

## **Developing Professionally Anchored Dissertations: Lessons from Innovative Programs**

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### *Introduction*

Perhaps the single most destructive trend affecting professional preparation during the last thirty years has been domination by an arts and science model rather than a professional school model of education. (Griffiths, Stout, & Forsyth, 1988b, p. 299)

The apparent lack of distinction between Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs, particularly in research course requirements and culminating research, products, might be another area of some concern. (Silver, 1978a, p. 210)

As we discuss in considerable detail in the literature review sections below, a searing spotlight of critical analysis has been focused on the preparatory function in school administration for some time now. While numerous deficiencies have been illuminated in the process, as noted in the Griffiths, Stout, and Forsyth (1988b) quote above, perhaps none is more troubling than the acknowledgment that the scaffolding of professional preparation has been constructed from the arts and science model of education. Numerous analysts of the preparation function have revealed how employing arts and science blueprints has (1) led to the formation of a knowledge base in educational administration of limited value; (2) misdirected faculty energy and effort; and (3) exacerbated, if not actually caused, a widening gap between the academic and practice arms of the profession.

Perhaps nowhere are the dysfunctionalities of the arts and science perspective more prevalent than in doctoral programs intended to prepare school leaders for the rigors of advanced leadership positions in schools and school districts, that is, in our Ed.D. programs. And nowhere in these doctoral programs are these impairments more pronounced than in the dissertation, an artifact of the arts and science model that is conspicuous by its absence in nearly every other professional school (e.g., law schools, colleges of veterinary medicine).

Not surprisingly, critique of preparation has produced important initiatives to reconceptualize and rebuild our educational programs, and at a deeper level the foundations of the profession in which these programs nest. Again, not

unexpectedly, most of that work has centered on revising the base programs in the field, that is, certification only and masters programs that lead to licensure as a school administrator. Considerably less effort is being invested in dismantling and reconstructing our Ed.D. programs. And as we document in passing below, very little traction has been gained on overcoming the dysfunctionalities associated with privileging a Ph.D. dissertation model in Ed.D. programs with the assignment to prepare educational practitioners.

This article is designed to examine efforts underway to create professionally grounded culminating experiences/dissertations in Ed.D. programs preparing educational administrators. That is, we explore incipient attempts underway to shift the calculus in culminating doctoral work from preparing graduates for careers as researchers to careers as practitioners in schools and school districts. We begin with two sections that review the literature in the area of administrator preparation. By design, we provide a broad perspective on the topic of the difficulties piling up at the door of preparation programs before narrowing in on the specific problem highlighted herein—employing an arts and science Ph.D. model designed to prepare researchers in Ed.D. programs that are intended to prepare practitioners. After that fairly extensive review of the literature, we outline the methodology employed to investigate the establishment of alternatives to the Ph.D. dissertation in Ed.D. programs throughout the U.S. The final section is devoted to the presentation and discussion of the findings. Our objective is twofold. First, we want to unpack reform efforts to deepen our understanding of the change phenomenon. Second, we want to provide as much information as possible to inform the thinking of others who are considering attacking this problem area. We rely on the construction of common themes to give meaning to these efforts.

### *The Context for Change*

#### *Macro-Level Problem: Misformed Intellectual Infrastructure*

As the weaknesses of the theory movement in educational administration have become increasingly visible under the onslaught of critical reviews over the last quarter century, thoughtful analysts have joined the debate about the appropriate value structure and cognitive base for educational administration (Culbertson, 1988; Donmoyer, 1999; Griffiths, 1988a). On the knowledge base issue, there has been increasing agreement—although with noticeable differences in explanations—that “a body of dependable knowledge about educational administration” (Crowson & McPherson, 1987, p. 48) did not emerge during the behavioral science era. This condition means that upon exiting the theory era, there was not much “conceptual unity” to the field (Erickson, 1979, p. 9). In practical terms, Erickson concluded that “the field consist[ed] of whatever scholars associated with university programs in ‘educational administration’ consider[ed] relevant. It is, to say the least, amorphous” (p. 9). In his review, Boyan (1988) concurred, arguing that “the explanatory aspect of the study of

administrator behavior in education over 30 years appears to be an incomplete anthology of short stories connected by no particular story line or major themes” (p. 93). Given this absence of conceptual unity, until quite recently there has not been much common agreement about the appropriate foundations for the profession. Thus, as the behavioral science era drew to a close, Goldhammer (1983) reported that although there were “general areas of concern that might dictate to preparatory institutions the names of courses that should be taught, ... there [was] less agreement on what the content of such courses should actually be” (p. 269).

