

Encouraging a Conversation for the Development of Doctor of Ministry Concentration Standards

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Introduction: Establishing a Standard for Doctor of Ministry Concentrations

The Doctor of Ministry (D.Min) degree is the most popular terminal degree offered under the accreditation umbrella of the Association of Theological Schools (ATS). Originally approved in 1970, by 2005 the degree was being pursued by 9045 students through the 149 Doctor of Ministry programs accredited by ATS member schools. Another 285 students were enrolled in other Advanced Ministerial Leadership (professional) doctorates at ATS member schools, in degrees such as the D.Miss.; Ed.D./D.Ed.Min.; D.M.A./D.C.M.¹ Many of these students are enrolled in programs of study advertised or promoted as a concentration or specialization program.

What is a concentration? This was the question that led to the review of 27% (40 out of 149) of the schools offering the Doctor of Ministry degree in the United States and Canada. The review was limited to institutions and programs accredited by The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada (ATS) and was based upon the official academic catalog and/or promotional literature. With the

¹ The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, Data Tables, 2005-2006.

exception of the six institutions of my denominational affiliation (Southern Baptist Convention), the schools were randomly selected.

Of the member schools studied, thirty-two promoted some type of concentration or specialization. Nomenclature for these concentration programs varied greatly. The term “concentration” was the most popular (8 usages), followed by emphasis (7), tracks (7), specialization (4), area of interest (4) and cohorts.² Terms use only once or twice among the programs reviewed include foci and major. A web search of ATS member school websites revealed an additional thirty-one member schools with Doctor of Ministry “concentrations.” Adding to the confusion was the use of non synonymic nomenclature for comparative purposes. For example, one school might describe a geographically defined group of students going through their doctoral class-room experience as a “cohort” while another institution call the group a “track” while yet another will use the term “colloquium.” Another approach taken by member institutions is to offer a “Doctor of Ministry in [name of concentration or emphasis].” In addition, some catalogs and promotional materials used more than one term to describe

² ATS member schools selected for this study included Drew University, Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary, Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fuller Seminary, Trinity International Seminary, Gordon-Conwell, Assembly of God Theological Seminary, San Francisco Theological Seminary, Talbot School of Theology, Denver Seminary, Bethel Seminary, McAfee School of Theology, Emanuel School of Religion, Toronto School of Theology, St. Stephen’s College, Lancaster Theological Seminary, Iliff School of Theology, Dallas Theological Seminary, Asbury Seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, Concordia Theological Seminary (Fort Wayne), Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary, Luther Seminary, Concordia Theological Seminary (St. Louis), Anderson University School of Theology, The Lutheran Theological Seminary of Philadelphia, Barry University, Reformed Theological Seminary, Azusa Pacific University, George Fox University, Lexington Theological Seminary, Fordham University, Southern Methodist University’s Perkins’s School of Theology, Western Seminary, Northeastern Seminary, McCormick Theological Seminary, Louisville Seminary, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond, Oblate School of Theology.

the same program, such as “concentration” and “specialization” to describe, for example, a Doctor of Ministry in Pastoral Care.³

Kevin Lawson writes, “Even in this time of increased resources and support for Christian education, we struggle with what exactly we are doing and what to call it.”⁴ The issue and problem of nomenclature is not new to theological education nor is it foreign to the Doctor of Ministry. Prior to the first published Standards for the Doctor of Ministry in 1970, the very nomenclature for a professional doctorate in theology was a hotly debated topic.⁵ However, when the dust settled and the degree standards for the Doctor of Ministry had been adopted, member schools embraced the new degree. It is the object of this paper to raise the question of nomenclature for Doctor of Ministry concentrations and to propose the development of a standard for concentrations and specializations.

Currently, 69% of students pursuing doctorate degrees in ATS member schools are in Doctor of Ministry programs.⁶ Throughout the first three decades of the degree, these programs demonstrated a significant and consistent growth that is only now showing early signs of waning. From 2004-2005 the degree experienced a decrease in enrollment of 2% after three decades of steady growth. Although this might be an anomaly, this development should give one pause for reflection.

