

WISCONSIN-SPENCER
DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROGRAM:
AN EVALUATION
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Introduction

In 1993-94, the Spencer Foundation invited and subsequently provided funds for the School of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison to design and implement a doctoral research program with two goals: (1) encouraging change in the structure of participating departments' research programs by impacting the faculty, and (2) educating promising doctoral students so that their study would enable them to enter a career and become producers of outstanding educational research. The Wisconsin-Spencer Doctoral Research Program (DRP) is the result. It has existed since Fall 1994, and nine cohorts of Fellows have been admitted. During the first few years, the cohorts consisted mostly of funded Fellows. However, the percentage of non-funded Fellows has increased yearly to the present level of about one-third funded and two-thirds non-funded Fellows. Funded Fellows receive full fellowships that include various benefits such as health insurance and remittance of out-of-state tuition. During the last few years, both non-funded and funded Fellows received professional expense funds yearly (up to \$1,000). The evaluation reported here examined as closely as possible the impact of that program on Fellows who were in Cohorts 4-8 and on the SoE faculty of 2001-02.

The Study

The goals that had guided DRP program development as interpreted in the DRP components guided decisions about the study. The design selected focused on collecting multiple types of data from multiple sets of people to create a rich database that would provide information to guide both the analyses and the conclusions drawn. The populations studied were: SoE tenure-track faculty on campus during 2001-02, Fellows admitted to the DRP in Cohorts 4-8, and all Fellows who had received their PhDs. Surveys provided demographic data, Likert-type scales, and responses to short-answer questions. Semi-structured interviews with probing provided data from selected faculty and graduates. Analyses were both quantitative and qualitative, as appropriate. Thirty-four percent of faculty provided information, while almost all Fellows and graduates responded.

The Findings

Faculty

The major finding of this study is that the DRP has been effective in achieving its goals with both faculty and students. The impact it had on faculty depended upon the amount of involvement individual faculty members had in the DRP. The more a faculty member worked in the DRP as an instructor, Advisory Committee member, or advisor, the more they reported

agreement with and the necessity to implement DRP components in his/her own department. The larger the percentage of a department's faculty and students that had been involved, the more departmental change was seen. Faculty who participated in the evaluation (34% of tenure-track faculty) reported that many of the DRP's components were implemented in the departments and that more discussion about graduate education had occurred. Of course, change in individuals and departments is a chicken-and-egg situation, and direction of causation cannot be determined. Did the individual work in the DRP because of agreement with its goals, or did working in the DRP influence subsequent action and beliefs? The DRP and the five participating departments of the SoE do not exist in a vacuum. They are not isolated from the broad community of doctoral research education and educational scholarship. Many of the same elements that are in the DRP also are being discussed in scholarly venues, and these discussions probably had an impact on the changes that were seen in doctoral education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. But there is some evidence that having an opportunity to explore ideas about graduate education enabled change in faculty beliefs to occur, and the responding faculty believed strongly that the DRP had an impact on the structure of their doctoral programs. At the very least, the DRP provided a forum for discussion that served as a catalyst and an opportunity to seriously consider graduate education.

While faculty reported that funding for Fellows was the most important part of the DRP, almost as important was its interdisciplinary emphasis. Faculty said that the emphasis on interdisciplinary education was substantively correct and necessary to prepare scholars for the 21st century. Not only was it seen as necessary for doctoral students, they believed it was critical for all faculty within the SoE to increase their dialog across disciplines and departments. The responding faculty believed that currently the DRP is one of the few places in the SoE where an interdisciplinary emphasis is stressed and where Fellows accept its premises as correct. This not only has had an impact on the Fellows, but also upon the faculty with whom they come into contact.

But, one must consider the two-thirds of the faculty that chose not to participate in the DRP's evaluation. Is it reasonable to suggest that the DRP had limited impact on them? Perhaps, this is so. But, they did not choose to ignore pleas to participate because they did not care about graduate education. Many non-respondents are outstanding scholars who have served as advisors for many graduate students who have gone on to be outstanding scholars in their own rights. But, there are multiple more valid suggestions that may explain why the faculty did not participate.

