

# Inquiry as Practice: The Pathway to Redesigning an Educational Leadership Doctoral Research Seminar Series

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## ABSTRACT

As faculty of an educational leadership doctoral program (EdD) aligned with the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) principles, we acknowledge the importance of inquiry to develop scholarly practitioners. Applying the tenet of Inquiry as Practice, our EdD faculty critically examined the doctoral curriculum to explore ways to effectively prepare our doctoral students to learn and apply research methodology meaningfully. This essay details how the review of our research curriculum led to a pedagogical and curriculum redesign of our research seminar series. This revised research seminar series culminates in a course offered every fall/spring semester in the final two years of the program and intentionally has different faculty members teaching each course. We have utilized a backward design to create the themes/content of these seminar courses to better prepare students for their dissertation research.

## KEYWORDS

*EdD, research seminar, CPED, backward design, dissertation, A.B.D., inquiry as practice, educational leadership*

With a mass exodus of executive position retirements looming (Stewart, 2016), the need for qualified leaders and change agents within the field of education has never been greater (Taylor & Youngs, 2018). This imminent leadership vacuum is not easily filled, as there is an expectation that today's educational leader holds a terminal degree and can research, assess, and evaluate their schools to improve student academic performance. Fortunately, this call for new leaders aligns with the increasing number of educators earning their doctoral degrees. The number of doctoral degrees awarded between 2000-2018 (both EdD and Ph.D.) in the United States has more than doubled (Snyder et al., 2019).

While educational leaders can choose between seeking a Ph.D. or EdD as a terminal degree for these purposes, it is becoming more common for educators to seek an EdD to prepare them to be scholarly practitioners and change agents. Reinforcing the benefit of EdD programs, Kerrigan and Hayes (2016) asserted that "the EdD is expected to develop existing practitioners into practitioner-researchers who can develop, implement, evaluate, and improve programs in their workplace based on empirical research" (p. 148).

While completing a doctoral program can be a transformative experience for students and strengthen their academic identities (Kriner et al., 2015), many doctoral students will need more time to

complete their degrees. This attrition creates an emotional toll on the student and an economic burden on the institution (Gardner, 2009) and society (Kelley & Salisbury-Glennon, 2016). To avoid this outcome, McBrayer et al. (2018) reminded us that doctoral programs play a significant role in the ultimate success of their students, and "[t]here is a need for doctoral programs to engage in continual reform to better meet the needs of our constituents" (p. 429). Acknowledging that a substantial number of students in doctoral programs will pass their course work but stall out at the dissertation phase, there is a calling for doctoral faculty to examine their curriculum and support structures to ensure students have the academic scaffolding needed to be successful in their dissertation work. At the heart of the dissertation process is the ability to develop a research study based on sound research methodology and design.

To that end, this essay aims to detail how the faculty of an EdD program used the framework of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) to redesign their research seminar series. By redesigning our research seminar series, we may better prepare students for the rigor and self-directed nature of dissertation study. We believe the foundations of these students' doctoral studies, both the content and research methods courses, should provide the scaffolding to propel them to complete their dissertation research



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



This journal is supported by the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate: A Knowledge Forum on the EdD (CPED) [cpedinitiative.org](http://cpedinitiative.org)

[impactinged.pitt.edu](http://impactinged.pitt.edu)  
Vol. 8, No. 2 (2023)

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)  
DOI 10.5195/ie.2023.329



successfully. However, this is not the case for many doctoral students, both in our program and in programs nationally. Acknowledging this concern, this essay addresses the question: Why are our students successfully navigating through their doctoral coursework and candidacy exam yet remain all but dissertation (ABD)? Our faculty address this question by proposing a revised research seminar series.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Recognizing the privilege and responsibility that doctoral programs have in shaping the identities of scholarly practitioners, it is imperative for faculty to assess their program's curriculum and pedagogical practices continually (Hall & Burns, 2009). As our faculty redesigned the research seminar series of our EdD program, we grounded our efforts in the knowledge and lessons learned from other colleagues and scholars, specifically those focused on the CPED tenets. Subsequently, we provide a brief insight into this literature which helped shape our redesign efforts. This abridged literature review begins by expressing the need for EdD programs in the professional preparation of educators and how CPED helps guide our efforts. We then explore the alarming rate of doctoral students who ultimately do not complete their degrees – stopping out at the dissertation stage of the program and remaining ABD. The literature review culminates in the calling for the (better) preparation of doctoral students to conduct scholarly practitioner research, which is at the heart of our redesign of the research seminar series.

