Example #1: Case study conducted by students enrolled in 791A (Spring 04)

Case Study Overview

It can take years to launch a doctoral program. Determining the terminal degree (Ph.D. or Ed.D.) is just the beginning. Key stakeholders need to articulate

- a rigorous course of study that ensures students' marketability upon graduation *and* adheres to guidelines advocated by the state agencies and professional organizations charged with program accreditation;
- key milestones and processes for measuring student progress/readiness for independent research;
- a time-frame that ensures students graduate in a timely fashion while allowing them to maintain productive/fulfilling family and professional lives; and
- policies and practices that are fair yet flexible--accounting for individual needs.

It's not surprising to learn that attrition rates within doctoral programs are high. According to Burnett (1999), doctoral programs can be very stressful, anxiety-producing, and occasionally isolating experiences. A number of factors contribute to these feelings. Demands on student time and juggling the responsibilities of home life, work, and school can be overwhelming (Miller & Irby, 1999). In addition, students venture into largely unfamiliar territory as they plan for, write, and defend the dissertation. The process lacks a familiar framework, and students often find it difficult to stay motivated.

Some program administrators opt to admit students in cohorts, believing that *group membership* can mitigate anxiety and stress among students while improving performance and time-management (Miller & Irby, 1999).

During the Spring 2004 semester, students enrolled in ED 791A conducted a case study focused on the first cohort admitted to the SDSU/USD Joint Doctoral Program (in Education).

Because they were the *first* group of students admitted, Cohort 1 (12 enrolled in the EdTec concentration, 10 focused on Teaching and Learning/Literacy) naturally suffered through some program growing pains. For example, they were affected by policies that weren't clear or weren't workable; they witnessed administrative change; and they completed a few courses that, in actual implementation, deviated from their original descriptions.

ED 791 has a long history of working with the SDSU-USD Joint Doctoral Program. Between Fall 2000 and Spring 2002, students enrolled during the Spring 2004 semester explored:

- reactions to the application process (including the interviews, orientation, etc.);
- communication issues (between/among students, with faculty, with program administrators); and

- faculty perceptions of the program (academic rigor, opportunities for project collaboration, etc.).

This particular task was fairly straightforward in terms of outcomes. Our data collection effort allowed us (and, ultimately, program administrators) to learn:

- more about students' career plans/professional aspirations;
- student perceptions of the program's academic rigor ... and how well courses prepared them for the future;
- how students "see" themselves as future educational leaders (academics, researchers);
- what skill sets/competencies students believe they've gained while enrolled--and their applicability;
- student perceptions of the cohort model; and
- students' ideas about ways to improve the program for future enrollees.

The investigation unfolded in four stages. In the first stage, each student researcher conducted an independent review of the literature, familiarizing himself/herself with evaluation processes (including methods for collecting data) *and* the key constructs of formative feedback and multicultural education. Then, in three- or four-person teams, the researchers

- conducted content analyses of core "documents" (the website and the Student Handbook) to which students had access once admitted to the program;
- administered a multi-part perceptual survey organized around the issues noted above; and
- interviewed three student volunteers to explore individual experiences as well as clarify (or expand on) survey results.

The following section summarizes research on one specific area of interest to the student investigators: the value attached to the terminal degree designation—Ed.D. vs. Ph.D.

Perspective and Historical Overview

Prospective doctoral students in education--like their peers seeking degrees in other disciplines--make program decisions by comparing logistics, residency and admission requirements, curriculum (required vs. elective courses, class size, the balance between traditional classes and fieldwork or internships, advancement to candidacy, publication or presentation mandates, etc.) and instructional strategies. Many also investigate differences in the terminal degree--Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) or Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.). Probing for distinctions between the two degrees is difficult, however. There is a surprising lack of agreement (among both researchers and practitioners) about the purpose of each degree, as well as which is most appropriate for specific career paths (Kolbert, Brendel, & Gressard, 1997). At one time the two degrees served distinct purposes; however, they have become more alike over the

years. Awareness of this issue is important because it can affect one's recognition in the field, marketability in the professional arena, or potential for career advancement.

The German university model was the archetype for Ph.D. programs in the United States, with the first doctoral dissertation completed at Yale University in 1861 (Nelson & Coorough, 1994). Historically the Ph.D. was offered by colleges of arts and sciences, and emphasized scholarly (basic) research; most graduates aspired to be university professors. Arts and science faculty grew alarmed when, by the early 1900s, the professional schools within their institutions became interested in granting the Ph.D. (Richardson & Walsh, 1978). Their concerns were fourfold. They:

- felt these schools were weak academically ... that courses didn't provide the "knowledge bases" suitable for the Ph.D.;
- objected to the research areas that these schools deemed suitable for the dissertation;
- disapproved of the tendency to use nontraditional research tools and techniques (including those with a more qualitative bend); and
- opposed waiving the foreign language requirement (Richardson & Walsh).

Still, the movement moved forward. The Harvard Graduate School of Education was the first to grant the Ed.D. degree in the 1920s; faculty felt the program was on par with its Ph.D. counterparts, but best suited for the field-based practitioner (Nelson & Coorough, 1994). The Ed.D. focused on *application*--preparing leaders to examine and ultimately improve an array of educational practices (Deering, 1998; Townsend, 2002).

Even though it was designed to be equally rigorous, the Ed.D. was largely denigrated by the research community; by the 1960s, many saw it as a superfluous and inferior degree (Deering, 1998).

