

Admission and Graduation Requirements for Special Education Doctoral Programs at Top 20 American Universities

Abstract

A quantitative analysis of the admissions and graduation requirements of the special education doctoral programs at top 20 universities in the United States was conducted. Admission requirements typically include an application fee, previous coursework GPA, previous field experience, GRE scores, TOEFL scores, professional writing sample(s), and enrollment. Graduation requirements include continuous enrollment, completion of courses, yearly progress reviews, doctoral products, a qualifying examination, dissertation completion, and final defense. Results indicate that the admission requirements and the quality of the instruction of the top 20 graduate education programs in the U.S. is comparable to that of the top 20 universities around the world and of the top 20 universities in the U.S.

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Special education is currently a field with a growing need for highly educated professionals in order to develop and provide better services and opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Some jobs that involve research or administration require persons with doctorate level training to maximize continued progress.

Many of the top special education graduate programs are offered at universities in the United States. In one of the few rankings available on the World Wide Web of best universities in the world, Shanghai Jiao Tong University's Web site (2006) ranks 17 U.S. universities among the best 20 on the globe (also see India Education.Net, 2006; MSNBC, 2006; National University of Singapore, 2006). Eleven of the best universities from the Jiao Tong University's Web site are also listed in a U.S. News & World Report ranking (2006b) of the best 20 universities in the U.S. Of the U.S. universities with the best graduate programs in education, according to the U.S. News & World Report assessment (2006c), six are among the best 20 universities in the world, and five are among

the best 20 universities in the U.S. Of the universities that offer the best special education graduate programs in the U.S., 11 are among the universities with the best graduate programs in education in the U.S., and three are considered to be among the best universities in the world according to the U.S. News & World Report ranking (2006d).

The doctoral degrees that are typically awarded are Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D., Philosophiæ Doctor) and Doctor of Education (Ed.D. or D.Ed., Doctor Educationis). A Ph.D. program typically prepares students for research positions, and an Ed. D. degree may prepare individuals for research, teaching, or administration positions in colleges and universities. Both degrees may lead to leadership positions in various service and educational agencies.

An extensive literature search revealed no surveys focusing on admission and graduation requirements in doctoral programs. The purpose of this survey is to provide prospective candidates to special education doctoral programs with an up-dated guideline as to the quality, admission requirements, program completion guidelines, and geographical setting of 20 of the top-rated academic programs in the U.S. In addition, the survey may provide family members, practitioners, and policymakers with information about the top 20 special education doctoral preparation programs in the U.S. This survey will hopefully encourage more individuals to choose to study special education and pursue higher degrees in order to contribute to the improvement of services for people with disabilities and to extend the body of research in the area of special education. Finally, colleges and universities may be able to develop more consistent admission and graduation requirements by sharing the type of information presented here.

Method

The Internet was used to obtain information on top-ranked U.S. universities that offered doctoral level programs in special education, and the requirements for those universities and programs (for historical background and a rationale for use of the Internet, see Everett, 2002; Hafner & Lyon, 1996; Isaacson, 2002; Naughton, 2000; Webopedia, 2006). Web searches were initially conducted using well-known search engines (Google, Yahoo, and MSN) and keywords such as "top universities," "world rank universities," and "rank colleges" in order to obtain a ranking of top universities around the world and within the U.S. A search of the universities' Web sites was subsequently conducted using any keyword that constituted a variable targeted in this survey, such as "special," "education," "disability(ies)," "doctoral program," "admission," "application," "GRE," "fee," and combinations of these. A third search was conducted on the official Web site of the U.S. News and World Report, where a subscription to the Premium Online edition provided a comprehensive list of universities with the top-rated programs in the U. S.

When the information from these main sources was insufficient or unclear, an e-mail message or a telephone call was placed to obtain the needed information. The criteria for inclusion of the first-ranked 20 special education programs in the U.S. were that: 1) the university had to offer special education specialization; 2) the university had to offer a Ph.D. and/or Ed.D. in special education; 3) the special education program had to be ranked among the top 20 in the U.S.; 4) the university had to be accredited; and 5) the university had to have a Web site. [For more information about how the school rankings were made, see U.S. News & World Report (2006a), and for details about accreditation of schools, refer to the Graduate Guide (2006)].

Results

The search revealed several rankings of American universities at the U.S. News & World Report Web site (2006a; 2006b; 2006c; 2006d) and at other Web sites that cited the U.S. News & World Report ranking. Additionally, the search produced information about minimum admission and graduation requirements in education and special education programs in the 20 top universities in the U.S. for 2006. The ranking from the U.S. News & World Report was accepted for the purposes of this survey because 1) this ranking was cited at all other visited Web sites that provided a university ranking, 2) this publication has journalistic prestige (U.S. News & World Report, 2006f), and 3) the company's staff conducted a stringent and thorough analysis of information in order to come to their conclusions. Table 1 lists the 20 top-ranked universities.