At the same time, a pattern of criticism was forming about both the definition of legitimate knowledge and the accepted ways in which it could be generated. As Crowson and McPherson (1987) reported, critics “questioned with increasing vigor the appropriateness of traditional research methods and assumptions as a guide to an understanding of practice” (p. 48). Analysts called for both relegitimization of practice-based knowledge and the acceptance of:

An increasing diversity of research methods, including attempts at qualitative ethnographic, naturalistic, phenomenological, and critical studies... [and] an *effort* to generate “theories of practice” that incorporate both objective and subjective ways of knowing, both fact and value considerations, both “is” and “ought” dimensions of education within integrated frameworks for practice. (Silver, 1982, pp. 56, 53)

Finally, there was a deepening recognition that the knowledge base employed in preparation programs had not been especially useful in solving real problems in the field (Bridges, 1982; Hills, 1975). This questioning of the relevance of theory to practice can be traced to a number of causes. Deeply ingrained methods of working that assumed that one could discover theory that would automatically apply itself to situations of practice was the first. A second was the emergence of a “parochial view of science” (Halpin, 1960, p. 6), one in which social scientists became “intent upon aping the more prestigious physical scientists in building highly abstract, theoretical models” (p. 6) at the expense of clinical science. A third was the proclivity of educational researchers employing social and behavioral sciences to contribute to the various disciplines rather than to administrative practice, administrative “structure and process were studied mostly as a way of adding to disciplinary domains” (Erickson, 1977, p. 136): “Indeed, the evolution of the field of educational administration reveals a pattern of attempts to resemble and be accepted by the more mature disciplines on campus” (Björk & Ginsberg, 1995, p. 23). Along these same lines, during this entire era there was a lack of effort on the part of professors to distinguish systematically those aspects of the social and behavioral sciences that were most appropriate for practitioners (Gregg, 1969). In particular, insufficient attention

was directed toward educational organizations as the setting for administration and leadership (Greenfield, 1995). Largely because of the overwhelming nature of the task (Culbertson, 1965), the weakness of the theory movement noted by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) in 1960, the failure “to work out the essentials in the social sciences for school administrators and to develop a program containing these essentials” (p. 57), was still a problem as the sun set on the behavioral science era. It remains a problem for the field as we embark on a new millennium in the education of school leaders.

A number of critics have also pointed out that regardless of its usefulness, the knowledge base constructed during the scientific era gave rise to a “narrowly defined concept of administration” (Greenfield, 1988, p. 147). This line of analysis spotlights the failure of the profession to include critical concepts, materials, and ideas (Anderson, 1990; Donmoyer, 1999; English, 1997). To begin with, by taking a “neutral posture on moral issues” (Culbertson, 1964, p. 311), the theory movement “actively de-centered morality and values in the quest for a science of organization” (English, 1997, p. 18). When the term value judgment did surface, it was “frequently as an epithet indicating intellectual contempt” (Harlow, 1962, p. 66). Throughout the behavioral science era, there was “little serious, conscious effort to develop demonstrably in students the skills or behavioral propensities to act in ways that could be considered ethical” (Farquhar, 1981, p. 199). Attention to the “humanities as a body of ‘aesthetic wisdom’ capable of contributing its own unique enrichment to the preparation of school administrators” (Popper, 1982, p. 12) was conspicuous by its absence.

Also neglected during this period of administration qua administration were educational issues, a phenomenon exacerbated by efforts to professionalize administration and thereby distinguish it from teaching. What Anderson and Lonsdale reported in 1957, that “few items in the literature of educational administration ... say much about the psychology of learning” (p. 429), and what Boyan concluded in 1963, that “the content of the advanced preparation tends to focus on the managerial and institutional dimensions as compared to teaching, the technical base of educational organizations” (pp. 3-4), were still true at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

In summary, by the mid 1990s a multifaceted assessment of the intellectual foundations of the profession had produced a good deal of disquiet in the profession (Donmoyer, Imber, & Scheurich, 1995). This unease, in turn, has continually fueled the turmoil which still characterizes the academic wing of the field. It has also served, directly and indirectly, as a catalyst for many of the reform initiatives that have sprung up in the profession, especially around the preparation and professional development functions.

### *The Mid-Level Problem: Inappropriate Content*

Turning to the content of preparation programs, at the same time that the ferment in the profession was richly bubbling, critical reviews revealed

the following problems: the indiscriminate adoption of practices untested and uninformed by educational values and purposes; serious fragmentation; the separation of the practice and academic arms of the profession; relatively non-robust strategies for generating new knowledge; the neglect of ethics; an infatuation with the study of administration for its own sake; and the concomitant failure to address outcomes.

One of the most serious problems with the cognitive base in school administration training programs was the fact that it did not reflect the realities of the workplace (Lakomski, 1998;) and, therefore, at best, was “irrelevant to the jobs trainees assume[d]” (Mulkeen & Cooper, 1989, p. 1) and, at worst, was “dysfunctional in the actual world of practice” (Sergiovanni, 1989, p. 18). As we reported earlier, scholars of the behavioral science era attempted to develop a science of administration. One of the effects was an exacerbation of the natural tension between the practice and academic arms of the profession. The nurturance and development of the social sciences became ends in themselves. Professors, never very gifted at converting scientific knowledge to the guidance of practice, had little motivation to improve. As a result, the theory and research borrowed from the behavioral sciences “never evolved into a unique knowledge base informing the practice of school administration” (Griffiths, 1988, p. 19).

