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CIRCLE: Building Community, Individuals and Respect: Creating Leaders of Excellence:

the EdD Program at Texas A&M University

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ABSTRACT

In this article, we describe how the online EdD program in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University underwent a transformative redesign that led to its being recognized as the Program of the Year by the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED). We detail the program's evolution from its 2009 inception, its structured pedagogical approach, and the comprehensive self-study process that identified the key features of this redesign which centered on human connection over static online communication. The resulting innovation, the CIRCLE model (Community, Individuals, Respect, Creating Leaders, Excellence), is presented as a theoretically grounded framework aligned with CPED principles. This redesign has fostered a vibrant, community-oriented ecology, leading to significant improvements in student retention and the development of scholar-practitioner-leaders. Evidence of impact is demonstrated through positive student survey outcomes, and compelling testimonials from students and faculty, showcasing the program's profound influence on individuals, the institution, and the communities served by its graduates.

KEYWORDS

Carnegie Project on the Educational Doctorate-informed EdD program (CPED), CPED principle alignment, community, doctoral education

The Online EdD in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University (TAMU) first commenced its operations in 2009, opening its virtual doors to a new cohort of aspiring educational leaders. Since its establishment, our program has experienced substantial growth, currently enrolling approximately 70 students across cohorts 11 through 15. The program is strategically housed within the Department of Teaching, Learning and Culture, which is part of Texas A&M University's College of Education and Human Development. Delivered entirely online, the program draws a diverse national and international student population, with a significant majority of its enrollees originating from Texas's two largest metropolitan areas, Houston and Dallas.

The motives behind the development of our EdD program were much the same as those behind the growth of other EdD programs: the need to provide a terminal degree in education that helps school leaders develop into scholar-practitioners and make the best-informed decisions possible to create more opportunities for all children. While our program has undergone continuous evolution over its fifteen-year history, the most profound and impactful changes were initiated after 2016 when we joined the Carnegie Project for the Education Doctorate (CPED). Our program's affiliation with CPED served as a pivotal catalyst for its internal transformation. Joining a recognized professional framework like CPED was much more than an administrative step; it signified a deep commitment to a specific philosophical and pedagogical paradigm. This membership provided our program with a clear mandate for critical self-reflection and a comprehensive blueprint for a practitioner-focused redesign.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

The Online EdD in Curriculum and Instruction is a fully online four year professional doctorate that is designed to support mid-career educational professionals mostly from K-12 environments advance in their careers. Its delivery model enables the program to attract a diverse student population from across the nation and internationally, with a notable concentration of students from the major Texas cities of Houston and Dallas. In terms of student demographics, the majority of enrolled students are over 30 years old, 84% are female, approximately 62% are White, 23% are Hispanic, and 10% are Black. This demographic profile is situated

within the broader context of Texas A&M University's 2023 enrollment, which included 77,491 students, with 16,762 specifically identified as graduate and professional students.

The program admits students once a year, with applications opening in April and closing on August 1. The initial application package requires applicants to submit essays, an outline detailing a preliminary idea for a potential problem based action research dissertation (termed as a Record of Study at our institution) and current GRE scores (although from the 2025 admission cycle onwards we offer the option of writing a proctored essay in lieu of the GRE). Following a rigorous initial review, a select group of candidates is invited to participate in a subsequent stage, which involves submitting a 5- to 7-minute video. This video serves as a unique opportunity for candidates to articulate their educational journeys, highlight an educational innovation of which they are particularly proud, and explain why they believe their profile aligns well with the program's mission and ethos. Final admission decisions are typically communicated in early October, with a standard cohort size ranging from 15 to 18 students who begin the program in January.

The program's pedagogical structure involves a predetermined course sequence and a highly scaffolded approach to the development of the Record of Study (ROS). For the initial two years, students typically enroll in an average of two three-credit courses during the spring, summer, and fall semesters. The curriculum is comprehensive, encompassing five courses on research methods, foundational courses exploring urban schools and global education, and skill-based courses covering essential areas such as program evaluations, grant writing, data mining, and strategies for supporting twenty-first-century learners. Towards the end of their second year, students enroll in a dedicated proposal development course. During this course, they engage in a structured problem development process that results in their initial idea for their final Record of Study which undergoes a collaborative review process involving both the course professor and program faculty. Subsequently, students are organized into small groups, each assigned a common advisor, to facilitate the further refinement of their chosen research topics. Although the cohort structure remains intact the students have the benefit of having a sub group who works with the same advisor. In the third year of the program, students dedicate their efforts to developing a robust literature review pertinent to their selected topic and concurrently complete an apprenticeship in research course. The apprenticeship course is designed to allow students further refine and define their problem of practice within the authentic context for which it was conceived.

