

INTERVIEW WITH MATT CIPRIANO, NYGAP PRESIDENT

By Raymond Lutzky, Polytechnic Institute of New York University

NYGAP, the New York State Association for Graduate Enrollment Management, was founded in 2007 as a chapter of NAGAP. What began as a group for professionals from the central and western parts of New York has now grown to encompass all graduate enrollment professionals in the state.

On July 1, Matt Cipriano took over as the new president of the organization. Currently, Matt is administrative manager at the Sackler Institute of Graduate Biomedical Sciences, a part of the New York University School of Medicine. The Sackler Institute offers programs in the basic medical sciences leading to PhD degrees and combined MD/PhD degrees. Matt holds a bachelor's degree in religious studies from Connecticut College, a master's degree in media ecology from NYU, and is currently working towards his EdD in higher and post-secondary education in NYU's Steinhardt School of Culture, Education, and Human Development. I had the chance to sit down with Matt after the NYGAP annual summer conference for his first interview as president to learn more about his background and the future for the chapter.

Matt has worked in graduate admissions for more than 12 years, but his career started in a very different way. Upon graduation from Connecticut College, he started a job working for an antique jeweler doing marketing and web design. However, his position came to an abrupt end with an 11 p.m. phone call telling him not to show up to work the next day.

"I was told 'don't come in, the building is currently on fire'...the next morning it had turned into a 5-alarm fire and rather than put it out, they tore the building down with all the stock and inventory inside, leaving nothing to sell or post a website about," he said.

Although Matt spent a good deal of time looking for work, his search began right around September 11, 2001.

"There were hiring freezes and it was difficult to find a job...I was being a little choosy until month five," he joked.

Around that time, a friend mentioned that she knew of open positions at New York University in the School of Medicine.

"After a handful of interviews, I eventually ended up at NYU and nine months later was named an assistant in the Sackler Institute," said Matt.

After 11 years at Sackler Institute, he rose from the role of administrative assistant to a manager overseeing the admissions process.

Matt had previously considered a career in education while in college, but as a teacher rather than an administrator.

"During my unemployment, I did some substitute teaching at middle school and high school level and discovered that working with students that age is terrifying...so I had written off education at that point," he said.

Fortuitously, with his hiring at NYU, he was able to get back into the world of education at the graduate level.

NAGAP entered the picture for Matt as he began to take on more responsibilities at NYU.

"Within a few years I worked my way up to an admissions coordinator position, and my boss recommended I join a professional organization," he said.

NAGAP was the only professional organization dealing with graduate admissions at that time, and Matt attended his first conference in Chicago in 2005. As a new member of NAGAP, he limited his involvement to



attendance at conferences and would review publications as they came out. However, while presenting at the 2008 conference in Denver, he was approached by a group of admissions officers from biomedical programs.

"They came and found me and said that they would love to have me involved in the New York City conference the next year," he said, which led him to hosting a dozen biomedical schools at an event before the 2007 conference. Remembering the experience, Matt remarked that "it was a great event; we discussed admissions processes, summer programs, sharing information – it proved to be very useful."

His work with that group led him to become more involved and eventually help to co-found BioGAP, the Biomedical Sciences chapter of NAGAP.

"That's when I really became 'hands on' with NAGAP," said Matt, who remembers meeting NYGAP past president Josh LaFave in the hallway of the conference hotel that year. "He asked why professionals from New York City were not more involved with NYGAP...I informed him that the NYGAP organization didn't do much for New York City."

The two discussed the idea of bringing a metro-area coordinator into the NYGAP leadership, who would focus on New York City and the surrounding area. After keeping in contact after the conference, Matt soon took on the role of NYGAP coordinator for the New York City area and began his work with the regional chapter.

"During that time I also became a

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MATT CIPRIANO CONTINUED

mentor for three individuals in graduate admissions through the NYGAP mentorship program while also serving as vice president of BioGAP," he recalled.

As his tenure at BioGAP ended and his mentoring relationships ran their course, Josh LaFave's time as NYGAP president also ended and Matt "decided to take a run for it."

Even though he is the new president of NYGAP, Matt finds graduate enrollment management as difficult to describe as most professionals in our field.

"I find it easier to look at admissions and look at how the concept of graduate enrollment management has expanded the role of admissions offices," he said.

Today, graduate enrollment management really involves looking at the whole student life cycle, from admission, through their time as a student and into graduation – and even beyond graduation to their relationship as alumni.

"Looking at graduate enrollment management from just an admissions standpoint brings students into an institution but it doesn't really comment on the quality of students, how those students interact with their communities, how successful they will be...retaining students or even what they will be doing after they graduate," said Matt. He

added that these points are important to the admission process as well, because "if you don't have successful students in your program and if you aren't able to retain them, you won't make your class size, it won't look good for the admission of future students... why would a student come to your institution?" he asked.

To Matt, graduate enrollment management focuses on the entirety of the student experience rather than the single admissions process.

While looking at the future of NYGAP, Matt sees challenges and opportunities for the chapter.

"The switch from graduate admissions to GEM is a fairly new one; the focus has been on best practices in admissions and processes, dealing with vendors... but with the shift to GEM, one of the bigger challenges is defining that shift," he said.

He points to the fact that in the past, many members of NYGAP were in "traditional" admissions roles, but now those roles are expanding based on university directives and how the profession is changing. One approach NYGAP has used is focusing on educational programming and professional development that is expanded to the entirety of the student experience, while still making it relevant to admissions professionals.

"One of the ways we focused on this at our recent NYGAP conference was to have educational offerings on social media," he said.

Typically, previous conference programs had focused on how to use social media to attract students. At NYGAP, the conference committee put together a panel that dealt with everything from the admissions process to alumni relations and best uses of social media in all contexts.

"There were some great ideas, including how to attract and communicate with students in foreign countries like China, where traditional means may be blocked," said Matt.

By focusing on a mix of traditional and new tactics, NYGAP is working to bring departments together and break down "silos" between admissions, student affairs, and alumni relations and development activities. Matt emphasized that "these departments really need to communicate across the student life cycle to ensure that not only is the admissions process successful, but that success of the student is assured." With these and other goals for the future, Matt is looking forward to a successful term as NYGAP president during this transitional time for the graduate enrollment management profession. ■

