

From Reacting to Re-imagining: Using Pandemic Adaptations for Program Advancement

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ABSTRACT

In this practice-based essay, we illustrated how our program, a charter member of The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) and a recipient of a CPED Program of the Year Award in 2018, has moved from reacting to pandemic-era needs, to reflecting on pandemic-era adaptations, to re-imagining our EdD program. Focusing on three areas: program growth, changes to students' professional contexts, and student well-being, we have reflected on our pandemic-era experiences and how we have drawn upon them as we re-imagined and advanced our program. We have included reflective questions for program coordinators and faculty members, with the hope that the information we have shared can help others consider how they might re-imagine aspects of their programs.

KEYWORDS

pandemic, program re-imagination, student well-being, EdD programs

The COVID-19 pandemic had a profound impact on various facets of our EdD program. Our students encountered disruptions in their professional lives as workplaces underwent substantial changes. Moreover, the pandemic altered the landscape of work itself, compelling students to adapt to remote environments while learning and employing new tools for their practitioner and researcher efforts. These disruptions had a cascading effect on students' Dissertation in Practice (DiP) endeavors.

Connected to, but somewhat distinct from the scholarly practitioner realm, the pandemic deeply affected the well-being of our academic community. As disease, isolation, and fear took hold, the mental, social, and physical health of students, faculty, and staff plummeted. Although individuals grappled with the pandemic's impact in distinct ways, collectively, we found ourselves struggling to maintain the routines of daily life, work, and school.

Despite the global disruptions to educational systems and various aspects of daily life caused by the pandemic, our program experienced unexpected enrollment during this challenging period. While experiencing these challenges, our program reacted with pandemic-era adaptations. Although reactionary changes are no longer needed, many have served as opportunities for re-imagining our EdD program.

In the essay, we have focused on three key areas that were affected in our program during the pandemic and how we are using

each to re-imagine our program moving forward. Those areas were (a) program growth, (b) changes to students' professional contexts, and (c) student well-being. We have described each of these areas in the next sections of the essay.

EDD PROGRAM CONTEXT

We have designed our EdD in Leadership and Innovation program at Arizona State University to develop scholarly and influential practitioners who can lead change and improve practice in their professional workplace settings. In particular, four program outcomes have guided our work with students as we sought to foster program graduates' (a) leading in their settings, (b) innovating to resolve local problems of practice, (c) conducting practice-based research, and (d) collaborating with others in these efforts. To facilitate the attainment of these outcomes, faculty members have implemented program components such as cycles of action research and leader scholar communities (LSCs), two signature pedagogies of the program (Buss, 2018; Buss & Allen, 2020; Shulman, 2005; Shulman et al., 2006). Additionally, we have organized and implemented program delivery using a cohort structure, focused coursework on leadership, innovation, change, and action research, linked coursework to students' professional work, and required students to conduct action research on their own problems/issues in



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their workplaces. Leadership, innovation, change, and action research have been pervasive aspects of our EdD program.

PROGRAM GROWTH DURING THE PANDEMIC

Our program was launched in 2006 and graduated its first group of students in 2009. Since that time, we have graduated over 360 students from our program. As it was initially envisioned, the program was designed to admit and enroll 20-22 students per year and involve 60-70 students over a three-year period. These students would continue to work in their professional roles in K-12 settings, higher education, and other informal educational settings. After nine years of operating at this level, in 2015 the program was expanded to include online offerings to cohorts of students. With the addition of the online offerings, the program began growing. It expanded from enrolling 20-22 students per year to enrolling 60-66 students each year with a concomitant increase of faculty members to deliver the program and advise students as they conducted their dissertations.

