

# **Building the Foundation for Master's Level Success in Reading, Writing, and Research**

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*This mixed methods study was designed to determine what factors characterize adequate support and preparation for Master's level students for both native English speakers and second-language learners. The study measured perceptions of graduate level success in the areas of support, study and research skills, undergraduate preparation, and the role of mentoring and advising. The purpose of this research was to strengthen Master's level programs in the social sciences to increase overall student success.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Comprehensive reading, writing, and research play a critical role in a graduate student's success and ability to contribute to a field of study effectively. How well are students being prepared to transition from baccalaureate to Master's level programs? *Summer Bridge* programs are often found in place and well supported in colleges to transition high school students successfully to the college world. There are also often steps put in place by a four year university to support an incoming transfer student. However, it is rare to see a program in place that bridges baccalaureate students to graduate studies. Many assume that after four or more years of study for a Bachelor's degree, a student is fully prepared and skilled to handle a graduate world filled with research, time-management, and the ability to be an analytic thinker as well as a proficient writer.

The landscape of graduate education continues to become increasingly diverse. This creates a challenge for instructors to support a diverse population of students effectively in graduate courses that maximize student performance and contribute towards fostering equitable learning experiences for each student. For instance, Hoffer, et.al (2003) noted that first-generation graduate students are more likely to be female, individuals of color, report debt upon degree completion, and have attended a community college at some point during their academic career. This is a very different type of demographic than of graduate students decades ago. Furthermore, ethnic diversity is also increasing in graduate education. Research indicated that the number of first-generation Hispanic graduate level students is growing; however, Hispanic students earned only 5.9% of the total 625,023 master's degrees awarded in the United States in the academic year 2007-2008 (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Are needs being met for the full range of learners including those who are native English speakers and those that are second-language learners at the Master's level?

The world of baccalaureate studies and graduate studies are very different from one another. At the master's level, student are expected to build relationships with their professors, actively engage in and contribute to critical discussion, fieldwork, and research and to fluently be independent learners,

presenters, and proficient writers. Cohen and Brawer (2013) noted that this compounds even further for a second language learner whose barriers can include but are not limited to language issues, not having a network of support within or outside the college, and/or being a first generation college student unsure of how to navigate the system.

Too often, there is no mentoring system in place to reduce these obstacles. These gaps need to be closed. Support mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure academic success and to build confidence for all students. The purpose of this Mixed Methods study was to determine what factors characterize adequate preparation and support for success in Master's level programs for all students, in an effort to expand their educational experiences and achieve success in graduate-level education.

## **DEFINITION OF TERMS**

For purposes of this article, the following terms are defined:

*Graduate level success.* The fulfillment of requirements that leads to a Master's degree in the field of education or the social sciences.

*Perceived Graduate-level success.* Student perceptions of a myriad of factors including support, mentoring, levels of confidence, and feelings of connectedness within a graduate-level experience.

*Mentoring.* The act of a person taking on the role of coaching, giving advice, or serving as a guide to someone who is less experienced.

*Second-Language Learner.* A Master's level student who receives instruction in English but is still in the process of fine-tuning his or her reading, writing, speaking, listening, and/or other communication skills in English. He or she may or may not be fluent in reading, writing, and speaking in the primary language.

## **RESEARCH QUESTION**

The following research question emerged as a result of reflection on the research: What factors characterize adequate preparation and support for success in Master's level programs?

1a. What is the impact of mentoring on native English speakers and second-language learners regarding perceptions of confidence and academic performance in Master's level programs?

1b. How do second-language learner (EL) experiences compare with those of native speakers in Master's level programs?

