# ADMISSION AND GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION DOCTORAL PROGRAMS AT 20 TOP AMERICAN UNIVERSITIES

#### Gabriela Walker

University of Georgia

A quantitative analysis of the admissions and graduation requirements guidelines of the special education doctoral programs at 20 top American universities 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 may include continuous enrollment, completion of courses, yearly progress reviews, doctoral products, a qualifying examination, dissertation completion, and final defense. Results indicate that the quality of the instruction is comparable to that of the top 20 universities around the world, of the top 20 universities in the U.S., and of the top 20 graduate education programs in the U.S.

#### Introduction

Special education is currently a field with growing employment needs in order to develop and provide better services and opportunities for individuals with disabilities. Based on data collected during the 2000 census, approximately 19% of the individuals in the U.S. population have one of these conditions: (1) they are 5 years or older and have a sensory, physical, mental, or self-care disability; (2) they are 16 years or older and have difficulty when going outside their home; or (3) they are 16 to 64 years old and have an employment disability (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). The same source also reports that of the 19%, 7% of boys and 4% of girls aged 5 to 15 have disabilities, and 20% of men and 18% of women aged 16 to 64 have disabilities. Some jobs that involve research or administration require persons with doctorate level training to maximize continued progress in this area of education.

Many of the top special education graduate programs are offered at American universities. 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.A. Of the American universities with the best graduate programs in education according to the US 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.A. 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).

Educational attainment may be an important income predictor, one would conclude that opportunities to earn a higher salary should increase with the number or the level of degrees that one attains. A table compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau and entitled *Earnings by Occupation and Education, United States, Both Sexes* (2005), summarizes data from the 2000 census and suggests that people with an advanced degree (defined as higher than a bachelor's degree) earned, on average, 2.02 times more than high school graduates. Furthermore, the table shows that people with high school diplomas were earning incomes which had increased 1.5-fold by the end of their employment career, whereas people with advanced degrees were earning incomes that had increased 2.2-fold by the end of their careers. According to the 2000 census, 15.54% of the American workforce had earned a bachelor's degree, and 8.86% had earned a graduate degree (Free Demographics.Com, 2005). Two of the highest graduate degrees are Doctor of Philosophy (Ph. D. - *Philosophiæ Doctor*) and Doctor of Education (Ed. D. or D. Ed. – *Doctor Educationis*). While a Ph. D. program typically prepares students for research positions, 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 educational agencies.

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 best academic programs in the U.S. In addition, the survey may provide parents and practitioners with information about the top 20 special education doctoral preparation programs in the country. Hopefully, this survey will also 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. A statistical analysis may provide the administration personnel of various colleges and universities with a consistent report about other universities' requirements and may assist in developing a more homogeneous collection of requirements variables. No similar surveys were found in a literature search.

#### Method

Since the creation of the ARPA-net (Advanced Research Projects Agency) in 1969 (Hafner & Lyon, 1996; Naughton, 2000; Webopedia, 2006), the Internet has undergone an explosion of growth. In 2003, 62% of American households owned one or more computers (Cheeseman Day, Janus, & Davis, 2005). Currently, the United States accounts for 19.1% of the Internet users in the world, followed by China, with 11.3 % users (Internet World Stats, 2006). Uses of the Internet and the World Wide Web currently include: (1) rapid retrieval of information; (2) dissemination of audio, video, or written information; (3) communication and interconnection; (4) searching for data and services; (5) distance learning; (6) numerous uses in the classroom; and (7) interdisciplinary resource use (Everett, 2002; Isaacson, 2002).

The Internet was used to obtain information on top-ranked U.S. universities, which offered doctoral level programs in special education, and the entrance requirements for those universities and programs, and other topics related to the focus of this survey. Web searches were initially conducted using wellknown 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 which 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 United States. When the information from these main sources was insufficient or unclear, an e-mail message or a phone call was necessary 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. 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.

#### 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 which 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 (Tables 1 and 2). 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. [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)].

### Admission Requirements

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). By comparing these two means, one would conclude that the expectance of academic performance in special education graduate programs is as high as the expectance in doctoral education programs (Tables 1 and 2). 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); (7) a minimum Grade Point Average (GPA) report; and (6) official scores from the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), if applicable (Table 3). 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 vita* and/or an interview, tape, or for a video recording with answers to questions selected by the admission committee. Some programs require an additional scholarly written sample.

