


The Architecture of the Unknown: Constructing a Flexible EdD Program

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ABSTRACT

Beginning in the summer of 2019, the College of St. Scholastica endeavored to build a flexible, adaptable EdD program grounded in the guiding principles of CPED. This meant establishing a welcoming and safe program dedicated to cultivating justice-minded change makers. It also meant constructing a curriculum that would accommodate differing student backgrounds, be responsive to fluctuating consumer demands, and function as context-inclusive in an ever-evolving and intersecting space. While this alone was certainly a challenge, we did not anticipate that a global pandemic would present the most significant test of what we had created. To accomplish the aforementioned goals, the program architecture was dependent on the following structural considerations: a broadening of the target participant profile to include students across various social sectors; the use of design thinking as an asset in supporting innovation, creativity and flexibility; the inclusion of credit-bearing “third-place” courses intended to provide open-ended space and place for community building and reflective, intentional action; and an approach to course design that encouraged risk-taking by students with a focus on cultivating mindsets and skills around equity and social justice. None of these attributes on their own provided total protection from seismic societal, cultural or market shifts. Collectively, however, they offered a unique environment for the culturing of a particular type of doctoral experience, unique in its elasticity compared to more traditional, inflexible designs. This essay details the ways in which we attempted to create an inclusive, innovative, flexible structure, as validated (and challenged) by the COVID-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

innovation, risk-taking, third place, COVID-19, ungrading

INTRODUCTION

Earthquake-resistant buildings are intentionally constructed to withstand seismic events. Such structures eschew the traditional design philosophies that associate strength with rigidity in favor of employing materials and mechanisms that not only allow for, but actually depend on, flexibility. Otherwise stated, architects have come to realize that inelasticity leads to instability when foundations become unsteady, an idea once considered counterintuitive.

Similarly, in the summer of 2019, the College of St. Scholastica endeavored to build a flexible, adaptable EdD program grounded in the guiding principles of the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED). This meant establishing a welcoming and safe

program dedicated to cultivating justice-minded change makers. It also meant constructing a curriculum that would accommodate differing student backgrounds, be responsive to fluctuating consumer demands, and function as context-inclusive in an ever-evolving and intersecting space. And while this was certainly a challenge, we did not anticipate that a global pandemic would present the most significant test of what we had created.

To accomplish the goals outlined above, the architecture of our program was dependent on the following structural considerations: a broadening of the target participant profile to include students across various social sectors; the use of design thinking as an asset toward supporting innovation, creativity and flexibility; the inclusion of credit-



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bearing third-place courses (discussed later in the manuscript) intended to provide open-ended space and place for community building and reflective, intentional action; and an approach to course design that encouraged risk-taking by students—all the while with a focus on cultivating mindsets and skills around equity and social justice. None of these attributes on their own provided total protection from seismic societal, cultural, or market shifts. Collectively, however, they offered a unique environment for the culturing of a particular type of doctoral experience, unique in its elasticity compared to more traditional, inflexible designs. It is with this at the top of mind that the College of St. Scholastica created and launched its EdD program during, arguably, the most challenging moment in US academic history.

The following essay details the ways in which we attempted to create an inclusive, innovative, flexible structure, as validated (and challenged) by the COVID-19 pandemic. Our investigative lens is contextualized by the previously-mentioned structural considerations and includes feedback from student surveys, faculty commentaries, and document analysis to provide a deep and wide evaluation of our efforts and their consequences. This essay contributes to the unique nature of this special issue by directly addressing two of its central questions: How do EdD programs adapt and survive during times of uncertainty and fear? How might EdD programs grow and enhance their programs during times of instability? This is our start at an answer while also keeping in mind the penultimate goal of (re)imagining, (re)designing, and (re)developing practitioner-based doctoral programs and fostering conversations around the new era of the EdD.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATION 1: BROADENING THE PARTICIPANT PROFILE

