

*Department of Higher Education
State of Colorado
Institutional Review*

CONSULTANTS REVIEW OF PROPOSAL

Relay Graduate School of Education

June 19, 2015

Summary of Strengths & Weaknesses

INSTITUTIONAL PROFILE

- Relay Graduate School of Education (GSE) is a non-profit, standalone, institution of higher education offering only graduate degrees in education.
- Relay GSE was created by three charter school management organizations: Knowledge Is Power Program (KIPP), Achievement First, and Uncommon Schools.
- Between 2008 and 2013, the corporation operated in partnership with the City University of New York's Hunter College. During that time the program awarded master's degrees to three matriculating classes totaling more than 350 graduate students.
- In February 2011, New York State issued Relay GSE a provisional charter.
- Relay GSE now operates in New York, Illinois, Texas, New Jersey, and Louisiana, and has been authorized to open campuses in Tennessee and Delaware. It has plans to open a campus in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, pending state authorization.
- Relay GSE proposes a single, narrowly-focused MAT degree that includes six licensure areas: elementary, secondary (English, Math, Science, Social Studies) and special education.
- Norman Atkins, president of Relay GSE, is a founder of Uncommon Schools.

MISSION/PURPOSE AND OBJECTIVES/GOALS

Strengths:

- The mission of Relay GSE is to teach K-12 teachers and school leaders to develop in all students the academic skills and strength of character needed to succeed in life.
- Relay GSE short-term vision is that its curriculum and instruction will enable graduates to lead their predominantly urban K-12 students to demonstrate annual achievement gains.
- Relay GSE long-term vision is that the institution will bring about transformational change across teacher preparation and will become a place where a new generation of continually improving, results-focused individuals fulfill their destiny in the world's greatest profession.
- Relay GSE approaches are focused on immediate classroom application.
- Relay GSE requires its graduate students to be already teaching in schools so they have the opportunity to immediately apply the techniques they have learned in the program.
- Relay GSE requires demonstrated student improvement on achievement tests during participants' process of completing their student teaching.
- Relay GSE has provided evidence of need of improvement in various metrics involving the City of Denver school district.
- The Denver Public Schools are a good match for the mission profile, with 80% minority students and 70% qualifying for free/reduced lunch.
- Program designers envision RGSE as collaborative and non-competitive, willing to work with other higher education institutions in the area.
- The emphasis on character development is distinctive and is a plus that can make a difference in students.

Weaknesses:

- The long term vision is ambitious and without clear evidence of how it will be achieved.
- Relay GSE may be too narrowly-focused on training and immediate practice in lieu of a broader-based teacher education program that includes theory, philosophy, and understanding of educational research.

- Relay GSE presents no evidence that sound philosophical underpinnings, teaching theories, and supportive research are paired with the innovative methods Relay GSE supports.
- Emphasis on demonstrated student improvement on achievement tests may be too narrowly focused.
- It is not clear that the program offered by Relay GSE, originally developed to serve needs of charter schools, is applicable to the needs of public schools.
- Relay GSE has not provided assessment information to demonstrate that it can successfully address the evidence of need issues identified.
- Relay GSE focuses on beginning teachers, which probably is the time in their careers of highest need for developing adequate classroom skills. Nevertheless, beginning teachers also may have the least amount of time in their careers to engage in a program of graduate study. No evidence is provided as to the completion rate of beginning teachers at existing sites.
- Relay GSE states it “maintains strong relationships with other graduate schools that both seek our guidance and lend invaluable insight to our own work,” and “Relay GSE has begun to engage with local institution of higher education [of the Colorado higher education community].” Nevertheless, Relay GSE provides no evidence of how it has worked with other graduate schools and how it has begun to engage with location institutions of higher education in Colorado.
- Although the MAT is designed specifically for new and early career teachers, it is not clear if experienced teachers be welcome or not.
- It is unclear how students will be accommodated if the program is suspended for any reason. For example, will students partway through the program be assured readily accessible avenues of completion through other accredited institutions? Since many of the courses appear highly distinctive, can student coursework be transferred for credit at other accredited institutions?
- Since (as stated on page 7 of the application) “Program offerings will be contingent upon partner needs, Relay GSE abilities, and enrollment numbers,” more information is required about how and when decisions are made regarding these determinates. This is particularly important to assure a smooth flow in a restricted 2-year curriculum.

ACCREDITATION / AUTHORIZATIONS and APPROVALS

Strengths:

- Relay GSE and all of its geographical locations are accredited by the Middle States Commission on Higher Education (MSCHE).
- Relay GSE received accreditation from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in October 2013 as an independent, autonomous unit.

Weaknesses:

- None indicated at this time.