³ This example comes from my own institution where I serve as Vice President of Institutional Effectiveness and Director of Doctoral Studies. However, similar synonymic examples were found at other schools included in this review.

⁴ Kevin Lawson, “A Call to Get Involved,” *Christian Education Journal*, 3d ser., 2 (2004): 4.

⁵ Jackson W. Carroll and Barbara G. Wheeler, *A Study of Doctor of Ministry Programs*, (Hartford Seminary, Hartford, CT, 1987), 9-11.

⁶ The Association of Theological Schools in the United States and Canada, *Data Tables, 2005-2006 Enrollment*, Table 2.10.

Back in 1987, Jackson W. Carroll and Barbara G. Wheeler co-authored “A Study of Doctor of Ministry Programs” (now called the Hartford Study). In their work they noted, “The integrity of a degree depends in significant measure on public perception, and public perception is formed in part by the views of peer institutions granting the degree.”⁷ They proceeded to support the development of standards that were specific enough so that the academic institutions granting the degrees were satisfied with the standards. To some degree, this was accomplished with the establishment of new ATS standards for all degrees, include the Doctor of Ministry, in 1996. However, the proliferation of diploma mill, unaccredited and correspondence-based “doctor of ministry” programs has caused the degree to continue to suffer on the public perception front.

The Association of Doctor of Ministry Education (ADME) was founded in 1990 as a response to the Hartford Study, which indicated that “D.Min. education was lacking a clear central identity, due to, in part, too many diverse educational elements.”⁸ Although progress has been made, the identity issue remains. In 2004, Charles J. Conniry Jr., wrote an exceptional article in *Theological Education*, noting that “Since its inception some thirty years ago, the D.Min degree has suffered from an identity crisis brought on, largely, by classically educated scholars who have envisioned such programs according to the influences that shaped their own theological education.”⁹ Despite these challenges, throughout the thirty-seven year history of the degree, it has experienced, until now, almost unhindered growth. Paradoxically, the degree is meeting the needs of many who pursue it while experiencing an identify crisis of public (and professional) identity.

⁷ Jackson and Wheeler, 22.

⁸ ADME Purpose. The Association of Doctor of Ministry Education website, <http://www.dmineducation.net/purpose.cfm> (accessed March 10, 2007).

⁹ Charles J. Conniry Jr., “Reducing the Identify Crisis in Doctor of Ministry Education,” *Theological Education* 40, Number 1 (2004): 137.

For clarity of understanding and usage, for this paper I will use accepted dictionary definitions, using the academic usage of a term when possible. The dictionary defines an academic *concentration* as “the focusing of a student's academic program on advanced study in a specific subject.”¹⁰ The same dictionary defines a *cohort* as “a group of persons sharing a particular statistical or demographic characteristic”¹¹ The definition of a *specialization* is “to pursue some special line of study, work, etc.; have a specialty”¹² and is used most frequently in the medical and health care related field. A *major* is defined as “a subject or field of study chosen by a student to represent his or her principal interest and upon which a large share of his or her efforts are concentrated,”¹³ or as “a field of study chosen as an academic specialty.”¹⁴ Although this word study is elementary, it is foundational to this discussion.

Consider the following scenario. One school promotes their concentration as an on-line connected community of learners who together complete a standard Doctor of Ministry course of study. Should this approach be considered a “concentration” on par with one in which a student has completed a program of study that includes eighteen semester hours of concentrated study, research and writing, beyond the doctoral core courses, in a specific area such as evangelism or pastoral care? Of course not. However, because of a lack of standards for nomenclature, currently such a scenario is not only possible, it is happening. No wonder Steve Delamarter observes, “the D.Min. program,

¹⁰ Concentration. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/Concentration> (accessed: January 17, 2007).

