

Reflections on Graduate School

"For me, graduate school was a delicate balancing act. One of two in my cohort married with children, the challenges exceeded my imagination regarding work/life balance. To work in student affairs, one must be generally committed to a significant deal of evening and weekend work and particularly through graduate school (at least at VT). With a family, this is often difficult. Academically, I found a good support network with adjunct faculty and some program faculty as well. Opportunities to expand knowledge were easily accessible as well as ability to attend professional development activities. University departments that provided graduate assistantships to HESA graduate students were extraordinarily supportive and encouraging on many occasions."

Kara E. Lattimer, MA
Virginia Tech, 2002

"As someone who had concerns about two more years of school, I can confidently say that I made the right decision to attend graduate school. While you may feel like you are ready for a change by the time you graduate college, know that graduate school is profoundly different from your undergraduate experience. In graduate school you are specifically focusing on what you are passionate about - in this case, student affairs - and having that passion makes all the difference. Graduate school gives you a unique opportunity to specifically explore your passion, while expanding on the foundation you built for yourself during your undergraduate experience. Moreover, for those of in student affairs, graduate school gives you the opportunity to apply a theoretical foundation to describe your own undergraduate experience - after spending four years going through college and witnessing my own development, I'm now learning why I went through such development and how I can help future students develop and grow just as I did."

Tyler Blair
University of Kansas, 2009

"My experience as a master's student at Penn State was nothing short of life-changing. Through my assistantship, various internships, coursework, and interactions with students, staff, faculty, and peers, I was not only more than prepared for my first professional position in student affairs, I quite literally came to understand my own self in a new light. Graduate school helped me leap past my own assumptions of what I knew to be true and what I was capable of learning, feeling, experiencing, and doing. If you are looking for a learning outcomes-based program with a social justice and advocacy-based philosophy, you should explore the options at Penn State and its College Student Affairs program.

Also - as an openly gay man coming from a relatively urban institution (Maryland), moving to Central Pennsylvania was nothing sort of a cultural shock. I also wasn't prepared to move from a rather racially diverse school to one that was not so diverse. Penn State's commitment to social justice allowed me to vent frustrations about the lack of a "gay scene." I never felt afraid to say "being a gay man in State College is hard sometimes." I always had support from supervisors, professors, friends, and colleagues. I was still able to find my community (and have lots of fun) as an openly gay man."

Tony Kraft, MEd
The Pennsylvania State University, 2008

- *Gaining experience outside of the classroom is the most important concept to grasp in graduate school. Internships, practicums, full or part time employment all provide perspective as well as giving your resume a boost.*
- *Every department will have tenured faculty who look out for your personal and career well-being. However, you will also be exposed to professors who care only about their research.*
- *The relationship with your advisor should be fantastic, if not, even though it is difficult, find another one.*
- *Listen to feedback from peers and work your tail off to differentiate yourself in a positive manner.*

Imants Jaunarajs, MA
Western Michigan University, 2006

"I loved Graduate School. My professors were very knowledgeable, helpful, and encouraging. It was an educational challenge that taught me just as much about myself as it did my specific subject. It was nice to learn history and theory behind the job I had been doing for a few years. This made me a better professional. My cohort was my rock. We did a number of things together and really supported each other during our two years. To this day, I still stay in contact with some of my cohort members regularly and consider them all good friends and great colleagues. "

Matt Scruggs, MEd
Virginia Tech, 2006

"The SAPHE Program at the University of Virginia is a one-year, intensive program focusing on the field of Student Affairs within the Higher Education system. Bridging courses from Counselor Education and Higher Education, students have the ability to live and learn within one of the nation's most respected institutions. All SAPHE students are required to participate in an internship within the University or a neighboring institution. The program places heavy emphasis on knowledge of student development, coupled with a keen understanding of university structure and management.

Professors within the program are a combination of well-known researchers, authors and practitioners in the field. Current Student Affairs staff at the University are common in the classroom, either as lead professors or guests. Students are encouraged to put their education to work through a variety of intern opportunities on grounds. Classroom discussion is open and collegial, adhering to Thomas Jefferson's education philosophies. The 36 credit program is designed to be completed in one calendar year, but does accept part-time students.

From a personal perspective, I would not have traded my UVa experience for any other. The ability to complete the program in one year was certainly challenging, but allowed for an intense and fast-paced learning experience. Additionally, the advantage of only incurring one year of financial aid was a great attractor. I enjoyed the classroom experience, where classes are shared with Ph.D. candidates as well as the occasional undergrad. The variety of perspectives, experiences and learning levels added great value to my education. The University of Virginia has consistently been ranked one of the top institutions in the country, and the education I received there reflects this sentiment. Aside from its beautiful architecture, setting and traditions, the students, faculty and staff at UVa make the college experience unlike any other."