By the end of the third year, students are also expected to successfully complete their comprehensive preliminary examinations and to develop a complete proposal for their action research study, which is then formally presented to their doctoral committee. Upon receiving committee approval, data collection can commence. To culminate the program, students author a five-chapter Record of Study, using a template specifically based on CPED guidelines for action research dissertations, which they must successfully defend in front of their committee. It is important to emphasize that all components of this rigorous program, from the initial coursework to the final defense, are conducted entirely online.

SELF STUDY, REFLECTION PROCESS AND HOW WE IMPLEMENTED OUR INNOVATION

The story of our transformation and what undergirded it was described in a 2019 publication by the EdD program staff. In this chapter, we summarize the results of a survey conducted to assess the state of our program and how we drew on the current literature on online education to contextualize and interpret our findings. Our motive in conducting this program evaluation was multifold: we wanted to be great not just good; we wanted to fulfil our mission as a program at a premiere land grant institution; and in keeping with our induction into CPED, we wanted to retool our efforts in order to bring about meaningful change and social justice both for our students as well as the communities they served.

Nearly 60 percent of our approximately 80 enrolled students took the survey. Key areas for improvement were identified, centered on the need for dynamic connections and interactions rather than static communication. As scholars of online education have put it, whereas online spaces are often described as environments, adopting an ecological approach may be more appropriate as it centers the living beings and their interactions within the online space (Hai-Jew, 2004; Ross et al., 2013). We determined that our redesign would entail creating a vibrant and active online community-oriented ecology for our program and began an aggressive process of reexamining our EdD program to align it with CPED principles, emphasizing equity, improving the lives of families and communities, and supporting practitioner research. Philosophically, as a group, we found a deep resonance with Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological systems theory, which locates human activity within a series of nested circles, with each circle influencing the other. We used this model to guide our program, with the intention of paying attention to each constituent circle within the program, such as the individual constituents, content, and the relationships between content and constituents, as well as the relationships between the circles. We have thus named our innovation the CIRCLE approach. It is built upon five principles: community, individuals, respect, creating leaders, and excellence. In this next section, we describe how we transformed each of these principles into actions, all the while centering CPED principles.

Principle 1: C is for Community

The first C in the circle model stands for community, which is what we want every one of our graduates to experience as well as to impact, and is also one of CPED's founding principles. A lack of community was one of the key areas of improvement that emerged from our program evaluation survey. The results showed that over one-third of our participants were first-generation college students; approximately 22% identified an ethnicity other than White, and the average age of the students was 42 years old. In the original program documents, we found little to no mention of the nature of the population that was likely to enroll in the EdD, nor was there a focus on strategies to recruit and retain diverse applicants. Thus, the most urgent finding, unsurprisingly, from our program evaluation was that what our students craved was not better technology but a more vibrant space within which they could interact with peers and professors. When presented with a curriculum mostly delivered through a static learning management system characterized by asynchronous communication, students responded by asking for genuine interactions, communication, and relationships to overcome their overwhelming sense of isolation and alienation from the

program. As our students expressed in the survey, given the ubiquitous nature of computing, technology-oriented bells and whistles were no longer impressive or even considered worthy of attention. What they wanted rather was a structure that reduced the distance in distance education, not through technology but through relationships: essentially, the technology had to recede into the background, and e-learning had to simply become learning. This resonated with our next finding that our minoritized and first-generation students needed a better sense of community and connection to succeed in the program, and aligned with the CPED guidelines to build communication and collaboration skills within and between diverse audiences.

Our resulting action was to intentionally examine our entire program and revisit our teaching philosophies and modes of instructional delivery, as well as to embed multiple spaces for community within the program, such as synchronous meetings alongside asynchronous classes, on-campus retreats, and an annual study abroad program. Now, from the day our students enter our program, they are encouraged to build a cohort community that becomes a professional network and a support system for our online students. This is particularly beneficial for our first-generation students as it helps them build a network for professional support. Further, students are encouraged to relate every experience they have in the program back to their own community, whether it be a grant proposal, a data mining exercise, or a problem of practice.

"Innovating" Community

> I feel like I am a respected colleague and not "just" a student. Growing and learning together along with our professors has been so energizing and exciting! I'm an experienced educator of 29 years, and this program has reconnected me to my "why" for becoming a teacher so many years ago and also to the fact that we should never stop learning. I see a difference in how I approach leadership and curriculum challenges, and how I can be part of the solution (Respondent 1).

