

Developing the Professional Master's Programs for Practical Use by All Students

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I support the University's plan to develop more Professional Master's Programs throughout the campus, with a couple major adjustments. Hearing over and over again that I wasn't a 'real' graduate student, has made me want to change this program so that no one else has to go through what I went through.

I decided to go back to school to get my Bachelor's degree when I was 24. I dropped everything and moved across the country from the East Coast when I found out I was accepted. I worked as an undergraduate research assistant, grader, and science summer camp assistant to pay for housing and food, taking out loans to pay for school (as most students do). Although I didn't come from a low-income background, I found myself independently funding this adventure, just trying to make it from semester to semester. After graduating with my BA, I asked one of my professors if I could work for him in a Temp position until I found a full-time job, and was lucky enough that it worked out. After working in that lab, which was part science and part engineering, I decided that I like the engineering side and wanted to pursue a Master's degree in Systems Engineering. However, this degree option doesn't exist at CU, so I chose what I thought was the best option, a Professional Master's Degree Program that offered Systems Engineering courses.

I've been told that Professional Master's degree Programs were designed for people with full-time jobs that wanted to change careers, increase a specific knowledge base, or further their career to a management role. However, after four semesters in this program, I think I was in class with 4-5 people who were employed full-time (out of about 40). I know that these programs started at other institutions before being implemented at CU, and maybe that description works for them, but it needs to be re-evaluated here. If the Professional Master's Programs are going to stand on their own and not be associated with the department that is hosting them, they need to have their own strategic plan and vision. The strategic plan for these programs should not discourage traditional students, people in the process of changing careers, or the unemployed from enrolling. If it is not the intention of the University to have these programs stand on their own, the individual departments should have more control over them and treat them like any other Master's program. The latter is my suggestion for how these programs should be managed.

Professional Master's Programs should be a class of specialized programs designed for career specific certifications or licenses, while being treated the same as any other Master's degree program by the University. There are currently two main differences between the management of PMPs and traditional Master's programs that I would like to see addressed: (1)

the cost of tuition and the way the money is handled, and (2) students in the Professional Master's degree Programs are not allowed to work as graduate students for the University.

Tuition for a PMPs is significantly higher than comparable traditional programs for In-State students. In engineering, the tuition is >\$4000 a year more for PMPs, business is ~\$3000 more a year, and if the tuition is similar to business and engineering programs, the cost could be \$6000-8000 more for Arts and Sciences. Which brings me to how the money is handled, which I haven't been able to get information about anywhere. The one thing I do know about this money is that it doesn't go towards funding graduate students, since these graduate students are not allowed to work as graduate students.

After I found out I was accepted to the Professional Master's degree Program, the professor I was working for offered me a Graduate Research Assistant position in Systems Engineering on a NASA grant. I was told that my tuition would be waived, and I would have a monthly stipend. It was perfect. I would be able to start paying off some of my undergraduate student loans, while getting experience in my career field. Then, two days before tuition was due, I was told the University wouldn't waive my tuition, and I wouldn't be allowed to work. It's not that the position suddenly disappeared, or the project didn't have the money anymore, the University just decided that I wasn't allowed to hold that position. Why? I don't know why. I've asked and asked when up the chain, sideways, the engineering college, the graduate school, everywhere. Most people just said that I wasn't a 'real' graduate student. The best answer I've gotten is that other schools do it this way. It makes no sense. After all the work I did, going back to school, getting my Bachelor's degree, working while taking classes, I finally found what I wanted to do for the rest of my life, and my feet were knocked out from under me. I found out what I wanted to do in life because of this lab, and now I can't work there as a student because I'm in the only program that offers the classes I want to take? It's not like I opted for the PMP over a traditional program, the traditional program doesn't exist. I now had bills totaling over \$10,000 a semester. I had to take less classes per semester to afford it, and I got a job (not in my field) earning \$11/hr to pay rent. It wasn't until I was offered a full-time position with a different program that could afford another full-time position, that I finally got back on my feet (albeit with an extra \$20,000 in debt). With the full-time position I was able to use University employee tuition benefits to pay for the last of my courses. The University obviously doesn't have a problem with these courses if they are allowing their employees to take them for free with employee benefits, so it's just unemployed graduate students that are suffering.

Professional Master's Programs do have a place in at the University. These are Master's degree programs, they should be managed and treated as such. I'm not asking for anything more than what every single other Master's degree student is afforded. I'm not asking that every student is guaranteed a TA or RA position, I'm just asking that it is not prohibited. These programs should have competitive tuition costs with other Master's degree programs on campus, and low-income, unemployed, or traditional students should not be discouraged to enroll in PMPs.