

# Learning & Leading Together: VCU's Team-based Capstone Model and Developmental Approach

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## ABSTRACT

The Virginia Commonwealth University EdD in Leadership is designed to prepare leaders to address complex challenges in diverse organizations and communities. Since its inception in 2008, our focus has expanded from K12 educational leadership to include higher education and organizational leadership. A key innovation of the program is the Capstone project, a year-long, team- and partner-based endeavor where students tackle real-world problems of practice. Continual improvement efforts have led to three key innovations that support the ability of students to succeed in the Capstone: a one-stop Canvas site, in-person residencies, and a formative assessment, which replaces a comprehensive or qualifying exam. Through the team- and partner-based capstone, the EdD in Leadership has graduated over 400 leaders across the P20-workforce pipeline and has provided over \$5.5 million in pro bono work to Capstone partner organizations.

## KEYWORDS

*educational doctorate, teamwork, innovation, doctoral assessment*

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) is an urban, public institution of higher education enrolling over 31,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Established in 1968, VCU was formed through the merger of the Medical College of Virginia (founded 1838) and the Richmond Professional Institute (founded 1917). VCU is composed of two campuses, the Monroe Park Campus and the Medical College Campus (also called VCU Health). Situated in Richmond, Virginia—the current state capital and former Confederate capital—the area has a long and brutal history of colonization and the slave trade (Equal Justice Initiative, 2022). This history is reflected in ongoing issues, including a legacy of racist practices at VCU Health (VCU Health Equity, n.d.) and the disruption of Black communities by racist city engineering (e.g., highway construction). Today, Richmond and VCU continue the work of recognizing and redressing past harms to build a just and equitable future, but there is still much work to do in our local context and in the contexts of our non-local EdD students.

The VCU School of Education (SOE) is ranked 24th among best graduate schools of education, and 15th among public graduate schools of education by US News & World Report (2025). VCU is accredited by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACSCOC), and the School of Education is nationally accredited by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation. Carnegie classifications include doctoral-granting, very high research activity, and community engagement. We are a high undergraduate institution with a medical school. Eighty percent of VCU undergraduates are enrolled full-time, and at least 20% are transfer students. In the academic year 2023-2024, VCU had 21,205 undergraduate students, 7,033 graduate students, and 1,876 part-time graduate students (VCU Institutional Research and Decision Support, 2023). In that same academic year, the EdD in Leadership had 158 students, accounting for 8.4% of part-time

graduate enrollment at VCU. In addition, VCU has a diversity index of 0.72, according to US News and World Report (2025).

The VCU SOE EdD in Leadership program is a founding member of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). We are committed to attracting and retaining students who have a deep commitment to organizational improvement for equity and social justice, a key departmental value that runs through all our programs. EdD students who enter in the same year are named according to the anticipated graduation year. The program is three years long, so Learning Community 28 (LC28) starts in the summer of 2025 and will graduate in the spring of 2028. In each LC, we have multiple cohorts, divided by sector and/or modality, such that students take all classes in their cohort, which averages in size from 12 to 16 students. For example, LC28 has four cohorts, an Organizational Leadership online cohort, a Higher Education online cohort, a K12 Online cohort, and a combined sector cohort that meets face-to-face. We continue to draw local, urban educators, yet an increasing number of students are out-of-state, international, and regional, but not urban-located. The program has also grown dramatically in recent years (see Figure 1).

The EdD program originated from a need for leaders of learning organizations, specifically to K12 leadership needs in the state of Virginia. The EdD in Leadership was instrumental in the School of Education's Strategic Plan Recalibration that occurred in 2022. In the recalibration, SOE intentionally moved away from "national prominence" and "collective urban and regional transformation" to "research and innovation to address societal challenges" and "thriving communities." The shape and characteristics of the EdD, as well as our expanding footprint and diversity of students in the EdD in Leadership, were among the drivers in those changes. While the EdD began as K12-focused, we now have thriving student cohorts of