Erin Gray, MEd
University of Virginia, 2006

"I recently graduated from UVM's HESA program, and am working my first professional position in residence life at the University of Arizona. I decided to attend a student affairs graduate school when I was heading into my senior year in college. I realized that I'd had so many mentors who had meant so much to me, and I wanted to be able to do that for other college students. Specifically, my passion and understanding of social justice began with the experiences I had as a student at the University of Michigan. When I was searching for graduate programs (I felt, and still feel) that my purpose in life is to be an advocate for social justice, and the best way I could do that was by working with college students in their daily lives. My social justice journey began at Michigan, but it was important for me to find a student affairs preparation program that would allow me to do the identity work I needed to do so that I could best work with students. I could not have found a better program than that at the University of Vermont. It was EXACTLY what I wanted, and while not always easy, those two years are without a doubt a time when I grew more than any other. My experience working with my professors, in a cohort, and for the residence life program at UVM had a profound impact on my personal and professional life. There are all types of graduate programs, but I knew I specifically wanted to do student affairs (planning to get my doctorate in Higher Education Administration eventually), and specifically a program with a strong social justice and experience based emphasis. I encourage anyone who is searching programs to do your research and fit the right kind of program for you. This is a wonderful field to be in, and I feel lucky everyday that I found my true calling."

Hannah Roberts, MEd
University of Vermont, 2008

"Graduate school is like taking your favorite classes from college -- the really great ones that kept you up at night talking to your friends, the ones you couldn't wait to get to -- no matter how early in the morning they were. Graduate study gives you a chance to think about, write about and become an expert in your favorite academic topic under the close mentorship of a professor who is invested in your success. You will gain more from the experience if you have a well developed intellectual interest. Finally, graduate school is like being in final exam week of college -- for two to seven years. If you aren't ready to work that hard don't go to graduate school yet. "

Justina Grubor, MEd
University of Maryland, College Park, 2006

"Pursuing a graduate degree in the field of higher education is unlike any other experience. It provides students the unique opportunity to apply what they have learned in the classroom to a real-life learning lab: your campus. Throughout my graduate school experience I took advantage of the learning opportunities a college campus can provide you and got involved with projects and committees that would enhance my understanding of higher education and provide me with experiences in several student personnel functions. It was my involvement across the college campus that helped to bridge the gap between the theories and concepts I was learning in the classroom to the experiences I was encountering in my graduate assistantship."

Jenna Roth Nobili, MA
University of Central Florida, 2008

"My experience at Virginia Tech in the Higher Education program was one of the most formative years of my life. I gained an immense amount of practical and professional experience in the classroom and with my graduate assistantships. The HED program is well connected to all Student Affairs offices on campus and in the surrounding community and works really hard to make sure that the student experience is holistic. The faculty are personable and friendly and committed to student success. The cohort model also helped me feel connected to the institution and provided an environment that was very fulfilling. Blacksburg and the university itself are beautiful, which added to my educational experience.

As I am currently pursuing my doctoral degree in Higher Adult and Lifelong Education at Michigan State University, I often reflect upon my years at Virginia Tech because it has prepared me well for this new academic rigor that I am experiencing in Michigan."

Pamela Roy, MEd
Virginia Tech (MEd), 2004

"Graduate school is completely different from undergraduate. You have the opportunity to dig deep into your interests and surround yourself with people that share the same passion. You learn from professors who have worked in the career you are striving towards and you finally begin to feel like an expert in your area of study. Graduate school is a time where you truly find yourself, you begin to believe in your talents and you know that your hard work will pay off. The people you surround yourself with in graduate school will be the people who continue to support you, especially in Student Affairs, because they are the only ones who really know what you do and what you are going through!"

Sara Hartley, MEd
University of South Carolina, 2008

"Graduate school was a wonderful stimulating environment. In fact, it was so intellectually stimulating that it became quite emotionally draining. Between thinking about coursework and reflecting on personal identity, I was really is forced to grow as a person. I am definitely glad that I spent a year working before I went back to graduate school. Had I not, the process may have been overwhelming and I was glad to have the professional experience to contribute to course discussions.

In terms of choosing a program, I think it is helpful to ask oneself whether a counseling-based or administration-based program better aligns with your interest. Finding the right program and advisor can make a big difference in how one grows as a professional and scholar."

Trent A. Engbers, MA
University of Maryland, 2002