

**A Report to the Board of Trustees  
from the Task Force on the Professional Doctorate**

Received by the Board of Trustees  
of The Higher Learning Commission  
June 6, 2006

# REPORT OF THE TASK FORCE ON THE PROFESSIONAL DOCTORATE

The Higher Learning Commission  
North Central Association of Colleges and Schools

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Within the past decade, several new degrees have emerged particularly in health care fields. They are called doctoral degrees, but clearly are not in title or content the same as the research doctoral programs in the field. Nor do they always follow the model of the “1st Professional Degrees” as defined by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES). They also appear to differ from other long-standing doctoral programs that do not carry the Ph.D. designation. Often referred to as the “clinical doctorate,” “professional doctorate” or “practicing doctorate,” most of these new programs do not yet serve as the professional degree required for licensure. While the various professions have defined the nature of each program, there seems to be no obvious consistency among the various degrees as to length of study; rigor, substance, or content of the program; or the ultimate utility of the degree to the person who earns it. Last but not least, in many universities, the decision has been made—at least to date—to separate the new professional doctorates from the coordinating oversight of graduate school. Even more important, many of the new programs are being provided by colleges and universities that offer few if any other doctoral programs and, in some cases because of the unique configuration of the total program offerings of the institution these institutions have no established graduate structures.

In recent years The Higher Learning Commission has been and is being asked to extend the accreditation of a college or university to include a specific new professional doctorate without having the evaluative tools that inform a team about the kind of institutional context necessary to support the program and its students. The Commission tends to rely on its familiarity with institutional contexts in which research doctorates are delivered or the contexts of professional institutions that offer programs in a single field or a few closely related fields. Neither works very well for many of the institutions now considering or delivering a new professional doctoral program. Moreover, at this point there is no consistent voice among the specialized agencies that could inform a regional agency as it contemplates how to define and implement quality assurance that contributes to meaningful consistency among types of new professional degrees.

Uncomfortable with the ad hoc nature of the decision-making about extension of accreditation to include a new professional doctorate and finding little evidence that a national discussion was going to occur, the Commission decided that it needed to create a Task Force to study the situation and to recommend to the Commission, other quality assurance agencies, and colleges and universities the best ways to provide quality assurance in this changing educational environment. It established and funded the Task Force on the Professional Doctorate and called on it to study the current trends and growth in creation of professional doctorates, become familiar with the common and most effective responses of graduate schools and colleges and universities to these degrees, create a report for broad distribution with recommendations to the Commission’s Board of Trustees on how the Commission should best respond to this new trend.

The deliberations of the Task Force included face-to-face facilitated discussions, conference calls, and review of comments received from sharing a public draft of the report. Some of those comments came from interested parties who reviewed the draft on the Commission’s website. Members of the Task Force also distributed the draft of the report to a variety of interested groups and individuals, inviting their response. Yet more response came from those who on April 3, 2006, attended an open session at the Commission’s Annual Meeting.

The recommendations made by the Task Force are based on the following fundamental assumptions shaped by the Task Force's deliberations:

1. a convincing case can be made that the professional doctorate has a clearly defined place in the hierarchy of U.S. higher education degrees, and it should be perceived as different from and not as a substitute for the research doctorate;
2. particularly in the health care professions there is an obvious need to create capacity to educate practitioners and those who will primarily be educating practitioners;
3. the professional doctorate should be considered as a degree level within the hierarchy of U.S. degrees, thereby falling under substantive change processes in accreditation;
4. new professional doctorates will mark fields other than those in the health professions;
5. higher education and the professions would benefit from quality assurance of professional doctorates validating that through them students acquire professional competencies they would not otherwise gain in existing degree programs within a given profession;
6. we cannot wait for answers to a sizable number of questions before creating and implementing strategies of quality assurance related to the new professional doctorates; and
7. the Commission can facilitate, experiment, and lead by example, but it cannot respond alone to the need for national consistency in defining and evaluating professional doctorates.

**The recommendations of the Task Force are organized into three overarching issues: Institutional context, program content, and shared quality assurance.**

**EVALUATING INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXT.** The Higher Learning Commission accredits colleges and universities, not the specific programs they offer. Therefore it is critical that in developing and implementing its quality assurance programs related to professional doctorates, the Commission continues to focus first and foremost on the capacity of the institution to mount and support effective programs that lead to the award of a professional doctorate. The Commission can make explicit its benchmarks for evaluating institutional capacity, provide guiding principles and illustrative examples to assist institutions, and review its substantive change procedures to determine how appropriate they are to reviewing the institutional context for these programs.

It is the institution's responsibility to document that the new program fits the institutional mission, and to provide compelling evidence that it has considered carefully the impact of the degree on the total institution as well as the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of providing the program.

