

# RETHINKING THE PURPOSE AND PRACTICE OF RESEARCH AT MASTERS LEVEL INSTITUTIONS: FINAL PHASE AND PROJECT CONCLUSIONS

---

## A POSTER PRESENTATION

*Dr. Ed Cunliff, Dr. Mike Nelson, Dr. Melissa Powers, Elle Skelton  
University of Central Oklahoma*

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Capstone experiences provide students the opportunity to demonstrate knowledge and skills obtained during a program. Ideally, capstone projects assess students' readiness to graduate and provide information regarding students' ability to apply knowledge learned in the academic setting to "real-world" problems. Research has been "the gold standard" of higher education throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. At the doctoral level and at the Masters level, a student's culminating achievement was the completion of research. Some question whether our current practices adequately prepare graduates to be "leading practitioners" prepared for the complex demands of a rapidly changing society. The (Perry & Imig, 2008) point out that practitioners need different preparation than future researchers (Perry & Imig, 2008; Rickli, 2009).

The purposes of this project are (a) to identify and describe current capstone practices, (b) to investigate how capstone experiences meet the needs of students, and (c) to identify and evaluate alternative capstone experiences for preparing students for the workplace. The purpose of this final phase was to develop consensus on effective preparation during master's level programs from recent graduates. Specifically, we asked about knowledge, skills, and abilities that graduate students should acquire during their graduate program and specific experiences that would prepare graduates to be effective employees.

The study was conducted in Delphi-style rounds to reach consensus. In the first round, a demographic survey and two open-ended questions addressing the primary purpose were sent electronically to 3,151 individuals who graduated from a master's level program in the past five years. The two open-ended questions were: 1) please list knowledge, skills, and abilities a graduate student, in your discipline, should learn during his/her graduate program. 2) Please identify the kinds of experiences that would prepare graduates to be effective employees in your discipline. Sixty graduates responded to and completed the first round (75% female). Respondents represented a wide range of disciplines with education (n=16) and higher education (n = 15) being the most represented. From their open-ended responses, a list of 50 knowledge, skills, and abilities that a graduate student should learn during his/her graduate program was generated; duplicate responses were merged. Additionally, a list of 36 experiences that would prepare graduates to be effective employees was also generated. In the second Delphi round responses were returned to the 60 respondents from round one. Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement with each of the 50 responses from question one and 36 responses from question two on a scale of 7 (strongly agree) to 1 (strongly disagree). Thirty-three participants responded in round two. Level of agreement was calculated as the percentage of respondents with responses within 3 categories of agreement with each other. Consensus was assumed at a level of agreement of 70%.

For the question regarding knowledge, skills, and abilities, consensus was reached in 46 of the 50 (92%) responses. Top responses, reaching 100% agreement, were *critical thinking*, *professional communication*, *strong writing skills*, and *working with others*. For the question regarding preparation experiences, consensus was reached for 100% of responses. The three responses with 100% agreement

were *peer collaboration*, *job shadowing*, and *internship*. In this study of recent graduates, we found a high level of agreement on knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences necessary for effective preparation in graduate programs.

Overall, in Phase II of the project researchers identified key themes from interviews with program coordinators about their master's level capstone experiences. These key themes are: application to practice, contribute to scholarship, multiple pathways/change, demonstrate knowledge of the domain, and preparation for academia. The final stage of the project sought to gain consensus on effective preparation during master's level programs from recent graduates. Researchers found that a) skills sets/abilities and experiences that were the lowest in levels of agreement were industry or trade specific. Those items do not reflect strengths that would be advantageous in a generalized setting and environment for post graduate students b) the skill sets/abilities and experiences that had the highest level of agreement support previous work that demonstrate the importance of critical thinking, communication, collaboration, and practical experiences in graduate programs.

### SELECT REFERENCES

- Hsu, C.-C., & Sandford, B. A. (2007). The Delphi technique: making sense of consensus. *Practical assessment, research & evaluation*, 12(10), 1-8.
- Perry, J. A., & Imig, D. G. (2008). A stewardship of practice in education. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, 40(6), 42-49.
- Rikli, R. E. (2009). The role of master's institutions in developing researchers: Rethinking the master plan. *Quest*, 61(1), 59-73.
- 

For further information, contact the Primary Investigator:

Dr. Ed Cunliff

Professor

University of Central Oklahoma

100 N. University Drive

Edmond, OK 73034

E-Mail: [ecunliff@uco.edu](mailto:ecunliff@uco.edu)