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# Conformity or Subversiveness

## *Alternative Approaches to Professional Master's Education in Regional Colleges and Universities*

***In response to major changes in the nation's workplace, consumer demand for master's education in the professions has grown rapidly over the last two decades. Today, regional institutions grant two of every five master's degrees awarded in the United States. Drawing on data from a national study of master's programs, the authors discuss three approaches to master's education that they identified in regional colleges and universities: conventional, interactive, and collaborative. Readers are invited to assess critically their own involvement in master's education in light of these three approaches.***

During the past several decades, changes in the nature of knowledge, work, and the economy have fueled consumer demand for master's education in the professions. From 1970 to 1990, the total number of master's degrees annually awarded increased by 48 percent, with more than four-fifths conferred in the fields of business, education, engineering, nursing, and public affairs. The number of colleges and universities offering master's programs likewise increased—from 621 institutions in 1961 to more than 1,100 by the late 1980s. In 1990, regional institutions granted two out of every five master's degrees in the United States.

In contrast to the superordinate emphasis national universities place on research and publication for national and international audiences, regional institutions generally emphasize teaching, research, and service activities designed to meet their regional constituents' needs. As Lois Cronholm stated in volume 2, number 2 of *Metropolitan Universities*, regional institutions—particularly those located in urban settings—aim "to bring distinctive benefits to their communities." To use John Bardo's words in volume 1, number 1 of this journal, these universities "focus" on "the total educational needs of [their] area." (p. 42)

In light of the regional orientation and heavy involvement in master's education of these institutions, the question arises: What approaches to

professional master's education do metropolitan universities employ to address the educational needs of their communities? Based on data collected as part of a national study on master's education in the United States, we learned that faculty and administrators in regional universities used one of three approaches: conventional, interactive, or collaborative. The approach chosen not only shaped the overall character of master's programs but also significantly affected evaluations of experiences by all constituents: students, alumni, and employers. We constructed these three approaches on the basis of 311 ninety-minute, open-ended interviews we held with faculty, program and institutional administrators, students, alumni, and employers in nineteen master's programs at fifteen regional universities located throughout the United States. Eight established and emerging professional fields were represented: applied anthropology, business administration, education, engineering, environmental studies, microbiology, nursing, and theater. In six of the nineteen cases, the department conferred both the master's and doctorate. In about one-half of the programs, the majority of students completed their studies on a part-time basis.

Our examination of the three approaches is divided into two parts. First, we analyze each approach in terms of four program-related dimensions emphasized by those interviewed: purpose, faculty-constituent interaction, curricular learning experiences, and the quality and value of their master's experiences. Second, we suggest that these approaches represent three broad views of professional master's education in regional universities. We conclude by enjoining the reader to assess critically his or her involvement in master's education in light of these three views.

## Three Approaches to Professional Master's Education

### *Conventional Approach*

As our title suggests, the conventional approach to professional master's education was the most traditional of the three approaches identified in regional institutions. Faculty and administrators in master's programs who chose a conventional approach focused on generating research for the academic community and providing predoctoral scholarly training to master's students. As we learned in our study, this approach conforms to the traditional arts and sciences model of graduate study commonly found in national research universities.

Faculty and administrators told us that they embraced this conventional approach largely as a means for developing a national reputation for their department. As a longtime faculty member in a microbiology program explained, a few years ago the department "took someone else's model and adapted it. We hired new faculty based on their research records and their potential and capabilities. It was a purposeful decision. We are trying to compete with the real universities." Similarly, an administrator in another program said that he and his faculty colleagues chose this conventional approach as a part of their "positioning strategy" to become "one of the top-25 engineering departments" in the country.

In describing this conventional approach, faculty and program administrators communicated two broad purposes for their master's program. First, and most important, they emphasized that it should serve academe by providing students with the scholarly training and background needed to pursue their doctorate. Indeed, many faculty told us that they viewed the master's as the first two years of doctoral study. As one professor put it: "Basically, what I've always thought—and this is the truth here—is that there isn't much difference between a master's and a Ph.D. except the amount of time that a student puts into it. I think starting out the first two years, the requirements for a master's degree and a Ph.D. are virtually identical....As far as course work and what's expected of students, I think it's pretty similar."

