

# Advancing by Degrees

Options for credentials multiply as the world of higher education embraces coaching

By Patrick Williams, Ed.D., MCC

In my book, *Therapist as Life Coach: Transforming Your Practice in 2002* (Norton Books), I predicted graduate schools would soon offer degrees in coaching. It was only logical, given the profession's evolution and the proliferation of coach-training organizations.

Initially, just a handful of colleges offered such certificates or degrees. George Washington University became the first ICF-accredited coach training program after starting as a certificate program within the Organizational Development department. The University of Sydney (Australia), in an effort spearheaded by Dr. Anthony Grant, offered the first master's degree in Coaching Psychology in the late 1990s. These institutions were soon followed by other colleges offering classes in coaching or certification as part of a degree in a related field.

## Universities adopt new paradigms

As of 2005, more than twenty-four colleges and universities offer either a certificate program or a full graduate degree in coaching. This trend repeats the earlier growth of clinical psychology within the academic realm. In 1949, the historical Colorado event called the "Boulder Conference" helped launch the field of clinical psychology and emerging Ph.D. programs that would apply the science-practitioner model



of academic studies. This model focused on both practical application of skills and the scientific rigor and knowledge of evidence-based research and research methodologies. A later conference in 1973 in Vail, Colorado offered an alternative for the student who did not want to focus on research but rather sought the specific applied skills needed to be a psychologist. This model, which became known as the scholar-professional model, created the momentum for the Doctor of Psychology (Psy.D.). Today, more students are enrolled in Psy.D. programs, even though more Ph.D. programs exist by number.

## A prestigious list of schools

In the current field of coaching, many of the graduate-level certificates are offered by recognizable institutions, such as Georgetown University, University of Texas, JFK University, Duke University, New York University, Villanova University, George Mason University, Fielding University, and others—all accredited and long-established institutions of higher learning.

Other institutions, such as Walden University and International University of Professional Studies (IUPS), allow "alternative education" and self-designed degree programs with an emphasis on self-directed learning, mentor relationships and distance-learning modalities.

Most of these graduate institutions are focused on

executive or corporate applications, but a few (such as the online classes at IUPS.edu) are focused on a more general education in Coaching and Human Development. And several institutions in the United Kingdom (including the University of Wolverhampton, Middlesex University, and Oxford Brookes) are offering degrees or certificates in professional coaching.

### Credibility and options

I spoke with representatives of several universities offering graduate degrees in coaching. Coaching teachers from around the world, including the University of Sydney to Georgetown University in Washington, DC, expressed their interest in being on the cutting edge of an evolving profession. They all described ways that their programs aligned with an academic philosophy of coaching and evidence-based research. They were interested in documenting what really works and why.

Those working in the academic side of coaching believe that graduate education in this area adds to the credibility of the profession. It may also assist in the future of self-regulation, as the various governments look highly on graduate degrees.

ingly more educated and savvy about coaching. In many cases, they are requiring that the coaches they hire be ICF-certified. I am committed to raising the standards of coaching. In today's environment that means incorporating the newest thinking about coaching based on developmental theory, cognitive capacity, and linking ways to align coaching with any evidence that is developmentally available. This will only serve to strengthen the power of coaching in the world."

And Dr. Irv Katz, Chancellor of the innovative International University of Professional Studies, states, "Research in coaching is essential if the field is to gain the credibility it deserves. Step by step, gains through coaching must be documented. The leadership recognizes this. If coaches are going to do the research, IUPS stands ready to assist them in earning their doctorates."

### Aiding global growth

The profession of coaching is growing in tandem with the academic theory, rigor, research, and application that comes with graduate education. As the profession of coaching continues to spread globally, the impact of

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"This trend will encourage private coaching schools to raise the bar," says Anthony Grant of the University of Sydney. "I'm sure we all agree that this is good for the students, good for the coaching industry, and good for the schools."

According to Dr. Leni Wildflower of Fielding University, "There is room for both academic programs and coach-training organizations. For those who want grounding in a long-term academically rigorous program, the degree programs are the answer. For those who wish to focus on skills and training, perhaps using the coach approach as part of their job, or becoming an entrepreneurial private coach, high-quality coach training is an equally valid approach."

Chris Wahl, MA, MCC, of Georgetown University's coaching program, adds, "We have found over the past few years that the corporate consumers are increas-

academic credentialing will be an important trend to monitor. Does this mean that would-be coaches will soon need a graduate degree to work? I say that's doubtful. But graduate education does expand the knowledge base and challenges the status quo. It will raise the bar for training programs. Similarly, the standards of best practice as taught by the International Coach Federation and similar organizations should be endorsed and absorbed into college curricula. For our profession to be self-regulated and publicly recognized, it must have the partnership of academia and the coaching profession at large. This partnership bodes well for all of us who want to see our profession thrive. •

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