Mann (1975), Bridges (1977), Muth (1989), Sergiovanni (1989), and others have all written influential essays in which they describe how the processes and procedures stressed in university programs as we transitioned beyond the theory movement were often diametrically opposed to conditions that characterize the workplace milieu of schools. Other thoughtful reviewers concluded that administrators-in-training were often “given a potpourri of theory, concepts, and ideas—unrelated to one another and rarely useful in either understanding schools or managing them” (Mulkeen & Cooper, 1989, p. 12). For example, in their review of training programs at the end of the theory era, Crowson and McPherson (1987) argued that institutions “that had emphasized a solid grounding in theory, the social sciences, [and] rational decision making ... were discovered to be well off the mark as effective preparation for the chaotic life of a principal or superintendent” (p. 49).

Thus, evidence from nearly all fronts led to the conclusion that the focus on the behavioral sciences during the scientific era of training resulted in a glaring absence of consideration of the problems faced by practicing school administrators (McCarthy, 1999). The pervasive antirecipe, antiskill philosophy that characterized many programs of educational administration resulted in significant gaps in the prevailing knowledge base: an almost complete absence of performance-based program components; a lack of attention to practical problem-solving skills; “a neglect of practical intelligence” (Sergiovanni, 1989, p. 17); and a truncated conception of expertise. Administrators consistently reported that the best way to improve training in preparation programs would be to enhance

instruction on job-related skills (Erlandson & Witters-Churchill, 1988).

In particular, the clinical aspects of most preparation programs in educational administration at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were notoriously weak. Despite an entrenched belief that supervised practice “could be the most critical phase of the administrator’s preparation” (Griffiths, 1988, p. 17) and a long history of efforts to make field-based learning an integral part of preparation programs, little progress had been made in this area. And despite concern over the impoverished nature of clinical experience for nearly 30 years, Pepper was still able to report in 1988 that “few, if any, university programs in school administration offer a thorough clinical experience for future school administrators” (p. 361). The field-based component continued to be infected with weaknesses that have been revisited on a regular basis since the first decade of the behavioral science revolution in administrative preparation (McKerrow, 1998; Milstein, 1990, 1996).

Woven deeply into the fabric of “administration as an applied science” was the belief that there was a single best approach to educating prospective school leaders (Cooper & Boyd, 1987), including a dominant world view of administration as an area of study (content) and method of acting (procedure). A number of reviewers maintain that this perspective has resulted in significant gaps in the knowledge base employed in training programs. Missing has been consideration of the diversity of perspectives that inform scholarship and practice. For example, in her review of the literature on women administrators, Shakeshaft (1988) discovered “differences between the ways men and women approach the tasks of administration” (p. 403). She concluded that, although “these differences have implications for administrative training programs ... the female world of administrators has not been incorporated into the body of work in the field. . . [n]or are women’s experiences carried into the literature on practice” (p. 403-406; see also 1999).

As noted above, one of the most troubling aspects of preparation programs historically is that they have had very little to do with education. Most programs have shown “little interest in exploring the historical roots and social context of schooling” (Anderson, 1990, p. 53) and have done “a very bad job of teaching... a wider vision of schools in society” (Mulkeen & Cooper, 1989, p. 12). Furthermore, there is ample evidence that the content in training programs is heavily influenced by the “pervasive managerial-administrative ethic” (Evans, 1998, p. 30) that undergirds the profession and that preparation programs have largely ignored matters of teaching and learning, of pedagogy and curriculum. Most of the interest and scholarly activity of the behavioral science era heavily reinforced the “separation of problems in administration from problems in education” (Greenfield, 1988, p. 144) and the emphasis on noneducational issues in training programs. As Evans (1991) astutely chronicled, the focus has been on discourse and training primarily on “the administration of education” (p. 3), or administration qua administration—a major shift from the profession’s formative

years when the emphasis “was upon the adjective ‘educational’ rather than upon the noun ‘administration’” (Guba, 1960, p. 115). The separation of educational administration “from the phenomenon known as instruction” (Erickson, 1979, p. 10) has meant that the typical graduate of a school administration training program could act only as “a mere spectator in relation to the instructional program” (Hills, 1975, p. 4).

By the early 1960s, the second major root of the field, values and ethics, like education before it, had atrophied (Farquhar, 1981). The result has been reduced consideration of two issues: (a) organizational values, purpose, and ethics and (b) organizational outcomes. According to Greenfield (1988), “The empirical study of administrators has eluded their moral dimensions and virtually all that lends significance to what they do” (p. 138). Despite some early notices that “educational administration requires a distinctive value framework” (Graff & Street, 1957, p. 120), in the face of pleas to reorient administration toward purposing (Harlow, 1962), and despite clear reminders that education is fundamentally a moral activity (Culbertson, 1963; Halpin, 1960), the issue of meaning in school administration as a profession and in its training programs has taken a back seat “to focus upon the personality traits of administrators—upon the mere characteristics of administrators rather than upon their character” (Greenfield, 1988, pp. 137-138). Thus at the dawn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, administrators still were exiting training programs unprepared to grapple with ethical issues (Rusch, 2003) or to address openly the values deeply embedded in schools that often hide behind “a mask of objectivity and impartiality” (Thurpp, 2003, p. 150).