**EVALUATING CORE CHARACTERISTICS OF A PROFESSIONAL DOCTORAL PROGRAM.** It is appropriate for The Higher Learning Commission and other institutional accreditation bodies to establish the "core characteristics" of acceptable professional doctorate programs. Without establishing the specific content of a particular degree, the Commission can nonetheless evaluate how well the new degree program fulfills core expectations of a sound professional doctorate.

The core characteristics should be broad enough to allow institutions to be responsibly creative in structuring rigorous programs to meet changing needs in society. However, because most professions strive for uniform competence and excellence from those who practice the profession across the nation, institutions should work closely with the academy (including when appropriate graduate schools) and appropriate specialized accrediting agencies as well as practicing

professionals in creating new professional doctoral programs.

It remains the purview of a specialized accrediting agency to fill in detailed standards for a specific professional doctorate. Therefore, not only might different agencies define differently how the core characteristics are met, they inevitably will include in their standards matters not included in the core characteristics. In setting the detailed standards, each agency, particularly those responsible for health care professions, will want to be cognizant of the vital importance of patient safety and the public's expectations about the professional competencies of a person using the title "Doctor" in health care settings.

**SHARING THE RESPONSIBILITY FOR CREATING AND IMPLEMENTING EFFECTIVE QUALITY ASSURANCE PROCESSES.**

Throughout its discussions, the Task Force recognized that it would be inappropriate for The Higher Learning Commission to take upon itself the creation of standards for all professional doctorates. However, professions and specialized agencies should not have to deal with significant differences among the national and regional institutional accrediting commissions. National dialogues among institutional accreditors are critical. Therefore, the Task Force offers a series of recommendations on how The Higher Learning Commission might encourage collaboration.

While it is also vitally important that conversations be held with specialized accrediting bodies, the Task Force agreed that institutional accrediting bodies should not defer to a specialized agency that has not set appropriate expectations for a professional doctorate.

End of Executive Summary

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## BACKGROUND

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For decades higher education in the United States has produced what could be called “professional doctorates,” but until recently many of these degrees have been classified as “1st Professional Degrees.” Men and women who wanted to be licensed to practice particular professions had to hold these degrees. The M.D., D.D.S., D.V.M., and J.D. are notable examples. Universities that granted them, The Higher Learning Commission, and the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) that gathers data on higher education classified these degrees as “1st Professional Degrees.” Over the years the list has grown, but modestly, as new professions emerged and licensing structures for them developed in many if not all states. Today NCES defines ten (10) degrees as “1st Professional Degrees.” With a few important exceptions, all of these programs typically are post-baccalaureate in nature and require approximately three years of study. In many universities that offer graduate education at the doctoral level, these programs are not included in the graduate school and therefore they are not shaped significantly by the graduate school’s academic practices and policies. Moreover, the heads of the professional schools do not report to the graduate dean. Professional doctorates are not new to U.S. higher education; they have served a specific role in preparation for a profession; and they have usually been located in schools within a university or freestanding, focused, professional institutions.

Within the past decade, several new degrees have been created particularly in health care fields. They are called doctoral programs, but clearly are not in title or content the same as the research doctoral programs in the field. Nor do they always follow the model of the “1st Professional Degrees” just described. Often referred to as the “clinical doctorate,” “professional doctorate” or “practicing doctorate,” most of these new programs do not yet serve as the professional degree required for licensure. NCES is not clear about how to classify them. And there is no consistency among colleges and universities that offer them; that is, if a graduate school exists, these degrees may or may not fall under its aegis. While the various professions have defined the nature of each program, there seems to be no obvious consistency among the various degrees as to length of study; rigor, substance, or content of the program; or the ultimate utility of the degree to the person who earns it.

The Task Force understands that there are other long-standing doctoral degrees not carrying the designation of Ph.D. The Doctor of Education, Doctor of Missiology, and the Doctor of Composition are three examples. They do not seem to be of quite the same nature as the new degrees that constituted the focus for this project. Therefore, the Task Force decided that it had neither the time nor the charge to develop a taxonomy appropriate to every doctoral degree currently being awarded. In its recommendations, however, it does propose a useful way to include these other non-Ph.D. doctoral degrees in this work.

The Higher Learning Commission together with many of its accredited institutions and other regional accreditation commissions face a quandary about how to respond to these new “professional” degrees. Program governance through a graduate school conceivably could assist in addressing the concerns about variability among these degrees. But in many universities, the decision has been made—at least to date—to separate the new professional doctorates from the graduate school. Even more important, many of the new programs are being provided by colleges and universities that offer few if any other doctoral programs and, in some cases because of the unique configuration of the total program offerings of the institution these institutions have no established graduate structures.

