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Preformative Evaluation of the San Diego State University Educational Leadership Ed.D.: Final Report

Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD)
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Executive Summary

Program Overview

At San Diego State University (SDSU), the newly initiated (Fall, 2007) professional doctorate in Educational Leadership (Ed.D.) program consists of two divisions or concentrations. One addresses PK-12 Education; and a second, Administration, Rehabilitation & Postsecondary Education (ARPE), focuses on Community College leadership.

In what is referred to as a “preformative” investigation, independently undertaken by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD), a rational foundation for the required ongoing evaluation of this program is established.

The purpose of this study is not to evaluate the program itself at this time. Rather, the purpose and goals of CERD’s preformative evaluation are two-fold. First: to lend a brief and targeted independent eye concerning the emerging Ed.D. program. Second: to identify the perceived dimensions of what indicates program quality; this, as a springboard for informing its self-study and in turn, meeting and exceeding evaluation requirements. In addition to meeting reporting requirements then, the preformative evaluation provides a rational and ‘school-in-community-’centered lens contributing to the ultimate evaluation design.

Study Overview

Participation in the preformative study was voluntary. Confidential individual and focus group interviews were conducted with SDSU Ed.D. students, faculty and community constituent key informants. In all, the following report represents the perspectives of 17 individuals. The interviews centered around five core questions designed to elicit interpretations of program quality, that in turn, can contribute to an overall program evaluation design.

Data was analyzed by the CERD team using constant comparisons of taped interviews to discover common themes/perspectives deemed pertinent to the study goals.

Summary of Findings

There was widespread agreement among interviewees that the Ed.D. program had progressed well to date in meeting or exceeding expectations. Students, faculty and

community members conveyed the unique promise as well as potential challenges, such as program insularity, facing this nascent program. In all, three findings help contribute to a rationally formed design for the program's evaluation.

Finding: Quality and development of school/community partnerships is central to program success.

There was an interest in moving beyond traditional language regarding community partnerships. As many graduates will remain in the local community, it is important to assess the perceived quality of relations Ed.D. students make with their surrounding communities as well as the extent to which direct school/community partnerships are crafted and maintained. This might be evaluated from data concerning perceived quality and levels of ongoing participation in such relations and partnerships, such as steering committee meetings and individual perceptions regarding such collaborative efforts.

Finding: The level of academic rigor in this professional program is a key indicator of its success.

There was consensus that the professional Ed.D. program should be academically rigorous enough to attract and retain quality students and faculty, as well as to engender respect and influence in shaping positive educational change at the local level.

In this case as differentiated from Ph.D. programs, the practical application found in Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership is emphasized through development of change agency skills and specific corresponding elements, ultimately in support of the students they serve. These include assessing program quality through demonstrated sufficiency of group process and collaboration concerning a diverse constituency; critical thinking, problem solving and management skills using technology as appropriate; and each of these as supported by strong research skills. This might be studied through course evaluations in relevant areas, as well as using ongoing student self assessments as mediated by faculty observations.

The various skills of change agency can also be evaluated by expert faculty determinations of learning through existing data sources such as dissertation qualifying

examinations, proposal defenses, dissertation defenses, program completion rates, and matriculation to higher levels of educational leadership during long term follow-ups.

Finding: Participant connectedness among cohorts over time is central to program success.

The collaborative virtues of utilizing student cohorts in proceeding through the SDSU Educational Leadership Ed.D. program was a common theme cited in the interviews.

Rarely examined in doctoral program evaluations then, the development of a caring, connected community of learners appears essential to program quality. Based on this, the extent of observed and/or demonstrated participant connectedness among cohort participants, both while in the program and post-graduation, represents criteria worthy of incorporating into an evaluation. This might include specific examinations of social psychological predictors of such connections, such as social influence research, attribution of change, or locus of control queries through survey studies.

Conclusion

By conducting this preformative evaluation CERD finds that SDSU has distinguished itself in contributing to a local and rational foundation for its evaluation design. Such a well-planned and implemented evaluation of the SDSU Educational Leadership Ed.D. possesses considerable promise for continuing to effectively move the program forward.