From the very beginning of the EdD design process at the College of St. Scholastica (which will be explored at length in the next section), we sought to create a program that broadened the participant profile in a way that differentiated itself greatly from that which is found in the marketplace of more traditional programs. This was, however, not simply a marketing ploy; it was—and remains—a mission, aligned closely with the CPED framework, which defines the education doctorate, or EdD, as one that seeks to “prepare educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession” (Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate, 2022, para. 4). Within this definition, the notion of an educator is broadly applied. This is best illustrated in CPED’s guiding principles of “Prepar[ing] leaders who can construct and apply knowledge to make a positive difference in the lives of individuals, families, organizations, and communities.” Leaders such as this do not function only within a classroom or school building; they are not only teachers or administrators. We sought to create a program for leaders to make a difference in a wide swath of social-sector professional settings. This, however, is uncommon in the world of traditional doctoral preparation.

The Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) is an annual census of individuals who earn doctoral degrees from accredited U.S. academic institutions. Sponsored by the National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics (NCSES), an arm of the National Science Foundation, the SED seeks to track changes in earned doctoral degrees over time relative to a host of criterion, including (but not limited to) political, economic, social, technological, and demographic

trends. This report specifically focuses on research doctorates (PhDs).

For the purposes of analysis, we have chosen to utilize the SED data from 2021, which measures doctorates earned during what one might consider the heart of the COVID-19 pandemic (academic year 2020-2021). To this point, the report itself notes that “This is the first year in which the data collection fully coincided with the pandemic, and this report includes the results of questions that were specifically added to the survey to measure the pandemic’s impact on doctorate recipients” (NCSES, 2021, p. 5).

In the context of this essay then, the data analyzed from the SED correlates well with the questions at the heart of our writing and this special issue. A total of 3,277 doctorates were earned in the field of education in 2021. Of those, 947 were specifically in the field of educational leadership and administration, 1,068 in the field of educational research, and 924 in the field of teacher education. The remaining 338 were defined as other (NCSES, 2022). As one might expect, the survey indicates that the vast majority of participants intended to teach (40.2%) or work in administration (34.8%) following the completion of their doctoral degrees (together totaling 75%). This means that the primary vocational profile of a PhD doctoral student in the field of education in 2021 was a teacher or administrator who intended to continue doing that same work. Additionally, the data indicate that just over 70% of these students are female, and approximately 50% are white.

Utilizing a design-thinking approach, the EdD design team at the College of St. Scholastica began in the summer of 2019 by seeking to construct a program accessible for individuals to whom traditional educational doctorates did not appeal or for whom there were significant barriers. In that sense, then, broadening the profile was just as much about the inclusion of, and accessibility for, diverse voices as it was about anything else. While the COVID-19 pandemic was still months from beginning at that time, hindsight now affords us the perspective that our efforts to broaden the participant profile served a dual purpose: accessibility and stability in times of seismic changes to the educational landscape.

Document analysis related to our initial design efforts reveal some profound shifts in how we imagined the program to be built. In an initial exercise, the group challenged itself to propose student personas, fictitious identities of those for whom our program might be appealing. In terms of prior education, there was a significant departure from what is true in the SED, insofar as the St. Scholastica team imagined an EdD that would be of interest not just to those in education, but also students with undergraduate degrees in political science, public policy, and even business. These imaginary individuals held positions in regional and federal government entities, corporations, and non-profit policy think-tanks, and their soft skills included such things as strong digital and equity literacies as well as significant relational capacities. Nowhere did the notion of teacher or school administrator show up—something that stands in direct contrast to the data demonstrating that 75% of traditional doctoral programs in education are built for such people. So why were we so keen on creating such a different program?

The answer can be found in another set of documents related to our design process—what we called the Design Sprint—an accelerated, brain-to-paper exercise in which we challenged ourselves to articulate the core goals inherent in the architecture of our emerging EdD program. When coded for common themes and synthesized with the student profile personas, the notions of

innovation, leadership, and social justice emerged. While these ideas sit at the heart of teaching and educational administration, they are by no means exclusive to those professions. Innovation, leadership, and social justice transcend context; they are adaptable footings on which a whole host of vocational architecture can (and should) sit. Thus, our non-traditional EdD began to take shape.

