Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

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Abstract: This manuscript presents an overview of a recently launched cohort-based EdD program that prepares participants to conduct group dissertations. The program, a hybrid model of online learning activities and monthly face-to-face class sessions, is delivered through a partnership between a university’s college of education and the administrative office of a statewide system of community and technical colleges. Discussion begins with a review of the pedagogical rationale for that informed program design and instructional practices, followed by a presentation of key program elements tracing the development of the cohort through an innovative collaborative dissertation process still in progress.

The traditional dissertation process has been described by Shulman (2010) as a marathon, designed to measure who has the stamina to stay the course, but not particularly useful for the real work that individuals with doctorates are called upon to do. Shulman argues instead for doctoral education, even for those in the humanities or more theoretical disciplines, to be viewed as professional education. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) is a response to this argument—that the Doctor of Education (EdD) is often just as much a long distance race as its Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) counterpart.

CPED is the most recent of a series of initiatives by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching that have rekindled discussions about doctoral education in the fields of chemistry, education, English, history, mathematics, and neuroscience (Golde & Walker, 2006) and the impact of 21st century technological advances on doctoral studies (Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). A notable distinction among the five disciplines examined is that “the field of education has struggled to strike a balance between the practice of education and research in education” (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006, p. 26), evidenced
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

by its two terminal degrees—the PhD, first awarded in 1893 by Teachers College at Columbia University, and the EdD, first awarded in 1920 by Harvard University. Research on education doctoral programs over the past six decades suggests that the only distinctive difference between the two is the inclusion or exclusion of a course on advanced inferential statistics (Anderson, 1983; Deering, 1998; McCarthy & Forsyth, 2009; Osguthorpe & Wong, 1993). Nonetheless, the PhD is often described as a research degree and the EdD as a practitioner degree (Brown, 1990; Golde & Dore, 2001; Guthrie, 2009).

The number of doctorates awarded in the United States annually in the field of education (approximately 6,500) is second only to those in life sciences, despite the fact that “most education students have had careers before pursuing the doctorate” and “attend school part-time while continuing to work” (Shulman et al., p. 26). The expansion of doctoral programs in education and the high productivity of terminal degrees has fueled discussions and debates about “the nature, the similarities, and the differences in programs” (Anderson, 1983, p. 55), particularly those in educational administration and leadership. A growing literature on the education doctorate includes recommendations for making greater distinctions between the two degrees (Andrews & Grogan, 2005; Deering, 1998; Silver, 1978; Toma, 2002; Townsend, 2002), particularly the traditional dissertation based on independently conducted research by EdD candidates (Archbald, 2008; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2005; Riehl, Larson, Short, & Reitzug, 2000).

Launched in 2007 by two sponsors, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching and the Council of Academic Deans in Research Education Institutions, CPED is a “national effort aimed at strengthening the education doctorate” (http://www.carnegiefoundation.org/education-doctorate). Representatives from the 25-member consortium of colleges and universities have independently and collaboratively examined features of revised and recently implemented EdD programs that are uniquely distinctive from
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

PhD programs. During convenings at locations across the United States, representatives from CPED-partner institutions report their efforts to transform doctoral education through emphasis on (a) scholarship of teaching, (b) identification of a signature pedagogy, (c) creation of laboratories of practice that undertake best evidence analyses, and (d) development of new capstone experiences in which EdD candidates demonstrate their proficiencies in scholarship.

The program presented here was designed and implemented by professors at a CPED-member institution for the purpose of developing leaders for two-year colleges. The goal of this manuscript is to examine a particular feature of this program: the development of a cohort of students who are sustained as collaborative teams through their capstone dissertation experience. This discussion also addresses the issue of time to degree that contributes to the debate over the distinction between the PhD and EdD. Professional degrees are typically completed in fixed periods of time, whereas completion of the PhD takes “as long as it takes”—from a few years to as long as a decade. Few professionals can plan around such an indefinite schedule. Many EdD programs—including the one presented here—are typically structured around a required number of graduate credit hours, a qualifying or comprehensive exam, and a self-paced capstone research project with no set deadlines for completion just like the PhD. Although professionals, especially educational practitioners, regularly collaborate and rarely work alone, the dissertation process is almost always an individual endeavor. This manuscript describes the efforts by one department to address a key question Shulman (2010) raises, How can we offer a professional doctoral degree in a more purposeful and efficient way that recognizes the collaborative nature of practice?