Consider the origin, administration, and limited character of the DRP. The idea and character of the program were originated at the Spencer Foundation and presented to the Dean of the SoE in 1993. He and a very small group of faculty designed the DRP program. It was then presented to those who had the major responsibility of graduate education as a rather inflexible program that was to lead to change. Also, the administration and direction of the program rested mainly in the Dean's Office. The invitation to participate in the Spencer program was accepted by Dean Henry Trueba (Dean at that time) and perceived by his office (as reported to us) as a "top-down"¹ plan to the faculty. Even though Charles Read, who has been Dean since the second grant proposal was accepted, has attempted to involve faculty in a variety of ways, the DRP is

¹ Words in quotation marks were taken directly from responders' comments. Brackets indicate a close paraphrase.

perceived by many faculty as a program to be accepted without change. It continues to be seen as a “Dean’s” program. The five cooperating departments in the SoE are large and diverse. It is safe to say that these five departments have a reputation as leaders in producing outstanding educational research and having many PhD recipients in places where they have produced valued research. Faculty are justifiably proud of their reputation and graduates. They are equally proud of their doctoral programs that existed before the DRP and continue to exist. The University of Wisconsin is a faculty-governed institution, and doctoral programs are controlled by departments and in turn by departmental faculty. Faculty rights and responsibilities are jealously guarded. Could the origin and administration of the DRP partially explain why some faculty did not appear interested in the DRP?

Secondly, consider the size of the DRP in relation to the total number of graduate students in the various departments. The participating Fellows represented a very small percentage of SoE graduate students in a department, varying from 4% to 9%. Only about one-third of the total faculty in the participating departments had an advisee in the DRP in 2001-02. So, it is clear that many faculty would have had little or no interaction with DRP Fellows or the program. It was originally assumed that the ideas on which the DRP was based would be at least partially transmitted to a faculty advisor by an individual DRP Fellow. But, a limited number of faculty worked with Fellows, so substantial change could not occur by this mechanism.

But, is it necessary that all faculty had to be involved to consider the program a success? The faculty who returned faculty surveys or were interviewed clearly believe that the program was a success and should be continued. Overall, they believed that most components of the DRP are important in graduate education and that the DRP contributes significantly to providing many of these elements. The data show clearly that an interdisciplinary emphasis in graduate education is perceived as important and that the DRP contributes significantly to the interdisciplinary education of DRP participants. Faculty currently believe that the DRP is one of the few places in the SoE where it can be found. Faculty who assisted in the evaluation were overwhelmingly positive. A major finding of this evaluation is that the DRP has been effective in spite of the small pool of involved faculty. One faculty member said, “You don’t have to have everybody in a department in order to make change So, what you need is a few committed people who care a lot about it and believe in the goals of it.”

It appears that the more faculty are involved, the more change takes place. Responding faculty from the Department of Educational Policy Studies (EPS) reported more change in their department than did faculty from any other department. More students from EPS than from any other department have been involved in the DRP, and a higher proportion of surveys was returned from this department. We also must take into account that Professor Mary Metz, a proposal writer and the former DRP Director, who probably had more impact on the DRP than any other faculty member, was an active member of EPS. Her influence on her department was obviously powerful. But a critical mass of students and faculty certainly helped in departmental change.

