



An Analysis of DrPH Degree Programs in the United States

by

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I. INTRODUCTION

A. Problem Description

Staff of the Association of Schools of Public Health (ASPH) regularly respond to inquiries about degree programs in the accredited schools of public health. Currently, the only sources of information on Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) programs that are readily available to the public are the catalogues of the individual schools that offer the DrPH degree. Association staff are slightly more informed because they have immediate access to the programmatic data maintained by the Council on Education for Public Health. However, even this information is inadequate to meet demands. Currently, there are no informational brochures, official policy statements, or research reports that provide an updated, in-depth description of the DrPH degree programs. In fact there is neither a single compilation of detailed information, nor is there a consensus statement among the Association membership regarding the overall objective of DrPH degree training.

Prospective students frequently request very specific information about the DrPH degree to help them decide whether it is an appropriate course given their backgrounds and aptitudes, and to help them select the most appropriate school by making programmatic comparisons. Students typically inquire about program objectives, admission standards, and dissertation requirements. Unfortunately, the ASPH staff can provide only general and anecdotal information, so students usually are referred to faculty and department chairs at the particular schools in question. ASPH has a number of informational brochures and leaflets for distribution to prospective students, career counselors and

direction to strategic planning efforts and the subsequent implementation of rather innovative programs. All attempts to reexamine the DrPH degree, however, have been hampered by the paucity of information to compare with programs in other schools.

Recently, ASPH has become interested in broad issues with regard to the DrPH degree. A number of significant events have focused attention on the production of public health professionals, and therefore, have motivated the Association to reconsider the direction of its professional degree programs. Probably the most important of these events has been the 1988 report by the Institute of Medicine, *The Future of Public Health*, which was critical of the schools of public health. The IOM stated that to many observers, "some schools have become somewhat isolated from public health practice and therefore no longer place a sufficiently high value on the training of professionals for work in health agencies." Indeed, if this is true, then it is contrary to what traditionally has been affirmed by the schools to be their objective in offering professional public health degrees.

With the anticipated passage of health care reform legislation, this issue has ramifications. The schools of public health have been training professionals to understand principles of population-level disease prevention and health promotion for three quarters of a century. Because the Association is on the verge of a new era of growth and has developed strong cooperative ties with government health agencies, charitable foundations interested in health care, and several large corporations, they can ill-afford to send the message that they are disinterested in training future public health practitioners to the doctoral-level.

In the two years that the investigator has been with ASPH, he has received some disturbing reports regarding the status of DrPH degree programs. Several department chairs and deans of academic affairs have stated that the DrPH programs are drifting from their original purpose and are becoming indistinguishable from PhD programs. There also is concern that because many public health faculty were trained for academia and basic research, they cannot teach practice skills to DrPH students. DrPH candidates have expressed concerns that their degree programs carry the perception of being second-rate to the PhD and that financial support is scarce for this reason. A few deans have reported that this is driving students to transfer degree programs. In general, the investigator has observed significant disagreement among faculty, administrators, students, and alumni regarding what it means to earn and to confer a DrPH degree.

Currently there are no operational DrPH degree programs in the United States outside the Association's membership; the same cannot be said for any other degree offered in a school of public health. To the pronouncement of this fact, Dean Palmer Beasley of the University of Texas School of Public Health, replied at the October 1993 Education Committee meeting, "It seems particularly wise to pursue this issue when one considers that the DrPH degree might very well be this association's only defining characteristic. Therefore, who better than to define what this degree should be than us, that is, the schools of public health."

In October, 1993, the Executive Director of the Council on Education for Public Health, Ms. Patricia Evans, told the investigator that, at present, there is little interest on the Council in setting standards for the DrPH degree. However, she believes that this attitude could change in the distant

future and probably will. Therefore, it becomes a matter of strategic planning for the Education Committee to address this issue before the Association must deal with the painstaking trials of an externally imposed accreditation process.