Faculty and administrators articulated another, albeit secondary, purpose for their master's program: to fulfill their regional public service mission, it should offer a terminal professional master's degree and consulting services provided by the faculty. Although this secondary purpose more adequately addressed student and employer needs (few interviewees expressed interest in becoming—or hiring—doctorally trained professionals) than the first, many faculty and administrators indicated that their master's programs better prepared students for doctoral study than for professional positions in the nonuniversity workplace. As one microbiology professor explained, "I think an idealized master's would be a technical degree where they [students] learn specific skills, have good lab and science experience, and could move into a lab or administrative job....The ideal master's would not be a mini-Ph.D. Right now, [our master's] degree is halfway to a Ph.D. and is not well-rounded. [It's] a retrofit."

*Faculty-constituent interactions in conventional master's programs were generally hierarchical and one-way.*

Faculty-constituent interactions in conventional master's programs were generally hierarchical and one-way: faculty disseminated the theoretical knowledge and skills of their discipline to students who, in turn, received and mastered that knowledge. Employers and other constituents then "consumed" faculty and program graduate's scholarly expertise in the workplace and community. Participants at different levels in the hierarchy seldom engaged in ongoing interactions with one another. For example, one professor said he "rarely" learned anything from students and that "it usually has to be you [the professor] instructing them [the student]." For their part, students frequently told us that faculty paid little attention to them—both in and outside of class. As one student put it, "I paid good money to go there and to get a good education, and I ended up spending a lot of time teaching myself. The faculty didn't spend any time with you. They didn't give enough."

Many faculty and employers also emphasized that they rarely interacted with one another, except when faculty solicited research funding from regional industries or when employers asked faculty to serve as consultants to their businesses. One employer, for example, told us that while he was initially pleased that faculty asked him to serve on an

employee's thesis committee, his delight quickly faded when the department chair solicited his company for research funding. Time and again, faculty made it clear that serving academe through research and doctoral education is their first priority and that interacting with practitioners, employers, or other regional constituents is a tertiary activity in their department.

Consonant with their primary focus on preparing students for doctoral study, faculty and administrators using a conventional approach in their master's program emphasized traditional scholarly training and learning experiences for students. Relying principally on classroom-based lecture and lecture-discussions, faculty taught specialized theoretical knowledge and research skills to students, who then demonstrated their mastery of this material on course tests and, occasionally, in a thesis or comprehensive examination. Students in these programs rarely engaged in hands-on activities (such as group projects, case studies, and clinical, laboratory, or performance activities) designed to link theory with practice.

In evaluating this conventional approach to professional master's education, many interviewees spoke appreciatively about the solid foundation of "theoretical knowledge and perspectives" that students acquired in these programs. Further, many noted that students strengthened their analytical, written communication, and research skills. One engineering alumnus, for example, told us that the scholarly training he received during his master's improved his "problem-solving ability. I know more now, and I can draw analogies in areas I wasn't exposed to before."

Positive evaluations notwithstanding, we learned from students, alumni, and employers that this approach to professional master's education often marginalized workplace and "applied" knowledge. Many indicated that faculty seldom related "theoretical knowledge" in their field to applications in the "real world"; were often uninformed about developments in the workplace; only occasionally brought "practitioners" into their classes to discuss professional issues; and often "neglected" students who planned to return to the workplace after completing their master's degree. Similarly, interviewees pointed out that faculty seldom engaged in "applied" research or service activities related to the technological, economic, or social needs of their region. In a microbiology program where institutional administrators established a center to facilitate technology transfer between their university and regional industry, several professors complained that this initiative was "too applied" and "took faculty away from the pure goals of knowledge." Faculty in other programs embraced a more instrumental view on service: many noted that they occasionally served as "expert consultants" to regional companies and organizations primarily to "supplement" their salaries or to secure release time from teaching.

