

Guidance for Developing a Quality Master's Degree

With an increasing number of ACEND-accredited programs elevating their degree level to a Master's degree, the following table provides guidance around the elements that distinguish a Master's degree from a bachelor's degree. **Please note that scholarly work includes program evaluation, quality improvement projects, comprehensive literature reviews, research project, and thesis.**

Topic Area	Explanation
Final project based on scholarly work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Practice of critical thinking and research skills leads to scholarly work culminating in a final project or capstone to allow students to demonstrate competency at the Master's level. Examples of scholarly work include program evaluation, quality improvement projects, comprehensive literature reviews, research project, and thesis.
Facilities or resources for scholarly work, relevant to the Master's field of study, available either on or off campus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Scholarly work, as explained above, is a large component of Master's programs. Students have access to appropriate resources and facilities on campus or off campus sites for scholarly activities. Examples of resources include access to library databases, SPSS or other data analysis software, or survey software. Scholarly work is supervised by a mentor. The student is able to work independently, focusing their area of specialization.
Demonstrated administrative support for the financial needs, learning resources, physical needs of the program and faculty development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> There is financial support for adequate faculty positions, travel, and scholarly work for both students and faculty. Other faculty development support includes attending and giving conference presentations, writing for publications, participating in professional networking, offered opportunities for grant writing and other collaborative projects. Other resources include technology to support a distance program or on-campus learning facilities, library resources, learning management systems (LMS), and other software.
Graduate assistantships or other leadership opportunities available to graduate students	The program and/or institution facilitate access to leadership skill building activities on or off campus (e.g., graduate assistantships, independent research, or consulting opportunities in the community, speaking engagements, leading campus professional groups, serving on advisory boards, etc.).
Faculty and resources allow for mentoring all students in their area of study	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentoring should be easily accessible and available to all students (related considerations may include faculty to student ratio, mentoring process, frequency of meeting with advisor, etc.). A mentor may be a faculty or preceptor. The institution should provide support for facilitating mentorship in any of these cases. Investigate further if no doctoral level faculty are mentoring and teaching in the program. For distance programs, faculty to student ratio is especially important; if there are more than 25 students per cohort, investigate further to make sure there is appropriate support. Program.
Opportunities to practice critical thinking with interprofessional collaboration	Students work with other professionals to gain confidence in contributing their expertise to the team.
Program length adequate for quality and quantity of graduate level coursework	<p>A typical Master's program is about 24 months. Closely evaluate programs significantly shorter or longer than this.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Shorter programs may lack enough graduate coursework or overload students by expecting a typical graduate coursework to be completed in a shortened timeframe. Longer programs may include unnecessary coursework that add to student costs.
Number of course credits coming from coursework vs SP/SEL hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A typical Master's program contains a minimum of 30 hours of didactic coursework.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If programs have a high number of didactic coursework credits (not counting SEL course credits), assess closely whether all of those credits are needed to fulfill the competencies and Master’s content. • Some programs include supervised practice rotations as separate courses. If too many of the minimum 30 hours course credits come from supervised practice, students may not receive the necessary didactic coursework to warrant a Master’s degree. • If more than 20% of the curriculum is coming from SP/SEL hours, investigate further to make sure there is strong, graduate level didactic content in the SP/SEL courses.
Number of cross-listed or dual-level courses (i.e. courses that include both undergraduate and graduate students, where graduate students have additional responsibilities that elevate the course to the graduate level)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • If there are excessive cross-listed courses the content may not be advanced enough. • Look closely at cross-listed courses and assess projects/ activities/ discussions that elevate the course to the Master’s level. • Having more than 12 credits or 20% of the curriculum cross-listed coursework (whichever is larger) warrants further investigation. Ask program director what state law or regional accreditor allows.
Program-specific objectives capture graduate level outcome expectations (*see below for examples)	
Seminar courses that promote student-led discussion and critical analysis with the guidance of the professor; this should include broad application of the specialization, such as effects on public policy and global health	Graduate level coursework is a concentrated course of study with greater expectations on the student to apply knowledge. There should be a rigorous evaluation of work by professors and peers. Less focus is on knowledge-based exams and more focus is on application of specialized skills in focused disciplines using complex problem-solving and critical thinking.
Students’ progress in their critical thinking skills to understand complexity of field and changing landscape of the field (rather than black and white thinking) and specialize in this knowledge	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program has greater depth than breadth in its specialization area. • Learning activities should include challenges to allow for students to develop skills to navigate the changing environment of the real world.

*Expectations of a Master’s-level graduate:

- a) Demonstrate leadership skills, including actively engaging in mentoring others (scholarship of Teaching);
- b) Integrate problem-solving/critical thinking skills throughout their professional life (scholarship of Application);
- c) Synthesize independent thoughts/critique within their field of expertise (scholarship of Application);
- d) Enter any employment setting and demonstrate confidence in their ability to grow, work independently and be a member of an interprofessional team (scholarship of Integration);
- e) Ability to do independent and collaborative research/inquiry and apply research/evaluation methodology to topic of interest (scholarship of Discovery);
- f) Continue to learn and develop skills as new knowledge/new research data become available (scholarship of Discovery); and
- g) Provide expertise as to how the dietetics field applies to public policy, global health, strategic thinking, etc. (scholarship of Application).