### Educational Leadership Doctoral Programs – Professional Preparation

Knowledge dissemination and application are paramount in higher education as working professionals gravitate toward teaching, research, and administration (Friesen & Jacobsen, 2021). Obtaining a doctorate in educational leadership catalyzes the careers of educators, administrators, and scholarly practitioners. Educational leadership doctoral programs also enhance the skills of strategic thinking and planning, applying evidence-based research to practice and incorporating equity and social justice objectives in leadership role qualifications (Ivankova & Stick, 2007).

EdD programs prepare aspiring practitioners, while Ph.D. programs prepare aspiring faculty members (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). Mid-career professionals working toward career growth at institutions benefit from EdD programs (Caboni & Proper, 2009). Successful EdD programs exemplify practice-focused and practitioner-oriented models of knowledge dissemination and application (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). These effective tactics foster the development of problem-solving skills and the applicability of evidence-based research. No matter the orientation, Ph.D. and EdD programs in educational leadership intentionally promote scholarship and practice in education.

### Carnegie Project on Educational Doctorates (CPED)

Acknowledging the intentionality to support scholarship and application to practice in education is one of the tenets of CPED. Subsequently, CPED prioritizes a practitioner-focused approach toward preparing aspiring educational leaders to foster lasting and meaningful impact in education domains (CPED, n.d.). The CPED framework incorporates values such as diversity, learning,

partnership, and social justice into shaping effective scholarly practice (Hoffman & Perry, 2016). CPED defines the education doctorate through an application lens, where disseminated knowledge is utilized for the profession's advancement (CPED, n.d.). CPED principles guide the work of doctoral faculty as they shape educational leaders. Doctoral faculty also capitalize on the bountiful benefits through their association/membership with CPED, as networking, ideas for curriculum development, conversation, and faculty development are among its vast merits (Gardner, 2009). CPED also provides a medium for collaborative efforts of faculty, practitioners, and administrators who meet to understand the needs and concerns of P-20 leaders and their constituents (CPED, n.d.). By articulating the attributes of an effective scholarly practitioner, CPED advocates for these guiding principles and frameworks to improve doctoral education.

To truly understand the value of CPED, scholarly practitioners need to recognize its significance beyond academia. Doctoral education in education has long been criticized for its lack of relevance to the needs and goals of professionals, often prioritizing theory over practical application (Buss, 2019). In response, CPED has implemented a practice-oriented dimension to doctoral education, emphasizing research and collaboration with educational institutions to address these critiques. For doctoral education to effectively prepare practitioners for the realities of the educational landscape, it must prioritize a curriculum relevant to their needs. By incorporating the principles of CPED, researchers can ensure that their findings have a tangible impact on education practice (Buss, 2019). By emphasizing a practice-oriented approach to research, CPED ensures that educational research is rigorous, relevant, and impactful, ultimately leading to improved educational outcomes (CPED, n.d.).

### Alarming Rate of Doctoral Completion

While the principles of CPED strive to improve doctoral education and develop scholar-practitioners (CPED, n.d.), McBrayer et al. (2018) pointed out, “[t]he time to complete a doctoral degree is an ongoing concern in the higher education arena” (p. 414). According to Berman and Ames (2015), approximately 20% of all graduate students pursue doctoral degrees, but 70% do not advance to graduation. About half of all doctoral students in education fields fail to complete their degrees (Ames et al., 2018; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012). While many of these students may get through the coursework in their doctoral program, about 20-30% of their academic journeys end when they opt out at the dissertation stage (Berman & Ames, 2015). This attrition may occur due to a variety of reasons, including issues with work-life balance, shifts in careers and employers, unclear academic expectations, academic burnout, academic isolation, and lack of preparedness for the demands and rigor of dissertation work (Breitenbach, 2019; Lake et al., 2018; Mullen, 2012). Additionally, pressures to meet enrollment goals often lead to the admission of students who lack the academic ability to be successful in a doctoral program (McConnell, 2015).