B. Objectives

The four main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. **To define the content and direction of individual DrPH programs.**
2. **To produce and distribute a compendium of schoolwide DrPH degree program data in a form useful for comparing and contrasting program governance, admission requirements, general objectives, areas of concentration, process requirements, and enrollment trends.**
3. **To provide an historical perspective of DrPH degree programs in the United States.**
4. **To identify and describe potential model programs.**

Information generated by this study will help the schools to identify aspects of DrPH degree education and training that are in need of improvement. Delineating the relevant history of the DrPH degree will provide a perspective from which the Education Committee may consider its purpose and

the external factors that most influence its direction. Hopefully, this information will demystify the degree for prospective students and provide the means for those who are currently enrolled in DrPH programs to distinguish themselves in the greater schemes of academic public health and public health practice. Finally, the methodology may be used by ASPH staff to develop a system for monitoring the degree and periodically updating relevant programmatic data.

II. RELEVANT LITERATURE

Professional Education in Other Fields: Similar Issues

Public health is not the first profession to encounter problems in defining the nature and content of its terminal practice degree. The academic branches of social work, education, business administration and psychology have, at some time, been confronted with the question of what it means to educate and train practicing professionals. Researchers in each of these fields have examined the problem and have collected data in a manner similar to this study in an effort to guide their academic policy-makers to consensus.

In "The PhD or DSW", Crow and Kindelsperger examined how schools of social work had responded to the profession's need for an advanced practice degree versus a research and knowledge building degree (Crow and Kindelsperger, 1975). They noted that at the time, there was virtually no difference between these two advanced degrees in social work. The team studied 28 doctoral programs, concentrating on the length of time to complete the degree, credit hours required, dissertation and research requirements, examinations, practica and language requirements. They found a marked similarity in all requirements except the modal length of time taken to complete the degree programs; PhD students took longer. Furthermore, the investigators reported a "remarkable unanimity in all programs in their commitment to a research, knowledge-building emphasis, in contrast to an advanced practice-oriented doctorate" (Crow and Kindelsperger, 1975). The investigators cited as additional evidence of this trend

the fact that most doctoral graduates of social work, regardless of degree program, assumed positions in academia.

The investigators also commented on the lack of data to describe trends in doctoral-level social work education. They suggested that because the educational accreditation process only applied to the undergraduate and master's-level social work programs, there was little attention afforded by the schools and their universities to setting standards for the doctoral-level programs. Moreover, they believed that most universities would be reluctant to have national standards imposed upon any of their doctoral programs. Crow and Kindelsperger also speculated that the shortage of data on DSW and PhD programs in social work resulted from the lack of consistent, centralized data reporting on program types, student and graduate characteristics, and post-graduate employment statistics (Crow and Kindelsperger, 1975).

In 1983, Patchner conducted a study of graduates of DSW and PhD programs to examine their academic and employment experiences. A 22 page questionnaire was mailed to graduates of the 41 existing social work programs to examine their perceptions of doctoral education, first employment after the doctoral program, and current employment. Graduates did not differ in their reasons for pursuing doctoral level education in general. However, DSW graduates viewed their programs as being geared toward professional practice, administration or teaching and a greater proportion of them claimed to not have specialized. In addition, a greater proportion of DSWs assumed nonacademic positions immediately after graduation and were in practice positions at the time of the survey. In contrast, PhD graduates perceived their

programs as more research-oriented. They also tended to pursue a specialization, and accordingly, a much greater proportion assumed positions in academia.

Studies on the terminal professional degree in education reveal that here, too, the distinction between practice and research has been blurred (Andersen, 1983; Dill and Morrison, 1985). Anderson surveyed 167 institutions (response rate of 100%) listed by the Council of Graduate schools as offering degrees in education, to determine the similarities and differences between PhD and EdD programs with regard to admissions criteria, qualifying examinations, academic residency requirements, coursework requirements, research competencies, and post-graduate employment settings. His findings suggest that while the degrees are different philosophically, they have very similar programmatic requirements, knowledge bases, competency standards and employment expectations. Specifically, he noted that EdD candidates were able to substitute a problem solving endeavor for a research study to satisfy the dissertation requirement, PhD graduates more frequently chose scholarly positions while EdD graduates chose positions in primary and secondary educational institutions. Thus, he concluded, the EdD is more suited philosophically for the practice of education while the PhD seems more appropriate for research and scholarly contribution.

