

Findings from the UCLA Master of Education in Student Affairs Alumni Focus Groups and Subsequent Program Response

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Introduction

The UCLA Master's of Education in Student Affairs (MSA) program was established in 2007. The MSA program is an intensive four-quarter (11 month) graduate program "designed to provide early-career professionals with knowledge, skills, and a social justice perspective in the areas of student development theory, foundations of higher education, student affairs administration, research, and assessment" ([UCLA SEIS](#), n.d). In 2023, program faculty reached out to recent alumni of the program with the intent of collecting feedback that could inform updates to the MSA curriculum. The following report is a summary assessment of the program curriculum and internship experience based on alumni insight from cohorts 10 through 16 and some alumni from cohorts 4, 7, and 9. The assessment was conducted by the MSA Assistant Director in consultation with the MSA faculty.

Procedures

Focus Group Design

The interview protocol was designed by the MSA Faculty Director and Assistant Director. The questions asked alumni to speak to the career preparation they received in courses and their internship, the knowledge and skills gained related to social justice in student affairs, their learning experience as it relates to the final comprehensive exam, and suggestions for improving the curriculum, training, and alumni support.

Recruitment

The SEIS Office and Career Development Coordinator assisted in updating the list of alumni and contact information. An email was sent to alumni in mid-June 2023 inviting them to participate in a 60 to 90 minute focus group interview. Alumni from cohorts 10 through 16 were invited to participate via email from the MSA Assistant Director. The email contained the purpose of the focus group, the length of the focus group, and a link to an interest form. An announcement was also posted on social media (Facebook and LinkedIn) with information about the focus groups alongside the Assistant Director's email address. Members of cohorts 4, 7, and 9 reached out after seeing the social media post and indicated interest in participating in a focus group. A reminder email was sent in early July 2023 asking for additional participants. The Faculty Director assisted with recruiting participants from cohorts with lower response rates. Some alumni also took it upon themselves to recruit classmates to participate.

Data Collection

The eight virtual focus groups were held in July 2023 via Zoom. Focus groups were recorded and transcribed.

Analysis

Analysis of the data primarily included inductively generating themes that reflect outcomes gained by past MSA students and suggestions for improvement.

Participant Demographics

Focus Group	Number of participants
Cohorts 4, 7, 9	5
Cohort 10	4
Cohort 11	6
Cohort 12	5
Cohort 13	4
Cohort 14	5
Cohort 15	5
Cohort 16	4
TOTAL	38

Current Jobs	Number of participants
Student or Academic Affairs	27
Research	3
Education adjacent (outside university setting)	5
Non-education related industry	3

MSA Program Experiences

Overall, students feel supported by the faculty and staff involved with the MSA program. They pointed to various instances in which faculty and staff helped them feel a sense of belonging and supported their professional goals. When reflecting on their coursework, they pointed to various academic and practical skills they learned. Across all cohorts they pointed to professional development as an area for continued growth.

How Coursework Prepared Students for Student Affairs Career

Alumni were asked to share how the coursework prepared them for their careers and how it contributed to their development of social justice and skills. Participants pointed to six overarching outcomes from MSA coursework: 1. expanded knowledge of student needs and higher education systems, 2. development of practical skills, 3. socialization into the field, 4. development of social justice knowledge, 5. development of social justice-related skills, and 6. directed field experience course provided career development ([Table 1](#)).

Several alumni shared they developed a greater understanding of student populations and higher education. Their greater understanding often informed their approach to programming, advising, training, and ability and confidence to have conversations with colleagues.

Focus group participants often spoke of the practical skills they learned in their coursework such as research, assessment, and counseling skills. These courses were often “top of mind” for alumni. Many pointed to these practical skills as the most applicable to their student affairs work, and they were viewed as the most transferable between positions.

