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Reflections on the CPED Self-Study Process:

Strengthening Practice and Purpose

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ABSTRACT

This reflective essay examines the challenges, learning gains, and programmatic changes that emerged from the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project conducted by a newly appointed coordinator and Graduate Assistant in the Education Doctorate (EdD) program at the University of Missouri. The self-study served as a catalyst for examining alignment with the CPED Framework©. Findings indicate that although the program's philosophy, structure, and pedagogy were largely aligned with the Framework©, CPED was not explicitly named in program materials, resulting in limited stakeholder awareness. Notably, students still identified skill development consistent with the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric. The timing of the study alongside accreditation with the Higher Learning Commission created both opportunities and challenges, particularly within a fully online program where stakeholders rarely meet face-to-face. In response, the program revised recruitment practices to explicitly introduce CPED to prospective students and began embedding CPED language and design concepts more intentionally throughout the curriculum and advising structures. The reflection highlights the value of intentional framework integration and offers lessons for other EdD programs engaging in self-study.

KEYWORDS

CPED, self-study, EdD Assessment, University of Missouri

In 2024, a call went out for Education Doctorate (EdD) programs affiliated with the Carnegie Project of the Education Doctorate (CPED) to participate in the Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project. As a new faculty member and coordinator of the EdD program in Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis (ELPA) at the University of Missouri, the invitation felt timely. Our current EdD model is a fully online, cohort-based program that admits approximately 30 students each year. However, the EdD program has existed at the University of Missouri for many years as part of a statewide cooperative that included a summer residency; the program transitioned to a fully online format in 2021 to better meet the needs of working professionals. As a large public land-grant institution, the University of Missouri primarily serves students from across the state of Missouri. Consistent with that mission, the EdD program enrolls mostly educational leaders working in Missouri educational institutions. At the same time, the fully online format expanded access to practitioners, from multiple states and several countries, who share a common goal of leading positive changes in educational organizations and systems.

Despite the program's long history and initial membership of the program in CPED in 2014, the Department of ELPA appeared to have limited shared understanding of where the program stood in alignment with the CPED Framework©. A study by Perry, Zambo, and Abruzzo (2020) found that alignment between departments and the CPED Framework© is a common struggle. While the Framework© offers guidance for EdD programs seeking to design or redesign professional doctorate programs, resistance and challenges often emerge when program teams attempt to implement its principles in practice.

Within ELPA, these challenges appeared to stem in part from faculty turnover. The faculty member previously most engaged with CPED had moved into an administrative role, leaving a gap in institutional knowledge. While there are 17 full-time faculty that currently exist in ELPA, all faculty teach across multiple programs. This is by department and dean requirements in an effort to balance workload across multiple programs. There is no faculty member solely dedicated to the EdD. Even the EdD coordinator role is a 20% EdD appointment, although this role was and currently is the biggest contributor to teaching in the program. As a result, there had been limited discussion of CPED within faculty meetings or program training. As coordinator, it seemed important to revisit how the CPED Framework© had been used to shape the EdD program and to better understand the program's current level of alignment. This reflection felt particularly timely as the University of Missouri was simultaneously undergoing its five-year accreditation review with the Higher Learning Commission (HLC), a process that further emphasized the importance of program assessment, alignment, and continuous improvement.

A part of the rationale to jump on the self-study process was to see how other institutions were applying the CPED Framework©.

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During the time of the Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project, the department was already collecting data and artifacts to use in accreditation, which aided in collection of rubrics and other artifacts about the program associated with the self-study. Ultimately, there were no negative repercussions from not being fully aligned with the Framework©, and realistically, there was probably never going to be an ideal time. In addition, there is significant research to indicate that completing a self-study evaluation can improve program utility, feasibility, rigor, and effectiveness (Butler et al. 2026; Moye, 2017; Woods, 2021) which was ultimately an important endeavor with the redesign. However, timing between this self-study and accreditation led to benefits and challenges as discussed further in this reflection. Due to accreditation happening concurrently and our faculty teaching across five different degree types, their time was being utilized elsewhere during the self-study process. To provide an extra layer of support to complete the self-study, the EdD Graduate Assistant joined me to make up the self-study team.