Our review of the literature on online education as well as our adherence to the CPED principles led us to believe that first and foremost we had to move away from thinking of our online program as a neutral environment from which students could download information to an ecological, community based model which fully took into consideration the relationships between our learners, our instructors and the technology that helped facilitate their interactions. The creation of a community-oriented model thus required us to reexamine almost every aspect of our program to see how we could make it more inclusive, dynamic, relationship-centered, responsive to the needs of communities and families, and student-friendly.

Our most concrete change was to **localize** our program. One of the oft-touted attractions of online programs is that they are ubiquitous; they can be taken by anyone, anywhere, at any time. However, in light of the CPED guidelines, which not only emphasize local knowledge but also field-based learning and community-oriented work, we began to embrace our own identity as part of Texas A&M University. While we still offered the convenience of a fully online program, we ensured that our students felt part of the larger Texas A&M community and that the Aggie values of respect, excellence, and leadership were well represented within it. We started to require three face-to-face meetings at strategic times, namely a first-year orientation, a fall retreat where problems of practice were developed and refined in consultation between students and advisors, and at the conclusion of the program. As of Fall 2023, over 75 students have attended our fall retreats to meet their doctoral advisors, and many more have attended our first-year orientations.

A recent endeavor has been to create a cross-class project between the courses taken in the first semester of the program, linking our online doctoral students to our undergraduate preservice teachers. In Spring 2023, we obtained funding for a new mentoring program that pairs a first-generation doctoral student with a first-generation undergraduate student. These students support each other as they both negotiate the unfamiliar world of academia. We also found that program pride supports student success (Graham et al., 2022).

We also **implemented networking** across cohorts. As our program faculty reflected on their own doctoral experiences, we recognized the impact of being part of a doctoral community, particularly the impact advanced doctoral students have on novice doctoral students. Thus, we made concerted efforts to bring our students together across cohorts, whether it be at our on-campus retreats, study abroad program, or through scheduled online hangouts. As one student commented, "My favorite experience was the purposeful collaboration in our coursework with others in our cohort. This included group projects and collaborative office hours and chats with our professors and cohort members about how our coursework could impact our current and future context." Finally, we **modified coursework and instruction** to include more opportunities for community building, including more class projects that asked our students to describe their own contexts of work and whenever possible to make them visible to us through technology.

Principle 2: I is for Individual

The I in CIRCLE stands for Individual, as we recognize that each student is embedded in an ecology of their own. The average student in our program is a mid-career professional raising a young family, returning to school after several years in the field. Despite these commonalities, we recognize that each student has individual needs that have to be met for them to be successful. We think of each student as being a point on the circumference of the circle, with unique interests and capabilities, with all of them being equidistant from the center. Thus, we strive to provide the same individualized attention to all students, empowering them to grow as leaders. This aligns well with the CPED principle of helping practitioners generate and use professional knowledge.

In our survey, as well as through individual communications, student narratives detailed their struggles even over procedural matters such as scheduling meetings with their advisors, preparing for preliminary examinations, and obtaining IRB approval, which were becoming roadblocks in their paths. It became explicit that some students came to us with much deeper funds of knowledge as related to academia than others, and it was thus incumbent on us to get to know each of our students so that we could support them adequately. As we undertook the process of redesign, we drew from the CPED frame of equity, ethics, and social justice to reimagine what our program could look like. As the title of our chapter indicates, faculty were sometimes perceived as ghosts who occasionally entered grades into a learning management system rather than as human beings who interacted with students regularly. In keeping with the critique expressed above of the sterility of the online environment, while students prioritized high-quality and up-to-date content, it was evident that the content only came alive when faculty co-constructed knowledge alongside their students. Our program

redesign, therefore, had to emphasize that knowledge was generated, constructed, and transformed through meaningful individual professional interactions within the program, as the CPED principles state. Our resulting actions included deliberately seeking ways to learn more about our students, adding professional development opportunities for our faculty that emphasized the dynamic nature of online instruction and to foster interactions where students and faculty could be their authentic selves and drawing from the community of inquiry model (Garrison, 2016) to strengthen social and teaching presence.

"Innovating" Individual Development

> "The faculty and staff are very accommodating to the needs of working professionals. The bar is held high while allowing for unique personal needs of the program participants." (Respondent 2)

As mentioned above, our program evaluation survey made us keenly aware of the vast array of individual needs that existed in the program as well as the absolute necessity of creating ways in which faculty could both get to know their students as individuals and be supportive partners on each student's journey. Further when we reviewed the results of our program evaluation survey as well as the literature on online education (Graham et al., 2022) we were struck by how often the word "alone" rose to the top. Online students characterized their greatest fears and most difficult experiences as loneliness and facing challenges alone. The "alone together paradox" (Turkle, 2011, p. 19), which refers to the state of isolation that many online students experience, was described as a major feature that inhibited student success. Students mentioned that although they knew who their professors and colleagues were, there was no real sense of connection or camaraderie among them. Our first-generation and minoritized students experienced this sense of isolation even more starkly.