As the pandemic was wreaking havoc on educational systems everywhere, our program experienced unexpected growth. In Spring 2020 and Fall 2020, in the midst of the pandemic, we received more applications than normal and admitted double the number of qualified students, 80 instead of 40. This was consistent with Arizona State University's charter to accept all qualified applicants and provide them with opportunities and support as they pursued doctoral education. Additionally, we were asked to engage internationally with a cohort of 18 students from a university in South America and a cohort of seven students funded by a special education training grant. As a result, during the pandemic, we went from offering one section per course each semester to as many as three sections per course (with individual cohorts of about 20 students enrolled in a dedicated course section) each semester. It also meant as we have explained below, we needed additional DiP instructor-chairs. Like any problem, this also afforded us an opportunity. We responded to this problem by reviewing our efforts and adapting them to meet students' and program needs in the short term and revising and re-imagining the program in the long term.

Reacting to Program Growth during the Pandemic

We quickly integrated more faculty members into the program to serve as instructors and DiP chairs. We hired a student advisor to work solely with the students in our EdD program, moving away from the previous model in which the student advisors in our college supported students across all doctoral programs. We hired an additional full-time clinical professor who served as a faculty advisor to the special South American cohort, taught classes for the program, and became a DiP instructor-chair. We also hired new adjunct faculty members as lead and co-instructors to aid in delivering courses to the growing number of students. Most courses were led by two instructors—a lead or primary instructor and a co-instructor. Two instructors in each course allowed for substantive and critical feedback to be provided to students in a timely and professional way. Notably, the soaring enrollment and the need for additional faculty and staff members revealed systemic changes were warranted. As new students, faculty, and staff were brought on quickly, the infrastructure to promote and sustain quality experiences for our students needed to be created just as fast.

Some of the reactionary practices we implemented during the pandemic included utilizing course coordinators, faculty members who designed and typically taught a course, in more strategic ways. We asked course coordinators to create and disseminate instructor guides which included course overviews, module breakdowns, integration of program outcomes, and examples of student feedback for various experiences across each course. The guides were instrumental in helping to quickly bring instructors on board for the new courses they were teaching. We also asked course coordinators to facilitate regular meetings with full-time and adjunct lead and co-instructors teaching the same courses across each semester. Paired with the instructor guides, these meetings promoted collaboration and discussion about course content, experiences, and student learning and provided new faculty members teaching in the program with powerful resources and consistent support opportunities.

The LSC experience, a hallmark of our program, has been employed since the beginning of our program to support students as they developed, conducted, and wrote about their DiPs. Each LSC has been composed of a faculty member who served as the instructor-chair and worked closely with a group of six to seven students guiding and directing their dissertation work during the final two years of the program. During that time, instructor-chairs held regular meetings of the LSC as students developed an action research DiP including writing and defending a proposal, implementing their action research work, gathering and analyzing data, and writing and defending their final DiP. During the pandemic, the number of LSC instructor-chairs grew from eight during pre-pandemic Fall 2019 to 32 in Fall 2022. Many of the LSC instructor-chairs brought on during the pandemic were unfamiliar with the program, with the concept of a DiP, and were new to mentoring EdD students.

Notably, the LSC has been a four-semester commitment in which the instructor-chair and students established and maintained close working relationships while the instructor-chair supported students in developing, implementing, and writing their DiPs. Thus, bringing on new faculty members to serve as LSC instructor-chairs necessitated a high degree of faculty onboarding and ongoing support. In an attempt to onboard and support LSC instructor-chairs, during the 2021-22 academic year, we began to hold monthly LSC instructor-chair meetings. For an hour at the start of each month, all LSC instructor-chairs were invited to a virtual meeting during which we would spend the first 30 minutes going over general questions and ideas related to the action research process and the DiP. Then, we would spend 30 minutes in break-out rooms. LSC mentors met with other LSC instructor-chairs supporting students at the same point in their dissertation journeys—LSC 1, LSC 2, LSC 3, or LSC 4—to facilitate discussions. These meetings were a good first step in supporting new faculty members' service as LSC instructor-chairs, but we quickly realized that each of the four semesters of the LSC had individual needs and questions and required more support. Thus, we added information and resources to course shells to serve as repositories of information relevant to each semester.