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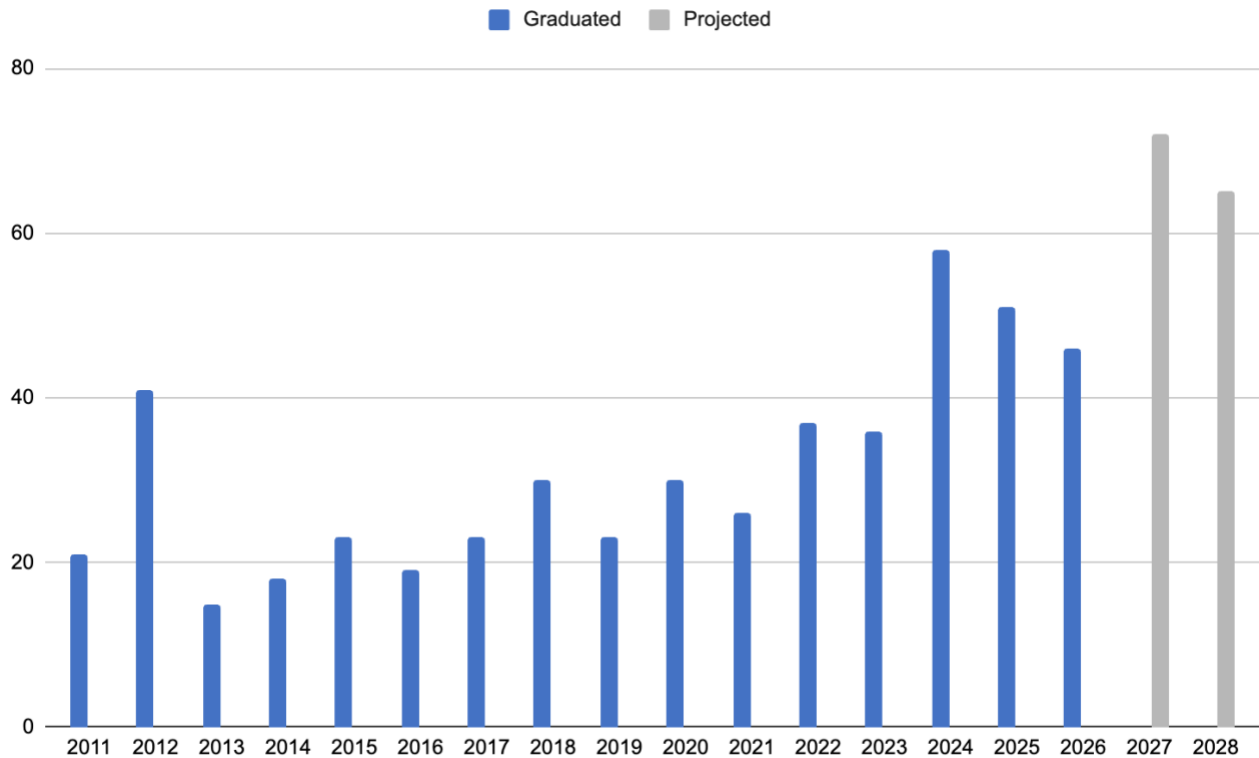


higher education leaders as well as organizational leaders, describing those in education-adjacent organizations such as non-profits, government, and military-affiliated.

We have infused the curriculum with a deep interrogation of systemic inequity and how structures, systems, and mechanisms are both oppressive and contain levers for creating more equity and liberation. While we have a class called "Equity and Leadership," we infuse principles of diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB)

into every class through student outcomes, applied projects, and reflection assignments. For example, we challenge students to consider critical perspectives as fundamental to analyzing problems, leadership, organizational change, and individual experiences. We ask students to consider where and how inequity shows up and is supported or disrupted by policy and ethical perspectives, legal perspectives, budgeting and finance practices, and change processes.

Figure 1. EdD Enrollment Growth



Note. In 2009-2011, there was more than one cohort, and they were shared with Old Dominion University. We do not have the ability to further parse these data

### INNOVATION FROM INCEPTION: THE CAPSTONE

From its inception, the EdD has included a unique dissertation-in-practice, which we call the Capstone. The Capstone is a team- and partner-based project focused on a real-life problem of practice. This signature innovation requires a team of students to work as consultants with a partner organization. Our program is committed to the idea that leaders cannot work alone, that collaboration, systems-thinking, and praxis are the heart of organizational improvement.

The Capstone provides a real-world, field-based opportunity for students to collaboratively tackle a complex problem of practice that implicates DEIB, integrates research, theory, and practice, and improves organizations and systems for more equitable and inclusive communities. Every year, we solicit organizations in and beyond Virginia for projects. Those interested submit a Request for Partnership (RFP) focused on a challenging problem of practice. The

faculty review the RFPs to ensure that the focus and scope are capstone caliber, that we have faculty chair capacity, and that the work can be completed within 12 months. In the subsequent matching process, students rank-order their preference of RFPs and provide special requests that we try to honor. Through this process, a team is formed and paired with a partner organization who is seeking services and a capstone chair who guides students throughout the project. Although students complete many team projects in coursework, it is the first time they must collaborate across a year-long project. Each capstone is estimated to provide ~\$50,000 in cost avoidance for each partner organization; over 5 million dollars in pro-bono work.

