The role of professional organizations as partners in the supervision of dissertation research in emerging professional (work-based) doctoral programs

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This paper will explore the role of professional organizations as partners to the university in the development, supervision and evaluation of research conducted by students in online professional work-based doctorate programs. Specifically, this paper will describe the case of one university's partnership with a state professional administrators' organization and the outcomes of this relationship as they relate to the online dissertation process. The author will first discuss the theoretical and philosophical lenses through which the program and partnership relationship were established and shaped. Then specifics related to the curriculum and delivery of this online program will be described. The use of Blackboard™ course shells and discussion boards will be described as they relate to the dissertation supervision process. Dissertation defences using Adobe Connect™ will be described as examples of online public defences. Current program evaluation projects will be described. The paper concludes with reflections on the program, a description of its Quality Assurance Committee and recommendations for this institution and others engaging in online doctoral programming and the supervision of work-based dissertation research.

Keywords: work-based dissertations, dissertation supervision, professional organizations, partnerships

Introduction

The university under examination in this paper has a history of engaging in the delivery of the professional doctorate in education (EdD) to school district leaders and early childhood educators. These professional doctorate programs are work based in pK–12 schools in the United States. As a result of rapid institutional growth and innovation, the university is now involved in significant partnerships with several professional organizations. These partnerships have increased the number of professional doctorate programs offered by the

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university and have also allowed the university to expand its online offerings. Coursework, exams and dissertation supervision are now done wholly online for some students. This new delivery model has caused the institution to examine how partners can be best used to supervise the work of students as they engage in the research (dissertation) portions of their programs. This research is exclusively work based and highly locally contextualized to the student's workplace. The partnership relationship as it relates to the supervision of student research is of special interest to those engaged in the delivery of the professional doctoral programs at the university.

Theoretical framework

The use of partner organizations has been stressed in the best practice literature in the field of professional doctoral program administration (Maxwell, 2003; U.S. Council of Graduate Schools [USCGS], 2007). Partnerships that serve to support academic programming and advance the professional field are more clinical, engaged and practical than traditional Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) programs. This university's EdD programs stress clinical experience in the form of fieldwork and engagement with the doctoral curriculum and the student's workplace to prepare practitioners and future educational leaders.

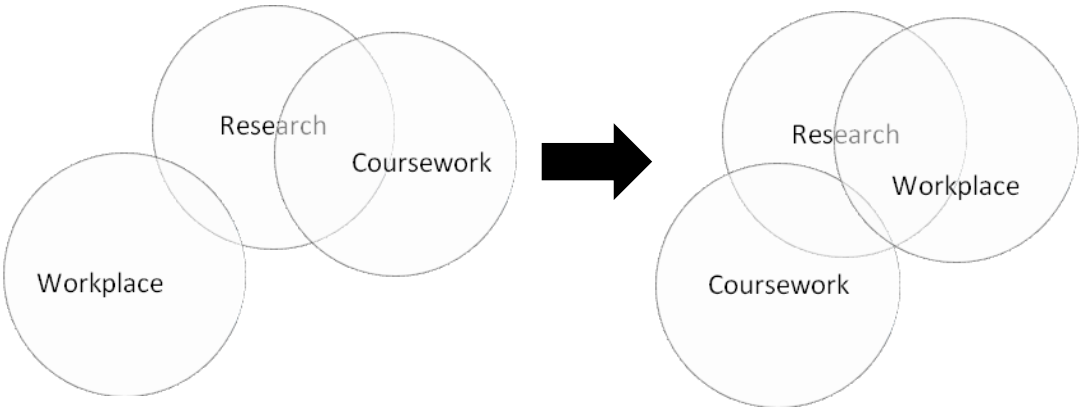
In the case of this university, new partnerships create relationships between professional organizations and a private university. One such partnership has resulted in the creation of a new professional doctorate program in teacher leadership. This partnership is between a state professional school administrators' organization and the university. Students come to the university through their membership and participation in the state organization. Students are seeking doctoral degrees that will lead to improved classroom practice and school leadership. The formal partnership allows the organization and the university to share the responsibility for the development and delivery of instruction during the program. Curriculum delivery is a joint responsibility and is almost exclusively online. It also creates a system whereby students are selected and enrolled in the program largely based on the marketing efforts of the partner organization.

As the U.S. Council of Graduate Schools (2007) has highlighted, the relationship between universities and industries (the profession) is often just at the surface level. As a result of the university's strategic planning and efforts towards innovation, a deliberate focus has been

placed on deepening these new partnerships. As the university has reconceptualised its own EdD programs, it has actively sought to make them more clinical, engaged and applied, reflecting recommendations in the literature (USCGS, 2007). In accordance with these efforts, the new teacher leadership program emphasizes the advanced leadership skills needed for teacher practitioners, and program development has integrated this intention into students' research preparation coursework and work-based dissertation experience, as discussed in this paper.