As early as 1960, Chase was pointing out what was to become an increasingly problematic situation in educational administration in general and in training programs in particular—a lack of concern for outcomes. Seventeen years later, Erickson (1977) reported that studies in the field “between 1954 and 1974 provided no adequate basis for outcome-oriented organizational strategy in education” (p. 128). Two years later, Erickson (1979) expanded on the ideas of his earlier essay. He documented “the tendency to neglect the careful tracing of connections between organizational variables and student outcomes” (p. 12). He decried the focus on the characteristics of administrators at the expense of more useful work. He laid out his now famous line of attack on the problem: “The current major *emphasis* in studies of organizational consequences, should be on postulated causal networks in which student outcomes are the bottom line” (p. 12). Preparation programs remain slow to resonate to this idea. Indeed, in their analysis using data available at the start of the current era of ferment (i.e., 1986-1987), Haller, Brent, and McNamara (1997) conclude that “taken collectively, graduate programs in educational administration seem to have little or no influence on the attributes that characterize effective schools” (p. 227; see also Brent, 1998).

*Micro-Level Problem: The Ph.D.-based Dissertation*

By the mid-1980s, the arts and science model of education had become firmly entrenched in schools of education and departments of school administration. As noted above, according to critics this arts and science framework emerged more to help professors develop “greater academic sophistication through their professional roles in order to gain acceptance by their peers in other departments” (Goldhammer, 1983, p. 256) than in response to the needs of prospective administrators. Unfortunately, it has become clear that the model has neither furnished professors the status for which they had hoped nor provided graduates with the tools they need to be successful practitioners. In addition, it has driven a wedge between professors and practitioners, creating what Goldhammer (1983) labeled the “university-field gap” (p. 265).

The emulation of the arts and science model has spawned a number of subproblems in preparation programs. One of the most serious is that education designed for practitioners (Ed.D. programs) has been molded to parallel the training provided to researchers (Ph.D. programs) in terms of both research requirements (Silver, 1978b) and general coursework (Norton & Levan, 1987). This blurring of requirements and experiences for students pursuing quite distinct careers has resulted in the development of ersatz research programs for prospective practitioners. Students, burdened with a variety of inappropriate activities, are being prepared to be neither first-rate researchers nor successful practitioners. In attempting to address the need to develop intradepartmental balance between professor-scholars attuned to the disciplines and professor-practitioners oriented to the field, departments have generally produced the worst of both.

*The Change Landscape*

There is moderate support for the claim that under the onslaught of such critique the foundations of educational administration, if not actually being repoured, have been undergoing important changes over the last decade. Particularly noteworthy have been the efforts to reshape the definition of school administration as a profession and to redefine educational administration as an area of study. On the first issue, there is some agreement that the conception of the school administrator role is being reconstructed around central ideas of leadership. At the most basic level, this has meant a movement away from a century-long preoccupation with management ideology and with the dominant metaphor of principal as manager.

Leadership is being recast with materials from the intellectual and moral domains of the profession. A key element of this emerging vision is a deeper understanding of the centrality of learning and teaching and school improvement within the role of the school administrator. Although other qualities of this new school administrator are less clear, the literature does provide clues about what they might be: (1) an understanding of caring and humanistic concerns as a key to effective leadership, (b) knowledge of the transformational and change dynamics

of school leadership, (c) an appreciation of the collegial and collaborative foundations of school administration, and (d) an emphasis on the ethical and reflective dimensions of leadership.

In much the same way that the literature is beginning to sketch out a redefined role for school leaders, it also reveals shifts underway in the prevailing conception of educational administration as a field of study. Three issues dominate the landscape here: (1) the search for a post-theory-movement knowledge base, (2) the emergence of alternative methods of investigation, and (3) a rebalancing of the academic-practitioner scale. On the first issue, of greatest importance here, the bulk of the literature echoes what reviewers have been arguing for over a decade, that the infrastructure supporting the knowledge base for the last 40 years has weakened considerably, that we have been witnessing the loss of the intellectual core of our profession. The literature we examined suggests that the emerging knowledge base will be more critical and more general in nature than it has been in the past. There is some sense that a post-theory-movement knowledge base will feature educational issues, ethics and values, and social conditions of children and their families and communities.

Concomitantly, there is consistency in the evidence that new forms of research have been privileged during the last 15 years. In particular, it is clear that ethnographic and other qualitative methods have gained considerable legitimacy. The emerging heterogeneity of methodology that Boyan (1981) noted in his review has increased.

