

Sherry F. Queener, Ph.D
Director of the Graduate Office, IUPUI
Associate Dean, Indiana University Graduate School

December 6, 2011

Dear Dr. Queener:

As requested, I'm writing to provide my professional opinion for the program proposal for a PhD in Health Communication put forth by the Department of Communication Studies at the campus of IUPUI. After reviewing the proposal, I'd like to offer my strong support for the proposal.

One of the most unique aspects of this proposal is the combination of clinical and academic research faculty. By exposing students to both practicing clinicians as well as academic researchers, students will get an opportunity to learn research as it is shaped by the structure of the healthcare system. Often one of the gaps in health communication research is a lack of understanding of the organizational system, payment structures which influence communication practices and patient behavior, and the dynamics between specialties and among disciplines (e.g., the historical relationships between nursing and medicine). The design of this proposal captures all of the dimensions of healthcare as well as all of the stakeholders involved (e.g., medicine, nursing, social work, patients, caregivers).

The core courses listed for all students completing this degree are comprehensive and consistent with other communication doctoral programs. The inclusion of a minor area of emphasis from departments outside of communication is also similar to other doctoral programs. I did not receive a copy of the proposed lecturers for the Seminar in Communication and Health but do hope that this list includes a variety of professional disciplines, ranging from medicine and nursing and inclusive of social work, chaplaincy, occupational therapists, etc. The program would be strengthened by an additional course in grant writing, which is the basis of quality health communication research and a tool likely needed for graduates of the program.

While current faculty have experience and expertise with health communication research, the addition of Dr. Michele Miller-Day adds tremendously to the quality of this program. Commitment and follow through of a professor (open rank) in health communication for Fall 2012 will be imperative to starting this program, both in terms of providing structure and experience, but also in terms of generating interest and publicity for the program within the field of communication. Two senior faculty members, with reputations in the field and complementing methodological approaches (qualitative and quantitative) would secure successful start up of the program.

Finally, I'd like to make two recommendations for changes to the proposal. First, the Graduate Admissions Committee to be housed in the Department of Communication Studies should include a clinical skills faculty member. As the program aims to attract working health care professionals as well as academic health communication researchers, a clinical skills faculty member would provide useful information about the productivity level of professionals applying for the program. For example, how will the committee evaluate an MD applicant versus an RN applicant? Applicants should be evaluated by a variety of faculty members who can speak to the specific nuances of different professional structures and experiences. Second, although required fieldwork/research is considered a strength, I recommend that a minimum of three hours be required field work and include a clinical faculty preceptor. Exposure to the clinical environment is a strength of this proposal and could be further maximized as a course credit hour requirement. Otherwise, I am concerned that students will take 6-9 credit hours in research – which would then make the experience like any other doctoral program.

To summarize, the proposed PhD program in Health Communication is comprehensive, meets the curricular needs of the field, and uniquely offers clinical and academic research experiences simultaneously. I hope to see this proposal approved and move forward in the IUPUI system.