Maxwell (2003) wrote about the implicit partnerships between EdD programs and education employers. The university is really only now explicitly engaging in such a relationship. During the initial EdD program development, advisory boards with individuals from the workplace were used, but this was not a true partnership. These individuals and groups gave input on and reacted to the proposed curriculum, but their role in the program ended there. The university sees that the overlaps between research, the classroom and the workplace cannot be ignored; in fact, the university recognizes that such overlaps should be stressed in program development (Maxwell, 2003; Scott et al., 2009). As Scott et al. (2009) have pointed out, research, the classroom and the workplace are 'three independent sites of knowledge-construction' (146). This university hopes that formal partnerships will allow the purposeful integration and overlap of these three areas and that this overlap will manifest itself during the development and delivery of the online program components. These overlaps are visually represented in Figure 1, which shows that the overlaps between the three spheres were not as great before the purposeful engagement with partner organizations. The university is moving towards a more intentional and fully integrated form of overlap between the students' coursework, research and workplace.

Figure 1. The overlap of coursework, research and the workplace.



Note: The university hopes that the overlaps between the workplace and student research will continue to become more interconnected through the development of partnerships and that partners will move from playing a role centred primarily in the workplace to a role that overlaps all three spheres: coursework, student research and the workplace (Lee et al., 2000; Maxwell, 2003; Scott et al., 2009).

Case example

The case example explored in this paper is that of a teacher leadership program within a state professional administrators' association. The emphasis of the teacher leadership program on the advanced leadership skills needed for teacher practitioners has resulted in an examination of the research curriculum used to support the programs of all students seeking professional doctorates at the university (Brennan, 1995; Caboni & Proper, 2009; Perry & Imig, 2008). Additional courses that stress work-based research methodologies and designs, including action research and classroom-based inquiry, have been developed. The university recognizes that if its programs 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 student's work on his or her dissertation. This curriculum must prepare students for their engagement in work-based dissertation research.

Revised research methods curriculum

The expansion of the research methods curriculum at the university offers students coursework that meets the needs of practitioners and that also meets students' learning objectives and desired research outcomes as candidates for a professional degree. The new curriculum is more connected to the workplace in that it is intentionally more clinical and stresses the methods needed by practitioners. Three faculty members were responsible for the revision of the research methods curriculum, and a primary pool of seven teach courses in this area.

The original research methods curriculum developed for all doctoral programs at the university included a three-course sequence: Qualitative Analysis, Quantitative Analysis and, finally, Research Design. The Qualitative Analysis course introduces students to several approaches to qualitative research and then focuses on one selected by the instructor. In most cases, this approach is grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Quantitative Analysis includes an introduction to basic statistics from descriptive to inferential techniques. Advanced techniques, such as hierarchical linear modelling (HLM) and meta-analysis, are covered as special topics but are not included in the main curriculum for this course. The final course in the original sequence is Research Design. This course gives an overview of educational research methods and focuses on the creation of the dissertation prospectus as a product of the course. With the initiation of university partnerships and an increased focus on professional doctoral programs, revisions to this sequence were made to further differentiate the research needs of those seeking a professional doctorate and those seeking a more traditional doctorate.

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 professional doctorates (EdDs) at the university.

Table 1. Research methods sequence

Original Curriculum	Revised Curriculum
Qualitative Analysis	Survey/Instrument Development*
Quantitative Analysis	Qualitative Analysis OR Quantitative Analysis
Research Design	Methods of Institutional and Practitioner Research*
	Electives:
	Mixed Methods Research*
	Advanced Topics in Qualitative Analysis*
	Advanced Statistics*
	Research Design

Note: An asterisk indicates a new course.

The new courses expose students to program 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 a work-based setting.

Further compounding these curricular changes is the shift of instruction to a distance delivery model. How this newly shaped and very practice based research methods curriculum is best delivered online is a major focus of the program evaluation efforts discussed later in this paper.

The university has also grappled with issues related to the supervision of practitioner research and its role in ensuring the protection of research participants. 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 student'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 very real academic work and relationships with students during their

dissertation research (USCGS, 2007), and how is this done online? Blackboard, discussion boards and Adobe Connect™ will be discussed as examples of how the university is beginning to grapple with and engage in solutions to these issues.

Blackboard course shells

Blackboard is the course delivery software used by this university. Both faculty training and student courses are delivered using this product. Online courses are developed and delivered in this environment. The university thus found that conducting training using this same software was a good fit. Online teaching certification courses have been developed to ensure that faculty meet a minimum level of competence before they engage with students in online courses. Nontraditional faculty, workplace supervisors and dissertation supervisors are also provided access to training in this environment before they engage with students during the dissertation process. Additionally, the university institutional review board provides access to online training modules to certify faculty for work with human subjects.