INSTITUTIONAL ORGANIZATION / GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Strengths:

- Relay GSE has a Board of Trustees with responsibility for ensuring that the graduate school's academic programs are successful and its programs and operations are faithful to its charter.
- Biographies of the members of the Board of Trustees are provided, and most members appear experienced in education, particularly nonprofit charter schools, and/or foundation work, particularly the Robin Hood Foundation.
- The Relay GSE Board of Trustees meets four times a year.
- An executive committee acts in place of the Board of Trustees between Board meetings.
- The Board of Trustees has five standing committees, including executive, trustees, finance, audit and compensation, and academic and student affairs.
- Relay GSE has an administrative team consisting of the President, Chief Financial Officer, Chief Research Officer, Chief Talent Officer, Provost, and Chief Operating Officer.

Weaknesses:

- The members of the Board of Trustees appear closely tied to charter schools with limited experiences with public schools, which appears to be the focus in the proposed program in Denver.
- The composition of the various standing committees and membership determination are not indicated.

- The President also serves as an ex officio member of the Board of Trustees, which may mean he has a voting role in determining general policy of Relay GSE and may limit the independence of the Board of Trustees from the President.
- The responsibilities and qualifications of the administrative team are not described.
- With Relay GSE's expansion to several states, it is unclear if the number of trustees and administrative team members is sufficient to provide adequate oversight to the additional sites, including the Denver site.
- It is unclear as to the length of terms of the members of the Board of Trustees.

LIBRARY RESOURCES AND SERVICES

Strengths:

- Relay GSE employs a librarian with a master's degree from an ALA-accredited program.
- There is a reference to the Association of College and Research Libraries' "Guidelines for Academic Librarians Without Faculty Status" as to the guide for professional staff.
- The library subscribes to databases like EBSCO, ProQuest, JSTOR, and Education Resources Information Center (ERIC).
- The library has articulated various policies, including access, copyright, and collection development.
- The library has an online training and reference module to support graduate students in utilizing the resources available in the digital library. Relay GSE requires all graduate students to complete it before coursework begins in the first term.
- Staff satisfaction with library services is high.
- The librarian is available to all Relay GSE graduate students, instructors, and staff via email or phone from 9:00am to 6:00pm EST, Monday through Friday. Students may also make appointments with the librarian for one-on-one support. Relay GSE utilizes a teleconferencing system which offers the advantage of "screen sharing," allowing the librarian to offer step-by-step guidance, if necessary.

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Weaknesses:

- No budget is provided for library resources and services.
- There is no indication of the extent of the library personnel and their responsibilities.
- A sample search of older (pre-2000 imprints) standard texts indicated they are generally not available electronically. Locations of print copies in libraries are given via OCLC, which means access either by visiting those libraries or via interlibrary loan, which may put an undue burden on local libraries or be overly time-consuming for students to acquire needed library materials.
- While Relay GSE states it participates in a national interlibrary loan service, it offers very little to support that service. According to the Interlibrary Loan Code, “Interlibrary Loan (ILL) is intended to complement local collections and is not a substitute for a good library collection intended to meet the routine needs of users. ILL is based on a tradition of sharing resources. . .” Of the 5,070 items the library held as of April 2015, 3,540 are internally-produced videos. It may be relying too much on other institutions of higher education. No information was provided as to the number of interlibrary loans requests from other institutions and by other institutions to Relay GSE.
- There is no reference to the Association of College and Research Libraries “Standards for Distance Learning Library Services,” particularly 1) involving library and other personnel in all stages of planning, developing, and evaluating, and adding or changing of the distance learning program; 2) development of written agreements with unaffiliated local libraries when they are to be used to support information needs of the distance learning community; 3) determining how the institution will fulfill its library’s primary responsibility for making its resources and services available to its users regardless of physical location; 4) how the library is implementing outcomes assessment to determine whether distance education students are learning effectively and whether library services are effectively meeting their needs; and 5) how direct human access is being made available to the distance learning community.
- Only one librarian (professional staff member) is listed, and she is available from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. EST. It is not clear how that individual provides adequate library service for a geographically diverse population existing across several time zones.
- The librarian listed is a recent (2014) library school graduate who may have very limited experience in managing an academic library and providing library services to graduate students.

- Relay GSE states, “The vast majority of graduate students will find the virtual offerings of the Relay GSE Library to be more than adequate.” However, there is no assessment information provided to support this assertion.
- The library description lists only a few of the 95 electronic databases to which it describes as subscribing.
- The library does not indicate which electronic book databases to which it subscribes.
- From reviewing the modules, it is unclear as to in which modules use of library resources is required.
- No qualitative or quantitative assessment information is provided as to the use and adequacy of library services and resources for the graduate students.

FACULTY

Strengths:

- The resume of the proposed dean of the site is provided
- Qualifications of adjunct instructors are provided, with a minimum of a master’s degree or doctor degree in education required.
- Relay GSE has described the type of faculty members they seek.
- A performance management process (PMP) is outlined to evaluate faculty and staff.

