

Program Mission & Design

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Sul Ross State University

Program Mission

The Ed.D. in Educational Leadership prepares experienced leaders to drive meaningful, sustainable improvement in rural, borderland, and underserved communities. The program develops scholar-practitioners who use improvement science methodology to address authentic organizational challenges and build capacity for continuous improvement.

This is the first doctoral program in Sul Ross State University's 103-year history, reflecting the institution's commitment to serving the educational needs of West Texas and borderland regions at the highest level.

What Makes This Program Distinctive

Designed for Rural and Borderland Contexts

Most doctoral programs prepare leaders for large, well-resourced urban or suburban settings. This program is intentionally designed for leaders working in contexts that are often overlooked by traditional doctoral education:

- **Rural communities** with small organizations, limited resources, geographic isolation, and unique challenges around recruitment, retention, and access to services
- **Borderland communities** navigating complex linguistic, cultural, and policy environments where binational relationships and cross-cultural competence are essential to effective leadership
- **Underserved settings** where leaders must do more with less, build capacity from within, and create sustainable solutions without relying on external resources

The curriculum, faculty expertise, and cohort composition reflect these distinctive contexts. Students examine case studies from similar settings, engage scholarship on rural and borderland leadership, and learn from peers facing parallel challenges.

Improvement Science as Core Methodology

While many Ed.D. programs teach research methods, this program uses **improvement science as its signature pedagogy** throughout the entire curriculum. Improvement science integrates into every course, every semester, and every aspect of Dissertation in Practice development.

Students don't just learn *about* improvement science. They learn *through* improvement science by applying its principles to their own organizational challenges from Semester 1 forward. This approach gives graduates:

- **Practical tools** they can use immediately to diagnose problems, design interventions, and measure impact
- **Disciplined inquiry skills** that combine rigor with practicality, producing actionable knowledge
- **Systems thinking** that reveals root causes, leverage points, and unintended consequences
- **Iterative mindset** that treats failure as learning and refines solutions through cycles of testing
- **Networked learning orientation** that recognizes improvement accelerates through collaboration

Graduates leave with a methodology they will use throughout their careers to lead evidence-based improvement.

Accessible Three-Year Design

Doctoral education has historically been accessible primarily to those who can relocate, leave employment, or afford years of full-time study. This program removes those barriers through intentional design:

- **Fully online delivery** eliminates geographic barriers
- **No campus residencies** means students complete the entire program from wherever they live and work
- **Cohort progression** provides clear structure and peer support, reducing isolation and increasing completion rates
- **Weekly synchronous sessions** at consistent times allow students to plan around a predictable schedule
- **Employment-integrated learning** encourages students to apply coursework immediately in their current roles
- **Three-year completion** timeline makes the degree achievable for working professionals while maintaining rigor

This accessibility is not about lowering standards. It's about removing barriers that have historically excluded talented leaders from rural, borderland, and under-resourced communities from doctoral education.

Dissertation in Practice

The culminating requirement is the **Dissertation in Practice (DiP)**, an applied research project that addresses an authentic problem in the student's current organization or professional context.

The DiP is fundamentally different from a traditional Ph.D. dissertation. Rather than contributing to academic theory, the DiP contributes to **professional practice** by:

- **Solving a real problem** that matters to the student's organization and stakeholders
- **Using improvement science methods** through Study-Implement-Analyze-Reflect (SIAR) cycles
- **Producing actionable knowledge** that generates solutions, tools, or insights implementable immediately
- **Demonstrating measurable impact** through data showing meaningful organizational improvement
- **Creating practical products** beyond the written dissertation—implementation guides, protocols, assessment tools, or policy recommendations

The DiP is built across all three years of the program, ensuring deep grounding in both scholarly literature and organizational reality.

Program Structure

60 Credit Hours | 3 Years | 9 Semesters

The program is organized into three phases, each building on the previous one:

Year 1: Framing and Grounding

Students identify their Problem of Practice, understand its systemic roots through improvement science tools, ground it in organizational context and ethical positionality, and engage stakeholder perspectives. Coursework focuses on improvement science principles, rural and borderland community contexts, research design foundations, and organizational theory.

Milestone: Problem of Practice Checkpoint (End of Semester 3)

Year 2: Designing for Improvement

Students engage scholarly literature to build their Theory of Improvement, design their intervention and measurement plan based on evidence, and defend their proposal to move forward. Coursework focuses on literature synthesis, strategic planning and evaluation, ethics and systems thinking, school finance and resource management, research methodology, communication strategies, and school law and policy.

Milestones:

- Literature Review Checkpoint (End of Semester 4)
- Methodology Checkpoint (End of Semester 6)

Year 3: Leading, Learning, and Integrating

Students implement their improvement initiative, collect and analyze data through SIAR cycles, refine their intervention based on evidence, and document findings and lessons learned. Coursework focuses on human resource management, instructional leadership, public relations, and dissertation completion.

Milestones:

- DiP Results Readiness Checkpoint (End of Semester 8)
- DiP Completion and Defense (End of Semester 9)

Specialization: The program includes a 15-credit specialization in Superintendent and District-Level Leadership. Future specializations are planned.

Time Commitment

Weekly:

- 10-15 hours per week during coursework semesters (Years 1-2)
- 90-minute weekly synchronous session throughout all nine semesters
- Additional time for dissertation implementation, data collection, and writing in Year 3

Structure:

- Fall, Spring, and Summer semesters (continuous enrollment)
- Cohort progresses together through the full sequence

- Designed for working professionals who maintain full-time employment

Students apply their learning immediately in their organizational contexts, making doctoral study enhance rather than compete with professional responsibilities.

Program Outcomes

Upon completing the Ed.D. in Educational Leadership, graduates will be able to:

- Design and lead organizational improvement initiatives
- Apply improvement science methodology to complex problems
- Use data and evidence to inform decision-making
- Lead sustainable change in resource-constrained environments
- Conduct applied research that produces actionable knowledge
- Navigate complexity in diverse organizational contexts
- Build and sustain networked improvement communities
- Produce scholarship of practice
- Think systemically about organizational challenges
- Lead with disciplined inquiry and professional judgment
- Develop organizational capacity for continuous improvement
- Address authentic problems in real organizational settings

Career Pathways

Ed.D. graduates are prepared to pursue leadership roles including:

Educational Leadership: Superintendent, Assistant Superintendent, Principal, District-level Director or Coordinator, State-level Education Agency Leadership

Higher Education Administration: Dean or Associate Dean, Department Chair, Program Director, Director of Institutional Research or Assessment

Nonprofit and Community Leadership: Executive Director, Program Director, Director of Research and Evaluation

Consulting and Professional Development: Educational Consultant, Improvement Science Facilitator, Professional Development Provider

Graduates also pursue faculty positions teaching educational leadership in universities, contribute to policy development, and lead improvement initiatives within professional associations and educational service organizations.

Sul Ross State University

The Frontier University of Texas