¹¹ Cohort. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cohort> (accessed: January 17, 2007).

¹² Specialization. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cohort> (accessed: January 16, 2007).

¹³ Major. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.1)*. Random House, Inc. <http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/cohort> (accessed: January 16, 2007).

¹⁴ Major. *The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fourth Edition*. Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004.

along with other professional doctoral programs, suffers a lack of respect from some quarters that lead to a confusing set of mixed messages for the D.Min students.”¹⁵

Surely the above scenario raises confusion among the constituencies we serve. Clarifying the nomenclature is one step toward addressing this problem of mixed messages. Delamarter continues, “Ironically, some faculty and administrators simultaneously demand that the most rigorous academic standards possible be applied to the D.Min. dissertation and, at the same time, summarily remove D.Min. degree holders from any academic search process carried out by the institution.”¹⁶ Here again, standards for concentrations would greatly enhance a Doctor of Ministry degree holder’s consideration for an appropriate faculty position if he or she held an approved concentration in the discipline sought.

For discussion, we need to ask, “Would standards for Doctor of Ministry concentrations help remove some of the stigma that is attached, by some, to the degree?” Although addressed above, this is a question for serious dialogue and debate. If there is a consensus to move forward with the dialogue, what contribution to academy and practice should be expected of one who has completed a concentration? For those new to this dialogue, I would highly recommend Conniry’s article published in *Theological Education* entitled, “Reducing the Identity Crisis in Doctor of Ministry Education” that raises the question of academics and practice under the banner of praxis. These are foundational questions for discussion that I am asking us to raise as a professional organization.

¹⁵ Steve Delmarter, “Getting Them Through the Doctor of Ministry Dissertation,” *Theological Education* 40, Number 1 (2004): 155.

¹⁶ Ibid.

A Preliminary Recommendation for a Doctor of Ministry Concentration Standard

First, I would propose that standard nomenclature be adopted by ADME and eventually by ATS for Doctor of Ministry concentrations. Current ATS guidelines state, “Programs may be designed to advance the general practice of ministry in its many forms or to advance expertise in a specialized area of ministerial practice (e.g., pastoral care, preaching, missions).¹⁷ Although this statement validates the development of specialized areas of study, it does not qualify such practices, nor does it provide a standard to which members schools should endeavor. Since the early 1970s, schools granting the Doctor of Ministry have offered various program options. An early example was the “in-sequence’ vs. “in-ministry” programs.

Next, what should be the expectation of those who complete a concentration? Should a person holding the Doctor of Ministry or other professional doctorate be considered qualified to teach at the graduate level? The current ATS standard allow for such an appointment, and state:

Faculty members shall possess the appropriate credentials for graduate theological education, normally demonstrated by the attainment of a research doctorate or, in certain cases, another earned doctoral degree. In addition to academic preparation, ministerial and ecclesial experience is an important qualification in the composition of the faculty.”¹⁸

Therefore, such appointments are allowed by ATS, howbeit, as the exception rather than the norm.

Regional accreditation standards are not as simple, nor are they as easily defined. In December 2006, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) adopted what

¹⁷ Association of Theological Schools, Doctor of Ministry Standard, F.2.2, Degree Program Standards (2005), 20.

¹⁸ Association of Theological Schools, Faculty Standard 6.1.1., General Institutional Standards (2005), 16.

is being called the “18 hour” rule which is officially published as their “Faculty Credentials Guidelines.” The guidelines are as follows:

- a. Faculty teaching general education courses at the undergraduate level: doctorate or master’s degree in the teaching discipline or master’s degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (a minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline).¹⁹
- b. Faculty teaching associate degree courses designed for transfer to a baccalaureate degree: doctorate or master’s degree in the teaching discipline or master’s degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (a minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline).
- c. Faculty teaching associate degree courses not designed for transfer to the baccalaureate degree: bachelor’s degree in the teaching discipline, or associate’s degree and demonstrated competencies in the teaching discipline.
- d. Faculty teaching baccalaureate courses: doctorate or master’s degree in the teaching discipline or master’s degree with a concentration in the teaching discipline (minimum of 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline).
- e. Faculty teaching graduate and post-baccalaureate course work: earned doctorate/terminal degree in the teaching discipline or a related discipline.
- f. Graduate teaching assistants: master’s in the teaching discipline or 18 graduate semester hours in the teaching discipline, direct supervision by a faculty member experienced in the teaching discipline, regular in-service training, and planned and periodic evaluations.¹⁹

Guideline E appears to shed some light on the on-going concern of some administrators and faculty over utilizing holders of the Doctor of Ministry degree as a graduate teaching faculty, however, an established concentration of adequate length and content would remove all doubt.

The North Central Association of the Higher Learning Council guidelines state:

Faculty credentials generally refer to the degrees faculty have earned at certain levels that provide a foundation for

¹⁹ Commission on Colleges: Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, *Faculty Credentials* (December 2006).

knowing what students should learn in a specific discipline or field. Faculty teaching in higher education organizations should have completed a significant program of study in the discipline they will teach and/or for which they will develop curricula, with substantial coursework at least one level above that of the courses being taught or developed...Faculty teaching in graduate programs typically hold the terminal degree determined by the discipline;²⁰

The New England Association of the Higher Learning Commission adds the following that is unique to their standards:

Research-oriented graduate programs have a preponderance of active research scholars on their faculties. Professionally-oriented programs include faculty who are experienced professionals making scholarly contributions to the development of the field.²¹

Similar guidelines have been established by the other regional accreditors. However, only the guidelines adopted by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools include reference to credit hours in ones discipline.

Therefore, in order address the aforementioned identity crisis facing Doctor of Ministry education, I would recommend that a concentration be considered 18 or more hours, including the project/thesis/dissertation in a specific discipline. Furthermore, such a decision would need to be acted upon by the Association of Doctor of Ministry Educators only after sufficient dialogue and debate.

I would also recommend that a specialization be granted for those students who participate in a program of specialized study during their Doctor of Ministry studies that did not meet the standards of a concentration recommended above. This term is compatible with current ATS standards and would allow members institutions to

²⁰ North Central Association-Higher Learning Commission, *Commission Guidance on Determining Qualified Faculty* (2005).

²¹ New England Association of Schools and Colleges of the Higher Learning Commission, Standard 4.22 (2005).

continue to determine the scope and focus of such specializations. It would also be an option for students seeking to gain praxis in a discipline without requiring his or her project dissertation be in the discipline.

An Invitation for Dialogue

At this point, I raise another question. Should a concentration have additional focus upon research or practice? Charles J. Conniry Jr. points to the University of Queensland as an example of a professional doctoral program that defines the amount of research required of the degree.²² The information page for their Professional Doctorates website states that their professional degrees must comprise between 33% and 66% research.²³

At Midwestern Seminary, students are encouraged to view their degrees as ones that combine “field research”, “applied research” and “cultural exegesis.” However, we currently do not define a percentage of the total dissertation that should be based upon research, whereas the Queensland website goes on to note:

Professional doctorates are coursework programs which allow experienced professionals to return to study to improve their professional practice through the application of research to current problems and issues. This qualification combines coursework and research, with a component of not less than 33% and not more than 66% research. The doctoral

²² Conniry, 146.

²³ “Professional Doctoral Programs,” The University of Queensland, available at <http://www.uq.edu.au/study/index.html?page=978> [accessed February 19, 2007]. The institution standard clearly distinguishes the professional doctorate from the purely research based doctorate, while addressing the issue of research as a required component of a professional degree.

research should make a significant contribution to the knowledge and practice of the profession.²⁴

In the professional doctorate programs, our school has sought to encourage interdisciplinary and professional collegiality both in the classroom and through the research conducted by both professional and research doctoral students. By encouraging students to draw upon the academic contributions of scholars through the classroom, professional journals and academic publications, we have sought to set a standard for research. We also encourage students to contribute to academic publications through book reviews, reading papers at regional professional societies and, on occasion, submitting for publication, their original field research.