### Preparation of Doctoral Students to Conduct Research

As we look to strengthen the academic abilities of doctoral students, there should be a focus on their ability to conduct research. Focusing on students' ability to conduct research aligns with CPED's (n.d.) emphasis on creating scholarly practitioners in education and supports students toward degree completion because most EdD

programs require traditional dissertations for their final projects (Foster et al., 2023). The ability to conduct a research project independently has been a consistent, critical part of doctoral programs, with the dissertation process being the most distinguishing aspect (Thomas et al., 1986). The goal of our EdD program is aligned with the work of Golde (2005), in which we strive to aid our students in moving from novice researchers to expert researchers to create change around educational reform. Scholarly practitioners should be able to engage in inquiry activities to solve problems of practice, including deciphering, debating, and designing solutions to these challenges in education (Hochbein & Perry, 2013). Specifically, scholarly practitioners must consume research and obtain the skills to employ knowledge by applying theory to practice. Arslan-Ari et al. (2018) noted that action research is vital for scholarly practitioners as each research course they take furthers their knowledge and strengthens their academic skillset. The need to prepare doctoral students to be scholar practitioners who can meaningfully engage in research supports redesigning our research seminar series. We aim to strengthen the focus on action research to solve problems of practice and improve time to degree completion.

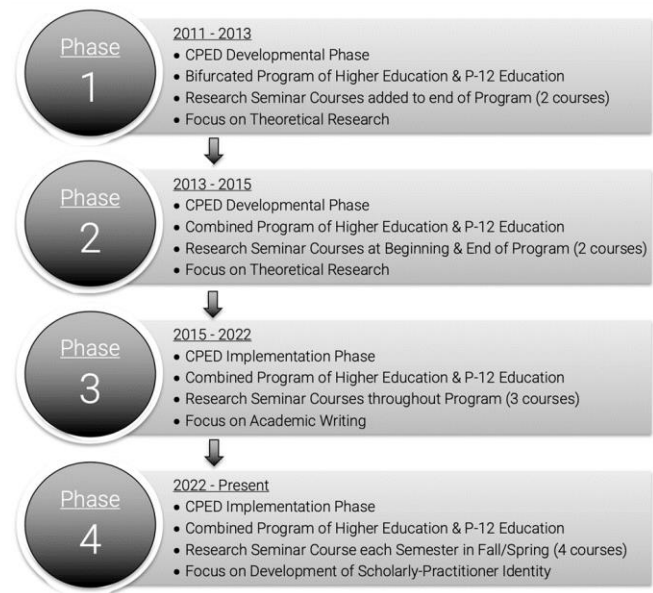
### Educational Leadership Program Redesign

Levine (2005) provided a scathing critique of EdD programs, and universities have been challenged to reimagine and redesign their programs (Perry, 2012; Shulman, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006). Doctoral programs in educational leadership have been criticized for lacking academic rigor, necessitating calls for program redesign and reform (Maranto et al., 2010; Zirkel, 2012). This criticism partly stems from the blurred differentiation in the fundamental differences between a Ph.D. and EdD (Goldring & Schuermann, 2009). Our EdD program has addressed this calling for reform by aligning our program with the CPED framework and principles to develop scholarly practitioners. To give context to our program and redesign of the research seminar series, it should be noted that our EdD program is 69 credits, and coursework is broken down into three tiers. In Tier I, students are required to complete 30 graduate semester hours post-masters. In Tier II, students complete an additional 30 graduate semester hours in a sequential mode over two years. After passing their candidacy exams, students move to the program's dissertation phase, Tier III.

While this educational leadership doctoral program underwent several iterations of redesign over its lifetime, each change focused on the framework suggested by CPED. Our EdD program has undergone four phases of redesign (Figure 1). Phase 1 focused on theoretical research, with a traditional five-chapter dissertation serving as the culminating activity for the P-12 and higher education students, who were in separate cohorts at the time. In Phase 2, emphasis was placed on more heavily embedding the tenets of CPED into the program and preparing scholarly practitioners. This phase also combined our bifurcated P-12 and Higher Education cohorts into one seamless group of P-20 educational leaders. In Phase 3, we fully embraced the CPED model, with an intentional focus on writing the first three chapters of the dissertation. After waiting several years to evaluate this phase, the faculty noticed that while our students continued to advance through their coursework, some lost momentum once they reached the dissertation stage and progress stalled. Both students and program faculty recognized that the obstacles to progression seemed concentrated in two areas: weakness in academic writing and comprehension of action-based

research. While these students may have had three chapters, they lacked an understanding of how their problems of practice could translate to meaningful studies. Our vision to engage in continued program redesign to strengthen the effectiveness of our program led us to our most recent redesign, Phase 4. This phase emphasized understanding the research and academic writing processes to address time to degree completion.