It could be argued that a regional institutional accreditation agency such as The Higher Learning Commission should look to specialized accreditation to provide guidance. This might be true if the academic component of the profession always plays the key role in defining the new degree. However, this has not always been the developmental pathway for some of the new degrees. In a few situations, institutions of higher education sought the Commission's inclusion of a new professional doctorate that had gained support within the profession but had yet to win the full support of the specialized accrediting agency. Some specialized agencies focus primarily, if not solely, on the degree program, no matter the level, that serves as the entry degree to the profession. Moreover, within several agencies there are very significant on-going dialogues between professionals who seek further professional education and related new credentialing and the academy responsible for staffing and supporting new professional doctoral programs. At this point, therefore, there is no consistent voice among the specialized agencies that could inform a regional agency as it contemplates how to define and implement quality assurance that contributes to meaningful consistency among types of new professional degrees.

In recent years The Higher Learning Commission has been and is being asked to extend the accreditation of a college or university to include a specific new professional doctorate without having the evaluative tools that inform a team about the kind of institutional context necessary to support the program and its students. The Commission tends to rely on its familiarity with institutional contexts in which research doctorates are delivered or the contexts of professional institutions that offer programs in a single field or a few closely related fields. Neither works very well for many of the institutions now considering or delivering a new professional doctoral program. Uncomfortable with the ad hoc nature of the decision-making about extension of accreditation to include a new professional doctorate and finding little evidence that a national discussion was going to occur, the Commission decided that it needed to create a Task Force to study the situation and to recommend to the Commission, other quality assurance agencies, and colleges and universities the best ways to provide quality assurance in this changing educational environment.

## **CONSTITUTION OF AND CHARGE TO THE TASK FORCE**

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The Board of Trustees of The Higher Learning Commission, in keeping with the Commission's bylaws and past practices, voted on June 3, 2005, to establish a Task Force on the Professional Doctorate. It approved the staff-proposed list of people to serve on the Task Force, noting that it included representation of specialized agencies currently evaluating a professional doctorate program as well as representation from other regional accrediting associations, a chief officer of a state higher education agency within the region, administrators of institutions and graduate schools, and representatives of the public. The Board established a budget of \$18,000 to support the work of the Task Force; it also determined that the Task Force should complete its work within a year.

The Board's official charge to the Task Force is as follows:

The Task Force will study the current trends and growth in creation of professional doctorates and become familiar with the common and most effective responses of graduate schools and colleges and universities to these degrees. The Task Force will create a report for broad distribution with recommendations to the Commission's Board of Trustees on how the Commission should best respond to this new trend. The report will:

1. provide a typology of existing programs that could inform appropriate classification by the Commission;
2. identify any hallmarks of length, rigor, and content that are, or should be, common among most professional doctorates or types of professional doctorates and, therefore, that might be integrated into accreditation reviews of such programs; and
3. propose the most appropriate strategies for a regional accrediting commission to follow in extending

accreditation to include these new professional doctorates, whether through comprehensive evaluations or through application of policies related to substantive change.

The Board wanted the Task Force to benefit from the thinking of people other than the members of the Task Force itself, for many individuals and organizations expressed an interest in the work of the Task Force. Therefore, the Board approved a protocol that allowed for interested parties to study and respond to the draft(s) of the Task Force report. It also required a face-to-face vetting of the draft at the Commission's Annual Meeting in April 2006, before the final report was delivered to the Board at its June 2006 meeting.

Beyond this charge and a brief background paper, the Commission staff provided members of the Task Force with a few articles meant to stimulate thinking and to guide some of the discussions when the Task Force gathered in Chicago. (These articles are included in the attached bibliography and are identified by an asterisk [\*].)

## DELIBERATIONS OF THE TASK FORCE

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The Task Force convened at 1:00 p.m. on October 10, 2005. Dr. Monica Manning of Nova Learning, Inc., facilitated the next sixteen hours of intensive Task Force deliberations that concluded at 3:00 p.m. on October 11. The following summary of the Task Force deliberations is included to provide evidence of the breadth and depth of the discussions that shaped the Task Force's recommendations to the Commission's Board.

Manning set the stage for the Task Force's work by helping participants identify key questions, report on other related discussions, and list the various driving forces behind the new professional doctorate.

**Exercise 1.** The group began its work by recording key questions regarding the professional doctorate. Without citing the full list, it is fair to summarize the major questions as follows:

1. What is the need for the new degrees and who has determined that need?
2. Who has defined quality in these degrees and who has the responsibility for assuring quality?
3. How important is the institutional context to the delivery of these degrees, particularly prior institutional experience in offering higher-level graduate degrees?
4. How do professional doctorates relate to other recognized levels of degrees within the field: baccalaureate, masters, and research doctorates?
5. How do these new degrees relate to mission creep, credential creep, and new forms of program delivery, especially eLearning?
6. Who really gains from these degrees: the profession, the student holding the degree, the employer, the patient/client?
7. Is there any common understanding of "doctoral quality" that should inform the content and rigor of these programs?

