

The Composition Resource Guide:

Setting Transparent Standards for the Dissertation in Practice for Students, Faculty, and Administration

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges that a recent CPED Program of the Year award-winning program experienced implementing a dissertation in practice (DiP) within an EdD program and the innovative solution of creating a program-specific Composition Research Guide (CRG) to establish transparent standards and guidelines for students and committee members. We begin by defining the central problem encountered early in the program—the inconsistencies in assumed dissertation expectations faced by students, faculty, and administrators due to prevailing PhD assumptions. This problem led program leadership to develop the CRG to standardize expectations and clarify programmatic standards for other interested parties at the institution. By detailing the process of creating the CRG, this article aims to provide insights into fostering dialogue among higher education institutions grappling with similar challenges.

KEYWORDS

dissertation, doctoral student writing, student support

In recent years, the implementation of the dissertation in practice (DiP) has emerged as a critical focus for EdD programs (Perry, 2016), particularly within institutions shaped by traditional PhD frameworks. At our university, the journey to launch the DiP included challenges that highlighted the complexities of aligning expectations among students, faculty advisors, dissertation defense committee members, and university administration. Early in the program, we encountered misaligned expectations that left students uncertain about their responsibilities and the nature of their work. Additionally, key administrators at our R1 institution raised questions regarding the rigor and quality of practitioner-based dissertations, seeking assurance that they would meet the university's standards for research doctorates. This article reflects on these initial hurdles and presents the development of the Composition Resource Guide (CRG) as a strategic response aimed at standardizing expectations and fostering clarity across all parties involved in the dissertation process. We build upon many conversations we have had over the last three Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Convenings about the problem, process, and purpose that led to the creation of the CRG. We start by briefly reviewing some problems we faced early in the launch of the program pertaining to the DiP. We then discuss the CRG, which we developed to address these

problems as well as the benefits it has yielded. We conclude by noting that this is a living document that continues evolving with our program.

DEFINING THE PROBLEM

We launched our EdD program firmly grounded in the CPED framework (Hoffman & Perry, 2016), with a strong commitment to having students produce a DiP that distinctly embodied practitioner goals (within our program, we refer to the DiP as a “Problem of Practice Dissertation”; however, we use the more common designation DiP within this article. For more on our program's development and iterative innovations, see Blevins et al., 2021; Werse, Murray, et al., 2023). Program leadership and faculty advisors eagerly engaged with foundational documents from CPED leaders regarding the DiP (e.g., Buss & Zambo, 2014) and reviewed example dissertations from colleagues at other CPED member institutions. Despite these proactive efforts and our recognition of how much our assumptions about the dissertation were shaped by the traditional PhD model, we routinely encountered key philosophical and practical tensions surrounding the nature of the



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This journal is published by Pitt Open Library Publishing.



impactinged.pitt.edu
 Vol.11 No.3 (2026)

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

ISSN 2472-5889 (online)
 DOI 10.5195/ie.2026.545

dissertation itself. One of the most significant challenges was that these tensions manifested in diverse ways that were not easily systematized or clearly connected, complicating our ability to establish a cohesive understanding of what the dissertation should entail within our unique context.

Upon reflection, we categorized these seemingly disparate tensions into three broad categories, which helped us identify root sources of the confusion. First, we encountered questions from institutional administration concerning the attributes of a DiP and whether it would meet the university's standards for a research doctorate. These questions were not born out of distrust or stubborn adherence to more traditional conceptions of the dissertation but were rather reflective of genuine curiosity and uncertainty. These questions led to numerous meetings between program leadership and representatives from our university's graduate school, as we attempted to explain how our approach to the DiP differed from traditional PhD models yet still satisfied the university's criteria for a research doctorate. These conversations highlighted just how difficult it was to define the DiP while still operating in the shadow of the often-unspoken assumptions of the PhD (see similar observation in Gillham et al., 2019; Perry, 2016). Eventually, the dean of the graduate school requested to review every tenth dissertation defended to better understand the rigor of the final product.

Second, we encountered challenges stemming from inconsistent advisor guidance provided to students during the dissertation writing process. Advisors often offered varying levels of feedback that reflected even deeper assumptions of the goals of doctoral work. Some provided detailed line-by-line guidance while others opted for more general comments. Furthermore, some felt that certain sections of the dissertation were more relevant for practitioners than others. The variability in advisor feedback and guidance during the dissertation process is a common issue in graduate programs. Blanchard and Haccoun (2020) found that inconsistencies in faculty support can lead to confusion among students and decreased well-being. This inconsistency became particularly problematic in our high-enrollment cohorts, where students participated in dissertation-focused courses together (Werse, Cooper, et al., 2023). Students often compared notes on different advisors' approaches to advising a dissertation, which led to confusion when they perceived the feedback as conflicting. The matter became even more complicated when these inconsistencies manifested within the dissertation defense committees (Smith, 2021; Wiest & Treacy, 2021).