Preformative Evaluation of the San Diego State University Educational Leadership Ed.D.: Final Report

Introduction and History

In August 2007, and in accord with the legislative mandate SB 724, San Diego State University (SDSU) became the first California State University (CSU) to establish a Doctorate (Ed.D.) in Educational Leadership. Accredited by the Western Association of School Credentialing (WASC), the SDSU program contains both PK-12 and Community College concentrations. The Community College concentration is also referred to as Administration, Rehabilitation & Postsecondary Education (ARPE).

It is important to note that the new CSU Ed.D. is a professional degree which is oriented toward application of skills and research concerning real world educational settings. At its most basic construction, this differs from that of typical Ph.D. programs, where the orientation might serve more theoretical and basic research purposes.

Part of the development and quality control process involved in this professional Ed.D. is an ongoing program evaluation as required by Education Code Section 66040.7. San Diego State University has vigorously undertaken this requirement. Since the program's inception, they have sought to create a rational basis or design foundation for its ongoing evaluation.

As a first step toward such evaluation the most fundamental question to be asked and answered is: "What represents program quality of the professional doctorate in educational leadership, and might therefore be incorporated into its ongoing evaluation to meet and exceed state requirements?"

In response to this question, what is referred to as a "preformative" investigation was independently undertaken by the Center for Educational Research and Development (CERD). CERD is a California chartered not-for-profit corporation committed to, among other missions, empowering evaluation and research.

The purpose of this study is not to evaluate the SDSU program itself at this time, although inevitably input regarding program quality emerges from the data. Rather, the purpose and goals of CERD's preformative evaluation are two-fold. First: to lend a brief and targeted independent eye concerning the emerging Ed.D. program. Second: to identify the perceived dimensions of what indicates program quality; this, as a springboard for informing its self-study and in turn, meeting and exceeding evaluation requirements. In addition to meeting requirements then, the preformative evaluation

provides a rational and 'school-in-community-'centered lens contributing to the ultimate evaluation design.

We begin with a brief overview of the study method then develop findings. The report is concluded with summarizing statements regarding the Ed.D. evaluation design.

Method

Purpose

In concert with required evaluation objectives and meeting all SDSU human subjects' protections, the purpose of the preformative investigation is interdepartmental study with the goals as described above—providing an independent eye concerning the emerging Ed.D. program, and contributing to a rational basis for its evaluation.

Data Collection

Design. The study consists of semi-structured interviews conducted with three groups of key informant participants involved with the Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership, SDSU students, faculty and San Diego community members who are affiliated with the program. Key informants are seen as individuals providing information regarding program quality that might otherwise not be available through other avenues (Patton, 1980).

To represent both groups, a purposive sample was drawn from each of the two concentrations, PK-12 and Community College concentrations. Participants were selected by the Educational Leadership Program Chairs of PK-12 and Community College divisions, respectively. This included a mix between focus groups and individual interviews. Scheduling and location of interviews was also arranged by each concentration.

Participants. The interviewees included a six-student focus group divided equally among PK-12 and Community College concentrations. Two individual student interviews, one each from PK-12 and Community College respectively, were also conducted.

One faculty focus group was conducted. It was comprised of four members evenly divided between PK-12 and Community College concentrations. Additionally, one PK-12 individual faculty interview was conducted.

Finally, there was participation from the SDSU constituent community. This included a three-member focus group and one individual interview.

With the exception of one individual student interview conducted by telephone, all focus group and individual interviews, lasting approximately thirty minutes each, were conducted in-person and tape-recorded for this analysis. All Interviews were completed by the end of the Ed.D. program's first year in existence, academic year, 2007-2008.

The combined interviews then, provided the perspectives of 17 individuals, across PK-12 and Community College concentrations.

