Focus on Industrial and Organizational Psychology Master's Programs: Benefits and Challenges

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Graduate programs focusing on educating master's students have become increasingly common. Much discussion revolves around PhD programs but less attention is given to master's programs, even though their number has grown greatly in the last 20 years. Thus, I would like to focus on the benefits and challenges of master's programs. In particular, I would like to focus on the benefits to students in attending a master's program, what faculty members should expect when joining a faculty specializing in masters' education, and the hallmarks of a high-quality master's program.

Thus, I asked three directors of master's programs for their input regarding these points: **Dr. Stuart Sidle**, coordinator of I-O Psychology Graduate Programs at the University of New Haven; **Dr. Elizabeth Shoenfelt**, director of the Industrial-Organizational Psychology Graduate Program at Western Kentucky University; and **Dr. Carol Shoptaugh**, program coordinator of the Master of Science I-O Program at Missouri State University. I thank them for their useful and insightful responses.

1. What are the benefits for students of attending a master's program versus a PhD program?

Stuart Sidle: If a student isn't passionate about conducting research and is not that interested in an academic career then a terminal master's program may be a better fit. Terminal master's programs can be a relatively fast way to gain specialized knowledge that can jump start a career. In our program, most of the students are interested in breaking into corporate human resource roles or consulting jobs. We also have students already in corporate human resource positions that are looking to advance. For both of these categories of students, the terminal master's in industrial-organizational psychology provides exactly what they are looking for. Then, of course, there are the obvious benefits of master's programs regarding time and convenience (e.g., part-time programs, weekend programs, etc.).

Betsy Shoenfelt: Students can earn a degree and enter the job market in only 2 years with good technical I-O skills. Although starting salaries are typ-

ically lower than for a PhD (excluding academic salaries in psychology), this difference declines across time such that 10 years out there may be little difference between salaries.

Carol Shoptaugh: I would like to preface my responses with the caveat that my comments are reflective of my experiences with the Master of Science program at Missouri State University and may not be true of all master's level programs in I-O psychology.

- Students in I-O master's programs, like those in doctoral programs, are trained utilizing the scientist–practitioner model; for students in master's programs this affords the opportunity to choose different career paths (doctoral training or applied work) before committing to doctoral education.
- Much of the focus in the master's program at MSU is on the development of skills necessary for practitioners; e.g., research and statistical skills for job analysis, performance appraisal, measurement of individual difference, program development and evaluation, and so on. These skills in conjunction with an emphasis on communication skill development, and the role of contextual influences, philosophical, ethical and legal issues, allow our alumni to enter the workforce immediately and perform competently.
- For students choosing to continue their education, these skills also provide a stronger skill set than most undergraduates entering doctoral programs; giving our alums a competitive edge in doctoral course work. These students have completed a thesis, have likely presented their work at conferences, and hence are better able to conduct independent research than the traditional first-year doctoral student. Additionally, the master's program affords these students the time to identify areas of I-O that are of particular interest for both research and practice.

2. Are there any differences between being a faculty member in a master's program versus a PhD program?

Stuart Sidle: Yes, in addition to larger class sections, faculty in master's programs will be serving students with different goals and needs than students in PhD programs. Master's students tend to want knowledge and skills that match their specific career interests. As a result, students appreciate it when instructors put an applied spin on their classes. In other words, master's students usually want to know how the theory and research methodology will help them make decisions in their workplace. Another difference is that students in PhD programs tend to be proactive in partnering with faculty on research. Conversely, in master's programs the majority of students I've worked with are more interested in field experiences than collaborating with their faculty on research (e.g., yet, each year I get at least one with a passion for research).

Betsy Shoenfelt: Answers to Questions 2 and 3 are related (please see both responses).

Differences lie in the nature of the students and the nature of the courses. With students in the program for only 4 semesters, course content is critical to ensure requisite competencies are learned in such a short time period. Our courses have a very applied focus and target the practical skills needed upon graduation. In the classroom, student presentations may need to be "supplemented" by faculty with comments that clarify and sometimes correct misinformation. Some master's students study "for the test" rather than because of intrinsic interest in the discipline and are likely to read only material specifically assigned for a class. Master's students are less able to work autonomously on research, requiring more direction on a more frequent basis.

Generally, a faculty member in a master's program needs to place a greater emphasis on teaching than research as a function of workload assignment. Master's programs tend to have a very strong developmental focus. Our program, for example, has approximately one I-O faculty member for four students; additionally we have strong support from our experimental faculty in the areas of statistics, research methods, and other core areas. This faculty–student ratio affords considerable faculty student interaction and allows us to maintain a strong developmental focus. Students are given greater opportunity to achieve competency within their courses, research, and applied experiences.

