Professional Master’s Degrees: Beyond the PSM

A Brief History of the Professional Master’s Degree

Recent media attention to the master’s degree focuses on it as an avenue to a career or a ticket to meaningful employment—“10 Master’s degrees that can actually pay off” (2015) and “Does a master’s degree make you more employable?” (2014)—or else raises questions about the value of graduate education—“The end of the master’s degree?” (2015). Outside the academy, many have observed with interest how the master’s degree has evolved over the last two decades; at the same time they question the relevance of the traditional master’s degree.

Current data show that while many college graduates are interested in graduate school, the majority are especially interested in master’s degrees (Allum and Okahana, 2015), specifically those providing both advanced academic training and career preparation. Howard (2015) chronicles the growing trend toward specialized career-oriented master’s programs as universities work to keep their master’s programs relevant in a landscape of tech boot camps, stackable certificates, and other options for acquiring employer-recognized credentials.

Although we are tempted to long for that imagined golden era when graduate students enrolled for the sheer joy of intellectual inquiry, the fact is that the professional master’s degree is nothing new: the most widely recognized professional master’s degree—the Master of Business Administration (MBA)—was created in 1908 at Harvard. The Master of Public Administration (MPA) followed a few years later, with one of the first programs at Syracuse University. By 1957, the first European MBA admitted its first students. After the mid-1900s, allied health master’s degrees—including speech pathology, counseling, nursing—added professional components required for accreditation. The Professional Science Master’s (PSM) degree from the 1990s is only one development in the long history of the genre—a significant development that focused attention on an unheralded type of master’s degree.

In 1997, Tobias, Chubin, and Aylesworth suggested the possibility of a professional science master’s degree; from that idea came the Keck Graduate Institute and its pioneering Master of Biological Sciences. The same year, the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation initiated a series of grants for development of professional science and mathematics master’s degrees at research universities. These parallel initiatives led to the PSM; and with the participation of CGS in 2002, the project expanded to include master’s institutions.

Encouraged by the PSM’s success and supported by the Ford Foundation, CGS undertook an exploratory study in 2002 “to increase understanding of the mission, components, and potential of professional master’s programs in the social sciences and the opportunities for and constraints to their development.” Involving a web survey of professionalization in social science master’s degrees, the study revealed that business and industry were the primary employers of social science master’s degree graduates. The study probed the correlation between workforce needs and the emergence of professional elements in social science master’s degrees, identified the roles of external stakeholders in these master’s programs, and codified the professional elements in the degree programs under analysis.

In 2006, the Canadian Association for Graduate Studies examined master’s education in Canada in the context of global trends and national developments and challenges. Not surprisingly, the research showed that, “Probably the most significant global trend is the proliferation of professional programs,” adding that at the time of the study, “there are more professionally-oriented degrees conferred. . . than liberal arts and science degrees.”

In 2007, CGS replicated the 2002 investigation of professional master’s degrees to discover whether professional elements identified in the original study increased or decreased. Noting that the MPA remained the benchmark for professionally focused master’s degrees, the study observed that master’s degrees in other social sciences—economics, communication, and political science—showed an increase in professional indicators. The 2007 study argued that professionalization in these programs was driven by globalization, a decline in federal funding coupled with growth in private industry funding, calls for increased accountability, and demographic changes.
As the late 2000s marched on, the drumbeat announcing professional master’s degrees grew louder—in the United States with the continued growth in PSMs and in the post-Bologna European Union with the realization that, “The Master offers universities new chances: to ensure the availability of high level education to all citizens throughout their lives, to anticipate and satisfy the needs of a labour market demanding ever higher skills (italics mine), and to contribute to economic growth by promoting research and innovation.” (HRK German Rectors’ Conference, 2011.)

Described as “a recognized point of entry to the European labour market” (EUA Survey of German Rectors’ Conference, 2011.)

Among the other successful programs from the original cohort are Global Interactions at Cleveland State University; Linguistics for TESOL at the University of Colorado in Boulder; Social Documentation at the University of California, Santa Cruz; Women’s and Gender Studies at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro; and several public history and museum studies programs including those at Appalachian State University, Claremont Graduate Universities, Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis, and the University of Maryland Baltimore County. These programs have diverged from the original structure but continue to identify as professional.

Evidence from both funded and unfunded programs that emerged from the CGS/Ford project, and from professional master’s degrees grew louder—in the United States with the continued growth in PSMs and in the post-Bologna European Union with the realization that, “The Master offers universities new chances: to ensure the availability of high level education to all citizens throughout their lives, to anticipate and satisfy the needs of a labour market demanding ever higher skills (italics mine), and to contribute to economic growth by promoting research and innovation.” (HRK German Rectors’ Conference, 2011.)

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Programs developed independently during the same decade, shows that master's degrees were already moving toward professionalization at a pace that has quickened in the last five or so years. The world of graduate education is rapidly producing an array of master's degrees explicitly designed with advice from external stakeholders to produce workforce-ready graduates who have undergone rigorous academic training. A key indicator that the professional master's degree is not "on life support" is the growing number of career-focused master's programs unrelated to the CGS/Ford project. None of these programs bear the "PMA" label; nonetheless, they incorporate in curricula and program structures professional elements similar to the indicators from the PSMs and from the PMA experiment. A good example, "UA master's programs that meet the workforce needs of Southern Arizona and the State," are the Workforce-Ready Master's Degrees at the University of Arizona, selected master's programs—STEM, social science, humanities, education—that clearly map to careers crucial to the Arizona economy. Significantly, the institution offers fellowships specifically for students enrolled in these master's programs. Also noteworthy are programs like the MA in Bioethics and Medical Humanities and the Master of Urban Planning at the University of Louisville; both programs display many of the professional indicators of the PMA, both are strongly tied to regional and national needs. In the arts, Virginia Tech offers the MFA in Theatre-Arts Leadership, a degree that integrates professional elements and career preparation throughout the curriculum.