## **TRANSFORMATIONAL LEARNING FRAMEWORK**

The framework of transformational learning serves as a foundation to this study. Transformative learning is defined as "the process by which people examine problematic frames of reference to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change" (Cranton, 2006, p. 36). These experiences are the keys to fostering social justice, equity, and change in the educational system. Only through collaborative dialogue and critical reflection, in the setting of problem-posed learning, can one come to put meaning to his or her words through this organic process. This can only happen through dialogue, and without this present, there is no communication or education. For dialogue, Freire (2012) noted that there must be love, humility, intense faith in humankind, hope, and critical thinking. It is essential that an instructor not present his or her perceptions of reality and instead let students investigate their own "thematic universe--the complex of their generative themes--inaugurates the dialogues of education as the practice of freedom" (Freire, 2012, p. 96).

Mezirow (1997) noted, "transformative learning is the process of effecting change in a frame of reference. Adults have acquired a coherent body of experience- associations, concepts, values, feelings, conditioned responses- frames of references that define their life world" (p. 5). Technical knowledge in relation to the Master's level experience occurs when students learn how to conduct and read graduate-level writing and research as well as understand roles, expectations, and workload. This includes the technical skills that are needed to be a highly qualified and successful practitioner in one's field. Students

often feel challenged during this period of learning and question if this is a goal in their lives that can be achieved.

Practical or communicative knowledge is constructivist-based and focuses in on the deep understanding and meaning to one's pursuit. In relation to the graduate level experience, students come to terms with why they need to perform at such a high level meeting rigorous demands and expectations. Time management and study skills often strengthen during this phase and content reading for understanding is pursued. It becomes a time where students often thrive on group consensus and shared interpretation (Cranton, 2006). She also noted that "leadership training, interpersonal skills, teamwork, conflict resolution, communication skills, and the new emphasis on emotional intelligence illustrate the importance of communicative learning in these settings" (Cranton, 2006, p. 12).

Finally, emancipatory learning allows Master's level students to do something with their learning such as applied project or thesis. There is an emerging openness to ideas as well as the desire to help others through one's field of study. Students are acting in a different way because they see themselves in a different way from when they started the program experience. They are now contributing to their field, engaging in self-reflection, self-determination, and personal growth. Habermas's idea of emancipatory knowledge stated,

The goal of adult education is to help adult learners become more critically reflective, participate more fully and freely in rational discourse and action, and advance developmentally by moving toward meaning perspectives that are more inclusive, discriminating, permeable, and integrative of experience. (1984, p. 224-225)

## **BRIEF REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Preparing students for proficiency in contributing to educational research as well as academic achievement through carefully articulated preparation and ongoing support can help ensure that a college's goals of student successful performance are met. Additionally, over the past decade, the number of nonnative English speakers enrolled in higher education continues to climb in all levels of education. In an ever-changing and diverse educational field, including that of higher-education, it is imperative to examine how instructors and institutions can provide continued support in academics as well as from the social-emotional perspective, which ensures the success of all students.

Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, Whitt, and Associates (2005) noted that based on the Documenting Effective Educational Practice (DEEP) project from the Center for Postsecondary Research at Indiana University, keys to promoting high levels of achievement in all levels of college are fostered by setting high expectations and emphasizing the importance of academic effort. Kuh, et al. (2005) affirmed that:

colleges and universities have demonstrated high rates of student success by emphasizing the following: informing students of high expectations from the beginning, expecting significant time-on-task for writing, reading and class preparation, collaborative learning opportunities, and encouraging student to share the results of their work through various forms of scholarship celebration activities, capstone assignments, and rigorous summative experiences such as a comprehensive examination. (p. 192-193)

Graduate-level instructors are then challenged to develop courses in a manner which excel student performance while fostering deep motivation and engagement.

