

Specialist Degree: A Bogus Degree or Diamond in the Rough

James S. Payne, Esim Erdim
(The University of Mississippi, USA)

Abstract: Requirements for Specialist Degree Programs in 12 comprehensive universities were analyzed. It is concluded that Specialist Degree Programs consist of a certain number of course credit hours beyond the master's degree, are composed of many independently taught classes, and require a thesis or major paper.

Understandably, many professionals view the specialist program as a bogus degree, made up of a conglomeration of courses designed to help practitioners get a pay raise in their job. However, when higher education is presumed to promote professional and personal growth, and the independently taught courses focus on service to the candidate by promoting professional and person growth, the Specialist Degree may be viewed differently.

Key words: specialist degree, independent study, teacher education

Teacher education programs at the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral levels offer a sequence of courses that are reasonably designed and generally agreed upon that lead to becoming a professional educator. The Specialist Degree program in teacher education, at a glance, appears to be in a void in the arena of academia. This article will take a closer look at this degree program to show how it can serve to further professional growth.

In general, a specialist program requires a set number of course credits beyond the master's that are made up of an abundance of Independent Studies, Special Readings, Field Hours and possibly Thesis Hours. After studying the requirements for a specialist degree as listed on the websites of 12 comprehensive universities located in the southeast, four do not offer a specialist degree, leaving eight that do. Of those offering a specialist degree (8 out of 12), the range of required hours beyond the master's degree is 30 to 36. Five require 30 hours, one requires 33 and two, Florida and Mississippi, require 36.

The majority of content courses required for a specialist degree are also required for a master's and/or doctoral degree. Candidates in a specialist program that take a required content course during the master's program must select an additional course not previously taken. Only two universities list courses specifically for the specialist program that are not required for either the master's or doctoral program. In other words, content courses specifically designed for only specialist candidates are almost non-existent.

One interesting finding is that in states where comprehensive universities do not have a specialist program, public schools offer a pay raise for completing a set number of hours beyond the master's level. In every state where a specialist program is offered, public schools offer a pay raise for earning a Specialist Degree.

So, in essence, Specialist Degree programs are mostly composed of courses that are independently taught, e.g., Individual Study, Special Readings, Field Hours and Thesis Hours. All of the comprehensive institutions

studied that offer a specialist program require a thesis, a major paper, or in the case of Mississippi, a submitted paper to a refereed journal. In every case, a series of independently taught courses are required to complete the thesis, major paper or submitted papers.

Since there are very few content courses specifically designed for specialist candidates, some professionals refer to the specialist program as a bogus degree designed to primarily help candidates get a raise in salary. This is an understandable perception when the specialist program is compared to other degrees requiring academic integrity composed of a series of carefully planned and sequenced courses. However, if the specialist program is viewed as an opportunity to meet specific individual needs, one might consider the specialist degree to be a diamond in the rough.

As presently operated, most specialist programs are a service rather than a program of study. However, when the independent courses are targeted toward promoting professional and personal growth, the specialist program takes on new meaning and may be an exemplar for other programs that allow independently taught courses.

The following are four cases in point that illustrate the uniqueness of a specialist program. They are presented to stimulate thinking as to a range of possible topics for independent study courses when the objective is to meet individual needs that promote professional and personal growth.

One candidate indicated a child was recently placed in her classroom diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome. She wanted to know more about Asperger's and how she could help the student. To promote professional growth, the candidate was assigned an Independent Study and referred to an expert on Asperger Syndrome that was employed outside the university. Also, the candidate was introduced to a parent of an older child having Asperger's. The expert recommended a series of readings and studied the child's evaluation report. After studying the evaluation, the expert offered ideas on techniques that could be used by the candidate to help the student in the classroom. The parent of the older child introduced the candidate to the state's Autism Spectrum Disorder Organization (Asperger is a mild form of autism).

As a result, the candidate developed effective teaching skills that resulted in positive growth of the student, joined the state Autism organization, became an advocate for individuals diagnosed as having Asperger Syndrome and gave a presentation on Asperger's at a professional conference.

Other similar cases earning Independent Study credit that were classified as promoting professional growth include: becoming knowledgeable on No Child Left Behind, developing Response to Intervention strategies, learning and using additional subject specific activities in the areas of reading, math, spelling, science and writing, and conducting case studies on specific students the candidate has in the classroom.

There are many avenues to promoting professional growth that are acceptable for Independent Study credit, but the ones cited above have been judged as worthy of credit and, if appropriate, have been recommended to other candidates for consideration in their own program of study at the specialist level.

