Survey of First Doctoral Graduates

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History of the Doctoral Program at Ashland University

After a thorough planning process over several years, the faculty of Ashland University submitted a proposal in December, 1994 to the Ohio Board of Regents (OBOR) for a program to grant the Ed.D. degree in Educational Leadership. The OBOR process for approval of a new doctoral degree was rigorous and lengthy. The proposal was critiqued by OBOR staff, and responses were prepared. In May of 1996, OBOR commissioned an external review team to visit the campus. The review team was complimentary of Ashland’s plan and recommended that OBOR approve the program. Then the Regents’ Advisory Council on Graduate Study, which was made up of representatives of institutions in Ohio that already offered the doctoral degree, offered an additional critique in June, 1997 that required more written responses. Finally, the new Ashland doctoral degree was approved by the Ohio Board of Regents in Fall, 1997. After additional approval by the North Central Association and a visit from the National Council on Accreditation of Teacher Education, the first cohort of students was accepted in Spring, 1998, and the first class of the new doctoral program began in May, 1998.

OBOR’s initial approval was for three years. In Spring, 2001 the agency commissioned another external review team to evaluate the program. That review resulted in Ashland’s earning permanent doctoral degree-granting status.

Program Requirements

Since Ashland’s doctoral program is built around the principle that students will continue their full-time employment, the residency requirement is met in a number of ways. First, students are required to attend an intensive 12-week summer program in their first semester. During that time they live on campus for approximately one and one-half weeks. Second, students develop a relationship with a faculty advisor from the beginning of their program. This relationship includes working together on
the mentorship project in the student’s employing organization (see below). In addition, students are members of a cohort, which builds a feeling of teamwork and solidarity.

Students must possess a master’s degree in order to be admitted to the doctoral program. The doctoral degree requires a total of 63 hours beyond the master’s degree. The hours are broken down into five components, as shown in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Course requirements for the Doctoral Degree at Ashland University</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Semester Hours</td>
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<tr>
<td>Foundations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organizational Leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cognate Area</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dissertation</td>
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<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
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The Organizational Leadership component consists of six courses plus the mentorship. The six courses are Organizational Behavior, Leadership Theory, Organizational Development, Professional Development, Institutional Law and Policy, and The Economy of Education.

The mentorship is a four semester hour course over 15 months (see Gerrick, Wilson, & Hughes, 2001-2002). The student and the faculty mentor together select an area of the student’s employing organization (usually a school district) that is operating sub-optimally. The student and mentor, in cooperation with the organization’s leadership, design an action research project with the goal of improving the organization’s functioning. Components of the action research include a needs assessment, a process aimed at organizational improvement, a product, and an evaluation. At the end of
the 15 months, students take the Leadership Exam, which entails an oral presentation of their project, and a 15-page paper, integrating their learning from the mentorship and the other courses.

The **cognate area** is designed by the student, with assistance from the faculty advisor and the director of the doctoral program. Two cognate areas have been specially developed for the doctoral program: one in technology and one in professional development. Students may also construct a cognate in an area of school administration for which they seek licensure, in theology, or in business. Cognates are individually designed to meet students’ particular needs.

At the end of all course work, students take the **comprehensive examination**. The written portion of the examination is given in two sittings: one for the core course work and the other covering the cognate area. Students who pass the written portions then are examined orally. Once students pass all parts of the comprehensive exam, they may form their dissertation committee.

The **dissertation** is oriented toward the practice of educational leadership. The Ashland dissertation:

1. is site based;
2. is a comprehensive study incorporating several components of the doctoral program;
3. demonstrates the utilization of skills and knowledge from the candidate’s individualized program to address a specific educational problem;
4. demonstrates the candidate’s knowledge of research design and the ability to interpret findings orally, in writing, and in application. (Student Handbook, p. 24)

The strengths of Ashland University’s Ed.D. program in Educational Leadership stem from the commitment to the university’s motto, “Accent on the Individual,” and from the notion that a practitioner degree should be built around the real challenges encountered in leading schools. Those strengths include the university’s partnership with the student’s school district or other employing organization through the mentorship, as well as the professional collegial relationships that are
formed with faculty and members of the cohort, from the beginning of the student's experience.