Procedure and Instrument. Participation in the preformative evaluation was voluntary, and the interview questions developed by CERD are noted below. In keeping with CERD's empowerment evaluation mission, the overarching goal was to support individuals in openly addressing what represents Ed.D. program quality. Based on this, the confidential individual and focus group interviews centered around five core questions suitable to the brief available time frame as established by the respective concentrations:

1. In attempting to achieve the Ed.D.'s program mission as you understand it, what in your mind represents a high level of quality?
2. How do you decide whether the Ed.D.'s activities are having a positive student effect?
3. How should the community influence the Ed.D. activities?
4. What do you feel are differences between:
 - a. What you want to see done?
 - b. What your understanding of the program is?
 - c. The student experience?
5. In your mind, what is the difference between what Ed.D. activities should be implemented, as compared to your knowledge of what actually is being implemented?

Additional avenues of inquiry were pursued as they emerged or became relevant during the course of each interview.

Data Analysis

Using the grounded theoretical approach (Glaser and Strauss, 1967), data was analyzed by the CERD team performing constant comparisons of taped interviews to discover common themes/perspectives pertinent in contributing to an evaluation design.

Here, interviewee statements were categorized until they formed a patterned understanding relative to the preformative evaluation questions noted above.

When appropriate, interviewee statements are provided for illustrative purposes. These were selected because they not only represent the evidence, but also best protect participant confidentiality. Unless otherwise noted, such statements are demonstrative of the evidence on that topic. Overall, evidence was considered valid only after contradictory information, spurious relations, and rival explanations were considered and subsequently accounted for (Sanders, 1994).

Limitations and Generalization

This study includes the perspectives of 17 people from focus groups as well as individual interviews. Participation was a result of department scheduling and key informant availability. Additionally, due to logistical requirements, CERD often interviewed a mix of PK-12 and Community College participants drawn from a program that was less than one year old. Based on these limitations, the results are carefully interpreted and likely bounded to the program due to the nature of the overall resulting sample, interviewee groupings, and early stage of the program.

Findings

Overview

To remind the reader, the outcome of this study is, as noted above, not an evaluation of the program itself, but rather a means of independently viewing and gathering criteria contributing to the Ed.D. evaluation design. Such criteria is defined when it is supported by the data.

Overall, individuals frequently qualified their assessments of the SDSU Educational Leadership Ed.D. program by acknowledging that classes had only begun about seven months prior to the interviews.

There was widespread agreement among all three groups that the Ed.D. program had progressed well to date in meeting or exceeding expectations. Students, faculty and community members focused on conveying the unique promise as well as potential challenges facing this nascent program.

Enthusiasm was observed to be particularly strong among students. When asked to describe what represents a high level of quality in fulfilling the overall mission of

the Ed.D. program, a number of commonly shared attributes emerged. For example, this student echoed the sentiments of others in summing up many of the desirable program qualities as closely corresponding to “the Four Rs: Rigor, Relevance, Results and Relationships”. (Student #3)

The early indication by students is that the emergent qualities in this professional program are useful:

Everything I’m learning in school is informing my practical work and I’m able to step back and frame it in a different way... Now, with what I’m learning, I have a bigger context to understand things with another lens to look through to understand what’s going on. (Student #5)

Another student emphasized the importance of learning opportunities provided by highly regarded faculty and active community involvement. He went on to observe that:

...in terms of measuring the quality of the program for me: Is it relevant? Is it current? We have faculty that are extremely talented. Can they deliver consistently and be good every time we meet? Because none of us, I feel, have the time to waste. We are all really busy people... So for me, I really need to be around people that are very talented and experienced with the topics relevant and current... Can I apply them? Can I use them? Is it making me better? And they’ve been delivering—that’s been just what I hoped. (Student #2)

In addition to the overall positive opinion of the program, the following findings reveal that respondents, most notably the faculty, well understood a number of legislative mandates delineating the overall mission and objectives of the new Educational Leadership Ed.D. These themes were later found to closely conform to “distinctive features” distinguishing this “innovative professional doctorate in education” as described in a California State University (CSU) informational document (n.d.: 4). A brief example of this will be provided in the discussion.