Re-imagining the Program Based on What We Learned from Program Growth during the Pandemic

We have continued to work with faculty members serving as course coordinators to create and refine instructor guides. We have been engaged in considering how to effectively use co-instructors in



courses. As course coordinators met with course instructors and collected information about courses, we have been using those data to further inform alignment across the program, reimagine the order of courses, and see where and how we can improve course experiences for students and faculty members. During the LSC instructor-chair meetings, we learned about what the program was doing well to prepare students for their DiPs and what they lacked in curriculum content and research experiences. These informal conversations advised our thinking about course content and made us begin reimagining how LSC cohorts were created. We also learned about the importance of providing support to LSC instructor-chairs themselves. The monthly meetings and the LSC instructor-chair mentors have helped to create a community among the LSC instructor-chairs that has become a space in which to safely ask questions and share successes and problems they were having as DiP dissertation instructor-chairs.

Reflective Questions about Dealing with Growth for Program Leaders and Faculty Members

1. What tensions have you been experiencing as your program has grown?
2. What current supports have you put in place to onboard new faculty /staff/students?
3. What opportunities have been *or* could be systemically built into your program to support faculty collaboration and faculty mentoring?

STUDENTS MAINTAINING, CHANGING, AND LOSING EMPLOYMENT DURING THE PANDEMIC

Across our program, from coursework through defending their DiPs, students have centered their work within their workplace, i.e., their local contexts. Notably, based on their leadership roles and experiences within their local contexts, students have identified a problem of practice (PoP) on which they engage through their DiPs. Students' knowledge of and familiarity with their local contexts support them in designing and implementing an intervention/innovation as they conduct practice-based research.

During the pandemic, our students experienced disruptions in their places of work. Some were moved into new roles or new departments within their workplaces. Some had to take a new job in a new context. Others lost their jobs and were not able to quickly, or ever, find another place of employment. Those who were able to maintain their job across the pandemic were also affected. The pandemic changed how work was conducted in employment contexts. Students found themselves working from home and having to learn and use new tools for conducting their work remotely. These pandemic-era disruptions to students' professional workplace settings and changes to work modalities, caused a myriad of disruptions to students' DiPs efforts.

Changes in where they worked or how they worked, for example, in the school/office or remotely, forced many of our students to change their PoPs and or to change their intervention/innovation design. In response to workplace changes, some students made minor revisions to their PoPs and moved forward readily during their program and dissertation journeys. By comparison, others engaged in much more substantive changes including having to redefine their PoPs later in their doctoral journey or be creative to continue research on a PoP while transitioning to

new workplaces. Almost all students had to make changes to their intervention/innovation design and data collection plans. These efforts entailed considerable flexibility on the part of students and faculty members, especially LSC instructor-chairs.

Reacting to Disruptions within Students' Professional Contexts

We have provided various examples illustrating the nature of these revisions. For example, during the pandemic, the institution essentially suspended in-person implementation of the innovation/intervention for dissertations and in-person data collection. These changes were readily accomplished by employing video-recorded modules to deliver the innovation/intervention, which were beneficial in terms of subsequent use and sustainability of the innovation/intervention. Notably, quantitative data were collected using online surveys, and qualitative data, generally interview data, were gathered using the audio feature of Zoom, which meant students had the benefit of transcript files being available from these interviews. Thus, these adaptations, albeit reactionary and often stressful for the student, actually supported students' efforts. Moreover, they afforded opportunities for the intervention/innovation to live on, providing ways to sustain the intervention/innovation.

Additionally, due to the pandemic, students employed Google Docs to support and document the implementation of their intervention/innovation across their DiP efforts. Several students used Google Docs as a means to gather participants' reflections and or create a space for virtual collaboration. Other students created online communities of practice using Slack as a means to provide online interaction and support to those participating in their intervention/innovation, which also served as another source of data for their DiPs.