Our most impactful changes were to **learn more** about all our students and the literature on online education, ensuring that all our students, but particularly those who were most vulnerable, felt a sense of belonging. Early on in the process of redesigning our program, we became aware of the community of inquiry model (Garrison, 2016), which positions online learning as a collaborative and constructivist process within which individual student understandings are created within social frameworks (Rios et al., 2019). The community of inquiry model provided us with a framework to address the concerns about isolation expressed by our students. It emphasizes the importance of three kinds of presence within online instruction: social, cognitive, and teaching presence.

To support individual development, we focused heavily on social and teaching presence, particularly the need for personal interactions, open communication, and group cohesion. (Our efforts to ensure cognitive presence are described below in the section on Excellence.) During both phases of the program (coursework and research), we built in more opportunities for individual interactions where students could be their authentic selves as they engaged in synchronous meetings, sponsored writing group sessions, and Zoom hangouts with their classmates and professors. We also provided **mentoring and support for faculty** on creating relationships with individual students. In the past, our focus for faculty who taught courses for the EdD was content expertise. We now intentionally recruit professors who are also adept in online instruction, who understand the needs of professional doctoral students, and the how to integrate their courses within the larger community of the EdD We make sure that our on-campus retreats and study abroad programs include multiple opportunities to interact with professors as individuals in meaningful ways. Further, we retooled our internship course so that it is closely supervised by doctoral advisors. This has helped students define their problems of practice more tightly as faculty consistently provide input as students pilot their ideas for research in authentic contexts and provide more opportunities for meaningful one-on-one interactions. In addition to prioritizing the individual nature of our students, we found that these interactions allowed for the development of much more complex and meaningful research studies.

Principle 3: R is for Respect

The R in the CIRCLE model is perhaps its most critical component; it stands for respect, a quality that we hope to nurture in our students as well as extend towards them. While we intentionally include experiences that demonstrate how every child comes from a unique background, all of which are worthy of respect, we also strive to remember this about our own students. To fulfil this goal, we added coursework as well as study abroad experiences that expose our students to diverse childhoods and school systems around the United States and the world. Furthermore, it involves being intentional about the kind of practitioner research we encourage our students to conduct. This drew inspiration from the CPED principle on building partnerships with diverse communities. As examples, our students have engaged in work such as surveying Columbine survivors on how to curb violence in American schools and studying the experiences of female teachers in Honduras related to sexism and harassment. The need to be respectful of our own students' backgrounds is also prioritized. Our program evaluation data showed some clear trends in terms of who our students were (and were not) in our program, as well as which communities our students served (or did not serve). For example, we were delighted to see that the largest percentage of our students represented urban communities within both the Houston and Dallas areas. Our rigorous admissions process is committed to attracting a diverse pool of applicants. Our resulting action was to institute a multi-step application process that included student-created videos that helped students better tell their story as to why they would be a good fit for our program. Additionally, we modified our advertising strategies to target students throughout the state. Such strategies have been shown to increase representativeness among the student population.

"Innovating" Respect

> This program has also grounded me in a more global view of education and where our country stands in comparison to others. I also feel much more confident and capable of being a change agent and advocate in education, no matter my position or title. (Respondent 3)

As mentioned above our focus on respect in the program was twofold. We wanted to inculcate respect for all in our students, but we also wanted to be respectful of our own students' backgrounds and journeys to become part of our community. As mentioned above, in pursuit of our goals to emphasize respect for all, we intentionally included coursework in our program that exposed our students to knowledge about children from a variety of backgrounds. Specifically, we added a course on urban education and global education to our curriculum. In our research methods courses, we made sure to illustrate the lack of knowledge about under-studied populations. Additionally, we made an effort to recruit faculty from a

range of philosophical perspectives to teach and mentor our students. To examine whether our innovation was having direct impact, we chose a random sample of approximately twenty percent of the Records of Study from two groups: those who graduated prior to 2016 (cohorts 3, 4 and 5) and those who graduated once the redesign had been completed (8, 19 and 10). We were encouraged to see that, post-redesign, the studies focused much more directly on improving specific contexts and respect for students from multiple backgrounds, in contrast to the earlier studies that tended to be more generic in nature. Prior to our redesign, only one-third of the sample of studies focused on social issues, whereas post-redesign, 83 percent of the studies adopted that orientation.

