

Guide to the Professional Doctorate (FPD) in AOM

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This document provides an introduction and a series of questions and answers in order to clarify concepts and issues surrounding a topic that has been an important objective of the Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (AOM) professional community for over twenty years: the professional doctorate.

Introduction

Kevin Ergil, MS, MA, LAc

Early in the development of our profession's educational process in the United States a number of programs were able to legally award a doctorate, the OMD (Oriental Medicine Doctor). As consensus emerged on educational standards and requirements for the field, and as programs understood the realities of legitimate professional education in America, it was agreed that this degree title would no longer be awarded and, by the late eighties, no ACAOM accredited programs awarded this degree. The master's degree (or level certificate) became the *de facto* standard for AOM programs.

However, many practitioners wanted the professional recognition associated with the doctoral degree and, in some states, the license title "Doctor" was available. This situation led to years of sometimes bitter discussion. The discussion focused itself, in particular, on two contrasting positions: 1) the desire, frequently stated by some members of the profession, that a doctorate should be the terminal degree in the profession and 2) the perception that AOM schools faced a wide range of challenges in granting a legitimate doctoral degree.

This situation shifted slightly in the late nineties with the adoption of a standard for a post-graduate doctorate in acupuncture and Oriental medicine (DAOM) and the successful implementation of several doctoral programs in Oriental medicine (typically based on two years of post-graduate training encompassing a minimum of 1200 hours). Subsequent to the development of standards for the DAOM standards for a post-graduate doctorate in acupuncture (DAc) were also developed, but no programs awarding this degree have been implemented. The post-graduate DAOM/Dac was never intended to replace the Master's degree (or level) as a standard for entering the profession. Instead it was designed to offer advanced clinical training with a focus on clinical specializations, and additional training in topics related to research and teaching.

Subsequently, based on substantial input from the AOM professional community, the idea of an entry level doctorate in either acupuncture or Oriental medicine was explored by ACAOM (The Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine),

which formed a task force composed of representatives of the professional community to develop and review educational standards for what has come to be called the First Professional Doctorate. These standards have been published and are available for review.

It is important to note that the development of these standards did not and do not mandate, or even propose, a transition from the master's to the professional doctorate as the entry-level degree. Instead, these standards, if adopted by ACAOM will allow institutions to consider developing such programs if they feel that the educational marketplace will support them.

An example of how this process might work is provided by the transition made by the physical therapy profession from the master's to the doctorate. This transition was not mandated, but driven entirely by student demand for a professional doctorate in physical therapy. Some professions that have developed professional doctorates have opted to support offering both the master's and the doctorate degree as first professional degrees in their field.

What follows below is a discussion, in a Question and Answer format, of critical issues and concepts related to the professional doctorate proposed by ACAOM, and reviewed by representatives of numerous other organizations.

What is a first professional degree?

A first professional degree (whatever the title: bachelor's, master's, or doctorate) is a degree required to enter the profession in question. Usually the receipt of a first professional degree is required by the state if a license is to be awarded. Presently the only first professional degree in acupuncture and Oriental medicine is the master's degree (or master's level certificate).

What is an "entry-level degree"?

The "entry level degree" is a degree that meets the standards provided by state law for entry into a licensed profession. Depending on state requirements and educational practice within the profession it is possible for one degree to be required for entry into the profession e.g. an MD, or for several to be acceptable, as is presently the case with professions such as occupational therapy, physician assistant, nursing, or physical therapy. There is a multiplicity of requirements because individual state laws and regulations determine the entry level degree. In AOM the master's degree (or master's level certificate) is typically the entry level degree, but most states permit entry with other qualifications, e.g. medical baccalaureate degrees from China. Thus any change in entry level requirements would be determined on a state-by-state basis.

What is a "terminal degree"?

The concept of a terminal degree varies depending on the profession in question and whether the degree is academic or professional. The phrase "terminal degree" lacks a precise definition, but in general, it is the highest degree given in a field of study. The MD is the terminal professional degree for practicing medical doctors, whereas a PhD is typically the terminal academic degree for any given profession or field of study.

Presently in AOM the master's is our entry level professional degree and the DAOM is the highest professional (terminal) degree we can earn. Based on the definition above, the DAOM is the terminal professional degree and could remain as a terminal professional degree even if the professional doctorate (FPD) is adopted. Based on other definitions the master's degree could be considered as our profession's terminal degree and the DAOM as the post-graduate degree. From this perspective the professional doctorate (FPD) has the potential to emerge as our terminal professional degree.

What kinds of doctorates are there?

