

*Department of Higher Education  
State of Colorado  
Institutional Review*

**CONSULTANTS RECOMMENDATION**

**Relay Graduate School of Education**

**August 14, 2015**

We have reviewed the initial application of the Relay Graduate School of Education (GSE) seeking operating and degree-granting authority to offer its Masters of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree program to novice and early career teachers in the state of Colorado. In response in our June 19, 2015 report, we made eight “Recommendations” and nine “Suggestions.” On July 1, 2015, Relay GSE responded to the eight “Recommendations” and four of the nine “Suggestions.” We responded on July 6, 2015, to the Relay GSE response. On July 31, 2015, Relay GSE provided a “Response to Outstanding Institutional Recommendations.” We have reviewed additional information provided to us on August 11, 2012. Based on these exchanges we have the following concerns and recommendation.

Relay GSE has proposed a highly ambitious, alternative teacher education program at the master’s level. While benefiting from extensive foundation financial support, Relay GSE has only a very modest “bricks and mortar” main campus. It offers only graduate degree programs at multiple sites throughout the country. It relies heavily on part-time, temporary faculty members and a small cadre of full-time administrators, both who often do not have degrees beyond the master’s level nor extensive teaching experience. There is some indication that graduates of the program or similar programs are employed to teach in the Relay GSE programs, which suggests to us an insular approach to the programs.

The proposed M.A.T. degree emphasizes classroom management and discipline. While appropriate classroom management and discipline are critical in teacher effectiveness, we have a significant concern about them being the focus of a graduate-level degree program.

Relay GSE emphasizes that it offers an M.A.T. versus a Masters of Science in Education. The difference being the M.A.T. focuses more on teaching. The point is well-taken. Nevertheless, Relay GSE extensively emphasizes the immediate practical application of teaching methods at the expense of understanding the concepts, philosophies, and styles of teaching. This narrow training on how to apply particular techniques has its limitations and does not appear balanced by a broader education in critical analysis and application of concepts and philosophies learned independently to solve complex problems in a variety of situations. For example, teachers completing the program may

later in their careers move to non-urban environments and find the skills developed in this program are not applicable in other situations.

While we understand the appeal of the Relay GSE approach to a first-year teacher in certain environments, we have serious doubts about its relevance to beginning teachers as they gain more experiences (and certainly not to more experienced teachers seeking to enhance their teaching skills and understanding of K-12 education). As participants acquire more teaching experience, they probably will need to complete more traditional master's degree programs in education to better understand the multiplicity of approaches to teaching and the role of K-12 education in our society.

Relay GSE has responded to several of our concerns, but many of their responses are only marginally acceptable and others are entirely unacceptable. For example, when requested to provide direct, short-term measurable goals used to assess the program Relay responded with a subjective, internally-developed "Observation Report" and descriptions of other internally-developed subjective assessments. We are significantly concerned that Relay GSE provided no evidence of objective, external quantitative measures indicating Relay GSE has successfully achieved its goals of "demonstrably effective teachers" and student "annual achievement gains."

While Relay GSE has a relatively short history, it has had ample time to evaluate rigorously the effectiveness of its programs. In 2013, it engaged Mathematica Policy Research to conduct an evaluation of the institution's teacher preparation efforts in New York City. Nevertheless, this evaluation will not be concluded until the spring of 2016. The state of Colorado may want to delay further consideration of the Relay GSE proposal until such time rigorous, peer-reviewed evaluations are available.

The rigor and depth of the program are also called into question by its level of library support. While Relay GSE stated its digitally based library was established by "a substantial vetting of the library sciences field," it did not provide the methodology used. We recognize the electronic library resources provided can offer valuable support to the program. Nevertheless, we have concerns about such heavy reliance on almost solely electronic library resources for a graduate-level program. The Relay GSE library has a very limited number of print resources, and many of its physical holdings are student-produced videos of unknown quality.