**Perceptions of Doctoral Students**

One year prior to the current study, the University was engaged in a comprehensive program evaluation of the doctorate in educational leadership. As part of an extensive self-study of the doctoral program prepared for the Ohio Board of Regents, the entire doctoral student population was surveyed as to perceived degree of student satisfaction with nine characteristics of the doctoral program. The nine program characteristics included:

1. **Environment for Learning** — Extent to which the department provides a supportive environment of mutual respect and concern between students and professors, students’ helpfulness to one another, and departmental openness.

2. **Scholarly Excellence** — Rated excellence of the department faculty, ability of students and intellectual stimulation of the program.

3. **Quality of Teaching** — Faculty enthusiasm for new ideas an helpfulness in dealing with class work; student evaluation of faculty teaching methods, grading procedures, and preparation for class.

4. **Faculty Concern for Students** — Extent to which faculty members are perceived to be interested in the welfare and professional development of students, are accessible and aware of student needs, concerns and suggestions.

5. **Curriculum** — Ratings of the variety and depth of graduate course and program offerings, program flexibility, opportunities for individual projects, and interactions with related departments.

6. **Departmental Procedures** — Ratings of departmental policies and procedures such as the relevance and administration of degree requirements, evaluation of student progress.
toward the degree, academic advisement of students, and helpfulness to graduates in finding appropriate employment.

7. Available Resources — Ratings of available facilities such as libraries and laboratories, and overall adequacy of physical and financial resources for a doctoral program.

8. Student Commitment and Motivation — Judgments about the extent to which doctoral students do significant amounts of unassigned reading, demonstrate enthusiastic involvement with the field, carefully prepare for courses, and persist on projects despite setbacks.

9. Student Satisfaction with the Program — Self-reported student satisfaction with the program as reflected in judgment about the amount that has been learned, preparation for intended career, desire to transfer, and willingness to recommend the program to a friend.

Each of these nine program characteristics was measured on a scale that ranged from one to four, with the value of four representing the highest rating. Four statements that required written responses were also included in the supplemental questionnaire. Two of these four statements asked the students to comment on the strengths of the program and note concerns with the program and/or recommend changes in the program. The final two statements were designed to obtain information regarding the students’ professional and scholarly activities.

All students participated in the survey and responded to an instrument developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Princeton, New Jersey. Specifically, the questionnaire entitled “Graduate Program Self-Assessment: Doctoral Programs Student Questionnaire” was employed.

The analysis of the perceived degree of student satisfaction with nine characteristics of
the doctoral program, as measured by ETS student questionnaire, revealed a relatively high
degree of perceived satisfaction with the program. All nine of the program characteristics
measured have mean ratings that placed them above the point on the scale labeled “agree with
reservation/good.” The three highest rated program factors are student satisfaction with the
program, faculty concern for students, and scholarly excellence. The students’ responses to the
open-ended question regarding the program’s strengths provide support for the high ratings
received by the program characteristics labeled “faculty concern for students” and
“scholarly excellence.” The most frequently mentioned strength of the program is the competent
and caring faculty and administrators. The high level of perceived faculty concern for the
students is also supported by the high rating given by the students to the statement on a
supplemental questionnaire that asked the students to rate the openness of the faculty and the
administrators to input from the students. Thus, the two program characteristics relating to the
level of concern for the students by the faculty and administrators and scholarly excellence
appear to be a current strengths of the doctoral program.

Two of the lower rated program characteristics were the curriculum and the available
resources. The relatively lower mean rating recorded for the curriculum program characteristic
is echoed in the students’ responses to the open-ended statement regarding recommendations for
program improvement. One half of the students expressed concern or provided
recommendations regarding issues related to the program’s courses. The students’ comments
may prove helpful as input for future reviews of the program’s curriculum and course schedules.
It may also be important to note in any future discussions regarding the curriculum, including
course content, that nearly one-half of the students expressed a desire to pursue future
employment in higher education.