Application fees for the 20 programs listed in Table 1 range from nothing to \$70, with an average of  $$50.5 \pm 15.5$ . Some special education doctoral programs require a master's degree, while others require only a bachelor's degree. The minimum acceptable GPA earned in previous college coursework ranges from 3.0 to 3.5, with a mean of  $3.16 \pm 0.20$ . Forty five percent of the investigated special education programs ask for some experience in the field prior to admission (range of 1 to 3 years, with a mean of 2.0 years ± 0.9). The GRE and TOEFL scores must be less than 5 and 2 years old, respectively. Of the 20 programs, 50% reported a minimum acceptable score, 35% did not have a cut-off score but expressed a preference, and 15% did not require a GRE score. The minimum GRE mean reported is  $1,018.8 \pm 54.4$ , with a range from 900 to 1100. Even if the department does not require a certain GRE score, the prospective students are reminded that the admission is competitive and that a GRE score report may be helpful in evaluating their overall abilities, and especially in considering allocation of financial aid. The minimum TOEFL mean score required for admission is 538.4 ± 117.9 for the Paper-Based Test, or 223 ± 19.8 for the Computer-Based Test. The student enrollment fees vary from \$125 to \$2,202, with a mean of \$1,018.6  $\pm$  599.5. The mean cost of full-time in-state tuition, consisting generally of an enrollment of 9 credit hours of graduate courses, is  $$6,775.4 \pm 3,076.0$ , with the costs ranging from \$1,818 to \$12,518. From a mean of 372.2 applications that the 20 investigated programs received in 2005, on average only 81 students were accepted into the reviewed special education doctoral programs (Table 3).

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 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 which 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 herein strongly recommend online application, which provides several advantages: (1) the application fee may be waived, (2) the application can be saved in an electronic form that can later be re-accessed for revisions if necessary, (3) the possibility to check on the status of applications to see which items have been received and processed, and (4) the speed of electronic application versus 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 special education course 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 graduation 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 in the course. The doctoral committee is typically composed of three to five members from within and outside of 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. From the 20 programs, 15 reported a minimum requirement of coursework with a mean of 64.1 ± 23.3 credit hours, and 13 reported a minimum requirement of research methodology credit hours with a mean of  $13.6 \pm 5.0$ (Table 4). 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 will be 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.

#### **Conclusion and Discussion**

Results indicate that the quality of the instruction offered by the top 20 special education doctoral programs in the U.S. is comparable in quality to the instruction offered by the top 20 universities around the world, by the top 20 universities from the U.S., and by the top 20 graduate education programs in the U.S. For admission into one of the top 20 special education doctoral programs in the U.S., a candidate needs, at minimum, to write a letter of aspiration, to send official transcripts of all previous coursework that show a minimum GPA of 3.0, to provide three to five letters of recommendation, to obtain approximately 1,019 points for GRE and 538 for TOEFL (if applicable), to pay for the processing fee, and, if admitted, to pay the student enrollment and tuition fees. In order to graduate, an individual needs to maintain continuous registration, work with an adviser, assemble a doctoral committee consisting of three to five members, complete all of the courses recommended with an acceptable grade, successfully pass the yearly review, complete the doctoral products, pass the general qualifying examination, and complete and defend the dissertation. All these graduation requirements should be completed on an average within three to five years.

## Recommendations

Similar analyses, which would focus on various fields of study 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. and around the world. Such studies may 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 the employment success rate upon graduation, on the number of graduates and employed graduates per year, and the satisfaction of the employees with their job.

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Table 1. Comparison of Rankings of World and USA Universities

Rank	Best World Universities (2006)	Best USA Universities (2007)	Best USA Educati
1.	Harvard University (USA)	Princeton University (NJ)	Harvard University
2.	University of Cambridge (UK)	Harvard University (MA)	Teachers College, (
3.	Stanford University (USA)	Yale University (CT)	University of Calife
4.	University of California - Berkeley (USA)	California Institute of Technology	Stanford University
5.	Massachusetts Inst Tech (MIT) (USA)	Stanford University	Vanderbilt Univers
6.	California Inst Tech (USA)	Massachusetts Inst. of Technology	University of Calife
7.	Columbia University (USA)	University of Pennsylvania	University of Penns
8.	Princeton University (USA)	Duke University (NC)	University of Wisco
9.	University of Chicago (USA)	Dartmouth College (NH)	University of Mich
10.	University of Oxford (UK)	Columbia University (NY)	Northwestern Univ
11.	Yale University (USA)	University of Chicago	New York Universi
12.	Cornell University (USA)	Cornell University (NY)	University of Minn
13.	University of California - San Diego (USA)	Washington University in St. Louis	University of Wash
14.	University of California - Los Angeles (USA)	Northwestern University (IL)	Michigan State Uni
15.	University of Pennsylvania (USA)	Brown University (RI)	University of Orego
16.	University of Wisconsin - Madison (USA)	Johns Hopkins University (MD)	University of Texas
17.	University of Washington - Seattle (USA)	Rice University (TX)	Indiana University-
18.	University of California - San Francisco (USA)	Vanderbilt University (TN)	University of Illino
19.	Tokyo University (Japan)	Emory University (GA)	Boston College (Ly
20.	Johns Hopkins University (USA)	University of Notre Dame (IN)	University of Virgi
Source	Shanghai Jiao Tong University (2006)	US News & World Report (2006b)	US News & World
Web Site	http://ed.sjtu.edu.cn/ranking.htm	http://www.usnews.com/usnews/edu/colle	http://www.usnews
	-	ge/rankings/brief/t1natudoc_brief.php	/edu/brief/edurank_

Table 2. Top 20 U.S. Special Education Programs and Mean GRE Scores  $\,$ 

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

Table 3. Doctoral Admission Requirements and Admission Guidelines in the Top 20 U.S. Special Education Programs