Some alumni also indicated that their courses helped them network with faculty, learn more about important issues in higher education, and develop their personal and professional identities. Additionally, some alumni indicated an appreciation for taking classes with students outside of their cohort. This allowed students to connect with other master’s and Ph.D. students in the department. Lastly, one person was glad they could take classes outside of student affairs and the school of education; it was an opportunity to take courses beyond student affairs.

Alumni were asked how the MSA curriculum developed their knowledge of social justice in student affairs and social justice skills. Three participants noted that, overall, the program helped them learn about social justice. Most participants said the courses developed their understanding of social justice concepts and theory which then informed their perspective of students’ experiences and how social justice relates to their practice.

When asked how the directed field experience (internship) class prepared them for their careers, alumni pointed to specific activities, presentations, and guest speakers as helpful in their career preparation. Receiving job search related support was important for some alum while others appreciated networking and learning more about the student affairs field.

Table 1. How Courses Prepared Students

Outcome	Examples
Expanded their understanding of students and higher education	• Greater understanding of higher education history and systems • Understanding of different student population needs • Higher education language • Research language • Developed research interests
Developed relevant and transferrable practical skills	• Research and assessment • Counseling and advising • Program development • Facilitation
Socialization into the field and personal development	• Socialization into profession • Networking • Developed personal and professional identity
Developed knowledge of social justice	• Learned social justice concepts/theory and gained language • Developed awareness and understanding of challenges faced by different populations • Learned about and/or strengthened their own social justice values • Became aware of personal biases • Were pushed to think more critically • Learned about higher education history that may not always be included in courses • Learned about the role of institution type in shaping student experiences
Developed social justice-related skills	• Learned to infuse social justice lens in their teaching, practice, assessment, and research • Learned to facilitate difficult social justice related conversations
Directed field experience course provided career development	• Provided assistance with job materials (resume and cover letter) • Liked learning about job search process

	● Provided job interview preparation ● Received feedback on how to navigate work-related challenges ● Opportunity to reflect on experiences ● Exposure to senior leaders and their career trajectories ● Exposed to current issues in higher ed ● Learned how to create welcoming environments ● Learned how to navigate NASPA
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How Internship Prepared Students for Student Affairs Career

Participants were asked to discuss how the internship experience prepared them for their careers in student affairs ([Table 2](#)). Some participants shared that the internship experience was a valuable experience they needed for their next step. Two alumni shared that the internship was an opportunity for them to apply what they were learning in the classroom. Alumni listed a range of skills they developed in their internships such as advising, supervision, and program development. In addition to skills, a few participants said the internship experience provided additional insight and socialization into higher education.

Table 2. How Internship Experience Prepared Students

Outcome	Examples
Gained a range of skills through their internships	● Advising and mentoring ● Supervision and hiring ● Program development ● Learned about funding processes ● Learned to facilitate training ● How to collaborate with campus partners ● Crisis management ● Assessment
Socialization into higher education	● Gained valuable experience needed for next steps; had great mentors and experience ● Gained exposure to various campus departments ● Identified preferred career paths and functional areas of interest ● Received mentorship and feedback ● Gained greater understanding of UCLA populations ● Developed understanding of what it means to work at larger

	institution • Learned what it means to advocate for oneself
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Opportunities for Strengthening MSA Program

Participants were asked to identify opportunities for enhancing and updating the MSA curriculum, internship experience, and the final comprehensive exam. Alumni noted that the program was strong and offered their suggestions to strengthen and update each of the three key areas of the program ([Table 3](#)).

With regard to the curriculum, alum suggested expanding course availability such as electives and adding topics to existing courses. Several alumni participants also noted a need for additional structure and goal clarity in the internship course and offered several potential topics and activities to include as professional development in the class.

While most alumni experienced a positive internship experience, participants provided some suggestions for strengthening the working relationship with their site supervisors and their overall internship experience.

