Promising Features of EdD Leadership Programs:

Findings from an Exploratory Narrative Literature Review

Sandra Jones Legay ⓘ
New Jersey City University
sjoneslegay@gmail.com

Christine Harrington
Morgan State University
christine.harrington@morgan.edu

ABSTRACT

The EdD leadership degree is needed to provide future college or university presidents with the training and background needed to pursue and succeed in the presidential role and other senior-level leadership positions in educational institutions. Identifying promising features in educational leadership programs can help directors of programs design or improve programs to best support aspiring leaders in the field. Based on an exploratory narrative literature review and informal conversations with practitioners in the field, the following features were identified as promising practices in EdD leadership programs: (a) support through a cohort model, (b) flexibility via online, hybrid, and weekend or executive style program delivery, and (c) mentorship. The findings suggest that an EdD leadership program with a cohort structure provides students with a collegial community of learners who encourage persistence to program completion and support their learning. In addition, flexible online programs and course delivery options offer an avenue for students with complex lives to earn a doctoral degree. This flexibility is very important to students who are managing their families, work, and educational responsibilities. Finally, an EdD leadership program that includes mentorship enhances students both professionally and personally.

<u>KEYWORDS</u>

doctoral program, educational leadership, program features, EdD

EdD leadership programs serve a critical purpose- developing the talent pipeline to fill leadership positions in educational institutions. According to the American Council of Education (2023), 55% of current sitting presidents, who continue to be predominately older, White, and male, expect to step down from their role within the next five years. Thus, there is a need for leaders to step into these roles. Based on a national survey of sitting college presidents, Clark (2017) found that leadership development was the second most important professional development area identified, followed by fundraising, which was the first. EdD leadership programs are needed to provide talented and diverse individuals with the necessary training and background to pursue the presidency role and succeed.

As with most degrees, there are substantial variations in how EdD leadership programs are offered. The Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (2022) is a national consortium of universities that have opted to "undertake a critical examination of the doctorate in education (EdD) through dialog, experimentation, critical feedback and evaluation" (para 1). Although there have been numerous convenings and publications describing ways to improve how EdD leadership programs are designed and delivered, to our knowledge, there is no synthesis of the promising features of such programs.

We conducted an exploratory, narrative literature review to provide directors and faculty of EdD leadership programs with a summary of the literature on promising features that can contribute to the success of EdD leadership programs. According to Green et al. (2006), a narrative review is "a comprehensive narrative synthesis of previously published information" (p. 103). It is hoped that EdD program leaders who are examining their doctoral programs and determining ways to redesign or improve their programs find this review to be helpful. It is also hoped that this review will be helpful to those who are designing new EdD leadership programs. We aimed to answer the following research question: Based on the literature and practitioner perspectives, what are the promising features of effective EdD leadership programs?

SEARCH METHOD

To gain knowledge of promising features of EdD programs, we gathered information from two types of sources: peer-reviewed journal articles and practitioner conversations. Peer-reviewed articles are critiqued by experts in the research and are, therefore, high-quality sources of information. We obtained additional information from relevant public scholarship sources to provide a more comprehensive understanding of doctoral program supports and practices. Though not peer-reviewed, these sources are of value to this review because they provide lived perspectives often not captured in peer-reviewed articles. The practitioner conversations

provided an insider perspective on practices contributing to student success in an educational leadership program.

Peer-Reviewed Literature

The following database search engines were used: Academic Search Premier, America: History & Life, APA PsycArticles, APA PsycInfo, Business Source Elite, Business Source Premier, Educational Administration Abstracts, Education Source, ERIC, Master File Elite, and Teacher Reference Center. The search terms included doctoral program or EdD or EdD (AND) leadership (AND) community college or higher education.