With respect to the available resources, the high ratings given by the students regarding
their satisfaction with the computer hardware and software used in the program's courses and the University's library do not provide insight into the relatively low mean recorded for the program characteristic labeled available resources. The program's administration may want to consider holding future discussions with the students regarding the program's resources to verify if the students do, in fact, have a significant concern with available resources. If that is the case, it would be important to identify those concerns.

*Program goals.*

The students rated preparing other practitioners as the most important goal of the program. The students placed less but equal importance on the program's ability to prepare scholars/researchers and to prepare college teachers. The students perceived the program as currently placing the most importance on preparing practitioners with less emphasis being placed on preparing scholars/researchers and preparing college teachers. Additional support for the importance placed by the students on the goal of preparing practitioners can be found in the students' responses to the open-ended question regarding program strengths. The emphasis placed on practical application of theory was mentioned as a strength by four of the students.

*Additional elements of the program.*

The students gave high ratings to the following elements of the doctoral program: (a) the linking of theory and site specific practice in the Leadership Exam, which was rated by only the first cohort; (b) the use of cohorts in the program; and (c) the ability to tailor course work in the program. The mentorship program also received a high rating by the students. An indication of consistency in the survey's finding regarding the mentorship program was found in the students' responses to the open-ended questions. Three students mentioned the mentorship component of the program as a program strength.

The supplemental questionnaires did reveal various pieces of information that may prove
useful in a review of the mentorship program. First, the students expressed a high degree of satisfaction regarding the helpful and supportive role played by the faculty mentors. Second, less satisfaction was expressed for the level of help and support given by the students’ employers. It also may be important to note that considerable disparity exists among the students’ views regarding the assistance given by their employers. Third, the views expressed by a quarter of the students suggest that clearer expectations for the mentorship project are needed. Fourth, specific suggestions for changing the mentorship program include the following: (a) a stronger link between the mentorship program and the leadership examination should be established; (b) a clearer focus on the role of the employer should be articulated; and (c) the mentorship project should begin at a later stage in the doctoral program.

Survey of Program Graduates

As previously noted, the Ashland University Doctor of Education Program was designed as and is operating as a practitioner oriented program. To reinforce the linkage of practice to the leadership core course work, an on the job mentorship project is required (Gerrick, Wilson, & Hughes, 2001). This linkage of the program classroom with the world of practice was evidenced by a number of student-faculty projects in addition to the required mentorship projects (Bon [Reis], Wilson & Gerrick, 2001).

Another goal of the program designers was to make the program as user friendly as possible. To this end for example, all required courses were scheduled on Wednesday evening so as to be predictable. Additional assistance was provided such as a designated library mentor. The library mentors assist in locating resource materials, arranging interlibrary loans and with electronic searches for data and sources. The faculty was provided time in load to maintain a close, intense mentor/advisor relationship with each student.

These and other similar provisions were intended to make real the Ashland University
motto: Accent on the Individual. All aspects of the program were well thought through and discussed as the program came together. The planning team was convinced the program was strong and challenging. However, the real test of the success of the program is the experience of the students involved. It was agreed that the first graduates would be surveyed shortly after they graduated to determine what had gone well in the program, what didn’t, what should have been included by wasn’t, and what could have been eliminated. As a result, the Spring, 2002 graduates were asked to share their thought with us.

The six individuals involved were the first graduates of the Ashland University Doctoral Program. They had lived through the birth and growing pains of the new program. Their ongoing first time experiences had already brought about many fine tuning changes in the program. Five of the graduates were members of the first cohort which had entered the program in May, 1998. They began with thirteen members but lost four during the first year. One of the graduates was from Cohort Two. This cohort was fourteen strong and had had no dropouts. They began the program May, 1999.

