

Hybrid Doctoral Program: Innovative Practices and Partnerships

DORI ALVICH

Brookside School, USA
dalvich@gmail.com

JOANN MANNING

Rowan University, USA
Manning@rowan.edu

KATHY MCCORMICK

Northern Burlington Regional School District, USA
kmccormick@nburlington.com

ROBERT CAMPBELL

Rowan University
campbell@rowan.edu

This paper reflects on how one mid-Atlantic University innovatively incorporated technology into the development of a hybrid doctoral program in educational leadership. The paper describes a hybrid doctoral degree program using a rigorous design; challenges of reworking a traditional syllabus of record to a hybrid doctoral program; the perceptions and attitudes of the participating students and the benefits of University partnerships with other educational institutions.

This paper attempts to address the challenge of unique approaches for preparing future school leaders by cultivating stronger leadership practices. Within a spirit of reflective practice, which involves thoughtful consideration of one's experiences in applying knowledge to practice (Schon, 1996), it is important for leaders to reflect on innovative methods in higher education institutions. This is particularly important in how educational lead-

ers are trained to be more effective in implementing technological measures consistent with 21st century learning (Braun, 2008).

The purpose of this paper is to reflect on how Mid-Atlantic Progressive University1 (MAPU) is achieving innovation through technology while developing a hybrid doctoral degree program in educational leadership. As part of its success, the University's progressive program tackles the following critical challenges: rigorous design; reworking a traditional syllabus of record for a hybrid doctoral program; consideration of the perceptions and attitudes of participating students; and developing partnerships within MAPU, with professional organizations, school districts, community colleges, and other educational institutions.

An extensive body of literature continues to underscore critical requisites to attracting and cultivating effective school leaders. School leaders establish direction and exercise influence indispensable to the creation of ongoing support for successful educational organizations (Kochan, Bredeson, & Riehl, 2002; Leithwood & Riehl, 2005). Despite this important need, few higher education programs have emerged that foster innovative hybrid doctoral programs focusing on educational leadership. Presently, educators in universities must respond to myriad learner characteristics and personal schedule demands by expanding their continuum of delivery systems for doctoral programs.

A positive outcome in the era of a rapidly enhanced technological society is the development, growth, and sophistication of distance education programs. Mid-Atlantic Progressive University has accepted the challenge of the 21st century regarding how to incorporate contemporary practices to develop educators ready to assume leadership roles in schools, colleges, universities, educational organizations, and educational advocacy groups.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Online education remains in its early stages in higher education, with preliminary efforts beginning just over a decade ago. Specifically, while many institutions have had online offerings for a number of years, 20% have introduced online courses this past year (Allen & Seaman, 2008). The Sloan Consortium (Sloan-C), a non-profit organization committed to infusing online learning into higher education institutions, classifies courses based on the proportion of content delivered online; for example, courses are classified as *online* if at least 80% of their content is delivered online, and courses where 0% to 29% of the content delivered online are classified as *face-to-face instruction*. A third delivery alternative classified as *blended* or *hybrid* instruction occurs when between 30% and 80% of the course content is delivered online (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

There are a number of important differences between fully online courses and blended, or hybrid courses, with the latter (blended or hybrid) often documented on many institutions' reporting systems in a manner identical to the descriptions of traditional, face-to-face courses (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007). These authors also report that blended courses are more likely to be taught by core faculty members and to include education courses. Blended courses have also been found to offer students increased flexibility in their approach, matching particular activities with specific personal circumstances (Aspden & Helm, 2004).

Results of a sixth annual study of online education (Allen & Seaman, 2008) reported a 12% increase in the number of students enrolled in at least one online course from the previous year, translating to 3.94 million students participating in at least one online education course. This also represents a substantial increase in student participation since Allen and Seaman's first study conducted in fall 2002, reporting 1.6 million students. Allen and Seaman examined the pervasive growth rates of online education for eight distinct disciplines. A range of 16% (engineering) to 33% (business) exists with the educational field reflecting a 30% penetration rate, or fourth on the list of eight disciplines. These nontraditional instructional alternatives have gained in popularity due to economics and access (Moller, Foshay, & Huett, 2008), and practicality (Meyer, 2002).

In addition to significant changes in educational technology in recent years, the nature of teaching and learning has evolved. Previously, professors relied predominately on lecture style to disseminate information, whereas effective online instruction includes multiple assignments, asynchronous reflection, synchronous conversation, and a range of media (Lebaron & Miller, 2005). There has been a shift of emphasis from what practitioners refer to as the *sage on the stage* approach in teaching to one that emphasizes a *guide at the side* method that fits well with teaching online (Perreault, Waldman, & Alexander, 2002).