Typically, educational institutions in the United States award either academic or professional doctorates. The academic doctorate, usually a PhD (Doctor of Philosophy), indicates that the recipient has demonstrated an ability to carry out original research in their field. A professional doctorate is different because it signifies professional competency at the doctoral level, but it may or may not be associated with licensure. For example, both the Doctor of Public Health (DrPH) and a Doctor of Education (EdD) are professional and terminal degrees that are not associated with licensure, while the MD is a terminal professional degree as well as an entry level degree.

Who helped develop the current professional doctorate (FPD) standards?

The current FPD standards for a professional doctorate in Oriental medicine and an Professional Doctorate in acupuncture were developed by key stakeholders including the former AOM Alliance, AAOM (now AAAOM), WFCMS (World Federation of Chinese Medical Societies), FAOMRA (Federation of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine Regulatory Agencies), members of the American Chinese medicine community and the Council of Colleges of Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (CCAOM).

When did the AOM community start talking about doctorates?

This is not a new discussion. There has been discussion in the AOM community about the first professional doctorate since the OMDs were offered in the 1980s (see introduction above).

What is the professional doctorate (FPD) in AOM?

The expression "First Professional Doctorate" is misleading (see discussion under first professional degree). The fact is that the "First Professional Doctorate" (FPD) is presently

proposed as a professional doctorate. Whether it ever becomes a first professional degree will depend on both state law and our profession. Nonetheless, because this professional doctorate has the potential to be a first professional degree in our field it is often, but inaccurately, referred to as the “First Professional Doctorate” (FPD). What is presently proposed under the heading of “First Professional Doctorate” (FPD) is a professional doctorate that expands and focuses the standards for the present master’s programs to allow these programs to transition to awarding a legitimate doctorate. As such, the proposed professional doctorate (FPD) would initially stand as a potential entry level or first professional degree.

How does the professional doctorate (FPD) differ from the post-graduate doctoral program (DAOM)?

The DAOM and DAC are post-graduate doctorates that serve as advanced degrees. They require students to first complete a master’s (degree or level) education in AOM. As discussed above the post-graduate DAOM and DAC do not provide entry level training. In contrast, students entering programs awarding the professional doctorate will enter directly from college without any prior AOM training and receive the doctoral degree in either acupuncture or Oriental medicine upon graduation.

How will the professional doctorate (FPD) affect the post-graduate doctorate (DAOM)?

The DAOM, an advanced Oriental medicine degree, will remain a post-graduate program that is designed to develop advanced skills in areas of clinical specialization and to support the ability of participants to participate in research, teaching and scholarly activity. It can continue to play a role contributing to the science and knowledge of the AOM profession as an advanced post-graduate degree. The same would be true for the post-graduate doctorate in acupuncture, but no such programs presently exist.

Is the professional doctorate (FPD) an Academic or Professional Degree?

The professional doctorate (FPD) is a professional degree as it focuses upon the knowledge, skills and abilities pertinent to practice. It is not an academic degree as is the PhD, which provides for competencies in independent research leading to new knowledge in a specific field. As discussed above, the PhD is an academic degree while professional degrees prepare individuals to work in their chosen profession. An example is the Educational Doctorate (EdD); it prepares leaders of educational institutions in legal, practical and evaluation type skills.

What is the difference between Regional Accreditation and National or Programmatic Accreditation?

Accreditation is a voluntary process whereby academic institutions seek recognition for meeting academic standards. Accreditation is typically conducted by private not-for-

profit agencies, recognized by the United States Department of Education (USDE). Recognition allows accredited programs to participate in Title IV Federal funding (student loans) among other programs.

Regional accreditation is conducted by a regional accreditor (usually associated with a geographic region of the United States) to provide institutional accreditation for a college or university as an institution (historically this form of accreditation addressed both the capability to provide both undergraduate and graduate education in general). Typically, when we speak about regional accreditation we refer to the accreditation of an institution and the recognition of its ability to conduct all the activities generally associated with any “real” college or university. Regional accreditation means that the institution in question has met generally accepted standards for educational institutions of its type. Almost all well-known colleges or universities participate in regional accreditation.

Programmatic accreditation is typically done by a national accreditor recognized by USDE. Programmatic accreditation is technically specialized accreditation for educational programs that prepare people for a specific occupation or profession. Medical schools, chiropractic colleges, nursing programs, and physical therapy programs all have their specific programmatic accreditors. ACAOM does this for AOM. ACAOM accreditation is required by many, but not all, states for schools or programs that train practitioners to gain AOM licensure.

USDE recognizes both national professional accrediting commissions such as ACAOM and regional accrediting commissions as accreditors.

What accreditation(s) will be required for the professional doctorate (FPD)?

ACAOM accredits all degrees in the field of AOM and so it will be able to accredit the professional doctorate (FPD) as it now accredits the Master’s programs and the DAOM. ACAOM has the capacity to accredit the professional doctorate at this time, but in order for the professional doctoral programs to participate in financial aid programs under Title IV and other Federal programs, ACAOM will have to secure USDE recognition of the professional doctorate.