**Exercise 2** The Task Force then compiled a list of the other discussions about the professional doctorate with which its members were familiar. It identified what it understood to be the primary concerns of those conversations. Some had to do with the impact of new doctoral degrees on institutions not already offering graduate education beyond the master's degree; some had to do with the relationships of these new degrees to institutional mission and credential creep; and some were occurring in states where state systems not currently offering doctoral education were seeking approvals to offer professional

doctorates. The National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) appears to be focusing on the future of the “First Professional Degree” category. The Council for Higher Education (CHEA) and the Council of Graduate Schools recently initiated discussions that sought to identify the various parties that should be involved in determining sound institutional decision-making about these degrees. The Task Force noted the renewed debate in the U.S. about the merits and content of the Ed.D. and Ph.D. in education. However, the most extensive study of a few new professional doctoral programs (although the primary emphasis is on the Ed.D) is found in studies from Australia, England, and New Zealand. Professional organizations review a variety of issues including the appropriate response to demands for new knowledge, for better-trained practitioners, and for inter-professional and interdisciplinary education. Because health care figures prominently in many of the new programs, a variety of agencies, including regulatory boards and licensing authorities are discussing their response to new professional doctorates. Last but not least, the Task Force members believed that entrepreneurial and proprietary colleges and universities saw new markets worth pursuing in these new degrees and other potential “niche doctorates.”

**Exercise 3.** As yet one more way to establish a good basis for understanding the broader contexts for these new degrees, the Task Force created a wall map of the various forces behind these new programs. The following list from that map reflects the breadth of identified forces rather than any consensus on principal and subsidiary drivers of change:

- o Desire of profession to better meet public need
- o Students want earning power from higher degrees
- o Money can be gained from students, alums, corporations, and the public
- o Explosion of information
- o Educational Marketplace: institutions competing for students
- o Parity among professionals
- o Insurance reimbursement: if not true now, might be in the future
- o Time limited nature of program make for a more convenient degree for students
- o Changing state licensure requirements
- o Faculty shortages in certain fields with growing practice-oriented programs
- o Existing Ph.D. programs not meeting the diverse needs in a profession
- o Enhanced prestige both for institutions and individuals
- o Supports definition of what it means to be a professional
- o Adult learners/non-traditional students/younger generation seeking relevant learning

From these initial exercises, the Task Force concluded that although it was not entering virgin territory, it could contribute in a significant way to tracking a course that might be instructive not only to the Commission but also to other stakeholders in this discussion. It also concluded that among its participants there was an appropriately broad range of views and opinions to enhance the credibility of the recommendations from the Task Force.

Dr. Manning led the Task Force through a series of “conversations” each of which engendered many lists and ideas, and each of which resulted in providing clearer focus for subsequent conversations, and ultimately, to the recommendations the Task Force makes to the Commission.

## Conversation 1: Perspectives on the Professional Doctorate

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The first directed conversation of the Task Force approached the professional doctorate from three foundational perspectives: public policy, graduate education, and the profession. Each of the three subgroups developed lengthy lists of issues related to the perspective, and then identified its perception of the three most central issues related to that perspective.

### Public Policy Perspective

1. There is an effective argument for other doctoral degree designators to signify higher-level learning and competency related to but different from the research doctorate.
2. There is a significant need for clearer understandings about rigor and outcomes of degrees that carry the doctoral title and thereby allow the holders of the degrees to use that title.
3. There is a significant need for more discussions related to establishing the most effective nexus of licensure, specialized accreditation, and regional accreditation.

### Graduate Education Perspective

1. Professions and the academy have yet to state clearly the problems for which the new professional doctorates are the solution.
2. Accreditation in general is not providing a response that confirms the need for specific degrees and contributes to the coordination of quality among them.
3. Leaders of graduate education need to find effective ways to include industry in the discussions about the role and nature of these new degrees.

### Professional Perspective

1. There is some confusion about who determines the appropriateness of the degree, particularly whether it is championed by practicing professionals, the academy, and/or the accrediting agency.
2. The value-added nature of new professional doctorates is not always clearly defined, whether they be to encompass breadth of new knowledge, to strengthen the capacity for independent practice, and/or to provide other competencies relevant to contemporary needs and practice.
3. There is no effective interface among quality assurance agencies, leading to too much variation and inconsistent information.
4. Accreditation policy focus should be on the public good, improving education, building evidence-based practice, addressing the complexity of the health care industry, and providing useful definitions for different levels of education.