There are a number of reasons that surveys such as this need to be viewed with some caution. The afterglow of success with the completion of a long, arduous, challenging program often produces a halo effect. In addition, the small sample size makes any significant statistical study nearly impossible. On the other hand, the experiences are reasonable fresh in the respondents’ minds.

The survey used was relatively informal and designed to be easy to respond to. It covered the organizational factors, relationships and support factors associated with the program. It closed with a general, open-ended impression section. Many of the items grew out of questions and concerns expressed by students in Cohorts One and Two. Other items were generated by faculty members as they discussed the progress of the program. While two of the
sections requested numerical ratings, the small sample size makes anything other than informal internal generalizations questionable.

Before reviewing the responses to the survey provided by the first six graduates, it might prove helpful to have some information as to the backgrounds of the respondents. Since the program was designed to improve the leadership understandings and skills in educational settings, it is not unexpected that the bulk of the students came from public school backgrounds. This has been true of most but not all the students entering the program.

Of the first six graduates as they entered the program, one was a Director of Personnel, two were Principals, two were Assistant Principals (one in a non-public school), and one was a Classroom Teacher. During the program, one of the Principals was appointed as Superintendent of the school district he served, the Director of Personnel was promoted to Assistant Superintendent and the two Assistant Principals became Principals (one in a non-public school). The Teacher now serves as a Director of Curriculum. This advancement in their chosen profession coupled with the fact that they successfully completed the doctoral program confirms that they are high achievers academically as well as on the job.

The survey was organized in four sections. Section 1 dealt with the Organizational/Operational factors. Nine of these factors were identified from comments of students in Cohorts One and Two as well as from the faculty members involved with the program. A tenth item allowed additional graduate input on items not included in the nine below. The items presented for graduate comment included:

1) Beginning the program with a Summer Session beginning in May;
2) The use of the cohort approach;
3) The scheduling of two required courses in some semesters;
4) Scheduling cognate courses other than Wednesday nights;
5) The provision of a library mentor;
6) The mentorship project scheduled concurrently with the leadership core courses;
7) Scheduling the dissertation seminar the same semester as the Comprehensive Examinations;
8) The selection of a dissertation chair and committee only after completion of the Comprehensive Examinations;
9) The scheduling of classes to start at 4:30 P.M.; and
10) Other organizational concerns.

While not all of the items are of the same magnitude of concern each represents an area of question or concern for a student or a faculty member. A review of the responses indicated general agreement with starting the program in the summer but with a later beginning date such as June rather than May. There was some concern about scheduling ten semester hours in the first summer session.

All respondents endorsed the cohort approach with very positive comments. The problem of two courses scheduled the same night, while making a long day was deemed preferable to coming a second night in the week. Scheduling cognate courses at times other than those scheduled for the required courses, usually summers, seemed acceptable to all respondents.

There seemed to be confusion as to the role of the library mentors. Most of the respondents indicated that they had made little use of the library mentor. This area needs to be given more study by the doctoral faculty.

The graduates seemed to see the value of scheduling the mentorship project with the leadership core courses. Several mentioned using concepts from various classes in the mentorship project.
There was some question as to the scheduling of the dissertation seminar and the Comprehensive Examinations in the same semester, but the concern seemed to be more directed toward the length of time between the end of the course work (May) and the Comprehensive Examinations (October) for the first cohort. With the introduction of Summer Comprehensive Examinations effective with the Second Cohort, this concern may have been met.

The timing of the formal appointment of the dissertation chair and the dissertation committee after the Comprehensive Examinations does not appear to be the problem it was perceived to be. Most of the students indicated they had made informal contacts with their choice of the chair prior to the examination.

The 4:30 PM class starting time does not appear to be a major problem. Several students indicated they had had to be late on occasion. Traffic and weather concerns play a role in this timing.

The final area was totally open-ended. Most of the graduates had comments. These ranged from some frustration about what a student perceived as a lack of clear expectations for the First Cohort to a concern with the scheduling of a statistics class. Several used this opportunity to comment most favorable about the assistance and support of the staff and faculty.