Although many doctoral programs use a closed-cohort delivery model (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000), the program described here extends that cohort experience into the dissertation experience, requiring students to work in teams on collaboratively conducted
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

dissertations. And, although only a few doctoral programs in education use a collaborative or companion dissertation approach (cf. Guthrie, 2009; McNamara, Lara-Alecio, Irby, Hoyle, & Tong, 2007; Murphy & Vriesenga, 2005), the program described here is structured around a manuscript dissertation that highlights the applied nature of the research and complements the collaborative process. What follows is a description of how the cohort model was used to prepare students to work collaboratively on team-conducted dissertations and how the dissertation was conceived as an applied project for specific audiences. At the time of this writing, the students are actively participating in this dissertation process, thus our conclusions regarding the efficacy of this model and its impacts remain a work in progress.

**Program Features**

The curricular content for the revised EdD program, launched in the fall of 2007, was developed collaboratively by program faculty from the university, representatives of the community and technical college system office, and adjunct faculty with experience in two- and four-year institutions. One of three programs in the CPED initiative focusing on postsecondary education, the planning group thought carefully about the particular needs of educational leaders in open-access postsecondary institutions. Program planners designed courses and learning activities to educate students to work resourcefully and imaginatively in the current environment of their home institutions and to lead community and technical colleges as components of a single, integrated P-20 educational system within the state. The signature pedagogy for this CPED-affiliated program is the investigation of authentic problems of practice through collaborative inquiry.

**Closed-Cohort Delivery Model**

The program was delivered as a closed cohort, an intact group of students that proceeds together throughout the program (Barnett et al., 2000); the only changes in cohort membership
were due to student-initiated withdrawals. Ongoing group-development processes were utilized to transform the cohort into a “generative learning community” (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2008, p. 78) that evidences the fundamental elements of a community of practice—a “domain of knowledge, which defines a set of issues; a community of people who care about this domain; and the shared practice that they are developing to be effective in their domain” (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002, p. 27). As communities of practice evolve over time, their members develop expertise through shared learning and knowledge refinement (Drath & Palus, 1994). A closed-cohort structure of program delivery is required, but not sufficient for creation of generative learning communities within postsecondary education. Transforming a cohort into a community of practice (Drath & Palus, 1994; Wenger, 1998; Wenger et al., 2002) emphasizing generative learning requires careful attention by instructors to the necessary stages of group development (Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2003, 2004).

By modeling development of group norms during the first year of program and encouraging open discussions of controversial topics and opposing opinions, the doctoral students engaged in an intentional, collaborative effort of community building. Over time cohort members became responsible for creating and sustaining learning environments (a) where all participants are respected and appreciated for their uniqueness and feel free to express their views about relevant issues and (b) where risk taking is supported by mutual trust and candor is protected by confidentiality. These efforts at community building and shared ownership for learning and outcomes were integrated into doctoral coursework (e.g., small-group presentations, group-conducted research project) to develop and hone cohort members’ collaboration skills and to experience joint accountability for performance.

**Adult-learning Theory**
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

Use of adult-learning theory constructs (Cranton, 2002; Knowles, 1990; Merriam, 2001; Mezirow, 1997) and constructive-developmental approaches that value knowledge adult learners already possess and support their active participation in learning processes (Baxter Magolda & King, 2004; Cross, 1981; Hansman, 2001; Kegan, 1980; Muth, 2000) produce new knowledge and skills transferable to and usable in diverse authentic settings. Further, when instructors assume diverse roles (e.g., guide, mentor, facilitator, explorer, discussant), experiential learning can provide opportunities for adult learners to practice transferable skills in conflict resolution, teamwork, and community building (Burnett, 1999; Churchill, 1996; Kolb, 1984; Witt & James, 1998), which are essential to effective leadership practice.

During face-to-face class meetings, program faculty often assumed the role of facilitator as student groups worked through problem-based activities. During online learning activities, the faculty regularly played the role of discussant and sometimes provocateur. In still another role, faculty sometimes acted as knowledgeable experts, guiding students through unfamiliar readings of social theory or educational history. Students were asked to play these roles themselves, learning how to facilitate, provoke, or guide their peers within the structured environment of the program coursework.

