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PRESS RELEASE

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New Report Highlights Growing Role of Learning Outcomes in U.S. Doctoral Education

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Washington, DC — Universities and the graduate education community are paying closer attention to the intended learning outcomes of doctoral education, according to a new report from the Council of Graduate Schools (CGS). Once associated with undergraduate education, learning outcomes—the knowledge, skills, attitudes and competencies that a degree holder can expect to attain by the end of a degree program—are becoming more central to graduate programs, including PhD programs. The finding is based on a CGS study supported by Lumina Foundation that involved surveys, interviews with leaders in higher education, and a day-long convening of higher education leaders.

According to a 2016 CGS Survey of graduate schools, the majority (65%) of responding institutions reported that all or most of their doctoral programs had developed learning outcomes. The report posits that this widespread use is at least partly tied to an increasing interest on the part of accreditors in documenting and measuring these outcomes. A CGS poll of chief officers of accrediting bodies that accredit doctoral programs found that nearly three out of four accreditors (72%) believe they are paying closer attention to outcomes assessment in doctoral education than they did in 2011.

The new attention to learning outcomes is consistent with a pattern seen in other national higher education systems. In recent years, higher education leaders in Australia, Canada and Europe have undertaken strategic efforts to define the doctoral degree using learning outcomes frameworks. Learning outcomes frameworks are reference points that define general skills and competencies attained by all degree recipients.

“For a long time, doctoral education was considered too specialized to distill into overarching goals or learning outcomes, but that view is changing,” said Suzanne Ortega, President of the Council of Graduate Schools. “Now there is more openness to the idea that some broad learning outcomes can help current and future doctoral students better understand program expectations, and evaluate whether a degree program aligns with their goals.”

“Students, educators and future employers will all benefit from greater clarity about the intended learning outcomes of graduate degree programs,” said Debra Humphreys, Lumina Foundation vice president for Strategic Engagement. “We’re heartened to see the graduate

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education community embracing this effort to define clear and transparent learning outcomes and then to use those outcomes to drive transparency about doctoral degrees and to impel improvements in the design of programs.”

The report also finds that further clarifying the goals of doctoral education will require collaboration across the higher education community, and offers six recommendations for future work to clarify the goals of the doctoral degree:

1. **Engage graduate schools and graduate deans**, who typically oversee outcomes assessment and graduate student skills development on their campuses.
2. **Engage disciplinary societies** to understand whether and how transdisciplinary frameworks and discipline-specific reference points might mutually inform one another.
3. **Engage employers** to understand how frameworks might be used and encourage better public understanding of the value of a PhD.
4. **Conduct a research study** to better understand challenges encountered in implementation with a cohort of institutions that reflects the diversity of U.S. doctoral programs and institutions.
5. **Conduct a deeper inquiry into the dissertation**, the key milestone in the U.S. Ph.D., focusing on the skills and knowledge that PhD candidates develop through the process of complementing the dissertation.
6. **Focus on the preparation of the next generation of future faculty**. Take advantage of existing programs to help future faculty understand the purposes of degree frameworks at all degree levels and help them to build competence and confidence in using these tools in outcomes assessment.

Additional findings and the full report, *Articulating Learning Outcomes in Doctoral Education*, can be accessed on the CGS website.

About CGS

The Council of Graduate Schools (CGS) is an organization of approximately 500 institutions of higher education in the United States and Canada engaged in graduate education, research, and the preparation of candidates for advanced degrees. The organization’s mission is to improve and advance graduate education, which it accomplishes through advocacy in the federal policy arena, research, and the development and dissemination of best practices.

About Lumina Foundation

Lumina Foundation is an independent, private foundation in Indianapolis that is committed to making opportunities for learning beyond high school available to all. Lumina envisions a system that is easy to navigate, delivers fair results, and meets the nation’s need for talent through a broad range of credentials. The Foundation’s goal is to prepare people for informed citizenship and for success in a global economy.