Beginning in May, students meet with the chair and partner, conduct problem analysis, determine a scope of work, and get approval from the partner and the VCU Capstone Committee (which consists of a capstone chair and faculty committee members). Students collaborate with their partner throughout the year and



deliver a partner-focused product (e.g., an executive summary of the project work, a dashboard, an action plan, etc.). Students simultaneously create an academic document and have a prospectus hearing and final defense with their committee to ensure high academic standards. Students have one calendar year to complete the three-course sequence and all milestones, including project completion and approval from the partner and capstone committee.

As of Spring 2025, students have completed 111 Capstone projects: 54 in K12, 31 in higher education (18 from different units at Virginia Commonwealth University), 21 nonprofit, 3 government, and 1 private organization. Example partners include numerous Virginia school districts, the Virginia Department of Education, Virginia Community College System, Virginia Economic Development Partnership, William & Mary University, Brightpoint Community College, Marine Corps University, United Way of Richmond and Petersburg, the Richmond Raceway, Richmond FBI, and Stop Sexual Assault in Schools. Projects are most commonly organizational improvement efforts, such as program evaluations, research projects combined with strategic planning, or research projects that generate transferable knowledge and understanding of societal issues.

Capstone projects have real implications for the partner organizations, generating final deliverables that ensure the partner organization has scholarship, organizational data, and a leadership plan to move towards implementation. In addition, many organizations return for capstone services, a testament to the value they find in the Capstone. Capstone projects illustrate the commitment to innovation as well as continuous improvement shared by our staff, faculty, and students, who are all stakeholders in the success of the VCU EdD in Leadership. We work to provide our student-leaders with an EdD experience and culminating project that builds skills, habits of mind and heart, knowledge, and capacity, not only to lead but to transform lives and organizations.

While the Capstone project is the culminating experience and heart of the EdD programmatic innovation, we are constantly reflecting on how we can improve the student experience and better scaffold the skills they need to successfully navigate the Capstone. Specifically, we have redesigned the qualifying exam typically required of PhD students, what we call the Formative Assessment.

## THE FORMATIVE ASSESSMENT

The EdD in Leadership program has a built-in check-in point we call the formative assessment (FA). We frame it as our alternative to the comprehensive exam that PhD students across the University must successfully complete to continue in the program and we have specifically tailored it for our doctoral students. Instead of a traditional, high-stakes exam, students in the fourth semester of the program compile a “learning journey portfolio” that emphasizes student development. The portfolio includes (1) reflective essay(s) focused on four key leadership domains: equity leader, researcher, writer/communicator, and team member. Students analyze their growth in each area and use examples from coursework assignments, class experiences, and professional lives to provide evidence. They also include (2) a professional resume or curriculum vita, and (3) give a short presentation where they connect these four areas to their leadership journey, professional practice and career trajectory, and goals for continued development.

The paper and presentation are read/attended by two faculty, who then engage the student in a series of questions—some spontaneous and some scripted—to delve into the individual student’s learning and areas of passion, challenge them in any perceived blind spots, and discuss the student’s pathway in the program and beyond in their career. Faculty also review student grades and instructor comments from each prior semester. Based on portfolio and presentation, faculty independently assess the student in each domain as *Exceeds Expectations*, *Meets Expectations*, *Developing*, or *Unsatisfactory*. Based on the totality of the essay(s), instructor feedback, resume, and presentation, reviewers independently use the rubric scores holistically to recommend an outcome: *Advance with Distinction*, *Advance*, *Advance with Support*, or *Do Not Advance*. All EDLP faculty then collectively review the FA outcomes and discuss specific support strategies students may need.

The FA process has several learning benefits for students and the program. Students must intentionally review their learning from the last year and identify areas of strength and opportunities for growth. Their task is to communicate like real-world leaders: developing evidence for their topic, engaging in storytelling about their journey, and crucially, adapting their communication based on the audience (faculty assessors may not have been their instructors). In addition, students receive detailed feedback from faculty on their progress, not simply a grade. The FA not only helps students understand how well they are meeting program expectations, it also supports their individual leadership journey. The process encourages them to use the data of their learning to tell a story of their leadership development and praxis. We frame the FA as strength-based with awareness—effective leaders know their strengths and continually assess where they can grow. The FA provides opportunity for programmatic reflection as we consider where we need to focus our attention for continual improvement.

