

Student Experience

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

Sul Ross State University

What to Expect as a Doctoral Student

The Ed.D. in Educational Leadership is designed to be rigorous, supportive, and transformative. You will be challenged intellectually, supported professionally, and connected to a community of scholar-practitioners committed to meaningful improvement in their organizations and communities.

This document describes what doctoral study looks like in practice: from your weekly routine to the relationships you will build to the milestones you will achieve across three years.

Your Learning Community: The Cohort Model

A Cohort of 15

You will progress through the entire program with the same group of 15 students. This deliberately small cohort size ensures:

- **Deep relationships:** You will know your colleagues well, understand their contexts, and learn from their perspectives
- **Meaningful collaboration:** Small group size allows for substantive peer review, collective problem-solving, and genuine intellectual exchange
- **Faculty accessibility:** With only 15 students, faculty can provide individualized attention and mentorship
- **Sustainable community:** The cohort becomes a professional network that extends far beyond graduation

Diversity of Context and Experience

Your cohort will include leaders from varied settings, school districts at different levels, and central office roles. This diversity is intentional. You will learn as much from your peers' improvement work across different contexts as you will from coursework and faculty.

Collaborative, Not Competitive

Doctoral education is often portrayed as isolating and competitive. This program intentionally creates the opposite experience. Your success depends on and contributes to your cohort's success. You will:

- Provide peer feedback on each other's dissertation work
- Share resources, tools, and insights from your improvement initiatives
- Celebrate milestones together
- Support one another through challenges
- Build a professional community that lasts throughout your careers

A Typical Week

Asynchronous Coursework (8–14 hours/week)

Most of your learning happens asynchronously on your own schedule through:

- **Readings:** from improvement science literature, leadership scholarship, and research methodology texts
- **Individual assignments:** applying course content to your Problem of Practice and organizational context
- **Discussion forums:** engaging with peers on key concepts and their application
- **Dissertation writing:** developing the components that will become your final DiP

You control when this work happens. Whether it is early mornings, evenings, or weekends, you fit it around your professional and personal commitments.

Synchronous Session (90 minutes/week)

Once per week, your entire cohort and all faculty teaching that semester meet together online for a live session. These sessions are where integration happens:

- **Faculty modeling:** Watch faculty demonstrate doctoral-level analysis, revision decisions, and scholarly thinking
- **Peer workshops:** Practice using structured protocols to give and receive substantive feedback
- **Collective problem-solving:** Work through challenges in your dissertation development together
- **Q&A and coaching:** Get real-time guidance from faculty on your specific work
- **Community building:** Connect with peers, share progress, and maintain momentum

Sessions are scheduled at a consistent day and time throughout the program. They are recorded for those who occasionally miss due to work obligations, but regular attendance is expected.

Dissertation Work (Variable hours/week)

- **Year 1:** Problem identification, stakeholder interviews, organizational analysis
- **Year 2:** Literature review, methodology development, proposal writing
- **Year 3:** Implementation, data collection, analysis, dissertation writing

This work often happens during your regular workday since you are conducting improvement science in your own organization. The lines between professional work and doctoral work blur, and this is by design.

Your Three-Year Journey

Year 1 *Finding Your Focus*

What you are learning:

- Improvement science principles, organizational theory, research foundations, rural and borderland contexts

What you are building:

- Your Problem of Practice: the organizational challenge you will address through your dissertation

What it feels like:

- Intellectually stimulating as you are introduced to new frameworks and tools
- Sometimes challenging as you adjust to doctoral-level expectations
- Exciting as you gain new language and concepts for problems you have known intuitively
- Grounding as you develop deeper understanding of your organizational context

Support you will receive:

- Intensive faculty modeling of how to think like a scholar-practitioner
- Structured peer feedback protocols to calibrate doctoral-level quality
- Formative feedback focused on growth, not grades
- Program director availability for individual consultation

Milestone:

- End of Semester 3: Problem of Practice Checkpoint – demonstrating readiness to engage scholarly literature and design your improvement strategy