Admission Requirements

Table 1 shows that the mean GRE scores obtained in 2005 by the students accepted in doctoral education programs (534.4 for Verbal Reasoning and 615.1 for Quantitative Reasoning) is close to the mean GRE scores obtained by students accepted in special education graduate programs in the same year (510.5 for Verbal Reasoning and 595.8 for Quantitative Reasoning). This suggests that expectations for academic performance in special education graduate programs are comparable to those in other doctoral education programs.

For a candidate to be considered for admission into a special education doctoral program at any of the 20 top special education doctoral programs investigated, the following items must be submitted: 1) an application and processing fee; 2) a letter of intent (sometimes referred to as a letter of aspiration or statement of goals); 3) two official transcripts of all previous

college work (i.e., bachelor's and master's level coursework at accredited colleges or universities in the U.S. or at equivalent foreign institutions); 4) three to five letters of reference; 5) official scores from the Graduate Record Examination (GRE); 6) a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) report; and 7) official scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), if applicable (Table 2). All documents must be submitted by the admission/application deadlines, typically approximately six months prior to the semester for which the candidate wishes to be accepted. Some colleges also ask for a *curriculum vitae* and/or an interview, tape, or a video recording with answers to questions selected by the admission committee. Some programs require an additional scholarly written sample.

The results of the admission requirements are summarized in Table 2 [page 20]. Some special education doctoral programs require a master's degree, while others require only a bachelor's degree. Forty-five percent of the investigated special education programs ask for some experience in the field prior to admission. Of the 20 programs, 50% reported a minimum acceptable score, 35% did not have a cut-off score but expressed a preference, and 15% did not require a GRE score. Even if the department does not require a minimum GRE score, the prospective students are reminded that the admission is competitive and that a GRE score report may be helpful in evaluating their overall abilities, and especially in considering allocation of financial aid. The full-time in-state tuition consists generally of an enrollment of nine credit hours of graduate courses.

International applicants who are not native English speakers are required to submit their scores from the TOEFL exam. Typically, international students are also required to submit an additional

Table 1. Top 20 U.S. Special Education Programs and Mean GRE Scores*

Special Education Graduate Programs Ranking	Education Graduate Programs Ranking	University	2005 Mean GRE Scores of Students Accepted in Doctoral Education Programs		2005 Mean GRE Scores of Students Accepted in Special Education Graduate Programs	
			Verbal	Quantitative	Verbal	Quantitative
1.	5.	Vanderbilt University (Peabody)	629	708	551	641
2.	24.	University of Kansas	500	550	490	550
3.	15.	University of Oregon	482	586	482	551
4.	19.	University of Virginia (Curry)	548	617	539	615
5.	18.	University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign	563	681	N/A	N/A
6.	11.	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	523	610	509	595
7.	24.	University of Maryland-College Park	525	603	508	600
8.	15.	University of Texas-Austin	531	594	525	603
9.	35.	University of Florida	554	660	510	610
10.	7.	University of Wisconsin-Madison	533	619	514	613
11.	11.	University of Washington	531	577	531	577
12.	2.	Teachers College, Columbia University	567	640	553	638
12.	49.	Syracuse University	551	621	477	575
12.	24.	Ohio State University	485	599	484	582
12.	17.	Indiana University-Bloomington	542	650	511	604
16.	29.	University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	532	570	N/A	N/A
16.	21.	University of Georgia	528	617	495	576
16.	52.	University of California-Santa Barbara (Gevirtz)	509	583	492	564
19.	14.	Michigan State University	538	630	537	629
20.	29.	Pennsylvania State University-University Park	518	588	481	601
GRE Range			482-629	550-708	477-551	550-641
GRE Mean \pm SD			534.4 \pm 31.9	615.1 \pm 38.6	510.5 \pm 24.4	595.8 \pm 27.1

*The information presented was obtained from the 20 university websites, listed in the reference section.