A course room with discussion boards has been developed for the dissertation process, as discussed in the next section of this paper.

Discussion boards

Within the Blackboard environment, students and faculty make use of discussion boards. In the case of dissertation work, students and faculty make use of these boards in three ways. First, a student is placed in a discussion group with his or her committee members. The student and committee can use this discussion area to post drafts, give comments and provide advice during the dissertation process. Second, faculty engaged in dissertation supervision have a discussion area in which to engage in dialog about the dissertation process, discuss how to best support students and share ideas. Third, each committee chair has access to a discussion area with just his or her mentees. This allows the students sharing a chair to operate as a cohort.

This cohort structure provides many supports to students as they engage in the dissertation process (Burnett, 1999). Burnett found that students engaged in a collaborative cohort felt less isolated, were more likely to complete, had a better knowledge base as a result of

sharing information and experiences with peers, showed gains in writing and critical feedback skills and produced higher quality dissertation documents. Students in these cohort groups do not necessarily start or complete their programs together, but they do often come from very similar work settings and, often, very proximal sites. This has allowed students to share local resources and create professional and research networks in and near their workplaces.

Adobe Connect

Adobe Connect is the software used to conduct oral defences of the dissertation at both the proposal and final stages. This product allows remote faculty, members from partner organizations, local faculty and students to meet virtually. Student presentations, typically using PowerPoint™, can be shared, and both audio and visual communication components are included. This software has also been used to conduct interactive training for faculty and partners new to the dissertation supervision process.

Program evaluation

All programs at the university are evaluated using formal processes. Both external and internal requirements dictate the parameters and frequency of many of these evaluations. Further compounding these pressures are the expectations and requirements of the partner organizations.

Accrediting agencies at the state, regional and national levels drive much of the evaluation at the university. The professional doctorate programs offered by the university are accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), the Higher Learning Commission (HLC) and the state. NCATE formally evaluates all teacher education programs at the university on an 8-year cycle. Many other groups, including some state bodies and professional organizations (such as the International Reading Association, Educational Leadership Constituent Council, and National Council of Teachers of Mathematics), provide information to NCATE and/or defer to the findings of this group. Accreditation by NCATE is considered a top-tier ranking for education programs in the United States. All professional doctorate programs at the university are currently accredited by NCATE.

A second major example of external evaluation comes in the form of the Academic Quality Improvement Program (AQIP) of the HLC, which accredits more than 1000 colleges and universities in 19 states. The AQIP process includes requirements related to evidence of continuous improvement, as demonstrated by ongoing action projects and a systems portfolio. One of the current action projects of the university's AQIP steering committee centres on faculty mentoring. One element of this program is related to the mentoring of new supervisors of students enrolled in doctoral programs and engaging in dissertation research.

The partner organizations may also have external program evaluation requirements. The state administrator's association that engages in the partnership with the university in this paper's case example must meet specific requirements of its home state. That state is not the same state that approves academic programs at the university. The evaluation requirements of both these states, then, must be met. In this case, the university has had to seek permission from the home state of the administrator's association to operate in that state, even if only online.

Internally, the university engages in formal evaluations as part of its strategic planning process. Every program at the university is evaluated on a 3- to 5-year cycle. Each year the university provost meets with the academic deans to determine which programs will be evaluated. The provost also sits on the university's Strategic Planning Council (SPC), which is composed of the college vice presidents and faculty and staff representatives. The SPC reviews the goals and objectives of each of the university's functional units, including academics, annually. The SPC evaluation of programs may span 1–3 years. Within the Graduate College, a Quality Assurance Committee (QAC) is used to carry out and support evaluation efforts required by the university.

Quality Assurance Committee

The college QAC was established by a single academic department within the Graduate College in 2006. It has grown to become a collegewide body with key responsibilities related to evaluation and planning. It is composed of faculty and staff representatives from each academic and service department in the college and is convened by the college dean. This

committee, in cooperation with the Office of the Executive Director of Doctoral Programs and the Office of the Dean of the Graduate College, is now engaging in a new initiative related to supervisor development. This initiative involves an examination of the pedagogy of supervision (Pearson & Brew, 2002). Recognizing that supervision of research is a relationship-building, academic and professional experience, this group is evaluating the training and professional development needed by faculty, partners and workplace co-supervisors (Maxwell, 2003). In doing so, the group is also striving to strike an academically sound balance between the very real expectations of the partner organization and those of the university faculty (Pearson & Brew, 2002).

This process began with the identification of goals and objectives and then metrics to determine the university's success in achieving the identified goals and objectives. In the case of the teacher leadership program, faculty content experts and representatives from the state administrator's association were involved in several planning meetings. At these meetings, the missions of the college and organization were examined first.

