# An Online CPED Educational Leadership Program

## Student Perspectives on Its Value and Influence on Professional Practice

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**ABSTRACT**

This qualitative case study of an online educational doctorate program in educational leadership examined how students perceived the value and influence of their experiences as doctoral students while practicing as full-time school leaders. Data were collected using surveys and in-depth semi-structured interviews. Through ongoing analysis of data, three themes emerged surrounding the concepts of: change in ways of thinking; program presented multiple values; and connections to others. The significance of these findings are discussed in terms of how online doctorate programs can be successful in the eyes of students who participate in them by offering synchronous online delivery, providing applicable content, and developing worthwhile connections between students and faculty.

KEY WORDS: Online Doctorate Programs; CPED, Impact of Educational Doctorate; Synchronous Online Delivery

## INTRODUCTION

Recently, the Educational Leadership (EDLE) Education Doctorate (EdD) program at University of Arkansas underwent two significant changes. First, in 2010 the program transitioned from a traditional face-to-face model to a predominately online model. The new design of the program offered coursework exclusively online but required students to complete three intensive on-campus seminar weekends focusing on leadership and research. The second major program change occurred in 2011 when the EDLE program joined the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) initiative and started the journey of transformation from a traditional research doctorate to a professional doctorate designed specifically for practitioners in the field. These two significant changes prompted an in-depth examination of the program. Thus, the purpose of this case study was to examine the experiences of students and their perceived value of the EdD program.

The increased prevalence of practitioners in doctoral programs necessitates the assurance that online delivery of the educational doctorate is impactful and meaningful. An increasing number of students pursuing doctoral work are practicing professionals (Pearson, Evans, & McCauley, 2004). The majority of students pursuing a professional doctorate in education are also full-time professionals, and online programs allow these students flexibility and convenience that

are not available in traditional face-to-face programs (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Furthermore, many rural practitioners work in areas in which traditional doctoral programs are not available; thus, online programs allow these practitioners access to doctoral education. Understanding student experiences in online doctoral programs is important in the development and maintenance of quality programs that meet the unique needs of practitioners in the field of education. The student experiences portrayed in this study are particularly valuable, as University of Arkansas's EDLE program is one of the few CPED doctoral programs offered online.

## CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In 2007, CPED was launched to explore, re-design, and promote the EdD as a practical and impactful professional doctorate degree. Consistent with this purpose, CPED has worked to develop signature pedagogies, laboratories of practice, and meaningful capstone experiences for students. At the same time, there has been an increase in the use of online courses and programs. In 2002, less than 10% of higher education students were enrolled in online courses. By 2011, this number had increased to 32% (Allen & Seaman, 2013).

Online courses and programs have increased because of the flexibility, convenience, and accessibility associated with online learning (Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Though these advantages to online

learning are consistently supported in the literature (Burns, 2013; Gabriela, Welch, & Nam, 2012; Xu & Jaggars, 2013), the effectiveness of online learning is less clear. Some research suggests that face-to-face and online courses are comparable in terms of learning outcomes (Johnson, Aragon, Shaik, & Palma-Rivas, 2000). A meta-analysis published by the U.S. Department of Education (2010) found that students in online courses performed at least as well as, or moderately better than, students in traditional face-to-face courses, and this advantage was even greater in courses that combined online learning with elements of face-to-face instruction (i.e., blended learning). Yet others have found that students perform significantly poorer in online courses than in face-to-face courses (Xu & Jaggars, 2013).

Student experiences in online courses and programs also send mixed messages. Students have reported feeling a sense of aloneness, anonymity, and trepidation associated with their participation in online programs (Reilly, Gallagher-Lepak, & Killion, 2012). They have also identified interaction with instructors and peers as a major challenge to online learning (Gabriela, Welch, & Nam, 2012). According to Burns (2013), though students perceive online courses as less effective than face-to-face courses, many still choose to take online courses because of the convenience they offer.

Students' sense of belonging in online programs is further complicated by the "part-time" status of many students enrolled in professional doctoral programs (e.g., EdD programs). In this context, "part-time" doctoral status refers to students who are enrolled in a doctoral program yet continue to work full-time within their field. Though these students are considered "part-time," they typically maintain a full-time course load that is equivalent to the full-time student. "The crucial aspect of 'part-timeness' has very little to do with credits taken. Rather, the issue is one of time pressures because of full-time employment, and how these pressures are recognized by both faculty and students" (Smith, 2000, p. 362). These pressures are further exacerbated by the many other professional and personal responsibilities "part-time" students assume.

Gardner and Gopaul (2012) examined the experiences of part-time doctoral students enrolled in diverse disciplines from one midsize research university in the U.S. They found that part-time students struggle to balance the intensive and often competing demands of graduate work, full-time employment, and family. Students also struggled to gain a sense of belonging as they believed their part-time status inhibited their ability to develop meaningful relationships with peers and faculty, to receive financial support for their continued education, and to engage in a deeper, more meaningful learning experience relative to their full-time peers.