A final theme in this area is the movement toward better integration of, or the development of more powerful linkages between, theory and practice. The struggle itself is defined by work that: (a) places more emphasis on constructing the knowledge base from the raw material of practice, (b) highlights “theory in action/practice” in research and preparation programs, (c) recognizes practitioners as legitimate contributors to the development of knowledge, and (d) legitimizes discourse about practice in educational leadership departments. The theme itself might best be described as the strengthening in some cases and the rebuilding in others of university connections with the field—linkages that have grown threadbare over the last fifty years. It represents new efforts to link the academic and practice arms of the profession through partnerships. It also reflects the significance of field-based experiences for students and the importance of practice-based problems for shaping learning activities in classes and in culminating activities in practitioner-based doctoral programs. Part of the storyline is an underlying sense of greater willingness to acknowledge the applied nature of the profession and to share the spotlight with practitioner colleagues—a movement that Clark (1997) labeled “authentic educational leadership” (p. 1).

One particularly important line of work to address problems resulting from an unbalanced intellectual infrastructure in general and an emphasis on the arts and science model in particular focuses on efforts to replace the Ph.D. dissertation framework that occupies such a critical position in most Ed.D.

programs. In the balance of the article, we examine some of the incipient rebuilding efforts underway throughout the U.S. We begin with a description of the methods employed to inform the issue and then present our findings.

### *Methodology*

We employed a two-phase design to explore the issue of replacing the arts and science Ph.D. dissertation with a professionally anchored capstone in school leadership programs.

*Phase 1:* From the universe of preparation programs, we identified all institutions offering the Ed.D. degree in educational leadership, using the *Educational Administration Directory 2003-2004* by Creighton, Lunenburg, Irby, and Nie (2004). A total of 161 Ed.D. programs were identified.

Letters were sent to all 161 programs inquiring about the presence of alternatives to the traditional dissertation in preparation programs. We requested existing written materials (e.g., official brochures, department documents) from those universities that had moved in the direction of creating professionally anchored capstone work.

We received a considerable number of important responses from colleagues around the country, about reform in preparation programs in general, about alternative dissertations, about resource materials that we could share, and so forth. However, only eight programs with “alternative dissertations” surfaced. Two of these were dropped after the initial review of the written material, one because the program had just begun in the summer of 2004 and a second because the alternative model is an alternative inside Ph.D. dissertation, that is, it focuses on the use of published research articles in lieu of the dissertation. Two others were dropped after conversations with key faculty at those institutions confirmed that the alternative dissertation was used with only a very limited number of students or was only a slight departure from the traditional arts and science dissertation.

We analyzed the initial batch of written material from the four remaining programs employing methods of “mining data from documents” (Merriam, 1998, p. 113) presented by Merriam (1998), Plummer (1983), and Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003).

*Phase 2:* In the second stage of the study, we collected additional information from four programs. We employed a combined interview approach, specifically “a conversational strategy . . . within an interview guide approach” (Patton, 2002, p. 347). We conducted interviews with “key informants” (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984, p. 119), that is, the coordinator/director of each of the programs. Following guidelines suggested by Patton (2002), questions were developed from the material in our literature review and from the analysis conducted in Phase 1 of the study (see Appendix).

We also accumulated additional written material from the four programs. All of this was extant information (e.g., detailed descriptions of the program).

The second round of written material was analyzed using the document

mining strategies employed in the first stage of the study (see especially Plummer, 1983). In order “to identify meaningful data and set the stage for interpreting and drawing conclusions” (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996, p. 27) from the interviews, the records from the key informants were coded following procedures outlined by Coffey and Atkinson (1996) and Miles and Huberman (1984). Materials were further analyzed using the “circular process of qualitative analysis” (p. 31) described by Dey (1993) and by design principles discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1985), Mason (1996), and Patton (2002).

### *Results and Discussion*

Before we move into the analysis of the themes uncovered in these professionally anchored dissertations, we begin with two caveats. First, while these dissertations and the programs in which they are ensconced are somewhat unique, they are not radically different from the norm; that is, they share much material and many design features with traditional doctoral programs. Students take a good number of classes often found in other universities, accumulate required numbers of Carnegie units, complete literature reviews, and work with faculty on the completion of a final project or dissertation. Neither, at least in three of the programs, do culminating projects assume a form that is unique. The point to be made here, and elsewhere we would suggest, is that it is necessary to look below the surface to discern how these four programs have made the shift to bringing professionally grounded dissertations, and Ed.D. coursework in general, to life in their institutions.

Second, we want to emphasize that each of these programs is different. That is, as we discuss below, while they share much genetic material, in other ways each program is distinct. One only need look at the essential elements of each program to affirm this conclusion (see Table 1). In one program (St. Louis University), students form their own dissertation groups while in another (USC) thematic units are developed by faculty and students sign on to areas that interest them. One program (St. Louis University) has a well-defined set of project options while at another institution the process is much more open ended (U of PA). And so forth and so on across the universities. The point is that while we are focusing here on themes that cut across and thus help define professionally based dissertations, the search for these common elements does not gainsay the fact that there are multiple ways to bring these characteristics to life.