Table 2. Admission Requirements and in the Top 20 U.S. Special Education Programs

Ranking	University	Application Fee (USD)	Minimum Previous GPA	Minimum Experience (yrs.)	Minimum GRE (V&Q)	TOEFL		Writing Sample	Fees (USD)	Full-time In-state Tuition	2005 Number of Doctoral Education Applications	2005 Percentage of Doctoral Education Applicants	2005 Number of Accepted Applications	2005 Number of Doctoral Education Entering Students
						PBT	CBT							
1.	Vanderbilt University (Peabody)	0	3.4	NCO	1100	550	213	1	2,202	11,547*	664	12.5	47	47
2.	University of Kansas	N/A	3.5	NCO	1000	570	230	1	441*	1,818*	225	44.9	N/A	N/A
3.	University of Oregon	50	3.0	1	1000	500	173	1	1,449	9,099	213	14.6	27	27
4.	University of Virginia (Curry)	60	NCO	NCO	1000	600	250	N/A	1,588	8,222	270	50.4	72	72
5.	University of Illinois-Urbana-Champaign	50	3.0	2	Not Required	613	257	N/A	1,772	7,160	304	41.1	87	87
6.	University of Minnesota-Twin Cities	55	3.0	NCO	NCO (~900)	550	213	1	1,641	8,748	450	49.1	137	137
7.	University of Maryland-College Park	60	3.5	2	NCO (~1000)	575	233	1	917	3,537*	446	36.1	91	91
8.	University of Texas-Austin	50	3.0	NCO	NCO (~1000)	550	213	1	N/A	7,174	580	38.6	163	163
9.	University of Florida	30	3.0	2	1000	550	213	2	207*	3,120*	158	44.9	32	32
10.	University of Wisconsin-Madison	45	3.0	2	Not Required	580	237	1	N/A	8,738	344	38.7	57	57
11.	University of Washington	45	3.0	0	NCO (~1000)	580	237	2	125	8,507	190	42.1	63	63
12.	Teachers College, Columbia University	65	3.0	NCO	Not Required	600	250	1	480	8,415*	1,236	25.8	160	160
12.	Syracuse University	65	3.5	3	1100	600	250	1	872	7,830*	88	40.9	27	27
12.	Ohio State University	40	3.0	3	1000	550	213	1	465	8,259	210	39.0	43	43
12.	Indiana University-Bloomington	55	3.0	2	1100	550	213	1	821	2,043*	399	43.6	95	95

(continued)

Table 2. (cont'd)

16. University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill	70	3.0	NCO	NCO (~1000)	550	213	1	1,401	3,613	205	51.7	58
16. University of Georgia	50	3.5	NCO	1000	550	213	1	990	4,368	495	38.0	133
16. University of California-Santa Barbara (Gevirtz)	60	3.0	NCO	NCO	550	213	1	1,598	7,525	368	29.9	47
19. Michigan State University	50	NCO	NCO	NCO (~1000)	550	213	1	882	3,267*	306	48.0	100
20. Pennsylvania State University-Univ. Park	60	3.5	3	1100	550	213	1	484	12,518	293	38.9	99
Range	0-70	3.0-3.5	1-3	900-1100	500-613	173-257	1-2	125-2,202	1,818-12,518	88-1,236	12.5-51.7	27-163
Mean ± SD	50.5 ±15.5	3.16 ±0.2	2 ±0.9	1,018.8 ±54.4	538.4 ±117.9	223 ±19.8	-	1,018.6 ±599.5	6,775.4 ±3,076.0	372.2 ±250.2	38.4 ±10.6	80.9 ±43.0

Legend: GPA = Grade Point Average; GRE = Graduate Record Examination; V&Q = Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning GRE scores; TOEFL = Test of English as a Foreign Language; PBT = Paper-Based Test; CBT = Computer-Based Test; N/A = Not Available; NCO = No Cut-Off; ~ = approximately; * = the prices with an asterisk were calculated given the credit hour rate multiplied by 9, which is the number of credit hours considered minimum for full-time enrollment.

Note: The last three columns of this table contain information pertaining to Doctoral Education Programs, not just Special Education Programs.

writing sample or an essay as proof of their competence in English. Furthermore, international students who have qualified for admission may be required to provide an official statement of financial resources that may be used to support their education for the first semester or year of graduate school. The official letter of admission is usually accompanied by a packet of information and an I-20 form with which international students obtain a U.S. Visa.

All colleges reviewed strongly recommend online application, which provides several advantages: 1) the application fee may be waived or reduced, 2) the application can be re-accessed for revisions if necessary, 3) the status of application can be checked online with convenience, and 4) electronic communication is faster than regular mail. Admission guidelines for all colleges generally state that attainment of minimum examination scores and timely submission of all required materials do not guarantee admission and/or financial aid because several other factors need to be taken into consideration. These include: 1) strength of the letter of introduction; 2) strengths of the letters of recommendation; 3) quality of the writing sample; 4) quality of previous experience and background in special education or a related field; 5) match of the applicant's and department's goals; 6) availability of a professor with a vacancy in the targeted specialty, and 7) availability of funds.

