

GUEST EDITORIAL PREFACE

Special Issue on Perspectives and Challenges of Graduate Education

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A common request by policy makers to higher education institutions is to increase both the rate and number of students completing undergraduate and graduate degrees. A sociocultural basis for this request is a belief that opportunity to attend and the ability to complete a postsecondary degree will help transition people from poverty. A financial basis for this request is the need for a highly skilled and trained workforce to expand economic development of local communities and subsequently a state tax base.

An underlying premise of both a sociocultural and financial emphasis for increasing graduation rates is that *all* have equal merit and subsequently an equal economic benefit. As I developed a theme for this special edition I considered various aspects and challenges of successfully completing an undergraduate and graduate degree. Additionally, issues presented as possible solutions to increase graduation rates, such as open enrollment underlying academic challenges with higher education institutions. A few examples of these additional challenges are presented as a rationale for the series of manuscripts presented in this special edition of the journal.

DEGREES AND FIRST-YEAR INCOME

All college degrees do not provide the same financial benefits or outcomes. Table 1 provides the “Average Salaries by Discipline” from a survey by the National Association of College and Employers and the discrepancies in future income. Expenses associated with attending college should be indexed relative to the anticipated income by discipline.

INSTITUTIONAL DEGREE VALUE

The reputation of a postsecondary institution does have value, but how much value? A majority of students who obtain a Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) are offered positions at major school districts in northwest Arkansas where the teacher salaries are higher. Does this indicate that U of A

Table 1. Average salaries by discipline

Broad Category	2013 Average Salary	2012 Average Salary	Percent Change
Business	\$55,635	\$51,541	7.9%
Communications	\$43,835	\$42,286	3.7%
Computer Science	\$58,547	\$60,038	-2.5%
Education	\$40,337	\$39,080	3.2%
Engineering	\$62,062	\$60,639	2.3%
Humanities & Social Sciences	\$37,791	\$36,824	2.6%
Math & Sciences	\$42,731	\$42,355	0.9%
Overall	\$45,327	\$44,259	2.4%

Source: September 2013 Salary Survey, National Association of Colleges and Employers.

MAT degrees have greater value? Are these graduates more effective instructors? It indicates this degree has economic value, a dedicated market for the graduates, and this may warrant a student seeking to absorb the expense to attend the U of A and complete an MAT degree. Figure 1 provides the median first-year earnings of students who attended postsecondary institutions in Florida. Why do Florida Atlantic University (FAU) and Florida International University (FIU) graduates have higher median incomes than those from the University of Florida or Florida State? Figure 1 challenges a common notion that academic reputation of an institution is a key factor in future income. The academic and economic relevance of degree by institution is an important element necessary to help inform financial decisions associated with a college degree.

The examples presented are not designed to answer all questions and challenges of increasing graduation rates, undergraduate and graduate degrees, but rather to demonstrate that there are different benefits to various degrees paths. As such, there are distinct challenges associated with attaining degrees and the financial benefits identified in Table 1. The institution where a degree is attained may also have distinct benefit as demonstrated in Figure 1. The information presented and Table 1 and Figure 1 applies to both graduate and undergraduate degrees.

As a professor in a doctoral degree program, my colleagues and I have discussed and developed many theories associated with the challenges of completing a graduate degree. It is these discussions that have created the inspiration for this special edition on graduate education. In lieu of our theoretical discussion, it seemed more prudent to ask colleagues with experience on various factors to provide their insight. I invited five colleagues to write on these factors and challenges (and I added a chapter based on my experiences as statistics professor) to complete this edition. The manuscripts are:

THE COMPLEXITIES OF METHODOLOGY IN GRADUATE EDUCATION AND GOALS OF SPECIAL ISSUE BY SEAN MULVENON

1. "Methodology in Graduate School: A statistics professor's perspective of the challenges and benefits" by Sean Mulvenon and Victor C. X. Wang
2. "Navigating graduate school: Insights and recommendations for a productive degree path" by Jenna Cambria

Figure 1. Median first-year earnings by institution. Source: Economic Security Report, Florida Department of Education.



3. "The unknown unknowns: Challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for graduate students from the perspective of postsecondary administration" by Debbie Haus-Vaughn
4. "Challenges and opportunities for international students in graduate eEducation" by Xinya Liang
5. "The scientist-practitioner: The Boulder model for education" by Karee Dunn
6. "Survey research: Methods, issues and the future" by Ernest W. Brewer, Geraldine Torrissi-Steele, and Victor C. X. Wang

Each of these perspectives provides insights to the challenges concomitant to completing a graduate degree. Additionally, the challenges that exist from a faculty perspective in guiding students, establishing appropriate academic expectations, and how this impacts the value of a degree (and the institutional value of the degree) are explored.

The emphasis of these papers may be focus on graduate education, but this special edition represents may be extended to all levels of postsecondary education. I want to thank the authors submitting their manuscripts and sharing their unique perspectives while contributing meaningfully to the discussion on how to improve graduate rates, undergraduate and graduate degrees.

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