tests are inherently biased and should be interpreted carefully. Educational Testing Service which administers the GRE has many documents available at <http://www.gre.org/edupubs.html> that will help the test taker and the test user to better understand test bias. The required use of standardized test scores for MA and MS graduate education is an open question. Graduate programs who use standardized test scores are no better or worse than those who do not. The increasing cost of the GRE is a consideration for some admissions committees and the limited predictive validity in MA and MS programs is a further concern.

The Graduate Record Exam (GRE) is multiple choice computer adaptive test and is among the most sophisticated achievement test in use today. The GRE is considered by many faculty to be the most useful test to predict graduate success, however the predictive validity of the GRE is quite low (Educational Testing Service, 2003)

Table 1A: Verbal and Quantitative Interpretive Data Used on Score Reports (Based on the performance of all examinees who tested between July 1, 1999, and June 30, 2002)

All Students **Verbal Mean = 469**

SD = 119 Quantitative Mean = 591

SD = 148

Table 4: Verbal and Quantitative Percentage Distribution of Scores Within Intended Broad Graduate Major Field Based on Seniors and Nonenrolled College Graduates

Student Counseling and Personnel Services

Verbal Mean = 425

SD = 83 Quantitative Mean = 491

SD = 117

Higher Education

Verbal Mean = 465

SD = 91 Quantitative Mean = 540

SD = 121

Table 5: Reliability Coefficients and Standard Errors of Measurement for Individual Scores and Score Differences

Verbal Individual Standard Error of Measurement = 32

Quantitative Individual Standard Error of Measurement = 42

Table 7: Average Estimated Correlations of GRE General Test (Verbal, Quantitative, and Analytical) Scores and Undergraduate Grade Point Average with Graduate First-Year Grade Point Average by Department Type

All Departments **Verbal $r = .30$ Quantitative $r = .29$**

(Educational Testing Service, 2003)

The Miller Analogies Test (MAT) is a 50-minute, 100-items analogy completion test that strongly weighted on verbal and analytical skills and on general knowledge. It is not widely known and used, but it is much less expensive and quicker exam than the GRE. The *Normative Data for Applicants to Graduate School Programs by Intended Field of Study* (Psychological Corporation, 2001) lists 44-46 as the 50th percentile for students applying in Education, and lists 45-47 as the 50th percentile for all students. There are many excellent preparation books for the MAT and it is generally worth while to prepare for the exam.

- **GPA and Coursework**

GPA is the best predictors of graduate success and there is a .37 correlation between Undergraduate GPA and first year graduate grades (Educational Testing Service, 2003). Many admissions committee members are interested in what courses a student took, and what grades the student was given in different types of courses. Minimum GPA requirements run from 2.00 to 3.25 depending on the graduate program. The program material, graduate catalog, and program web pages should publish minimum GPA standards. Many programs require a background in specific curricular areas, or have a general requirement to ensure that the application has appropriate preparation in the behavioral sciences.

- **Letters of Recommendation**

Letters are considered important by most admission committee members. While the material in a letter is not objective, a good letter will help 'round out' the picture of an applicant. The best people to write letters of recommendation are faculty who know your academic work, and from whom you got good grades. Faculty or staff who know your experiences in student affairs will also be good references. You should meet with the people who you are asking to write letters and explain your graduate school and professional goals. Some graduate programs have specific forms for letters of recommendation and other graduate programs do not. If there is not a specific form the letter must be hand signed and on letterhead. Make sure to thank the people who wrote you letters of recommendation because it takes significant time and effort to do this.

- **Transcripts**

An official record of your grades are generally sent directly from the Registrar's office where you attended school to the Graduate Admissions Office. Transcripts are usually required from all undergraduate schools attended. The Graduate Admissions Office has staff who examine transcripts to make sure that each one is original, and that each has been received. Admissions committee members are quite accomplished at reading and interpreting transcripts and generally look at student performance in a variety of academic areas.

- **Experience and Extracurricular Activities**

Student involvement is important in student affairs and most applicants to graduate programs in student affairs were very active in residence halls, student organizations,

student government and student activities as undergraduates. Experience is an important factor in the admissions process so it is in the applicant's best interest to make sure that the admissions committee has a complete list of the applicants student affairs and related experiences.

- **Essays**

Student writing is taken seriously by admissions committee members. What the applicant says and how it is said are important factors in preparing answers to essay questions. Great care should be taken in preparing this admissions essay because it is taken so seriously. Typically admissions essay questions cover your short and long term career goals, your interest in student affairs, and something about yourself. This must be typed, well written, grammatically appropriate and to the point. Keep a copy for yourself.