The recommendation decision (admit/do not admit) is usually made by an admission committee from the department that offers the special education program from each university. An official notification of

admission is sent to the applicant via mail or email from the appropriate department or from the Graduate School. It is therefore important to provide the university with a current e-mail and/or postal address, since the notification will also include further procedural instructions and contact information for the applicant.

Graduation Requirements

Once admitted into a doctoral program, the status of doctoral student is granted and should be maintained through: 1) continuous registration; 2) enrollment and successful completion of recommended course work hours, including research tools (courses in areas related to research design, methodology, and statistical analysis); 3) yearly student progress review determined by the department's faculty and/or student's committee members; and 4) professional products. Successful performance in a course is defined as earning a grade of B or higher. The doctoral committee is typically composed of three to five members from within and outside the department, including one or two committee chairs. Depending on the program and the student's personal goals, doctoral program duties or products may include: 1) teaching an internship or a practicum; 2) student supervision; 3) teaching a college course; 4) professional presentations outside the department (e.g., state, national, or international conferences); and 5) writing or contributing to grant proposals.

Because the doctoral programs are so uniquely tailored to the needs of the individual student, the number of hours of minimum research and graduate credit hours vary, and they may exceed the core program, especially because the number of dissertation hours can vary from 3 to 27 credit hours. A number or a guideline from which an approximate number of minimum coursework credit hours could

be calculated was reported inconsistently throughout the revised programs. The results of the graduation requirements are summarized in Table 3 [page 23]. A commitment of three to four years of full-time doctoral work or the equivalent is required by all of the 20 special education programs. In general, upon completion of course requirements except for the dissertation, there is a general qualifying examination (oral and/or written). If this is passed, the student officially becomes a doctoral candidate. The candidate is then given the opportunity to work on his/her dissertation proposal. Once the proposal is approved by the committee members, the doctoral candidate conducts research for, writes, and defends his/her dissertation in the context of the final (oral) examination. Dissertations generally consist of: 1) a comprehensive literature review, 2) a description of the methodology used, and 3) several chapters of scientific and philosophical analysis. The time line in which a student is expected to finish his/her studies varies from four to five years. From the 20 programs investigated, only 8 have reported a time limit for graduation, with a mean of approximately 10 years from admission, given that the student has the special approval of the doctoral committee and the Graduate School to delay his/her defense no later than four to six years from promotion to candidacy.

Discussion

This paper has identified the 20 top-rated special education programs in the United States, and has reported on their admission and graduation requirements. Similar analyses, focusing on related disciplines pertinent to careers in disability, and emphasizing both admission and graduation requirements for undergraduate and graduate levels, would be useful additions to the existent statistical data about the quality of the colleges and universities in the U.S.

Table 3. Graduation requirements in the Top 20 U.S. Special Education Programs

Ranking	University	Min Hours of Graduate Work	Research Hours
1.	Vanderbilt University (Peabody)	72	N/A
2.	University of Kansas	N/A	N/A
3.	University of Oregon	90	
4.	Univ. of Virginia (Curry)	36	21
5.	University of Illinois–Urbana-Champaign	36	12
6.	University of Minnesota–Twin Cities	75	18
7.	University of Maryland–College Park	90	N/A
8.	University of Texas–Austin	72	15
9.	University of Florida	26	12
10.	University of Wisconsin–Madison	54	12
11.	University of Washington	N/A	12
12.	Teachers College, Columbia University	42	9
12.	Syracuse University	90	9
12.	Ohio State University	N/A	N/A
12.	Indiana University–Bloomington	90	15
16.	University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill	N/A	N/A
16.	University of Georgia	39	6
16.	University of California–Santa Barbara (Gevirtz)	N/A	N/A
19.	Michigan State University	66	12
20.	Pennsylvania State University–Univ. Park	84	24
Total Range		26 - 90	6 - 24
Total Mean \pm SD		64.1 \pm 23.3	13.6 \pm 5.0

and in other countries. Such studies should motivate prospective students to make informed decisions about their future careers. It is recommended that official Web sites of various colleges and universities should report information about admission and graduation in a more detailed and consistent fashion. Universities' Web sites could also provide statistics about employment success rates upon graduation, the number of graduates and employed graduates per year, and the satisfaction of the employees with their job. Should more statistical data about special education preparation programs be made available, they could be summed up in a meta-analysis, which could offer overall conclusions about the field of special education.

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