While interviewing one candidate, frustration was experienced regarding not having enough time to do everything. After some discussion, it was decided to offer an Independent Study directed at adopting a time management system. The candidate was required to read two books, *First Things First* and *Time Management for Dummies*. Also, the candidate had to attend a one day workshop on time management offered by the Department of Human Services at the university and ultimately, try using some type of planner.

The result was the candidate started using an electronic hand-held planner, but found it to be more frustrating than helpful. The candidate switched to a popular print matter daily planner, but found it not user friendly. Finally, the candidate developed her own system using a conventional calendar. She took what she learned from reading

the books, attending the one day training session, and her experience with the electronic and print matter systems to develop a simple, easy-to-use system that guided her toward getting more things done in the same amount of time. More importantly, the projects she completed were healthy and purposeful.

To earn Independent Study credit, the candidate explained to the advisor the key points of time management and, specifically, what she learned when a specific planner was used and, ultimately, described the system she developed.

Other cases earning Individual Study credit for promoting personal growth included conducting self-change studies in areas the candidate expressed a need, for example: exercise, nutrition, stress management and attitude adjustment. Most of the Independent Studies judged as being most worthy of credit required data or production of a product rather than the typical written paper.

A highly successful case involved a candidate that chose to learn how to get her own literary agent. For Independent Study credit, she was required to read the book, *How to Write a Book Proposal* by Michael Larsen, write a proposal and submit the proposal to 10 literary agents. The candidate discovered how to write a good proposal.

After 40 submissions to different agents, 30 more than the required 10, the result was an offering and signing of a contract. Months after the Independent Study was completed, a contract was signed with a publisher and a year later, the candidate's first book was published.

Other Independent Studies that exceeded expectations or requirements have resulted in patents, trademarks and academic games. In Independent Studies that exceed expectations, the course provided a stimulus to take a risk, time to fail and in some cases, succeed.

A most unusual case involved a candidate that, during a conference with the advisor, expressed frustration and a small degree of anger. She had been assigned to be in charge of the cheerleaders in the school she worked. The candidate, never having been a cheerleader, not only did not know how to work with cheerleaders, but did not like or respect the idea of cheerleading. The advisor was not too keen on cheerleading either.

Out of frustration and a sense to help, the advisor enrolled the candidate in an Independent Study with the purpose of, at least, helping the candidate get through her assignment of being in charge of the cheerleaders and hopefully help the aspiring cheerleaders get started on the right foot.

The candidate was sent to the person in charge of cheerleading at the university. Promptly, the candidate returned, disgusted, with a rather large box of books and videos. The advisor suggested she look over the materials, try some of the things described in them, and return at the end of the semester to explain what she had learned that would be worthy of a grade.

At the end of the semester, the candidate came to the advisor's office. When asked what she had done to earn credit for the course, the candidate popped out of the chair, and to the amazement of the advisor, the candidate sprang into an enthusiastic cheer. After completing the cheer, the candidate sat down and explained cheerleading was a sport that takes skill, practice, dedication, discipline, teamwork and guts. She pronounced she was a good director and coach. She understood cheerleading, and she liked it. She then pulled out a video tape from her purse of her self-revered team, but before being allowed to proceed, the advisor explained, "I get it," which concluded the conference. The candidate left, the advisor issued a grade "pass" and filed the video, never to be seen again.

Other unusual cases that exceeded expectations often impressed the advisor more than the candidate. Experience has shown, often times, rather than determine the criteria for a grade up front, simply require the candidate to report to the advisor's office at the end of the semester and explain what they learned and did to be

worthy of a grade. Most candidates do more than the advisor would have ever thought possible.

Possibly a specialist program filled with opportunities to meet needs, both professional and personal, might do as much good as a well-designed program with a set of prescribed courses that contain academic integrity. Maybe a stellar, world class program, can and should focus on needs rather than pre-assigned subject matter.

If it is decided to use an independent study course to promote professional or personal growth, then consider doing the following:

- (1) Listen closely to the candidate
- (2) Mutually decide what might best meet the need, professional or personal
- (3) Propose a plan of action
- (4) Let the candidate do it
- (5) Require the candidate to return at the end of the semester and justify what was learned and done to earn a grade
- (6) Record a grade
- (7) Move on to the next semester

A specialist program just might be what education is all about, promoting professional and personal growth while helping the candidate get a raise.

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