**Figure 1. The Phases of the Redesign of the EdD Program Since the Phase 1 Design in 2011**



### INQUIRY AS PRACTICE AS THE PATH TO PROGRAM REDESIGN

As faculty of an EdD program aligned with the principles of CPED, we acknowledge the importance of inquiry in the work we do within our doctoral program to develop scholarly practitioners to become change agents within P-20 education. As we think about our commitment to the inquiry process in our EdD program, we must remember that Inquiry as Practice plays a role in the courses we teach and the work we do as faculty who develop, coordinate, and lead EdD programs. Hoffman and Perry (2016) remind us of the importance of inquiry, asserting:

Inquiry is an undeniable component of any educational process and crucial to doctoral study. In the case of the CPED-influenced EdD, however, inquiry has special meaning. Inquiry as Practice is a process targeted toward improvement of practice through an examination of applicable questions and the development of relevant solutions. (p. 20)

Applying this Inquiry as Practice tenet, our EdD faculty critically examined the doctoral curriculum to explore ways to prepare our doctoral students to learn and apply research methodology meaningfully. This systematic review of our research curriculum led to a pedagogical and curriculum redesign that spawned a dedicated research seminar course each semester in Tier II of the program over a two-year period.



## RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES REDESIGN

Acknowledging the dishearteningly high national estimates of students who will not complete their doctoral degree (Ames et al., 2018; Berman & Ames, 2015; Spaulding & Rockinson-Szapkiw, 2012), our Inquiry of Practice focuses on the factors preventing our students from completing their dissertation stage, while also helping them successfully navigate their coursework leading up to it. As our faculty revisited the curriculum, it became apparent that more emphasis was needed to prepare our students to be active researchers who are better informed about developing, conducting, writing, reading for comprehension, and presenting dissertation research as scholarly practitioners. We initially believed we covered all aspects needed for student success, including educational leadership content, research methods, and the connection of these two areas via a seminar series. However, as our faculty discussed our perception of students who had stalled/stopped out of our program, it became clear that our research seminar series was the obvious piece that could hold the promise to address our students' needs for additional preparation.

Like many EdD programs, our EdD is designed for students to complete the dissertation phase (Tier III) in as little as three semesters (one academic year). However, our faculty acknowledge that six semesters (two academic years) is a more realistic timeline for most students. Anecdotal evidence from our program suggests that less than half of students who move beyond ABD status and successfully defend their dissertation will do so in two years or less. That means most of our students take between three to five years to defend their dissertation (not to mention the significant number who will never defend, remain ABD, or time out of the program). Acknowledging this necessitated our faculty to explore mechanisms to decrease the time-to-completion of dissertation defenses (seeking our desired one-to-two-year timeline to do so) and, even more importantly, address our students who permanently remain ABD.

Locke and Boyle (2016) suggest that more than half of educational leadership graduate students are in this ABD position. Redesigning our research seminar series actively addresses the academic preparation our students need to ebb their ABD rate and expedite their time to complete their dissertations. The redesign was informed by insights from our faculty and doctoral students, who collectively shared challenges in academic writing, scholarly practitioner research skills, and reading comprehension. Subsequently, multiple revisions have been made to our research seminar series over the last decade, which evolved from a two-course series to a four-course series offered throughout Tier II of the program (McBrayer et al., 2018). At the heart of these ongoing revisions has been the recognition that action-oriented research and academic writing shortcomings are our doctoral students' primary areas of difficulty. The most recent iteration of the research seminar series included the following course offerings:

- Research Seminar I was offered in the fall semester (year 1). In this seminar, students drafted the first half of chapter one for their dissertation manuscripts (introduction through the significance of the study).
- Research Seminar II was offered in the summer semester (year 2). In this seminar, students drafted chapter two for their dissertation manuscripts (literature review).
- Research Seminar III/IV was a combined course in the final spring semester (year 2). This seminar allowed students to

focus exclusively on developing their dissertations, particularly the materials needed for their pre-prospectus defense (chapter one of the traditional dissertation).

As our faculty critically examined this curriculum design and when the courses were being offered, we pondered whether there was a better way to develop our doctoral students to successfully defend their pre-prospectus and support them throughout their entire dissertation process. Our assessment of this curriculum helped us draw a few conclusions which would ultimately help redesign the research seminar series. The first was to rethink when and how we offered the research seminar courses (Table 1). We decided to offer a seminar each fall/spring semester and to pair it with either a research methods or leadership content course. We opted not to have a seminar course during the summer term because it was abridged due to the shortened summer session. In addition, we deliberately did not want to have two seminar courses in one semester, instead spreading them out to serve as a scaffold throughout Tier II.