Recognizing the breadth and depth of these issues, the Task Force sought to focus its attention on issues particularly germane to the challenge faced by regional institutional accrediting agencies. It refined these above perspectives to five key questions that would help to focus ongoing discussions:

1. Does institutional context matter when it comes to delivering a professional doctorate?
2. What should be expectations of institutions offering these degrees?

3. What is the appropriate Interface between regional accreditation agencies and specialized accreditation agencies?
4. Can we define the professional doctorate without trying to define the research doctorate, the Ph.D.?
5. If credential creep drives institutional mission creep, what are the implications for institutional accreditation?

## **Conversation 2: Key Questions to Address**

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The second structured conversation regrouped the Task Force to respond to the large issues. Each member of the Task Force participated in the discussion s/he found most interesting. Three groups emerged: relationship between regional and specialized accreditation, consistency and best practices in the professional doctorate, and the professional doctorate and credential creep. Each group was asked to identify “what we know,” “what’s happening,” “trends,” and other critical questions.

### **Regional and Specialized Accreditation Relationship**

Often a chicken and egg dynamic exists between the regional and specialized agency. Moreover, across regional agencies there are differences in the understanding of and expectations of these programs. Nonetheless there is a proliferation of new and unfamiliar degrees, and these degrees are often seen at the institutional level as helping to respond to pressures to generate new revenue streams. Even though all accrediting agencies experience an increased focus on accountability at many levels, there is a lack of clarity throughout the decentralized quality assurance in the United States regarding roles and responsibilities of accreditation agencies for the new doctorates.

Clearly a regional agency could set all rules for these degrees by defining the nature of these “high level” degrees as well as setting standards for institutional capacity and fit to institutional mission. But there is clear skepticism about whether the regional agencies should or could develop a common, “national,” set of general principles across the spectrum of all professional doctorates.

### **Consistency and Best Practices in the Professional Doctorate**

An effort should be made to engage various stakeholders in the exercise to create relevant “Best Practices” for the professional doctorate(s). That exercise needs to address: cost benefit, consistency, protection of integrity of degree system, predictability/clarity of outcomes of programs, and quality assurance built off best practices. To be effective, these “Best Practices” need to reflect an awareness of the driving forces of need for revenue, the competition for legitimacy among some professions, the need to respond to the explosion of information relevant to practice, and the current lack of consistent external standards. Moreover, these “Best Practices” need to reflect the best consensus the stakeholders can reach.

### **Credential Creep**

After identifying the key questions of the skeptic about the need for and value of these degrees, this group concluded that it could not answer these seminal questions nor should it need to before it could provide some guidance to regional and specialized accrediting agencies. It concluded that quality assurance agencies could respond appropriately if the standards applied to professional doctorates actually led to better practice and increased the student’s capacity to practice effectively in diverse settings. In short, if the objective of these doctorates is related to the enhancement of professional practice, then their quality should be defined by how effectively they fulfill that objective.

## Discussions About Taxonomy of Doctorates

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The Commission asked the Task Force to determine whether there is a new professional doctorate offered in various but consistent patterns by several different fields or whether professional programs are splintering post-master's offerings into several distinct varieties of the professional doctorate. Throughout the discussions of the Task Force, different descriptions emerged from time to time, so the Task Force returned to this discussion frequently.

The first approach to the challenge was to list all of the factors or characteristics that participants might find relevant to defining degree designations. Forced voting on the sixteen options generated by the group led to this collective priority list of distinguishing characteristics:

- o Amount and type of research training
- o Amount and type of applied practice
- o Stated competencies for research and practice
- o Research utilization vs. research production
- o Practitioners/providers for clinical experience
- o Type of supervision of doctoral students

The Task Force attempted to create matrices to provide a visual map of four categories of degrees: First Professional Degree, Practicing Professional Degree, Researching Professional Degree, and Professional Researcher Degree. It created a matrix differentiating research- and practice-oriented degrees according to the generalist or specialized nature of the degree. It tried a different matrix to differentiate career-ladder degrees from those not currently tied to career laddering. Then it listed the fields in which new degrees are emerging or might be emerging.

Ultimately, these exercises led to the general conclusion that at this time little would be gained from trying to differentiate doctoral education beyond the generic "professional doctorate" title. As new programs emerge and as variations of the Ph.D. take shape, this might well need to be revisited. But for the Task Force, the task at hand was to locate the professional doctorate within the existing hierarchy of degrees and to capture the fundamental differences within a given field between its professional doctorate and its other programs that lead to the master's degree and the research doctorate (Ph.D.).