While DRP funding and an interdisciplinary emphasis were perceived as important, some other DRP components were perceived as not providing much to graduate education. A close examination of these suggests that they were provided routinely by departments, so faculty might have thought that the DRP didn’t need to provide them. However, one specific component of the DRP, i.e., the Proseminar, received less than enthusiastic support, even though it has been seen by the DRP as one of its most critical components. Faculty perceived that the DRP Proseminar

was not very important to graduate education. Since this seminar was designed to be the major source for DRP Fellows to gain interdisciplinary research knowledge, it is puzzling why it did not rank at the same level as other interdisciplinary components. Of course, only a small percentage of SoE graduate students participate in the Proseminar, so perhaps its emphasis is not as apparent to faculty as some of the other elements that were better described by their names. Many variables are at play in any instructional situation (perceived competence of the instructor, intellectual atmosphere, work required, etc.), so variables other than the intellectual content of the Proseminar may have influenced faculty. However, the negative reaction to the Proseminar indicates that its structure and substance need to be examined and modified.

Faculty recommendations for the future were few and varied widely. Some were short-term suggestions for modifications in the current program. Recommendations for the long-term future of the DRP were somewhat negative and mostly had to do with funding and questioning whether in the current financial climate the DRP in its present form should continue. This comment from one faculty member summarizes the recommendations well. “I think intellectually it is a good idea . . . for the students. I think the cross-disciplinary . . . cross-department discussions . . . are good. [But, if it costs the SoE money, it isn’t a good idea in its entirety.]” The comments must also be interpreted in light of the current budget cuts at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. Thus, faculty could have been responding with the idea that funding the DRP would detract from funding for other programs they considered more essential.

Fellows

The DRP did have an impact on participating Fellows. Of major benefit to students were fellowships, professional expense funds, and the interdisciplinary emphasis, all of which are in limited supply elsewhere in the SoE. The preparation as researchers and the connections they made with other students in the School that they received through the DRP were also valued. Some other aspects of the program, however, were considered peripheral, namely, advising components, facilitation of their research experiences, changing program requirements, and the Proseminar.

Consider the benefits provided by fellowships and other types of funding. Fellowships served to reduce the constant stress associated with financing graduate school, thus freeing students to devote more attention to intellectual pursuits and often decreasing the time it took them to complete their PhDs. Graduate students commonly deal with multiple responsibilities and pressures on top of their doctoral research, such as: growing children, relationships with a significant other, serious illness, death in the family, primary provider’s unemployment or employment, mounting student loans, full course loads. The medical insurance and tuition waivers that accompany fellowships can be as important to graduate students as the stipends themselves.

Even the relatively modest professional expense funds provided by the DRP for Fellows can make a difference in how well they are able to pursue their research and professional growth. Attending professional conferences, buying recording and transcribing equipment, paying for production of research materials, and buying software and even computer equipment are ways in which Fellows have used these funds, all necessary expenses for researchers. An area in which only funded Fellows currently are supported by the DRP is resources such as office supplies, computers, printers, access to technical support, and additional equipment such as laptop

computers, LCD projectors, and recording and transcription equipment. Making these resources available to all Fellows was suggested as a critical way to facilitate their work.

The interdisciplinary emphasis of the DRP provided Fellows with a unique and necessary perspective in the SoE. The conversations about research that happened in the Proseminar and informally in the DRP community broadened many Fellows' visions of educational research. While their experiences with these conversations in the Proseminar varied among cohorts from difficult to pleasantly stimulating, at least this was a place where the discussion was taking place. But, the DRP needs to find ways to better facilitate discussions about the validity and contributions of different research paradigms and to help Fellows understand how and when to challenge or accept claims about knowledge created by different approaches. The need for a place for more extensive discussions in the SoE was illustrated by a recent flare-up on the graduate student email listserv that could be said to be related to diversity of researchers and approaches to research. The open listserv proved inadequate for handling such a discussion, but no satisfactory alternative was found. If handled sensitively and openly, a seminar like the DRP's could provide a suitable forum for facilitating such discussions.