TABLE 1  
Essential Elements of the Four Programs

St. Louis University	USC	UCLA	University of Pennsylvania
scholarly knowledge	accountability	leadership	instructional leadership
intellectual inquiry	diversity	the changing	organizational leadership
& communication	leadership	environment	public leadership
community building		organizational	
	learning	design and redesign	
leadership and service		enhancing student	evidence-based leadership
spirituality and values		development and	
		programs	
		conducting continuous	
		action research	

We now turn to Table 2 as a heuristic device to help unpack our findings. There we lay out six continuums that permit us to portray the essential ingredients of these “innovative approaches to dissertations” (USC), of these professionally grounded culminating experiences.

### *Practice Orientation*

Collectively, the work of these four programs represents a conscious effort to “unblur the lines between the Ph.D. and Ed.D. degrees.... The Ed.D. produces administrators and educational leaders, while the Ph.D. prepares faculty for tenure-line positions at ... universities” (USC). There is a palpable sense of a professional and practice orientation in these Ed.D. dissertations, a noticeable “focus on problems of practice” (St. Louis University). The work is less on knowledge production than on addressing “practical needs” (St. Louis University), on “meaningful topics” (USC) and on helping students gain “real world experience” (USC) and solve “real world problems” (U of PA, UCLA). The hallmark of the work is its “implications for practice” (USC). Projects are designed to have a “direct impact on the field” (St. Louis University), so that they “can be put into practice to improve educational issues” (UCLA)—in short to help administrators “use evidence to enhance practice and problem solving” (USC) and to “make a contribution to the improvement of educational practice” (St. Louis University).

Not surprisingly, there is a focus on “current professional practices” (U of PA) in these dissertation designs. The “use of the workplace for data collection” (U of PA) is underscored. As we discuss more fully below, attention to the needs of clients (schools and school districts) who will use the products is often emphasized. Also, to help cement the practice orientation into place, practitioners often play an important role in the culminating project; that is, students work

“collaboratively with practitioners from the field” (USC) as they tackle real life issues.

TABLE 2  
 Defining Elements of Professionally-Anchored  
 Dissertations (and Ed.D. programs)

Arts & Science (Ph.D.) Orientation	Professional (Ed.D.) Orientation
Theory Orientation: Knowledge Production	Practice Orientation: Knowledge Application
Discrete Elements	Integrated Activities
Individually Focused	Collaboratively Grounded
Open-Ended	Bounded
Research Tools	Inquiry Tools
Faculty Focused	Client Focused

*Integrated Activity*

One of the most prevalent, and troublesome, features of many doctoral programs is the abundance of loose linkages between the various parts of the experience. It is often assumed that students will connect the dots between the disparate elements on their own. Perhaps nowhere is this more obvious than in the culminating activity where coursework is often only very thinly connected to the dissertation, or where, in the words of the faculty from St. Louis University, the dissertation is an “afterthought”; that is, where coursework is completed and then students turn their attention to the dissertation. When they arrive at the river that separates coursework from dissertation, students are expected to build bridges over the divide, largely on their own. Many never succeed.

Quite a different pattern emerges in the alternative, professionally grounded dissertations in these four programs. To begin with and most profoundly, the dissertation is deeply woven into the fabric of the program, “the culminating project is an integral part of the doctoral program” (UCLA), “the project is a continual process throughout the program, rather than an afterthought to the coursework” (St. Louis University). One type of integration has students complete chunks of the dissertation as they progress through the courses, or alternatively, by completing the regular curriculum students complete the dissertation. For

example, at USC in the research course in the second spring students complete their literature review. In the dissertation research seminar in the second summer, they write the introduction and the methods sections of the dissertation. Thus by the end of the second year, the first three chapters of a USC dissertation are finished. A similar design but in varied order (chapter 1 in the fall, chapter 2 in the winter, and chapter 3 in the spring) is employed at UCLA. At the University of Pennsylvania, students also “ground the preparation of their dissertations in their coursework” (U of PA), starting in the second semester of the first year and completing a dissertation module each semester thereafter. Thus, as was the case at USC, “at the end of the research sequence students [at the U of PA] have completed a substantial segment of their dissertation” (U of PA). As we discuss below, St. Louis University may be the most well developed model of project and coursework alignment.

Integration is promoted in these professionally driven programs in other ways as well. There is considerable emphasis on jumping off to an early start on the project, including early identification of the project topic—a “problem they are interested in addressing as their dissertation project” (U of PA). This occurs most aggressively at St. Louis University where the initial course is given over to “providing the foundational knowledge and skills that students will need to plan, implement, and complete their projects successfully” (St. Louis University), especially the investigation of the characteristics of effective work teams and the study of the fundamentals of effective program management. In two of the universities (USC and St. Louis University), coordination is promoted by having students work on their projects with the same faculty member over the length of the program. For example, at USC team leaders stay with their cluster of advisees from the first summer to the completion of the dissertation at the end of year three. Alignment is also promoted when the general curriculum encourages and models the type of collaborative work required in the culminating project. Finally, bringing the dissertation into the final year as a set of formal classes, as opposed to a cluster of independent study units, provides a good deal of cohesion.