In "EdD and PhD Research Training in the Field of Higher Education: A Survey and a Proposal," Dill and Morrison report the results of a survey of the chairs of all graduate programs listed in the *Higher Education Directory* as offering terminal degrees in education.

Schmidt conducted mail and telephone surveys in 1986 of a sample of the 99 business schools in the U.S. with doctoral-level programs to determine their status and why some schools have switched doctoral degrees. His findings bode poorly for the future of the DBA.

Of the schools that switched programs from the DBA to the PhD in business, most emphasized the need to provide research skills and to offer depth of knowledge in a particular aspect of the field. There were no cases of a school switching from a PhD in business to a DBA. Those schools that planned to keep the DBA program intact stated generally that university political factors favored the DBA; in effect, another department was offering a PhD in a similar area of study and the university perceived unnecessary duplication. In most of these cases, the DBA resembled closely a PhD program in business anyway. One school contact added "Although we have both the PhD and DBA programs, the DBA is drying up. It's too general a degree and it isn't as marketable as the Ph.D. because of its lack of research emphasis. It may have to go someday" (Schmidt, 1989). The investigator concluded that the blurred distinctions between the degrees, the general prestige of the PhD, and the declining marketplace for the DBA could result in the complete disappearance of the DBA from accredited business schools.

Donald Peterson constructed a framework for examining the difference between (and the need for) a professional degree in the field of psychology in "The Need for the Doctor of Psychology Degree in Professional Psychology." His argument was based on the recommendations for professional training in psychology developed at a conference on the

subject in Vail, Colorado in 1973. The conference recommendations were straightforward: the PsyD degree should be used to designate completion of professional training programs, while the PhD should be awarded to scientists or scholars (Peterson, 1976). Peterson differentiated the traditional demands and contributions of researchers (academicians) and practitioners in psychology to explain certain attitudes toward professional training programs and to emphasize the need to distinguish the PsyD degree from the PhD degree.

According to Peterson, problems arise when psychologists in professional practice are referred to as scientists or scholars. The labels erroneously imply that practitioners produce as well as apply basic knowledge of psychology. Successful application of knowledge is dependent upon a different set of skills than is production and professional settings rarely are conducive to objective research. While practitioners must understand the theoretical basis of the field if they are to successfully evaluate and develop service to the client, practicing psychologists do not use the scientific method in approaching client problems; decision-making also must be based on subjective assessment. Furthermore, scholarly accomplishment is not the goal of practice. (Peterson, 1976).

Peterson believes that when the objectives of the two degrees become confused, the profession can no longer distinguish between the values of professional service and active scholarship. Professional degrees such as the PsyD assure a certain level of competence and prohibit unqualified individuals from masquerading as practitioners. Scholarly degrees denote

III. METHODS

A. Historical Information

ASPH is located strategically in Washington, D.C. in proximity to a number of sources of historical public health data. The archives of the American Public Health Association occupy an adjacent suite area in the building. The William Henry Welch Library of the Johns Hopkins University School of Hygiene and Public Health, less than forty minutes away by train, was the first school of public health library built in the U.S. And, of course, the Library of Congress is located in the District of Columbia. The investigator culled historical information from public health and education volumes in each of these collections. In addition to books, journals, catalogues and other documents, a number of public health historians and senior academicians graciously discussed the origins and evolution of academic public health.

B. DrPH Program Profiles

Data Collection

The first step in the process of compiling profiles of schoolwide DrPH degree programs was to identify those schools that offer the degree. The investigator sent a fax to each dean of an accredited school of public health requesting information on whether the school had an operational program or, if not, whether it was actively planning one. The deans of schools with current programs