In broad strokes, students and employers evaluated conventional professional master's programs as "too academic," "impractical," and "unrelated to the real world." Many told us that by marginalizing workplace-related knowledge and experiences, treating the master's as a steppingstone to the Ph.D., and focusing almost exclusively on academic audiences, conventional professional master's programs contributed little

to meeting the educational needs of their region, either by preparing students as "practitioners" for the nonuniversity workplace or by working with others in addressing regional issues.

### *Interactive Approach*

In another set of programs in our study, faculty and administrators employed what we term an interactive approach to professional master's education. We learned that, in many ways, this approach resembles the traditional model of graduate professional education found in many professional schools in national universities, where faculty members first provide students with a foundation of disciplinary-based theoretical knowledge before teaching them relevant practice-based technical knowledge and skills.

Faculty and administrators who embraced an interactive approach articulated two purposes for their master's program. First, most indicated that their program should prepare "practitioner-experts" for the regional nonuniversity workplace. One professor, for instance, told us that their master's program in business administration (M.B.A.) aimed to "service industry by preparing students with a kind of practitioner-expertise for job opportunities available in our region....I'd say we're a boot camp, if you will, that prepares students with the expertise and the credentials to move forward in their companies." In the same vein, an education faculty member said that the master's program was designed to "create effective practitioners" for local middle schools.

Second, faculty and administrators emphasized that their master's program should provide "client-centered" services to regional constituents. These services included "customer-friendly" nontraditional delivery structures that allowed full-time working professionals to pursue their master's studies at convenient times and locations; "client-based" career planning and placement assistance for students and employers; "expert" faculty consultations with area businesses and human service agencies; and assorted community-sponsored initiatives. Speaking to this purpose, one administrator remarked that faculty in the program were not like "so many academics in business schools that are...so far removed from what the profession is really interested in. That is not the case here....The type of faculty we have here is responsive to what managers really think is important." Another administrator told us that the education program "took seriously our institution's commitment to public service" by offering master's classes at several off-campus regional sites and encouraging faculty to engage in research and consulting activities with practitioners in area schools.

Faculty-constituent interactions in this set of master's programs often followed a traditional "expert-client" script: faculty delivered "expert" knowledge to clients who "contracted" their services through formal classes, informal advisory meetings, and consultations in the nonuniversity workplace. Hierarchical "expert-client" role expectations defined the character of these interactions. For instance, in referring to his interactions with students, one professor said: "With these students, I pretty much am the expert. Nobody is going to challenge me on what

I have to say. It rarely ever happens. These students really expect me to dispense information—they sort of look up to you as the major focus of information." A student reiterated this point: "I wanted professors in my M.B.A. program who would be definite in their goals and experts in their fields. I didn't want a course where students did reports and spoke all the time and that was the course. After all, I was paying money to hear the professor—I don't mind if students get up and speak during class—but I wanted to learn from the professor. They're the experts."

Hierarchical "expert-client" relationships also characterized faculty-employer interactions in this set of programs. Several faculty and administrators, for example, told us that regional employers often contracted their services to consult on various management, financial, educational, technological, and planning issues in their organizations. An administrator noted that faculty in the education program set up a university-business school partnership where faculty interacted with area teachers and provided them with expert advice on curriculum development. And, in somewhat of a role reversal, some faculty and administrators said that they invited feedback from employers—as "expert-practitioners"—in order to make their programs "more responsive" to "client needs."

*Many interviewees favorably assessed the "interactive" approach in this set of professional master's programs.*

Faculty and administrators using an interactive approach in their master's programs designed sequential theory-to-practice curricular learning experiences for students. For the most part, faculty transmitted "disciplinary-based" theoretical knowledge and "practice-based" technical knowledge and skills to students through classroom lectures and lecture-discussions. Occasionally, however, faculty invited practicing professionals to their classes. These individuals, in the words of one professor, "passed on their practical knowledge and expertise to students." Once this "expert" knowledge was delivered, faculty then required students to apply the theory and skills they learned in class to "real-world" professional problems through various interactive, hands-on activities, such as case study simulations, group projects and presentations, and internships. In effect, faculty in this set of programs divided "theory" and "practice" into two discrete categories, each characterized by distinct instructional activities.