Will the professional doctorate (FPD) be an entry-level, terminal degree when adopted?

No, if adopted, the professional doctorate (FPD) would not inevitably be entry level, as entry level standards are determined by state legislatures and/or regulatory boards. However, the curriculum proposed for the professional doctorate would meet the entry level standards for most states.

How much will the professional doctorate (FPD) cost?

All cost considerations for the professional doctorate (FPD) at this stage are speculative because the standards are still being reviewed and a final determination regarding program length and competencies has not been completed.

The proposed ACAOM standards for both the professional doctorate (FPD) in acupuncture and the professional doctorate (FPD) in Oriental medicine will require 4 academic years to complete (8 semesters/12 quarters/3 calendar years). This is the same length as the current standards for the master's in OM, and one academic year (two semesters) longer than the current standards for the master's in acupuncture.

The proposed ACAOM standards for the professional doctorate mandates increasing the master's in OM standard clinical training from 870 hours to 1000 hours for the professional doctorate in Oriental medicine and increasing the master's of acupuncture from 660 hours to 790 hours for the professional doctorate in acupuncture. The above changes in program length are minimal and many programs already meet them.

The curricular changes proposed for the professional doctorate are focused on program educational outcomes and are not characterized in terms of length. The standards align closely with the existing master's standards and so adopting the professional doctorate will not necessarily increase program length or cost by any substantial extent.

How will the new degree title affect my licensure?

For those who are already licensed, no impact is likely. However, it is possible that a change in professional degree title will eventually engender changes in licensing titles, determined on a state-by-state basis. For example, if a state were to make the professional doctorate (FPD) the requirement for entry into the profession, they might consider changing the license title from "Licensed Acupuncturist" to "Doctor of Acupuncture," but they might not.

It is important to understand that no state has required additional education for already licensed professionals for a change in license title. This has been true in NM, FL and RI. Usually, through the legislative process, a state will change the title, and all previously licensed individuals are “grandfathered” into the new licensure title. When a state increases or changes their scope, however, (for example the addition of injection therapies in NM and FL), further certification is often required to guarantee that the practitioner using that expanded scope has the competencies to practice safely.

Will practitioners who have a master's degree be grandfathered or will they have to return to school?

Grandfathering applies only to licensure, not to earned degrees, and is defined by each states' practice act. A degree such as the professional doctorate (FPD) must be earned. Licensure titles are granted by the states. Degree titles are granted by educational

institutions on the basis state authorization, and although educational institutions do have the ability to grant transfer credit, they may not grant a “grandfathered” degree. In short, if you wish to receive the professional doctorate (FPD), you will have to return to school. However you will not be required to do so in order to retain your state licensure.

For those who choose to return to school and upgrade, in some instances transfer credits may be awarded for coursework and clinical work at programs with equivalencies. Any transfer credit awards will be guided by ACAOM transfer credit standards and final determinations made by individual schools. An example might include transfer from TCM colleges in China or from previously completed master’s training. The rules for transfer are subject to the policies of the degree granting institution.

What is a transitional doctorate?

A transitional doctorate is an upgrade path for people who are already practicing in the field when a new first professional degree evolves. For example, transitional doctorates are being offered to individuals who hold the master’s in physical therapy and wish to receive the Doctorate of Physical Therapy (DPT). Ideally, these programs are convenient (including distance learning), relevant, inexpensive, and take into account competencies learned through their professional experience. ACAOM has not yet explored what a transitional doctorate would be like.

How long will it take to obtain an professional doctorate (FPD)?

The proposed ACAOM standards for both the professional doctorate (FPD) in acupuncture and the professional doctorate (FPD) in Oriental medicine will require 4 academic years to complete (8 semesters/12 quarters/3 calendar years). This is the same as the current standards for the master’s in OM, and one academic year longer than the current standards for master’s in Acupuncture. Admissions requirements will vary from institution to institution. The proposed ACAOM professional doctorate (FPD) standards would require 90 semester units of college level education to enter a program. The current admissions requirement for the master’s degree is 60 semester units for both acupuncture and OM programs.

If a state does require doctoral level education for entry, does this risk splitting the profession into two parts, those with the degree and those without?

No. This is the same situation the AOM profession encountered over 15 years ago when the educational institutions and ACAOM upgraded from a diploma program to the master’s degree. There was much concern and dissent over the presumed splitting and yet, no such split occurred. The transition was far smoother than anticipated. The majority of the students that have entered the profession at the master’s level in the last 15 years are entirely unaware of the history. And most of the practitioners who were already practicing when the upgrade occurred experience no negative effects as a result of the change in degree title.

Will there be recommended differentiations in scope of practice between different degrees?