Alumni were asked what they learned from the final comprehensive exam. Some participants indicated they did not gain much from the final exam. One person said the exam was challenging, because it was hard to recall information from the beginning of the year. People who took the exam during the COVID-19 pandemic had a much more positive experience and felt that the expectations were reasonable. Several alumni suggested that MSA students should complete a different kind of culminating project such as a capstone project.

Participants also provided feedback on ongoing alumni support. They liked having access to job postings on social media (i.e., Facebook) and being invited to assist with mock interviews for current MSA students.

Program Updates

In response to alumni feedback and an interest in updating the program, the core faculty first met in September 2023 to review and discuss the findings from the focus groups. Ongoing conversations led to changes to the curriculum, internship experience, final comprehensive exam, and alumni engagement. A current list of program updates are found in the table below.

Table 3. Suggestions for Strengthening MSA Program and Program Updates

Program Component	Suggestions	Changes implemented (as of June 2026)
Curriculum	• Consider additional professional development topics for directed	• Continuous updates to syllabi, professional development

	field experience course ● Provide added goal clarity and structure to each quarter of the directed field experience course ● Expand course offerings ● Expand topics in current course offerings ● Expand number of electives required for degree ● Expand social justice discussions in courses	topics, and structure of internship field experience course ● Continuous updates to topics/readings in course syllabi
Internship experience	● Provide additional onboarding and guidance to site supervisors ● Provide option to keep full-time job ● Provide additional guidance on internship outcomes ● Expand internship site options ● Assign internship sites sooner	● Additional internship sites have become available ● Directed field experience course provides additional guidance on identifying internship goals
Final comprehensive exam	● Did not gain much from a comprehensive exam ● Suggested students complete a different kind of a project	● Replaced comprehensive exam with a culminating capstone project and presentation
Alumni engagement	● Consider hosting alumni reunions and affinity gatherings ● Provide opportunities to cultivate mentorships ● Make job resources and alumni directory available ● Provide ongoing workshops and professional development	● Updated alumni directory ● Continued inviting alum as course guest speakers ● Continued inviting alum to assist with mock interviews ● Continued inviting alum to participate in informational interviews with current students ● Invited alum to Facebook and LinkedIn groups to connect alum and to share job opportunities

ADDENDUM: Where Alumni Work

During the 2024-2025 academic year, the alumni directory was updated. The information below reflects the institutional affiliation of those 178 alumni that worked in higher education and student affairs at the time of the directory survey.

Arizona State University
Bentley University
Brown University
California Institute of Technology
California Lutheran University
California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly), Pomona
California State Polytechnic University (Cal Poly), San Luis Obispo
California State University, Dominguez Hills
California State University, East Bay
California State University, Fullerton
California State University, Long Beach
California State University, Los Angeles
California State University, Northridge
California State University, Office of the Chancellor
California State University, San Bernardino
California State University, San Marcos
Chapman University
Colorado School of Mines
Columbia University
De Anza College
El Camino College
Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University, Prescott
George Washington University
Georgetown University
Lewis & Clark College
Los Rios Community College District
Loyola Marymount University
Mount Saint Mary's
New York University
Northeastern University
Northeastern University Silicon Valley
Northern Virginia Community College
Orange Coast College
Pitzer College
Pomona College
Portland Community College
Rio Honda College
Roosevelt University

San Diego State University
San Francisco State University
San Jose State University
Santa Ana College
Santa Clara University
Simmons University
Southern Methodist University
Stanford University
Texas A&M University
Tufts University
University of California, Berkeley
University of California, Davis
University of California, Education Abroad Program
University of California, Irvine
University of California, Los Angeles
University of California, Merced
University of California, Riverside
University of California, San Diego
University of California, Santa Barbara
University of California, Santa Cruz
University of Colorado, Boulder
University of Kansas
University of Massachusetts, Lowell
University of Nebraska at Omaha
University of Oregon
University of Redlands
University of Southern California
University of Texas at Austin
University of Texas at El Paso
University of Toronto
University of Washington
Utah State University
Washington University in St. Louis