The second part of the survey explored relationships: the interaction of the various aspects of the doctoral program. Nine relationships were proposed with the opportunity to add and discuss others that the graduate might wish. These relationships were:

1) Coursework – Mentorship;
2) Coursework – Dissertation;
3) Mentorship – Dissertation;
4) Faculty – Student;
5) Cohort – Student;
6) Cohort – Coursework;

7) Adviser – Student;

8) Adviser – Mentorship;

9) Adviser – Faculty; and

10) Other Relationships not included.

The graduates were asked to rate these relationships on a scale with four being “Extremely Helpful” and one, “Not Helpful at all.” Of the nine items, only one student indicated a score on an item below three and that was on the Coursework – Dissertation relationship.

The response to the Coursework – Mentorship relationship was very positive with a number of favorable comments. This was also true of the input relative to the Coursework-Dissertation relationship. The Mentorship-Dissertation pairing received favorable response but fewer comments. The Faculty-Student relationship evoked highly favorable comments and a perfect four rating. This was also true of the rating and discussion relative to the Cohort – Student item.

The Cohort – Coursework comparison was rated highly but did not elicit many comments. The response to the Adviser – Student relationship was highly positive as was the Adviser – Mentorship comparison. The graduates also rated the Adviser – Faculty pairing very favorably.

The final item in this section allowed each graduate to discuss other relationship he or she felt important. Three graduates took advantage of this opportunity. One commented that “District support is an important element in successful completion of the program while working full time.” Another noted “The open door policy of the Program Director- great support”. The third observed “There did not appear to be much opportunity to interact with other cohorts”.

The third part of the survey focused on the various support systems associated with the doctoral program. The graduates were asked to rate and comment on nine support related items.
Again, they were offered the opportunity to add and discuss any support items of importance to them. The support items included:

1) The program administration;
2) The doctoral program office;
3) The doctoral faculty;
4) The advisors/mentors;
5) The library mentors;
6) Book Store personnel;
7) Cohort members;
8) The College in general;
9) The University in general; and
10) Other persons, offices, agencies not included above.

The graduates rated the program administration very positively both with their scores and with their comments. The same was true of their evaluation of the support of the doctoral program office. The doctoral faculty support received high marks and good comments. This same rating was afforded the advisor/mentors support.

The library mentor support evaluation was by far the most negative of the whole survey. Three of the respondents rated them helpful, two indicated the not very helpful choice and one listed them as not helpful at all. There were only two comments both tending to the negative. It is obvious that the Doctoral Program Executive Committee needs to revisit this aspect of the program. When this item’s responses are coupled with item 5 of the Organizational Factors it is evident that this part of the program is not functioning as it was intended. A serious follow-up should be conducted to clear up any misunderstandings, to clarify expectations and to improve communications relative to this aspect of the program.
The bookstore personnel were rated helpful but there was only one comment. The respondents indicated the support of the College and the University was helpful to very helpful. There was only one comment on the item relative to other persons, offices, agencies support and that dealt with the confusion caused by the late change in the APA format from fourth to fifth edition.

The final section of the survey was designed to elicit the graduates’ overall impressions and opinions of the doctoral program they had recently completed. As might be expected, there were a wide range of ideas about the program. The graduates were asked to provide comments in the five following areas:

1) What did you like best about the program;
2) What did you like least about the program;
3) What was not in the program that you think should have been;
4) What should be deleted from the program; and
5) What other comments would you like to make.

The comments in reply to the question as to what they liked best about the program generated the most agreement of all the items in this section of the survey. Four of the graduates listed the cohort approach among their replies. Three mentioned the mentee-mentor/ advisee-advisor as a ‘like best’ choice. The course work and the leadership focus of the course work was noted by three respondents. The quality of the professors drew two comments. Five other items were mentioned once each as positive aspects of the program.