Concurrent with gaining breadth of vision was Fellows' apparent development of more egalitarian views of different research paradigms. Fellows spoke of consulting their DRP peers about different approaches to research and incorporating these into their own work or teaching. There was increasing tolerance and intellectual appreciation of different research perspectives as they learned and worked as a community. When some found staying within the bounds of their major paradigm too confining, it was a development not always well received by their departments or advisors, where it was sometimes believed that breadth of vision would come at the expense of depth in one's own paradigm, not only in course taking and research experiences, but also in one's resulting perspective on research. Whatever the outcome of this depth versus breadth argument, DRP graduates appear to be becoming researchers who are well educated in methodologies, and there is an indication that its Fellows will take the lead in promoting future cross-disciplinary conversation in the profession.

It was suggested by Fellows that the DRP be expanded to provide more, if not all, doctoral students in the SoE with the experience and benefits of an interdisciplinary emphasis. Such a development could be disruptive to departments with their focus on depth, but it could also enrich students' research education as well as discussions in SoE courses among students of different research traditions. The appeal of the DRP's interdisciplinary emphasis becomes apparent when one considers the increasing number of non-funded Fellows accepting the invitation to participate. Whereas in earlier cohorts students were unlikely to participate if they hadn't received fellowships, in recent cohorts the number of non-funded Fellows has risen to twice that of funded Fellows. Participation has actually increased to the point where it was necessary to cap the number admitted in 2003 to provide for productive and participative interaction in the Proseminar.

Another benefit to Fellows is the connections they make with fellow graduate students across cooperating departments through the DRP. While they can meet and get to know students from other departments in less formal ways, the DRP community is unique in that it brings together diverse students with a common interest in research. Fellows' positive responses to the Spring semester of the Proseminar reveal how much they value interaction with peers around their own research. Additionally, graduate school is notorious as an isolating experience for students. Outside of their colleagues on research or teaching appointments, connections with other

graduate students are difficult to originate and/or maintain. The strengths of Fellows' common interest in research, the structure that the DRP provides, and the cohort experience are all factors that may be helping to sustain this community of Fellows beyond what social groups or individual departments have been able to do. It makes the case even stronger for formal supports for the DRP community of Fellows beyond the first year in the Proseminar. To that end, several varieties of Advanced Seminars have been implemented in the program to continue the interdisciplinary conversation as well as to maintain the community of Fellows and extend it across cohorts. Fellows value participating in the larger community of Spencer Research Training Grant (RTG) institutions as well, through meetings arranged at AERA or separate conferences. There was an interest in developing more opportunities for interaction with RTG communities at other universities.

Fellows were very vocal about their experiences in the Proseminar, considered to be the keystone of the DRP. Although half of the Fellows attributed their breadth of vision about research to the Proseminar, they tended to be negative in general about the Fall semester while positive about the Spring semester experience. Their comments indicate more is operating in the Proseminar than the interdisciplinary emphasis, especially in the Fall semester. Dissatisfaction with the quality of discussion and the disagreements among students, already addressed above, appeared to have shaped their views of the seminar. The Proseminar is an important component in that it launches a cohort of Fellows in the program and is the primary forum in the DRP for exploring multiple perspectives within a cross-disciplinary group. Every new group goes through several stages of formation, some of which can be rocky. This may be the first time many of the Fellows engage in a significant way in interdisciplinary dialog about research. Some have found themselves in a position of defending their major paradigm without the depth of experience and knowledge to do so effectively or comfortably. Instructors, too, find this course challenging to lead, in part because it causes them to confront their own assumptions and to co-teach with a colleague from a markedly different tradition about which they may not be well informed. Changing instructors annually may not allow them to become skilled in this role. The dynamics between the co-instructors also appears to have a major impact on how well the course runs. And, while the syllabus may be passed from one pair of instructors to the next, each pair has the latitude to develop their own, contributing to potential differences from year to year, another source of dissatisfaction for Fellows. Fellows reported that the three-credit Fall Proseminar required a lot of students' time and attention, for which multiple requirements are already competing. The Proseminar can become a source of frustration rather than a source of intellectual stimulation when such potential problems outweigh the benefits of community and interdisciplinary exposure.