Careful study suggests, however, that the two degrees have become more alike over the years. Elements that once distinguished them as very different academic tracks (foreign language and residency requirements, comprehensive examinations, and research methods used in the dissertations) have all but disappeared. Richardson & Walsh (1978) reviewed a series of surveys administered at scores of institutions between 1960 and 1978 by staff affiliated with Phi Delta Kappa (PDK) and the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), and found that the number of Ph.D. programs mandating foreign language courses had dwindled dramatically while dissertation requirements were becoming strikingly similar. Results of the their own 1978 survey (a modification of the PDK/AACTE original) suggested that responding programs (regardless of terminal degree) had similar residency conditions, research/statistics prerequisites, and qualifying exams. A 1998 study conducting by Deering (involving 50 randomly selected universities from the Holmes Group's consortium of 96 universities with professional education programs) largely substantiated Richardson and Walsh's efforts--as did inquiries led by Nelson and Coorough (1994), Kolbert et al. (1997), and Townsend (2002).

Also disappearing is the distinction between *applied* research (where findings may be immediately applicable to the profession) and *basic* research (where the focus is on development and testing of theoretical models). Still, Nelson and Coorough's (1994) review of close to 2,000 dissertations (1,007 earning Ph.D.s and 960 Ed.D.s) did reveal that the Ed.D. dissertations relied heavily on descriptive approaches and analyses while the Ph.D. dissertations featured multivariable statistics and experimental or quasi-experimental designs.

Important to note is that two key differences in the degrees continue to lingers. The first is the *granting entity*. Despite growing curricular and research parity, Ph.D.s tend to be awarded by a university's *graduate college*, while Ed.D.s are generally awarded by a *college* or *school of education*. The second is how the degrees are promoted or marketed--with the Ph.D. targeting those who hope to focus on research and theory (and pursue faculty or research positions), and the Ed.D. those interested in serving as *educational leaders* (see, for example: the websites associated with The Pennsylvania State University/College of Education, Northern Illinois University/College of Education, University of Missouri/College of Education, and Wayne State University/College of Education).

Professional Acceptance of the Ed.D. and the Ph.D.

Stereotypic beliefs about the Ph.D. and Ed.D. abound. Kolbert et al. (1997) surveyed 127 program coordinators from 194 institutions offering counselor preparation, with results indicating a clear bias toward the Ph.D. About two-thirds of the respondents felt that the Ph.D. has a stronger research component; more than half, in fact, specifically noted (as a positive) the quantitative focus of most Ph.D. dissertations. A majority of respondents also believed that Ph.D. programs have more selective admission criteria.

Kolbert et al. also explored the potential for hiring bias by supplementing the surveys with a one-year review of job postings in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Although partiality toward the Ph.D. was hard to discern *in print* (93% of the 179 job postings requiring a doctorate *did not* specify a degree type), coordinators with hiring responsibilities told a slightly different story. Only seven indicated that they would absolutely refuse to interview an applicant with an Ed.D.. More revealing, however, was that respondents were *personally* ambivalent about the Ed.D. but *professional concerned* about its marketability and public perceptions of its value. On the whole, though, coordinators were far more concerned about the quality, reputation, and accreditation standing of the programs from which a counseling applicant graduated than the terminal degree itself.

Graduates' Perceptions of the Two Degrees

Regardless of the *type* earned, graduates tend to highly value their degree.

Nerad & Cerny (1999) examined 6,000 Ph.D.s from six degree-granting institutions; common among respondents was that they had all earned their degrees about a

decade earlier. The researchers' intent was to explore perceptions of the value of the Ph.D. and the gap, if any, between career goals and careers obtained.

- More than 80% of the respondents indicated that they had actively sought or were highly interested in tenure-track positions immediately after graduation However, only 53% of the this group *actually held* such positions 10 years later; many had moved into other career sectors (business, government and nonprofit). Some had found themselves unable to enter a saturated academic market, were forced to look elsewhere and then opted to remain in their "alternative" settings. Others resisted the urge to join institutions that were less "reputable" than those from which they had graduated. About 50% of the academic-track respondents who *currently* were tenured or close to tenure indicated taking lecturer or adjunct positions for up to three years before obtaining their academic appointments.
- Interestingly, despite the varied career paths, respondents' perception of the degree's value held firm. Many felt personally fulfilled and believed they had made substantive contributions to society--via teaching, researching, writing, and innovative business practices. Respondents were also satisfied professionally--regardless of the setting or environment in which they worked.

Survey research conducted in 2000 by California's Postsecondary Education Commission focused on the Ed.D. and the degree's popularity among educators (Townsend, 2002). More than 80% of the respondents, all *chief executive officers* in community colleges across the state, had earned a doctorate; not surprisingly, far more held the Ed.D. than the Ph.D. (46%). While the Ed.D. respondents noted several reasons for valuing their degree, they emphasized its marketability (i.e., its role in helping them obtain higher-paying and/or higher-level administrative positions). It made them credible; it established their professionalism and their leadership skills.

Conclusion

Debate about the two degrees continue, perhaps because the lines of demarcation are now so blurred. Deering (1998), for example, advocates for eliminating the Ed.D. and reallocating resources to strengthen the Ph.D. But Townsend (2002) calls for "configuring" the Ed.D. so that it no longer contains the Ph.D.'s three traditional components: courses, oral examination, and dissertation. While the "experts" struggle with definitions, real life goes on--and it appears that the terminal degree does not significantly affect professional options and career advancement opportunities.