Despite the challenges of online learning, the convenience, accessibility, and flexibility associated with online courses and programs continues to drive their expansion (Burns, 2013; Xu & Jaggars, 2013). Thus, understanding the effectiveness of online programs and student experiences in online programs, particularly those enrolled as part-time doctoral students, is important to the development of quality programs that support the personal, social, and professional development of students. It is further important to understand student experiences in CPED programs as signature pedagogies, laboratories of practice, and capstone experiences continue to be discussed, debated, and explored. This study provides a unique examination of student experiences in an online program that adheres to the CPED framework. This type of investigation is necessary to understand how CPED programs might utilize online formats

and ensure that online programs are providing students with a meaningful learning experience that will impact their professional practice.

## METHODS

Case studies are used to examine unique or special situations that might lead to a deeper or richer understanding of a practice or phenomenon (Yin, 2009). Because this case study sought to examine student perceptions within the program, a qualitative approach was used. The following questions guided the study:

- How do current students and alumni describe their experiences in the Educational Leadership online doctoral program at University of Arkansas?
- How do current students and alumni perceive the online experience as impacting their professional practice?
- How do current students and alumni describe the value of the Educational Leadership program?

### Case Description

The case examined in this study is the EDLE EdD program at University of Arkansas, a flagship/R1 university. The EdD program was designed for students pursuing careers in central office school administration or advanced leadership positions in educational settings. Degree requirements for the EdD include: completion of courses required for building and district level leadership certification, an additional 21 credit hours primarily focused on research in educational settings, 18 hours of dissertation credit, a minimum grade point average of at least 3.25, and satisfactory completion of all written and oral portions of candidacy examinations and the dissertation. At the time of the study, the EDLE program was comprised of three full-time tenure track faculty and two visiting faculty members.

Since 2010, University of Arkansas's EDLE program has undergone significant changes. First, the program transitioned to a predominately online program delivery. This change occurred in response to the growing demand from working practitioners for educational doctorates that are flexible, convenient, and accessible – allowing them to complete their advanced degree while maintaining their full-time professional positions. Though the EDLE program moved its coursework online, faculty elected to use Collaborate®, an online video software from Blackboard® that allows synchronous, real-time class meetings from any location.

Through the use of Collaborate®, faculty members can simulate "real" classroom experiences for students. Using video and audio technology, faculty and students can view and hear one another. Students can raise their hands by pressing a button, alerting the instructor that they have a question or comment. The use of a whiteboard allows instructors and students to take notes and display power points or screen shots. Collaborate® also allows instructors to share and view documents simultaneously with students, and a web-touring tool allows instructors to navigate web browsers with students. A live chat box offers another method of communication during class, and students can also be divided into groups to facilitate small-group discussion. These tools allow more student-student and student-instructor interaction than is often found in traditional online courses. Another unique feature of Collaborate® is the ability to record and re-watch class sessions. This allows students to revisit class sessions at any point in the semester. Though faculty members vary in their use of Collaborate® tools (e.g., some faculty hold

weekly sessions while others might hold bi-weekly sessions), all in-structors use Collaborate® to facilitate synchronous course meetings in the online EdD program.

When the program transitioned online, an on-campus, face-to-face seminar was established. The seminars are designed to facili-tate interaction between students and faculty and provide students with a sense of belonging on campus. Each seminar meets for two intensive days during the fall and spring semesters of students' ma-jor coursework. Seminar content varies each semester, but the common thread of the seminars is student-faculty dialogue related to current educational issues and student research.

In 2011, the EDLE program joined CPED and underwent its second wave of significant changes. The first major CPED-inspired change was related to student research and capstone experiences. Historically, the EDLE EdD program required students to complete a traditional dissertation that focused on filling knowledge voids. Now, the focus of student research is the systematic investigation of prob-lems directly within students' fields of practice. Though the format of the traditional five-chapter dissertation remains, the purpose has shifted from the generation of new knowledge to solving problems of practice that exist within the field. The problem of practice disserta-tion requires students to identify and investigate problems within their systems that focus on instructional and/or systemic issues, are di-rectly observable and actionable, connect to broader strategies of improvement, and are high-leverage.

The other major CPED-inspired change was the sequence and design of research methods courses. A "Problems of Practice" course was added at the beginning of students' program of study, a statistical literacy course was added to the course sequence, and a "capstone" course that assists students with proposal development was added at the end of coursework. Each change was designed to support students' investigation of problems of practice and to exem-plify CPED principles. The transition to a CPED program began in 2011, but the changes described above were not fully implemented until the summer of 2014. The 2014 doctoral cohort was the first co-hort to participant in the "fully transitioned" CPED program – though the program is committed to ongoing reflection and improvement.

## Participant Sample

All students enrolled in the program since 2010 were invited to participate in the study. The only criterion for exclusion was with-drawal from the program. The final sample included 24 of the 26 students who were enrolled between 2010 and 2014. Six of these students also participated in in-depth interviews (see Table 1). All students interviewed were serving in building level or district level ad-ministration positions representing three Midwestern states and one South Central state. Pseudonyms were used for all individuals.