As part of the self-study process, the team conducted a systematic review of core program documents and instructional materials to examine alignment with the CPED Framework©. This review included all course syllabi, the program handbook, advising resources, and archival data that made up the foundation of the fully online EdD experience. In addition, a survey was sent out about the application of Framework© to all graduating students from the first cohort of the online EdD program. The purpose of this survey was not only to assess alignment with CPED's six core principles, but also to identify areas where CPED-informed practices were being enacted implicitly rather than articulated explicitly across program artifacts. The reflection below is a review of the self-study team's experience with the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric and self-study process. Overall, the hope is that by describing processes that supported the self-study, challenges that created barriers in the process, and recommendations after completion of the self-study, future programs who participate will be set up for success and have an insightful, streamlined experience.

Processes that Supported the Self-Study Process

The timing of self-study supported the process in important ways. Because the self-study invitation went out almost concurrently with the HLC accreditation review, the self-study team was already anticipating data collection, documentation, and collective reflection. In addition, program goals for the EdD reflected the CPED Framework©, which meant we were already actively looking at how courses tied back to the Framework© through curriculum mapping within the HLC accreditation process. It is unknown when program goal decisions were originally made by faculty as turnover was high and the few remaining faculty remember when program goals were originally set. However, the fact that program goals aligned to the CPED Framework© was fortuitus as the team had a cohesive set of metrics to evaluate for both the self-study and accreditation. Overall, this alignment made the self-study decision easier as it seemed unlikely to create additional workload. At the same time, the program was finalizing defenses for its first cohort of 60 students from the redesigned online EdD program. In anticipation of needing stakeholder input, an exit survey was designed with components to specifically capture students' reactions to the CPED Framework©. The survey collected information specifically around the EdD program's ability to grow or strengthen participants' abilities in the six principles for program design attached to the Framework©. These questions were designed as Likert scale questions ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. In addition, after each principle Likert scale question, there was an open-ended question asking for specific examples of how they implemented that principle. The hope was that ease of completion of the survey, through data collection that would take less than 10 minutes to complete, would achieve a high response rate. The team found previously that the more time consuming a survey was to graduate students, the less likely they would complete it. Ultimately, the first round of data collection achieved a 79% response rate. As a result, survey materials were readily available and could be thoughtfully repurposed for the Principles Implementation & Framework© Impact Self-Study Project, allowing the analysis to be more efficient and grounded in existing evidence (Gall et al., 2006). This alignment in timing enabled the program team to build on concurrent evaluative work and deepen its reflection on program identity and coherence through the lens of the CPED Framework©.

In the self-study team's assessment, there might not have been as much gain from the self-study process without partaking in the process with other institutions. During the self-study process CPED peer institutions met on Zoom periodically to discuss the Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric, the process, and any barriers or challenges along the way. The goal was not to make an institutional comparison measure on who was applying the CPED self-study process best, but to examine the process, provide support, and make suggestions for changes for future programs participating in the self-study. Essentially, working with peer institutions as the self-study process created a program Professional Learning Community (PLC) to share knowledge and resources and led to further collaborative opportunities in the form of conference presentations and publications, which aligns tightly with benefits found in previous research on PLCs (Clark et al., 2023). In several situations, the team found other institutions struggling with the same issue and a work-around was generated. For example, when the Excel sheet originally provided for documenting artifacts to compare to the rubric was not a great fit for every institution, the consensus among the group was that an alternative sheet used by one of the institutions was adopted. The combined reflection of the process from multiple institutions concurrently allowed CPED to adjust rubrics and instructions to be clearer and more effective for future self-study participants. Despite many processes that supported the self-study process, there were still challenges that arose.