Recommendations were made for policy and practice reform that included having administrators, instructors, and counselors trained and made aware of the specific needs of first-generation students through professional developments. Using hierarchal regression analysis, Tate, Fouad, Marks, Young, Guzman, and Williams (2014) surveyed 170 low-income, first-generations college students in graduate education with five assessment instruments (Graduate Education Self-Efficacy Scale, Family Influence Scale, Perceptions of Barriers Scale, Coping with Barriers, and Indicators of Intent to Attend Graduate School) which resulted in one sub-construct of graduate school self-efficacy (research self-efficacy) and family influences (family values) to be predictive of students' pursuit of graduate education. The researchers explained,

When family influence was introduced in the second step, an additional 8% of the variance was accounted for, with a significant change in variance ( $p = .30$ ). A large, statistically significant jump in variance accounted for was found when graduate school self-efficacy was entered in the third step (additional 14% variance explained), where there was significant change in variance ( $p = .00$ ), and the model was significant overall ( $p = .00$ ). (Tate, et. al., p. 9)

As a result, when students' self-efficacy for conducting graduate-level research increased, so did his or her active pursuit of graduate school.

Sinacore, Park-Saltzman, Mikhail, and Wada (2011) conducted a qualitative study in an effort to document immigrant and second-language learner graduate students' experiences in higher education and how these influence cultural transitioning and social integration. Data collection resulted in 600 pages of interview data where major and minor themes were determined and peer reviewed. They found that a strong mentor fosters success in graduate programs and indicated the extreme importance that a mentor plays for supporting second-language and immigrant graduate students. When a good mentor could not be found, second-language learner students in the study, including international students, would often rely on colleagues for support. Those who received no mentoring were extremely frustrated with their academic experience. They were found to be academically struggling with how to succeed. The interviews also identified that there was a general lack of supportive individuals on campus to help learn the "unwritten rules." Therefore, negotiating the university system became the greatest challenge (Sinacore, et al., 2011).

## **SAMPLE POPULATION AND METHODOLOGY**

An Explanatory Sequential Design was utilized which included two phases: (1) a collection of quantitative data using a Qualtrics survey and SPSS analysis; and (2) a second collection of qualitative data using semi-structured interviews and Dedoose software.

This study used convenience sampling and included three institutions that offer Master's level education including a California State University campus, a University of California campus, and a private college in the Northern Central Valley of California in the fields of education, sociology, and social work.

Over 140 Master's level students participated in the questionnaire that measured perceptions of master's level success in the areas of support, study and research skills, levels of preparation from the Bachelor's Degree work, the role of mentoring and counseling, and overall perceptions of student success. After expert review, the questionnaire was sent using Qualtrics to Master's level students to measure their perceived levels of preparation and support for success in their current graduate programs. Data were collected for approximately two months and then imported into SPSS for analysis. Table 1 and Table 2 summarize demographic data on the participants who completed the Master's Level Success questionnaire.

**TABLE 1**  
**SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS REGARDING TYPE OF INSTITUTION,  
PROGRAM, AND UNITS COMPLETED**

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Native English Speakers</b>	<b>Second-Language Learners</b>
Type of Institution		
Attend a U.C.	2 (2%)	3 (6%)
Attend a CSU	51 (59%)	31 (63%)
Attend a Private	33 (38%)	15 (31%)
Type of Program		
Master's in Education Program	64 (77%)	31 (69%)
Master's in Social Sciences Program	19 (23%)	14 (31%)
Units Completed in the Program		
0-15 units	28 (32%)	19 (41%)
16-30 units	24 (27%)	13 (29%)
31 or more units	36 (41%)	14 (30%)

**TABLE 2**  
**SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS REGARDING GENDER AND STUDENT  
WORKLOAD**

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Native English Speakers</b>	<b>Second-Language Learners</b>
Gender		
Male	22 (25%)	4 (8%)
Female	65 (74%)	46 (92%)
Decline to State	1 (1%)	0 (0%)
Student Workload		
Works full-time (25 hours or more)	57 (66%)	30 (60%)
Works part-time (24 hours or less)	18 (20%)	9 (18%)
Does not work	12 (14%)	11 (22%)

The participants for the interview portion of the study included three Master's level students who were native English speakers and three Master's level students who were second-language learners. Two participants who completed the questionnaire were selected from each institution in order to provide a representative sample of Master's level programs in the Central Valley of California. Criterion for selection included: (1) the participant marked the box that indicated he or she was willing to participate in an additional interview regarding perceptions of graduate level success and (2) contact information was provided. If there were more than two students willing to participate from each institution, then the

possible participants were numbered separately by college or university and randomly drawn from a box for the opportunity to interview. These students participated in semi-structured interviews that indicated their perceptions of support and the role of mentoring in their graduate level experiences.