In describing our broadening of the participant profile, it is also worth noting that the defining of a learning organization was also critical to our efforts. Drawing from the work of Senge (1990), our team operated under the notion that a learning organization is one “that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future” (p. 14). Such organizations focus on generative learning that enhances their capacity to reach objectives. They are not just schools. Any organization can (and should) be a learning organization. In terms of appealing to potential students from a wider swath of the professional spectrum, then, it can be concluded that in 2019 and 2020, the conceptualization of our program centered on this more generous, inclusive, invitational definition of where teaching and learning happens. This corresponded in a unique way to the manner in which models of teaching and learning were deeply and permanently altered because of COVID-19.

We feel that our efforts in broadening the participant profile were a crucial, stabilizing factor as we launched our program in the heart of the pandemic, a footing on which a more stable, earthquake-resistant structure could be built. This effort to reimagine the traditional architecture of doctoral program design resulted in an initial learning community that included individuals from health care fields, non-profits, higher education administration and social work sectors in addition to teachers and school administrators. Our second cohort, set to begin in the fall of 2023, will share a similar demographic.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATION 2: DESIGN THINKING

As mentioned in the previous section, the EdD program at the College of St. Scholastica was designed to engage students from diverse social sector backgrounds. Such students aim to find innovative solutions to a problem of practice that also promotes equity and social justice while collaborating closely with users and other concerned participants. To ensure that we thoroughly assessed the complexities and provided innovative solutions to support our program, the EdD program’s development process involved a dedicated group of faculty forming a design team led by the founding chair of the program, who had experience and training in design thinking. The aim was to develop a transformational program aligned with the college’s strategic initiative in equity, diversity, and inclusion. Furthermore, the program follows the CPED’s guiding principles and frameworks, which emphasize the importance of addressing equity and social justice to solve complex problems of practice.

We implemented design thinking strategies from the beginning of the program’s conception. In comparison, prior curricular work at the college had historically been done in isolation, thus presenting a marked shift in ideation.

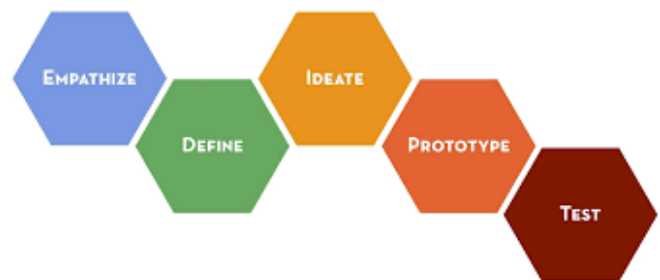
During the development phase, we utilized the design thinking process as a conceptual and practical framework, implementing design thinking elements and tools to address the creative and innovative challenges in curricular and programmatic development.

This design process, which focuses on generating innovative solutions through inspiration, ideation, and implementation, was originally rooted in the study of design cognition and methods dating back to the 1950s and 60s (Panke, 2019). During the 1980s, design thinking emerged in the business sector as a component of management programs as a way to address complex or wicked problems and has been embraced among service and social organizations. In fact, Stanford University’s d.school, a design-thinking institute, played a pivotal role in promoting design thinking by introducing it in the early 2000s to foster social innovation (Panke, 2019).