Transformative Learning

Transformative learning requires adult learners to develop new frames of reference encompassing “habits of mind and a point of view” (Mezirow, 1997, p. 5) that help them become autonomous critical thinkers as they move along the continuum from novice to expert. Whether learning is oriented toward cognition (developing new knowledge), dispositions (developing new orientations to self and others), or behavior (interacting appropriately with others), “learning involves change” (Beghetto & Alzono, 2006, p. 285). Thus, adult learners need sufficient time to explore new information and develop concepts related to new information before they are able to
connect it with their prior knowledge and apply it in different settings. They also need to practice using their new knowledge and skills in settings where their performance can be monitored and assessed because external feedback and reflection about learning are essential (Bransford, Brown, & Cocking, 2000; McCombs, 1991; Thompson, Licklider, & Jungst; 2003).

To provide practice in collaborative academic authorship, students wrote group-prepared papers for presentation during an October 2009 conference sponsored by a regional council on educational administration. Topics included student perceptions about the impact of program features on their learning (Berry, Blankenship, Bolt, & Phillips, 2009), stages through which the cohort progressed (Burke, Preston, Quillen, Roe, & Strong, 2009), their experiences as returning students and impact of peer support on their retention (Decker, Dykes, Gilliam, & Marrs, 2009), and synthesis of their individual personal case analyses about leadership issue (Hlinka, Mayo, Mobelini, Stephenson, & Young, 2009). The papers also served as a midpoint assessment of learning progress and data for evaluation of the collaborative approach of the program.

**Formative Assessment Strategies**

The CPED-affiliated EdD program is one of the original doctoral programs offered by the college of education at the host institution, the state’s research-extensive, land-grant university. Twenty-eight students were accepted into the initial cohort that launched in August 2007. By June 2010, 21 of those students had successfully completed coursework and a comprehensive exam that represented the first step of the qualifying examination assessment. Following the establishment of dissertation teams and their dissertation proposal defenses, 19 students are currently completing their team-based capstone projects—companion dissertations.

Data were collected through regular assessment activities embedded within the constructivist instructional approach of the program, conference papers written by the students about their learning experiences (described above), and multiple instructor-created “temperature
check” surveys completed by students. The first author, who at the time of survey administration was the instructor for the three leadership-oriented courses in the CPED-affiliated EdD program, designed the surveys to assess student responses to new course content, diverse instructional strategies, and group-based assignments. Because the host university’s institutional review board approved use of the existing anonymous survey responses as an exempt study, it is impossible to link commentary generated through the surveys—and presented below—to specific cohort members.

Students completed the 15 required courses (45 credit hours) during the first three years of the program, with content emphasis spanning from foundations (first year) to application for practice (second year) to organizational leadership and academic practices (third year). During the first two years of the program, program faculty engaged students in the collaborative development of experiences that addressed their individual learning needs and group-oriented reasoning and judgment. Assessment inventories, case studies, peer discussions, small-group projects, and other action-oriented experiences required students to be prepared to participate actively in scheduled learning events—both face-to-face and online—and to engage in those events in a timely and responsive manner. As program-implementation progressed, students assumed greater responsibility for overseeing those learning events and addressing peer-related issues that arose.

**Building Cohort Relationships: The First Three Years**

Efforts to transform the new cohort from a group of strangers to collaborative learning partners was initiated during the first face-to-face session of the Fall 2007 semester when students were asked to engage in short reciprocal interviews with individuals unknown to them and then introduce their “new friend” to the entire cohort. Throughout the first semester, cohort members were required to participate in Blackboard-based discussion board activities in which
they reviewed and critiqued their peers’ reflections about community college issues. They were also formed into two different, randomly assigned small groups and required to sit with their group members during face-to-face meetings and to communicate with their peers via group discussion boards in Blackboard to complete two collaboratively developed papers (i.e., an abstract of an assigned research-based article, an outline for a research proposal). After completing these assignments, students then completed a Web-based questionnaire in which they were asked to reflect about their groups’ performance with regard to assigned readings about high-performing work teams.