Such distinctive features proved to be useful in deepening and rationally establishing dimensions suitable to program evaluation. Thus, the remainder of this

report assesses the primary factors indicating program quality based on the opinions of these key student, faculty and community respondents.

Finding: The quality and development of school/community partnerships is central to program success.

The CERD team found that members of each respondent constituency valued the importance of “true partnerships” with local PK-12 and Community College educators in contributing to the ultimate success of the Ed.D. program.

Community members in particular, expressed considerable interest in being actively involved in all facets of the Ed.D. program development. This participant articulated such a perspective:

...active [program] involvement was clearly intended to go well beyond the lip service so often accorded such “partnerships” between university programs and the surrounding communities. (Community Member # 4)

Indeed, students were genuinely enthused about the instructive and real-world value offered by this distinctive feature of the Ed.D. program. One of them envisioned this collaboration ideally functioning as a collaborative think tank:

When you bring this many people from all the Community Colleges and other schools in the area...They have tremendous experience and know-how and (up until now) universities have not been tapping into what we can learn from them and learn together with them. (Student # 4)

One faculty member echoed the opinion of others by contending that the SDSU Educational Leadership program is already engaging with community members:

I like our emphasis on ongoing program evaluation and our ties to the community—formally and informally. These keep giving us feedback on what is going on, and force us to make changes when they are warranted. We’re not isolated in that regard. (Faculty #4)

From our research then, the nature, scope and magnitude of community partnerships help to represent program quality and thus, should be included in the ongoing program evaluation. Specifically, emergent evaluation outcomes, to be examined from both the student and community standpoint, could include:

1. The extent to which program participation prepared leaders to enhance the quality of community relations in general.
2. More specifically, the extent to which program participation prepared leaders to craft and maintain school/community partnerships.

Finding: The level of academic rigor in this professional program is a key indicator of its success.

Indeed, as may be typical of many such programs, there was widespread consensus that the new Ed.D. program be academically rigorous enough to attract and retain quality students and faculty. Equally important is being able to engender respect and influence in shaping positive educational change at the local level.

This student aptly describes the perceived importance of academic rigor:

Rigor, I think, is very important. You don't want this to eventually be a watered-down program that's a joke. That's why I chose San Diego State instead of other less reputable [programs]. So rigor, I mean, we have tough assignments. We've got high expectations. (Student #4)

What though, in the context of this program, does rigor mean?

Members of the student, faculty and community discussed the importance of the Ed.D. program in successfully preparing students to become more effective change agents concerning both the community context and the schools in which they work. The skills of change agency include several components to be described in this section.

According to our key informants then, academic rigor in this professional program includes the actual development of change agency facilitation skills. As this participant noted:

If there is any skill that a leader or administrator needs today it is how to actively facilitate a diverse group of people toward a common solution...The greatest challenge is around group process. I think that course content is important for this program. But I also think that if there isn't intentional teaching to better prepare students for taking on effective leadership roles when they come around a table or meet in a group—then you're missing a critical skill...(Community Member #4)

Such leadership change agency skills are found to include, but not be limited to, the skills of collaboration among “diverse” groups, particularly concerning “group process.”

The development of technological efficacy, “critical thinking” and “problem-solving” skills are also found to constitute additional components of change agency related to academic rigor:

Are they going to have the ability and skills in all of their communities to solve the complex problems of both today and tomorrow? This will take collaboration, applied research and knowledge, communication—particularly through electronic means, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. (Community Member #3)

In addition to these factors, respondents also felt that skills of change agency need to be constructed on a strong foundation. In this case then, academic rigor includes learning to be good “consumer[s] of research”:

We want [students] to be good consumers of research such that they know how to use research as a tool to improve their practice and help achieve better results and manage complex systems. Being a good consumer of research means having a clue about what the research says, and understanding the implications of research for their work...(Faculty #2)

