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ABSTRACT

This paper describes selected issues and concerns facing students who are deciding upon a masters or doctoral program in instructional technology. Issues of recognition, program identification, and environment are considered to help students trying to choose a program from the nearly 200 masters level and over 60 doctoral level programs offered by institutions of higher learning in the United States. Several factors utilized by instructional technology students to select their graduate programs are outlined, including program requirements, program emphasis, course offerings, internships, sources for funding, opportunities for student productivity, and reputation of program. Resources available to the student who wishes to gather information about graduate programs in instructional technology are listed, including publications, professional organizations, the ERIC database, and interviews with people involved with the program. (Contains 23 references.) (ALF)

Issues, Factors, and Resources to Consider When Selecting An Instructional Technology Graduate Program

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by

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One of the most significant decisions that a person can make is whether to pursue a graduate degree. If the answer is "yes," many sacrifices of time, money, and energy will have to be made. The rewards for these sacrifices include qualification for professional employment, opportunities for promotion, and greater self-esteem. Instructional technology graduates tend to be in high demand and virtually all obtain employment within a reasonable amount of time (Logan & Brown, 1984; Morgan, 1986). Once the decision to attain an advanced degree has been made, the next important task is the selection of the graduate program.

For the instructional technology student, the selection of a graduate program can be a daunting task. Nearly 200 master's level and over 60 doctoral level programs in instructional technology, or closely allied programs, are offered by institutions of higher learning in the United States (Logan 1990a, Logan, 1990b). This paper will describe selected issues and concerns facing students who are deciding upon a masters or doctoral program in instructional technology, identify factors that potential students should consider when selecting a graduate program, and provide a list of resources to assist students and others interested in information regarding instructional technology graduate education.

ISSUES

In contrast to the student who seeks an advanced degree in an "established" field of education, budding instructional technologists often face an uphill battle when trying to locate a program in their discipline. Much of the problem can be traced to issues of recognition, program identification, and environment.

Recognition

Compared to "established" fields, such as educational psychology, elementary education, and educational administration, instructional technology is a relative newcomer as a recognized academic discipline (Morgan, 1986). Many of those outside of instructional technology are either unaware of the field as a whole (Osguthorpe, 1989), or believe that it is occupied exclusively by media "cart pushers" and computer "tekkies." As a consequence, many students are sent mistakenly to computer science, electronics technology, or television production departments.

Program identification

One of the major obstacles that potential students of instructional technology face is the lack of a standard name for the discipline. Although "instructional technology" and "educational technology" are the most prevalent titles used by graduate programs in this field, over 60 other titles were identified by Schiffman and Gansneder (1987). A student wishing to pursue advanced studies in high school instruction can easily locate programs in "secondary education," while the aspiring principal may have to broaden the search to include both "educational administration" and "educational leadership" titles. The instructional technology student, however, must wade through a myriad of names, such as instructional media technology, training and learning, instructional science, computers in education, instructional design and development, library instructional media, educational communications and technology, instructional systems, and interactive technologies (Schiffman & Gansneder, 1987).

Environment

Another issue unique to instructional technology is its strong presence outside academia. Elementary, secondary, and educational administration graduates are found, almost exclusively, in schools and colleges. Graduates of instructional technology programs, however, can be found in business and industry, government agencies, non-profit organizations, libraries, the military, and in the schools and colleges (Hutchinson & Rankin, 1989). There is also no standard program emphasis within instructional technology graduate education. Programs can emphasize instructional systems design, instructional media, instructional computing, telecommunications, or library media and still be considered "instructional technology" (Klein, 1990; Reiser, 1986; Schiffman & Gansneder, 1987).

Although this diversity is often considered advantageous to instructional technologists, who are not limited to a specific work environment, it has been suggested that different competencies should be taught to academic and industry instructional designers (Rossett, 1990; Stolovich, 1981). This brings up another important environmental issue: Can the same program effectively train the industry instructional designer, the school district technology specialist and the library information technologist?