**Engagement Challenges**

Cohort members reported that “the process seemed very disjointed” and that some groups “never formally assigned specific authority within the group as it pertains to tasks or timetables.” These first efforts at collaborative work were challenging because cohort members were accustomed to collaborating in “physical environments,” not virtually across miles and time zones. They “thought in terms of fairly immediate feedback” and rather than “asynchronous discussions in Blackboard” and thus did not consider “how other team members used technology in responding.” Although many cohort members use Blackboard and other online platforms in their professional practices as community college instructors, they had not experienced the process as learners. Others simply “lacked the understanding of how to accomplish the task” using information technology.

**Interpersonal Conflict**

These early group projects also generated conflict, which was troubling to some cohort members as evidenced in this survey response:

The first group in which I was assigned was recognized by both group members and observers as spending a great deal of time “storming” . . . I have been a member of many
groups in the past, but this was by the far the most difficult in which to work. . . . Our team had no management or leadership.

Issues such as “no management or leadership” within the small groups and failure to “not hold the non-contributing team member accountable” contributed to the conflict. Although most groups “followed instructions” and “produced a great final product,” it became evident that more intentional efforts at group development were needed.

**Instructional Intervention**

During the Spring 2008 semester, students were asked to complete a Web-based assessment of their strengths (Rath, 2007) and then send their results to the instructor for the course on leadership in educational organizations. Six small groups were formed through purposeful selection to assure each group had at least one individual with a Gallup-defined strength within four broad domains (i.e., executing, influencing, relationship building, strategic thinking). Their first assignment was to work collaboratively to develop norms for completing two future group presentations that semester. The norm-development assignment guidelines included a worksheet based on “leading a team tools” (Harvard Business School Press, 2006, p. 13). Groups posted their norms in their designated Blackboard discussion sites and sent an electronic copy to the instructor. The instructor then informed the cohort that all decision making about group structure and processes was left to the discretion of each group.

Their responses on post-assignment online questionnaires administered that semester suggest that this intervention made them aware of important requirements for successful group work. They realized that “team effectiveness must be intentional” and that “effectiveness can be improved by some thoughtful, intentional discussion before launching out toward the goal.” One cohort member, self described as a “very task/project oriented person,” found it difficult to form “a team without the focus of a project” and complained that developing norms for the group
without a specific purpose was very frustrating. A peer with prior experience in teamwork reported a different response to the activity.

The most important lesson I learned from this assignment was how to start the work of forming a team. I have developed team norms before both as a team member and team leader, but starting the process from the beginning without pre-defined roles was something new for me. I think it is always good to "experience" the process. It is one thing to read about a concept, but to actually be forced to engage with the process takes it to a whole new learning experience.

Other cohort members perceived that the activity focused on “the importance of team norms,” which is often “taught in a training setting [but] doesn’t seem to actually be used outside that setting.”

**Team Building**

The initial group experiences during the first semester made cohort members aware that conflict can be an impediment to goal achievement. One cohort member provided a synthesized response to a questionnaire prompt asking about lessons learned from developing group norms. This was an excellent assignment as it required our group to discuss some ground rules and guidelines. The activity itself opened up lines of communication, which is crucial in any group activity particularly one in which most of the interaction is done via technology. That was a very important thing to do for group cohesion and development. While we all agreed on specific ground rules, it will be very interesting to see how we as a group and as individuals deal with any conflict that might occur. The important thing is for everyone (including myself) to be aware that we may not agree on all aspects of what we are doing as a group and that is okay. As long as we are open and respectful in our communication, we will be a productive group.
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

The team-building assignment helped develop shared understanding that “group norms, roles, and responsibilities when working in a group that is geographically dispersed” were critical to success. As members of a geographically dispersed cohort, the students had to “depend on communication techniques like online chats and discussion boards.” They likewise gained awareness that they must be cautious of actions that can potentially “inhibit complete participation” and thus jeopardize “maximum group performance.”

Professional Reflection

One purpose for the reflective writing assignments throughout the first two years of the program was to assist cohort members in becoming more aware of their personal styles of leadership and interpersonal interactions and how their styles can impact others. Following completion of a group project late in the Spring 2008 semester, students were asked to reflect about lessons learned. The commentary below suggests a newfound appreciation for shared decision making among team members.

This assignment challenged our group initially in terms of establishing the guidelines for what we were to produce. There was a great deal of discussion concerning the process and format of the final product. We had excellent participation and were able to establish our group roles and norms not only for this project, but also for any future endeavors. The most important thing I learned was to nurture the decision making process—not too heavy handed, not too laissez faire—just let things develop and keep making progress. I believe we were successful in this regard.