Design thinking involves five phases (see Figure 1) implemented through an iterative process and incorporates an empathetic, user-centered approach that allowed us to challenge our legacy practice of solo curricular design (Panke, 2019). It is a dynamic approach that utilizes generative design thinking elements. Design thinking concepts (e.g., empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test) help challenge assumptions and spark creativity and innovation. The design thinking core ideas are as follows:

- Empathize: understand the problem from the perspective of the users and concerned participants through strategies and methods that include activities such as creating personas, journey mapping, observations, and focused interviews.
- Define: understand the problem as clearly as possible, incorporating the insights learned through working through the empathetic stage
- Ideate: generate a wide range of possible solutions to the problem without judgment by reimagining what might be possible, embracing creativity and open mindsets.
- Prototype: transform ideas into prototypes for rapid iteration, review, and improvement.
- Test: implement prototypes with users; use feedback to improve the prototype

Figure 1. Stanford d.school Design Thinking Process (2018)



Note. The Design Thinking elements include the five components as identified by Stanford’s d.school; the process is iterative rather than linear.

For the College of St. Scholastica, the online Doctorate in Educational Leadership program was a new-level program. Although the education faculty had experience in creating several online graduate programs, the complexity and level of this new program posed challenges to the development of the curriculum and overall structure. Our design team faced our own problem of practice when trying to create a flexible student-centered program at the doctoral level that prioritized equity, social justice, and decolonized structures. We researched aspirational doctoral program models to reference that had features we were seeking, such as a multi-modal



dissertation or an integrated concurrent dissertation in practice that moves away from an all but dissertation (ABD) structure. Upon further reflection, our lack of experience may have provided an opportunity for curricular innovation and an openness to new ideas. As Liedkta et al. (2017) explain, one of the main obstacles to innovation is holding onto preconceived notions, worldviews, and ideas.

We also realized we needed to let go of past experiences, ideas, and assumed practices in designing EdD courses and program policies. The EdD Faculty Design Team discovered our own various doctoral programs had similar protocols and systems that reinforced traditional PhD-like EdD programming. To avoid being overly influenced by our past experiences, assumptions, and beliefs, we had to intentionally reflect and be mindful of these ideas. This helped us ensure that we were adopting the most impactful curricular and programmatic expectations rather than what we were already familiar with. We used design thinking protocols to guide our iterative process and ensure that our program was focused on student success, online communities of practices, flexibility, equity, and social justice. The design thinking strategies helped us remain open to new ideas.

We believe we improved our curriculum development efforts by working collaboratively, a key design thinking principle, rather than our prior practice of developing curricula in isolation. By doing so, we achieved our goal of establishing a program that fosters inclusivity, community, and flexibility and disrupts legacy doctoral program practices that do not serve students effectively. By utilizing a collaborative approach, ideation, and prototyping, we fostered a culture of empathetic thinking and provided new insights and ideas to strengthen courses and program policies, including a new model for the Dissertation in Practice. For specific examples of program concepts that resulted from this approach, see Table 1.

Table 1. Example of New EdD Programmatic Concepts

| EdD/PhD Legacy Practice | CSS EdD Reimagined Practices |
|---|---|
| Students may or may not be working with a community; may use a cohort model | Cohort model with credit-bearing Professional Learning Community courses, third spaces, promoting community and collaboration |
| Literature Review | Renamed and framed the review as a Scholarly Review that welcomes other "Ways of Knowing" |
| Five Chapter Dissertation | Renamed: Dissertation for Impact Welcomes multimodal elements Required positionality statement and equity and social justice considerations throughout |
| Oral Defense | PC2: Proposal Collaborative Committee meeting |
| Dissertation Chair and Committee Assigned | Chairs are assigned early, in the second year. The committee is assigned early and agrees to support the student through the process. One member of the four represents a user perspective and does not need to have a doctorate. |

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERING 3: CREDIT BEARING THIRD-PLACE COURSES

Through the use of design thinking, program designers were intentional about including space and opportunity for students to collaborate and build community within the online environment, through required and optional opportunities. According to Weidman et al., (2001), community is an important consideration in determining and defining a program's culture and also impacts relationships among students. Research tells us positive peer connections contribute to student persistence (Gardner, 2008; Golde, 2000; Lovitts, 2001). Retention of online students is tied to feelings of community and success in the online learning environment (Bawa, 2016). Students learn more and are better able to construct knowledge in collaborative environments (Richardson & Swan, 2003). And allowing students to develop relationships with classmates enhances learning and allows students to develop personal and professional networks outside of a school setting. Thus, it is important for online programs to establish avenues in which students can pursue peer-to-peer connections in order to establish community and allow space for creating a welcoming and safe program.

