

East Carolina University

Request to Plan a Doctor of Physical Therapy Program

Introduction

East Carolina University requests approval to plan a doctorate in Physical Therapy (CIP: 51.2308).

Program Description

The institution has provided the following description of the program:

The Doctor of Physical Therapy (DPT) Program will offer a pre-professional educational experience to prepare entry-level practitioners in physical therapy. The DPT will follow the *consensus-based competencies of physical therapy entry-level programs* as designed and supported by the American Physical Therapy Association. The program will consist of 110 student credit hours (SCH) and will include didactic course work (82 SCH), defined clinical experiences (17 SCH for thirty-four week clinical rotation and 2 SCH for clinical integration), and doctoral-level research experience (9 SCH.). Clinical experiences will be at a predetermined facility and under the supervision and direction of a faculty preceptor. (Note: The current entry-level master's program at ECU is 75 SCH.)

The primary goals of the DPT are to strengthen diagnostic clinical decision-making and patient intervention skills by emphasizing an evidenced-based patient management model and to provide a research experience. However, according to the American Physical Therapy Association, "There is only one set of standards for professional (entry-level) education. The *1998 Evaluative Criteria for Accreditation of Education Programs for the Preparation of Physical Therapists* apply to master's and doctoral-level physical therapist professional education programs." The intent of the DPT, therefore, is to provide additional advanced course work, and clinical and research experience beyond what is offered in the master's of physical therapy (MPT) degree. The proposed program will integrate with the current MPT program appropriate elements of the following in both didactic and experiential clinical and research activities:

- evidence-based clinical decision making and intervention
- differential diagnosis and diagnostic reasoning across systems and life span
- systems and psychosocial assessments
- health-risk screening
- research methods and statistics, data acquisition, and interpretation
- clinical skills and effective patient management
- communications as a health professional, professional scholar, and educator
- interactions and responsibilities in community health and risk prevention
- health care systems administration

The American Physical Therapy Association has changed its expectations of the skills and training needed by physical therapists. Consequently, the entry-level DPT has been endorsed by physical therapy program administrators and is quickly becoming the preferred degree level for students entering the profession. Though the conversion from master's to doctoral levels was first seen in private institutions, the trend is clearly nationwide and within both private and public educational domains. In 1996, Creighton University was the first institution to offer a DPT degree. According to the American Physical Therapy Association, currently there are now fifty-nine institutions that offer a DPT entry-level program, four others have received approval to convert to the DPT from a pre-existing PT program, and eighty-eight MPT programs have expressed a commitment to transition to the DPT entry level by 2006. By 2006 three-fourths of the existing PT programs (151 out of 203) will be at the DPT entry-level. The transition to the DPT is necessary for our students to be competitive in this changing environment,

The time constraints of the existing entry-level master's program limits student exposure to and development of a more comprehensive, integrated, and evidenced-based level of practice. As such, diagnostic methods, interpretations decision-making, and research methods are limited in scope and application. The proposed doctorate of physical therapy will provide in-depth education and training in PT diagnostics, clinical problem solving, and patient intervention skills. It will affirm the importance of evidence-based practice and clinical research by the PT practitioner. Graduates will have opportunities to further expand their knowledge, participation, and contributions in health care system administration, community wellness, professional education, and research experience.

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:

Since this proposed change from a MPT to a DPT is being motivated in part by developments in the discipline that include an articulation by the accreditation agency of the need for a DPT eventually as the entry level degree, one might raise some issues about the timing of the full switch over, and whether the MPT should remain available for a few more years. While the DPT will provide the opportunity for more advanced training for practitioners, doctoral graduates may find more opportunities and it may be more difficult to keep them in the region. Even though we will have more highly trained practitioner, under the conversion plan there will be fewer graduates at a higher overall cost.

The planning process might be elaborated more fully and include some attention to the impact this move will have on the employment patterns of graduates of MPT programs in contrast to DPT program.

Graduate Council

The Graduate Council had, as a basis for its consideration, the proposal to plan the program, the summary letter to the Chancellor, and a presentation to the Council by representatives of the program. The above concerns were discussed but no further concerns were identified.

Response

ECU documented the speed with which physical therapy programs around the country are moving from the master's level to the doctoral level as the entry-level degree. An expanded program will provide more opportunity for in-depth training of students. According to the most recent information, 82 of 210 physical therapy programs offer the doctorate and 158 of those programs either offer or are in the planning stage for a doctorate in physical therapy. ECU also detailed more fully the planning process they will follow. There will be technically trained physical therapy assistants available so the impact of moving the level to the doctorate and possibly training fewer at the doctorate level than previously at the master's level will have less impact on the number of employees available than a similar move in pharmacy has had.

Need for the Program

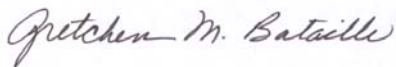
The field is moving to the Doctor of Physical Therapy as the entry-level degree more rapidly than anyone expected. ECU, to be competitive with its peers, will need to move to the doctoral level.

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 East Carolina University to plan a Doctor of Physical Therapy Program.

Recommendation

The Office of the President recommends that the Board of Governors approve the request from East Carolina University to plan a Doctor of Physical Therapy Program.

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

Senior Vice President Gretchen M. Bataille

November 3, 2003