No.	University	Appl.	Prev.	. xp.	Min. GRE (V&Q)	TOEFL		Prof. Writing	Fees	Full-time	Doc. Appl. Received
		Fee USD				PBT	CBT	Sample	USD	In-state Tuition	2005
1.	Vanderbilt University (Peabody)	0	3.4	NCO	1100	550	213	1	2,202	11,547*	664
2.	University of Kansas	N/A	3.5	NCO	1000	570	230	1	441*	1,818*	225
3.	University of Oregon	50	3.0	1	1000	500	173	1	1,449	9,099	213
4.	University of Virginia (Curry)	60	NCO	NCO	1000	600	250	N/A	1,588	8,222	270
5.	University of Illinois- Urbana- Champaign	50	3.0	2	Not Required	613	257	N/A	1,772	7,160	304
6.	University of Minnesota— Twin Cities	55	3.0	NCO	NCO (~ 900)	550	213	1	1,641	8,748	450
7.	University of Maryland– College Park	60	3.5	2	NCO (~ 1000)	575	233	1	917	3,537*	446
8.	University of Texas-Austin	50	3.0	NCO	NCO (~ 1000)	550	213	1	N/A	7,174	580
9.	University of Florida	30	3.0	2	1000	550	213	2	207*	3,120*	158
10.	University of Wisconsin– Madison	45	3.0	2	Not Required	580	237	1	N/A	8,738	344
11.	University of Washington	45	3.0	0	NCO (~ 1000)	580	237	2	125	8,507	190
12.	Teachers College, Columbia University	65	3.0	NCO	Not Required	600	250	1	480	8,415*	1,236

Fig 3: Cont'd

No.	University	Appl. Fee	Min. Prev.	Exp. (yrs.)	Min. GRE	TOI PBT	EFL CBT	Prof. Writing Sample	Fees USD	Full-time In-state Tuition	Doc. Appl. Received
10	0	USD 65	3.5	3	(V &Q)	600	250	(Y/N)	872	7,830*	2005 88
12.	Syracuse University	65	3.5	3	1100	600	250	1	8/2	/,830*	88
12.	Ohio State University	40	3.0	3	1000	550	213	1	465	8,259	210
12.	Indiana University— Bloomington	55	3.0	2	1100	550	213	1	821	2,043*	399
16.	University of North Carolina— Chapel Hill	70	3.0	NCO	NCO (~ 1000)	550	213	1	1,401	3,613	205
16.	University of Georgia	50	3.5	NCO	1000	550	213	1	990	4,368	495
16.	University of California— Santa Barbara (Gevirtz)	60	3.0	NCO	NCO	550	213	1	1,598	7,525	368
19.	Michigan State University	50	NCO	NCO	NCO (~1000)	550	213	1	882	3,267*	306
20.	Pennsylvania State University– Univ. Park	60	3.5	3	1100	550	213	1	484	12,518	293
Rang		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
	ı ± 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

Legend (in order): Appl. Fee = Application Fee; Prev. = Previous; GPA = Grade Point Average; Exp. = Professional Experience Rexamination; V&Q = Verbal and Quantitative Reasoning GRE scores; TOEFL = Test of English as a Foreign Language; PBT = Particular Test; Comm. = Minimum Years of Commitment Required; USD = United States Dollars; Doc. Appl. Received 2005 = Number of Doc. Accept. Rate 2005 = Acceptance Rate in Doctoral Educational Programs in 2005; Doc. Entering Stud. = Number of Entering N/A = Not Available; NCO = No Cut-Off; ~ = approximately; \* = the prices with an asterix were calculated given the credit hour reredit hours considered minimum for full-time enrollment.

Table 4. Graduation requirements in the Top 20 U.S. Special Education Programs

No.	University	Min. Hrs. of Grad. Work	Research Hours	No.	University	Min. Hrs. of Grad. Work	Research Hours
1.	<u>Vanderbilt University</u> ( <u>Peabody</u> )	72	N/A	11.	University of Washington	N/A	12
2.	University of Kansas	N/A	N/A	12.	Teachers College, Columbia University	42	9
3.	University of Oregon	90		12.	Syracuse University	90	9
4.	Univ. of Virginia (Curry)	36	21	12.	Ohio State University	N/A	N/A
5.	University of Illinois— Urbana-Champaign	36	12	12.	Indiana University— Bloomington	90	15
6.	University of Minnesota—Twin Cities	75	18	16.	University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill	N/A	N/A
7.	University of Maryland–College Park	90	N/A	16.	University of Georgia	39	6
8.	University of Texas– Austin	72	15	16.	University of California–Santa Barbara (Gevirtz)	N/A	N/A
9.	University of Florida	26	12	19.	Michigan State University	66	12
10.	University of Wisconsin–Madison	54	12	20.	Pennsylvania State University–Univ. Park	84	24
Total	Total Range					26 - 90	6 - 24
Total	Mean ±SD	$64.1 \pm 23.3$	$13.6 \pm 5.0$				