Weaknesses:

- The Relay GSE Denver site will open with a full-time dean and part-time adjunct faculty to support content learning. This is too heavy reliance on part-time adjunct faculty members.
- The qualifications of the dean are inadequate by traditional standards. Her classroom teaching experience at the K-12 level appears to be only four years. She does not have a doctorate. The proposed date of completion (2017) of her doctoral program suggests she has considerable work yet to be completed for the doctorate to be awarded her. In addition, she will be working on it while trying to fulfill the time-consuming responsibilities of both serving as dean of the site and teaching in the program. At many traditional institutions, she probably would be employed only at the instructor level with tenure-track placement contingent on completion of the doctorate, and she would not be considered qualified to teach graduate students. She does not have the qualifications of a “master” teacher typically expected of a faculty member teaching “methods” courses to graduate-

level or even undergraduate students in traditional programs. It may be necessary for her to work closely with more experienced administrators and teachers in the establishment phase of the program.

- A minimum of four years of K-12 teaching experience for adjunct instructors is a very modest requirement by traditional standards for a faculty member to be teaching educational practice courses to graduate students.
- The minimum of a master's degree for adjunct instructors is inadequate for them to be teaching at the master's level.
- Others have observed that Relay GSE has relied heavily on graduates from its own and similar programs as faculty members. The institution should be cautioned against this practice at the Relay GSE Denver site.
- Generally, faculty members who teach in graduate programs are expected to have a degree one level higher than the students, which would exclude faculty members with a master's degree as their highest degree teaching master's level students. This requirement may be modified if the faculty member presents a record of experience and achievement in the field. It remains unclear how the faculty applicants' "attributes" will be evaluated, particularly so faculty members with a master's degree as the highest degree is the exception rather than the rule in the program.
- Faculty members appear to be teaching a prescribed curriculum and it appears unclear if they have an opportunity to participate in its development or later modification to reflect the needs of local graduate students.

STUDENTS SUPPORT SERVICES

Strengths:

- The application described Student Learning Resources and Support Services.

Weaknesses:

- The Office of Enrollment Services and the Office of Financial Services will support Denver graduate students via e-mail, teleconferences, and over the phone as needed. No onsite services to provide face-to-face services are listed in the application.
- Academic advising is the responsibility of the Dean and faculty members, and each faculty member advises ten to thirty graduate students, with some who may advise over thirty graduate students. This involves scheduling office hours, making classroom visits, and being accessible via phone and e-mail. It is not clear how this will be successfully accomplished by primarily part-time faculty members.

- Faculty members are to schedule office hours, but there is no mention of office space for faculty members, such as might be required for confidential conferences with students.
- Relay GSE did not provide sufficient detail as how to address any special student counseling beyond faculty academic advising.
- It is not clear how much student guidance is provided before enrollment in the program so students have a more complete understanding of its nature and commitment.
- From reviewing information of other Relay GSE sites there are references to Urban Teacher Scholarships to reduce the tuition, which is sometimes described as \$35,000 for a two-year degree. The application does not indicate the tuition costs nor the availability and qualifications for awarding the Urban Teacher Scholarship. For example, what is the tuition for students at the Denver site, and is every student at the Denver site eligible for such a scholarship?

DEGREES/ACADEMIC PROGRAMS/GENERAL EDUCATION

Strengths:

- The Relay GSE program has been conducted elsewhere during the past few years.
- The application describes the course descriptions, method of delivery, and total contact hours and credit hours.
- The curriculum is a combination of four distinct “elements of effective teaching,” including “self and other people,” “classroom culture,” “teaching cycle,” and “content.”
- Relay GSE has described its academic policies and admissions and non-discriminations policies.
- Applicants must have secured employment as a grade K-12 teacher or teacher resident in a district public school or charter public school in the city of Denver for the year in which they intend to matriculate to Relay GSE.

Weaknesses:

- The MAT coursework, involving approximately 35 graduate students, initially is to be delivered by one full-time professor—the Relay GSE Denver Dean of Teaching & Learning—as well as several part-time professors. This is inadequate for a graduate level degree.

- The school district of the city of Denver already had an agreement with the University of Denver regarding the completion of a master’s degree by its teaching residents.
- It is not evident that there is any scholarly activity present in a graduate level program, such as might involve a review the literature, understanding of various educational philosophies, and the analysis and application of educational research and philosophies in different settings with different student needs.
- Some of the courses described are usually taught at the undergraduate level in more traditional programs or as in-service training programs, but not as courses for graduate credit.
- Relay GSE has developed a program that might have limited application outside of urban charter schools where there may be more diverse populations with more diverse student needs.
- The descriptions of the modules are long on verbiage and jargon but it is difficult to determine their actual content. The program appears very narrowly focused on application without convey an underlying understanding of the psychological and sociological foundations of the various pedagogical strategies.
- In the end, whatever the descriptions, the quality of the program depends on how well the modules are developed and taught, which cannot be determined without rigorous, scholarly assessments that is lacking at this time.