3. What challenges, if any, do you believe are unique to master's programs?

Stuart Sidle: Finding a home in their department, their university, and even in SIOP. Sometimes I-O master's students may feel like the ignored middle children in their department with faculty focused on their undergraduate advisees and their doctoral student research partners. At the university level, there may not be services that actually match the needs of the master's level I-O students. I-O master's programs are attracting students from all over the globe and many of them are right out of their undergraduate studies. This population is unique from the typical commuting MBAs who have a few years of work experience or from PhD students who plan on making the university their home for several years. That said, the university services aimed at undergraduates, commuting MBA students, or PhD students may not match the services needed by master's level I-O students. And, at SIOP, even though we now have programs to support a limited number MA level students, I sense that there are many master's students who feel lost at the SIOP meeting. I believe many SIOP members are unaware of the large number of master's level students who are at the annual meeting. These issues put the burden on the I-O master's program faculty to help their students feel at home in their departments, their universities, and in the larger SIOP community.

Betsy Shoenfelt: It can be a challenge to maintain a research program because of a heavier teaching load (typically 12 hours/4 courses a semester) and the nature of directing multiple theses. We admit three students per I-O faculty member each year, meaning we chair an average of three theses a

year. Typically, a thesis that can be completed within the timeframe cannot stand alone as a publication. We typically direct theses outside of our immediate research focus. It is not uncommon to direct three theses each year on entirely unrelated topics.

Carol Shoptaugh: Like doctoral programs, faculty in I-O master's programs must assimilate students into their research programs. In doctoral programs faculty can reasonably expect a student to become involved in their research and eventually develop, expand, and contribute significantly to both their program of research and research productivity. This is much more challenging at the master's level. Students enter research programs in need of skill development before they are real contributors; at the point that they become most productive they graduate, enter doctoral programs, and leave projects largely unfinished. The cyclical nature of this makes research productivity more challenging for faculty teaching in master's programs.

Identifying practicum and internship experiences where students are supervised by I-O practitioners rather than human resources professionals is a second challenge. Many students must be supervised by faculty long distance to receive the I-O support needed to have positive internship experience. Lastly, securing funding for graduate assistantships for recruitment and retention of quality students is another challenge.

4. What do you think are the one or two distinguishing features between a low-quality and high-quality master's program?

Stuart Sidle: Having actual industrial-organizational psychologists as faculty who teach and advise the master's students. Though many psychology departments see the value of offering I-O programs or I-O concentrations, they may not have enough faculty with actual I-O training to support an I-O program. Students may not have the mentors they need if the program relies too heavily on faculty without I-O training or if they rely too heavily on adjuncts or faculty from other departments (e.g., management department) to teach the I-O content courses.

Betsy Shoenfelt: First, high-quality programs have faculty who are involved in the program and are willing to contribute beyond what is required in the classroom by meaningfully engaging students outside of the classroom, such as including them in consulting and research projects. This includes building cohesiveness among students and helping them develop an identity as a master's-level I-O psychologist.

Second, high-quality programs develop a solid foundation in measurement skills (e.g., statistics, psychometrics) and technical skills (e.g., job analysis, criterion development) in addition to softer skills (e.g., knowledge of leadership theory and motivation theory). An important part of this is the completion of a data-based thesis to teach program management, data management, and technical writing skills.

Carol Shoptaugh: I believe there are several features of high-quality programs:

- Student-to-faculty ratio is such that students receive considerable developmental feedback and multiple perspectives on key theoretical and practical issues
- Course work required for program completion is broad based with both I and O side skills competently represented
- Emphasis on both theory and practice versus a predominately practice only approach

5. What piece of advice would you give someone who is interested in being a faculty member in a master's program?

Stuart Sidle: Sometimes it is important to step outside of your research bubble if you want to help your students succeed. You need to be connected with the external environment that matches your students' goals. This usually includes understanding the needs of organizations that are looking to hire students with the skills your master's program provides and knowing what admission committees for doctoral programs are looking for in applicants who have already completed a master's degree.

Betsy Shoenfelt: Money should not be a top priority (because you will likely be in a psychology department where salaries are substantially less than in a business school or in industry) and you should enjoy teaching (because you will likely have a heavy teaching load). Programmatic research will be a challenge. Be prepared to demonstrate the applicability of virtually everything you teach. Despite these factors, teaching in a master's program can be very rewarding as you see your students develop, graduate, and prosper in their jobs.

Carol Shoptaugh: I feel being a faculty member in a master's program is extremely rewarding for someone who enjoys a balance of teaching and research. Master's teaching is likely not conducive to the type of research productivity that is expected at most research one doctoral granting institutions. Additionally, I believe that master's programs receive more first generation college students, those generally less privileged, and those students who had a "slow" start but developed the skills necessary to be successful in graduate education. I believe a genuine love of teaching is required to meet the needs of these students.