### Conversation 3: Priorities for Commission Strategies

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Despite the complexity of discussions surrounding the new professional doctorates, the Task Force moved to the challenge of crafting specific recommendations for the Commission. As a group it listed the foci that the Commission should address, and then through forced voting, it identified the following priorities:

1. Regional accrediting agencies must evaluate professional doctorates within the institutional context, including institutional mission.
2. Regional accrediting agencies need a defined set of levels of skills expected in a professional doctoral program (defined as core characteristics).
3. Regional accrediting agencies need better connectedness with professions contemplating new doctorates and better communication with specialized accreditors sharing quality assurance for those doctorates.

Task Force members divided themselves by interest into three groups tasked with fleshing out possible recommendations to the Commission. Each group identified key goals and possible tools. Each also proposed, if appropriate, elements of flexibility that might be essential in the years ahead, and identified questions that had not yet been satisfactorily answered through the Task Force deliberations.

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## RECOMMENDATIONS TO THE COMMISSION

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### SUMMARIZING BASIC CONCLUSIONS

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As it reflected on the key learning from its various conversations, the Task Force summarized the professional doctorate situation as follows:

**New professional programs, despite concerns about their variability and the different purposes among them, draw attention primarily because they use the degree designation of “doctorate.” The increased use of the title of “Doctor” is causing some concerns among professionals who currently hold the title. Others fear that the new degrees will erode the integrity and primacy of the research doctorate in U.S. higher education.**

Noting that professional doctorates have been in existence for a very long time and acknowledging the major studies currently underway on the effectiveness of the research doctorate, the Task Force determined that it could not be responsive to the charge of the Commission simply by providing counsel that the Commission wait patiently until others untangled the skein of politics, redefinition of several professions, and the changing understanding of professional competence in the information age. In fact, by its very response to the new professional doctorates, the Commission either assists in the untangling or unwittingly ties troubling knots. There are significant national concerns about the nature and purposes of the Ph.D. programs in the United States, and other important groups are giving thoughtful attention to this matter. The Task Force chose to leave to others the task of redefining the Ph.D. and counsels the Commission to track closely that important work.

The recommendations that follow are based on the following fundamental conclusions shaped by the deliberations of the Task Force:

1. a convincing case can be made that the professional doctorate has a clearly defined place in the hierarchy of U.S. higher education degrees, and it should be perceived as different from and not as a substitute for the research doctorate;
2. particularly in the health care professions there is an obvious need to create capacity to educate practitioners and those who will primarily be educating practitioners;
3. the professional doctorate should be considered as a degree level within the hierarchy of U.S. degrees, thereby falling under substantive change processes in accreditation;
4. new professional doctorates will mark fields other than those in the health professions;
5. higher education and the professions would benefit from quality assurance of professional doctorates validating that through them students acquire professional competencies they would not otherwise gain in existing degree programs within a given profession;

6. we cannot wait for answers to a sizable number of questions before creating and implementing strategies of quality assurance related to the new professional doctorates; and
7. the Commission can facilitate, experiment, and lead by example, but it cannot respond alone to the need for national consistency in defining and evaluating professional doctorates.

The Task Force's recommendations rather quickly took on shape as the result of the last round of conversations. **At the risk of oversimplifying, the Task Force counsels the Commission to attend to the three C's: context, core characteristics, and collaboration.**

## **RECOMMENDATIONS ON INSTITUTIONAL CONTEXTS**

**The Higher Learning Commission accredits colleges and universities, not the specific programs they offer. Therefore it is critical that in developing and implementing its quality assurance programs related to professional doctorates, the Commission continues to focus first and foremost on the capacity of the institution to mount and support effective programs that lead to the award of a professional doctorate.**

It is the institution's responsibility to document that the new program fits the institutional mission, and to provide compelling evidence that it has considered carefully the impact of the degree on the total institution as well as the anticipated and unanticipated consequences of providing the program.

### ***Define Benchmarks of Capacity***

Institutional capacity for professional doctoral programs should include:

- consideration of how well the program meets the specific standards set by the specialized agency that accredits or will/could accredit the program;
- consideration of the strength and adequacy of the institution's internal quality assurance programs;
- consideration of the relationships among institutional governance, faculty governance and program development and approval;
- consideration of the institution's communication with communities of interest particularly to assess the need for and acceptance of the new program;
- consideration of the thoroughness of institutional financial planning for the program; and
- consideration of the institution's understanding of dependency in these programs, particularly the necessary access to practice settings fundamental to the practice emphasis of the degree.

### ***Provide Guiding Principles and Illustrative Examples***

Some institutions currently offering strong training in specific fields at the baccalaureate and master's levels might find themselves forced to consider moving to the higher degree level. To assist their thinking about the shift, the Commission should create

- guidelines that would help an institution in evaluating its own readiness to move to a higher degree level;
- illustrative examples of effective professional doctoral programs in a variety of institutional context, ; and

- networking support particularly through Annual Meeting programming.