Challenges Encountered During the Self-Study Process

One of the primary challenges of the self-study process was assessing the CPED Framework© alignment across courses that were not taught or co-taught by members of the immediate self-study team. While we are the most active in teaching and administering the EdD program, coursework taught by other faculty at this time was out of the purview of the EdD coordinator. At the time that the study took place, the department was graduating its first cohort who had enrolled in the 100% online EdD. Due to budget cuts and high turnover rates of full-time faculty during the COVID-19 pandemic, this cohort was taught by adjuncts or other full-time faculty adjusting to a new format and a significantly large introductory cohort. These changes, combined with the quick pivot to a fully online program, left training gaps on syllabus development for adjuncts. Ultimately, the self-study team found inconsistent format, accessibility issues, and missing information; all indicators that best practices around syllabus

development (Jones, 2018) were not properly instructed upon. While syllabi for all EdD courses were available, the self-study team recognized limitations in fully capturing how CPED principles were enacted in practice beyond what was formally documented. In some cases, CPED-aligned pedagogies and learning experiences may have been present but not explicitly named in syllabi or course descriptions using the CPED language, creating uncertainty in the assessment process. Alignment was more straightforward in courses where full-time faculty had directly designed instructional materials and assignments and explicitly listed curricular elements, which have been identified as a best practice for all faculty syllabi (Wagner et al., 2023).

An additional challenge found within the self-study process was the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric itself. While the overarching metric categories of Emerging, Progressing, Full Integration, and Exemplar were consistent with other program evaluations, the percentages listed for meeting that standard boxed the self-study team in ways that did not allow for the flexibility to adequately represent the EdD program. For example, in Principle 1: *The Professional Doctorate in education is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice* the self-study team came to the consensus that 50-75% of relevant documents and 50-75% of program assessments supported students in manifesting understanding of this principle. However, this measurement put us in Progressing for the relevant documents category and Full Integration for the assessments category essentially spanning two categories (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric (2024)

Emerging	Progressing	Full Integration	Exemplar
Principle #1: The Professional Doctorate in education is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.			
Expectations for candidates to understand, internalize, and address issues of equity, ethics, and social justice appear within relevant data sources (e.g., curriculum, policies, and practices; interviews):			
• 25-50% of relevant documents; • less than 25% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding.	• 50-75% of relevant documents; • 25-50% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding.	• 75-90% of relevant documents; • 50-75% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding.	• 90-100% of relevant documents; • more than 75% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding; • Alumni data sources provide evidence that graduates manifest this understanding.
Data sources: Please indicate the data sources used to rate your program and a brief description of the evidence from this data source used to rate your program on this principle.			

1This inconsistency ended with the self-study team guessing with which category the EdD program best aligned and took more consideration than often was warranted for this process. This experience matched research done by Stevens and Levi (2005), cautioning that inconsistency in assessment could lead to extended time consumption.

The third challenge related to step 2 in the self-study process *Schedule at least four focus group interviews with current students (2), program faculty (1), and program alums (1).* This challenge may be of increasing importance as EdD programs come online or are new to operate as a degree program. On-campus programs that have ready access to ensuring student feedback may not have the ease of access in fully online programs, where evaluation or survey completion is typically lower (Dinu et al., 2015). That was the case for the University of Missouri EdD program. At the time the self-study, we had no alumni for the redesigned program, and as previously mentioned, students were in the throes of final defense work. All faculty were also participating as committee members or chairs during this three-week process. In other words, interest in an interview or focus group was bleak at best.

However, after discussion with other institutions on ways they modified the self-study process to best align with their institution, an exit survey was developed and sent to all EdD students to complete as a graduation requirement. While initially there was some concern focus groups may have provided more rich data, the self-study team's dive into the literature found that systematically collected evidence of students' connection to their learning and perceived program outcomes from graduating student exit surveys could yield rich insights into student learning and meaning-making (Chow et al., 2020; de Rodriguez, 2007; Schneider & Niederjohn, 1995) and that the benefits of doing a required exit survey outweighed the logistical challenges of attempting a focus group at a time when recruitment would have been extremely difficult. While the exit survey did not allow for follow-up, EdD students provided quality feedback about their experience. By the end of summer, the program had 79% student completion rate of the exit survey.