While Relay GSE offers interlibrary loan services to its students, it had only 40 interlibrary loan requests from July 1, 2014 to July 31, 2015 from more than 1,400 graduate students. This suggests to us that either their students are not expected to explore the literature in the depth expected of a graduate-level program, or students are relying heavily on the largess of their local institutions to supply any needed print resources. In addition, Relay GSE employs only one librarian to support all its programs at multiple sites. The lack of extensive library resources and adequate professional guidance in the use of available resources may preclude the fulfillment of any expectation, if there is such an expectation, that students develop the ability to conduct

in-depth, critical literature reviews, particular of topics beyond those included in the relatively narrowly focused curriculum Relay GSE has proposed.

Relay GSE provided a sample of a Masters Defense. While we do not know if this sample was provided as either typical or exemplary. Nevertheless, the level of self-analysis by the author is modest. There is little evidence that the author tested various teaching/classroom management techniques learned and reflected adequately on their effectiveness. The data provided is largely descriptive, and the author apparently lacked basic knowledge of elementary inferential statistics to test the relationships among variables studied. The author's exploration of the literature regarding "emotional intelligence" is, at best, superficial, and the author's knowledge of "emotional intelligence" appears cursory, although the author tried to apply it. Therefore, the sample Masters Defense did not add to our confidence in the proposed program.

The review the author did of one student is one-dimensional--largely based on test scores. While we do not expect a full social work/psychological profile of the student, we do expect some background regarding the students home life, interaction with peers, social development, some insights as to the reasons for the lack of eye contact, and other variables that may impact the student's academic performance. Instead the author writes, "John and I still do not have the closest relationship, and there is still so much I do not know about him after teaching him for two years." Therefore, we find it puzzling why the author selected this student for review.

Neither the one Masters Defense document nor the relatively modest level of library support for a graduate-level program at a remote site is alone a reason to not recommend acceptance of the program. Nevertheless, they add to the list of our concerns about the adequacy of the intellectual rigor of the program.

Relay GSE is a young institution that, based on the information provided, has not yet had to consider closing any of its campuses. In addition, it has only a relatively modest financial investment in its Colorado operation. To protect students' time and investment, a prepared plan for terminating instruction, for any number of unforeseen causes, is not only prudent but essential. Legal liability and institutional reputation are motivators in addition to the ethical commitments implied. We encourage the state of Colorado to seek stronger guarantees than offered by Relay GSE in their response so that students will not be left with coursework that can not be transferred to local regionally-accredited institutions of higher education.

In summary, when viewed in its totality, we continue to have numerous concerns and reservations about the M.A.T. program proposed by the Relay Graduate School of Education. **While we will not oppose approving the proposed program, we believe it to be important to express our concerns and reservations for consideration by the Department of Higher Education of the state of Colorado.**

Already cited in this and our previous responses are examples of the limitations we perceive in several critical areas--the faculty's modest teaching experience and education,

a tightly crafted curriculum that appears promising though not yet tested sufficiently, reliance on a largely digital library with an inadequate staff component to serve the Colorado campus, in addition to the other far-flung campuses, lack of assurances that students' credits from a singularly-designed curriculum will be acceptable at local regionally-accredited institution of higher education, a program that appears narrowly focused on classroom management from a limited perspective, etc.

**Therefore, we are uncomfortable recommending unqualified and full approval of a program** with an as yet unconfirmed record of graduate students' achievement at the conclusion of the degree or as one resulting in a long-term career commitment to the teaching profession (longitudinal research pending).

We recognize limitations imposed in preparing only a paper review of the proposed Relay Graduate School M.A.T. We also are ambivalent whether even the typically brief accreditation onsite visit would allay/revise our expectations/concerns. Probably an in-depth, objective analysis is required to do so, which, at this time, has not been forthcoming from either Relay GSE or the scholarly literature.

Consultants

Larry L. Hardesty, Ph.D.

Sarah M. Thorburn, Ph.D.