A sense of community is particularly important for students in a doctoral program. Starting a doctoral program is a big decision. Completing a program can be an even bigger challenge. According to Nettles and Millett (2006), attrition rates for doctoral education programs average 70%, while they range from 40% to 60% for other doctoral programs, and online programs have an attrition rate of 10% to 20% higher than face-to-face programs. This comes at a high cost, both emotionally and financially, to students. Our program has intentionally put structures in place to support this sense of community within our online EdD and aligned with CPED principles related to collaboration and communication.

There is a misconception that online programs are unable or ineffective at building community. Our data support high levels of connectedness and belonging through our intentional program and course design. Students move through the program in a cohort model, have weekly, synchronous seminars on Monday evenings, and meet for yearly residencies. Additionally, students participate in professional learning communities (PLCs), four individual credit-bearing third-place courses intended to provide open-ended space and place for community building and reflective, intentional action in an online environment. Students also can engage in a third-place or optional, weekly Zoom session called Conversation Cafe, a space for specific program questions, focused writing time, scaffolding in student-driven topics, or unhurried conversations.

Third place is a term first provided by sociologist Ray Oldenburg (2013) and originally referred to physical, social spaces outside of home and work, like a coffee shop or community center where people socialize, collaborate, and build relationships. Elements of third places include the leveling of power structures where people feel welcome regardless of their socio or cultural background. Ultimately, third places help members establish a sense of place and community, and "nothing contributes as much to one's sense of belonging to a community as much as membership in a third place" (Oldenburg, 2013, p. xxiii).

Within the third-place PLC courses, students are grouped into smaller virtual learning communities (VLCs) grounded in communities of practice (Wenger-Trayner & Wegner-Trayner, 2015). Students create and set group norms as a foundation for building community and trust. The VLCs meet synchronously and biweekly,

at a minimum, with the days and times directed by the groups. Guided topics allow students to select their own content based on their needs. Flexibility in time for scheduling of VLCs and the repeated opportunities to meet over the course of the semester and program help to establish a social presence, set the climate, and support discourse. Student evaluations indicate the PLC courses are helpful in creating a sense of community and belonging and encouraging deeper thinking related to topics of equity and social justice, a core principle of the program and in alignment with CPED. Students continue to build their social relationships throughout each course of the program and have noted they value the opportunity to, not only engage in the content, but also in other areas of their work and personal lives. “We are connecting really well; we are getting to know each other much better; supporting each other, not only on a scholarly level but on a personal level; meet each other’s needs; really reach out to each other when anyone else is struggling” (student comment).

As noted, online third places were intentionally designed and added to this EdD, not only through our credit-bearing PLCs, but through Conversation Cafe. All of the program students and faculty are invited to these optional weekly online drop-in sessions. Some Conversation Cafe sessions include topics for discussion, skill-level tutorials, or program information, but most sessions are open-ended. Cafe sessions have revealed several unintended benefits and surprising opportunities for students and faculty. For instance, students are often engaged in informal conversations about their work and family life. Conversations often focused on students’ projects or content from multiple courses. Students are able to ask questions, provide support for each other, and suggest Conversation Cafe topics. Though voluntary, approximately 60% of students attended weekly.

Each of the program design elements support the community and trust necessary to persevere. Overwhelming student feedback across multiple data sets (e.g., emails, conversations, course check-ins, and course evaluations) indicate a strong connection between and among cohort members and the program. Themes from the data indicate students feel they are members of a supportive and collaborative community, relative to both their coursework and their personal lives. They have found these third-place spaces are an opportunity to build relationships, which, in turn, have helped them better understand each other’s thinking and provide more personalized feedback. A majority of students feel the PLC and Conversation Cafe are safe spaces for vulnerability, allowing for open dialogues.