By comparison, some students were obliged to make major changes such as changes from working with K-12 students and gathering data from them to working with teachers because students were much less accessible from home settings during the pandemic. And in studies where students were examining how K-12 teachers were delivering lessons, which were supposed to be in-person, students had to pivot to explore virtual lessons or later hybrid lessons, which required major revisions of their intervention/innovation implementation and data collection. These major revisions were not limited to K-12 settings. Students working in higher education and informal educational spaces and who had planned on implementing their intervention/innovation in person also were required to implement their action research virtually. Through all of these experiences, it became evident that faculty members offering coursework and LSC instructor-chairs supervising students' DiP work needed to allow for much more flexibility in how students defined the local context for their DiPs, revised or changed their PoPs, and conducted their practice-based research.

Re-imagining the Program Based on What We Learned from Disruptions within Students' Professional Contexts

In re-imagining our program, program leaders and faculty members have advocated for and supported greater flexibility for students' efforts as they developed their DiPs by creating opportunities for students to play with their dissertation ideas across the program. For example, students have been asked, allowed, and

encouraged to conduct cycles of research in contexts other than their workplace or conduct additional cycles of research to explore a new problem of practice or innovation within courses in the program or during the first semester of their LSC. Asking students to imagine other possibilities, provides experiences to fall back on if students need to change their PoPs or the innovative process for addressing a PoP.

Reflective Questions about Disruptions within Students' Professional Contexts

1. How has your program responded to students' needs for adaptations to their research as they experienced disruptions to their professional workplaces during the pandemic and subsequently?
2. What adaptations presented here might be helpful as you consider your program coursework and research experiences?

STUDENT WELL-BEING DURING THE PANDEMIC

During the pandemic, as disease, isolation, and fear set in, the mental, social, and physical well-being of students, faculty, and staff plummeted. Individually, we were experiencing the pandemic in distinct ways, and collectively, we were struggling to maintain life, work, and school routines. Programmatically, moving in-person courses online left our face-to-face students feeling disconnected. Our online students were craving more opportunities to connect with their peers about things within and beyond program learning. Our faculty and staff members were struggling to support students who, due to the pandemic, were experiencing multiple layers of compounding issues affecting their efforts in coursework and DiPs.

Reacting to Student Well-Being

In responding to the course delivery needs of students in our face-to-face program, our initial response was consistent with university directives. We migrated the delivery of our face-to-face courses to synchronous weekly Zoom class meetings with an asynchronous online component, which continued through the spring of 2021. Using Zoom in this way afforded opportunities for us to learn more about the synchronous delivery of coursework, and it hastened the deployment of a hybrid format that replaced face-to-face program delivery. Hybrid delivery afforded students greater flexibility and allowed the program to reach a broader state-wide audience as compared to a Phoenix-metro, area-based cohort. Moreover, the use of synchronous virtual discussions in these hybrid courses provided students and faculty members with connection opportunities weekly to support students' learning and well-being.

To respond to face-to-face students' perceptions of feeling disconnected, program faculty members offered regular time during Zoom class meetings for small group work and asked instructors to hold virtual office hours. Students also used Zoom to hold study group meetings or cohort meetings. Moreover, those students working on their dissertations met frequently with their LSC peers and instructor-chairs using Zoom. Students used various methods to connect with their peers such as Slack, private Facebook groups, and other social media platforms, and explored new tools for creating and sharing ideas related to their DiPs such as Miro.

Notably, it was not just our in-person students who were craving personal connections with others. During the pandemic, our online students desired more personal engagement with their peers because face-to-face interactions in which they typically had engaged at their workplaces were severely curtailed or eliminated. Online students, who before the pandemic preferred emails and asynchronous experiences, began to seek out opportunities to connect synchronously with faculty members, staff members, and fellow students via phone and video conferencing tools. During the pandemic, online students in one of our courses asked their instructor if they could conduct course discussion board activities in a new way. They proposed that instead of writing initial and peer response posts on the board, they meet with a group of classmates using Zoom and hold virtual conversations. Students would record these meetings and submit a link to their recorded conversations as evidence. The synchronous conversations extended students' learning in powerful ways because the discussions were more authentic, more effectively connected to their practices, and tended to be more thoughtful and thorough in scope. This student-initiated pedagogical shift provided opportunities for learning while simultaneously providing opportunities to connect with their peers. Students were grateful for these opportunities.