The search was limited to full-text peer-reviewed articles that were published between 2015 and 2022. The search yielded 249 articles. After removing 62 duplicates, a title review was conducted on 187 articles. After conducting the title review, we determined that 145 of the articles did not focus on promising features of EdD leadership programs; therefore, these articles were excluded. We then reviewed the abstracts of the 42 items that remained and eliminated an additional 29 articles that were not related to the promising features that can contribute to successful EdD leadership programs. Thirteen articles remained, and a deeper dive into these remaining articles led to three more articles being excluded for the same reason. At the end of the full article review, 10 articles remained and were included in the review. While reading the 10 articles, 14 additional sources, including articles, books, and websites that addressed the factors contributing to successful doctoral programs, were discovered using the snowball method (Greenhalgh & Peacock, 2005). The snowball method involved looking at the reference list of the articles reviewed. Thus, a total of 22 resources were included in the review.

Practitioner Conversations

To add to the written literature, we also sought out the perspectives of practitioners in the field. This approach brought the lived experiences of prior doctoral students who are now higher education leaders into the review process. The practitioner conversations provided an opportunity to become familiar with individual expectations and experiences as they related to the program features that contribute to doctoral student success in an educational leadership program. Three women holding doctoral degrees in educational leadership shared their experiences in higher education leadership. Two of the three were women of color. These women held various high-level leadership positions; two were vice presidents, and one was an assistant dean. All three practitioners were employed at different community colleges. They were chosen as informants because they completed an educational doctorate leadership program, had experience in higher education, and were accessible to us. These were not structured interviews but rather casual conversations about their experiences.

FINDINGS

Three promising features of an educational leadership doctoral program emerged after examining the literature and having informal practitioner conversations. The first feature was helping students develop a support system within the program. A cohort model was often used for this purpose. Students in a cohort-based EdD leadership program were able to learn and grow by exchanging ideas with other members of their cohort who were also working toward achieving a terminal degree. The support that students provided to one another via the cohort model was critically important. The second key feature related to flexibility via online, hybrid, and weekend or executive program modalities in EdD leadership programs. The most flexible option noted was the online, asynchronous modality. This flexible learning approach enabled doctoral students to meet the demands of home, work, and school. The last feature identified was mentorship. Having a knowledgeable person in the field of study to support students helped them complete the program successfully.

Cohort Model

Buss and Wolf (2021) described the importance of building and sustaining a community within EdD programs, especially those that are delivered in an online format. One way that several programs aimed to develop a sense of community among EdD leadership students in an online program was through cohorts. In an EdD leadership program, a cohort is defined as a group of approximately 10–25 students who start the program together, progress through a sequence of courses and educational experiences related to the program, and complete it generally in the same time frame (Lei et al., 2011). According to Harrington et al. (2021), cohort models are implemented into programs to enhance engagement and build a collegial community among students, faculty, and other leaders in the field of education. Buss and Wolf (2021) described how intentional programming, such as doctoral research conferences, can help cohort members gain a sense of community and how it can also be important to help students connect in a deeper way with subsets of their cohorts working collaboratively on assignments and projects.

Students in an EdD leadership program cohort develop social connections, building a collegial community (Lei et al., 2011; Murakami-Ramalhoa et al., 2013). The ability to lean on each other and connect with people who respect your work and research is important (Gordon et al., 2016). A study conducted by Greenlee and Karanxha (2010) revealed the social benefits of an EdD leadership program, including making connections and having trust and respect for classmates' expertise. Students helped each other reach graduation by sharing effective time management skills, communicating common interests, and encouraging peers to persevere to graduation. Having others who provide encouragement and have a common interest is an advantage of a cohort model (Nimer, 2009).

In their study, Bista and Cox (2014) reported that discussions among doctoral students were based on commonalities in family and work-related topics, and students provided one another with high levels of encouragement to finish the program. The importance of this type of support was reiterated by a vice president who valued the cohort of women in her program, describing them as a sounding board for work, family, and the EdD leadership program issues. She explained that the ability to lean on one another was important. In fact, she said the six women peers became lifelong friends and were known as the "Doc Chicks" (K. Archambault, personal communication, December 2, 2021).

