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New Ideas for Ph.D. Education

For educators and state officials who want to reform doctoral education, "it's easy if you just want to make it easier," said E. Garrison Walters, interim chancellor of the Ohio Board of Regents.

The challenge, he said, is to undertake reforms that don't sacrifice quality. "It's difficult to keep the core values of a Ph.D. and keep it flexible," he said. Walters spoke this week at a conference in Chicago of the State Higher Education Executive Officers — the officials who approve new Ph.D. programs in their states and periodically review such programs, sometimes with an eye toward saving money by eliminating them.

At a session on new approaches to doctoral education, state officials were briefed on two new approaches — both of which were warmly received. One involves non-residential Ph.D. programs for students who are older than most who earn doctorates. The other involves doctoral programs that are run by more than one university — and that sometimes cross state lines and public/private distinctions. Officials at the meeting said they believed there was strong demand for both kinds of programs, and wanted to find ways for their agencies to encourage such innovations.

Laurien Alexandre, director of Antioch University's Ph.D. program in leadership and change, said it was easy to see that there is interest in the kind of non-traditional doctorate her institution has created. The students are already far along in their careers and lives — 85 percent are over 40, with many in their 50s and 60s — and they don't need the doctorate as a credential. "No one is coming at 55 because they need it for their job," she said. "So why are people paying $80,000 for a doctorate?"

Her answer is that Antioch's doctoral students are on an "evolved path" in which they are seeking to take their understandings of organizations to a higher level, and want to conduct the kind of in-depth research associated with doctoral programs. The program attracts students from all over the country, who periodically meet in person at Antioch's campuses around the country, but conduct much of their work in close collaboration with faculty members, who are also spread out around the country and communicate with students via phone and videoconferencing.

The program is "courseless," Alexandre said, and students must demonstrate their competencies in knowledge and research skills after completing "multiyear learning paths" that are supervised by faculty members. Only then, Alexandre said, can they write their dissertations. And while Alexandre clearly relishes the way Antioch is "pushing the envelope" on most aspects of the program, she said that the dissertation process is traditional: committees, chapters, defense, and so forth. "The dissertation is the gold standard," she said.

The concept underlying this approach, she said, is "rigor without rigidity," and that approach may be what it takes to encourage doctoral education from older students. She noted that Antioch just graduated its first students in the program and that retention rates are well above the typically low rates for many Ph.D. programs.

If the Antioch model demonstrates flexibility within a graduate program, two new biomedical engineering programs may represent the ability of universities to be flexible in how they put together a graduate program in a hot science field — and one that can be expensive to support. One program joins forces of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University, and the other combines offerings at Virginia Tech with Wake Forest University. Both programs have one institution with a medical school (Chapel Hill and Wake Forest) and one institution with an engineering school (N.C. State and Virginia Tech).

Stephen Knisley, director of the North Carolina program, said that it grew out of a stand-alone program at Chapel Hill that officials there felt would be strengthened with more ties to engineering. To make the program effective,

Knisley said, real partnerships are needed. That means admissions decisions, curricular requirements and the like are all decided jointly. And to really have students be able to move back and forth to the two campuses, officials have also had to make sure they can get dual ID cards, parking spaces, and access to all facilities. There are currently 103 graduate students in the program, and North Carolina hopes to double that number in the next few years.

In a similar approach, Wake Forest and Virginia Tech decide matters together — and have managed to do so even though the former is private and the latter is a public university in another state. Brian J. Love, a professor at Virginia Tech, noted that the two universities don't observe the same holidays or have the same class schedules, so everything must be negotiated. "This program now has its own calendar," he said.

But he said that's a small price to pay to have combined resources that neither institution could otherwise create. "This can really be a win-win situation."

One difficulty such collaborations sometimes face is with accreditation. Gail Morrison, interim executive director of the South Carolina Commission on Higher Education, said that the Medical University of South Carolina and the University of South Carolina recently merged their pharmacy schools. While both entities had been accredited, they needed an entirely new review, even though it seemed to Morrison that the new school was clearly stronger than the two separate ones of the past.

Her story brought knowing nods from the audience of state officials, several of whom said later that specialized accreditation was a barrier to the kinds of collaboration being encouraged at the session.

Of course some collaborations don't require any accreditors' approval. Morrison said that generally breaking down institutional boundaries was a great way to encourage more efficiency and that formal units aren't always needed. For example, the state's three doctoral institutions are opening a building in Charleston that will bring professors together. No outside approval needed.

— [Scott Jaschik](#)

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