Another fundamental change accompanying the integration of technology includes faculty support from different subsystems commonly known as Course Management Systems (CMS) that facilitate key areas of instruction and assessment. Using the Internet as a connecting link, instructional delivery can be accomplished via Lotus Notes and Blackboard groupware, providing asynchronous and collaborative learning experiences (Ivankova & Stick, 2007). However, upon investigating effectiveness and limitations of technology driven CMS, Ioannou and Hannafin (2008) concluded that programs such as WebCT, Blackboard, Angel, Educator, and FirstClass remained unproven as evolving tools for online delivery of instruction. Universities must also examine critical topics of curriculum design, rigor, flexibility, blended courses, and collaboration to implement successful online doctoral programs.

An important consideration in the efficacy of all graduate programs is the rate at which students persist until graduation. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), of the 1,850 million students enrolled in American graduate education approximately 20% are pursuing doctoral degrees (as cited in Ivankova & Stick, 2007). An extensive body of research exists regarding the attrition rate of doctoral students who do not persist to graduation, with Bowen and Rudenstine indicating a 50% attrition rate among education majors (as cited in Ivankova & Stick, 2007). In their investigation of factors related to graduate students' persistence in distance education programs, Ivankova and Stick (2007) found four factors that reduce attrition of doctoral students enrolled in distance education: quality of academic experiences; online learning environment; support and assistance; and student self-motivation.

Given the increase of online learning that has emerged over the last decade, it is particularly important to increase knowledge about how instructors can best provide coursework that is meaningful, effective, and adequately supported. Academic leaders frequently cite student self-discipline as the single most important factor in a successful online experience (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Accordingly, a number of participant characteristics have been cited as important prerequisites in programs absent traditional mentoring relationships between students and teachers, including self-regulation (Artino, 2008) and self-reflection (Schunk, 2005). Faculty buy-in has also been identified as a necessary component of successful e-learning programs (Jones & Moller, 2002).

ORIGIN OF THE HYBRID PROGRAM

The concept of the hybrid doctoral program began in 2007 when MA-PU's Provost and local county community college presidents began discussing the need to prepare future leaders to become department heads, deans, and presidents for community colleges. The initial program began during the fall 2007 semester, with traditional instruction taught by educational leadership faculty and community college presidents. During the first year of the program technology was integrated (Blackboard), hybrid instruction was incorporated, and K-12 educators seeking a doctorate in educational leadership were invited to participate in a hybrid program.

The partnerships between the Educational Leadership Department and MAPU, community colleges, school districts, and professional organizations were critical to the initial implementation and expansion of the hybrid doctoral program. The partners included the University's College of Professional and Continuing Education, which provided the formal infrastructure for the online program and external partners who collaborated with recruitment efforts, providing sites for meetings, interviews, and class sessions.

Not surprisingly, during the planning year skeptics and critics within MAPU said that the online doctoral program would destroy the quality and scholarship of the doctoral program. The Educational Leadership Department at the University engaged in discussions culminating in submitted recommendations that would maintain the rigor, quality, and scholarship of the doctoral program. In 2007, the University's administration along with the Educational Leadership Department within the College of Education signed a "memoranda of understanding" implementing the hybrid educational doctoral program.

PROGRAM DETAILS

In response to the increasing, nationwide demand for more online doctoral programs MAPU, a public, liberal university began its first hybrid program during the fall semester of 2008. The target population for this program was primarily pre-K-16 professional educators. The first cohort consisted of 26 students of varied professions: 14 teachers, four principals, two vice principals, two supervisors, two guidance counselors, two assistant superintendents, one social worker, and one adjunct college professor. Nineteen members were female and seven were male. The group consisted of White background (20), Black (5), and Latino (1). Cohort members included a wide range of ages, with six individuals of 20-30 years of age, six of 31-40 years of age, 11 of 41-50 years of age, and three over 51. Additionally, the cohort members practiced in diverse educational environments ranging from rural districts to urban settings. All were chosen after an extensive application process whereby each applicant submitted a portfolio documenting his or her leadership experience. After the paper screening, each candidate was interviewed by a professor from MAPU. Other admission requirements included a master's degree from an accredited institution of higher learning, official transcripts from all colleges attended, three letters of recommendation, and copies of teaching certificates held.