While most DRP Fellows reported they had recommended participation in the DRP to others, the recommendations came with cautions. The demands of program requirements for activities beyond their departments' requirements caused Fellows to caution others to weigh the costs against the benefits before they decided to participate. Receiving a fellowship could tip the balance in favor of the benefits, as could the research knowledge obtained, provided that was aligned with their goals. Program requirements sometimes changed during a Fellow's tenure and increased the level of participation expected of them. One such requirement was the development of a new Advanced Seminar in which third- and fourth-year Fellows were asked to participate, something that was not part of the program when they started. Changing the requirements over the years is understandably difficult for students given the pressures they are under in graduate school. There are often good reasons for making changes, such as continuing the interdisciplinary community beyond the first two years in the case of the new Advanced

Seminar. An important message is that changes to requirements should be considered carefully before they're made, given the impact they have on students.

Fellows expressed some dissatisfaction with how the DRP facilitated their experiences in hands-on research. Indeed, the DRP has played only an indirect role by setting requirements for Fellows to participate in faculty research, present research at a conference, and conduct original research early in their program. While most funded and non-funded Fellows used DRP professional activity funds to attend and/or present their own research at national research conferences, not all Fellows are finding opportunities to participate in faculty research projects; one-quarter said they hadn't had any such opportunities at all. Students generally find research positions through their advisors or other faculty members; there is no central clearinghouse of such opportunities in the SoE. If the DRP is serious about promoting Fellows' development in this dimension, it should consider how it may more directly effect their involvement in faculty research.

Some of the DRP's components were considered by Fellows to be peripheral, not necessarily because they thought them unimportant, but because these requirements often overlapped with what their major departments required or provided. Departments generally provide advising committees and require annual planning/reporting and writing a pre-dissertation research paper, although some departments provide more of these components than others. Significant differences may exist, too, because the DRP's goal is to engage Fellows in some of these earlier than normally would be done by departments, for example, having a committee member from another department on a Fellow's committee before the dissertation stage. It would be useful for the DRP to consider ways to tailor program requirements to individuals so that it didn't duplicate what was already in place, while still maintaining the integrity of the program and helping Fellows develop in desired dimensions.

Overall, Fellows valued the DRP highly for the professional development it gave them as researchers. Many components contributed to this and have been discussed. Another component that can't be neglected is the prestige conferred by being a Spencer Fellow. It was viewed as a mark of distinction not only on one's CV but also while still graduate students, and it led them to take themselves seriously as researchers. The impact of the title suggests an important consideration in the shape of the future program in continuing to select participants in a way that gives recognition to their potential as educational researchers.

Because the number of graduates from the program was small, we can't get a complete picture of how Fellows are orienting to research in their careers. However, a trend is emerging. Among the first group of nine graduates from 2000-2002, five are involved 50-100% time in research, four spend up to 25% of their time doing research, and all professed an abiding interest and desire to do educational research. Among the second group of nine graduates who finished their PhDs in 2003, after data collection for this study was completed, eight are going on to university faculty positions while one is starting as a public school administrator. Indications are that the program is indeed having success in selecting and developing future educational researchers.

Overall Conclusions

Seldom do university educational programs receive such intensive, research-based (and extensively reported) evaluation as the Doctoral Research Program. So what does the study tell us about the DRP? In brief, we believe the important conclusions are:

- The DRP had a positive impact on departmental faculty and their graduate programs. The amount of impact reflected the amount of involvement by faculty and students.
- The interdisciplinary emphasis was highly important to both faculty and Fellows who had participated in the DRP.
- The interdisciplinary emphasis of the DRP was unique in the SoE.
- Funding was critical for Fellows.
- As far as we can predict, graduates of the program will continue to participate actively in educational research.
- The DRP's emphasis on interdisciplinary research education should continue, although not necessarily in its present form.
- The Proseminar needs critical examination and revision.

