**Master’s Admission Attributes**

**Connecting Admission Success and Student Success**

**Complete Project Background**

**The Role of the Joint Committee**

In 2015, Suzanne Ortega, president of the Council of Graduate Schools, established an 18-member Joint Committee on the Master’s Degree to examine the current status of the degree and to identify areas of needed research with a focus on areas where evidence to inform best practices was lacking (Augustine, 2016, 2017). The Joint Committee was composed of 9 members of the Master’s Committee and 9 Members of the Research Committee. The members of the Master’s Committee included 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 Kitto, Western Washington University; Sheryl Tucker, Oklahoma State University; and, Jerry Weinberg, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. The members of the Research Advisory Committee included Beth Boehm, University of Louisville; Joan Ficke, Montclair State University; Dennis Grady, Radford 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 Joint Committee convened for the first time in December 2015 during the CGS Annual Meeting in Seattle, Washington, to develop a plan for achieving its charge. The plan included the following actions leading to the project on master’s admissions.

The Joint Committee reviewed recent CGS Graduate Enrollment and Degree (GE&D) surveys (Allum, 2014; Allum & Okahana, 2015; Gonzales, Allum, & Sowell, 2013) to verify sustained demand for the master’s degree over multiple decades. Equally high demand for master’s degrees was observed based on the International Graduate Applications and Enrollment Fall 2014 (Allum, 2014) report and CGS labor market outcomes study. The Joint Committee concluded that a defining feature of the master’s degree that influenced the research agenda for this project and heightened the immediate need for research on master’s practices was the magnitude of demand for master’s education. To understand the factors that drive master’s degree demand, the Joint Committee reviewed past CGS research and related studies on master’s education and found that the multiple competencies that create diverse career pathways for those who complete a master’s degree served as evidence of the “success” of a master’s program. This explained an important connection between demand for the master’s degree and the competencies it offers. To complete the analysis of additional factors associated with the value of the master’s degree, another subcommittee identified the quantitative metrics, (e. g. number of applicants, admission yield rates, number of theses completed, internship placements) and qualities (e. g. student learning outcomes, competencies, employer satisfaction) that programs used to achieve the success that created the value associated with demand for degree. Within the literature on quality practices some of the first perspectives on quality metrics, including admission criteria, emerged as potential areas where research was needed.

During an August 2016 webinar, the Joint Committee shared its findings in support of the alignment of demand with “success” defined as competencies supported with quality metrics and practices with CGS members (Augustine, Boehm, Grady, and Marshall, 2016). The webinar helped to create the agenda for the first Colloquium on the Master’s Degree held in October 2016. The Colloquium convened graduate deans, representatives of business/industry, foundation leaders, representatives from disciplinary societies and other stakeholders who had contributed to prior discussions of the degree. The 2016 Colloquium presented emerging evidence for three themes that consistently recurred in the literature on master’s education and offered a possible model for study. These included demand, competencies, and metrics. The Joint Committee referred to the relationship among these recurring themes as the Alignment Framework because when workforce-ready competencies aligned with quality metrics the resulting success was the demand for the degree by applicants and demand for degree recipients in the workforce. Equally important, when aligned in this way, innovative, distinctive, and responsive master’s degrees evolved. The 2016 Colloquium highlighted areas where research was immediately needed because there was evidence that the qualities or attributes assessed at the time of admission were often disconnected from the program’s success expectations. However, the evidence needed to assess the current status was not available. As a result, the Committee agreed that understanding the relationship between admission evidence and expectations of program success was the most critical area where evidence-based practices in master’s education was needed.

**Engagement with Business and Industry**

To understand the value of the master’s degree to business and industry, CGS held meetings with organizations that pursue master’s-focused business-education partnerships. A discussion with the Business Higher Education Forum (BHEF, 2010) provided insights related to *iCURE*, a program that promotes industry-based undergraduate research opportunities. Undergraduate research has been shown to promote degree persistence and completion rates among first generation and minority undergraduate students. Evidence of undergraduate research is frequently used to verify research competence for admission to research-based master’s degrees. CGS also convened with the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE) to study their recently published definitions of career-readiness competencies of college graduates developed by (NACE, 2016). NACE identified critical thinking/problem solving, oral/written communication, teamwork/collaboration, information technology applications, leadership, professional/work ethic, and career management as evidence of career-ready success for college graduates. These competencies match well with recent research on transferrable master’s degree competencies (Gallagher, 2015) and highlighted potential ways to consider success in meeting workforce demand. A meeting with the National Governors Association Workforce Economic Development Program representatives provided information about the project *The Next Generation of Workforce Development Policy: Connecting Workforce and Economic Development* (Simon, 2016). This project tracks the effectiveness of business and education partnerships in six states that were intended to connect workforce competencies to successfully meet state economic needs.