**Table 1. The Course Sequence of when the Research Seminar Series Courses are Offered in the Program's Previous Iteration Versus the Newly Redesigned Course Sequence**

		Previous Iteration	Newly Redesigned Course Sequence
1	Fall	Research Seminar 1	Research Seminar 1
	Spring	-	Research Seminar 2
	Summer	Research Seminar 2	-
2	Fall	-	Research Seminar 3
	Spring	Research Seminar 3 & 4	Research Seminar 4

Secondly, we wanted to expose our doctoral students to the wealth of resources provided by each of our graduate faculty. Subsequently, we established the expectation that a different faculty member would teach each of these newly redesigned research seminar courses so our students could learn research insights from faculty with varied expertise. Lastly, and most importantly, we were intentional in what content each redesigned seminar course would offer. Similar to the process of Weiler and Lomotey (2022), we utilized a "backward design to develop, align, and assess curriculum and pedagogy with those outcomes, including scholarly learning experiences (rigor in research) and the elicitation of students' critical thinking (rigor as complexity)" (p. 124). The intention was to develop the central themes for each newly redesigned research seminar course (Table 2). These newly developed themes for each of the research seminar courses are substantial and fundamental changes to the curriculum and pedagogy of each course. As of Fall 2022, the redesign of Research Seminar 1 and a pilot test of Research Seminar 3 were being taught. The syllabi for these courses can be viewed at <https://tinyurl.com/CPED-article>.

## RESEARCH SEMINAR SERIES REDESIGN: SUCCESSES AND CHALLENGES

Like many doctoral programs, our faculty have observed that our students have the academic ability to complete their terminal degrees readily. With few exceptions, our students excel in their coursework. They successfully defend their candidacy exams before beginning their dissertation journeys and immersing themselves in the academic world of research in the last phase of the final



**Table 2. Description of the Redesigned Research Seminar Series in Tier II of the EdD Program**

Research Seminar 1	Fall (Year 1)	<b>Introduction to Doctoral Studies and the Dissertation Journey.</b> Topics include developing a fundamental working understanding of Problems of Practice, theoretical and conceptual frameworks, dissertation manuscripts versus defenses, dissertation manuscript components, and dissertation alternative formats
Research Seminar 2	Spring (Year 1)	<b>Literature Review.</b> Completing an annotated bibliography, developing a literature review matrix, critiquing scholarship, and identifying and finalizing a Problem of Practice and theoretical framework
Research Seminar 3	Fall (Year 2)	<b>Research Questions and Research Design.</b> Critiquing quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods research articles; and developing quantitative and qualitative research questions and research design proposals that can be used to explore their Problems of Practice
Research Seminar 4	Spring (Year 2)	<b>Pre-Prospectus.</b> Preparation for the candidacy exam, finalizing their Problem of Practice and research questions, and drafting their Pre-Prospectus document

dissertation. The foundations of these students' doctoral studies, both the content and research methods courses, are intended to provide them with the knowledge and skills necessary to complete their dissertation research. However, this outcome was not the case for many of our doctoral students, leading our faculty to posit the following question: If our students are struggling to finish their dissertation research, what can we do as a program to help scaffold their learning during coursework in a way that can help propel them to completion?

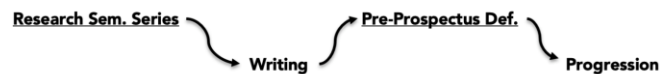
To address this adaptive challenge meaningfully, our faculty ascribed to the Inquiry as Practice principle and critically examined our program's curriculum and pedagogical practices. This inquiry started with a shared observation and evolved into a collaborative dialogue among our program's faculty. We discussed our practices and explored national efforts to address the high attrition rate of EdD students at the dissertation stage. Similar to the experiences of Coaxum et al. (2022) and Gillham et al. (2019), we found CPED's framework to be a common thread to serve as a guiding resource for the development of scholarly practitioners and the focus on a Dissertation in Practice (DiP) model. Our faculty held firm to the commitment to developing educators to be scholarly practitioners who would not only be consumers of knowledge but would continue to add to the literature base to inform the work of other educators, practitioners, and scholars. As we acknowledged many of our students' shortcomings regarding their research preparation, we collectively agreed we needed to address this within our curriculum and immediately looked to redesign our research seminar series.

