

Education Leadership Conference

Question Working Group #3: Core Knowledge in Doctoral Education and Training in Psychology

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Main Question:

Is there a core body of knowledge, skills, and related competencies that should be expected of all doctoral students in academic psychology (i.e., students in PhD programs in the foundational areas of psychology as a scientific discipline in contrast to areas of psychology in which graduate students are prepared for professional practice)?

Answers

The original question posed of the group raised further questions about what constitutes “academic psychology” and “foundational areas of psychology.” In discussing these questions, the group noted that many graduate students working in applied areas (e.g., clinical or industrial/organizational) also pursue academic careers. The structure of the original question did not recognize this group. Likewise, those whose graduate study is in areas not typically related to the professional practice of psychology (e.g., cognition, psychometrics, developmental, and social) sometimes pursue careers in

applied fields, even seeking licensure on occasion. Thus, it seemed more appropriate to focus on the knowledge, skills, and related competencies expected of all psychologists, or at least those awarded the PhD degree.

Before defining what these outcomes should be, the group made several other observations as follow.

First, psychological science and practice today have as a foundation many bodies or domains of knowledge. The discipline is too broad and complex to have as its foundation a single body of knowledge. While some leaders of the discipline have attempted to develop integrative theories across these bodies of knowledge, the number and diversity of the latter make it difficult for all students to be expected to master or even find relevant to their areas of study the full spectrum of knowledge in psychology. What all students must learn, the group agreed, is that there are multiple determinants of behavior. In their graduate education, students are afforded different types of opportunities to learn about subsets of these determinants through their research and other studies. This education also is intended to prepare students to learn how to learn in new domains of knowledge as such become relevant as possible determinants of behavior in the areas of their focus as these evolve through their careers.

Although there were some differences of opinion among group participants about whether there should be a core curriculum for all doctoral students in psychology, as there may have been 50 years ago, the reality of graduate education in doctoral programs today is that there is not such a curriculum for all students. The closest to a set of core requirements is in doctoral programs preparing students for areas of professional practice, in which there are specified areas of foundational knowledge and related competencies expected of graduates. But, here too there may be little overlap between the preparation of any two students in areas so broad as “social determinants of behavior.”

This observation notwithstanding, the group did agree on the principle that doctoral education in psychology should emphasize breadth as well as depth of focus. How this principle is implemented in graduate departments, however, should not be prescribed. Differentiation of new areas of inquiry within the traditional boundaries of psychology and expansion of those bounds through exciting new interdisciplinary collaborations are promising

developments for the field, but they present significant challenges to older notions of common mastery of core areas by all doctoral students.

With the advancement of knowledge and breadth of the discipline of psychology, doctoral programs preparing graduate students for scientific careers have characteristically adopted a more highly specialized research focus, very often employing a “mentor model” in which a few graduate students work closely with one another and a faculty mentor. Although students in these programs may have formal coursework in psychology and other disciplines related to their research, the general manner in which their graduate education is structured varies from program to program, even at times from student to student in the same program. Breadth of preparation in these programs often includes interdisciplinary as well as intra-disciplinary study, tailored to and pursued in individualized programs targeted to specific foci of specialization. It is through their research agenda and mentoring that these doctoral students are challenged to explore the multiple determinants of behavior in their area of focus, pursue diverse learning methods, and develop attitudes and ethical principles of scientific inquiry and explanation.

In contrast, other doctoral programs in psychology, especially those preparing students for professional practice, are designed to ensure that students learn at graduate levels of instruction about biological, cognitive, affective, social, and individual difference bases of behavior. These programs also tend to familiarize their students with the history of thought in the discipline, research methods, statistics, qualitative analysis, and ethics through formal courses or seminars, following what might be termed a “core curriculum model.” Typically, they study with many different faculty over the course of their graduate education and training, thus having multiple role models. One member of the group suggested that graduate students in professional areas of psychology are now probably the most broadly prepared psychologists within the discipline because of prescribed competencies.

No member of the group argued for the superiority of one of these training models over the other. The diversity of roles for psychology and psychologists calls for multiple training models.

What psychologists should have in common

Despite the diversity of bodies of knowledge foundational to psychology as a scientific discipline and profession, and despite the diversity of pedagogy models among doctoral programs in psychology, the group agreed that all psychologists should have:

1. a substantive understanding of multiple determinants of behavior in individuals, groups, organizations, and communities;
2. a “culture of evidence” perspective about behavior based on scientific inquiry and reasoning, replicable methods of observation and measurement, and interpretation of qualitative and quantitative evidence;
3. an understanding of ethical principles applicable to practice, research, and teaching as well as a value orientation of respect for human diversity; and,
4. an understanding of what it means to learn as a psychologist and a commitment to lifelong learning.

The group also agreed that doctoral programs in psychology could conceptualize additional competencies expected of their graduates in one or more of the following domains of scholarship, borrowed from Boyer’s analysis:

1. generation of knowledge
2. synthesis of knowledge
3. communication of knowledge
4. application of knowledge

How well are these aspects of scholarship emphasized in our doctoral programs? Do programs vary in the extent to which they focus on these aspects of scholarship? What are the implications of these orientations to scholarship for the successful preparation of graduate students for the careers and employment markets they seek? These questions, the group agreed, merit further discussion. They can and should be discussed in the context of department strengths, program goals, and student career interests.

Group Recommendations

1. The group agreed that this type of discussion about the goals and methods of graduate education in psychology should be continued. As ways in which to encourage this conversation, the group recommended that the results of this conference be broadly distributed to all constituencies involved in the education and training of psychologists for comment and reflection within academic departments, in annual meetings of their focused constituency organizations, and even at future Education Leadership Conferences with participation by the constituents most directly involved in the topics of focus. This likely means extending the conversation beyond the bounds of APA membership.
2. Another recommendation of the group was that the Education Directorate encourage and facilitate interdisciplinary education and training opportunities in graduate education so that graduate students learn along with faculty the values and methods of collaboration with colleagues in other disciplines in addressing complex problems of common interest. This recommendation is consistent with recommendations of recent years from the National Research Council on graduate education in the sciences and is in keeping with the increased need for interprofessional understanding in areas of professional practice or other applications.
3. A third recommendation was that the Education Directorate identify and publicize innovative models of education and training in doctoral programs in psychology as a means to encourage others to reflect on their program models and outcomes. These innovative models could be made public through such means as the Education Directorate web site and other communications media. The group believed that encouraging innovation in training holds more promise for the future of psychology than does specifying a core curriculum and thereby restricting new approaches to training.