In the sample group of programs studied, duration of the programs all followed the general ATS guidelines of three years, however, those “three year” programs ranged from 27 credit hours at San Francisco Theological Seminary to 54 credit hours at St. Stephens and Concordia, St. Louis. The vast majority of programs range from 30 to 36 credit hours. Thus, requiring 18 hours (including the project/thesis/dissertation) would mean approximately 50% of the degree coursework in the area of concentration. This would provide an adequate foundation for research and contribution to academy.

Some Potential Advantages

The development of standards should provide enough benefit to offset the inherent challenges brought by change. Lyndon Furst notes, “Not all Christian schools change their identity in an intentional manner.”²⁵ I will readily admit that establishing standards for concentrations would create challenges for every institution.

Administratively, even simple changes to catalogs and manuals create a significant

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Lyndon Furst, *Journal of Research on Christian Education* 10, no. 2 (Fall 2001): 360.

workload and expense. Academic and course changes are much more time consuming and can have significant impact upon scheduling, marketing and faculty load.

However, I believe the “disadvantages” of adopting standards for Doctor of Ministry concentrations will be offset by the following potential advantages.

Student and Parish Satisfaction:

Eddie Gibbs, noted writer on the emerging church, writes, “The decline in the appeal of the Doctor of Ministry degree is partly because of a desire for a narrower focus and an increase in specialization.”²⁶ This statement was made in the context of his perception that the emerging missional church will require men and women who can invest in their passions with the establishment of incarnational communities as the objective. Many students have told me that the reason they came to Midwestern (or chose to go elsewhere) was due to our concentrations – or lack therein – in their area of passion. Passion drives satisfaction and excellence.

Professional Certification and Credentials:

Thomas Chapman, a noted Christian counselor, writes, “The Doctor of Ministry program offers a challenge to pastoral counselors and clinical supervisors to become involved with professors of the classical disciplines of the bible, historical and ethical fields.”²⁷ His thoughts dovetail well with those of Charles Conniry, as both men promote the idea of praxis – the practical application of academics. Chapman goes on to write, “The educational possibilities of the Doctor of Ministry degree are one avenue for developing a disciplined professional approach from within the churches.”²⁸ Currently, the Doctor of Ministry degree is an accepted terminal degree for those seeking

²⁶ Eddie Gibbs, *Church Next: Quantum Changes in How We Do Ministry*, (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2000), 109.

²⁷ Thomas Chapman, *A Practical Handbook for Ministry: From the Writings of Wayne E. Oates*, (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2000), 69-70.

²⁸ Ibid.

certification in Christian Counseling and Clinical Pastoral Education.²⁹ However, members of these professional organizations are currently in dialogue as to the future standards and competencies for certification. The development of a standard for concentrations would likely address these concerns.

Recruitment:

At Midwestern, 76% of our Doctor of Ministry students are in concentration programs.³⁰ For some, it is the attraction of studying under specific faculty – either full-time or part-time. For others, it is the desire to move from a generalist to a specialist in their ministry setting. For yet others, a concentration serves as the “open door” to denominational or institutional ministry. For example, since launching the Doctor of Ministry in Church Planting in 2004, three of our students have gone on to mission leadership positions within the denomination. Thus, concentrations can serve to enhance recruitment.

Academy:

Concentrations are an accepted component of doctoral degrees in other disciplines. The University of Massachusetts has established the following standard for educational concentrations:

Upon first matriculation into the concentration and prior to registering in specific courses, the candidate should meet with her/his initial advisor to select relevant courses for the first semester. As the candidate undertakes course work, she/he develops a full program of study. This program of study reflects the concentration’s minimum of 42 course

²⁹ Certification. The Association for Clinical Pastoral Education, Inc., <http://www.acpe.edu/certification.htm> (Accessed March 1, 2007).