The intentionality of these third-place opportunities has provided a space for collaboration and support, as well as open-ended places for community building and reflective, intentional action. This unique and innovative environment relies on the flexibility of both faculty and students to leave space for each other in a post-COVID online environment and adds a layer of support and scaffolding for student risk-taking in their learning.

STRUCTURAL CONSIDERATION 4: RISK TAKING AS A CURRICULAR INTENT

In addition to establishing and nurturing collaboration and community-building through our third-place PLCs, we wanted our students to be able to take risks in their learning, and we wanted them to be able to show their learning in both linguistic and non-

linguistic modalities. Most importantly, we wanted to help our students nurture the passion for learning that we believe can be present in a doctoral program.

A first design consideration in this regard was our approach to grading. We were aware of the negative impact that grades can have on student learning. The research is clear: grades are frequently inconsistent and arbitrary; they discourage risk-taking; they are teacher-oriented, not student-centered; and they encourage academic hoop-jumping as they nurture extrinsic motivation over intrinsic motivation for learning (Blum, 2020). True learning frequently takes a back seat to the grade, and we did not want that in this program. Additionally, as Chemaly (2015) notes, bias in grading is well documented and can negatively affect “students who are female, Black, Brown, Indigenous, disabled, neurodivergent, queer,” among other students (as cited in Blum, 2020, p. 34). This brings to the forefront serious concerns of equity and grading justice.

It was these considerations that led us to the idea of ungrading (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2021), which Alfie Kohn asserts eliminates “the control-based function of grades, with all its attendant harms” (as cited in Blum, 2020, p. xv). Ungrading is not one single thing. However, the goal is the same regardless of the method: to remove the burden of points and grades and to increase rich feedback to students on their work. Instead of a traditional A-F grading model, we designed an ungrading approach in one of our early courses, The Science of Learning. We developed met/not yet rubrics for each of the course’s five major assessments. Students were told on the first day of class that assessments would not be given letter grades. Rather, we would provide students with rich, descriptive feedback, and they would revise, if needed, until they attained the met level on each assessment. When they attained that met level in each domain on the various assessment rubrics, they would earn an A for the course. We could see relief in many students’ eyes as we explained this assessment approach. End-of-semester feedback from students confirmed the relief we saw on their faces on that first day of the class: students felt relieved because of how they would be assessed, and they were able to enjoy a collaboration in learning with their professors.

One concern we carried out of our design phase was the question of whether or not students would hold themselves to high expectations in a met/not yet approach. Although no system is perfect, we were very impressed by the quality of the work the vast majority of our students submitted. Of course, there was a time or two when we felt that individual students underachieved on given assignments, and we gently nudged them to push harder, to go deeper. However, in the big picture, it was amazing how students pushed themselves. And regarding our concern that students would not give their full effort, a couple of students noted that they spent more time and energy in this course because they felt the emphasis was on true learning, not on grading. They felt that this approach respected them as unique learners.

In addition to removing the burden of the grade, which sometimes shackles genuine curiosity, we understood the power of multimodal composition (Sweetland Center for Writing, 2023) and wanted to empower students to utilize various modes of communication in their coursework in order to speak with real audiences that moved beyond the professor’s audience of one. “Multimodal texts have become an essential part of communication in nearly every arena of contemporary culture” (Ball et al., 2022, p. vi) as they allow us to become makers of our social futures...By



learning to compose multimodal texts instead of rehashing the limited use of written essays, writers/designers can use a broader toolkit to communicate in more globally aware, digitally driven, socially just and accessible ways, making our society a better place (Ball, et. al, 2022, p. 6).

In addition to recognizing the incredible power of multimodal communication, we also believed that this could encourage risk-taking and nurture student autonomy in the program. Consequently, we designed assessments that gave students the ability to communicate with words, images, audio, video, graphics, animation, whatever they needed to convey their messages to real audiences.