FACTORS TO CONSIDER

Several factors, which have been utilized by instructional technology students to select their graduate programs, are outlined below. Potential graduate students, regardless of discipline, should become very well acquainted with these factors and make them an important consideration in the selection of a masters or doctoral program.

Program requirements

Most programs require a certain grade point average and completion of a standardized examination--usually the Graduate Record Examination or the Miller Analogies Test--for entrance into their program (Johnson, 1989; 1992). Each program decides acceptable score levels. Once a student is admitted to the program, there is a general core of courses required by the program and several electives from which a student may choose (Piña, 1992).

Program emphasis

It is essential that students select a program which emphasizes their fields of interest, whether it be instructional design, media, computers, or library science (Carrier, 1986; Klein, 1990). Certain programs in instructional technology are adapting their curriculum to include emerging technologies (Allen, Dodge, & Saba, 1990) as well as performance technology (Rossett, 1990). Students should become aware whether their program trains for a future in industry or academia (Stolovich, 1981). Where are graduates of the program most often employed?

Course offerings

The number and types of courses offered by the program is another important factor. Some programs offer more than 40 courses, while others offer as few as four (Johnson, 1989; 1992). Several programs will have students take course work exclusively from instructional technology faculty; others may have only one or two instructional technology faculty and rely heavily upon other departments to offer related course work.

Internships

Internships in the field have been identified as extremely useful and desirable for instructional technology students (Lorenz, Jorstad, & Bratton, 1986). Many programs require internships, while most do not. Availability and types of internships vary between programs. Some internships are available in public and private schools, community colleges, large and small corporations, city governments, and on campus. Some internships pay quite well, while others offer, at best, a meager salary.

Sources for funding

Most programs should keep track of scholarships and grants that may be available to their students. Many programs waive the out of state tuition costs for graduate students. Several programs have projects funded by corporations or professional organizations, such as the National Science Foundation. These can provide opportunities for students to gain practical experience and help defray the costs of higher education. Some programs allow graduate students to teach undergraduate courses, serve as research assistants, or as teacher

assistants. A few select programs provide travel funds for students who present papers at professional conferences.

Productivity

The cliché "Publish or perish" is well known among the academic population. Scholarly productivity is an important issue for anyone pursuing a career in academia, but most especially those who wish to teach at the university level. Although one may argue the relative merits of research versus teaching, it is apparent that publications and conference presentations will continue to play a major role in the hiring and promotion decisions of universities.

For the student investigating graduate programs, both faculty and student productivity can play a major factor in the choice of program. Faculty engaged in active scholarly production, it is argued, can provide students with the most current information in the field. This can be essential in a field which relies on emerging technologies. However, if students are not given the opportunity to participate actively in the research process, along with the faculty, then the student benefit gained by faculty research is minimal. Programs that are serious about training scholars will allow their students to participate fully alongside faculty, often as first authors of papers and studies. Students in these programs are encouraged to present their papers at professional conferences and publish them in professional journals.

Productivity includes much more than research, especially for instructional design students. Programs must provide sufficient opportunities for their students, particularly doctoral student to design, develop and evaluate instruction in many different settings.

Reputation of program

The ranking of academic programs is a dubious process. It is difficult to establish criteria acceptable to everyone's opinions and needs. The studies that rank instructional technology graduate programs have relied upon opinions of a sample of members of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT) and the National Society of Performance and Instruction (NSPI), two organizations with close ties to the field of instructional technology (Moore, 1981; Moore & Braden, 1988). Other published works which identify leading programs have tended to emphasize the scholarly productivity of the programs (Ely, 1992).

Program rankings present both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages include the recognition of programs which are well-established and recognized by leaders in the field. These programs have, in fact, produced the current leaders in the field. High ranking programs tend to maintain a high profile at professional conferences, have established and influential faculty, and a broad base of former students, who provide good contacts for new graduates.