*Table 1: Descriptive Data on Study Participants*

| Participant | Cohort year | Status at time of interview | Professional Position | Years of experience in position[a] |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Wilma Anderson | 2014 | In classes | Elementary Principal | 7 |
| Gregory James | 2013 | ABD | Superintendent | 1 |
| Victor Jennings | 2012 | ABD | Elementary Principal | 4 |
| Gabriela Killebrew | 2012 | ABD | Assistant Superintendent | 2 |
| David Murdock | 2010 | Graduated | Associate Superintendent | 3 |
| Harold Slocomb | 2013 | ABD | Assistant Elem. Principal | 1 |

[a]This data reflects the number of years that each participant was in the position that they held at that particular level of leadership. For example, Gabriela Killebrew had been an Assistant Superintendent for two years, but in two different school systems.

The EDLE EdD at University of Arkansas only admits 8 – 12 students per cohort. The sample in this study, though relatively small, represents the majority (92%) of students who participated in the online program and thus establishes a strong sense of student experiences within the case. In the original design of the study, we intended to interview two students from each doctoral cohort starting in 2010. Attempting to obtain representation from each cohort be-tween 2010 and 2014 was considered important as students in these cohorts were enrolled during the online and CPED-inspired changes. However, only six students representing four of the five cohorts vol-unteered to participate in the in-depth interview. A more robust representation of student experiences would have been possible if students in all cohorts were interviewed. This is considered one limi-tation to the study.

## Data Collection

During the initial phase of data collection, participants were asked to complete a brief, online survey related to the perceived value of the EDLE doctoral program at University of Arkansas (Ap-pendix A). Surveys were distributed to all current and former students in the program between 2010 and 2014. The survey was designed to examine students' experiences in the program, as well as the perceived value of the program.

The study also involved semi-structured, in-depth interviews with students (Appendix B). Semi-structured interviews ensured that core concepts were discussed yet provided flexibility to pursue emer-gent concepts. Interviewing participants allowed for the collection of rich and substantive data that is necessary for constructing an under-standing of the essence of each participant's experience (Roulston,

2010; Seidman, 2006). The length of interviews varied, ranging from 35 minutes to 2 hours and 20 minutes with an average interview length of 1 hour and 13 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. A total of 169 pages of transcripts were produced.

To safeguard against feelings of coercion or manipulation, five of the interviews were conducted by a graduate student who was not part of the educational leadership program, but was working as a research assistant on this project. The graduate student engaged in pilot interviewing to gain experience in conducting semi-structured interviews. The sixth interview with David Murdock was conducted by one of the educational leadership faculty as a matter of geographic convenience (i.e., both the researcher and the participant lived close together in a neighboring state). Since David had graduated prior to

the interview and the faculty member conducting the interview had not shared a faculty-to-student relationship with David, it was believed that there would be a minimal sense of coercion involved during the interview.

## Data Analysis

The research team engaged in a formative, iterative approach to data analysis. This involved an intentionally designed multi-step, iterative process of pre-coding, open coding, analytic memo writing, dialogic engagement, and thematic development (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the analytic process of the research team. Data analysis commenced upon completion of the first interview and continued throughout the collection of data (Ravitch & Carl, 2016).
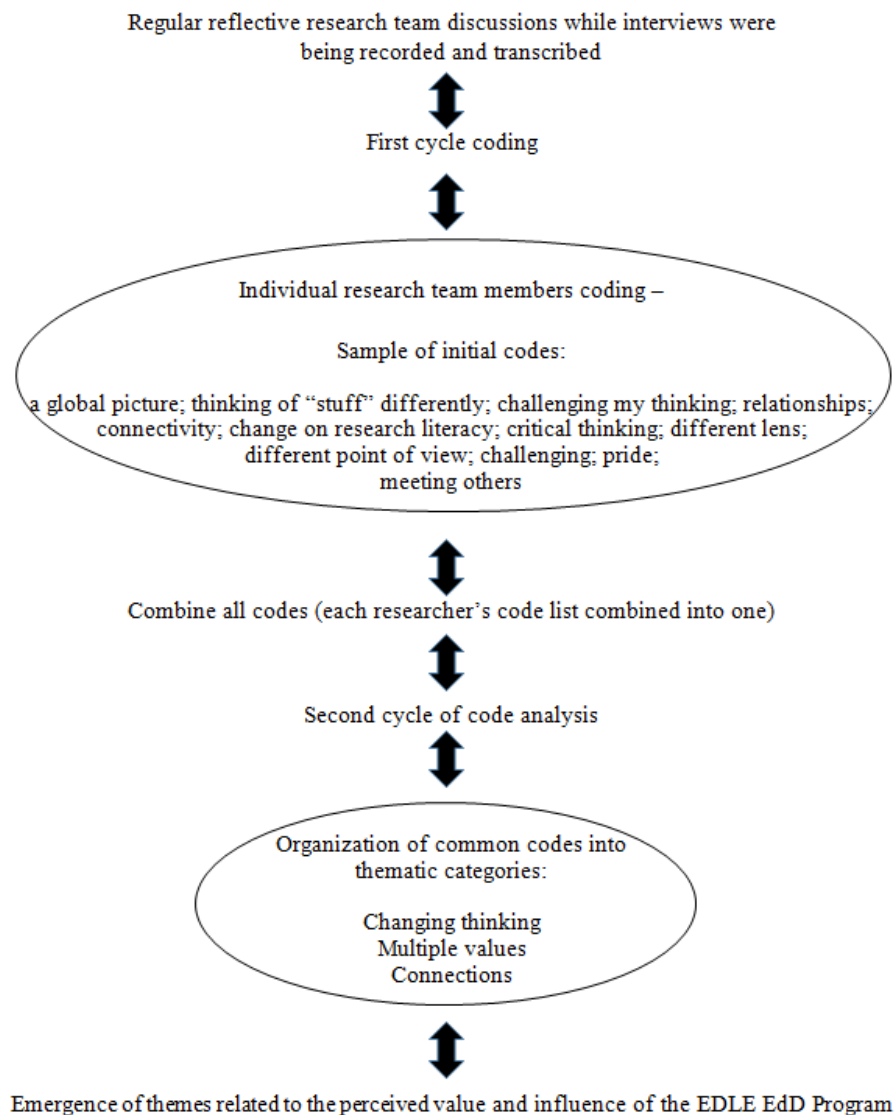