Socializing within a cohort ranged from students becoming familiar with the cohort team members to leaning on one another for input related to course assignments. The close nature of the cohort is particularly true of closed cohorts that do not permit new students to join once the cohort is established (Bista & Cox, 2014).

Alternately, Holmes et al. (2016) found that students who are moving at a faster pace than their cohort peers benefit from vertical cohort engagement that enables them to connect with an earlier cohort member who is at the same point in the dissertation process.

A cohort provides doctoral students with opportunities to learn together and learn from each other. Cohorts can form a family-like environment as they meet and complete learning tasks for a common goal (Lei et al., 2011). Cohorts have been found to decrease attrition and absenteeism by promoting student-to-student accountability and support (Amey, 2006).

An additional benefit of a cohort is that it offers rich academic experiences (Lei et al., 2011). Cohorts provide opportunities for group members to interact and discuss the content being learned (Murakami-Ramalhoa et al., 2013). This type of support can be especially important for students who may not have colleagues in the field. Having cohort members to reach out to when trying to better understand real-world examples of leadership theories can be helpful. Cohorts in EdD leadership programs with experienced and knowledgeable faculty and networks prepare students to grow as senior leaders (Maldonado et al., 2021).

Flexible Modalities

Flexibility in EdD leadership programs is important because doctoral leadership students have complex lives with competing demands (Brochu et al., 2021). Zippia (n.d.) surveyed 30,000,000 students and found that more than 31,640 doctoral students were employed. The same study indicated that the average age of a doctoral student was 44 years old. According to the American College President Study conducted by Gagliardi et al. (2017), women often had several roles, including being caretakers for their families and fulfilling their professional duties. Balancing home, work, and academics, especially when in an intensive learning experience such as a doctoral program, is complicated. Flexible options for completing EdD leadership programs help students balance their numerous responsibilities.

Many programs offer a variety of formats, such as online, hybrid, and weekend classes, or even a combination of these formats (Amey, 2006). Online programs can be synchronous or asynchronous. Hybrid models offer students a learning experience comprised of face-to-face and online learning opportunities. Programs utilizing the face-to-face modality sometimes offer weekend-only courses to accommodate working adults. All of these options provide flexibility for professionals seeking a doctoral degree.

Online programs that are asynchronous offer the most flexibility. Asynchronous learning opportunities allow students to complete learning tasks at varied times of the day or days of the week (Watts, 2016). In an asynchronous learning setting, "students can choose to learn when their cognitive resources and cognitive flexibility are at their greatest" (Northy et al., 2015, p. 173). Scheiderer (2021) shared that asynchronous online classes provide time for students to work on weekly assignments, receive immediate feedback, reflect, and view class sessions at their convenience.

One common concern with asynchronous online programs is student engagement. Synchronous sessions can be used to keep students engaged while also offering flexibility. Scheiderer (2021) reported that synchronous classes allow students to report to online classes in real-time with the instructor and classmates and participate in live discussions. Being able to attend class from home reduces travel time and makes it easier for students to balance

competing priorities. Some programs will record synchronous meetings if students are unable to attend.

Mentorship Support

McConnell et al. (2021) asserted that mentoring is a critical practice in an educational leadership doctoral program. Lunsford et al. (2017) defined mentorship as faculty or administrators who provide professional guidance within a given context that supports graduate students academically and professionally. Faculty, advisors, and dissertation committee members may serve in a mentorship capacity (Lunsford et al., 2017; McConnell et al., 2021). Brown et al. (2020) advocated for embedded mentoring that varied in nature based on current student needs. Individual peer mentoring was offered in their program as students transitioned into the program and then shifted to group mentoring related to academic and professional issues.

Mentorship matters in an EdD leadership program. Mentors can guide students in developing into critical thinkers, scholars, and published authors. Mentoring is productive when mentees feel safe and can openly express leadership concerns and take risks to build their leadership skills (McNair, 2015).