Our data also showed that "respect for all" needed to begin at home for us, in our own program. As noted, 22% of our students claim an ethnicity other than White; slightly over one-third were first-generation college students, and the average age of our students is 42. While these demographics reflect more diversity than other programs at our institution, we still wanted to make sure that our admission process was equitable and respectful to all. We therefore instituted a two-step admission process in order to provide students with more ways in which to tell their stories. Our original admissions package consisted of GRE scores, three admission essays, including a prompt on how students would allocate time for their internships, and letters of recommendation. As part of our redesign, we revised the prompts to provide students with more opportunities to share information about themselves and their backgrounds. Further, we added an additional step to the admission process where promising candidates were invited to submit videos that told us more about themselves.

When we analyzed the data for our admitted students, we found that our first-generation and minoritized students found ambiguous spaces the most complex to negotiate. For example, although all our students performed well in their courses, they struggled when they began to negotiate relationships with their advisors individually or when carrying out tasks that were not part of a course. As one student commented:

> "I had a great experience with my chair. I do think that after prelims, the experience is entirely contingent on the comfort and relationship with your chair. If it felt like my chair wasn't communicating or responding to me, I'm not sure I would have finished or it would have been significantly harder." (Respondent 4)

We therefore began holding advisor meetings each semester to streamline expectations for students and to share concerns that faculty had, so we could address them proactively. We also found that our first-generation students often viewed setbacks as an indication that they did not belong in the program, rather than as opportunities for growth and conversation. Thus, we decided to attach as many tasks associated with completing a doctoral program to courses, so that students always received support. Students now define and refine the problem of practice that they will investigate for their Records of Study within a course; they write the first draft of their literature reviews within a course; they write the first three chapters of their Records of Study within a course; they obtain IRB approvals within a course and they prepare for their comprehensive preliminary examinations within a course. We believe that removing ambiguity and providing a clearer path forward towards graduation has helped all of our students tremendously, but particularly those for whom academia and its ways and mores are unfamiliar. Further, for our current cohorts, only one student out of a total of 50 students has withdrawn from the program thus far.

Principle 4: CL together stands for Creating Leaders

A goal that emerged early on in our redesign efforts was that it was important to reimagine our program as transformational in nature. Students would enter from varied backgrounds, but we wanted them all to leave as scholar-practitioner-leaders who could integrate theoretical and practical knowledge as CPED emphasizes. We believe that in the second/third year of our program, as students define their problems of practice, they enter a zone of transformation in which they transition from being students to teacher-leaders. This typically happens as students outgrow the scaffolds provided and strengthen their own identities as leaders, through developing and carrying out their problem-based dissertation. Additionally, mindful that the transformational leadership literature (Bass & Riggio, 2006) emphasizes the need for leaders who understand that curriculum is always in a state of change and that 21st century leadership requires strong communication skills and the ability to consume, conduct and supervise action oriented research, we redesigned our course sequences as well as our research orientation. We found that despite our commitment to high-quality writing, we had not instituted measures to support students' development as writers, so we added a multi-semester writing program designed to help educational leaders communicate with a wide variety of audiences. The annual study abroad experience also provides students with the opportunity to critically examine educational practices in an unfamiliar context and engage in reflection and deconstruction exercises. Finally, the redesign of the requirements for the Record of Study based on CPED principles, including the mandatory creation of an implementable artifact, helped our students demonstrate their leadership potential to their contexts.

"Innovating" creating leaders

> I find myself quoting different professors when working with my department - saying if you don't have evidence to support your claim, you should not say that or if you can't get your message across in a sentence less than 10 words you don't know your message. And don't get me started on passive voice! I have served on two defense committees for students in my district and each time the chair has asked about my doctoral experience because of the feedback I provide on the research questions and methodologies chosen. I give credit to this program! (Respondent 5)

The objective of our program redesign was to strengthen and fortify our curriculum by redefining our sequence of courses and other required program activities to reflect our commitment to building transformational teacher leaders. Transformational leadership has been defined as a style of leadership in which leaders "engage with others in such a way that leaders and followers raise one another to higher levels of motivation and morality" (Burns, 1978, p. 19). Further in the 21st century, the literature on curriculum and instruction leadership emphasizes the importance of understanding that curriculum and instruction are always in a state of change, given that knowledge itself is continually evolving (Ahmad & Ghavifekr, 2014).