## QUANTITATIVE ANALYSIS

Confirmatory Factor analysis with principal axis factoring was used in this study to find patterns in correlations among the 30 questionnaire items related to adequate preparation and support for success in Master's level programs. Three key factors resulted. The first factor, The Need for Sustained Support, accounted for 25% of the item variance. The second factor, Importance of Purposeful Advising and Mentoring, contributed an additional 11%. The third factor, Importance of Strong Undergraduate Preparation in Master's Level Success, contributed an additional 8%. Values for which factor loads were greater than .40 were included in the determination of factors.

A 2 X 5 contingency table was run on each Master's Level Success Questionnaire item that was a significant contributor according to the Factor Analysis. The chi-square test of independence was used to determine if the level of agreeability (strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, and strongly disagree) varied based on whether the Master's level student was a Native English speaker or second-language learner. The results of the analysis indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in the observed proportions of seven responses based on being a native English speaker or a second-language learner in a Master's level program in the areas of education, sociology, or social work.

Table 3 displayed the overall means for significant items in the first factor, Need for Sustained Support, were higher for second-language learners at the Master's level with a range of 3.34 to 3.80 on the following: (1) Having instructors provide more language support with writing (2) Benefiting from more writing support in one's graduate program , (3) Providing more language support with other language communication skills such as speaking and comprehension, and (4) Benefiting from more research skill support in the program.

In contrast, native English speakers had higher perceptions than second-language learners on overall means for the following significant items in the first factor, The Need for Sustained Support: (1) Perceptions of excellent reading and writing skills and (2) Perceptions of excellent speaking and communication skills. However, all students had stronger-than-weak perceptions of themselves as proficient readers, writers, and researchers.

Furthermore, the overall mean for the significant item in the third factor, Importance of Strong Undergraduate Preparation in Master's Level Success, was stronger for native English speakers at the Master's level on the following: If I do not understand the content in a graduate level course, I seek help from instructors, support centers, or tutors to help me ( $M_{\text{NativeEng}} = 4.0$ ,  $M_{\text{ELs}} = 3.58$ ).

**TABLE 3**  
**CHI-SQUARE ANALYSIS OF MASTER’S LEVEL SUCCESS QUESTIONNAIRE ITEMS THAT**  
**WERE SIGNIFICANT IN THE FACTOR ANALYSIS**

	$M_{NE}$	$M_{ELs}$	$\chi^2$	$p$	$CV$
I would like my instructors to provide more language support with writing during my graduate program.	2.65	3.34	16.59	.02*	.35
I would benefit from more writing support in my graduate program.	3.08	3.62	10.97	.03*	.28
I would like my instructors to provide more language support with other language communication skills such as speaking and comprehension.	2.65	3.34	16.60	< .001**	.35
I would benefit from more research skill support in my graduate program.	3.31	3.80	13.64	.01*	.31
I have excellent reading and writing skills.	4.17	3.42	24.85	< .001**	.42
I have excellent speaking and communication skills.	4.06	3.36	21.46	< .001**	.39
If I do not understand the content in a graduate level course, I seek help from instructors, support centers, or tutors to help me.	4.00	3.58	10.42	.03*	.28
Note. $N = 138$ .					
* $p < .05$ . ** $p < .01$ .					

### QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS

During Phase II, semi-structured interview questions were developed as a result of the descriptive data from the quantitative portion of the study and a subset of those Master’s students from each institution, including those who are English learners, participated in interviews to describe their perceptions of preparation and experiences in graduate studies.