### *Collaboratively Grounded*

A defining element in the design of these professionally based programs and dissertations is the extent to which they eschew the traditional perspective of the lone investigator laboring away on her or his research project. Rather, collaboration is a cardinal component of all four programs. To begin with, there has been and continues to be “more collaboration” (UCLA) among the faculty in these universities, primarily in terms of the planning of the culminating activity and the larger set of courses that informs that work, but also at times in terms of instruction. There is more of a “culture of collaboration and of collective work” (St. Louis University) among faculty than is the norm in our profession. For example, “the first four courses in the Ed.D. program [at USC] were collaboratively designed by a team of 15 faculty members” (USC).

For students, “collaboration in teams is an essential part of the Program” (UCLA) writ large. The creation of “learning communities by forming cohorts” (U of PA) is common. Students “work in groups in the field” (St. Louis University) and in the classroom. At UCLA, 6-8 students work in the summer between year one and year two “to identify a problem issue to study” (UCLA). At USC, 8-12 students work as a team on a thematic dissertation for the final two years of their programs. At St. Louis University, at the start of their programs, students in clusters of threes select problems on which they will collaborate for three years as they develop culminating activities.

Returning to the practice-focus issue raised earlier, there is a sense that this collaborative work “mirrors how administrators ought to solve problems in schools” (USC) and helps them “conduct research like administrators do in everyday settings” (USC), in addition to providing students with a built in system of support—that “doctoral projects within a group setting . . . reflect the needs and realities of leadership expectations within a professional context” (St. Louis University).

Finally, the thread of “students work[ing] collaboratively with faculty and practitioners in the field” (USC) is quite evident in the program tapestry in these institutions. The long-term relationships created between faculty and students at USC and St. Louis University seem especially effective in promoting collaboration.

### *Bounded Nature*

As we reported above, a keystone in the structure of these programs is the bounded nature of the work. We saw this, in particular, when we described the integrated structure of the coursework and degree completion, when we revealed how completing coursework carries students to the end goal. In short, these programs are bounded on one dimension because the dissertation process is tightly managed “from beginning to end” (U of PA). From the students’ perspective the voyage to the degree represents a tightly packaged trip. Similar to what unfolds in professional degree programs outside of education, once the initial plunge is made students enter a current that pushes them to the end destination.

Thus a cardinal element of these professional preparation programs, or at least three of the four, is that, as is the case in veterinary medicine and law, the program “terminates at the end of three years” (St. Louis University) and all, or nearly all, students graduate. Or, as it is explained at the University of Pennsylvania, the “systematic approach to the dissertation [described above] allows students to defend in the last semester of the program; . . . with the dissertation process embedded in the schedule, students are able to complete their dissertations within 36 months” (U of PA). This defining dimension is laid out most emphatically in the literature at USC.

In most doctoral programs, if you ask students when they are graduating, you will likely get a best-guess estimate or an emphatic “I don’t know!” Nationally, one long-standing criticism of doctoral programs . . . that are designed to prepare practitioners and administrators is that they take too long for students to complete, and many student never graduate. We sought to address this problem in the redesign of our Ed.D. program. Now, our Ed.D. students will respectfully call them “doctor” in three years.

Our analysis leads us to conclude that the non-bounded nature of the Ed.D. degree—the separation of coursework from the dissertation and the subsequent failure of a significant percentage of students to graduate—is the Achilles heel of most doctoral programs in school administration. Our sense is that “Graduation!” (SCU) at the end of the formal program will be the litmus test for these—and all other—professionally anchored degree programs in educational leadership. No matter what else programs accomplish, if students are left hung out to complete dissertation/culminating projects on their own after formal coursework ends, they will have failed.

While the data on achieving enclosure are in short supply, early signals are positive. At the University of Pennsylvania, an analog program for higher education administrators achieved a 100 percent graduation rate after 36 months for the first two students cohorts. And at USC, the pilot program on the thematic dissertation produced a graduation rate of 94 percent versus 52 percent for the non-thematic groups, although it is not clear if the measure was taken after 36 months or at some extended time. In contrast, at UCLA, the least robust program in terms of boundedness, between 1993 and 2000, only 78% of students ultimately completed their degrees, and many had to continue their work well beyond the end of the formal program to accomplish this end. Again, our conclusion here is that a staunch commitment to degree completion at the end of the formal program is essential, and must be carefully structured and monitored to prevent regression to institutional norms in Ed.D. degree programs.

