

Assessing partnership models; maintaining quality as professional doctoral candidates are prepared for independent research

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This paper reports the results of a three-year study to evaluate two partnership models used to develop, market, and deliver doctoral programmes at a private university. Specifically, this study assessed the preparedness of doctoral candidates for independent research, comparing students from two different partnership models (A and B) involved in educational leadership doctor of education programmes. The structure of the two partnership models is described, and then data are shared related to candidate, faculty, and partner experiences and successes, with a focus on the preparedness of candidates for independent work-based dissertation research. Also integral to this study is the examination of the role of dissertation supervisors in developing independent practitioner researchers and the use of partner organisations in this process.

Keywords; work-based dissertations, dissertation supervision, partnerships, professional organisations

Introduction

The university under examination in this study initiated the use of partnerships with professional organizations to develop market and deliver doctoral programmes in 2008. The university recognized the need to create these partnerships as a way to recruit students and support the delivery of relevant coursework and independent research experiences. The relationship between universities and industries (the profession) is often just at the surface level (U.S. Council of Graduate Schools [USCGS], 2007). As a result of this university's strategic planning, a focus was placed on deepening these connections to make them more clinical, engaged and applied (Maxwell, 2003). Recognizing that our students capture and construct knowledge in their coursework, in their workplaces and in their own independent research (Maxwell, 2003; Scott, Brown, Lunt, and Thorne, 2009), these partnerships and the evaluation of their success are critical.

This study focused on two of the university's partnership programmes. Both partnerships lead to doctor of education (EdD) degrees in educational leadership. Partnership Model A involves the use of a state school administrator's organization. The partner maintains relationships with students during their time at the university. Members of this partner organization serve as adjunct instructors in the doctoral programme, supervise student internships and oversee candidate dissertation research in collaboration with full-time university faculty. Currently 66 students are enrolled in coursework or in the dissertation phase of the programme using Model A.

Partnership Model B involves the use of a regional teacher and school administrator professional development organization. Membership in this group provides students access to a specific professional doctorate programme in educational leadership at the university. The partner organization is not involved in the delivery of coursework or in supervision of candidate research. Members of the organization do provide student support services, such as registration assistance, during the degree programme. Currently 169 students are enrolled in coursework or in the dissertation phase of the programme using Model B.

Both partnership models were initiated along with a shift to instruction via a distance delivery model. In Model A, delivery is both face-to-face and online. In Model B, delivery is almost exclusively online, with students gathering for face-to-face meetings just four times per year. The evaluation of the online aspects (as opposed to traditional face-to-face delivery) of the programmes was not specifically under investigation in this study, but acknowledging this mode of instruction seems critical in providing context. See appendix 1 for Partnership Models A and B.

Objectives

The primary purpose of this inquiry is to compare the success of two partnership models in preparing candidates for independent work-based (in this case, dissertation) research. The research questions for the study were as follows;

1. Is one partnership model more effective than another in preparing candidates for independent research?
2. Do candidates feel prepared for independent research?
3. Do faculty/supervisors feel that candidates are prepared for independent work-based research?

By examining how partnership models are used to prepare future scholars and practitioners, this study serves the ancillary purpose of contributing to the discourse on innovation in doctoral education. As institutions compete for students and as many deepen their dependence on tuition revenues, how can creative partnerships be used to leverage market position *and* add to the quality and relevance of programmes? This work will inform individuals in all areas of doctoral degree programming, regardless of discipline.

Theoretical framework

Partnerships have created relationships between professional organizations and the university under examination in this study. Students come to this university through their membership and participation in the partner organization. Students are seeking doctoral degrees that will lead to improved classroom practice and school leadership. The formal

partnerships allow the partners and the university to share the responsibility for the development and delivery of instruction during the programme. Curriculum delivery is a joint responsibility, and enrolment is largely based on the marketing efforts of the partner organization.

In 2003, Maxwell discussed the implicit partnerships maintained by education employers and EdD programmes. Only now has the university begun to explicitly engage in these kinds of relationships. During initial EdD programme development, advisory boards including individuals from the workplace were employed; however, these were not true partnerships. Although these individuals and groups gave input on and reacted to the proposed curriculum, their role in the programme did not extend much further. As time elapsed, though, the university began to understand that overlaps between research, the classroom and the workplace cannot be ignored; in fact, it recognized that such overlaps should be stressed in programme development (Maxwell, 2003; Scott et al, 2009). Scott et al. (2009; 146) have emphasized that research, the classroom and the workplace are 'three independent sites of knowledge-construction'. This university believes that formal partnerships allow the purposeful integration and overlap of these three areas and that this overlap manifests itself during the development and delivery of programme components. Figure 1 offers a visual representation, showing that the overlaps between the three spheres were not as great before the purposeful engagement with partner organizations (Maddocks, 2011). In response, the university has moved towards a more intentional and fully integrated form of overlap between a student's coursework, research and workplace. See appendix 2 for; The overlap of coursework, research, and the workplace.

