

Chapter 67

Enacting a Cycle of Inquiry Capstone Research Project in Doctoral–Level Leadership Preparation

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, the doctorate in Urban Education Leadership at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC) has been redesigned to respond to two distinct but important challenges: (a) the challenge of creating greater distinction between the academic and professional doctorates, and (b) the challenge of improving the nature and quality of its principal preparation program. Within the context of a broader multi-year program improvement and redesign effort, program faculty designed and enacted an alternate Culminating Research Experience (CRE) for their doctoral students. This CRE emphasizes the leadership of cycles of inquiry for school-wide improvement over a two-year period of time and the subsequent analysis of this work using empirical and scholarly literature. The accounting provided in this article advances existing literature by making visible many of the important granular details associated with this CRE as well as considerations associated with its design and implementation within a doctoral-level leadership preparation program.

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INTRODUCTION

There has been a proliferation of professional practice doctoral degrees in the last several decades as well as a dramatic increase in the number of individuals seeking these degrees (Zusman, 2013). These doctorates have become widely recognized in such fields of medicine, public health, law, and education (Zusman, 2013). Professional practice doctorates now exist within many universities throughout the US, and several scholars (Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006) have urged higher education institutions to carefully construct or reconstruct these degrees with a different purpose than academic or research doctorates. If such a distinction is to be achieved with the degree design, professional practice degrees will need to be designed in ways that strongly emphasize practice and use research and theory to inform professional practice (Guthrie, 2009; Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, & Garabedian, 2006).

Professional practice doctorates are becoming increasingly commonplace in the field of educational leadership. These doctorates are oftentimes provided within the context of the Doctorate of Education and the Ed.D. degree (Normore, 2010). However, if this degree is to cultivate robust professional practice in the field of educational leadership, it is critical that degree designers carefully consider the vision, purpose, and goals associated with degree completion and draw on this information in the design of program learning experiences (Shulman et al., 2006). Such rethinking will require careful consideration of the needs of practicing school principals. An important area for redesign attention will be culminating research experiences (CRE) which will be strengthened from careful alignment “with the expectations and demands confronting school leaders in the twenty-first century” (Smrekar & McGraner, 2010, p. 156).

Beyond the call to strengthen professional practice doctorates, there has been simultaneous pressure to improve the overall quality of principal preparation programs (Bottoms & O’Neil, 2001; Cheney & Davis, 2011; Cibulka, 2009; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2005). Arguably, the convergence of these two factors has motivated efforts within some universities across the US to improve educational leadership programs through program/degree redesign. Not surprisingly, the last decade has seen a notable increase in scholarship about redesigned, innovative, or exemplary principal preparation programs/degrees (such as Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cobern, 2007; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Orr, 2011; Orr & Orphanos, 2011). Although a small body of literature on such programs shares insights about the redesign of CREs, recent research suggests that the field in general is slow to enact new CRE designs in lieu of conventional dissertations and that lack of faculty understanding relative to these designs is a likely contributor (Osterman, Furman, & Sernak, 2014). Clearly, there is a need for additional literature that makes visible alternate CRE approaches and does so in ways that cultivate deeper faculty understanding by revealing granular details about CRE features and enactment considerations. Alternate CRE models from doctoral-level principal preparation programs can make important contributions both to the literature on professional practice doctorates as well as to the literature on principal preparation.

To address these needs, this article explores a redesigned CRE that replaced a more traditional dissertation within a redesigned doctoral-level principal preparation and development program at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC). In 2012, UIC’s program was identified as an exemplary principal preparation and development program in research conducted by Davis & Darling-Hammond (2012). In 2013, the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA) recognized UIC’s program as one of two Exemplary Educational Leadership Preparation programs in the US in its inaugural competition in 2013. Although the doctoral program was introduced in 2002 to replace a more conventional masters-level principal preparation program, it has been dramatically enhanced over the last decade through ongoing formal and informal continuous improvement efforts. One of the more recent enhancements made to the

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