

Comments on “Proposal for a Doctor of Philosophy Program in Health Policy and Management on the Indianapolis Campus” – Department of Public Health – Indiana University School of Medicine

This is an interesting and well-developed proposal. My comments are based on my thirty years of experience with our doctoral program at Minnesota, fifteen years as director of graduates studies (DGS) for our M.S. program in health services research, policy and administration, and seven years as DGS for our doctoral program. The comments are offered in the order corresponding to the order in the document, not necessarily in order of importance.

Page 3. Do we need another Ph.D. program in health policy and management? I think that the answer is “yes,” we always can use another high quality program, but it is important to be honest about (a) the niche in the market that the new program is intended to occupy; and (b) the likely job prospects for the graduates. The two are, of course, related. The first page of text (page 3) mentions a shortage of scholars and leaders with training in advanced research methods and an appreciation of bioethics. Any university can establish a health policy management program that provides strong training in advanced research methods if they have the will to do so. As it turns out, making a sustained commitment to that goal seems to be surprisingly difficult and relatively few programs accomplish it. Some fall by the wayside because only a few faculty believe it is important. Others find that requiring a calculus prerequisite for admission limits the number of applicants to their program. There are many ways to fail, but programs that succeed can establish a reputation in the field very quickly, which helps their faculty obtain grants and helps their graduates obtain jobs. The commitment must extend across the faculty, not only the economists (the usual suspects), but also the sociologists, organizational theorists, clinicians, etc.

A credible emphasis on ethics is even more difficult to achieve, especially for a state (secular) university. I notice that the University of Indiana has a religious studies department at the Bloomington campus which might or might not give you a leg up in ethics, depending on the inclinations of the faculty, but at least you aren’t limited to “secular” bioethics, which in my opinion (an apparently the opinion of others – see attached article) is a waste of time and resources.

Page 4. You mention part-time students. This is a tough decision. Many students need to attend part-time for financial reasons, and others simply want to keep their jobs, particularly when the economy is depressed. However, it is very difficult to establish cohort camaraderie with part-time students. In my doctoral program, I learned as much from my fellow students as I did from the faculty. At Minnesota, we recently changed from an extensive set of core requirements taken by all students to “areas of emphasis” with a reduced core, and one of best

students recently e-mailed me saying he was considering leaving the program because he was expecting more of a cohort experience in the program. That's regrettable. I would try if at all possible to establish a cohort of students each year who take a substantial number of core courses as a group. You also should encourage students to start a journal club, a student chapter of AcademyHealth, or any other activity that brings them together – both within and between classes – on a regular basis. (When I say “classes” in this context, I mean for example, the “class who entered in 2012 and the class who entered in 2013.”)

Page 7. Minor point. At Minnesota, if you state absolute minimums such as 213 on the TOEFL, there can be no exceptions, so you should check with your legal department on the wording on your website. “Guidelines” or “expectations” might provide you some wiggle room.

Page 9. The curriculum. I didn't see sociology, political science or organizational theory explicitly mentioned in the curriculum. We have tried to maintain a core curriculum that emphasizes theoretical frameworks from traditional academic disciplines rather than specific applications, such as “aging” or “the uninsured.” The latter are covered as examples in class or in elective coursework. Also, you have to decide how much of the core coursework will be taught internally (by your faculty) and how much will be taught externally (in other departments). At Minnesota, we have been fortunate to have a faculty that is large and diverse enough so that we can teach much of the core coursework internally. However, Michigan takes the opposite approach and obviously has been very successful with it. When students are sent to other departments, however, one often loses the health care applications. A particularly important part of the curriculum, particularly in view of your desired emphasis on quantitative methods, is the core statistics requirement. Many programs, including ours, start their students in the biostatistics department. We sent students to the statistics department for many years, but the teaching quality was very uneven; there were no health applications; and there was no instruction in commonly used software. About ten years ago, we moved the core statistical coursework into the biostat division and generally have been pleased with the results. The most important thing in the first year is for the students to get a very strong background in intermediate mathematical statistics, starting with probability, permutations and combinations and going, if possible, all the way through basic linear regression and violation of the ordinary least squares (OLS) assumptions. It can be done, but we found that our biostatistics division had to create a new set of two semester-long courses to do it. Fortunately, our demand for the course generated interest in the doctoral programs in epidemiology and environmental health whose doctoral students previously had received only “baby biostat” to their detriment. Also, make sure that the biostat courses include exercises that use a popular computer package. Stata would be best, though SAS is an acceptable substitute. I would not use SPSS. It's not strong enough in econometrics. I would ask the biostat faculty not to include qualitative and