Not only was the quality of the work exemplary, but students also took the risks that we hoped they would. Although they had the choice in modality in most of their assignments, students did not play it safe and hand in the typical essay for each assignment. The met/not yet grading approach encouraged them to take chances and work with modalities they had never previously used.

The intentional design choices we made in nurturing risk-taking through ungrading and multimodal assessment have paid off. Student work has been creative and exceptional in quality. Furthermore, student feedback has been so positive that we have moved to an ungrading approach in the entire doctoral program.

FORWARD-LOOKING CONCLUSIONS

This essay began with two central questions. First, how do EdD programs adapt and survive during times of uncertainty and fear? Second, how might EdD programs grow and enhance their programs during times of instability? While these questions certainly prompt a reflective look back at process and planning, they also deserve—and, perhaps, even demand—a forward looking perspective as well.

In order to adapt and survive, an important conclusion we have drawn is that a program must begin (in the design phase) with a structure that not just allows for, but is dependent on, flexibility. Doctoral programs have too long been built upon traditional footings, a phenomenon that Smith (2021) attributes to the manner in which American education has been colonized through the establishment of western knowledge as superior to all others. On this, she writes:

Academic knowledges are organized around the idea of disciplines and fields of knowledge. These are deeply implicated in each other and share genealogical foundations in various classical and Enlightenment philosophies. Most of the “traditional” disciplines are grounded in cultural worldviews which are either antagonistic to other belief systems or have no methodology for dealing with other knowledge systems. (Smith, 2021, p. 74)

It comes as no surprise, then, to find that higher education—and doctoral programs in particular—bear these attributes. Synonymous with Smith’s (2021) notion of antagonistic belief systems is the idea of inflexibility; to be intolerant is also to be unbending. To build a flexible doctoral program that can adapt and survive therefore necessitates an intentional effort to decolonize it. Smith (2021) again writes that it is with this very intent that “academics and researchers have begun to address social issues within the wider framework of self-determination, decolonization and social justice” (p. 4). To decolonize a program in this sense means to tear down existing structural paradigms; to rebuild with social-justice, inclusivity (of both people and ideas) and consideration of all perspectives as central tenets. Our efforts at broadening the participant profile, our

employment of design thinking, our inclusion of credit-bearing third-place courses, and our approach to course and program design with a focus on risk-taking were all initiated as an attempt at decolonization. This is critical because “decolonizing is a practice of hopefulness...one that needs to be nuanced to our own contexts, that [has] to be pragmatic in the face of catastrophe” (Smith, 2021, p. 285). Certainly, the COVID-19 pandemic was one such catastrophe, and our initial efforts at decolonization (which are very much imperfect, ongoing and in-process) were perhaps the most important steps toward preparation. It is our hope—and perhaps even an imperative—that the future of all doctoral programs hinge on such a shift in paradigm.

In addition to the question of adapting and surviving, this essay also attempted to address how EdD programs might grow and enhance during times of instability. While the aforementioned exploration of decolonization serves as an answer, our experience also tells us that the structural flexibility needed to grow and enhance is a function of embracing emerging shifts in assessment, program policies, and content. Whereas it may have once been blasphemous within the academy to offer credit-bearing classes focused solely on community-building and writing support, the necessity of such third-place courses has become quite clear (Bawa, 2016; Oldenburg, 2013). Whereas it may have once been considered destructive (to existing structures of power, privilege and intellect) to encourage risk-taking in multimodal expressions of knowledge, it is clear that the greater risk is in not doing so (Ball et. al., 2022). Finally, whereas it may have once been considered academically countercultural to work toward everyone getting an A, the advent of ungrading has revealed both the merits and rewards of such a perspective (Blum, 2020; Stommel, 2021). How might EdD programs grow and enhance their programs during times of instability? The answer is that instability must breed creativity, and EdD programs built for the future will need to rely on this maxim in order to endure seismic events to come.

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