From a faculty, staff, and programmatic perspective, the FA is not only about student growth, though that is the core focus. The FA, by requiring students to integrate evidence across the domains, provides a much richer picture of a student’s progress and journey as a scholar-practitioner. The timing of the FA early in the 5th semester of the program allows us to proactively identify students who might need extra help with writing, research skills, teamwork, or their understanding of equity issues. It also gives us two full semesters to provide needed support and accelerate the student’s growth.

Beyond the student, however, full-time faculty who do not teach primarily in the EdD get to know students, solidify their understanding of the current curriculum, and help us identify weaknesses that may be at the course or program level. The presentation and Q&A provide an opportunity for more in-depth conversations with students about their learning and professional aspirations, fostering a stronger mentorship relationship and student-faculty network. Through collaborative discussion, we can identify where students are consistently strong or where they commonly struggle and gain valuable insights into the effectiveness of our curriculum and teaching methods.

Essentially, FA is a scaffolded, high-value process designed to support student learning and provide faculty with a comprehensive understanding of each student’s journey. This process ensures we can offer tailored guidance and resources for their continued success in the EdD program. The FA has become an essential tool in fostering growth and development and ensuring students are ready to take on the Capstone project in the 7th semester.



## EVIDENCE OF EDD ALIGNMENT WITH CPED PRINCIPLES

The EdD in Leadership has strong curricular alignment with CPED principles and design concepts (see Table 1). Students begin the program with an asynchronous orientation that helps them with basic student needs (e.g., claiming their email, registering for classes, claiming tuition benefits). The orientation also helps students learn to use Canvas and various Google and teaming tools used throughout the program. Since it is a self-paced orientation, it is also the first taste students have of how they will need to be active agents in their learning and journey.

As part of orientation and their first two classes, students attend a first-year, in-person residency (a two-day event where students engage in workshops, build technology skills, collaborate, and begin coursework together). The core focus on the residency is interrogating what it means to be a scholar-practitioner (principles 2 and 5), how the EdD will intentionally build skills through coursework, how students can set themselves up for success (i.e., socialization), and serves as a key initial opportunity to build community (principle 3). The subsequent first semester courses engage students in developing foundational skills they will use iteratively throughout the program: analysis using critical perspectives and teamwork.

Table 1. CPED Design Principles

Principle 1	Framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.
Principle 2	Prepares leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.
Principle 3	Provides opportunities for candidates to develop and demonstrate collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and to build partnerships.
Principle 4	Provides field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice and use multiple frames to develop meaningful solutions.
Principle 5	Is grounded in and develops a professional knowledge base that integrates both practical and research knowledge, which links theory with systemic and systematic inquiry.
Principle 6	Emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice.

Students reflect on their own practice and experience, learn about and apply critical organizational frameworks, and assess their readiness for being a change agent (principle 5). Critical reflections of collaboration challenges they have experienced in their own organizations help them to apply their learning to their own leadership practice (principle 4). They also learn about their own contributions to group dynamics using the findings about aspects of their individual identity and conflict management approaches from tools including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) and Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument (TKI). They learn to establish team norms and accountability systems through team-based assignments across the semester that assess both the team's processes and its outcomes. The learning-through-application design also includes an emphasis on giving and receiving feedback, especially tools to work through challenging feedback, and working together to create psychologically safe teams where risk-taking, honesty, and accountability are paramount. Each semester has students engaging in one course primarily grounded in individual work and one course grounded in a group project of some kind to

reinforce and provide real-life practice of teaming skills (principles 2 and 6).

In another early class in the sequence—Scholarly Writing—students hone their ability to communicate effectively across the practitioner-scholar divide. They conduct a systematic literature review, become familiar with research terms and bodies of literature, and convert the literature into both an executive summary and a public scholarship piece (e.g., op-ed, blog, podcast episode, etc.). The assignments and content unmask the hidden curriculum of graduate school and demystify academic scholarship. Students learn how to enter an academic conversation and to code switch in their writing, learning to work and write in new ways as they learn to research and write collaboratively (principles 3 & 5).