Regular reflective research team discussions while interviews were being recorded and transcribed

First cycle coding

Individual research team members coding –

Sample of initial codes:

a global picture; thinking of "stuff" differently; challenging my thinking; relationships; connectivity; change on research literacy; critical thinking; different lens; different point of view; challenging; pride; meeting others

Combine all codes (each researcher's code list combined into one)

Second cycle of code analysis

Organization of common codes into thematic categories:

Changing thinking
Multiple values
Connections

Emergence of themes related to the perceived value and influence of the EDLE EdD Program

*Figure 1. The data analysis process indicating the sequence of actions taken during the reduction of data.*

Interviews occurred over a five-week period and were transcribed verbatim by research team members. Throughout data collection and transcription, the research team engaged in ongoing reflective conversations to discuss and monitor the study. This initial analysis, which involved weekly research team meetings, served as a form of precoding (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). During the meetings, initial reflections were shared and discussed. In a sense, these brainstorming sessions were oral memos offered for discussion, debate, and synthesis. These ongoing discussions supported the more formal inductive analysis conducted by the three researchers in isolation. Each researcher's coded data was then combined into one document leading to six documents (one for each participant) with multiple coded texts. This led to a second cycle of analysis.

The second cycle of analysis involved in-depth examination of commonalities and differences between the researchers' initial codes. This became the fuel for further discussion among the research team. The team participated in this ongoing process of reflection and debate to "produce an agreed-upon interpretation of the data" (Ravitch & Carl, 2016, p. 260). A code list was developed leading to the fracturing and expansion of analytic ideas into categories and eventually themes which established the findings of the study. Strategies used to establish the trustworthiness of data analysis included investigator triangulation, data triangulation, dialogic engagement, and multiple coding.

## FINDINGS

Analysis of survey and interview data led to three overlapping themes which represent the essence of shared experiences of students and alumni within the case:

Students believed the doctoral program led to a change in their thinking;

Students overwhelmingly perceived the program to have value for multiple reasons, including the program's rigor, practicality, and design; and,

Connections to people and campus were important to students as they participated in the program.

### Doctoral Program Led to a Change in Student Thinking

Participants reported that they believed participation in the program changed their thinking, including the manner in which they approached problems and made decisions in their professional practice. Of the students surveyed, 79% believed that their thinking about their professional practice changed as a result of participation in the program. Victor provided a global statement regarding a change in his thinking by offering, "It is just a perception shift of what I'm doing. The way I'm looking at stuff. That's probably the biggest one, it is changes, just changes the way I look at stuff. Problems, things like that." More specific examples provided by students indicated that they often consulted the literature or course materials and experiences when making decisions that would impact their buildings or systems – a practice they did not engage in prior to the program. For example, Gregory believed his course experiences changed the way he thought about the work of a superintendent:

How I look at things within a school district from a human resources perspective and financial outlook, facilities has been completely transformed. Like, I'm, I scare myself sometimes

now. The level of scrutiny that I put on decisions that before I was, you know, in the job and before I had the last two or three years of classes, I would have just never thought twice about.

David believed he thought differently about problems and approached problem-solving in a new way:

I think about "what does the literature say?" Those are questions that are popping up in my head that didn't pop up in my head before. I definitely can read those stats parts of the findings, when you read an article, now I am like, "oh, I think I know what that means" or at least I have a general sense of what they are going to, so I have a better understanding of some of that based on my experience.