Year 2 *Designing Your Improvement Work***What you are learning:**

- Literature synthesis, strategic planning, ethics, systems thinking, research methodology, school finance and law

What you are building:

- Your Theory of Improvement and complete dissertation proposal including methodology

What it feels like:

- Intellectually demanding as you synthesize extensive literature
- Methodologically challenging as you design rigorous research
- Professionally relevant as you connect theory to your organizational reality
- Increasingly confident as you see your dissertation taking shape

Support you will receive:

- Lab-based intensive courses for literature review and methodology development
- Multiple rounds of feedback on proposal components
- Dissertation committee formation connecting you with faculty expertise
- Peer review calibrating expectations for checkpoint quality

Milestones:

- End of Semester 4: Literature Review Checkpoint
- End of Semester 6: Methodology Checkpoint (ready to implement)

Year 3 *Leading and Learning*

What you are learning:

- Human resource management, instructional leadership, public relations, dissertation completion

What you are building:

- Implementation of your improvement initiative, data collection and analysis, completed Dissertation in Practice

What it feels like:

- Empowering as you lead real change in your organization
- Iterative as you learn from data and adapt your approach
- Integrative as you connect coursework, leadership practice, and dissertation work
- Culminating as you see three years of work come together in a complete DiP

Support you will receive:

- Regular check-ins with dissertation committee
- Peer support from cohort members also implementing their initiatives
- Faculty coaching on data analysis and writing
- Multiple mock defenses before your final defense

Milestones:

- End of Semester 8: Results of SSIAR Cycles Checkpoint
- End of Semester 9: Dissertation Defense and Completion

Support Resources

Academic Support

Program Director: Provides ongoing advising, answers questions about program requirements, helps navigate challenges, and ensures you are progressing appropriately

Dissertation Committee: Guides your dissertation development, provides expert feedback on your work, and evaluates your readiness for defense

Faculty Office Hours: All faculty maintain regular availability for individual consultation on coursework, writing, and research

Peer Review Protocols: Structured processes for giving and receiving substantive feedback that strengthens everyone's work

Library and Research

Online Library Access: Full access to Sul Ross library resources including databases, journals, and e-books essential for doctoral research

Research Librarians: Specialists who help with literature searches, citation management, and accessing hard-to-find sources

Interlibrary Loan: Access to materials not available in Sul Ross's collection through partnerships with other institutions

Technology

Learning Technology Assistance Center (LTAC): Technical support for Blackboard, Teams, and other learning technologies

IT Help Desk: Support for connectivity issues, software questions, and technical troubleshooting

Technology Orientation: Training at program start on all platforms and tools you will use

Writing and Research

Writing Resources: Access to writing guides, templates, and exemplars specific to dissertation writing

APA and Citation Support: Resources for mastering scholarly citation and formatting

Dissertation Formatting Support: Guidance on meeting institutional formatting requirements

Professional Development

Conference Presentations: Support for presenting your improvement work at professional conferences

Publication Guidance: Mentorship in developing dissertation work into publishable scholarship

Professional Networks: Connections to ICPEL, CPED, and other professional organizations

Balancing Work, Life, and Doctoral Study

Realistic Expectations

Doctoral study is demanding. Most students dedicate 10–15 hours per week during coursework semesters and additional time during dissertation implementation and writing. This is in addition to full-time employment and personal responsibilities.

Strategies for Success

- **Integration over addition:** The program is designed so your dissertation work happens in your workplace. In most cases, you are not adding dissertation research on top of your job. You are conducting improvement science as part of your job
- **Protected time:** Successful students block recurring time on their calendars for coursework and writing, treating it as non-negotiable professional development
- **Support systems:** Family, supervisors, and colleagues need to understand your commitment. Most successful students have explicit conversations about their time needs and support requirements
- **Flexibility where possible:** Asynchronous coursework allows you to work when it fits your schedule. Dissertation timelines have some flexibility built in for unexpected professional or personal demands
- **Grace and persistence:** Some weeks will be harder than others. The program is a marathon, not a sprint. Persistence matters more than perfection

What Makes It Sustainable

- **Cohort accountability:** Your peers help you stay on track
- **Employment integration:** Your work and your dissertation reinforce each other
- **Faculty understanding:** Faculty are former practitioners who understand professional demands
- **Immediate application:** What you learn Monday, you can use Tuesday in your organization
- **Meaning and purpose:** You are solving real problems that matter to people you serve

Program Culture and Values in Action

Rigor with Support

The program maintains high standards for doctoral-level work while providing scaffolding to help you meet those standards. Faculty push you to think more deeply, write more clearly, and analyze more rigorously while also modeling what quality looks like and providing formative feedback focused on growth.