Since the inception of the program, two more cohorts have been created with similarly diverse backgrounds. The second cohort included 11 females and nine males working in a variety of positions from teachers (7), supervisors (4), principals/assistant principals (6), a reading specialist, and a director. This cohort consists of White (11), Black (6), and Latino (3) students. Four members' age range is 20-30, seven members' age range is 31-40, six are between the ages of 41-50 and three are over age 51. The cohort members' positions cover a variety of grade levels. Members come from primary settings, secondary settings, post-secondary settings, and district settings. The third cohort is similarly diverse with a range of members from different professional positions including teachers, principals/assistant principals, an assistant superintendent, an adjunct professor, members of

the child study teams, and supervisors coming from a variety of educational levels including primary, secondary, and post-secondary positions. The nationalities of this cohort are similar to the first with 62% Caucasian, 31% African American, and 7% Latino. Of the 11 females and the three males, three range in age from 20-30, eight range in age from 31-40, and three are above 41. This diversity offers each group a wide variety of perspectives during class work.

In terms of definition, the hybrid doctoral program at MAPU is formulated in accelerated course sessions, each course of eight-week duration. During that time, students meet face-to-face three times on Saturdays from 9:00 a.m. to 2:00 p.m. Ordinarily, students meet on the first Saturday of the course, the fourth or fifth Saturday, and the eighth (the final) Saturday of the particular course. The remainder of the eight-week course session is conducted online using the Blackboard system. Students submit assignments, participate in class discussions, interact with their instructors, and complete papers in the online format. During face-to-face class time, students work collaboratively, listen to lectures, partake in practical work, discuss contemporary educational issues, and share educational problems and case studies indigenous to each cohort member's professional work setting.

Coursework for the cohort was divided into three very different and productive phases, with one benchmark review at the end of every phase. The first phase consists of 18 credits to be completed during the first year. These courses focus on leadership theory, organizations as cultures, changing organizations, action research, and diversity in educational settings from pre-kindergarten through college level. Upon the successful completion of these credits, each cohort member meets with a team of professors, including the student's advisor, to participate in a benchmark progress review. During the review each student delivers a 15 minute presentation, along with a synthesis paper he or she has written describing what that student learned during the first year, and explaining how that new knowledge influenced his or her leadership style. Finally, each student shares with the benchmark committee, a leadership portfolio containing written products from each of the courses previously completed, including the student's personal leadership platform along with the first draft of a literature review that focuses on an area the student is interested in pursuing. Based on the presentation, synthesis paper, portfolio, and how well the student responds to the benchmark panel's questions, the advisor determines whether the student is recommended to begin Phase II of the doctoral program. The second phase allows students to earn a total of 12 credits in applied fieldwork, leadership seminar, and the research project proposal course, which concludes as the student presents his or her dissertation proposal during the second benchmark progress review. Phase III includes 18 additional credits of required coursework in qualitative research, survey research, policy, ethics, and advanced leadership. The third

and final benchmark falls at the end of this process culminating with the approval of each candidate's completed dissertation and symposium. Each student chooses a dissertation committee and the topics of action research for the dissertation. After completing the written portion of the dissertation, the doctoral student will present the findings to the committee and defend the dissertation at the symposium. Following the prescribed course sequence, the duration of the program is three years.

METHODS AND RESULTS

At the conclusion of the first year, each online cohort was analyzed using end of course assessment data including students' reflective journals and end of course evaluations conducted following each eight-week class session. Following each eight-week course, students were asked to participate in an anonymous online evaluation of the session. Student responses to the 30 evaluation statements ranged from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. These items were followed by a section where students could respond with an opinion or comment they wished to make about the course. A review of the student responses to one of the first courses (Organizations as Cultures) suggested a high degree of satisfaction with the course. All students (100%) selected *strongly agree* indicating that the course was well organized. A high percentage of students (86.7%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that the course activities and assignment were appropriately challenging. All students (100%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that they were able to communicate directly with the instructor as needed (either by phone, email, or within Blackboard). A high percentage of students (93.3%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that the course developed their ability to actively conceptualize, analyze, and apply information. A high percentage of students (73.3%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that in regard to their personal schedule, this course was convenient.

At the conclusion of the sixth course (Leadership Seminar), student responses remained favorable. A high percentage of students (92.3%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that the course was well organized. A high percentage of students (76.9%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that the course activities and assignment were appropriately challenging. A high percentage of students (92.3%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that they were able to communicate directly with the instructor as needed (either by phone, email, or within Blackboard). A high percentage of students (76.9%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that the course developed their ability to actively conceptualize, analyze, and apply information. A high percentage of students (84.6%) selected *strongly agree*, indicating that in regard to their personal schedule, this course was convenient.