One of the goals of the coursework phase of the professional doctorate programmes at the university is to enculturate students to become members of the research community (Lee, 2008). The partnerships should foster a level of collaboration between the profession and the academy that wouldn't be as feasible without it. All of this university's EdD programmes stress clinical experience in the form of fieldwork and engagement with the doctoral curriculum and the student's workplace to prepare practitioners and future leaders.

Although an EdD candidate's dissertation research is always work based, it should be noted that only in partnership Model A is the partner organization involved in the candidate's dissertation research.

The university has grappled with issues related to the supervision of practitioner research as it has adopted these partnership models. What is the role of the university? The supervisor? The partner organization? If workplace co-supervisors, individuals affiliated with the partner organization and traditional university faculty will be used during a candidate's research process, how should these individuals be prepared? How do they need to be prepared differently? How do non-traditional faculty and/or supervisors become 'qualified' for real academic work and relationships with candidates during their dissertation research (USCGS, 2007)? Professional development at the university has been engaged in finding solutions to these issues. The effectiveness of these professional development initiatives is certainly a factor in the overall success of the partnership models but is not a specific focus of this study.

The university sees the role of dissertation supervision as a pedagogical relationship (Franke and Arvidsson, 2011) intended to develop independent practitioner researchers. The university draws on the research literature and its own experiences in establishing goals for dissertation supervisors (Brew and Peseta, 2004; Pearson and Brew, 2002; USCGS, 2007). Both the university and its partnering organizations have agreed that supervisors should be able to;

- manage the supervision process to ensure timely completion
- develop the research skills of practitioners and professionals
- ensure the protection of human subjects (research samples)
- communicate with candidates, including timely and constructive feedback
- model, scaffold and fade, as needed, to coach candidates through the research project (Pearson and Brew 2002)

This perspective on the role of supervisors reflects a vocational training model in which research is an educative process more about the process than the product (Franke and Arvidsson, 2011). Supervision is about management, enculturation, academic development, relationships and, finally, the very important act of emancipating the candidate to do his or her own research as part of his or her practice (Lee, 2008).

An individual faculty member's supervisory style (Mainhard, van der Rijst, van Tartwijk, and Wubbels 2009), whether his or her academic home is at the university, or whether he or she is a member of the partner organization, undoubtedly has an impact on the success of the supervisory relationship. Some supervisors approach the process from a problem orientation (Emilsson and Johnsson 2007). They see the dissertation supervision experience as a series of tasks. Others approach it from a process orientation, seeing the experience as interpersonal and relational (Emilsson and Johnsson 2007). Whether approaching the process from a problem or process orientation, or a combination of the two, supervisors see their role as transferors of a research tradition, mediators of the process, serving both as supervisor and leader (Franke and Arvidsson 2011).

In addition to individual supervisory styles, issues of interpersonal style also play a role in the dissertation process. The job of the supervisor is to develop confidence and independence in our candidates (Sambrook, Stewart and Roberts 2008). Supervision is an interpersonal process (Emilsson and Johnsson 2007). The university recognizes that compatibility and rapport (Sambrook et al, 2008) are critical and thus allows the candidate to voice preference before assigning supervisors. In most cases, candidates know their supervisors from coursework or other academic experiences before working with them on their dissertations.

The university's approach to the supervision process both with partners and without is consistent with the best practice literature. The inquiry described here was initiated to determine if the partnerships further enhance the work-based dissertation supervision experience and which partnership model best prepares future practitioner scholars.

Data Collection

This study used a mixed-methods design, including a quantitative survey and qualitative evidence in the form of document analysis, focus groups and interviews (Teddlé and Tashakkori 2009; Strauss and Corbin 2008). This design supported the quantitative data collection with qualitative data and results so that any meta-inferences were generated using as complete a data picture as possible. This also served the purpose of triangulating the survey data with additional qualitative data. All phases of the study were approved by the University's Institutional Review Board.

Document analysis

The first phase of this study involved an examination of the planning documents, meeting notes and partnership agreements for Models A and B. Curricular changes were made at the time of programme initiation with the partner organization, specifically in the area of research methods; these are discussed in the results section of this paper.

Focus groups and interviews

Between the autumn semester 2009 and the autumn semester 2011, 103 students who were in the coursework phase of the programme were interviewed or involved in focus groups of up to 8 students. Data collected from these students at four times during this two-year period related to programme quality and their individual experiences with all aspects of their doctoral programmes.