A cohort peer compared past experiences as a group member in other settings to this experience in the cohort and reported new learning about teamwork.

In the past, I have often found it frustrating to work on group projects because I did not appreciate the existence and value of individual strengths and behavioral styles. I am now
making a conscious effort to recognize the personal style of those I work with, both in this course and in my work environment. That is where the importance of establishing norms comes in. The “rules for operation” capitalize on individual strengths so that each team member makes a positive contribution. Everyone knows what is expected of them and feels involved and appreciated. Appropriate norms assure that positive relationships are established so the group’s energies are focused on developing an excellent product. Another cohort member, however, expressed frustrations about the norm-development activity.

The team members each have very differing approaches to team exercises. If I had complete control over the management of how the team exercise proceeded, I would have stressed very different themes, questions, and embraced a different attitude than [those] developed within our team.

These reflections were written during the cohort’s second semester of doctoral studies. When compared with reflections written by them a year later, they provide an interesting contrast between their responses to low-stakes learning activities and reflections about a high-stakes team project directly impacting their course grades.

**Collaborative Research Project**

During the Spring 2009 semester, cohort members formed into six self-selected groups to design, conduct, and report findings from a field-based study about a student-services issue. Although they had the option to base their research study on a teammate’s research proposal developed during the previous semester or to develop a new proposal, they were required to use the Rapid Assessment Process (RAP) developed by Beebe (2001). Beebe defines the methodology as “intensive, team-based qualitative inquiry using triangulation, iterative data analysis and additional data collection to quickly develop a preliminary understanding of a situation from the insider’s perspective” (p. xv). Unlike previous group efforts, this assignment
was truly high stakes: The team score on the research report, determined a cohort-developed rubric, accounted for 40 percent of each team member’s final course grade.

The collaborative research project served several purposes, but most importantly as an opportunity for cohort members to conduct authentic research with significant consequences for the team’s performance. In other words, their project mimicked tasks, responsibilities, and processes that cohort members will experience while conducting their group dissertation. Their responses to the prompts on the post-assignment online questionnaire provide interesting glimpses into their new learning.

Cohort members found that conducting research as a team “takes a lot of planning to get everything going well” and that an under-performing team “can have a negative affect on [that] research.” Working as an inquiry team “can be more difficult, especially when everyone has outside professional and personal responsibilities.” They discovered that the “workload was not evenly distributed because some members of the team had more skills and knowledge in research methodologies” than others and that the “insider [member of the team required in RAP] had to assume more organizational responsibilities” than team members not working at the study site.

They also discovered that scheduling interviews “can be a huge challenge” and that communication is critical “to make sure that everyone is on the same page.” They appreciated having the opportunity to conduct a team-based research project because the “process of actually doing a ‘practice’ study helped [them] to envision what the dissertation will be like.” Although the process was not smooth for some teams, one cohort member described how lessons learned earlier in the program were important when the team experienced problems.

We did a lot of storming and that cost us a least a week, placing greater pressure on time later in the project. I learned that a storming team can also be productive and work together professionally despite differences in style, and to some extent, ethos. I also
learned the importance of having agreements in advance on what the responsibilities are, and having norms in place to handle times when team members cannot meet their deadlines.

A cohort peer asserted a global understanding about program experiences and a newfound appreciation about working with others.

I think the biggest lesson for me was to see everything from two years come together in a better understanding of what would occur during an actual research report. I was able to work with some members that I use to have reservations about . . . but learned that judging a book by its cover is sometimes very misleading.

Completing the pilot study forced cohort members to “hold each other accountable” in order to complete the diverse tasks required to implement RAP appropriately, which several teams “successfully completed.”

**Transition to the Capstone Experience**

The online survey administered after completion of the collaborative research project also asked cohort members to share their expectations, anxieties, and excitements regarding the group dissertation based on their recent experiences as members of inquiry teams. Their responses were generally positive, containing assertions that the group dissertation would be “very doable and not as intimidating as” originally thought and will be “an incredible experience.” Their comments reflect understandings about the inherent challenges of collaborative work and their recent discoveries about teamwork.