### ***Review Substantive Change Policies and Procedures***

Given the unanticipated speed of some changes in professional education, particularly in light of the fact that some programs might be developed before the specialized agency has created quality standards for them, the Commission might wish to consider making changes to its policies and procedures on substantive change. In particular, it might consider

- creating a special status such as conditional approval;
- differentiating in procedure between an institution offering the professional program for the first time and an institution that already provides the professional program but is moving it to a different degree level;
- deciding not to extend its accreditation to include a degree program until it is clear where the field's specialized agency stands on the degree; or
- creating and implementing agreed-upon strategies with specialized agencies for monitoring particularly when significant innovation is involved.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS ON CORE CHARACTERISTICS**

It is appropriate for The Higher Learning Commission and other institutional accreditation bodies to establish the “core characteristics” of acceptable professional doctorate programs. Without establishing the specific content of a particular degree, the Commission can nonetheless evaluate how well the new degree program fulfills core expectations of a sound professional doctorate.

The core characteristics should be broad enough to allow institutions to be responsibly creative in structuring rigorous programs to meet changing needs in society. However, because most professions strive for uniform competence and excellence from those who practice the profession across the nation, institutions should work closely with the academy (including when appropriate graduate schools) and appropriate specialized accrediting agencies as well as practicing professionals in creating new professional doctoral programs.

It remains the purview of a specialized accrediting agency to fill in detailed standards for a specific professional doctorate. Therefore, not only might different agencies define differently how the core characteristics are met, they inevitably will include in their standards matters not included in the core characteristics. In setting the detailed standards, each agency, particularly those responsible for health care professions, will want to be cognizant of the vital importance of patient safety and the public's expectations about the professional competencies of a person using the title “Doctor” in health care settings.

### ***Create Generic Core Characteristics for the Professional Doctorate***

The Commission's core characteristics should remain broad and generic. Beyond fit with institutional mission, they should take into account both the design of the program and the general learning outcomes appropriate to the program.

*Design features of a professional doctorate should include*

- learning outcomes that state clearly the intended and necessary balance between learning through experience and learning through use and/or creation of research;
- a curriculum through which the program transmits the knowledge, skills, attitudes, and values expected of the

graduates;

- comparisons to other professional doctoral programs provided by the institution and/or the same professional doctoral program offered in the field by a variety of different institutions;
- unambiguous descriptions of the faculty (numbers, credentials, and experience), facilities, and financing required for the program;
- determination of length of study appropriate to the expected learning and competence of the graduate;
- evidence of the inclusion of stakeholders and peers in the design; and
- fit of the program into institutional programs of self-evaluation and quality assurance.

*Fulfillment of general learning outcomes, among other things, should be demonstrated by*

- appropriately evaluated experiences in clinical areas;
- appropriately evaluated experiences with research and scholarship (utilization and/or production);
- tested competence in the mastery of knowledge dictated by the profession assuring depth and breadth of knowledge *as well as* competence in application;
- evaluation processes that also allow for evaluation of ethical maturity requisite for the professional practitioner; and
- evidence of successful transition from student to the role of professional practitioner.

### ***Allow for Variation among Professional Doctorates***

The Commission needs to understand that within the professional doctorates there may be significant differences in emphasis. Some programs will expect students to understand how to use research and apply it to practice while others might require the production of research drawing on field experience. Therefore, some might place a higher value on appropriately credentialed faculty who use research to inform their practice while others might expect those credentialed faculty to have a record of publishing research. While many in the academy might wish that all professional doctorates would be built on the baccalaureate degree and might encourage all new professional doctorates to require baccalaureate education as the foundation, we already have some existing professional doctorates that are four year programs built on the foundation of two years of collegiate study. Moreover, even in long-standing fields such as medicine, students have moved into medical education before completion of a baccalaureate degree.

Therefore the Task Force recommends that the Commission not create and apply standards that define a specific educational pathway for the professional doctorate. Instead, it should expect that the institution providing the program demonstrate that its curricular pathways result in the rigor and educational achievement appropriate to a professional doctorate. It might be of use to the Commission to evaluate a variety of existing doctoral programs that do not carry the Ph.D. designation to determine if they provide some useful benchmarks for this task. The Commission should also keep abreast of the deliberations and decisions of NCES in regard to changing classification systems for graduate degrees.

## RECOMMENDATIONS ON COLLABORATION

Throughout its discussions, the Task Force recognized that it would be inappropriate for The Higher Learning Commission to take upon itself the creation of standards for all professional doctorates. However, professions and specialized agencies should not have to deal with significant differences among the national and regional institutional accrediting commissions. National dialogues among institutional accreditors is critical.