Despite these challenges, findings from the document analysis and exit survey indicated strong overall alignment with the CPED Framework©, though this alignment was unevenly distributed across the six principles. All courses and program materials demonstrated clear alignment with CPED Principle 3, which emphasized the development of collaboration and communication skills to work with diverse communities and build partnerships. In addition, the majority of courses and key program documents reflected strong alignment with Principle 1, which centers equity, ethics, and social justice in addressing complex problems of practice (9 out of 15 courses), and Principle 6, which emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge in practice (10 out of 15 courses).

The remaining CPED principles—*Principle 2 (preparing leaders to construct and apply knowledge for positive impact), Principle 4 (providing field-based opportunities to analyze problems of practice using multiple frames), and Principle 5 (integrating practical and research knowledge through systematic inquiry)*—were also present, though less consistently embedded and articulated through student surveys. These principles appeared in approximately 40–50 percent of courses and related materials. Importantly, while these principles were addressed through course design, assignments, and practitioner-oriented inquiry, they were rarely named explicitly using CPED terminology. Overarchingly, students identified the CPED principles more strongly in their exit surveys than the self-study team found in the document analysis. This pattern reinforced a central insight of the self-study; although the program's philosophy, pedagogy, and structure align closely with CPED, the Framework© itself had not been explicitly foregrounded across program materials, limiting stakeholders' awareness and critical thinking of CPED's role in shaping program identity and outcomes (Schmidt et al., 2026).

Epiphanies and Programmatic Response

The self-study process prompted immediate and actionable programmatic changes. Recognizing the importance of explicit Framework© integration, the program team took steps to introduce CPED more intentionally prior to the start of the 2025 cohort to promote critical thinking, academic success, and future career trajectories (Schmidt et al., 2026). During program orientation, students were explicitly introduced to CPED, its philosophy, and its guiding principles, as well as the program's identity as a CPED member institution designed around these commitments. This shift represented a move toward greater transparency and coherence in how the program communicates its purpose and values to students.

Additionally, the self-study team reviewed recruitment and application materials and identified that CPED membership and alignment were not clearly communicated on the program's online application site. This gap is currently being addressed through ongoing revisions to recruitment materials to ensure that prospective students encounter CPED language and principles early in their decision-making process. Together, these changes reflect the program's commitment to using self-study not as a compliance exercise, but as an improvement-oriented process that strengthens program identity, coherence, and Scholarly Practitioner development (Butler et al., 2026; Moye, 2017).

An additional goal is to provide more consistent training on best practices for syllabus design for faculty and adjuncts alike. Clear, well-aligned syllabi would allow us to more accurately document course content and the types of assessments used, which would strengthen the department's ability to match course artifacts to program outcomes and the CPED Framework© in an efficient and transparent way. An explicit listing of how assignments and course objectives tie directly back to the CPED Framework© will be encouraged. Explicitly tying program outcomes to course objectives and assignments strengthens coherence and transparency, helping students and faculty see how individual learning activities intentionally build toward broader program goals while also supporting more meaningful assessment (Jones, 2018; Wagner et al., 2023). Concurrently, an accessible overview of CPED—its Framework©, its significance to EdD student success, and the resources it offers—across all adjunct and full-time faculty is vital for the future success of the program. This is particularly important as many instructors are new to the program and may not yet be fully aware of the ways CPED guiding principles and support can enhance teaching, learning, and doctoral preparation.

Hindsight and Recommendations for Future Self-Study Participants

If undertaking this process again or offering guidance to other programs, the self-study team would strongly recommend securing early and intentional buy-in from faculty who regularly teach in or administer the program, as their engagement is critical to both the accuracy and sustainability of the self-study (Dorontich et al., 2025). While the self-study team was the most active participants in administering and teaching in the EdD program, which brought added benefits and expertise in how the program ran, decisions about the self-study would have benefited from wider feedback and participation. Wider participation in the self-study process also benefits the program in long-term change, as the faculty have a deeper understanding of the recommendations and future directions and are more likely to be collaborative in enacting needed changes as well as foster deeper reflection about one's own practice (Samaras et al., 2019; Wills-Jackson, 2025).