I am much more comfortable with it now than in the past. I was worried about the group dynamics, especially the idea that I may have to carry someone else. Interestingly, my team carried me when I had to be out for a time during the study. I know that I can count on them. We have each other back, so to speak, and will do a great job.
Another response suggests that one cohort member has given considerable thought about the pros and cons of completing a group dissertation.

I think the group dissertation will allow a more thorough study of an issue by having multiple aspects being researched that are all intertwined and relating back to the issue. [Conducting] different pieces of research and then blending the individual components and concepts back into one cohesive document [will be challenging]. The team for the dissertation has to be the right fit with members for it to be the most successful it can be. The members of the team have to be able to work with, depend on, and rely on each other.

References to concerns about who selects dissertation team members appeared in many survey responses, perhaps because cohort members understood from experience that team composition can have considerable impact on “a high-stakes document like a dissertation as a group project.” That truth became evident when their group-authored study reports were returned after review and evaluation by the instructor. Team scores ranged 10 points between highest and lowest, which impacted the semester grades for several students whose team effort at writing the research

**Carrying the Cohort into the Dissertation Phase**

Near the close of the Fall 2009 semester, cohort members were asked to complete a survey in which they identified their proposed dissertation topic and assessed their individual skills in research methods. They were also asked to rate each of their cohort peers on two scales—how much they learn from each person, how much they contribute to that person’s learning—and to identify peers they considered would make a dissertation “dream team.” Using the survey findings and recognizing each student’s interests, skills, and team preferences, the program director created five dissertation teams composed of three to four members each. Three
cohort members were advised to develop individual dissertation studies as they had not established enough rapport with their cohort peers to elicit confidence in their participation on a team. Interestingly, these three students also received the lowest grades in the cohort indicating their lack of rapport may reflect a general lack of engagement in the program overall.

A variety of collaborative research models are used in “companion dissertations” (McNamara et al., 2007, p. 1). Examples of methodologies include the *meta-analytic model* in which doctoral candidates analyze a topic from multiple perspectives for comparison purposes and the *multiple case study model* “characterized by a collaboratively developed research question that envelopes two, three, or more cases” (p. 3). A companion dissertation may also use the *evaluation model* in which “the same question is asked for varying samples” (p. 5) or the *subsequent replication model* in which doctoral students examine the same topic multiple times in a sequence using “the same target population” (p. 7). Although formats vary, all companion dissertations share six elements: (a) a common research agenda, (b) a common inquiry statement, (c) integrated research tasks, (d) a common report format, (e) the same advisory chair, and (f) similar statements in each dissertation about its being a companion to others. McNamara and colleagues assert that although companion dissertations require teamwork and collaboration, a major benefit of the required interdependence of peer support increases completion rates of degree achievement.

A unique feature of this EdD program is the requirement for cohort members to collaboratively produce a portfolio of writing projects rather than the traditional dissertation monograph. The intended audience for these writings includes the state community college system, the field of research and practice in community college settings, and the field of education writ large, especially regarding questions of method and policy development. Each cohort member’s manuscript-based companion dissertation consists of three chapters presented
in the same order: (a) the team’s collaboratively written technical report for the system office, (b) the individual’s research report that contributed to the technical report and for dissemination as a conference paper or journal article, and (c) the individual’s scholarly essay regarding some aspect of her or his doctoral education experience and future career plans.

Six potential research foci were identified by the chancellor’s leadership team at the community and technical college system office: (a) student transfer from two- to four-year institutions, (b) developmental and transitional education, (c) dual credit for matriculation or employment, (d) online learning, (e) student services, and (f) workforce education. Dissertations teams worked during their last semester of coursework to develop a group prospectus as well as individual studies that address a specific element of the problem or issue selected by the team. The five resulting dissertation projects are investigating (a) distance learning, (b) transfer, (c) transitions during community college, (d) dual enrollment through early college program, and (e) organizational excellence. Faculty committee members were recruited from the university’s colleges of education, business, and public health and approved by the university graduate school following established procedures for the doctorate.

Each team was assigned a major dissertation advisor tasked with mentoring both the team and individual members throughout the process. Other advisory committee members were selected according to expertise needed to assure each team member produces a quality research study. For example, the advisory committee for the team studying distance learning includes a director of distance learning on one of the system campuses and the committee for the team studying transfer culture among Appalachian colleges includes a faculty member from the host institution’s college of business who is an expert on social network analysis as well as two associate faculty from the university’s Appalachian Center. Advisory committee membership
also provides a way for department faculty who were not involved in teaching cohort courses to become engaged in the degree-reform process.