The profession will make no recommendations for differences in the scope of practice between the master's and professional doctorate (FPD), however, scope of practice is always at the discretion of the states. It is possible that the development of the professional doctorate will affect the scope of practice in a given state in a positive way.

Will the professional doctorate (FPD) require additional basic science or biomedical coursework?

No specific additional requirements in the basic sciences or biomedicine are stated. The standards for the professional doctorate (FPD) are written in competency based language, so there are no specific numbers of hours or credits required in any didactic area. More significant however are the entirely new competencies in systems-based medicine, which is related to the ability to participate in communities of care.

Will the professional doctorate (FPD) require a bachelor's degree?

No. The proposed standards recommend 3 years of undergraduate education, which is similar to other health profession doctorates like the DC.

Will the professional doctorate (FPD) require pre-med curriculum prior to entering school?

No. The proposed FPD standards do not have such requirements.

What effect will the professional doctorate (FPD) have on job opportunities?

Improved education (not necessarily longer) and higher degrees have been shown in studies¹ to improve earning power. Those with terminal doctorates in the health professions may have better opportunities for participating in policy development in institutional, municipal, state, federal and global areas. The net result would be higher levels of equality in health care systems over time.

The profession could consider tiered entry for technician status, in areas such as chemical dependency or acupuncture assisting, under the supervision of more extensively qualified practitioners. This would permit low cost community models of care in communities that otherwise could not afford services.

¹ Numerous studies demonstrating this point have been produced, we have included one for reference. (<http://www.census.gov/prod/2002pubs/p23%2D210.pdf>)

How will the professional doctorate (FPD) influence our ability to obtain research grants?

There is a tendency for governmental agencies to prefer doctoral level education for chief investigators in grant submissions. It is clear that holders of doctoral degrees in their profession have greater credibility in a research context. A professional doctorate, however, is not a research or academic degree. An appropriate background and a proven track record in research and successful grant management are more important than a degree title. It is likely, however, that the professional doctorate (FPD) will increase research opportunities for individuals who hold the degree.

Will the professional doctorate (FPD) have a positive or negative effect on reimbursement rates from insurance companies?

Reimbursement rates are primarily determined by other factors such as cost of care, regional economics and utilization review. Rates won't necessarily be affected by the professional doctorate (FPD).

Will current licensed acupuncturists be economically threatened by newly minted practitioners with a professional doctorate (FPD)?

Only minimally, because word-of-mouth advertising and referral are the primary drivers building and maintaining a practice, and senior practitioners would have a distinct advantage due to their experience in the market.

Would there be changes in the day-to-day activity for private practitioners if the professional doctorate (FPD) is implemented?

It is not anticipated that the professional doctorate (FPD) will have any an immediate impact on those currently practicing. Over time, especially as AOM practitioners more successfully enter hospitals and the health care system and the safe, cost-effective, and efficacious character of our medicine become better known, increased awareness and referrals will benefit those in private practice as well.

Would practitioners be required to use electronic medical records (EMR) if the professional doctorate (FPD) is implemented?

No. While part of the systems based competencies in the professional doctorate (FPD) include EMR, as this is the direction that hospitals and medical clinics are headed, implementing the professional doctorate (FPD) itself would not require licensed acupuncturists to use EMR.

For further information:

ACAOM Doctoral Task Force Issues Final Report. ACAOM Seeks Public Comment, Accreditation Commission for Acupuncture and Oriental Medicine (ACAOM)
<http://www.acaom.org/PdfVersion/ACAOM%20Doctoral%20TF%20%20206-11-05.pdf>

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<http://www.acaom.org/PdfVersion/Structure%20Scope%20and%20Standards%20Manual%2007-08-08.pdf>

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http://www.apta.org/AM/Template.cfm?Section=PTA_Programs2&CONTENTID=19980&TEMPLATE

FAQs about Accreditation, US Department of Education
<http://ope.ed.gov/accreditation/FAQAccr.aspx>

NCES Announces Final Plan for New Categories and Definitions for Classification of First-Professional Degree Reporting in PPEDS, US Department of Education Department of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics
http://nces.ed.gov/IPEDS/news_room/ana_NCES_Announces_10312006_5.asp

Report of the Task Force on the Professional Doctorate, The Higher Learning Commission, North Central Association of Colleges and Schools, 2006
<http://www.higherlearningcommission.org/download/TaskForceProfDocFinal0606.pdf>

Structure of the U.S. Education System: First-Professional Degrees, International Affairs Office, U.S. Department of Education
<http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ous/international/usnei/us/professional.doc>

Please send comments on the document contents via e-mail to FPDConsensus@gmail.com and reference the version number (circulation date). If you have further questions or would like to submit a position statement please contact your state professional association.

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