While it is also vitally important that conversations be held with specialized accrediting bodies, the Task Force agreed that institutional accrediting bodies should not defer to specialized agencies if they conclude that the profession's degree is lacking in the substance and rigor appropriate to a professional doctorate. In short, at some critical point(s) a decision must be made and acted upon in order to serve the common good.

While providing the Commission with recommendations for its own activities, the Task Force wants to highlight the urgent need for the Commission to collaborate with many other agencies and organizations with vested interests in new professional doctorates.

### ***Lead if Necessary but Participate Fully***

While acknowledging the usefulness of the conversations created by this Task Force, the participants propose that the Commission consider this as a first important step, not as the solution to the challenge.

The Commission should:

- seek the full inclusion of the Council of Regional Accreditation Commissions (CRAC) in drafting and promulgating generic core characteristics of the professional doctorate;
- work closely with the Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors (ASPA) to assure that appropriate conversations are held if and when tensions emerge over professional doctoral programs;
- work with CHEA to find support for the necessary on-going deliberations that this significant transition requires;
- review the work of others related to this issue such as the recommendations of the Council of Graduate Schools, and
- assure that when its quality assurance program comes to new professional doctoral programs, it is based firmly on knowledge and shared understandings rather than assumptions about purpose of the program and the motives of those advocating for it.

### ***Consider the Usefulness of Shared Processes***

Specialized agencies are holding critically important conversations about new professional doctorates at the same time as the regional accrediting commissions. They have significant concerns about institutional context, particularly when the new program moves an institution into a higher degree level. Through their standards and procedures they can seek to assure comparability among programs, but they cannot and should not get at some of the key institutional variables that are important to their task. Therefore, they would find the assurance they seek in consistent and sound reviews of institutional context. Because both specialized and institutional accrediting agencies are often venturing into new territory, the Task Force proposes that this might be the right opportunity to find ways to coordinate better the quality assurance charting both want to do.

This appears to be a time to share the responsibilities for providing effective quality assurance. Among other things, the development of professional doctorates is being shaped by new technologies integrated into the nature and content of the program and by pressures of globalization on many professions. In short, for both institutional and specialized agencies, the challenge is not simply the emergence of a new degree, but a degree often gained through new strategies of teaching and learning.

Last but certainly not least, the Task Force concludes that coordinated processes would lessen the burden on institutions and programs while allowing agencies to fulfill their quality assurance responsibilities.

The Commission should consider working with specialized agencies in creating

- agreed upon protocols for evaluation.
- agreed upon protocols for program development (allow for different pathways).
- shared best practices/good practices on generic aspects of professional doctorate.
- shared education/training programs that focus specifically on evaluating professional doctorates.
- shared best practices on internationalizing aspects of professional doctorate.
- a shared template for substantive change that would be used by both agencies (perhaps as well by state or national professional licensing bodies).

Accepted by the Board of Trustees

The Higher Learning Commission

June 6, 2006

(See Appendix B for full action)

## Appendix A

### Task Force on the Professional Doctorate

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## **Appendix B**

### **Action of the Board of Trustees of The Higher Learning Commission regarding the Report of the Task Force on the Professional Doctorate June 6, 2006**

In June 2005, the Board of Trustees of The Higher Learning Commission, in keeping with the Commission's bylaws and past practice, voted to establish a Task Force on the Professional Doctorate. The Board called on the Task Force to study the current trends and growth in creation of professional doctorates, become familiar with the common and most effective responses of graduate schools and colleges and universities to these degrees, and to create a report for broad distribution with recommendations to the Commission's Board on how the Commission should best respond to this new trend. Drafts of the Task Force were posted on the Commission's Web site for several months, and the Task Force process took into account comments received from those who read the report as well as those who participated in a 2006 Annual Meeting session devoted to the project.

During its June 2006 business meeting, the Board voted

1. To accept the report with thanks to the members of the Task Force for its thoughtful and useful work;
2. To ask the Commission staff to begin to implement the first recommendation of the Task Force by creating guidelines that outline key aspects of institutional capacity that should be considered by institutions preparing to offer new professional doctoral programs; to gather useful practices from those institutions already providing such programs; to recommend to the Board any appropriate changes in the Commission's substantive change policies that might be useful;
3. To ask the Commission staff to survey of a sample of non-Ph.D. doctoral programs to determine if some core characteristics of sound professional doctorates might be evident; and
4. To ask the Executive Director to contact CHEA and CGS (Council of Graduate Schools) as well as to use the upcoming September meeting of CRAC and ASPA (Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors) to determine whether there is significant interest in creating a national approach to these new programs, and to report back to the Board at its November 2006 meeting.

## Appendix C

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