Third, we encountered challenges arising from misaligned expectations between students and advisors (Smith et al., In Press). Early in the program, many students did not fully grasp the requirements of a comprehensive dissertation, leading to significant misunderstandings about the scope and depth of their work. Some students expressed surprise when they received feedback that called for substantial revisions, as they initially believed their projects would not require the same level of rigor typically associated with traditional dissertations, or they were simply unaware of the expectations. This disconnect highlighted the necessity for clearer communication regarding expectations and deliverables, ensuring that students understood the demands of the DiP from the outset. By addressing these misalignments, we aimed to foster a more supportive environment that empowered students to meet the rigorous standards set forth by the program.

While these three broad categories of misaligned expectations may appear remarkably diverse, they all stemmed from a plethora of

often unspoken assumptions about what the dissertation should entail. Many of these expectations were conditioned or framed by the traditional PhD dissertation model, or conversely, represented an explicit rejection of that framework (Andrews & Grogan, 2005). These differences manifest across programs, as EdD programs differ widely in dissertation requirements, with some requiring traditional dissertations, others adopting a DiP model, and some using capstone projects or applied research (Reyes & Zhang, 2024). Regardless of the perspective taken, we grappled with underlying beliefs and norms that traced back to our socialization into conventional PhD practices. This realization underscored the need for clear communication within our department, ensuring alignment among faculty and students, as well as with interested parties at the university. By addressing these foundational issues, we aimed to create a more cohesive understanding of the DiP that would ultimately benefit all involved parties.

THE COMPOSITION RESOURCE GUIDE

The convergence of challenges we faced in launching our DiP prompted the development of a program-specific CRG. This guide originated from a compilation of notes and guidelines gathered from early faculty advisors, supplemented by writing development insights from our writing center team. Its primary purpose was to articulate both the programmatic expectations for each section of the dissertation and the rationale behind those expectations. By clearly communicating these standards to students, university administration, and defense committee members, we aimed to establish transparency regarding what constituted a passing dissertation and the reasons for these criteria. In doing so, we effectively highlighted how our dissertation model not only maintained a practitioner focus but also adhered to the rigorous requirements expected of a research doctoral dissertation within our context.

From the outset, the CRG emphasizes to students that their dissertations must be anchored in a problem of professional practice, ultimately leading to actionable recommendations tailored to address specific issues within their local contexts. This foundational principle ensures that students remain focused on real-world applications of their research to their profession throughout the dissertation process. Simultaneously, we underscore the importance of employing the precision, skills, nuance, and accuracy expected of any doctoral dissertation. By integrating these elements, we not only reinforce the scholarly rigor required for their work but also affirm the practical relevance of their findings, thereby bridging the gap between academic inquiry and professional application.

The guide serves as a comprehensive resource for students composing their dissertation, aiming to facilitate the application of doctoral-level research to real-world professional challenges. We begin with an overview of the purpose of a DiP and key principles and then move into guidance on writing (i.e., tense, voice, and person) and university formatting requirements. The CRG then moves systematically through each section expected in the dissertation, detailing the content requirements, suggested page counts, and specific university-required formatting and the American Psychological Association (APA) guidelines. As we detail what students should include for each section of the dissertation, we also point to errors they should avoid. Additionally, we include visuals that help students with formatting and links to additional resources that may be helpful in their work.



In the explanation of each section of the dissertation, we explicitly state the purpose and expectations of that section. For example, in the description of the literature review, we explain how to write an introduction to a literature review and roadmap the structure of the review, in addition to the importance of headings and the proper use of quotations. Additionally, we provide clear guidance on how students should evaluate the sources they select to incorporate into their literature review, suggesting that they acknowledge seminal works, but also examine the recent research in their fields.

We provide a similar level of detail when describing what students should include in their methods chapter, operating under the assumption that all students benefit from having clear, specific guidance. For example, we outline our expectations for how students should describe their data collection procedures, detailing the differences between a qualitative protocol and a quantitative instrument. In addition to the descriptions, we also provide exemplars and the research language typically associated with their selected methodology.

In the section of the CRG focused on the study's findings, we outline how scholars tend to present qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods results. While students do not need to adhere exactly to the structure we provide, we have found our students to be much more successful when they begin their work from an initial framework. We also share the purpose, tips, and errors to avoid when writing the discussion, implications, and recommendations sections of their dissertations.

Toward the end of the CRG, we offer helpful tips to our students in the appendices. In the first broad section of the appendices, we offer outlines for the various types of research methodologies, including those for qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods studies. In the second broad section of the appendices, we offer our students tips on how to format the DiP, including notes for font and spacing requirements, page numbers, citations, and headings. In the last broad section of the appendices, we offer tips on formatting tables and figures. In the last section of the CRG, we offer tips for students to consider as they compose their bibliography. Specific tips include using APA references, formatting, and additional resources.

The CRG is an iterative document that undergoes revisions each term. All members of the graduate faculty offer suggested changes to make to the document to either provide more clarity or more explanation of the existing components. Then, our leadership team organizes the suggestions and provides an opportunity for graduate faculty to vote on each suggested change. In this way, we ensure the collective voice of our graduate faculty is heard and reflected in the guidelines and requirements of the CRG.