The foundational principles of DEIB (principle 1), and teamwork (principle 3) as cornerstones of the scholar-practitioner are then carried forward in subsequent classes where students continue to examine DEIB issues through multiple frames—legal, policy, ethics, and budgeting & finance perspectives (principle 4). In the legal perspectives class, for instance, students work collaboratively to do a deep dive into a particular legal issue—discrimination law, religion and law, Title IX, and free speech, for example. The policy and ethics course was recently renamed and revamped. Prior to this revision, students did not have a policy class. Now students have explicit experience in interpreting, analyzing, and developing policy. We couple the policy focus with ethics and challenge students to engage in divisive topics to analyze such topics through ethical and policy perspectives (principle 4). The approach is grounded in critical pragmatism, and students must balance what is right with what is possible. Incremental change and levers of change (carrots and sticks) become part of student vernacular (principle 5). The budgeting and finance course is also a new course. Students learn about the connection between values, ethics, and budgets, learn to craft a grant proposal (many students actually submit the grant), and consider how finance management is a tool of equitable leadership (principle 1).

Students take research courses that begin with an embedded, practice-orientated understanding of epistemologies in an organizational analysis class. The early introduction of these concepts enables us to link to critical pragmatism in subsequent quantitative and qualitative research courses. Instead of traditional statistics and qualitative traditions content, students learn to identify and analyze data sources, principles of numerical reasoning, and how to conduct human subjects research ethically and authentically with communities (e.g., action research). Students complete pilot projects in teams, usually in one of the team member's organizations leading to actionable data (principles 4 & 5). They also engage with how to use organizational data that already exists and to consider what data they may need to understand what is going on (e.g., empathy interviews). The focus is on systematic data collection and transferable implications for policy and practice (principle 5). The research sequence also includes a course dedicated to data visualization. Students learn to use free tools (e.g., Looker Studio) and learn about design principles so they can communicate effectively using data as the narrative drive. Students hone their ability to advocate for change through data (principle 3).

The program, in developing leaders as change agents, has a strong focus on change itself, which requires systematic inquiry and combining the tenets of improvement science with professional knowledge to better diagnose problems of practice, understand unique organizational contexts, and target efforts towards those



experiencing institutional challenges—particularly stakeholders from historically marginalized communities. Through a two-course sequence, students learn about both systems change and organizational culture change. In the first class, students focus on understanding the root causes and drivers of inequity, managing change, and structuring continual improvement through use of tools including the plan, do, study, act cycle. In the second course, they learn how to describe organizational culture and practices to intentionally shift organizational culture. This sequence prepares students for the comprehensive, field-based organizational improvement efforts they will employ in their capstone project as well as in their own change leadership beyond the EdD.

In their penultimate coursework, students must apply all the tools they have built in the program to understand and address equity in their organization through an in-depth and data-rich equity analysis and report in their own organization. They must also apply communication skills, their understanding of systems, legal, policy, ethical, and budgeting perspectives to respond collaboratively to organizational crises. These courses have been designed to give students a more holistic laboratory of practice to apply their knowledge and skills in their own organizations and in response to crisis case studies. In the final year of the program, students engage in a culminating experience we call a Capstone. The capstone is a team- and partner-based project (i.e., dissertation in practice) focused on a real-life problem of practice.

### Self-Study and Critical Reflection of the EdD Program

After the global pandemic of COVID 19, the faculty were confronted with the reality that the program had more than doubled in size, there were many new players at the table (i.e., personnel changes), and the students and faculty alike were experiencing challenges with the program structure. We therefore sought to revise and refresh the EdD in Leadership. The program retained its signature innovation of a team- and client-based capstone project, but the faculty have reimagined our work (curriculum, course delivery and scheduling, instructional capacity, and signature assignments) to best serve students and their organizations. We started with student, faculty, and staff feedback, including understanding current outcomes and opportunities for improving the student experience and preparedness for the Capstone project. We worked to ensure every class had an explicit DEIB focus and intentionally built skills through the course sequence so students could find success in the Capstone and beyond.

The EdD in Leadership does not have classes that separate theory from action. Instead, every class asks students to apply theory to practice, reflect on how their practice is theory-in-action, and recognize and continue to develop their own and others' professional knowledge. One class per semester has reflections embedded into the course so that students can engage with their lived experiences and practical knowledge and grapple with "unlearning" prior schema or presumptions. Almost every class has an assignment that can directly translate to students' professional contexts. The program's recent emphasis on content knowledge about the practice of giving and receiving feedback has also improved the ability of teams to hold each other accountable through honesty, reflection, and intentional—collaborative norms and mechanisms.