Surveys

During the autumn semester 2011, surveys were administered to 28 dissertation supervisors and 142 doctoral candidates (those in the dissertation phase of the programme). These surveys asked candidates to self-report their levels of comfort with various aspects of dissertation research, including items such as, Do they feel they have the technical skills to collect data? Do they feel their coursework prepared them to analyze quantitative data

appropriately? and other similar items. Supervisors were asked to assess their own candidates' levels of preparedness in the same areas.

Twenty-four supervisors (an 86% response rate) and 65 candidates (a 42% response rate) completed surveys online. Of the 24 supervisors, 41.7% were from the Leadership department, 8.3% were from Foundations, 20.8% were from Research and 29.2% were from other areas. Of the supervisors, 12.5% reported being affiliated with Partner A and 12.5% with Partner B. This affiliation means that they are employed or contracted by both the partner and university.

The majority of the candidate respondents (36 of 65, 55%) were from partnership Model B. Although this may skew the results, it does accurately reflect the proportion of students enrolled overall in the university's programmes.

Results and Discussion

Document analysis

As part of the curriculum development for the new partnership programmes, four new courses were developed, and the required sequence of courses in the research curriculum was modified. Table 1 shows the original and revised sequences of courses for those seeking EdDs at the university. See appendix 3 for research methods sequence.

The new courses expose students to programme evaluation; action research; instrument development techniques; qualitative analysis software applications; advanced statistical procedures, including factor analysis, meta-analysis and HLM; and the emerging field of mixed-methods research. Most importantly, the focus of much of this new curriculum is on the different needs of those seeking professional doctorates and planning to conduct their dissertation research in work-based settings. Faculty involved in the development of these courses hoped to enhance the research skills and preparedness of students for work-based dissertation work.

The university recognizes that if its programmes are about 'entering a community of practice' (Berliner 2006; 275) it must provide the curriculum and instruction to support such goals. Immediately following the research coursework and qualifying exams is the candidate's work on his or her dissertation. This curriculum must prepare students (who are now candidates) for their engagement in work-based dissertation research.

Focus groups and interviews

Six major themes emerged from the analysis of the focus group and interview data; faculty/instruction, collegial circles, programme format, course mechanics, communication and services. Students reported both positive and negative reactions to all the themes but only negative reactions to issues around services. The collegial circles are the face-to-face meetings held for partnership Model B students. In general, students were satisfied with their research coursework and felt it would prepare them well for their dissertation research. When students reported not feeling satisfied, issues related to course mechanics. The students cited 196 examples of things that were going well in their programme. These items were categorized, and on the basis of this work, the themes listed earlier were developed. The most commonly cited positive aspect of their programme was the collegial circle meetings. Twenty-three percent of the 196 identified responses (data points) related to the face-to-face meetings with students. Twenty-four percent of the responses related to faculty and instruction. Instructor interaction was specifically cited by 35 students as a positive aspect of their programme. The flexibility of the programme, overall pace, cost and cohort model were cited in 20% of the responses. Course design aspects, including the use of Blackboard (an online course delivery software), rubrics and course readings, were referenced in 13% of the responses. Communication outside of coursework was also referenced as a positive aspect of the programme including interaction with advisors and other staff and faculty (7% of responses). Responses were consistent between students in partnership Models A and B.

One hundred forty-eight examples of areas needing improvement emerged out of the focus groups and interviews. The most commonly cited area for improvement related to

programme and course mechanics. Thirty percent of the responses related to this theme. Specific areas within this theme included Blackboard glitches, the order of courses, course errors, syllabi errors and calendar errors. Faculty and instruction was also an area of concern. Twenty-four percent of responses focused on this theme, with 28 students citing a lack of feedback or late feedback from instructors as an area needing improvement. Students from Model B suggested that there be more collegial circles and that more full-time university faculty become involved in those meetings (17% of responses).

Communication was also cited as an issue in 11% of the responses. Most of these concerns related to inconsistent messages, whether they were about course expectations or the tone of interactions between students. General university services were cited in 8% of the responses. Again, responses were consistent between partnership Model A and B students.

Surveys

Survey results indicate that 96.9% of those candidates responding believed they have the technical skills needed to complete their research. In contrast, only 45.8% of supervisors felt that candidates have the required skills for independent research. Also of interest was the finding that supervisors with less experience working with candidates were more likely to have negative feelings on this issue, $\chi^2(9, N = 24) = 21.20, p = .048$.