Improvement Mindset

Failure is reframed as learning. When your first SSIAR cycle does not produce the results you expected, that is not failure. It is data informing your next cycle. This mindset applies to your coursework, your writing, and your leadership practice.

Collaborative Inquiry

Scholarship happens in community, not isolation. You will engage in peer review, collaborative workshops, and collective problem-solving throughout the program. Your dissertation benefits from multiple perspectives, not just your own thinking.

Practitioner Voice

Your professional experience is valued as legitimate knowledge. Faculty do not position themselves as experts delivering wisdom to novices. Instead, they facilitate collaborative learning where practitioner insights and scholarly knowledge inform each other.

Ethical Leadership

The program takes seriously the ethical dimensions of leadership and research. You will engage deeply with questions about power, opportunity, consequences, and responsibility throughout your doctoral journey.

Technology and Learning Environment

Platforms You Will Use

Platform	Purpose
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Blackboard	Learning management system for accessing course materials, submitting assignments, and engaging in discussions
Microsoft Teams	Video conferencing for synchronous sessions, office hours, and committee meetings
Microsoft Office 365	Word, Excel, PowerPoint, and OneDrive for coursework and collaboration
Email	Primary communication channel between students, faculty, and program leadership
Citation Management	Tools such as Zotero or Mendeley for organizing literature and managing citations

Technical Requirements

- Reliable high-speed internet (sufficient for video conferencing)
- Computer with webcam and microphone
- Headset recommended for synchronous sessions
- Up-to-date web browser
- Adequate storage for documents and recordings

Digital Citizenship

As doctoral students, you are expected to communicate professionally, respect intellectual property, maintain confidentiality when appropriate, and engage constructively in online discussions. These expectations mirror professional workplace standards.

Building Toward Defense and Graduation

Checkpoints, Not Gatekeeping

The five milestones throughout the program are designed to ensure you are progressing appropriately and ready for the next phase. They are formative assessments with feedback for improvement, not high-stakes gatekeeping moments designed to eliminate candidates.

Defense Preparation

Your dissertation defense is the culmination of three years of work, but it is not the first time you present your work. Throughout the program, you:

- Present at checkpoint defenses
- Share work-in-progress in synchronous sessions
- Practice with peers in mock defenses
- Receive feedback from your committee at multiple stages

By the time you reach your final defense, you have practiced extensively and your committee already knows your work intimately.

Beyond Graduation

The program prepares you not just to earn a degree, but to continue as a scholar-practitioner throughout your career. You will leave with:

- Improvement science methodology you will use in future leadership challenges
- A professional network of peers across Texas and beyond
- Faculty mentors who remain available for consultation
- A completed dissertation demonstrating your capacity for applied research
- Confidence to lead complex organizational change

What Students Say

As this is the inaugural program, student testimonials will be added as the first cohort progresses. Check back for perspectives from students experiencing the program firsthand.

Ready to Begin?

The Ed.D. journey is challenging, rewarding, and transformative. It requires commitment, persistence, and willingness to be pushed beyond your current thinking. It also offers intellectual growth, professional advancement, and the satisfaction of making meaningful improvement in organizations and communities that need effective leadership.

If you are ready to engage in rigorous doctoral study while continuing your leadership work, this program is designed for you.

Next Steps:

- Submit an Expression of Interest to stay informed about the application timeline
- Review Admissions Requirements to confirm eligibility and prepare application materials
- Contact the Program Director to discuss whether this program aligns with your goals

Questions About the Student Experience?

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