As the above passage shows, the attributes of change agency and academic rigor are not confined to enhancing collaborative, “group process,” “critical thinking” and “problem

solving” skills. With the evident interest in improving “practice” and achieving “better results,” participants also connected the skills of change agency with the importance of developing strong consumer research skills, and being able to “manage complex systems.” In being guided by research this faculty member elaborated that:

Students have a better understanding whether they are making decisions based on data or making decisions based on their perceptions. They start learning about using data or using theory to guide their decision-making process. (Faculty #3)

It became clear from all three groups that skills building for change agency, which rests on the strong foundation of consumer-based research skills, is designed to influence both the community and the culture of instruction. For example, this faculty member notes the importance of acting on “behalf of the students they serve:”

Of importance would be their [student’s] ability to better appreciate the complex organizations within which they work, and how they are able to effect change on behalf of the students they serve. Ultimately, we want our schools to facilitate important improvements in ways in which their schools and colleges serve students and meet their needs.” (Faculty #1)

Interestingly, while acknowledging the program focus on regional change/reform, many interviewees (particularly community members), emphasized the importance of “Think globally—Act locally.” One individual described how a high quality program should inspire “deeper thinking” in shaping “an ethos” and better appreciation of:

the global context of a changing world... [Students] should be provided ample opportunities for understanding “what works” elsewhere in this country and overseas. (Community Member #2)

Summarizing the key informant data then, evaluating for academic rigor may include the extent to which program participation prepares leaders to apply a variety of change agency skills; this, concerning both the community context and schools in which

they work—each in support of the students they serve. Such skills include the extent to which program participation prepares leaders to:

1. use group process to collaborate with diverse constituency
2. develop and apply critical thinking and problem solving skills
3. develop and apply skills of management in complex organizations
4. use technology and research in developing and applying the skills noted in items #1-#3 above

Finding: Participant connectedness among cohorts over time is central to program success.

The collaborative virtues of utilizing student cohorts in proceeding through the SDSU Educational Leadership Ed.D. program was a common theme cited in the interviews:

I think what's really very, very beneficial has been the people, the colleagues—I think they are the best part and pieces of this program. [They] are folks that we're in the cohort with—both groups—the Community College and the K through 12. This campus, this university, is then going to attract really, really talented people that really work in the field, and we've developed really strong relationships that we can work together and support each other professionally as well as academically. (Student #4)

In addition to the importance of cohort support itself, there was a palpable sense of excitement expressed by many of those interviewed (particularly students), in being part of this program from the ground floor.

There will never be a first group, first moment again! It was an honor to be part of the first cohort for the same reasons that R__ was saying—trusting that this will deliver everything that they promised. And so far, it's been an incredible experience... I'm finding that everything I do at work is informed by what I'm learning at school. (Student #5)

Another student explained that:

It's very exciting to be part of the original cohort. It was also reassuring to know that this is intended to be a three-year program which helps to counter any ABD [all-but-dissertation] fears that I or other students might have...(Student #8)

Student collaboration was widely regarded as genuine and long-lasting with considerable optimism for the future. They described how their similar objectives and ongoing geographical proximity to each other helped to inspire high levels of confidence regarding future collaborations with fellow students after completing the program.

Such data found at an early stage of the program both suggests and demonstrates that consideration of the kinds of caring and connected learning communities that may support long-term leadership success is indeed important. Additionally, rarely examined in such programs is the extent to which such connectedness, developed both in the program and post-graduation, contributes to our understanding of program success.

Discussion

Overview

Among the interviews with key informants, across all three groups, the CERD team found considerable agreement and praise regarding the overall mission and unique attributes characterizing SDSU's Educational Leadership Ed.D. program.

At the same time, many of the respondents revealed some seemingly inevitable challenges in achieving a satisfactory balance between differing objectives. These included diversity and insularity concerns which accompany the widely-praised (and mandated) regional recruitment and emphasis of the Ed.D. program. In consideration of this issue, faculty, students and community members all emphasized the ongoing need for active collaboration in ensuring that the Educational Leadership program remains vital and dynamic into the future.