A large source of the supervisor dissatisfaction is linked to their evaluation of their candidates' writing ability. Over half of the supervisors (54.2%) responding did not feel that candidates have the writing skills needed to complete their dissertations. There were differences based on teaching area, with leadership faculty more likely to be positive about candidates' writing ability and faculty in foundations and research less so $\chi^2(9, N = 24) = 20.99, p = .013$.

Candidates were asked about their comfort level with regard to data collection and analysis. Eighty percent of the candidates feel comfortable collecting data. Seventy-five percent feel comfortable analyzing data, and 76.8% feel that they can identify and complete data

analysis with the appropriate methods. No differences were found between partnership Model A and B candidates.

Candidates were asked if they felt they were able to apply the technical skills they learned in their research methods coursework to their dissertation research. Of the candidates responding to the survey, 96.9% felt that they do. In contrast, only 45.8% of supervisors felt that candidates are ready to engage in independent research. Candidate responses to this item also varied by the length of time they have been in the dissertation phase of their programmes, with those very early in the process and those who have been in the process for two or more years feeling less confident, $\chi^2(8, N = 65) = 16.18, p = .040$. No differences were detected between Model A and B candidates.

Conclusions and Further Research

This inquiry began with three questions;

1. Is one partnership model more effective than another in preparing candidates for independent research?
2. Do candidates feel prepared for independent research?
3. Do faculty/supervisors feel that candidates are prepared for independent work-based research?

The data gathered do not show any measurable difference between the preparedness of candidates from partnership Model A or B. Future research might include completion rates and an evaluation of dissertation research quality or impact to further examine any differences between the models.

In general, candidates feel they have the technical skills needed to complete their dissertation work. When asked about data collection and analysis, their responses were generally positive, with 75%–80% indicating that their research coursework meets their needs. Overall, 96.9% believe they have the technical research skills they need.

The data did show a clear finding that candidates feel prepared for independent research. What is troubling is that the faculty/supervisors do not agree. This disconnect seems to be related to faculty/supervisor perceptions related to candidates' writing ability. What is unclear is if issues related to writing ability overshadow their evaluation of the candidates' technical/analytic research skills. Further research will focus on the disconnect between candidates' self-perceived ability/competence levels and their abilities as assessed by supervisors.

It should be noted that leadership faculty had higher opinions of candidate preparedness—and perhaps these voices carry a special weight in this context as these faculty members are all former practitioners. Now university-level academics, these faculty members have a strong connection to the work setting and are now scholar-practitioners. As we prepare and assess our own ability to prepare practitioner-scholars, shouldn't we consider these differences? Perhaps those who have not been in the schools but have instead had careers based in higher education are not as aware of what practitioner-scholars need. If our focus is on the dissertation work and not the post-graduation professional work of our candidates, are both voices equally valid?

It is hoped that with continued professional development, all supervisors will become increasingly prepared for work with candidates and will begin to feel that they have the skills to assist candidates they feel are less than fully prepared. But if, at the core, the supervisor does not believe in the collective readiness of candidates, is there any hope? How will our supervisors effectively perform their roles (enculturator, emancipator, etc.) if, at the core, they do not feel their candidates are prepared? Are positive relationships possible, given the disconnection?

As discussed earlier in this paper, the university sees the dissertation supervision process as vocational training. An element of vocational training is apprenticeship. With such deep connections to the profession and practice, as made possible by the partnerships, the ability to train future practitioner researchers should be easier.

It is possible that even with all of the focus on supervision and best practices, there still remains at the university ambiguity about what doctoral supervision is. As Lee and McKenzie (2011) point out, it is not really teaching or research. Supervisors need professional development to turn the light on the ambiguous and private space (Manathunga, 2005), and our university has certainly taken action in this area, but more is needed.

This study's findings have sparked internal conversation on how the programmes are constructed and delivered, with emphasis on the pedagogy of supervision (Pearson and Brew 2002) and the examination of how faculty and workplace co-supervisors need to be differently prepared to deal with the needs of candidates involved in these partnership models (Maxwell 2003; Pearson and Brew 2002). Although this study did not show any differences between the candidates' preparedness between the two models, it is assumed that Model A's involvement of members of the partner organization at the dissertation phase enhances the supervisory experience. But how do we confirm this? Related conversations are happening at the department, college and administrative levels of the university. Of immediate concern are issues related to writing ability. Additional study will focus on this issue, and in the interim, professional development focused on engagement with partner organizations continues.

The paramount challenge for this university as it continues to engage in these partnerships is to maintain adaptability to the needs of the candidates, the supervisors and the partner organizations, while preserving and enhancing quality. As we and other universities move away from traditional models, how can we best use partners to support work-based scholarship? Only by thoughtfully preparing practitioner scholars and supervisors can we move beyond the dangers of superficiality as we engage partners in the development and delivery of doctoral programmes.

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