



# Mastering Higher Education

By DOM NICASTRO '00

**T**oni Fierro '06G was laid off by a travel agency where she had worked for 20 years. Looking for a new place to land, it was time to rethink her career. She had, at one time, been a high school teacher, but despite being fascinated by the art of teaching, she wondered if there were other options for her in the field of education. Three years ago, Fierro discovered there were a lot more options, indeed.

"My cousin told me about Salem State College's master's degree program in higher education in student affairs," the now 44-year-old Fierro remembered. "I had been putting off a master's degree for so many years, but this program seemed to be everything I was looking for."

Fierro made the decision to return to school, and today she is among the first graduating class of 15 to earn a master's degree in higher education in student affairs from Salem State's innovative program. Currently teaching Italian at the College, she has several applications circulating for student affairs positions across the country. "It's opened up many doors," Fierro said, "and the program itself is made up of some of the finest professors available."

Dr. Lee Brossoit, assistant dean of students at the College, is one of those professors as well as the program's coordinator. Prior to his arrival at Salem State, he was the assistant director of campus residences at the State University of New York at Stony Brook. He was also the director of the Village, residential services comprised of 11 buildings that housed over 400 students, at Syracuse University. At Buffalo State College he was the graduate hall director. He came to Salem State College in 1990 as the director of residence life. After completing his doctorate at UMass-Boston in 1999, Brossoit was appointed to his current position.

With 22 years of experience in higher education, Brossoit detected

a flaw in the Massachusetts public higher education system. Although the Boston area has the highest concentration of colleges in the country, many of which require a master's degree for entry-level positions, Boston College, Northeastern University and Suffolk University offered the only master's degree programs in higher education in student affairs. No public institution in the region had such a program in place. Brossoit was determined to change that and saw Salem State as the perfect place to fill that void.

Finding a way to improve the higher education in student affairs industry is an 85-year-old mission. In 1918, the dean of men at the University of Iowa and the dean of men at the University of Illinois met professionally to discuss their roles at their respective institutions. Out of that initial meeting evolved an organization of student



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affairs administrators in higher education, the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA). Later, in 1924, the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) was founded. Fast forward 80 plus years, Brossoit maintained this mission by pitching a student affairs graduate program to Salem State officials.

It was not a difficult sell. Although adding an entirely new graduate program can often take three to five years, according to Brossoit, Dr. Marc Glasser, dean of Salem State's Graduate School, and Dr. Elizabeth Kenney, the Graduate School's director of academic services, showed unwavering support. Nine months after Brossoit began to lobby for the new program, Salem State had it in place. "I looked at the top 10 programs in the country, and I looked particularly at the scholar/practitioner model, in which people who currently work in the field can concurrently be in our program," Brossoit said. "As far as professors are concerned, I looked for individuals who had worked professionally in the field, and all six of ours have. Three of the six have been vice presidents, and one, Dr. Leila Moore, is a past president of ACPA." Brossoit urges potential entrants to shop around and make themselves aware of other colleges in the Boston area who offer the degree. In so doing, though, he urges them to consider their financial investment as well. The master's degree program at Salem State runs below \$10,000 for two years. "The 'Bostons,'" he said, "can cost more than \$30,000."

Cost efficient, the Salem State's higher education in student affairs program also includes working with diverse populations among its major tenets. As college campuses become more diverse, Brossoit said, "The question becomes 'how do you develop skills to work with diverse populations?'"

Salem State's practicum program is one way. Fierro did her practicum at Montserrat College of Art, a quick ride up Route 1A North into Beverly. She worked in the office of the dean of stu-



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dents. "It showed me there was more to education than getting in front of a classroom and teaching. I got high honors," she said. "I got a chance to be in contact with students, run functions and run workshops."

**Victoria Pasciuto '06G**, the assistant coordinator of student activities at North Shore Community College (NSCC) and another student from the first graduating class of this program also had a rewarding practicum experience. Her practicum took her from the steps of the Sullivan Building to the steps of the White House. Shadowing Wayne Burton, president of NSCC and former dean of Salem State's business school, she attended a New England Council annual meeting in Washington, where she attended a White House briefing and a Congressional breakfast. Pasciuto also planned a student luncheon with Massachusetts Senator **John Kerry '86H** and Congressman **John Tierney '73**. "This practicum has been a wonderful complement to the course work of the student affairs program," Pasciuto wrote in a department newsletter. "I have been able to observe how a college is affected by its president . . . I began this practicum seeking a basic understanding of college functions and responsibilities as seen from the president's office. What I got was so much more."

Another student with high praise for the practicum is **Kristy Cormier '06G**, a Beverly native who received her undergraduate degree at the University of Tennessee. Cormier was already working in the field when she entered Salem State's new program. A senior admissions counselor and events coordinator at nearby Gordon College in Wenham, she aspires to move up to an assistant director's position. Her practicum took her to the department of housing at Gordon College, where she learned the importance of educational philosophies such as integrating upperclassmen and



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freshmen into housing facilities and how to resolve problems such as the lack of public transportation to Boston. “I want to continue in higher education and become more knowledgeable about student development theories and how an institution works,” she explained.

In addition to the unique practicum experiences offered by the program, one of most acclaimed aspects of this degree, according to students, is its staff. Professors challenged students, prepared them for the next level and, most importantly, the students reported, they cared. “Dr. Brossoit was great about making sure we had everything we needed,” Cormier said. “He fostered wonderful communication. It was great. He would email us all the time and was willing to meet outside of the classroom. He was my professor for my practicum, and he would really go out of his way to communicate with us. He was also great about sending us all the job positions that became available.”

**Tina Favara '04, '06G** agreed. “The professors that Lee sought out for this program are some of the most incredible people in the field; two of the most notable being Leila Moore and Barbara Feinman,” said the new senior financial aid counselor at Northern Essex Community College. “I learned more from these two professors than I did in my entire undergraduate program and most of my career. They took a genuine interest in the success of their students.”

Dr. Stanley Cahill, the College’s executive vice president, is another well-regarded member of the teaching staff for this program. Cahill also brings highly valuable experience to the table. Working in the residence program at Kent State University in Ohio, he was on campus when four students were killed by the National Guard as they protested President Nixon sending American troops into Cambodia in May of 1970.



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“One of the things he talked about regarding that experience was the importance of having some type of emergency plan in place if a crisis occurs on campus,” offered **Erika Stevens '06G**, a staff associate in the College’s financial aid department. She credits the program for giving her a “better understanding of who I am and what I am capable of doing. It gave me further insight into areas of student affairs other than financial aid. I liked the fact that I was in a cohort, taking classes with the same people,” she added. “By being in a cohort, I was able to build relationships with other students. This created a comfort level where I did not feel intimidated about sharing my ideas. Being able to listen to others and have my ideas appreciated mean a lot to me.”

With the feedback of his students and the graduation of the program’s first class last May, Brossoit is excited about the program’s future. Additional courses have been approved by the Graduate Education Council, and a collaboration agreement has been authorized with the doctor of education in higher education administration program at UMass-Boston, to encourage graduates to continue their studies.

“The success of the program is contingent upon the success of the graduate,” Brossoit noted. “We try to instill in them, not only their own credentials, but that they’re now professionals and that they’re advocates on the behalf of the students.”

As Salem State prepares the future leaders in higher education administration, it is, as it has been throughout its history, mastering the art of education.

—**Dom Nicastrò** is a Salem State graduate of 2000. He is the editor of the Gloucester Daily Times. Previously the newspaper’s city and sports editors, he’s won three awards from the New England Newspaper Association.



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