- **Interviews**

Direct interviews or phone interviews with applicants are common. Many Graduate programs and assistantship sites require an on-campus interview. Typically these are scheduled between February and April, and you should receive a specific invitation to campus for the interview. On-campus interviews are carefully orchestrated events to allow you to get to know the campus, the faculty and the student affairs staff. It also allows the faculty and staff to get to know you so professional behavior is required even during social events.

- **Resumes**

A list of student accomplishments are often a required as part of the admissions packet. The resume should be up-to-date, typed and professional. A visit to the campus career center may improve the quality of anyone's resume. One to two pages should suffice, and the resume is a way to list all of your activities with brief explanations.

- **Quality Application Materials**

Presentation is important; appearances count. The admission committee member's first impression will be from your papers, consequently, quality counts.

Doctoral Programs

Should you get a doctorate? The key question is whether or not your current credentials and experience will allow you to achieve your career goals. A doctoral program is a three to four year investment of time and energy, requiring at least one full-time year as a student. Consider the barriers to a doctoral program and advantages you may get after you complete your degree. Are you willing to take a risk, to give up what is good and comfortable and known for the potential of new knowledge and new experiences?

How do I prepare for the transition into a doctoral program? If you have not been in class for a while take a course or two in advance to get back into practice taking classes and managing time to study. Check with the program -- perhaps you can take something that can apply to the program requirements. Consider a statistics review. If the move to a doctoral program involves others people in your life, how much have they been considered? Have you and your partner set mutual goals for the move? Do not underestimate the transition. Consider what you can do to prepare for the transition. One strategy is to be involved in one "outside" professional activity/community such that those "connections" will stay with you as you move.

How do you learn about doctoral programs? Attend conference programs and ACPA Professional Preparation Commission meetings related to getting a doctorate and presenting issues in doctoral programs. Attend conference presentations by faculty or doctoral students at graduate programs you are considering. Talk with students about their experiences in the program. Visit the program socials at regional and national conferences. Visit the campus and meet with faculty and students in the program, attending a class if possible.

Can I find what I need on the Internet? You can find some of what you need to know on the Internet, but nothing beats an on-campus visit.

How can I choose a specific program? Develop a list of questions for your search and as you search ask about what is important to you ask to speak to a current doctoral student and ask to see recent graduates' dissertations. The following list of topics and questions is a good start.

- What are the students like and who will be your classmates? Student peers may likely be significant long-time professional colleagues and collaborators.
- How are dissertation topics determined?

- What are the faculty research interests?
- What are the professional affiliations and organizations for the faculty?
- Do faculty engage in on-campus and off-campus consultation and training?
- What is the faculty-student ratio and how much interaction is there between faculty and students? Is the the interaction social, based on research, does it involve professional presentations or projects?
- What are the opportunities for assistantships/employment and other avenues of learning?
- What faculty and/or student affairs professionals are available to work with and do these professionals mentor students?
- Is there an individual faculty member with whom you could feel comfortable working closely for an extended period of time?
- If faculty do not know the answers to your questions, are efforts made to find out the answers?
- Do full-time, degree-seeking students finish their degrees in a timely fashion?

How do I find out if I "Fit" with a program? You should look at the faculty's level of involvement with students, research interests, professional involvement, philosophy about practitioners in the classroom, diversity in composition and professional interests and find out if their retirement is imminent. Examining the environment is important in determining fit. Answering the following questions will help.

- Is the program located in a place you could live for 3-7 years?
- Does the program support different lifestyles?
- If you are from a cultural/ethnic group that is not the "majority" at the institution, is there a way for you to have community?
- Is it (the program or institution) a political environment? How do you feel about that?
- Does the program have a good reputation? How old is that reputation? What does it mean?
- Is there a cohort group of doctoral students? Is having a cohort group important to you?
- Are the faculty/practitioners going to be able to help you make the connections you will need upon graduation?
- Are students given a "voice" in shaping the program and program's activities?

What about diversity? Diversity is important in any endeavor. Learn how diversity is defined in a program and ask how diverse the faculty and students are within this definition? Learn how important diversity is to the program and what evidence there is for valuing diversity. Are the faculty teaching and valuing diversity in multiple ways?

How can I evaluate program curriculum? Curriculum in doctoral programs have many similar elements across programs, so points of comparison are course choices, statistics courses, comprehensive examinations, dissertation, residency and internships. What are the requirements in the program, how rigid or flexible are they, and are there supports for meeting program requirements? Curriculum emphasis is equally important. Does the program focus on practitioner preparation or on preparing tomorrow's faculty?

Applications to doctoral programs are similar to master's programs, but typically require GRE or MAT scores. For a doctoral program several letters of recommendation should be from people who know your academic work. Since the doctorate is the apex of academic preparation, applications are taken very seriously.

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