With one exception, there was far less agreement about what the graduates had to say about what they liked least about the program. Four respondents focused on the ethics course and how it was presented. There were five other areas of concern listed by the graduates.
The comments as to “What was not in the program that you think should have been” were very wide ranging. There was no commonality to the responses; each was a free standing suggestion which will need to be considered for the future. Only four of the graduates submitted ideas.

The fourth area soliciting ideas, “What should be deleted from the program,” drew only two comments, one of which was “nothing.” The other suggested the deletion of the dissertation seminar unless it is made part of the program after the selection of the dissertation chair.

The final item was an open-ended invitation to make whatever additional comments the graduates wished. With one exception, all the comments were highly positive about the program and their experience in the program they had recently successfully concluded. The one exception was an endorsement of the Comprehensive Examination procedures. This was in response to the efforts of a student in a later cohort to solicit support for an effort to modify these procedures.

There are several other indicators of the program’s success. One of the authors has had the experience of being involved in helping two other universities inaugurate doctoral programs. He joined the Ashland University doctoral faculty just as the first cohort began the program. His observation is that the Ashland University doctoral program appeared to become operational with fewer problems that the other two programs with which he had been associated.

Another measure of success of the Ashland University doctoral program is the retention of students in the program. The OBOR approval limited the number of doctoral students Ashland could accept to 15 per year. As Table 2 shows, a total of 68 students have enrolled in Ashland’s doctoral program in the first five years.
Table 2: Cohort Membership, 1998-2002

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cohort</th>
<th>Month, Year</th>
<th>Number</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 1</td>
<td>May, 1998</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 2</td>
<td>May, 1999</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 3</td>
<td>May, 2000</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 4</td>
<td>May, 2001</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cohort 5</td>
<td>May, 2002</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>68</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cohort One launched the program in May, 1998 with 14 members. As of August, 2002 six have graduated, one transferred to Cohort Two, one transferred to Cohort Three, and three are in the dissertation process. Three Cohort One students dropped out or transferred to other universities. Cohort Two began the following May with 14 students. Two have graduated and all the rest are active in the program, most in the dissertation stage. Of the 13 students who made up the Third cohort, nine are still active. Cohort Four had 13 students starting with 11 still actively involved. Cohort Five got underway in May, 2002 with 14 members. Excluding Cohort Five, 54 students have entered the doctoral program of whom nine have dropped out or transferred (16.9%), eight have graduated (14.8%), and the remainder, 37, are active in some phase of the program. The retention rate has been higher than was anticipated.

Yet another indicator of the satisfaction with the program is the steadily increasing number of applicants to the program. Since the program is currently restricted to 15 new students per year, the selection process will become more competitive in the future.
Summary and Conclusions

The implementation of a new program is almost always accompanied with apprehension; have all necessary arrangements been made; has the planning anticipated all the needs; are the resources adequate, and so forth. While much time and effort went into the design, much can still go wrong. These same apprehensions were shared by all the program faculty associated with the design of doctoral program at Ashland University.

Now, four years later, the data are in. The peer reviews, student opinions, and related observations and data indicate the program is a success and that the students involved have had a rich experience. Is the program perfect? The evidence from the data suggests the need for fine tuning and some rethinking. While most things operated as designed and planned, several areas did not live up to expectations and will need to be rethought and reworked. The major surprise in the graduates’ responses was their perceptions and utilization of the library mentor services. This was one of the more unique aspects of the doctoral program design. The faculty held high expectations for this feature of the program. The graduate responses clearly indicate that there needs to be an intensive review of this part of the program. A joint study by the University Librarian and the doctoral program faculty is being organized. A number of reasons could account for this service not meeting expectations. Each needs to be explored.

All new programs have growing pains. The Ashland University doctoral program is no exception. The results of this survey of graduates of the program, the review of other related data, and the results of other similar evaluations in the future can be invaluable tools for the continuous improvement of the program. Any program of this sort must remain responsive to the emerging, changing needs of the students involved, in other words, an “Accent on the Individual.”
References