limited dependent variables (e.g., logit and probit) in the first year. It will be difficult enough to squeeze in the OLS model and the biostat perspective on logit, for example, is very different from that of econometricians who emphasize discrete choice models. Discrete and limited dependent variables should be covered in the course you list as “Health Services Research Methods.” Another deficiency of most biostat programs is a lack of emphasis on causal modeling. The students should become familiar with instrumental variables, including two- and three-stage least squares, Heckman sample selection models, regression discontinuity, interrupted time series, difference-in-differences, and other methods for drawing causal inferences from observational data. These methods are the staple of health policy research, and typically not covered well in biostat departments. The course descriptions on page 33 are not very encouraging in that regard. They will need to be covered in the health services research methods course, which should be taught internally and should be an intermediate econometrics course. If you really want to establish yourself as a top quantitative program, the advanced HSR methods coursework should be extended to two semesters, and if it is, it should include a basic introduction to primary data collection. (If you figure out how to do all that in your curriculum, please let me know. We’ve been trying for 25 years!) The U.S. Health Care course is very important, especially if you anticipate admitting international students. I would drop “Global Perspectives” from the core unless you are trying to make global health one of your trademarks (not mentioned on page 4) and cover some of the basic differences between the U.S. and European health care systems in the U.S. Health Care course. The elective coursework looks very appropriate to me. You provide the flexibility that many students are looking for these days. It might be helpful to construct some additional sample programs that show how the electives can be combined into coherent areas of emphasis that provide the students advanced, credible expertise in a particular area. At Minnesota the Graduate School allows students to choose either a formal minor or (in addition to their area of emphasis in our curriculum) a “supporting program” consisting of twelve semester credits in a proscribed set of courses. We require the latter to be approved by the graduate faculty, leading to long discussions about whether the supporting program coursework “hangs together” to produce a meaningful concentration; whether the coursework is advanced enough; and whether it meets the student’s career goals. The students must state their career goals when submitting their supporting program and we ask that they attach announcements for several positions for which they would like to apply. Finally, I would recommend offering a year-long course in which students prepare an NIH-style research proposal on a topic of their choice, followed by a simulated study section in which students review each other’s work and present the results to the faculty. The more presentations the students can do during the program, the better.

Page 13. It would be helpful to clarify who exactly administers the qualifying exam. Is it the student’s dissertation committee? How are conflicts among committee members resolved?

Page 15. How will faculty members' time spent on the doctoral program (teaching, advising, dissertation committees) be covered? (I didn't have an operative link to the financial tables.) In soft-money research programs it is not uncommon to have trouble recruiting faculty to serve on dissertation committees. How will the program finance doctoral level courses that might have only six or eight students per year? It is both unrealistic and illegal to expect that time to be covered by external research grants, since the funding agencies expect their funds to be spent on the research projects, not teaching and advising.

Page 16. It would be helpful to list the competencies of the faculty or the possible course assignments for them.

The market for good students is quite competitive. You can expect to have one or two good years very talented local students who are not able to travel to other programs, but after that, you will be in a competitive market for full-time students where the minimum "bid" is one full year of tuition, a stipend (approximately \$20,000), and health insurance, followed by a guarantee of a research assistant position that covers at least half their tuition for the remainder of their time in the program. The top programs (e.g., Penn) offer their top choices a free ride for four years.