The coding process was approached in a systematic way by creating a spreadsheet of descriptors that signified key demographics among the participants such as educational background, work status, English Language Development (ELD) experiences, among others. Next, codes were identified that were designated as a topic from the interview transcription text and that appeared more than once throughout the data set. The coded excerpts produced a categorization of the shared topics that contributed to the development of thematic framework.

The next phase of the process focused on the development of a code tree. Some codes were designated as singletons, some were codes with children, while others were weighted on a scale of 0 to 2 to indicate the

degree in which a code had a negative (0), neutral (1), or positive (2) impact on the participant. The goal was to have each code contribute to the creation of an overarching thematic framework.

Once the code tree was uploaded to Dedoose, an inter-coder reliability test was applied using over ten excerpts from the data with another expert knowledgeable in the field and not involved in the study. The purpose was to establish reliability and trustworthiness of the coding process by demonstrating the goodness of fit of the code tree to say that there were a reasonable selection of topics that could be applied by people with similar backgrounds. Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest that inter-rater reliability should approach .90. Thus, for this research project, an acceptable score was determined to be 0.80 or above on the Cohen’s Kappa. Completing this process resulted in confidence with a score of 0.90 on the Cohen’s Kappa.

### **QUALITATIVE RESULTS: TOP INFLUENCES ON MASTER’S LEVEL STUDENTS**

The researcher identified the top six codes or factors that influenced Master’s Level students in this study: adjusting to Master’s level expectations, areas of frustration and struggle, perceived keys to success, faculty influence, areas of accomplishment, and peer support (see Table 4).

**TABLE 4  
INFLUENCES ON MASTER’S LEVEL STUDENTS THAT IMPACT SUCCESS RANK ORDER  
OF CODE APPLICATIONS**

<b>Code Application Rank Order</b>	<b>Influences on Master’s level students that impact success</b>
1	Adjusting to Master’s level expectations
2	Areas of frustration and struggle
3	Perceived keys to success
4	Faculty influence
5	Areas of accomplishment
6	Peer support

Both native English speakers and second-language learners have similar influences that impact their success as a Master’s level student. According to the Code Application table (see Table 4), adjusting to Master’s level expectations proved most challenging and frustrating, but was mediated by the support and influence of faculty and peers. Also, a well-kept alignment between perceived keys to success and reflecting on areas of accomplishment helped to motivate Master’s level students to persevere. For example, one participant from a private institution noted, “In the Master’s program, there is a lot more demanding reading, conversation, and giving of feedback to the students. Students have to participate in the class through class discussion. I think this is good. You have to do a lot more revisions on your work.” Another student from a U.C. explained, “It’s completely different! Bachelor’s work is about studying, listening, and regurgitating information on a mid-term or final. Graduate work is discussion-oriented; taking the information and critiquing it.”

## PRESENTATION OF CODE CO-OCCURENCES

Utilizing Dedoose software, six code co-occurrences resulted based on the participants' responses during the interview portion of the study. Code co-occurrence transpires when two or more codes were applied in the same excerpt. The researcher also examined all the excerpts to identify themes that apply to both native English speakers and second-language learners at the Master's level in the areas of education, social work, and sociology.

The six code co-occurrences were (1) adjusting to Master's level expectations and cultural norms, (2) adjusting to Master's level expectations and navigation, (3) peer support and perceptions of social support, (4) areas of frustration and struggle and Master's level expectations, (5) areas of accomplishment and perceived keys to success, and (6) adjusting to Master's level expectations and academics.

**TABLE 5**  
**RANK ORDER OF THE MOST FREQUENT CODE CO-OCCURENCES**

<b>Rank Order</b>	<b>Code Co-Occurrence</b>
1	Adjusting to MA Expectations & Cultural Norms
2	Adjusting to MA Expectations & Navigation
3	Peer Support & Perceptions of Social Support
4	Areas of Frustration and Struggle & Adjusting to MA Expectations
5	Areas of Accomplishment & Perceived Keys to Success
6	Adjusting to MA Expectations & Academics

Success in academics, time management, and personal growth were repeatedly identified as significant experiences at the Master's level. The six code co-occurrences provided evidence as to how students viewed their interactions with their Master's level experience in the areas of education, social work, or sociology in the Central Valley of California. For instance, one participant from the U.C. commented, "The Master's level programs across the various universities and even departments are very different. This is also the case for graduate and undergraduate in expectations. There is much more of a culture of "you better take care of it yourself." Another participant at the private college talked about the cohort model, and even though they are a diverse group, they have become friends. They communicate regularly through Facebook and other means, and they support each other every step of the way.