All program decisions run through the department of Educational Leadership. We review student progress and instructor insights each semester. The program has clear milestones: orientation and year 1 residency, coursework, year 2 residency, FA, coursework, Year 3 residency, and capstone. All faculty are involved in at least one but usually multiple milestones. We rotate on and off chairing capstones. We meet monthly to discuss a variety of issues, from policy and handbook updates, to course updates and instructional needs and challenges. Our department values collecting data and analyzing problems before taking action, but we also seek quick and small wins that help us incrementally improve student experiences. For our faculty, it is always both/and. Our focus on continual improvement and collaboration has enabled us to re-envision the curriculum, sequence, signature assignments/engagements relatively quickly in response to changing student needs. At the same time, we have retained our core signature innovation—the team- and partner-based capstone project.

Program growth also led us to rethink course delivery, milestone structuring, and student groupings for capstone projects. With so many students (currently 185) and such a lean faculty (11.5 full-time faculty, including the department chair and a colleague with a split administrative appointment), we must live the work of teaming in our own work even as we seek to empower students. We have had to ask ourselves hard questions around the value of keeping students in-cohort for the Capstone, how we are assessing teaming throughout the program to ensure all students are ready for the capstone experience, how we handle an adjunct-heavy teaching staff and deliver both high quality and consistent experiences for our students, and how we support student learning and scaffold their experiences. None of these deep and complex questions have been answered fully, and they never will be. We embrace continual and incremental improvement with each cohort. In this way, our work to scale the program, coupled with our unique Capstone project, has required us to embrace improvement science tenets to focus on problems, collaborate with a focus on DEIB, and make small changes over time.

We used the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate's Program of the Year (POY) Award application process to re-consider our data gathering efforts. While we have always periodically gathered student feedback, the POY process made us realize it was less consistent and systematic than we needed to fuel our continual improvement efforts. However, since 2021, the SOE Office of Data Analytics has collected data annually each fall (incoming students survey) and spring (student experience survey). Career Services also surveys graduates each semester, and we are able to look at EdD graduate responses each spring (first destinations survey). See Table 2 for key findings from three annual surveys that indicate the quality of student experiences.

In 2023-2024, to supplement ODA data, our program surveyed alums. In 2023, 98.1% of alum survey respondents indicated that they would recommend this program or recommend it with reservations (13%). In 2024, 100% of alum survey respondents indicated that they would recommend this program or recommend it with reservations (24%). Comments revealed that what students liked best about the program was the cohort model. Overall, these data suggest student satisfaction with the Capstone model, core program structure, and quality of support they receive in the program.

The program actively gathers multiple and multi-mode data at key moments—such as after summer residencies and graduation—

by encouraging participation in the ODA student experience survey (with EdD-specific items) and by collecting experiential data via instructor comments on each student collected each semester and review of a standard mid-semester survey. This robust system ensures that lead instructors maintain close communication with their course faculty and allows the Director to proactively reach out to

students as an outside party to identify interventions. Interventions include conflict resolution for teaming challenges, coaching for individuals and teams, and addressing instances of inadequate student or instructor engagement, such as removing an adjunct in the fourth week of class. Combined, these efforts allow the faculty to be responsive to program and student challenges.

**Table 2. Key Findings from ODA and Career Services Surveys**

Survey	Key Findings
2025 EdD Student Experience Survey	On a 4-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, EdD students agreed or strongly agreed with a median score of 3.25 that the program is supportive.
	On a 4-point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree, EdD students agreed or strongly agreed with a median score of 3.4 that the school and program provide a welcoming and culturally affirming environment.
	Strengths identified in comments include collaboration among peers and faculty, coursework and engagement, supporting historically marginalized communities, and class content.
	Areas for improvement included more opportunities for engagement and the quality of some adjunct instructors.
2024 EdD Incoming Student Survey	Respondents of the incoming students survey who were enrolling in the EdD program indicated that the most important factor for choosing VCU SOE was the program's structure.
2024 EdD First Destinations Survey	91% of graduates of the EdD program who completed the VCU First Destinations Survey indicated that they were employed following graduation with an average salary of \$88,189.
	48.9% of respondents indicated that they were very satisfied with their outcome. 44.4% of respondents indicated that they were somewhat satisfied with their outcome.
2025 EdD First Destinations Survey	96% of respondents who graduated from the program indicated satisfaction with their outcome and that their occupation is related to their degree.
	Respondents report an average salary of approximately \$97k, and 93% reported that they are employed following graduation.