The disadvantages of program rankings become obvious when inactive or terminated programs are still ranked as "top five" or "top ten" programs. A few instructional technology programs exist on reputations built many years ago, with no recent accomplishments to justify their high ranking. Another issue is the fact that some of the smaller or lesser known programs are pioneering the utilization of new technologies and leading the field in innovations.

Don't settle for just one

It should be obvious by now that considering only one or two of these factors will provide only a fraction of the information essential for selecting a program that will thoroughly meet the needs of the student. Most, if not all, of these factors should be considered before this important decision is made.

RESOURCES

Several resources are readily available to the student who wishes to gather information about graduate programs in instructional technology. Most of the resources listed below are available at college and university libraries or through the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (AECT), 1025 Vermont Avenue, NW, Suite 820, Washington, D.C. 20005.

Publications

- College catalogues

  The most common sources of information about graduate programs are college catalogues and information sent by the program itself. Many colleges maintain a collection of college catalogues on microfiche, which can be read and copied by students.

- Instructional Technology Graduate Program Notebook (Piña, 1992)

  The Division of Instructional Development of AECT is in the process of collecting catalogue and program information, with the goal to create an hypermedia based database that can be accessed by interested faculty and students. The Notebook currently contains information on 70 programs in instructional technology.

- Educational Media and Technology Yearbook (Banyan-Broadbent & Wood, 1990; Logan, 1990a; Logan 1990b)

This standard reference includes a list of masters, six year, and doctoral programs in instructional technology and includes enrollment figures, funding information, contact names, admissions requirements, and specializations

- Doctoral Research in Instructional Design and Technology: A Directory of Dissertations (Caffarella, 1991; Caffarella & Sachs, 1988)

  This work, currently in two volumes, gives titles, authors, schools, and chairpersons for all dissertations undertaken in the field of instructional technology between 1977 to 1988.

- Graduate Curricula in Educational Communications and Technology: A Descriptive Directory (Johnson, 1989; Johnson, 1992)

  This book gives course titles, admission requirements, contact names, and emphases for U.S. and selected foreign programs. Also included is a list of instructional technology faculty, their doctoral institutions and specializations.

- Student and faculty productivity reports

  Some programs publish annual or semi-annual reports of papers published and presented by faculty and students in the program.

- Instructional technology-related journals

  Information on a variety of instructional technology topics are reported in scholarly journals, such as Educational Technology Research and Development, and more popular magazines, such as Performance and Instruction, Tech Trends, and Educational Technology.

- AECT Membership Directory

  A useful tool for networking with instructional technology leaders and students.

Professional Organizations

- Association for Educational Communications and Technology

  AECT is the leading professional association for instructional technologists, especially those with academic ties. The annual conference presents a wonderful opportunity for students to meet and interact with instructional technology faculty and students. Interviews with faculty and graduate students, attendance at receptions, and visits to the division booths are invaluable sources of program information.

- National Society for Performance and Instruction

  The industry counterpart of AECT. Essential for those interested in instructional technology in business and industry.

ERIC CD-ROM

The Educational Resource Information Clearinghouse (ERIC) CD-ROM is a database which lists hundreds of thousands of education documents from thousands of education journals, magazines, and conferences. ERIC is updated every six months and is extremely useful for gathering information about faculty publications and research interests.

Interviews

The best sources for useful information, however, are the people involved with the program itself. Students who are serious about enrolling in a graduate program should contact both faculty and students, who are in the best position to provide accurate information about the program.

CONCLUSION

The selection of a graduate program is a difficult decision for a student in any discipline. The instructional technology student, however, faces particular challenges of program recognition, identification, and environment, that do not appear to be present in other educational fields. Notwithstanding these differences, instructional technology graduate students should utilize the same factors--program requirements, program emphasis, course offerings, internships, funding sources, productivity, and program reputation--used by students in other disciplines, to help select their programs. Those interested in information regarding instructional technology graduate programs can find a wealth of information through publications, professional organizations, ERIC, and instructional technology faculty and students.

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