

Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors

Statement on Professional Doctorates

September, 2008

The past decade has seen the emergence of professional doctorates in a number of health care disciplines. The new degrees have challenged the higher education community's understanding of, and beliefs about, doctoral education. The Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA), whose membership includes organizations that accredit programs offering professional doctoral degrees, is in a unique position to offer the following perspectives about these emerging degrees.

Numerous rationales have been proposed by the professions that have moved or are moving toward the professional doctorate, especially in the health related areas where the fields are evolving as the entire health care system itself rapidly changes.¹ The creation of professional doctorates is a legitimate response to the changes in scope and complexity of practice within the professions. Therefore, the challenge to the higher education and accreditation communities is to allow for the institutional prerogative to develop these new degree programs and, at the same time, find mechanisms to clearly distinguish them from the more traditional doctoral degrees and to foster the quality of the programs being developed. To those ends, ASPA offers the following observations and suggestions.

EXPECTED CHARACTERISTICS

There is a wide diversity of requirements for and characteristics of the professional doctoral degrees currently offered in health care fields. This diversity results from differences in the history, nature, and values of the various professions. It also results from differences in the intent of the doctoral degree programs, i.e. first professional degree education for entry into the profession or post-professional education for the development of knowledge and skill for advanced practice of the profession.

In light of this, it is not feasible nor reasonable to suggest that all professional doctoral degrees should have the same characteristics. Rather, ASPA suggests that there are certain demonstrable end points of doctoral study that should characterize any professional doctorate, whether considered for entry level or for advanced practice. Graduates of professional doctoral degree programs should demonstrate the following capabilities :

- A level of professional practice appropriate to the stated purpose of the degree.
- Utilization of current research related to the profession. Ideally, for advanced practice doctorates, an expected and demonstrated level of scholarship contributing to the advancement of the profession.
- Demonstrated understanding and support of the work of other professionals and the contributions they make to society, including the demonstrated ability to work in both an interdisciplinary and interprofessional manner.
- Demonstrated advanced level of communication, critical thinking, and problem solving skills.
- Demonstrated ability to identify and address population based issues affecting the health and well-being of society.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Further, ASPA suggests the following guidelines for institutions in the process of developing professional doctorates:

- Wherever possible, the title of the doctoral degree should be consistent with the title commonly agreed upon within the profession.
- Clearly delineate the length of study and the prerequisite college studies requirements; optimally, a minimum of three full academic years beyond the baccalaureate.

- Clearly delineate research requirements of the degree and the program's demonstrated commitment to the use of scholarship.
- Clearly delineate how graduates with professional doctorate degrees may be considered for faculty positions within a program and include considerations for promotion and tenure.
- For practitioners with professional doctorates, clearly delineate institutional achievement requirements for faculty status at all levels.
- Programs should confer with institutional administrators, specialized and regional accreditors early in the professional doctorate development process to be clear about requirements/eligibility for granting the degree.
- The institution and program housing the doctorate must have the resources and commitment to support a professional level program.

¹ Unpublished data from a study of professional doctorates in 14 health care professional fields conducted by the American Association of Nurse Anesthetists (AANA).