In light of the above, we made significant changes to our program. This included redesigning our sequence of courses on curriculum and instruction with a sharpened emphasis on data

literacy and 21st-century understandings of curriculum and instruction. These are supplemented with courses on professional development strategies and program evaluation in curriculum and instruction. Since communication has repeatedly been identified as an important component of 21st-century leadership, we added a course on academic writing. We found that our first-generation college students often struggled with the conventions of academic writing, so we added a course taken early on in the program that explicitly teaches students the academic writing conventions. The writing faculty members remain as resources for students throughout their entire program. We also added a writing component to our annual study abroad experiences. Students who participate (approximately 20% of our students do so each year) receive feedback from our academic advisors, who are trained writing consultants, and from professors in the program. Given that leadership also encompasses the ability to understand and guide action research, we have also redesigned the template for our Record of Study to be explicitly action research-focused. Students are required to not only define concrete problems of practice as foci for their Records of Study but must also describe how the work they do impacts their context and what lessons the context has learned from their research. Finally, all students must produce an implementable artifact that is delivered to the context they work in as a concrete solution to a problem of practice. These artifacts often take the form of professional development courses, policy briefs or guidelines for how school programs should be run (for example, ensuring that recruitment for gifted programs specifically targets students of color). Furthermore, we instituted efforts to **build professional connections among our students,** enabling them to belong not just in our program but in the worlds to which they aspired. As one of our students said,

> It helps cut down on feeling alone. And then for those of us who really struggle with impostor syndrome and things like that, and those of us of color who've been through bad, all kinds of experiences in our life. That wasn't always positive to feel invisible...so to have this family mentality where we're looking out for each other, take care of each other, cohorts checking on each other and come together ... that helps us cut down on the alienation and the isolation and the loneliness as well as the feeling invisible. (Respondent 6)

Principle 5: E is for Excellence

Finally, the E stands for excellence: pursuing excellence and rigor in how we prepare teacher leaders is demonstrated through emphasizing high-quality writing, rigorously conceptualized research studies, and careful adherence to the highest ethical standards in conducting research to enable our students to succeed. Adopting this approach has helped us become, we believe, an example of a proofing site where all the pieces work in unison towards a common goal. We demonstrate our commitment to excellence through recruiting high caliber faculty to teach in our program and mentor our students, holding our students to the highest of academic standards, conducting annual evaluations of student performance at critical junctures in the program, reviewing our Records of Study to ensure that the integration of theoretical and practical knowledge is seamless and comparing our online program to our face to face program.

"Innovating" Excellence

> Collectively, the program experiences so far have supported me towards becoming better at writing about my professional practice and sharing those experiences locally with colleagues and with broader audiences through journals and conference presentations. Having each course require extensive writing sustains high expectations and the rigor of the program experience. (Respondent 7)

Excellence is a complex concept and embeds itself in all areas of a well-designed program. We would like to highlight three areas of our focus on excellence that have been the most impactful. The first relates to the community of inquiry model described earlier, in which cognitive presence is an important component (Garrison, 2016). Cognitive presence demands that program content be complex and well-defined. We therefore took a detailed look at the quality of each one of our courses. For example, we found that we had built in six one-hour seminars to help students complete the preliminary examination and proposal process; however, we found we could cover that content in three seminars instead. Those were therefore replaced with an extra course on proposal writing that helps students create a draft of the first three chapters of their Records of Study. Additionally, cognitive presence demands that students be given opportunities to try out ideas in authentic contexts to determine their validity. Consequently, we built dynamic research projects into our research methods courses that linked our EdD students with our undergraduate preservice teachers in mutually beneficial partnerships. Our EdD students see firsthand the kinds of struggles that preservice and early-career teachers face as they enter the field, and our undergraduate students initiate our online students into the traditions and culture of Texas A&M University. The second action to foster excellence is to map student progress in terms of performance at their proposal and final ROS defenses. We require all doctoral chairs to assess the performance of their students at these critical points in terms of mastery of content, ability to formulate arguments defending their work, and understanding of action research components. We have seen growth in these measures. In the 2021-2022 academic year, nine students completed their proposal defenses during the specified period. Eight of these students were assessed using a specific rubric to evaluate their proposals. On the mastery of knowledge criterion, only three out of the eight students were ranked as *above expectations*. According to the reasoned arguments criterion, four out of the eight students were evaluated as exceeding expectations, and only one student exceeded expectations on the action research criterion. During the next assessment cycle, nine out of the 16 students, or 56%, achieved above expectations on the rubric on all three domains which represents about a 20% increase.