### *Inquiry Tools*

While the evidence is less robust here than with the dimensions examined above, and is more embedded than explicit at times, there is a sense in these programs that the focus is on developing inquiry skills rather than on compiling a portfolio of classic research tools. On one front, this means more attention to issues such as problem definition and problem framing and less on methods of analysis. On a second front, it means more attention to the application of tools and a focus on an “applied research sequence” (U of PA), applications that are integrated into the completion of the dissertation. Finally, it means privileging certain modes of work, of research if you will, that are generally not underscored

in Ph.D.-oriented doctoral programs. For example, we see a good deal more discussion of action research methods (UCLA) here than we do in traditional doctoral programs. St. Louis University, in turn, highlights problem-based learning and product development strategies much more heavily than one would find in arts and science anchored doctoral programs.

### *Client Focused*

In many university preparation programs, the faculty is the center of gravity. Courses are set on the basis of what professors know and can teach. Structure, schedules, and calendars are crafted from the needs and interests of faculty. To a certain extent, this is appropriate. But at the end of the day, producer domination is every bit as objectionable in professional degree programs in school administration as it is in the Pk-12 school system. The four professionally based programs in general and their culminating activities in particular demonstrate a much higher degree of client focus than is the norm in doctoral programs in educational leadership. The programs are backward mapped from “thinking clearly about the populations [being] served” (U of PA).

At one plane, client focus is visible in the way that schedules are constructed to meet the needs of mid-career professionals. It is also evident in the organization of resources to support students. For example, USC has created “a one-stop shop,” the Ed.D. program office, to meet all the needs of their clients.

At a deeper level, client focus is illuminated in these universities because faculty have carefully and thoughtfully arrayed elements of the program to “build in support for students” (USC). Especially striking here is the emphasis on collaborative work on the dissertation and the creation of learning communities discussed above, collaboration that stretches across students and between faculty and students. Particularly relevant here, as seen especially at St. Louis University and USC, is the creation of cultures in which “group members hold each other accountable” (USC) for their work. Client focus is also discernable in the guidelines by which dissertation committees are developed, that is, in including “both ladder and adjunct faculty members” (UCLA), and in the procedures by which clients are brought “into the product review process” (UCLA). It is also seen in the concerted efforts these programs make to bring alumni into the program community and hold them there.

At the deepest level, client focus is an outcome of the concerted efforts of these institutions to construct their programs not solely on the basis of faculty expertise, but also on the foundation of what graduates need to know and be able to do on the job. Client needs often hold the high ground. A client focus also results because culminating projects are generally “products of working for real clients” (UCLA) and because they focus on “solving real-world educational problems” (UCLA).

*Conclusion*

We believe that this initial exploration of efforts to transform or replace the Ph.D.- focused dissertation in our Ed.D. programs illuminates a number of dynamics in the profession. Although not explicitly designed to do so, it reinforces our entering assumption that most of the reform work on preparation is bypassing doctoral programs. In retrospect, this is not surprising, and likely appropriate. Given the state of our profession, developing problem-anchored work and creating robust clinical experiences in masters programs is probably a more critical need than overhauling ill-designed doctoral programs and poorly thought out Ed.D. dissertations.

Given this limited amount of work, some colleagues with whom we have shared our research question whether we really have a problem, and if we do, whether the profession is ready to do anything about it. While colleagues may turn out to be correct, and complacency is indeed somewhat endemic to the profession (McCarthy, Kuh, Newell, & Iacona, 1988), our own studies on the reform of school administration lead us to a different conclusion. Our sense of the field is that reform of Ed.D. programs is just now surfacing and that in the next 15 years we will see major initiatives in this area. In particular, we believe that a growing number of individual universities and the profession as a whole will engage the dissertation problem.

As the problem is addressed, we maintain that the efforts of the four universities discussed above will prove helpful. To be sure, all are inchoate initiatives. Of the four programs, only UCLA which began their program in 1993 has yet to produce a graduating class employing their newly designed, professionally anchored culminating experience. Also, to date there is very little information available on the effectiveness of the programs, that is, evaluation information is in short supply. Notwithstanding, we believe that these pioneer programs have surfaced the key issues that others would do well to consider as they join the voyage. Their groundbreaking efforts also, we maintain, identify key elements (e.g., bounded work timelines) that should prove instructive as the next generation of program developers begin their work.

APPENDIX

Interview Protocol

A. *General-Open*

Please describe your alternative dissertation.

Can you elaborate on how it is different from the traditional dissertation?

What would you say are the defining characteristics of the alternative dissertation?

B. *Structure*

If I were to pick up one of your alternative dissertations, how would it look different from the traditional dissertation?

Describe the process used to work with a student to get the dissertation completed.

C. *Development*

Why did your group decide to go the way of the alternative dissertation?

Who was involved? Was there a lead force?

Describe the process used to arrive at the alternative dissertation.

Were there any barriers you confronted along the way? Can you describe them?

Were there any unexpected sources of support?

If you were able to give one piece of advice to others moving in this direction, what would it be?

D. *Assessment*

How are you assessing whether the alternative dissertation approach is working well?

E. *General-Open*

If I were a student in your program, what would I say about the dissertation?

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