Defining and Supporting Professional Doctorates in Higher Education

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Abstract

The impetus for this paper was to gain some consistency in how advanced degrees are described, developed and evaluated at the author's institution. A particular focus was on professional doctorates, which was found to be a topic of relevance to universities in many countries. The result of that effort will be reported in this session. Specifically, after a brief history of graduate education, including the emergence of professional doctorates; the discussion will provide a synthesis of the core components of doctoral pedagogy and curriculum, with foci on the research training environment and the capstone process. The session will end with a set of recommendations for making choices about doctoral programs, especially in the increasingly distributed and online environment of global higher education.

Outline

In 2012, Harvard University discontinued one of the oldest professional doctorates – their Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree (Basu, 2012). This change appears to align to conversations being had at other US universities (Lee, Brennan, & Green, 2009; Walker, 2008) and in other countries (e.g, Dreher & Smith Glasgow, 2011; Fenge, 2009; Kärner & Puura, 2008; Neumann, 2005). In contrast, some universities have found noticeable increases in enrollments in their professional doctorate programs (Servage, 2009), including the author's university. Examples of such degrees include the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA), Doctor of Nursing Practice (DNP), Doctor of Social Work (DSW), and the Ed.D. This shifting pattern of doctoral education raises questions about professional doctorates and how they relate to the traditional, research-focused Ph.D.s in those same disciplines.

Unlike their undergraduate peers, doctoral students are not well researched. This void prompted the Carnegie Foundation on the Advancement of Teaching in the USA to initiative a project on doctoral education (Walker, Golde, Jones, Conklin-Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2009) that provided the framework for this paper. Two areas of scholarship also support this work. Opening the door to new models of delivery, the emergence of the "knowledge worker" (Schreiterer, 2008; Tenant, 2004) challenges academic programs to prepare a different type of doctoral graduate—one who has the skills demanded by the workplace (Fink, 2006; Kärner & Puura, 2008; Usher, 2002).

Research on the mentoring of doctoral students, especially in the online environment, provides additional support for the recommendations in this paper (e.g., Baltes, Hoffman-Kipp, Lynn, & Weltzer-Ward, 2010; Coghlan, 2006; Gardner, 2009; Holmes, 2010; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004; Wintson & Fields, 2003).

Based on this review, three key challenges were identified and recommendations were generated.
1. First, a professional doctorate degree should not be constructed to be a "Ph.D. lite", but rather, the two types of degrees should be "separate but equal".
2. Second, the market for doctoral degrees has been changing dramatically, and unlike the research focused Ph.D., the mission of most professional doctorate programs is to prepare advanced practitioners.
3. Third, freedom to learn relies on the opportunity to learn, and distance education has offered a strategy that aligns well with the goals of many professional doctorate programs (Butcher & Sieminski, 2006; Wikeley & Muschamp, 2004), to support workers in their workplace.

Arguably, doctoral education has long been a closed culture and resistant to change. But, as the market place for doctoral degrees has changed, the ascendency of professional doctorate programs, which have their focus specifically on serving the academic needs these types of practicing professionals, might have been expected. This paper should help faculty and administrators address these challenges in their own institutions.

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