Many interviewees favorably assessed the "interactive" approach faculty and administrators used in this set of professional master's programs. To begin, most indicated that these programs provided comprehensively trained "practitioner-experts" for their region: program graduates had a "solid foundation" of knowledge and technical skills, enhanced professional confidence, and improved performance in the workplace. Representing the perspective of many of his peers, one business student summarized his experience in these terms: "I feel like I have the knowledge now. I feel like I can really run spreadsheets, do cost-benefit analyses, and write effective marketing strategies. This has really given me the confidence to go out there and be a little more demanding about what I want....I really feel like I can be very effective in the business world now."

Many interviewees also spoke appreciatively about the variety of "client-centered expert services" faculty provided to regional constituents. In contrast to faculty in "conventional" programs, we learned that faculty in the "interactive" programs responded more frequently to employer needs by providing them with informal advice, engaging in formal consulting arrangements, conducting applied research projects, delivering on-site instruction and staff development seminars, and developing nontraditional delivery structures that allowed employees to complete their master's degree on a part-time basis at convenient times in nearby locations.

On the down side, interviewees in some of these programs suggested that meeting regional needs through "client-centered expert services" was carried too far. For instance, one theater professor said that in "trying to be all things to all people" in their community, program faculty could "not resolve what we should be offering or what we should be focusing on. As a result, our students often don't get the specialized training they need." A faculty member in an education program told us that the department currently provides classes at several off-campus locations to meet statewide needs for teachers with master's degrees. While he supported this initiative, he worried that "too much responsiveness" could undermine the quality of services offered to clients. In his words: "The faculty in this program really want to serve our students, but we also want to ensure that there is some degree of quality in what we're doing. Right now, I think we're so service-oriented that we've become a kind of Statue of Liberty institution. You know, give us your weak, your feeble, give us everybody and we'll take them all and be a torchbearer for education. I think that's a mistake...to provide these classes and meet student demands and, at the same time, try and maintain a quality program."

## *Collaborative Approach*

In a third set of cases in our study, faculty and administrators approached professional master's education from a collaborative perspective in which faculty, students, employers, and other community members mutually learned from one another both in and outside of their programs. We learned that this approach differed significantly from conventional and interactive approaches, especially in regard to the emphases placed on nonhierarchical collegial interactions, the integration of theory with practice, and program participants' commitment to community service.

In discussing this collaborative approach, faculty and administrators articulated two interrelated purposes for their master's program. First, they stressed that their program should develop students as skilled social stewards—individuals committed to serving their profession and region. To illustrate, a program administrator told us that faculty in their global education program felt strongly that "we need to give students a feeling of efficacy...that we are not just talking about involving students in some conceptual way of thinking globally, but also acting locally...that there are ways that we can empower them as teachers and they can empower

students to actually go out and determine what it is about the United States or about the world that they think could be better. And I think we teach them the skills to do that." Similarly, a professor said that faculty in the nursing program encouraged students to view themselves as "patient advocates" who served their patients and profession by "influencing and improving the health care delivery system for their clients." In a nutshell, faculty in the "collaborative" programs anticipated that the perspectives and skills students learned would, in turn, "ripple out" through their students' service—or stewardship—to benefit other individuals, professionals, and community groups in their region.

Closely related is a second purpose for their master's program communicated by faculty and administrators: it should address regional educational needs and issues through collaborative service activities, research projects, and educational exchanges involving faculty, students, employers, and other community members. An administrator in an applied anthropology program represented the view of many interviewees in this set of programs when he told us that he and his faculty colleagues jointly worked with students, government officials, social service professionals, and community members in "understanding their region and coming up with solutions for the region...[that's] always been my understanding of what a master's program should be."

*Many faculty emphasized that students, employers, and community members have important insights and ideas to contribute.*

To foster this collaboration, faculty engaged in frequent and collaborative interactions with constituents. Many faculty emphasized to us that students, employers, and community members had important insights and ideas to contribute, and that by interacting with them as "colleagues," program participants could learn from one another through collegial dialogue. Indeed, we spoke with many faculty in these programs who openly criticized traditional, hierarchical faculty-constituent role expectations, emphasizing that they did not want students or employers to view them as "learned authorities" whose only role was to transmit expert knowledge and give scholarly advice.