Before the pandemic, it was not out of the ordinary for students in the program to experience something that affected their coursework or DIP journey. For example, students might have changed jobs or needed to care for an elderly parent. Our faculty and staff members were accustomed to supporting students through these experiences. Nevertheless, during the pandemic, our students were not just experiencing one thing at a time that affected their doctoral education. Instead, the pandemic-era norm was that students were experiencing multiple layers of compounding issues all at the same time (S. Till, personal communication, June 8, 2023). For example, students were learning how to teach their high school curriculum remotely, supporting the remote/home school experiences for their children, and dealing with the death of loved ones all at the same time. Under such high stress and high anxiety, some students needed to step away from their studies or seek extensions on coursework or dissertation milestones.

Before the pandemic, program policies and practices supported students if they needed to take a leave of absence or more time to finish a course. As originally intended, students had to meet certain criteria to receive an extension for completing a course, i.e. students had to be in good standing in the course and have completed the majority of the coursework or get approval for a leave of absence, i.e. a student was experiencing a medical emergency, a natural disaster. During the pandemic, program faculty members offered more flexibility in when and how these practices were used. Across the pandemic, faculty members approved more incomplete and leave of absence requests than ever before. While providing more flexibility in the approval process was an easy and understandable thing to do. Normalizing these supports proved to be a harder task. Our students, much like most students in graduate school were high achievers and self-starters. They were used to handling multiple responsibilities successfully and with ease. In many instances, asking for and receiving help was a new experience for our students and one with which most were not comfortable.

Our faculty and staff members, advisors, and at times, other students in the program, worked collaboratively to offer counsel and support to students. For students who needed extra time to complete a course, faculty members worked with one another across



semesters to provide time and space for students to get caught up while not losing ground in the next semester's courses. Faculty members, while keeping course outcomes in mind, re-imagined how assignments in a course could be adjusted, i.e., combined or done differently so that students could complete a course. Supporting students in taking a leave of absence also necessitated some new practices. For students in the early stages of the program, before the start of the LSC-1, taking a semester off and returning later was relatively easy to manage. Although students who stepped away at this stage left their original cohort of peers, they joined a new cohort and through the remaining courses, were able to build friendships and support systems with their new peers.

Students taking a leave of absence after already completing LSC-1 required more care and attention. Because the LSC has been a small group of students who worked closely with one faculty member to develop, implement, and write their DiPs, the decision to step aside for a semester had greater consequences. LSC students typically had become very close with their small group of peers and on a tight timeline toward graduation. Convincing students that taking a leave during this phase of the program was a good idea and appropriate to their situation, was a harder sell. In response to the larger-than-normal number of students taking a leave of absence during their LSC experience, we modified our LSC structure and created LSC groups that were still led by one faculty member but that were made up of students from different cohorts and different stages in the LSC process. This adjustment afforded students the benefits that come from the LSC experiences: to build and sustain relationships with peers (Buss & Graves, 2021), to present and receive feedback on their work (Buss, 2022), and to receive academic, professional, and emotional support during their dissertation efforts (Buss, 2022; Buss & Allen, 2020). Similar to the flexibility we developed to deal with disruptions to students' professional work contexts, we became more flexible in responding to students' needs for completing coursework and/or taking a leave of absence. Keeping student well-being at the center of our efforts during the pandemic promoted successful, innovative practices for supporting students.