One final way we ensured that excellence became routine in our program was to compare ourselves annually to our face-to-face PhD program to ensure that students were held to the same standards of rigor all the while recognizing that our standards for the EdD were distinct. For example, we compared the objectives for an introductory course that all doctoral students in both programs take. The course is designed to orient students to the program and outline the skills they are expected to acquire. The original comparison was done in Spring 2017 and at that time the course was found to have almost identical objectives to the PhD version which has 11 objectives, one related to understanding the field, four related to the nature of research, two related to scholarly writing, two related to research ethics and two related to synthesizing and presenting research. Through the redesign, an updated EdD version of the course, effective from 2018 onwards, was created, which has a

much narrower set of objectives that prioritize action research and professional, as well as scholarly, writing. We compared performance in both courses and found it to be comparable once the redesign had been implemented.

EVIDENCE AND DATA OF THE PROGRAM'S IMPACT ON THE INSTITUTION, STUDENTS, AND COMMUNITIES

The programmatic redesign undertaken by the online EdD in Curriculum and Instruction has had a comprehensive and far-reaching impact across multiple dimensions. To measure this impact, the program utilized various data sources, including surveys of current and former students, analysis of retention rates, and testimonials from both faculty members and former students.

Impact on Scholarly Practitioners.

The most significant impact that we hoped to see from our program redesign was, first and foremost, that more students would complete the program. We were not disappointed in this outcome. Table 1 below describes the graduation rates pre and post program redesign.

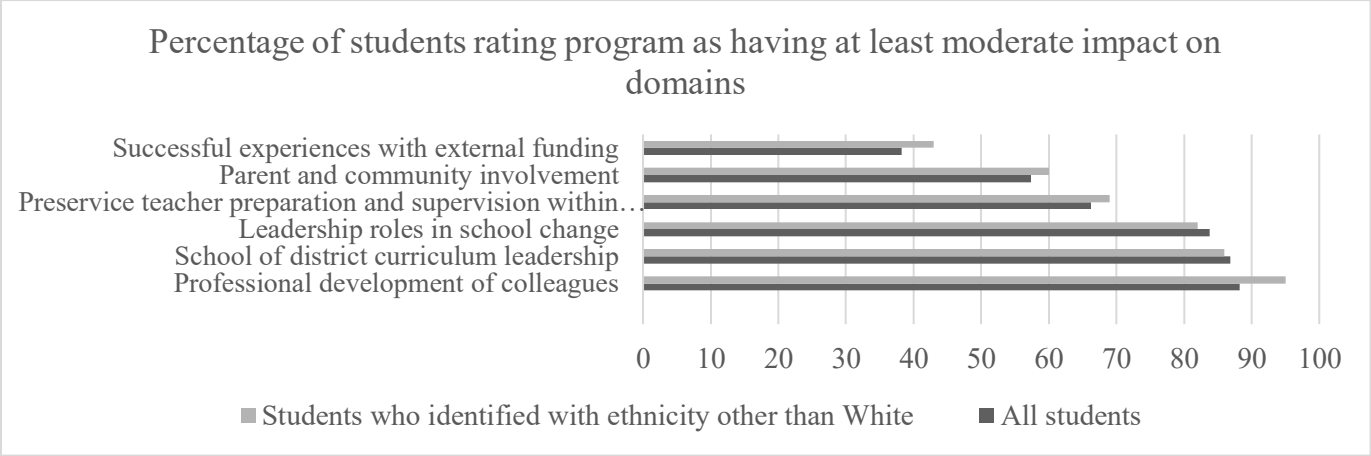
Table 1. Retention rates pre and post program redesign

	Before Redesign (Year of expected graduation)			Post-Redesign (Year of expected graduation)			
	Cohort 3 (2015)	Cohort 4 (2017)	Cohort 5 (2018)	Cohort 8 (2021)	Cohort 9 (2021)	Cohort 10 (2023)	Cohort 11 (2024)
Admitted students	24	26	23	22	19	14	16
Non completers	8	7	4	3	3	3	1
Graduation rate	66.67%	73.07%	82.6%	82.6%	84.2%	81% graduated, 3 in progress.	87.5% completed, 2 in progress.

To gauge the overall impact of the program, we administered an impact survey at the conclusion of the last academic year (2023) for which we could report data to 129 current and former EdD students from cohort 4 (2014) through cohort 13 (2023). 68 (52.7%) students responded to the survey, with representation from all ten cohorts in the sample. Out of these 68 students, 23 identified with an ethnicity other than White. Survey participants were asked to rate the degree of impact (a great deal of impact, moderate impact, slight impact, no impact) on eight domains of practice targeted by the EdD program including leadership roles in school change and improvement initiatives, school or district curriculum leadership, professional development of colleagues, parent and community involvement, pre-service teacher preparation and supervision within school contexts, contributions to the teaching profession through service and successful experiences with external funding efforts.