Students further believed they had developed skills to adequately critique the legitimacy and value of empirical research as it related to their professional practice. As an elementary school principal, Wilma explained:

I am a much more critical reviewer of materials. Um, I was telling somebody the other day, there was some data put out in the meeting that I was looking at, and my initial question was "Where did that come from?, because I don't think that is right." Knowing that you can make data say lots of different things. I guess that empowerment of being able to say "I don't think that's right, and if it is you're going to have to show me how you got it."

The changed ways of thinking among participants was one of the evolving program outcomes. How to think more deeply about the work of a school leader and how to develop a way of thinking that was out of the norm for students was important to the program. Gabriela described how she perceived the program achieved this goal with her:

The other thing I believe through the doctoral program has been that push back on well why do you think that way. Just because it says we should do that, why? And so, to me, that is the true value of learning is just really thinking deeply about our opinions about what we think are facts to do the very best job.

Gabriela mentions the "push back" on her thinking as something that the program presented and that she valued in terms of learning at a deeper level. She, like Wilma, believed that the development of critical thinking skills was valuable. Wilma articulated critical thinking about external information (e.g., data, empirical findings, etc.), while Gabriela identified the importance of questioning her own thinking and learning (i.e., asking why she thinks a certain way). Both are types of critical thinking that were valued by participants.

### Students Perceived Multiple Values

Students perceived the program to have value for multiple reasons, including the program's rigor, practicality, and design. Participants believed the program was rigorous and demanded them to think and work differently than they had in previous coursework. They further believed that the "thinking" skills learned through participation in the program could be directly transferred to their professional practice. Finally, they valued the program because they had ongoing opportunities to connect to campus, faculty, and other students.

## Rigor

According to participants, the perception of online programs is that they are less demanding and intellectually stimulating than traditional face-to-face programs; however, participants believed that the online doctoral program at University of Arkansas was rigorous and intellectually demanding.  Victor expressed this sentiment stating, "I wouldn't say online makes it the easier part. You know some people figure 'oh it's online so it has to be easy.' Well no, not really. Um, (laughs), that's definitely not the way it works."  Some participants acknowledged that though they expected the program to be work-intensive, they were surprised at the program's intellectual rigor.  Gabriela, who had completed her Education Specialist degree (Ed.S.) at South Midwest prior to enrolling in the EdD program, gave this perspective:

The doctorate level classes are a whole different ballgame. Um, they are very rigorous, and I, and there is a part of me as I've talked to other people, I guess I, when you've always been a good student, and then you have to really work, sometimes …you're surprised at how much work you have to expend.

Wilma, the student who experienced the most recent changes in the program, described her internal struggle through the rigorous demands of the program.  Though she described feelings and experiences that were outside of her "comfort zone," she ultimately found value in the lessons learned through this struggle:

Everybody had always told me that the further up you go, the easier it gets. You just have to show up and sit in class, is what I was told about some of, just read the books, write the papers, and you'll be fine. And that changed completely when I started doctorate level classes because' that isn't it at all... but it's made me grow as a person.

Wilma seemingly valued the program's culture of learning that provided multiple opportunities for feedback and revision of work which she related to the concept of rigor.  While identifying the rigor of the program as somewhat unsettling at first, she reportedly valued the growth she experienced as a result.  Similar to Gabriela's thoughts presented in the previous finding about having her thinking challenged, Wilma suggested that there were times she felt uncomfortable being forced outside of her comfort zone:

There's been a lot of times in this program that there's not one answer, and you can't tell me exactly the path to get there. I'm a, I'm a number's person, tell me the formula I that need to get to the answer at the end, and I spent two semesters on qualitative research, and there is not this nice little path. There's like all these side paths, and all this other stuff that you have to travel through. So that, has made, I mean, is that level of uncertainty, and being ok with uncertainty cuz' as leaders, that's really kind of the way it works.

Wilma's comments resonate with the EDLE program's understanding that today's educational leader must solve problems and make decisions in highly complex contexts.  Learning how to deal with the complexity of schools and school systems, and the uncertainty that can be present in the decision-making process, contributed to the rigorous challenge of the program for Wilma.

Though participants found the program challenging, they also believed the program's rigor made the accomplishment of completing the program more meaningful and personally fulfilling, thus bringing value to their experience.  As Gregory suggested:

…you're going to be put through the grinder a little bit and you're going to come out

changed. You're going to be that type of practitioner that has had to learn to do things the right way to be able to get out and do it in your school district.

An appreciation of the program's rigor was shared by Victor when he stated, "It's not like we just showed up and had taken up space and stuff.  So I mean, we, yeah, it's going to be worth our time. It's going to feel we accomplished something."