Specifically for the POY application, we also conducted focus groups with students and alums, sought feedback from capstone partners from the previous five years, and engaged in building out an alum database that includes the types of leader positions graduates have attained. The database work was later expanded to include all programs in our department and has led to more alum outreach and engagement. We provide data related to alum leadership roles in Table 3. We have also improved the consistency of student check-in / drop-in sessions—students can get extra support or connection and

share their experiences with the program across LCs and cohorts. We offer these almost weekly at various times to accommodate various students' schedules. In addition, we are in the middle of creating a student advisory board and launching student-led affinity groups. Many students are too busy with work and life to commit additional time to the EdD, but there are also students with available bandwidth, passion projects, and a desire to give back and lead within the program. These initiatives grew directly from our data gathering work.

**Table 3. Alums by Leadership Role**

Sector	Role	No. of Students	Students/Sector
Higher Ed: VCU	Deans/Directors	45	75
	Specialists/Coordinators	16	
	Educators	14	
Higher Ed: Other Universities	Deans/Directors	30	52
	Specialists/Coordinators	11	
	Educators	11	
K12 Education	Superintendent/Assistant Superintendent	11	146
	Principal/Vice Principal	66	
	Executive Director/Chief Director/Director	26	
	Specialists/Coordinators/Admin	24	
	Educator	19	
General Leadership	Executive Director/Director/Chief Director	13	35
	Specialists/Coordinators/Admin/Manager	20	

*Note. These data are incomplete since we scoured social media for alum information.*



## CAPSTONE PARTNER AND COMMUNITY IMPACT

In our commitment to be leaders of community engagement and the generation of research to inform practice, our department has concluded 123 doctoral/community partner capstone research initiatives in collaboration with over 50 partner organizations, spanning offices at VCU, other higher education institutions, school divisions, and education-adjacent organizations (i.e., nonprofits, military education institutions, and government entities). Notably, our efforts have resulted in approximately \$50,000 in cost avoidance for each of our client stakeholders per capstone, showcasing the substantial impact of our free consulting services, playing a pivotal role in building, improving, and fostering communities across the state of Virginia and beyond.

Capstone projects are carried out across sectors. The research topics covered by these capstone projects span diverse areas of expertise, underscoring the commitment of EDLP to nurturing forward-thinking practitioner-scholars and leaders who advocate for equity across various domains. Recent capstones are available on VCU's Scholar's Compass website (n.d.). Projects have included transferable research, evaluations, and systems analysis to develop recommendations for practice on diversity recruitment, restorative justice, creating a sense of belonging, facilitating equitable access and retention for students from historically marginalized communities, first generation student support, and increasing doctoral student completion rates. In addition, some projects require analysis to design a system or intervention, for example, designing a university to community-college to community impact project, developing a balanced calendar for a school division, and designing a communication strategy and handbook for school leaders to prevent sexual assault.

In a 2024 survey of capstone partners ( $n=10$ ), partners either agreed or strongly agreed that

- The capstone project addressed a significant need or challenge within our organization.
- The capstone team's work demonstrated application of theory and research to the problem of practice.
- The capstone team provided valuable insights and recommendations for improving our organization's processes or outcomes.
- The team's work positively impacted our professional practice and community.
- The team communicated high-impact findings and recommendations to our organization.
- It was valuable to have a team of students work on the project.
- Having a team work on the project (instead of an individual) positively impacted our organization.
- Having a team (rather than an individual) work on the problem of practice was valuable.
- The Capstone team's work demonstrated we value the professional expertise and lived experiences of every educational professional.
- Having a team dedicated to the project was an innovative way to structure a doctorate culminating experience (dissertation in practice).

We continue to collect these data annually and will launch a student capstone experience survey this year.

Brightpoint Community College President Bill Fiege's comments capture much of our anecdotal data on the impact of capstones on the partner organization. Dr. Fiege has been a part of two capstones in the last five years at Brightpoint and served on a Capstone committee in the 24-25 academic year:

I love this program. It enables us to have important non-biased research on key issues at the college studied by higher education professionals who are not directly impacted by the outcomes...We have had two research projects. The first dealt with our advising model and led to the development of the Help Hub, which has made significant impacts at Brightpoint. The second project just concluded, and we are still in the process of using the feedback to consider the appropriate changes moving forward. We can always produce a project that I think would be mutually beneficial and hope we get the opportunity to partner again in the future. Thank you!