BENEFITS OF THE COMPOSITION RESOURCE GUIDE

Since the launch of the CRG, we have observed three significant benefits. First, it provides students with a clear articulation of the expectations for their DiP from the beginning of the program. This clarity enables students to grasp not only what will be required of them but also the underlying reasons why these expectations are crucial. By explicitly communicating the often-unspoken assumptions surrounding the dissertation and the values it embodies, the CRG makes doctoral work more accessible to first-generation students and those lacking connections to academia insiders who can help

them navigate the intricate landscape of unspoken doctoral education expectations.

The CRG also helped minimize students' feelings of confusion when receiving feedback from different committee members. Students in the early cohorts at times suggested that the feedback from different committee members was conflicting or that the feedback did not align with what they were taught in earlier courses. Indeed, discussions among the committees and faculty often revealed that the feedback was not so much conflicting as it was framed in different ways and with different language. The CRG provides some standard language that committee members could use to help align the way they frame feedback to minimize this student confusion. Because our program uses a cohort model, most students move through their coursework and take dissertation-focused courses together (Kaul et al., 2024; Shelton et al., 2023; Werse, Cooper, et al., 2023). These dissertation-focused courses are embedded throughout the program so that students are working on their 4-chapter dissertation over time and can complete the program in as little as three years. Faculty teaching these courses can draw upon the CRG to frame their guidance using the same standards that dissertation committee members will later employ when reading the DiP.

Second, the CRG has provided benefits for faculty members serving on dissertation defense committees. By establishing a framework of consistent expectations for the final product, the CRG facilitates a unified approach among faculty who are largely in agreement about what the dissertation should include because of the written nature of the CRG. The expectations and standards outlined in the CRG are particularly helpful for faculty advisors and committee members who are new to advising dissertations or new to advising in this specific program. When working with large groups of students, knowledge about the expectations for the dissertation, including both what to include and writing guidance, reduces questions about where to focus feedback or how to guide students in meeting those standards. As a key benefit, this agreement thereby reduces the likelihood of conflicting feedback from committee members, which is beneficial for students, as we all work together toward the common goal: to support the student in producing a strong and sound artifact that reflects their expertise as scholar-practitioners. While this is not to say that all committee members agree on all matters (disagreement is, after all, one of the benefits of having a committee reviewing a terminal degree artifact), we work toward agreement with the support of the CRG. This alignment streamlines the evaluation process and minimizes the chances of delays in student defenses due to disagreements within the committee.

Third, the CRG has become a helpful tool for communicating our program's standards to university administrators. The mere process of composing it helped program leadership determine consistent language to communicate the essence and nature of the DiP with colleagues across campus. The CRG embodies clear and objective standards set for the dissertation that addressed university administrators' questions. Beyond addressing immediate concerns, it also provides a foundation for ongoing discussions about how the dissertation aligns with institutional expectations for doctoral work. This document has since served as a key resource in administrative reviews and accreditation processes, reinforcing the credibility and rigor of the program. The CRG provides a platform to explicitly outline the stated goals of the dissertation, emphasizing its aim to make an immediate impact on professional practice. By doing so, the CRG illustrates how the dissertation serves as a demonstration of

the student's expertise as a scholar-practitioner, employing all the methodologies and analytical tools that one would anticipate from doctoral candidates at the university.

CONCLUSION: A LIVING EMBODIMENT OF OUR CONTEXT

The implementation of the CRG has been instrumental in addressing the early challenges we faced in defining, structuring, and supporting the DiP within our EdD program. By providing clear standards and expectations, the creation and use of the CRG have fostered greater alignment within student-advisor relationships, across advisors, within dissertation defense committees, and with university administrators. Beyond its direct impact on students and faculty, the CRG has played a role in shaping institutional discourse around the nature of applied doctoral research. Providing a structured approach to evaluating practitioner-focused dissertations has helped university administrators better understand and support the distinct purpose of the EdD, reinforcing its legitimacy as a terminal degree alongside more traditional PhD pathways in an R1 institutional context.

While the CRG has already yielded substantial benefits, it remains a living document that continues to evolve alongside our program. As we gain more insight from faculty and students, we refine the guide further to enhance clarity, streamline feedback processes, and address emerging needs. Additionally, we engage in continual conversation with other CPED member institutions to share best practices and refine the broader understanding of what constitutes a high-quality DiP. As EdD programs continue to refine their approaches to the DiP, tools like the CRG serve as a model for structuring dissertation expectations in ways that support scholarly practitioners while maintaining institutional rigor. The lessons learned from our experience highlight the importance of standardization without rigidity, ensuring that the dissertation remains both academically robust and practically relevant.

Acknowledgment

From its initial conception to its current iteration, this work has been shaped by the insights, expertise, and dedication of many individuals committed to supporting doctoral students and strengthening our program. The CRG was largely born out of the experiences of our faculty advisors and writing center staff who served the first three cohorts. Their collective feedback, comments, and discussions formed the foundation for the first version of the CRG. Each cohort of faculty advisors and writing center staff has since made iterations, improvements, and adjustments to the document. As such, the document is a program document, authored collectively by the many faculty and staff who make this program possible. We want to acknowledge the many faculty and staff beyond the authors of this article who have contributed to portions of the CRG.

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