³⁰ As of March, 2007, Midwestern Seminary has 131 students enrolled in the professional doctoral program. 109 are enrolled in the Doctor of Ministry program, and 83 of these have indicated a concentration.

credits (typically 14 courses); it may, of course, include more courses as relevant for the candidate's learning goals.³¹

The establishment of concentrations has potential to facilitate acceptance among academy. It is possible that some institutions could establish concentration requirements that exceed those of the traditional Doctor of Ministry program. Many of our students in doctoral concentrations have taken two or three additional seminars (which we offer at no additional tuition). Of these, several are now teaching and writing in their area of concentration at ATS or regionally accredited schools.

Build upon institutional strengths:

Concentrations allow schools to capitalize on the unique faculty resources afforded to the school. In the Southern Baptist affiliated school where I serve, a partnership with our North American Mission Board has allowed us to develop a strong church planting emphasis within the Master of Divinity program. With available full-time and part-time faculty available with experience, passion and a value for mentoring, the Doctor of Ministry in Church Planting concentration has been a great success. Building a Doctor of Ministry concentration upon the strengths of the faculty and the ethos of the institution may assist recruitment, identity and most importantly, credibility. Conversely, developing a concentration based upon perceived popularity without adequate faculty support and passion might diminish the program and compromise institutional support.

Summary and Conclusion:

³¹ University of Massachusetts, Guidelines for Doctoral Study, http://www.umass.edu/education/academics/main_advising.htm. (accessed March 2, 2007).

Those of us who serve in Doctor of Ministry programs frequently feel as if we are fighting an uphill battle for program acceptance and credibility. I recognize that many of my esteemed colleagues have already dealt with this question at an institutional level and that my proposal may seem restrictive, then again, it might seem relevant.

Although the Doctor of Ministry degree has enjoyed overwhelming acceptance among Master of Divinity students and graduates, the programs and degree in general are analogous to generic soup. It sells well, it is readily available and is relatively cost effective. However, it lacks the punch of the name brands.

When our Old Testament professors note, "My PhD is from Hebrew Union" one immediately assumes he is academically qualified in his field. The same is possible with Doctor of Ministry programs. My friend Elmer Towns holds the Doctor of Ministry in Church Growth from Fuller Theological Seminary. As one who studied under Donald McGavran and C. Peter Wagner, he is recognized immediately as one who is qualified.

A concentration should be identified and limited to those students obtaining eighteen semester hours or more in a concentrated, identifiable area of study, such as evangelism, pastoral care, ecological ministry, preaching, biblical counseling, church planting, missions, women's ministry, church administration, etc... The total hours may include hours earned in classroom, supervision and the project/thesis/dissertation process. Thus, a student in Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary's "Doctor of Ministry in Evangelism" who earns twelve hours (four residential seminars) of credit in the required specialization track who subsequently implements a project in the area of Pastoral Leadership and is granted six semester hours credit upon the successful defense of his dissertation would graduate with a Doctor of Ministry degree with a specialization in Evangelism. However, if that same student implements a project in the area of evangelism and successfully defends the project/dissertation, he would graduate with a Doctor of Ministry with a concentration in Evangelism. Such a student would be academically and experientially well suited for many parish or denominational ministries in evangelism. Additionally, such a concentration would likely have equipped the student academically for select roles in academy.

Schools should take note of their strengths and their constituencies as they develop concentrations. I suggest that we also establish standards for these concentrations and specializations, so that the end user – the church and parish – might have assurance in the programs of study offered under the Doctor of Ministry banner. Jackson and Wheeler concluded, “A degree program, even if it is in fact irreproachably conducted, will have a bleak future unless the public believes in its integrity.”³² Setting basic Standards for Doctor of Ministry concentrations and specializations is a positive step towards establishing the integrity of this theological degree and is an idea “whose time has come.”

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³² Jackson & Wheeler, 220.

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