The hybrid doctoral program is designed for the working professionals; therefore, the online schedule is flexible and convenient. Additionally, the interactive nature of online discussions and face-to-face meetings offers students opportunities for professional networking and support. Some of the evaluation statements question students about the amount of time spent working on the course each week; evaluation statements further ask students to note their feelings regarding their interaction with classmates. The majority of students spent 10 to 12 hours per week on course work. A high percentage of students (92.3%) indicated that they *very often* or *often* participated/interacted with their classmates. A high percentage of respondents (84.6%) indicated that compared to a traditional face-to-face class, their experience in this online course was *better* or *much better*. A high percentage of respondents (92.3%) indicated *strongly agree*, demonstrating that they enjoyed this course enough to continue taking courses with MAPU Online.

The authors² of this paper examined the data of the first cohort in order to understand the effectiveness of the hybrid doctoral program; subsequently, they are aware that researcher bias may be present in the study for the following reasons: of the four authors, two MAPU professors designed and taught several of the hybrid courses; additionally, two of the four are students currently enrolled in the hybrid program. These students purposefully selected the hybrid model to pursue their doctoral degree because it provides abundant online courses affording them an opportunity to further their educations at the doctoral level in spite of their great proximity from campus; moreover they selected the hybrid program, in large part, because it did not conflict with their professional work obligations in the same way that a face-to-face program may have. The findings revealed that this online doctoral program has not yet been perfected and that continuous work will be needed to maintain and improve the online doctoral program's quality, rigor, flexibility and collaboration. This paper is not intended to be a comparison of face-to-face, hybrid or exclusively online educational doctoral programs; instead it is a contribution to the dialogue regarding the cultivation of innovative practices in higher education. The authors support further research using multiple assessments and sources of data required to study the approaches being used to implement educational doctoral programs.

CHALLENGES AND BENEFITS

A discussion with members of the three hybrid cohorts in the doctoral program at MAPU revealed several benefits of the hybrid program. The primary benefit the majority of members shared was the flexibility of workload while providing additional support through the three face-to-face meetings. The discussion boards enable students to share ideas and resources, while

the face-to-face meetings provide the opportunity to develop personal relationships. Due to the rigor of the program, many students agreed that the organization and materials used in the courses are a benefit and apply directly to their professional lives, which provide continuous personal growth and professional development. All of the students involved in the program are practitioners in the education field. This advantage offers real-life experiences to be incorporated into the theoretical discussions. The support of the faculty provides another advantage for students. Advisors are assigned at the beginning of the program, and as students progress to the dissertation phase, individuals can choose their dissertation committees.

The cohort model offers support to all students through the ongoing communication during online periods, at group meetings, and in the classroom. Many students indicate that this network is vital to their success in the program and that their interaction with peers is higher in the online-hybrid model than it was in a traditional course. Much of the research for the final dissertation is embedded throughout the program. By working in a cohort, students are able to collaborate on similar projects; this creates a supportive and professional network not only within the program, but beyond it as well. Many students throughout the three cohorts commented that the personal and professional relationships developed during the program were an advantage.

Technology was a challenge for cohort members with limited computer literacy; during brief periods, online participation may become unavailable to faculty and students as a result of regular maintenance and other disturbances. In addition, learning a new system created challenges during the first courses as students and professors adjusted to the format. Also, students learned early that they must be self-motivated and self-directed. Much of the coursework is done independently. If questions arise, students had to feel comfortable asking for help from their cohort members and professors.

CONCLUSION

Research has shown that in all areas of education, leadership is a critical factor that influences student achievement (Kotter, 1996; Reeves, 2006). Universities can potentially increase the pool of leaders by offering rigorous hybrid doctoral programs, defining universal standards by combining, or creating a hybridization of high-quality online and face-to-face andragogy in educational doctoral programs, with collateral benefits to university partnerships. Finally, more creative approaches are required in preparing future school leaders such as this hybrid program that teaches current and aspiring leaders to be effective in educational organizations.

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Notes

1. Mid-Atlantic Progressive University (MAPU) is a pseudonym for the actual institution discussed.
2. Of the four authors of this paper, two are students and two are faculty, currently and respectively enrolled in and teaching in the Educational Leadership Program at MAPU; additionally, all four conducted and analyzed the study discussed herein.