We also encourage programs to view program self-study as a flexible guide rather than a rigid or compliance-driven exercise. Although it may initially feel similar to an accreditation activity, the purpose of the process is formative; to learn, reflect, and grow in understanding how the CPED Framework© is currently being used, not to penalize programs for areas that are not yet fully integrated (Jones, 2018; Wagner et al., 2023). As seen in this reflection, the self-study benefited the program in key ways that allowed for immediate and strategic future pivots. While we might have come to the same conclusions eventually, the process allowed for greater efficiency and effectiveness in program administration.

Additionally, CPED as an organization may wish to consider ways to make data collection within the self-study process more accessible and sustainable across varying institutional contexts. While focus groups and interviews can provide rich insights, they may not always be feasible for programs operating primarily online or for faculty already stretched thin in terms of time and capacity. Providing institutions with adaptable examples of surveys, questionnaires, or other streamlined data collection instruments could increase participation and reduce barriers to engagement by making the process feel more manageable and actionable. Further, greater consistency in the alignment of rubric percentages would help eliminate confusion when programs attempt to determine where they fall within the rubric metrics. For example, if Emerging is defined in Figure 2 of the CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric as representing 25–50% of relevant documents, it is recommended corresponding assessment descriptors mirror that same 25–50% range rather than using phrasing such as "less than 25%," which can create ambiguity in interpretation and scoring.

Figure 2. CPED Guiding Principles Implementation Rubric (2024)

Emerging	Progressing	Full Integration	Exemplar
Principle #1: The Professional Doctorate in education is framed around questions of equity, ethics, and social justice to bring about solutions to complex problems of practice.			
Expectations for candidates to understand, internalize, and address issues of equity, ethics, and social justice appear within relevant data sources (e.g., curriculum, policies, and practices; interviews):			
• 25-50% of relevant documents; • less than 25% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding.	• 50-75% of relevant documents; • 25-50% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding.	• 75-90% of relevant documents; • 50-75% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding.	• 90-100% of relevant documents; • more than 75% of program assessments indicate expectations for student products to manifest this understanding; • Alumni data sources provide evidence that graduates manifest this understanding.
Data sources: Please indicate the data sources used to rate your program and a brief description of the evidence from this data source used to rate your program on this principle.			

Additionally, advanced departmental planning around data collection, ideally beginning a year prior to the self-study, can significantly streamline the process, reduce inefficiencies, and prevent barriers that may otherwise lead to frustration. Early alignment of assessment measures with program goals, accreditation standards, and CPED design concepts allows faculty and staff to gather more intentional and actionable evidence rather than retroactively assembling materials under compressed timelines (Mertens et al., 2025). Thoughtful planning also creates space to build shared understanding among stakeholders, establish clear roles and responsibilities, and integrate both quantitative and qualitative data sources, strengthening the rigor and credibility of the self-study.

Finally, consistent with CPED's mission as a supportive professional network, we recommend partnering with a peer institution to move through the self-study concurrently. Having the opportunity to exchange ideas, troubleshoot challenges, and reflect collaboratively made the process more meaningful, effective, and ultimately more beneficial for future planning. This recommendation is also soundly found in the literature, which recommends cross-institutional professional learning communities to promote academic, psychosocial success and institutional, and programmatic culture change (Kezar et al., 2025).

Overall, the self-study contributed to a deeper shared understanding among the program team of how CPED principles are enacted across the curriculum, where alignment is strongest, and

where greater intentionality is needed. It also highlighted the value—and challenge—of conducting meaningful self-assessment in a fully online doctoral program, particularly in contexts of faculty role differentiation, program growth, and institutional accountability. These insights continue to inform ongoing efforts to embed CPED language, design concepts, and principles more systematically across curriculum, advising, and faculty–student engagement.

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