ADMINISTRATIVE SERVICES / ADMISSION POLICIES

Strengths:

- Relay GSE will secure administrative offices and classroom space in the Denver area.
- Relay GSE has provided an admissions policy.

Weaknesses:

- The adequacy of the administrative offices and classroom space cannot yet be determined.
- There is no provision for office space for instructional staff.
- The admissions policy refers to a “holistic admissions review” by the Director of Enrollment services, the Dean, the Director of Financial Aid, and faculty members. It is not clear if all these individuals will be at the Denver site. It is also not clear as to what is meant by “perceived fit with Relay GSE’s academic programs and institutional mission.”

ASSESSMENT/EVALUATION

Strengths:

- Relay GSE graduate students must demonstrate that they have mastery of the techniques they have learned at Relay GSE and are using these skills to successfully lead their students to meaningful and measureable achievements.

Weaknesses:

- No assessment is provided to determine the success of the program at its other locations in order to anticipate its success at the Denver site.
- Graduate students are to lead K-12 to the equivalent of at least one year's worth of academic gain, but it is not clear as to the "meaningful and measureable" assessments of this achievement.

BUDGET/FINANCIAL PLAN

Strengths:

- Relay GSE 2014 audit is included with the application.

Weaknesses:

- Relay GSE Denver intends to become financially sustainable on tuition revenue when at scale but no proposed financial plan or budget is submitted.
- Relay GSE's financial stability is largely dependent on the support of a few foundations and other outside sources.
- The application lacks a budget, including costs of the program to students.

INSTITUTIONAL RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations are binding items in the Consultants' Report. During the program review process, the review team members noted changes that they believe are necessary to bring the institution into compliance with the CCHE Degree Authorization Act. A written response to each of the recommendations is required.

1. Provide a detailed financial plan, including associated costs and anticipated income for the first three to five years and a budget for library support, to support its operations at the Denver site.
2. Describe anticipated needs for physical facilities that include administrative space, faculty space, classroom space, record maintenance facilities, and library facilities at the Denver site.
3. Specify what direct, short-term measurable goals have been developed to assess the effectiveness of the program and provide the associated metrics.
4. Provide evidence of the philosophical underpinning, teaching theories, and supportive research and assessment to support at the graduate level the methods Relay GSE uses.
5. Provide evidence regarding the appropriate use of relevant library resources and services at the graduate level and their availability “to students on a regular, dependable basis.”
6. Provide a plan for accommodating students if the program is suspended for any reason, including readily accessible avenues of completion of the degree through other regionally-accredited institutions and transfer of credits earned to other regionally-accredited institutions.
7. Describe the factors involved in determining how “partner needs, Relay GSE abilities, and enrollment numbers” will influence course offerings, and how and when those decisions are made.
8. Provide evidence of sufficient student support services onsite, including academic advising by faculty members and other student counseling needs beyond academic counseling.

INSTITUTIONAL SUGGESTIONS

Suggestions are non-binding items in the Consultants' Report. During the program review process, the review team members noted changes that they believe would enhance or improve the institution or the program. The team's suggestions are presented below. Although these suggested changes are not necessary to bring the program into compliance with the CCHE Degree Authorization Act, the institution is encouraged to discuss the suggestions with relevant stakeholders and implement them where appropriate. A written response to the suggestions is not required.

1. Provide a position roster that identifies the anticipated faculty members qualifications and workload associated with the Denver site, including each professors overall teaching schedule for a given time-frame, with identification of those courses that will be taught as part of the Denver program. Of concern is whether faculty members will have sufficient qualifications and time commitments to teach in the program's areas at the master's level and whether the institution is overly relying on part-time faculty members.
2. Provide evidence of how Relay GSE has begun and will continue to engage with local institutions of higher education in Colorado.
3. Provide information as to the adequacy of the number of Board of Trustees to oversee adequately Relay GSE programs at multiple geographical sites.
4. Provide information as to the role of local faculty members in influencing the curriculum to meet local needs.
5. Provide information that describes the responsibilities of the administrative team and their qualifications to fulfill those responsibilities.
6. Provide information as to how Relay GSE meets the Association College and Research Libraries "Standards for Distance Learning Library Services."
7. Provide evidence that the degree level and experience level of the proposed dean is sufficient to fulfill her responsibilities.
8. Describe what is meant by a "holistic admissions review" by the Director of Enrollment services, the Dean, the Director of Financial Aid, and faculty members, and if this will be conducted on site for the Denver program.
9. Provide assessments used at other sites and how the metrics used will be extrapolated to determine the success and continuation of the program at the Denver site.

Consultants

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