**Beginning the Journey: From Cohort to Team**

Perhaps the two most difficult tasks for faculty and students in implementing the group dissertation were (a) determining dissertation topics that aligned with the system’s needs and addressed individual cohort members’ preferences and (b) forming teams with potential for success. Two teams with successful experience conducting the group research project worked especially well together, requested each other as “dream team members,” and quickly decided upon their dissertation topic and possible individual components. Two other groups had clearly aligned research interests, yet had to negotiate a longer iterative process to develop individual studies. The fifth team was formed due to their shared conceptual interest in organizational effectiveness; however, the group needed additional time to construct a conceptual framework that would link their proposed individual studies into a unified project.

The second challenge was to identify and remediate potential methodological deficiencies to ensure that each individual is prepared to complete her or his independent inquiry project. Unlike many recently developed EdD programs that require fewer research courses than the PhD, this program requires 12 credit hours of inquiry. The curriculum, however, emphasizes general skills in institutional research and design rather than development of advanced methodological skills. Thus, as the doctoral candidates began implementing their group and individual research proposals, some candidates had to acquire more skills independently (e.g., by attending a weeklong Social Network Analysis workshop, by reading advisor-recommended research methodology books). Some teams worked with advisory committee members to learn more advanced quantitative design approaches.
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

Because the client-oriented group dissertation is a new concept for faculty in the college of education at the host institution, procedures necessary to facilitate development of both team projects and individual studies were new—requiring lengthy committee meetings to allow time for discussion about goals and objectives. Although advisory chairs received additional funding during the proposal development period, faculty-advising responsibilities have been intense and have increased as the teams reach the writing stage of their projects. The true test of the group-dissertation model thus depends on the candidates’ ability to resolve issues themselves without undue interference or overbearing support from the faculty, while at the same time sustain the important collegial relationships they formed with their peers—with whom they will continue to work long after they complete the program.

Next Steps in Program Refinement

Our challenge in developing this program—to offer a professional doctoral degree in a more purposeful and efficient way that recognizes the collaborative nature of practice—has only partially been met. The closed cohort model and the sustained structure of collaborative work through dissertation completion appear to address both an efficient progress to degree completion and the realities of collaborative professional practice. To avoid slipping back into a “marathon” model of doctoral training, however, we have learned that careful structuring of students’ experiences and support of their collaborative relations must be sustained, especially during the dissertation phase of the program.

As the teams enter the writing phase of their dissertations and the first defenses of their companion dissertations are scheduled, we have recognized two key areas for refinement: (a) sustaining each cohort’s engagement as a community of practice all the way to graduation—and hopefully beyond—and (b) a more purposefully designed applied research curriculum from the
Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations

beginning. To achieve these two goals, three action points have been identified by program faculty as needed changes.

• As the cohort members become dissertation team members, their timelines have changed—making it difficult for advisors to require deadlines. Because most doctoral candidates work at community colleges many miles distant from the host university, neither they nor their advisory committees have time to meet often during the proposal writing and data collection phase. It has become apparent that the plan to graduate the first cohort at the same time will not be achieved. Thus, subsequent EdD cohorts sponsored by the department will be advised upon admission that they must attend regular cohort meetings throughout the dissertation phase.

• Standardizing courses helps make curriculum more purposeful, but standardization inhibits opportunities to engage doctoral students in authentic problems of practice when they arise. Further, students’ gaps in requisite knowledge and skills to engage in just-in-time experiential learning can also delay progress. The research expertise of next EdD cohort members will be assessed upon program admission in order to redesign the inquiry component to address identified knowledge and skill gaps early in order to plan appropriate learning interventions.

• Collaboration requires careful building of teamwork skills, but successful completion of companion dissertations likewise requires collaborative writing skills and specific strategies for writing for multiple audiences. The refined EdD cohort program will include a course or workshop series on writing designed specifically for scholar practitioners (i.e., full-time employed students), rather than reliance on the traditional dissertation bootcamp or grant-writing workshops provided by the university.

References


*Balancing ambiguities, expectations, and responsibilities.* Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Regional Council on Educational Administration, Atlanta, GA.


Preparing EdD Students to Conduct Group Dissertations