## Practicality

Participants further valued the program because of its practicality and relevance to their work as school leaders.  Specifically, 96% of students completing the survey indicated that the EDLE doctoral program had a significant impact on their professional practice as educators; 91% believed the program helped them become better problem-solvers in their work settings; 91% believed the program was directly applicable to their current professional positions; and, 100% believed they understood how to apply the knowledge and skills learned in the program to their professional work.  The narrative below describes the connection between the program and practice as described by Gregory who is a superintendent of a small school system near the university:

The things I'm learning with Dr. Irving right now in statistical literacy for leaders, I'm using it at work. While we're in the class, I'm picking other data that we already have, and I'm using it and it's helping. It's going to add to my success there, but in the end, it's going to change practice in the classroom with our teachers and our kids. And that's the goal that the Higher Ed. community is trying to do. How we bridge the gap between resources that are on this campus, and actually get them into classrooms.

Gregory enrolled in the program after its involvement in the CPED initiative, and his response reflects the working principle of CPED that "emphasizes the generation, transformation, and use of professional knowledge and practice" (CPED, 2014).

Participants found the program evaluation aspect of coursework particularly useful to their work.  According to Wilma, "the things that you do are valuable… particularly program evaluation.  Everything I do in there I feel like is stuff I am going to use."  Gabriela echoed Wilma's remarks related to program evaluation:

…understanding of a high quality evaluation, I think that has helped me a lot…we do such a poor job of evaluation in K-12, we bring in new programs, do we like them, do we think we got good results, but we just don't know how to design a true program evaluation. So, I, I really think that understanding of a high quality evaluation, I think that has helped me a lot.

Both Wilma and Gabriela reflected general evidence of the value of the program evaluation course; however, David, who was an assistant superintendent when he was interviewed, shared a specific example of how he was able to apply the content he learned to a real work situation:

I was going through [the program] when I was principal. I was in the program evaluation course. We were changing from a basil to a comprehensive literacy model workshop approach, and I used the stuff that we learned in that class. How to evaluate the model, bringing stakeholder groups together. I used one of the models in the book to help do that in my building,

and it was great. We walked out of there way stronger than I thought. I applied it right to what I was doing.

All three of the above participants found that the course had significant meaning for them as they applied what they learned to practice. The course was designed to augment students' research skills and abilities in a practical manner. While the course might have informed students' dissertation work, the focus of the content and delivery was to strengthen practice by looking at actual problems in their schools and systems through a program evaluation lens. This, again, aligns with CPED principles that speak to the provision of opportunities to analyze problems and apply a means to develop a viable solution, and "preparing leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference…" (CPED, 2014, para. 6).

### Design

Finally, participants valued the design of the online program – specifically course design and delivery. According to survey responses, 79% of students believed the online delivery of courses in the EDLE program was effective. This sentiment was expressed by one survey respondent who stated, "I think one challenge is ensuring student engagement when using an online delivery method. That said, most professors were able to do a good job of structuring class sessions in a way that fostered students' engagement and collaboration."

Participants appreciated the online aspect of the program not simply for convenience and accessibility, but also because of the unique learning opportunities it provided. One example of the perceived value of the online program design was the diversity of locations that students came from, as Gabriela explained:

> …we have people from different states in the program, and so while we're talking about something from a South Midwest perspective, we had someone from Florida, someone from Kansas, and someone I think from Illinois that all gave their state perspective, which I felt like really added to the discussion…

The ability to share ideas outside of one's immediate context is possible when global access to the program exists. There was also evidence that the synchronous nature of program delivery added value to the richness of discussions, again according to Gabriela:

> I don't feel that we sacrificed discussion online, because I felt like I could still, raise my hand, um, we, you know, in fact what was really neat, you know, we would have a conversation going verbally, and then you know, you'd also have the texting going on where people are you know, typing responses that way… I know that there are online programs where they are not face-to-face, and they are not having discussions. And it's simply turning in work, and work is graded, and I feel like there is, there is a true lack of instruction in those programs. So, um, I think having been involved in a quality online program, I know learning can take place if it's, if it's done correctly.

The design of the program also required on-campus experiences which students seemed to value. Victor, who was an out-of-state principal, made this observation:

> I still have to come and do stuff. So it's not a complete phantom program. It's uh, the seminar stuff, the three times you have to come plus um, you know, defense presentation, so you know it's not like a phantom program. You still have to come, so I think that also lends a little bit of, I want to say,

credibility because the program is credible, but it is uh, that adds something to it too. You have to physically be here from time to time, you can't just mail it all in.

Ultimately, participants valued the program because they had ongoing opportunities to connect to campus, faculty, and other students through synchronous class meetings, seminar weekends, and defenses. According to Gregory, "The reality of the online program at the University of Arkansas is it's the same quality education that we've always had, it's just a different delivery mode."

## Connections to People and Campus

Participants consistently indicated that relationships played an important role in their sense of belonging in the online EDLE program; however, participants varied in their beliefs about the quality of relationships established in the program. Most students believed that the synchronous online class meetings allowed them to interact with their peers and instructors in more meaningful ways than other online courses they had taken; however, one student reported feeling isolated throughout his involvement in the program. Despite this contradiction, students consistently described their desire to connect to campus, faculty, and other students.

