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The University of North Carolina at Charlotte Request to Plan a Doctoral Program in Health Psychology

Introduction

The University of North Carolina at Charlotte requests approval to plan a doctoral program in Health Psychology (CIP: 42.9999). [ECU has also requested approval for planning a doctoral program in Health Psychology.]

Program Description

Health psychology is a rapidly emerging field of basic and applied research which utilizes principles of psychology to impact health and illness across the life span. More specifically, health psychology seeks to understand the role that behavior and its physiologic concomitants play in the etiology, treatment and prevention of physical and mental illnesses, and the promotion of health and wellness. Behavioral influences on health include environmental, psychosocial and sociocultural factors, as well as individual behavioral attributes such as personality. The biopsychosocial model is at the core of health psychology, serving as the foundation for much of the theory building in this area. Although disease onset is typically triggered by physiological changes, the biopsychosocial model implies that the risk for illness, severity of symptoms, time course of illness, and recovery from illness can be influenced by a complex matrix of psychosocial factors. Similarly, the promotion of health and wellness relies on knowledge of the interaction of community and social factors with individual physiological and behavioral characteristics. To understand and address these factors effectively, an interdisciplinary approach to health is essential.

The Goals of the Interdisciplinary Health Psychology Ph.D. Program are:

1. To build upon the strong existing collaborations among Psychology faculty and those in Gerontology, Counseling, Special Education and Child Development, and other partner disciplines and community partners to create a true interdisciplinary “program of excellence,” widely recognized throughout the country.
2. To train the next generation of health psychologists to understand the role that behavior and its social and physiologic concomitants play in the etiology, treatment and prevention of physical and mental illnesses, and the promotion of health and wellness.
3. To graduate approximately five students per year in the 3rd and 4th years, increasing to an average of 6-8 Ph.D.s per year after the first five years, who assume roles in health care settings, health research settings, universities or other public, private and non-profit applied settings throughout the country.
4. To develop additional collaborative partnerships with regional public, private, and nonprofit institutions, to meet ongoing and emerging regional needs related to the themes of Health, Children, Families and Schools, and Community and Regional Development.
5. To utilize university and regional partnerships to increase the amount of funded

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interdisciplinary research that addresses the many challenges to the health of people in the region, state, and nation.

Health psychology has a significant role in addressing physical and mental health issues in individuals and communities. Working together with physicians, counselors, nurses, social workers, health educators, administrators, policy analysts, and other professionals, health psychologists utilize their unique understanding of human behavior and strong methodological skills to conduct research and intervene with individuals, families, organizations and communities to improve health and wellness. The Interdisciplinary Health Psychology program at UNC Charlotte has as its objectives the training of students who will:

1. develop strong research skills that will enable them to be leading contributors to the science of health and wellness;
2. gain experience in working with faculty and practitioners from other health related fields that will enable them to be active participants in and leaders of multidisciplinary teams that seek to understand and improve health and wellness;
3. obtain educational training and supervised experience with faculty in psychology and in related health professions that will enable them to develop an interdisciplinary perspective on health that they can apply to research and/or practice;
4. have the opportunity to obtain specific applied skills that will enable them to use knowledge from psychology and related health disciplines to better understand disease, dysfunction, and the promotion of healthy lifestyles.

Consistent with this broad view of health and an emphasis on the cognitive, behavioral, and environmental factors that contribute to positive and negative health outcomes, the Interdisciplinary Health Psychology Program at UNC Charlotte will focus on research and applications addressing health from several different perspectives. Students in the program will take courses from and engage in research with faculty from Psychology, Counseling, Special Education, Gerontology, and other departments and programs engaged in health-related scholarship and training.

Program Review

The review process for requests to plan is designed to determine if the proposal is developed to the stage appropriate for taking to the Graduate Council and if so what are the issues that may need further attention. Proposals to plan doctoral programs are reviewed internally. The concerns from the reviewers were summarized in a letter to the Chancellor prior to the presentation to the Graduate Council. That summary follows:

It has been reviewed internally with positive results but with some concerns expressed by the reviewers. One concern with a new degree field is whether students will take a risk for such a program, and whether the graduates of such programs are well matched to existing employment opportunities. While the reviewers comment that these issues are addressed, they thought it an issue needing more attention as the proposal is developed.

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Graduate Council

The Graduate Council had, as a basis for its consideration, UNCC's proposal to plan the program in Health Psychology, the summary letter to the Chancellor, and a presentation to the Council by representatives of the program. While several issues were discussed including the relation to the ECU program no major issues were raised.

Response

The representatives from UNCC responded that the two programs were different in focus and that there was a strong pool of students available for the programs.

Need for the Program

There are currently three doctoral programs in the state, but it was agreed there was heavy demand for all psychology doctoral programs. The Council discussion indicated there was strong support for the need for additional training in psychology in the state. An issue was raised about the extent to which a joint program between the two schools (ECU and UNCC) might be considered. Each school thought it would not be feasible based on the difference in the programs and the high demand for training in the field.

Recommendation by the Graduate Council

After consideration of the issues raised by previous reviewers and Council members, the Graduate Council voted, without dissent, to recommend approval for UNCC to plan a doctoral program in Health Psychology.

Additional Review

The Office of the President, in light of two proposals for planning a Ph.D. in Health Psychology, decided it would be wise to seek outside advice. A reviewer was asked to review and compare the two proposals and respond to a set of questions: Those questions were:

1. Is it feasible and wise to establish a psychology program with a focus on health?
2. How similar or dissimilar are the two proposals? That is, to what extent do they overlap?
3. What would be the source of students for each program, and what would be the typical placement of graduates? To what extent would they be in competition for students and placements? What is the pool of students for these programs, and what are the employment opportunities for graduates?
4. At this stage of development, how would you rate the overall quality of the proposals and the contemplated programs each seeks to develop?

The reviewer confirms that Health Psychology is a recognized and established field and that health care in psychology now extend beyond mental health to include "behavioral health," and that both proposals capture the need and opportunity for such programs. The reviewer, in regard to the overlap question, states, "While the topic of 'health psychology' is in both programmatic names and descriptions, they appear to have significantly different foci beyond the core of clinical (psychology) training and research

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and core health psychology training.” The reviewer thinks there will be demand for these programs and the opportunities for employment will be adequate to accommodate the graduates of their programs. But the focus on pediatric school psychology may need some additional attention to determine how it fits with the current field. The reviewer concluded with, “I think each University has done a good job outlining the trends and programmatic goals for these two ‘health psychology’ programs as well as making the case for student interest and high employability of graduates.”

Issues to Address in Planning

Each program will need to consult with the other as planning takes place. The reviewer also suggested that there needs to be careful attention to which areas each will seek accreditation and that there be prior consultation with accreditation agencies as the programs are planned.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the Board of Governors approve the request from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte to plan a doctoral program in Health Psychology.

Approved to be Recommended for Planning to the Committee on Educational Planning, Policies, and Programs

Senior Vice President Gretchen M. Bataille

August 31, 2004