Moreover, master's innovation is global; degrees modeled on the MBA, the MFA and the PSM are emerging as a result of Bologna reforms in the EU and national initiatives in graduate education in Asia and Australia. A web survey of master's degrees in Europe revealed a significant number of post-Bologna master's programs displaying many indicators of professional orientation: skills courses, interdisciplinary offerings, internships and practical experiences—including many in international locations, an applied research capstone or final project, and career information on the program website. These degrees are designed with attention to the current landscape for graduate education: emerging careers (MSc in Food Identity, France), global challenges (MA in Intercultural Mediation, Poland), disruptive technologies (MSc in Artificial Intelligence, Netherlands), and even changing student demographics (online MA in Media Art Histories, Austria—marketed to working adults).

Indeed, clinging to the PMA label may only cloud the discussion about professional master's degrees—certainly, most students are unaware of the differences between "academic" and "professional" programs (those are distinctions within the academy). We know that many prospective graduate students, domestic and international, seek master's degrees and—especially in this second decade of the 21st century—these students are attracted to degrees that offer advanced study and clear pathways to careers.

Next Steps?

Ideas from the final CGS/Ford conference on the PMA remain important, and should be considered in the development of new professional master's degrees. The 2011 CGS guide provides excellent advice about resource allocation, institutionalizing programs, and internal and external advocacy. But ten years ago, few would have predicted the significance to master's degrees of disruptive innovation in information delivery platforms, or the speed of globalization, or the impact of demographic changes on higher education and the workforce. These and other developments require further discussion in light of their importance to the evolution of the professional master's degree.

This study raises more questions than it answers, but it creates an opening for conversations about the master's degree, specifically professional master's degrees. What defines a successful professional master's degree? How can the conversation be expanded to include ideas from alumni and employers, from workforce boards and economic development professionals? While the job market for PSM graduates is clear, how might we discover the multiple employment pathways for master's graduates in non-STEM fields—and how do we prepare graduate students for those careers? With far fewer professional master's degrees in the humanities, in what ways can development of these degrees be encouraged and supported? What role should CGS and its affiliates play in the ongoing evolution of professional master's degrees?

We invite you to join the conversations about professional master's degrees and to participate in the Hot Topics discussion on "Professional Master's Degrees" at the CGS Summer Workshop in Savannah.

By Edelma Huntley, CGS Dean in Residence

References


### Indicators* of Professional Master’s Degree Programs

*(Revised** in 2016 from the 2003 CGS report to Ford Foundation)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Evidence/Measure(s)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Skills-based courses; professional development embedded in curriculum</td>
<td>Courses that focus on career-specific skills; Course modules and assignments that focus on career-specific skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Courses at the boundaries of disciplines or in other disciplines</td>
<td>Courses in other departments; Courses team-taught across disciplines; Interdisciplinary courses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emphasis on writing and communication skills</td>
<td>Writing across all rhetorical platforms; Oral communication; Writing for public audience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final project or team research; or capstone experience</td>
<td>Project/research/capstone based on real-world problem to solve through collaboration and team effort</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advisory board*** of external stakeholders and employers from industry, government, non-profit organizations, arts and cultural organizations; and/or Alumni council or board</td>
<td>Formal advisory board, or more loosely structured group of external advisors that meets regularly; Program alumni who provide support, input into initiatives and programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Required internship or practicum in appropriate external organization (arts &amp; culture, nonprofit, business, etc)</td>
<td>Formal internship; Practicum or shadowing experience; Experiential modules embedded in course work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty with significant professional experience and/or continuing professional connections outside academe</td>
<td>Program website highlights faculty experience and connections with the professional work landscape</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programmatic opportunities beyond the campus—community, regional, state, national, global</td>
<td>Off-site activities embedded in course work; Volunteer opportunities related to program; Formal study/research abroad; Professional meetings, symposia, workshops</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career information and/or position openings on program website</td>
<td>Career possibilities in the field; Current job postings from relevant employers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alumni information on program website; ongoing contact with program graduates</td>
<td>“Where are they now” stories; Mechanism for surveying graduates regularly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment and quality control protocols</td>
<td>Competencies (graduates); Quality metrics (program)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Notes:**

*Very few professional master’s degrees display all of the indicators—the ones most likely to do so are programs with disciplinary accreditation.*

**Revisions were based on evidence from current professional master’s degrees that are not PSMs. Some were part of the CGS/Ford project; most were independently developed during the same decade: 2005-2015.*

***The formal advisory board is the most commonly absent indicator.*
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- Open Doors With a Doctorate
  (Revised 2016)
  Item Number: PHDFLYER
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- Financing Graduate Education
  (Revised 2016)
  Item Number: FNLFLYER
  Price: $1 (Bulk discount)