Mentors have the crucial responsibility of guiding doctoral students through the completion of the program (University of Pittsburgh, 2023). Mentors assist mentees in identifying areas for growth and development and provide feedback. As the mentoring relationship grows, they begin to engage and share stories. They discover relatable professional and personal experiences, and both the mentee and mentor learn from exchanging information (McConnell et al., 2021). During a practitioner conversation, a community college vice president shared how the support of her mentor contributed to her persistence in the program during her pregnancy and subsequent birth of her child. She took her mentor's advice and persevered in completing the program, ultimately graduating with her cohort members. The practitioner viewed herself as a role model for women of color who would follow her in the EdD leadership program because these women will also be navigating family, work, and school (Y. Madas, personal communication, December 10, 2021).

Additionally, students in the cohort identified the mentor-mentee relationship as an essential factor in completing the dissertation. In a study conducted by Reedy and Taylor-Dunlop (2015), timely feedback from mentors was essential in helping students complete their dissertations. Similarly, Buss and Wolf (2021) highlighted the significance of scheduled mentor-mentee meetings.

In addition to academic and personal support, mentors can provide professional development opportunities when the EdD leadership program has an experiential learning component (McConnell et al., 2021). Not every EdD leadership program has an experiential program, but for those that do, the mentor serves as a liaison, opening up doors for their mentees so that they can meet and expand relationships with leaders to help broaden their network as part of the EdD leadership program pathway (Lunsford et al., 2017).

A practitioner serving as assistant dean shared, "The experiential learning was really important" (M. Campagna, personal communication, December 15, 2021). She believed women benefit from having other women as role models and mentors, stating, "Women have to first see other women in leadership roles, to see themselves to work in those roles." Mentorship was seen as an

essential factor, especially when the program had an experiential learning component. Mentors play a critical role by helping guide students through the experiential component by helping them to network or being a sounding board as students enter into networking with other professionals in the field of education (White, 2017).

LIMITATIONS

Although this review provides a synthesized summary of the literature related to promising features of EdD leadership programs, it is important to note that the findings are based on data from only 22 sources. A limited number of articles were available on this topic, so it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions from the information shared in this review. It is also important to note that not all articles were empirical; several were theoretical or based on practitioner perspectives. As a result, findings need to be interpreted with caution.

CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

EdD programs provide essential leadership preparation for students seeking senior leadership positions. Based on an exploratory narrative literature review and informal conversations with leaders in the field, three promising features of EdD programs were discovered. The first feature was a cohort-based model that creates a support system for students with common professional goals of becoming senior leaders in colleges or universities. The second program feature was flexibility offered via online, hybrid, and weekend or executive modalities. Online, asynchronous programs can offer the most flexibility to students with demanding personal and professional responsibilities. Finally, an EdD leadership program with a mentorship feature can help students develop and expand professional networks.

Doctoral program directors and coordinators can use these findings and reflect on their program's components. Directors may want to discuss these findings with their faculty and consider ways to put these findings into practice. For example, program directors can also consider the value of implementing a cohort-based model if this approach is not yet being used. If a cohort-based model is not viable, they can consider other ways to help students establish strong peer connections. Directors and faculty are also encouraged to discuss ways to increase how the program and courses are offered in flexible modalities such as online options. Foster et al. (2023) found that EdD programs were more likely than PhD programs in higher education to offer flexible formats such as hybrid, online, and executive programs. However, only 5.6% of EdD programs were offered entirely online, and 18% were offered online with residence requirements. Finally, directors and faculty can discuss ways to add a mentoring component to the program if this does not already exist. Alumni and practitioners in the field are often willing to serve in the important mentor role. Geesa et al. (2023) utilized graduates of their doctoral program as mentors and found that students appreciated support from both mentors and faculty, found mentoring as a way to expand their professional network, and appreciated mentoring that was personalized to their needs in terms of both content and modality.

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