Relationships with faculty members were specifically discussed by both Victor and Harold. When asked about strengths of the program, Victor responded:

> They're [faculty members] easy to get along with and communicate with, I mean that's the number one thing I was looking for, the accessibility of everything. Um, and that know if you are going to do this you can't be ignored. You have to have people willing to talk to you and pay attention to you and all that good stuff.

Harold compared his experiences in the online doctoral program to his previous experiences in online programs by stating:

> I just feel like I've gotten more out of this program because maybe it's just the mentality that the professors have… in most of my other programs besides this one, it's been like this deal where get your work done, get your grade, and move on. There's been no relationship building, no you're our student kind of thing, you know.

Gregory believed that "networking" was the most professionally valuable aspect of the program, "The networking is number one, even though it's online. Now you just know people from a wider range. You've grown your base of support. You have all of these professors, all of these different students you've worked with." Gregory also specifically discussed the close relationships he developed with cohort members throughout the program:

> They've been great. We've had a lot of fun. We've spent time together outside of class. We help each other get jobs. We proofread each other's papers, and spend extra time trying to pull whoever is struggling at that time through. And we check on each other when people aren't in class for a little bit to see what's going on. They're a pretty dynamic group of people. It's great for me because I can see the older generation, and then together at events we go to in Little Town, and all of our different trainings and things, that I can tell that these our my people now. Like, those are a lot of people you really get excited to see and to be around that you respect because you've gone through the same thing together.

Though students appreciated the opportunities provided by the online program, they also appreciated the connections to campus that were provided through the seminar weekends and student defenses (i.e., comprehensive exams, proposal and dissertation defense). According to Harold, "I mean just coming to campus makes you feel like you're a student still, so I think that this is kind of refreshing every once in a while to do." Wilma also believed that "The seminar time has been enormously valuable, because just the chance for all of us to sit around the same table and see each other face-to-face." Gregory specifically noted how maintaining the seminar component of the program would be important, even as the program expanded to larger geographic locations. "It's great when we get everybody back on campus here to work together in this program, and having that face-to-face component will continue to be an important thing even though you're reaching students from a wider geographic region." Both Gregory and David believed the on-campus meetings were so valuable that the program could be improved by requiring additional seminar weekends or scheduled meetings with advisors and committee members.

Interestingly, the students who spoke the most fervently about the importance of relationships represented two contrasting extremes regarding the quality of relationships established in the program. Wilma, the individual who provided the most compelling evidence that strong connections to others were created in the online program, was from the most recent cohort. Whereas David, the individual who strongly believed that relationships were missing within the online program, was from the earliest cohort represented in the sample. The contrasting descriptions between the students regarding the quality of relationships in the online program are presented below. Wilma, who was interviewed during one of the on-campus seminar sessions offered:

> I love the fact that I get to see these people. I mean, when we came here, we all, there was no awkwardness, we all know each other, we talk to each other twice a week, every week, you know. And there's, there is a collaborative feel, um, you know, and just today we all sat and talked about how does my job relate to yours, and how can we become better advocates for our kids, and we're building connections there that we didn't build in our previous online classes. We didn't interact like that. So when we interact in class, I guess I really feel like we're building that personal connection….I laughed when I came in and somebody said something about "sit with the family," and I said "You're all part of my family, I spend a lot of time with you", but I feel like I'm making connections with those people that is not just a connection for these two years that we're in the program. The connections that I'm making with them will last.

Wilma's experiences are in contrast to David's experience in the original online doctoral cohort. David's lack of connection to peers, faculty, and campus is illustrated in the passage below:

> I thought there would be more connectedness between me and my professors or my classmates. And really that wasn't, it was very much in isolation. And that saddened me a little bit because my other courses, other coursework, uh, you're kind of in a cohort of people and you travel course-to-course, seated class to seated class….wasn't super relational with my professors or classmates. I had to be a little bit intentional and seek folks out.

While Wilma continually reflected on the close connections she maintained with cohort members and faculty, David stated, "I couldn't even name another person in our cohort." The contrast between David and Wilma's experiences may suggest that the program has improved its efforts and ability to foster meaningful relationships and connections with students in an online environment since its transition online in 2010.

## SIGNIFICANCE

Results from this study suggest that it is possible to design an EdD program in educational leadership that follows the CPED principles, provides a meaningful experience for students, and is delivered in an online format. Findings suggest that the online CPED program has evolved students' thinking, and the program has value for students for multiple reasons, including the program's rigor, practicality, and design. However, the practicality of the program was primarily demonstrated in the way in which students' thinking about their work shifted or evolved throughout the program. Students reported that they approached problems in their workplace differently and considered themselves more critical consumers of educational research. On the other hand, students did not necessarily believe the program informed the daily operations of their positions (i.e., the "nuts and bolts" of their positions). Participant responses also suggest that students appreciated the convenience and accessibility of the online program, but they further believed that opportunities to connect to campus through synchronous class meetings, seminar weekends, or correspondence with faculty were important to their success.