## OVERARCHING THEMES THAT SUPPORT MASTER'S LEVEL SUCCESS

The researcher analyzed the interview data of six Master's level students in overall code application and thematic findings. Three themes that applied to both native English speakers and second-language learners at the Master's level resulted: (1) more graduate level language and writing support, (2) the need for mentoring, and (3) utilizing the influence of faculty on Master's level student success.

**TABLE 6**  
**OVERARCHING THEMES FOR BOTH NATIVE ENGLISH SPEAKERS AND SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNERS AT THE MASTER'S LEVEL**

Rank Order	Overarching Themes
1	More Graduate Level Language and Writing Support
2	Need for Mentoring
3	Utilizing the Influence of Faculty on Master's level Student Success

More graduate-level language and writing support is needed from peer tutors who have been educated at the Master's level or above. There was strong feeling that support personnel who were at the Bachelor's level couldn't understand or support them with master's level writing expectations and that much of the writing support was not in alignment with their program or respective field. Additionally, EL's requested language and writing workshops be customized just for them that build language skills in the discipline area. Several discussed the need for embedding language and writing skills, particularly research writing using the APA format, within the context of the courses themselves.

Next, there was a need for mentoring, especially for English Learners. Many of the EL's in this study continue to do just everything on their own and try to find their way through the process.

Finally, institutions must utilize that strong influence of faculty on Master's level success. Master's level students repeatedly referred to the one instructor who was an advocate who made all the difference for them.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

As students openly talked about the process through their Master's level program, it became evident that they had changed. As reported by students, they experienced cognitive (i.e. approaches to learning and understanding), social, and psychological changes. This is in alignment with the transformational learning framework where students move through stages as they seek three types of knowledge which result from learning: (1) technical knowledge or instrumental learning which allows people to manipulate and control their environment through principles and skills, (2) practical or communicative knowledge which allows people to understand and interact through language, and (3) emancipatory knowledge in which people are seeking self-knowledge, growth, personal development, and freedom (Cranton, 2006).

As Cranton affirms (2006), education, including that of graduate level, has the power to be taught in a way as to develop and emancipate an individual. Instructors can engage in deliberate actions to disconnect students from status quo thinking and reformat them to develop new characteristics, attributes, behaviors, and perspectives that become new habits of mind. Additionally, students become critical thinkers and skilled practitioners or researchers in their field that contribute to the positive development of society.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CURRENT PRACTICE**

After examining the results of this study, institutions of higher education that offer Master's level programs in education and the social sciences need to reflect on current policy and practice in supporting student success. Are the needs of the full range of learners at the Master's level being met? The informal role of faculty as advocate and mentor needs exploration as well as the levels of language and writing support embedded within program courses. Support services should be evaluated for highly qualified personnel, personalized services based on field of study, as well as services that target the specific needs of both native English and second-language learners at the graduate level. The addition of student success

seminars at all levels of the program experience need consideration. Additionally, advisors need to work closely with students to develop clear education plans, to disclose the educational experience to increase transparency and ease of navigation, and to regularly meet with the student to support success every step of the way. Finally, it is recommended that students further along in the program be paired up with incoming students to serve as a peer mentor with shared experiences and valuable advice for program success.

Given the disparities in equality and access for an ever diversifying population of post-baccalaureate students, institutions must seek to continually assess and strengthen their programs to meet the full range of learners and to support students to degree completion. It is the hope of this researcher that the findings from this study will be used to help strengthen the Master's level experience for all students.

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