Another recent capstone partner commented that "It is still too early to fully know, but the deliverable and recommendations will be an amazing advocacy tool! Excellent work by your team. Extremely responsive and overall excellent work. Thank you!" There are rare instances when a partner is not fully satisfied, or little impact is reported. Often this is accompanied by a change in leadership at the organization, though sometimes it is due to an organization not providing promised data, the partner being unable to adequately help recruit participants, or a team dysfunction that stymied the work. Again, those instances are rare. Occasionally, it arises from poor understanding of the capstone process, which our new capstone partner handbook and capstone partner orientation address.

## Recommendations for Implementation

For those interested in implementing a team- and partner-based dissertation-in-practice, there are a few key takeaways. Capacity for teaming is always a challenge. There is a body of literature about teaming (e.g., Adham et al., 2023; Edmondson, 2018; Killman, 2022; Lencioni, 2002; Stone & Heen, 2015; Woolley et al., 2011), yet most education programs fail to explicitly name or grapple with what effective teaming actually looks like, what practices support teaming, and what to do when teaming goes awry (e.g., conflict resolution, coaching). We embed teaming thoughtfully throughout the program, ground student learning and development in the first course of our curriculum, Learning Networks. We embed continual learning and assessment throughout the curriculum as well. In addition, faculty should first look inward about their own capacity to support student teaming and their own ability to work in a team. One of the most common challenges we experience is that students, instructors, and faculty—while committed to collaboration—often struggle with the intense demands of interpersonal conflict, managing diverse working styles, and establishing mutual accountability when the work becomes challenging. This is not a program where faculty or students can walk away from the challenges of interpersonal conflict, working styles misalignment, or lack of accountability systems. That is the true work of leadership, to work through those challenges.

In addition, managing capstone partner relationships is a skill as well. Managing capstone expectations, building relationships with external partners, training chairs to work with both the team and the partner in managing power relationships, understanding the political landscape, and having student and faculty work on display to external partners are all areas we have had to grow into as a faculty



(see, for example, Lambrev, 2021, Soska & Butterfield, 2013; Stevahn et al., 2016). Being intentional about relationship-building, creating systems that support engagement (e.g., request for partnership and the capstone matching process), establishing feedback loops early, and managing expectations are all key to successfully recruiting and guiding teams and partners through the process.

If seeking to implement a formative assessment style milestone in your program, first get very clear on what exactly you need to assess, what forms of evidence students can leverage to illustrate their growth, how the faculty will manage the workload, and how the FA will work logistically. Two faculty assess each student. This fall, we had 73 students complete the formative assessment, which averaged to 11.5 formative assessments per faculty member. The FA itself requires faculty to read an essay (~8 pages), attend the presentation, frame and ask questions, and then complete an assessment that includes ranking each domain, indicating a final outcome, and adding comments that go to the student. We complete these within a 2-3 week window in September. It is a monumental lift for faculty each year, and the systems we have iterated over time make the process better and better each year, but the logistics and faculty labor involved are not to be minimized. In addition, we then have to logistically carve out how we will support students who land in the “advance with support” category, which is usually a tag team of mentoring, coaching, and tailored academic support sessions (e.g., writing).

Finally, I must acknowledge that we are a program with an explicit DEIB focus in an American context that is increasingly anti-DEIB in policy and practice. Thus far, we have been fortunate to be supported by our school and university administration in navigating compliance with policies and retaining our academic freedom over the curriculum. Our faculty has discussed potential strategies should the climate turn more stormy. Our focus on DEIB remains a collective moral and ethical imperative for our faculty and we receive positive feedback from students, colleagues, and the community regarding our focus and the way we embed DEIB into each class and the capstone. My recommendation for those who want to continue the work of DEIB is to first make DEIB an integral part of the curriculum. Excising DEIB from our curriculum would be challenging since it is interwoven into every class. Therefore, whether we call it diversity of ideas or collective intelligence, equity or improving organizations, inclusion or belonging or a welcoming environment, the imperative continues. Leaders must be able to work with anyone, to self-regulate, have difficult conversations, and hold themselves and others accountable for the success of every person in their organization and the organization itself.

## CONCLUSION

The VCU EdD in Leadership program is an innovative model for developing leaders who are prepared to drive meaningful change. Our vision of leadership as collective, adaptive, and equity-focused coupled with our commitment to continuous improvement ensures the program remains responsive to the evolving needs of students and partner organizations. The capstone, as a team-based and community-engaged leadership project, provides real-world solutions to our community partners. The formative assessment, as a crucial milestone in the EdD, not only supports individual student success but also provides valuable programmatic feedback and connects

students and faculty. Both the capstone and the FA serve as transformative experiences that integrate theory and practice, foster problem-solving skills, and emphasize collaboration in learning and leadership.

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