Students frequently indicated that they greatly enjoyed and benefited from collaborative interactions with faculty. One microbiology student, for example, described faculty as "collaborative, not competitive....Here faculty are just so into what they're doing—they're into it so that they pull you into it. It isn't just that `this is my baby and I'm teaching you about it and I'm going to give you this information.' No, here they pull you into it—they care about you and they really want to help you learn." Another student remarked that, in his applied anthropology master's program, "There's no distancing, no hierarchical structure [between faculty and students]. Some professors can make you feel like you aren't equal to them—and I've seen that in other departments—but there's none of that here."

Similarly, many employers spoke enthusiastically about the collaborative exchanges they had with faculty in these programs. One hospital employer described the collegial relationships shared with nursing

faculty and graduate students: "We engage in collaborative research projects with them and many of our nurses serve as preceptors to master's students. Faculty also invite us to give guest lectures at the university. We share a very collaborative relationship." An employer associated with another program told us that faculty "established critical ties" between the university and regional community by sponsoring neighborhood leadership training workshops that "opened up lines of communication that were nonexistent [between the university and community] by bringing together groups of people who before believed they had no common interests....[They have] taught people in our community that they are not isolated and that they do have...channels for action."

Faculty and administrators using a collaborative approach encouraged students to integrate theory with practice in their master's programs. We learned that they did this by weaving hands-on learning into the fabric of their entire curriculum: through courses, formal internships or clinical experiences, and various outside-of-class activities. To illustrate, one administrator told us that in the applied anthropology program, "Students get involved not just in one practicum, but in a series of projects. They go from one [project] to the other and then they become interactive with you. And then we want them to evaluate, to reflect—to bring that back to a course and say, 'How does this fit in with the literature? What does it mean?'" Unlike their colleagues in the conventional and interactive programs, faculty using a collaborative approach did not view theory and practice as discrete categories of knowledge—each associated with different instructional activities. Rather, they saw all knowledge in "connected," dynamic, and inseparable terms and encouraged students to do likewise through a variety of curricular learning experiences in their master's programs.

In evaluating this collaborative approach to professional master's education, many interviewees communicated that students graduated from these programs as skilled social stewards. Students and alumni, for example, frequently remarked that they developed the skills and confidence needed to act upon their commitment to serving their regional community. As one alumnus put it: "During my master's, I began to feel a real dedication to give something back [to my community]. That became more focused for me during my master's....The master's taught me how to become actively involved, and I learned how to play this out. Before, maybe I was just a good neighbor as opposed to being a community servant." Similarly, another alumnus said: "Before [the master's] I was just a robot....I was a good staff nurse. But it wasn't like anything I can do now....[Now] I think that we [nurses] help the community through education, support, listening to families and patients—and nobody else is going to do that. Nurses are the leaders in community health support."

*Many employers emphasized that students from collaborative programs are highly skilled "movers and shakers."*

Many employers emphasized that students from these programs were highly skilled "movers and shakers" in the workplace. Indeed, an

employer of nursing graduates told us that she so strongly valued these graduates that she would like to "clone them. They're just a different kind of person after they leave that [master's] program....They seem to be more well-rounded, enthusiastic, self-starter types."

Employers likewise indicated that faculty and students in the collaborative programs made important contributions to their region. Many indicated that faculty nurtured collaborative university-community relationships through a variety of activities, including joint applied research projects; cosponsored community development workshops; collaborative partnerships with regional business, health and social service agencies, and county government; and various educational exchanges where practitioners, faculty, and students actively taught and learned from one another in both on- and off-campus settings.

Notwithstanding these positive evaluations, interviewees expressed two concerns about the collaborative approach used in this set of master's programs. First, a handful of faculty mentioned that some students were initially apprehensive about the nontraditional, nonhierarchical approaches to interaction and instruction they used. For the most part, however, they told us that as students became involved with other program participants, they developed increased confidence in their abilities to make meaningful contributions to the learning process. Second, some faculty indicated that their commitment to serving master's students and their regional community often was not shared—or supported—by campus administrators. Many remarked that their efforts went unrecognized in institutional promotion, tenure, and merit reviews.