The mission of the college is 'serving, leading and innovating with integrity, creativity, competence, and compassion through graduate and innovative programs of excellence and relevance for the adult learner'. The use of partnerships to develop and deliver professional doctorate programs is in line with the mission of the college. The mission of the state administrator's association is to 'increase student achievement by improving instructional leadership and building a culture of continuous improvement'. The partner's interest in participating in a teacher leadership program is also in keeping with its mission.

The agreement that the missions of the two organizations are congruent was an important first step in the development process. A second step was for the university and professional organization to specify goals and objectives. Specific content and curricular objectives were identified, with attention paid to the literature and needs of practitioners in the field. The partner characterizes the program's purpose as 'energizing and mobilizing the untapped attributes and contributions of teachers to strengthen student performance and increase student achievement'.

In addition to content objectives, a primary objective of the university and partner organization is to ensure that doctoral programs and dissertation research now being facilitated online are of high quality and match the outcomes of the university's traditional face-to-face programs. To measure the achievement of this objective, the QAC is currently collecting and reviewing data related to the efficacy of all online courses and programs offered by the Graduate College. Data are being gathered from student course evaluations, student satisfaction surveys, feedback gathered by students' academic advisors and student interviews.

The literature in the area of online learning and research illustrates that there are several ways to measure quality in online teaching. Student achievement, attendance, persistence and learning are all cited by Gayol (2010) in her chapter on online learning research in the recently published *Sage Handbook of Online Learning*. Attention to interactivity between learning and teacher, learner and learner and learner and content is also suggested by Gayol as a way to assess quality. Student satisfaction is a measure of quality from the perspective of the learner, though not necessarily from the perspective of the institution offering the course (Wang, 2008). Stevens-Long and Crowell (2010) echoed the need for attention to student satisfaction and noted that student–teacher interaction is a key element of satisfaction.

The analyses related to these data include course, department/field and overall program performance metrics. These metrics include the level of student satisfaction with the content, online pedagogy, faculty response and feedback and student-to-student interaction. The purpose of this analysis is to compare online and traditional ground-based courses, courses from different departments/fields and overall programs of study.

In an analysis completed in 2009, it was found that online courses in the educational leadership content area were more equivalent (as measured by student satisfaction variables) to traditional face-to-face courses than were research methods content courses (Maddocks, 2010). It was also found that individual sections of online research methods courses varied significantly in their ability to achieve learning objectives. This analysis focused on how students rated the course content and instruction and the faculty's ability

to meet course content objectives. A result of this study has been an increase in the training faculty receive before they engage in online instruction. Because online course templates are largely the same for each section of a class, it was clear to the QAC that the major variable affecting the findings was the instructor teaching the course.

For new courses and, specifically, the new research methods curriculum, analyses are focused on how well instructional units and courses meet prescribed course objectives, goals for engagement and relevance to students' workplace needs. The QAC is now collecting data not only from course evaluations and student interviews but also from workplace co-supervisors and representatives from partner organizations.

In addition to the examination of efficacy between online and face-to-face programs and courses, the QAC is engaged in an initiative to evaluate how the university prepares its faculty and partners to supervise student research. Because there are significant overlaps in the pool of individuals working as workplace co-supervisors and those supervising dissertation research, these individuals and traditional faculty are trained in both teaching practice and research supervision.

The university's goals for supervisors (those supervising dissertation research) draw on its experiences and the literature related to research supervision (Brew & Peseta, 2004; Pearson & Brew, 2002; USCGS, 2007). The university and partner organization have agreed that supervisors should be adept at the following:

- managing the supervision process to ensure timely completion
- developing the research skills of practitioners and professionals
- ensuring the protection of human subjects (research samples)
- communicating with students, including timely and constructive feedback
- modelling, scaffolding and fading, as needed, to coach students through the research project (Pearson & Brew, 2002)

These objectives will be evaluated by the QAC through focus groups, surveys and exit interviews with students and supervisors and workplace co-supervisors.

Reflections and future research

After 3 years of engaging in online programming, the university recognizes the key role that formal partnerships with outside organizations play in the success and efficacy of the university's programs. Curriculum development and delivery were both made possible and of high quality in large part because of the efforts and experience of the partner organization. Program evaluation continues, remaining focused on how and how well the university prepares individuals involved in dissertation supervision.

Remaining work centres on issues of maintaining quality as programs grow. Over the course of the next 3–5 years, internal formal program evaluations will continue, primarily through the engagement of the Graduate College's QAC.

Recommendations

It is recommended that those institutions wishing to make use of partnerships enter into these relationships thinking holistically. This university could have made use of the partner organization solely as a source of students for the program. Instead, it took an approach that engaged the partner in the development of the program, its delivery and, now, its evaluation and improvement. This deep relationship creates an incentive for both the partner and university to ensure the success of the program overall.

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