It can be anticipated that many of the questions and concerns emerging at this very early stage of the program's existence will become more defined in the coming years. Additional opportunities are also likely to appear or become more pronounced.

This dynamic state of affairs underscores the need for developing a flexible, evolving evaluative design process informed and approved by students, faculty and community members. Members of each of the various groups expressed at least some interest in working with others in developing optimal evaluation instruments and design strategies.

Based on this abiding interest, it is appreciated that initial scaffolding with options for program development has been created by the inception of the Ed.D. program itself. An informational document published by the California State University emphasizes that this new professional doctorate in Education:

...explicitly aims to achieve high levels of quality and relevance—features not found consistently in Ed.D. programs in the past. There are several distinctive features of the new CSU professional doctorates in education that make them a *model for the nation*. (California State University, n.d.: 4)

Based on such considerations, as well as the totality of findings presented herein, three implications can be drawn. First, specific reporting requirements mandated by the SB 724 legislation and WASC standards aligned well with what has been found in this preformative study.

Second, based on resource availability combined with initially identified program needs, it is reasonable for program leaders to recommend that construction of the Ed.D. evaluation design draw from assessment instruments already developed by the Ed.D. Leadership program.

Finally, with resource availability, there exists the greater opportunity of developing ongoing evaluative instruments and designs which can effectively tap into a diverse range of opinion and experience in seeking to capture deeper, more nuanced perspectives of program quality. These are explored in the latter portion of the following section.

Emergent Evaluation Criteria

Several specific factors indicative of program quality emerged from our analysis of key informant data.

First, there was an interest in moving beyond traditional language regarding community partnerships. As many graduates will remain in the local community, it is important to assess the perceived quality of relations Ed.D. students make with their surrounding communities as well as the extent to which direct school/community partnerships are crafted and maintained. This might be evaluated from data concerning perceived quality and levels of ongoing participation in such relations and partnerships, such as steering committee meetings and individual perceptions regarding such collaborative efforts.

Second, academic rigor is of utmost importance. In this case as differentiated from Ph.D. programs, the practical application found in Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership is emphasized through development of change agency skills and specific corresponding elements, ultimately in support of the students they serve. These include assessing program quality through demonstrated sufficiency of group process and collaboration concerning a diverse constituency; critical thinking, problem solving and management skills using technology as appropriate; and each of these as supported by strong research skills. This might be studied through course evaluations in relevant areas, as well as using ongoing student self assessments as mediated by faculty observations.

The various skills of change agency can also be evaluated by expert faculty determinations of learning through existing data sources such as dissertation qualifying examinations, proposal defenses, dissertation defenses, program completion rates, and matriculation to higher levels of educational leadership during long term follow-ups.

Third, and rarely examined in doctoral program evaluations, the development of a caring, connected community of learners appears essential to program quality. Based on this, the extent of observed and/or demonstrated participant connectedness among cohort participants, both while in the program and post-graduation, represents criteria worthy of incorporating into an evaluation. This might include specific examinations of social psychological predictors of such connections, such as social influence research, attribution of change, or locus of control queries through survey studies.

Conclusions

In closing, by conducting this preformative evaluation CERD finds that SDSU has distinguished itself in contributing to a local and rational foundation for its evaluation design. Such a well-planned and implemented evaluation of the SDSU Educational

Leadership Ed.D. possesses considerable promise for continuing to effectively move the program forward.

Ideally, such efforts will capture the range of developed skills and opinions representative of students (both current and alumni), faculty and the concerned community. This will in turn, effectively inform an active process of constructive data-driven decision-making in the Educational Leadership program. The resulting analysis will hopefully offer a nuanced assessment of program progress with clear recommendations for consideration and program evolution.

Overall, by meeting required evaluation criteria, synthesizing existing data sources and, when possible, developing new rationally-based criteria for program self-study, the SDSU Educational Leadership Ed.D. will produce successful graduates while actively engaging the essential broader community in shaping program growth.

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