## Conformity or Subversiveness: Views on Professional Master's Education in Regional Universities

In volume 1, number 1 of *Metropolitan Universities*, John Bardo argued that "a metropolitan university is not merely a university in a city, it is of the city" (p. 42). Building on Bardo's definition, we maintain that the three approaches outlined above represent three broad views of professional master's education in regional institutions as either *above, in,* or *of* the region. We consider each of these views below.

Faculty and administrators using a conventional approach in professional master's programs often viewed their programs as *above* the concerns of their region. We learned that they consistently tailored their programs around a traditional arts and sciences model of graduate education and readily conformed to its hierarchical preferences for addressing national issues over regional issues, serving academic audiences over regional audiences, conducting pure research over applied research, advising doctoral students over master's students, emphasizing theory over practice, and engaging in research activities over public service activities. Students, alumni, and employers repeatedly stressed that faculty in these programs took more interest in—and focused their master's curriculum on—"keeping students for themselves" in academe than in preparing them as practitioners for the nonuniversity workplace. They likewise underscored that faculty took little interest in working with

nonuniversity professionals on regionally focused research or service-related activities.

Faculty employing an interactive approach in professional master's programs generally viewed their programs as serving educational needs *in* their region. Interviewees told us repeatedly that faculty consistently prepared students with the "expert" knowledge and skills to assume professional careers in the regional nonuniversity workplace and offered a variety of "client-centered expert services" to regional constituents. Although faculty frequently designed their master's programs around a traditional model of graduate professional education, we learned that they did not conform entirely to its norms and conventions. For certain, faculty embraced traditional "expert-client" role relations and the bifurcation of theory and practice in these programs. But they also circumvented this model by providing a wide range of nontraditional "customer-friendly" services to their clients. These "expert services," many faculty and employers emphasized, responded to, and met regional needs.

Faculty and administrators who used a collaborative approach to professional master's education viewed their programs as being *of* the region. Unlike many of their colleagues in the conventional and interactive programs, faculty in this set of programs frequently questioned and examined traditional academic norms. For instance, many faculty did not view the university and the region as wholly separate entities but as interdependent parts of a common whole. They worked the interface between academe and the workplace by participating in joint research projects, collaborative partnerships, and educational exchanges where faculty, students, employers, and community members engaged in on-going dialogue about and developed mutual solutions to regional problems. Many faculty also criticized traditional and hierarchical faculty-constituent role expectations and chose instead to develop collegial and collaborative relations with constituents. Finally, faculty in this set of programs did not accept the conventional dichotomy between theoretical and applied knowledge. Rather, they saw all knowledge in connected terms and encouraged students to do likewise by requiring them to participate in a variety of hands-on learning experiences. In Donald Schon's words (See Suggested Readings), faculty in collaborative programs designed curricula that prepared students as "reflective practitioners" for their respective professions.

In volume 2, number 2 of this journal, Lois Cronholm said: "Metropolitan universities are pioneers in the recognition of major flaws in the education system and in programs to correct those flaws. We are still a long way from the right to congratulate ourselves....But I suspect that the metropolitan university may be closer to meaningful reform than others." (p. 6) Although not all of the professional master's programs in our sample of regional institutions were subversive of traditional practices, to a considerable extent our findings provide support for Cronholm's interpretation. Indeed, many of the regional master's programs we studied provided highly valued alternatives to the conventional approach to graduate education in the arts and sciences and successfully defined professional master's programs as either *in* or *of* the region. Still, we

caution that this subversiveness—which was especially evident in the collaborative approach, less so in the interactive approach—may not work well for all programs. We suggest that faculty critically consider these three broad views of professional master's education and then choose an approach that is most appropriate to their circumstances. Above all, we invite faculty and administrators to use our findings as a thinking device to generate continuing dialogue within their professional master's programs.

## *Note*

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## *Suggested Readings*

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