Re-imagining the Program Based on What We Learned about Student Well-Being during the Pandemic

Throughout the pandemic, we learned we could do more and do things differently to support our students and faculty members. We have been focusing on using humanizing language in our policies to support students in our program as they encounter life disruptions. For online students, we have been building opportunities for synchronous connections early on and throughout the coursework. We created a student advisory council so program students have an avenue for voicing concerns. A focus on well-being has been built into meetings, events, and courses.

As we considered the matter of students' well-being, we have been developing additional opportunities for students to interact with their peers. For example, we have modified our Doctoral Research Conference to include student-focused, student-led co-peer mentoring sessions that allow students to interact with one another in areas of their choice. Some of the co-peer mentoring sessions have been related to student well-being including sessions such as School, Work, and Life Balance and Practicing Self-Care. These sessions were specifically included to respond to students' expressed

concerns about being afforded more opportunities to connect with others in the EdD program. This modification to the Doctoral Research Conference has been implemented on a trial basis, and we have been gathering data on its effectiveness, which has been used to make refinements to the process.

Finally, we have continued to revisit and revise our practices and policies surrounding incompletes and leaves of absence. Although we may be post-pandemic, students in our program still have been in the process of building up their stamina for balancing work, life, and school. Some still have been experiencing stress and anxiety that began during the pandemic. Faculty and staff members and advisors in our program have continued to prioritize the socio-emotional well-being of our students through the addition of new support services and continuing the conversation around the well-being of our students and faculty and staff members.

Reflective Questions about Student Well-Being

1. What changes have been noticed regarding student well-being across the pandemic?
2. How has your program responded to student well-being during the pandemic and subsequently?
3. What adaptations presented here might be helpful as you consider supporting student well-being in your program?

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, we have benefitted from drawing on the theme of re-imagining our program to move beyond reactionary, pandemic-related, and rapid growth decision-making and onto considerations and adaptations related to program advancement. In the spring of 2023, the faculty program committee began to set aside large chunks of time for program re-imagination. We stepped away from day-to-day teaching and management of the program to think deeply about what we valued about the program, our core values. We considered what curriculum and learning experiences and practices related to our core values and what rapid growth, reactionary pandemic practices, and experiences had taught us.

To do this work, we mapped out our meetings for the semester and the objectives for our work together. We brought in an outsider to our program committee to help us see what we could not see as insiders. This individual had participated in the original design of the program in 2004-2006 but had not been associated with the program for over 10 years, and much had changed. She asked us questions we may not have thought to ask ourselves and sometimes made us uncomfortable and defensive. We surveyed students, alumni, and faculty about what to keep, what to cut, and what to add to the program. We discussed what had worked well during the pandemic and what we had learned about flexibility and addressing the well-being of our students and faculty members. We ended the semester with a statement of our core values, an analysis of the survey, and more work to do.

The pandemic pushed us to make changes quickly and to think differently about our program and our students. What we learned encouraged us to continually re-imagine and improve our program to meet the ever-changing needs of our students, faculty members, college, and community and to prepare for future growth. Taken together, responding to program growth and the pandemic provided opportunities for us to carefully consider how we might re-imagine our program to make it more powerful and effective.



We leave you with a few thoughts for your consideration as you think about re-imagining your programs.

- Set aside time beyond the usual meeting time for program reimagination including mapping out meetings for the year and determining objectives for the work you will undertake.
- Bring in outsiders to help you see what might be missing from your insider perspective.
- Engage in collaborative reflection on pandemic-era challenges, your program's reactions to those challenges, and which pandemic-era reactions you want to sustain and why.
- Survey current/former students and faculty members on ideas related to current program strengths and areas for improvement.
- Consider more flexibility for students including sequencing of their research efforts and allowing for abrupt changes in their local contexts and what that means in terms of their research work in your program.
- Incorporate a focus on student well-being while designing program adaptations.
- Revisit and revise your program's core values to reflect any post-pandemic insights.
- As you engage in re-imagining work, keep your core values close and ground all your decisions in your values.

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