

## Graduate School in Health Education: A Challenge to Consider

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### Abstract

This article examines aspects health educators should consider before obtaining an advanced degree. Specifically, challenges and expectations facing graduate students in health education are discussed in addition to available options for individuals thinking about graduate school in the discipline. Health educators must devise goals to obtain the most from their graduate school experiences. Potential students must also choose programs that best suit their personal and professional needs. Above all, health educators must determine when to attend graduate school and at what costs.

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Peters (1992) stated, “If you decide to go to graduate school, don’t do it just because you don’t know what else to do” (p. 9). Unfortunately, many individuals opt to attend graduate school without having a set vision in mind. Such individuals set out on “fishing expeditions” in pursuit of finding a good fit for a career.

Shea (n.d.) indicated that caution is warranted for those heading to graduate school in search of their career niche. At the undergraduate level, it is not uncommon for students to change majors several times before determining their field of study. With the exception of full-time graduate students who have a career change at stake, part-time graduate students typically adhere to a chosen field of study for the purposes of networking and advancing professionally (Abell, n.d.a). The purpose of this paper is to explore factors to consider before seeking graduate school opportunities in health education.

A graduate degree is not necessary for carrying out the responsibilities of an entry level health educator. However, as health education continues to advance through credentialing and other venues, more and more individuals are seeking graduate school opportunities in the field. As part of an ongoing effort to identify graduate level competencies for health

educators, the Competencies Update Project (CUP) has been underway since March of 1998 (NCHEC, n.d.). The National Commission for Health Education Credentialing (NCHEC) (1999) has identified three graduate level competencies for health educators including the following: a) to promote and enhance the profession, b) to conduct and apply research in the field, and c) to deliver health education programs. First and foremost, health educators thinking about pursuing graduate school should consider whether or not their interests coincide with fulfillment of these competencies.

Greene and Minton (1989) discussed the following reasons for choosing graduate school: (a) satisfaction of achieving a personal goal, (b) professional recognition and promotion, (c) and meeting the requirements of select professions. Moreover, individuals pondering the possibility of attending graduate school must decide when they are ready to meet these challenges. Shea (n.d.) alluded to the fact that many individuals continue their education during an economic recession. A depressed job market could create an impetus for health educators to attend graduate school rather than face a potentially fruitless job search.

For whatever reasons, some individuals wish to postpone graduate school. Kuther (n.d.)

identified burnout as a plausible reason for delaying graduate school. Regardless of the reasons why individuals put off graduate school, delaying graduate school offers individuals time to prepare for entrance exams, to glean practical experiences that can contribute to classroom discussions, and to research various academic programs (Hansen, n.d.). In order to get the most out of the graduate school experience, Hansen (n.d.) recommended a need to set goals. By postponing graduate school, individuals can think thoroughly about their future career aspirations and whether or not graduate school should be a part of this preparation.

Many graduate programs in health education offer teaching and research assistantships as well as internship opportunities (Hansen, n.d.). Although there are many programs that offer graduate study in health education in the United States, there are significantly fewer schools of public health in the nation. Through graduate study in public health, health educators can expand their horizons to incorporate epidemiological and behavioral approaches to health promotion and disease prevention (Simons-Morton, Greene, & Gottlieb, 1995). Historically, health education programs situated within public health institutions place a greater emphasis on social, cultural, political, and environmental aspects of health.

With all of the available program options in health education, graduate students must consider elements such as school and/or program reputation, school and/or program accreditation, tuition, quality of faculty, access to effective resources, school atmosphere and

culture, opportunities for job placement, and research versus academic emphasis (Hansen, n.d.b). The latter aspect is of particular importance to individuals seeking doctoral degrees. Many doctoral students have aspirations of specializing in academia. As major academic institutions continue to place an added thrust on producing research, doctoral students must be cognizant and willing to balance their future teaching and research endeavors (Torabi, 2001).

Hansen (n.d.) reinforced the idea that it is never too late for individuals to attend graduate school. Graduate study in health education can be very demanding and thus, the keys to success are dedication and a willingness to make sacrifices. Although many individuals apply to graduate school in the hope of ultimately attaining higher salaries, graduate students must be willing to make short-term financial sacrifices (Shea, n.d.). For example, a regular diet of Ramen noodles is not uncommon! Another sacrifice involves time. Graduate students devote a lot of weekends and late nights to studying. Time sacrifices are especially critical for part-time graduate students who have families to support (Abell, n.d.).

For the most part, contemporary graduate study accommodates the needs of most students. For example, distance learning provides an avenue for students who live in remote areas (Hansen, n.d.). Overall, graduate study in health education can be very fulfilling for health educators in pursuit of broadening the scope of their knowledge and skills and applying the principles of research and theory to their everyday practices.

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