**Engagement with Disciplinary Societies, Foundations, and Other Stakeholders**

Several disciplinary societies had previously completed projects important to the study of the master’s degree. Meetings were arranged to review the projects and their application to master’s admissions. A meeting with the American Historical Association provided insights regarding the AHA’s *Tuning Project* (AHA, 2012) that was designed to identify the knowledge, understanding, and skills associated with a degree in history in order to better align competencies of graduates with workforce and career success. A review of the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association’s *Minority Student Leadership Program* (ASHA, 2017) revealed that the program is designed to promote mastery of the professional leadership competencies minority students need for career success. The American Chemical Society’s *Chem IDP* program (ACS, 2017) was also examined. This tool helps align the skill sets of those completing a chemistry degree with their career pathways to promote post graduate success and alignment with non-academic careers. Lumina’s *Degree Qualifications Profile* (Lumina, 2014) provided a comprehensive list of proficiencies of successful master’s degree candidates include designing, implementing, applying, evaluating, and proposing solutions and initiatives based on mastery of disciplinary knowledge. Another important review was D2L’s master’s outcomes project (Desire 2 Learn, 2017). This online tool is designed to serve as a repository for master’s learning outcomes that could then be used as a guide for considering the common and unique competencies of similar and different degrees and how these are aligned with workforce and career success.

**CGS and ETS**

The Council of Graduate Schools and Educational Testing Service jointly produce a standard publication each year titled *Graduate Enrollment and Degrees*. Data from this document helped establish the need for more research on master’s education. During initial discussions with the Joint Committee on the Master’s Degree, representatives from ETS were included to help develop an initial research agenda. Following these discussions and those held with business and industry, disciplinary societies, and other stakeholders, ETS provided funding to support the current project. The project began with a series of regional focus groups and the engagement of an advisory board.

**Engagement with the Regional Focus Groups**

To consider the survey questions and data that needed to be collected to advance the study, CGS/ETS convened a series of focus groups composed of graduate program directors representing multiple master’s degrees, graduate deans, and administrators. Program directors offered program-level insights based on their experience leading different types of master’s programs. These included research-focused master’s degrees that require a thesis; professionally-focused master’s degrees in areas such as business administration and professional science master’s degree that require a culminating event such as an internship; and clinically-focused master’s degrees that lead to certification, licensure or other credentials required for practice at degree completion. Graduate deans were also convened to discuss and examine institution-level admission criteria. Each session began with an introduction to the topic(s) that will be discussed. The larger group was then organized into smaller focus groups so that the directors from similar master’s programs (research, professional, or clinical) were in the same group facilitated by one on more program leader. Graduate School administrators composed the fourth focus group. Each focus group session was followed by a report-back session with the whole group to construct the parameters of the study.

Fourteen universities representing 79 master’s degree programs across multiple university classifications and disciplines participated. The focus group in the Southern Region was convened on October 20, 2017, and includedparticipants from the host institution, Georgia State University, and Columbus State University, Emory University, University of Georgia. The Northeast Region focus group was held on October 24, 2017, and included representatives from the host institution, the University of Connecticut, and Worcester Polytechnic Institute, University of Massachusetts Amherst, and Southern Connecticut University. The Western Region focus group was convened on October 26, 2017, and included representatives from the host institution, California State University Fresno, and California State University Sacramento, University of California Davis. The Midwest Region focus group convened on October 31, 2017 and included participants from the host institution Southern Illinois University Edwardsville, and University of Missouri St. Louis, and University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The focus group discussions guided development of the initial survey to collect data needed to address the research questions.

**The Project Advisory Board**

The initial list of survey questions was reviewed by the CGS Research Committee and the Joint Committee on the Master’s Degree during the 2017 Annual Meeting in Washington, DC. Following these discussions, an Advisory Board for the project was established in January of 2018. The Advisory Board was convened in February 20, 2017, via a Webinar to review the draft survey questions and provide guidance. The board was reconvened in June 26, 2017, via a Webinar to conduct a preliminary review of the data from the survey and to guide development of the project outcomes prior to participating in the 2018 Colloquium on the Master’s Degree held in Washington, DC, on September 16 and 17, 2017. The members of the Advisory Board included Alberto Acereda, Educational Testing Service; Lisa Armistead, Georgia State University’ Jaime “Jim” L. Diaz-Granados, American Psychology Association; Sean Gallagher, Northeastern University; Gwendolyn Galloway, Educational Testing Service; Kent Holsinger, University of Connecticut; James Marshall, California State University Fresno; Chad Moutray, National Association of Manufacturers; Monica Plisch, American Physical Society; Margaret Rogers, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association; James D. Sterling, Keck Graduate Institute; Christopher Valentino, Northrop Grumman Corporation; Jerry Weinberg, Southern Illinois University Edwardsville

**The Committee on the Master’s Degree**

The CGS Committee on the Master’s Degree serves as the current voice of graduate deans. It was convened during the 2018 Summer Workshop to review and provide feedback on the project and will be convened during the 2018 Annual Meeting to provide a final review of the project. The members include Kevin Archer, Central Washington University; Lisa Armistead, Georgia State University; Scott Herness, Montclair State University; Michael Cunningham, Tulane University; Jack DeRochi, Winthrop University; Kent Holsinger, University of Connecticut; James Marshall, California State University Fresno; Julie Masterson, Missouri State University; Mary Owens-Southall, Coppin State University; Sheryl Tucker, Oklahoma State University; Jerry Weinberg; Southern Illinois University Edwardsville; Jennifer Ziegler, Valparaiso University