As a flagship institution, University of Arkansas's online EdD program offers an opportunity for students to receive a rigorous degree that participants in this study suggest is dynamic and impactful to their practice. We find this significant as it counters the suggestion that online programs at the doctoral level cannot be impactful and do not rise to the standard of doctoral work (see Ghezzi, 2007). The critique about online doctorates often centers on their inability to produce students who can publish research articles, which might be true for the Ph.D. but not necessarily for the professional doctorate (Gill & Hoppe, 2009). Even as recently as 2011, the legitimacy of a totally online EdD was questioned when University of Arkansas initially attended the CPED Phase II institution meetings. Since then, as universities have been under pressure to offer online degrees, the skepticism within CPED has lessened. Unfortunately, many times online programs are viewed as being the "cash cow" of the university while running great risk of simply churning out degrees or as some refer to as becoming a "diploma mill."

The University of Arkansas online EDLE EdD is not a "cash cow" for the College. Since the program's inception, there has been care taken to admit no more than twelve students per cohort, and often times less than twelve are admitted. This is considered significant as the question of whether or not our students' reported experiences would be possible in a "diploma mill" setting emerges. We assume that our students would not have the same experience, at least not with the same program design as this case represents. Participants suggested that accessibility to program faculty was something they found valuable and important to their success. The same level of accessibility might not be possible if the number of students was significantly higher.

Findings from this study suggest that University of Arkansas's online CPED program offers more than job preparation. Augmenting instruction of job-specific knowledge, the program teaches students broader, more abstract thinking skills. Thus, the program is not training students for positions as principals or superintendents (which

arguably would have already occurred in students' certification programs), but the program is preparing students to think deeper about their work and to be more impactful within their professional positions. These findings are important to EdD programs in general, and more specifically to those delivered online, as they continue to consider the design and delivery of doctoral education programs.

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## APPENDIX A

### Student Survey

1. The online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas had a significant impact on my *professional* practice as an educator.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

2. The online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas had a significant impact on my *personal* development.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

3. The online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas helped me become a better problem-solver in my work setting.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

4. The knowledge and skills I gained as a result of participation in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas were directly applicable to my current professional position.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

5. I understood how to apply the knowledge and skills I learned in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas to my professional work.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

6. The way I think about my professional practice as an educator has changed as a result of participation in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

7. The impact of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas on my professional practice is unclear.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

8. I believe the *online delivery* of courses in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas was effective.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

9. Overall, I would describe my experience in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas as positive.

   Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

10. I believe my involvement in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas has benefitted me as a practitioner in the field.

    Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

11. I believe the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas provided me the information necessary to be a competent professional within my field.

    Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

12. I believe the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas prepares students for what to expect in the field.

    Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

13. I would recommend the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas to a friend.

    Strongly Disagree     Disagree     Agree     Strongly Agree     Uncertain

14. Would you be willing to participate in an in-depth, face-to-face or phone interview to further discuss your experiences in the program? If so, please contact Maureen Murphy-Lee at mmurphylee1@gmail.com. Your survey responses will remain anonymous.

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## APPENDIX B

### Student/Alumni Interview Protocol

1. With which cohort did you begin the program?
2. Describe your professional experience in education.
    a. Positions held & total years of experience
    b. Current position & years
    c. Degrees & certifications
    d. Additional responsibilities
3. Describe your experiences as a graduate student.
4. Describe your previous experiences with online courses (prior to the online EDLE program).
    a. How did the structure or format of courses offered in the online doctoral program at the University of Arkansas compare to the structure or format of other online courses you have taken?
    b. Compare your prior online experiences to your experience in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas.
    c. Compare your prior experience in face-to-face graduate courses to your experience in graduate courses in the online EDLE doctoral program.
5. Why did you select the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
    a. How do you believe others perceive your online doctorate from the University of Arkansas?
6. Describe how it made you feel to be involved in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas.
7. Thinking back to when you were first accepted into the program, compare what you thought at that time your experience would be to what you've actually experienced since you have been enrolled.
8. What were your expectations of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
    a. (Knowledge, skills, content, instructional delivery, mentorship, and research experiences, etc.)
9. Compare your expectations of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas with your experiences in the program.
10. Describe the challenges you experienced in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas.
11. How has the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas impacted your professional practice?
    a. Describe some experiences that demonstrate how the program impacted your practice.
12. What information would you want to share with a prospective student regarding your experiences in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
13. Describe your relationships with faculty in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas.
14. Describe your relationships with other students in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas.
15. If you had to do it all over again, would you still choose the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas? Why or why not?
16. What aspects of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas were valuable to you as a professional?
17. What aspects of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas were valuable to you as a person?
18. What aspects of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas provided no value to you as a person or professional?
19. How have you changed as a result of your experience in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
    a. Provide an example of how the program helped you change in this regard.
20. Overall, what do you believe are the strengths of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
21. Overall, what do you believe are the weaknesses of the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
22. What, if anything, do you believe could have improved your experience in the online EDLE doctoral program at the University of Arkansas?
    a. If this/these improvement(s) were made, how would it/they add value to the program?