An inherent challenge in making a significant change to any academic program is the faculty investment in the current model. Any change can be difficult, especially when navigating the political terrain of colleagues' egos, the skepticism of the ability for small programmatic changes to make a significant impact, and avoiding the all-too-common pitfalls of this is how we have always done it or that is how we did it in my doctoral program. EdD programs may also struggle with faculty and academic administrators being mentally locked into a Ph.D. model way of thinking (Friesen & Jacobsen, 2021). However, one of our greatest resources as EdD programs is our affiliation with CPED and the commitment to reimagining our doctoral programs, their purpose, and the curriculum. At the forefront is the commitment to developing scholarly practitioners who will serve as change agents in education. This shared commitment, and

the excitement around it, enabled our faculty to avoid these inherent challenges in the change process and instead ask the question, What if? What if we tried this? What if we support our students in another way to see if it helps them to succeed? What if...?

Our faculty's answer to this question, What if, led us down the unified path of redesigning our research seminar series. This redesign now gives our students more time, resources, and support to develop research skills for their dissertation studies. We fully anticipate a richer experience for students and their identities as scholarly practitioners. While we are in the first year of implementing this redesigned curriculum, we are already finding it fruitful in our conversations with our doctoral students inside and outside the classroom. These richer experiences address the calling by other colleagues and scholars to incorporate the dissertation processes earlier into coursework to better equip doctoral students for their dissertation research (Leach et al., 2020). To that end, we expect we will see gains in the quality of our students' writing at the dissertation stage and yield greater numbers of students defending their dissertation at the pre-prospectus stage, improving overall progression and time to degree completion (Figure 2). The strengthening of the research seminar series will be reflected in the quality of students writing and overall knowledge of research methodology as they progress towards defending the pre-prospectus defense. This will lead to students being (more) successful in their pre-prospectus defense and catalyze progression as they move onto the prospectus phase of their dissertation.

**Figure 2. Logic Model of the Anticipated Impact of Revised Research Seminar Series on Dissertation Progression**



### PROGRAM EVOLUTION – NEXT STEPS AND FUTURE (RE)DESIGNS

Shepherd et al. (2016) remind us that our educational leaders need to be better prepared to meet their ever-evolving roles and the growing demands thrust upon them as academic leaders. To that end, establishing their identity as scholarly practitioners through their EdD program provides them with the much-needed skills and resources to succeed in these leadership roles. Our EdD programs are responsible to our doctoral students and, more importantly, the educational communities they serve. We must keep striving to develop our programs further and, in turn, (further) strengthen the educators and scholarly practitioners we help produce. As our program continues to commit to innovate and look ahead to the future, the following next steps are on our horizon:

- Utilizing the crosswalk provided by Phillips et al. (2018) to develop a curriculum map that aligns course outcomes with CPED's guiding principles and framework
- Redesign of the pre-prospectus defense format to expedite students having engaged in scholarly conversations with their dissertation committee earlier in the process
- Intentionally moving away from traditional five-chapter dissertations associated with the Ph.D. and meaningfully adopting alternative dissertation formats



- Connecting pieces from each research seminar course to the student's ultimate pre-prospectus as a mechanism for scaffolding
- Redesign our candidacy exam to be a better indicator of students' abilities to successfully navigate their imminent dissertation and connect the candidacy exam prompt directly to the student's intended dissertation topic as another mechanism for scaffolding

## CONCLUSION

There is a clear need to address doctoral students' completion rates and ABD status (Brietenbach, 2019). We can better prepare our students through the research seminar series and scaffold the knowledge needed to conduct their research. In doing so, it will have a ripple effect on their dissertation completion and graduation rates. Our faculty challenged one another to explore how we could better cultivate a culture of research and help our students view inquiry as a means of practice. Careful assessment and reevaluation of our program revealed opportunities in the curriculum, notably our research seminar series, where we could provide our students additional support to become well-practiced scholarly practitioners. Redesigning our research seminar series will better provide the scaffolding students need at the dissertation stage. Not only will this redesign begin to address the vexing number of students who remain ABD, but it will also have a rippling impact on P-20 education, as these newly minted doctors of education "are prepared to effect change in their organizations and respond to the many and often conflicting demands of their constituents" (Stark, 2019, p. 40).

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