The three greatest areas of impact were professional development of colleagues (88.2% responded a great deal of impact or moderate impact), school or district curriculum leadership (86.8% responded a great deal of impact or moderate impact), and leadership roles in school change and improvement initiatives (83.8% responded a great deal of impact or moderate impact). This held true for all students as well as the non-White students. A majority of survey participants, 57% or greater, felt the EdD program had a great deal to moderate impact on all but one of the domains (Figure 1). We are encouraged that these highest rated domains of impact align well with our innovation's focus on community and leadership. Further, as Table 2 shows, the impact on students who identified as non-White was often greater. In particular, students identified the ability to impact professional colleagues as one that had been greatly impacted by the program.

Table 2.1 EdD program Impact on Students



Impact of Program on Faculty and Community

Faculty members involved with the EdD program consistently list it among the most impactful work they undertake. One faculty member notes that students conduct "translational research" that directly benefits educational environments by solving current issues, working with peer mentors during internships to identify and address problems. EdD students have explored a wide array of topics, including computational literacy, early childhood STEM, teacher recruitment, high stakes testing, gun control, instructional coaching, technology access for underserved students, glocalization, learning assistants, mathematical fluency, CTE teacher training, curriculum design for belonging, empathy programs for teachers, "hard history" topics, response to intervention, mental health, preschool parent resources, early-college high schools, increasing female interest in STEM, teacher self-efficacy, hybrid learning, school shootings, dual credit algebra, and language instruction for children of color. Students develop an implementable artifact to share with their committee and stakeholders, making a concrete difference in their school settings.

Another professor highlighted the passion of EdD students for enacting positive change in their communities, with projects stemming directly from observed problems. She provides specific examples: one student addressing STEM disparities by training high school girls to recruit middle school girls into engineering through an after-school program, and another recent graduate who addressed teacher compassion fatigue by running a workshop to help teachers with emotional needs arising from COVID-19, focusing on self-care and resources. She praised the impressive caliber of EdD students, describing them as talented leaders seeking sustainable impact, and emphasizes that their studies have a noticeable, direct impact on the communities they serve, effectively "making the world a better place".

Impact of Program on Communities Served (Former Students' Testimonials)

The program's impact extends directly to the communities served by its graduates, as evidenced by testimonials from former students:

Dr. Toni Harrison-Kelly, Executive Director of The Budd Center at Simmons School of Education and Human Development, Southern Methodist University, Dallas, Texas, attests that receiving her EdD "opened doors" she did not know were available.[1] She transitioned from an 8th-grade teacher to leading a research center and teaching M.Ed.-level students as an adjunct, and now owns an equity consulting firm. She feels prepared for an upward leadership trajectory due to the rigorous training and the program's stellar reputation.

Dr. Elana Goldbaum, from the Archer School for Girls, Los Angeles, California, describes a profound study abroad experience in Berlin in 2019 that formed the basis for her Record of Study.[1] She successfully navigated emotionally challenging topics like race and genocide with disparate groups, forming strong bonds, and was able to share her work with her school's professional learning community as an implementable artifact.

Dr. Raynardo Gallardo, Vice Principal at Arroyo Valley High School, San Bernardino, California, states that the EdD program developed in him the tools to be analytical and critical based on data, empowering him to make confident, fact-supported decisions as a leader. He gained strong familiarity with current and relevant academic discourse, supporting positive site-based decisions for teachers and students, and is now more confident in articulating leadership messages in written and spoken words in his role as a High School Vice Principal overseeing 2900 students and 150 staff.

SUMMARY

The online EdD in Curriculum and Instruction at Texas A&M University is a multi-pronged enterprise that has positively impacted the lives of students, families, and communities for several years now. The programmatic redesign, which focused on transforming a static online environment into a vibrant ecology where students and faculty interact meaningfully to engage in transformational work, has proved to be an extraordinary success. This success is largely attributable to intentional efforts centered on strengthening a sense of community, supporting individual development, promoting respect for all, and fostering leadership skills. Consequently, the program's students have actively sought out and addressed the most pressing problems in schools and communities, striving to find innovative solutions that can improve the lives of the most vulnerable.

In essence, the story of our program's transformation underscores that connection, context, and care are the pillars of online doctoral success. Any program wishing to undertake a similar endeavor might consider taking steps to fostering community and belonging (with special emphasis on the needs of online students), humanizing online learning through instituting regular touchpoints of contact, embedding a focus on equity in all aspects of their program, ensuring that expectations and policies and procedures are clearly communicated and perhaps most importantly of all continuously reviewing and evaluating the impact that the program is having on those whom it is designed to serve.

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