Recommendations for the Future of the Doctoral Research Program

The designers, implementers, and interpreters of this study are two diverse, yet similar, scholars who participated equally in the design, implementation, and interpretation of the evaluation reported here. One is an emerita faculty member of the SoE who has been involved in educational scholarship and research education throughout her professional career. The other is an advanced doctoral student who was a funded DRP Fellow for four years and who brought an extensive experiential background to her work here. We represent the two groups that are central to the DRP and, because of our qualifications, were able to communicate well with the subjects of this study. No doubt our backgrounds colored but enriched our interpretations of the results.

Our recommendations address two somewhat different audiences, one that has and will have the responsibility for planning for the continuation of the DRP. The other has responsibility for maintaining the current program and perhaps serving as a pilot site for testing new ideas. Each recommendation is listed below, with its audience identified and followed by a short expansion.

Overall Recommendations

1. THE WISCONSIN DOCTORAL RESEARCH PROGRAM (DRP) SHOULD CONTINUE.

The DRP has been remarkably successful and has the potential to grow and become even more successful. We do not recommend necessarily that the DRP should continue in the

exact form in which it is now or that funds should be expended as they are now. But a doctoral education program that cuts across departments, is focused exclusively on educational research, and serves a selected population of students should continue to exist. Such a program has helped, and would continue to help, the SoE to achieve a portion of its mission.

The DRP goals of education in interdisciplinary research and preparation to be lifelong researchers should not be diluted. While other types of graduate education also are important, this program will be successful only if it is sharply focused on its goals.

2. A CROSS-DEPARTMENTAL PLANNING COMMITTEE COMPOSED OF FACULTY AND FELLOWS SHOULD BE APPOINTED IMMEDIATELY, WITH THE CHARGE OF FORMULATING PLANS FOR THE NEW DRP.

One of the major findings of this evaluation is that the more faculty were involved, the more successful the program has been. So, faculty should have major responsibility for planning the new DRP. Fellows have a somewhat different perspective and will bring to such a committee knowledge of how to design a program that can be implemented most effectively with students. While the planning for a new DRP should build on the existing DRP and the findings from this evaluation, it should also consider deviating markedly if another organization with new components seems more appropriate. Seriously considered should be: funding, interdisciplinary emphasis achieved by a cross-departmental organization, faculty involvement, and selection of students to be admitted recognizing scholarly potential and the need to achieve diversity. Program components should be carefully selected and planned. Included should be specific ways for facilitating the implementation of each component and monitoring it. Components should not duplicate departmental requirements.

3. WHILE ALL STUDENTS ADMITTED MUST BE QUALIFIED, A DIVERSITY OF STUDENTS IS ESSENTIAL.

Wherever funds are found, continued diversity of the Fellow population is essential for understanding interdisciplinary approaches. Considering research concerned with different populations, different questions, and different methodologies has had a major impact on the ways in which educational research is and will be conducted in the 21st century.

4. FUNDS SHOULD BE FOUND TO SUPPORT THE NEWLY DESIGNED DRP, AND THE SEARCH NEEDS TO START IMMEDIATELY.

It is difficult to separate the search for funds and the planning, as one is necessarily dependent upon the other. Nevertheless, the two should be done concurrently. While it is most desirable that funds be found to support as many fellowships as possible, lesser awards to students, such as professional expense funds and other types of support, should be strongly considered. Partial departmental funding should be seriously considered, as it indicates faculty involvement. AOF funding, foundations, government sources, and private sources should be considered.

5. THE ADMINISTRATION OF THE DRP SHOULD BE LOCATED IN THE DEAN'S OFFICE, AND A FACULTY MEMBER SHOULD SERVE AS THE DIRECTOR.

At the present time, the only cross-departmental governing unit is the Dean's office. As such, only someone who reports directly to the Dean is responsible for a cross-departmental instructional program.

The Director assumes the role of overall administrator and overseer of the many diverse pieces of the DRP. S/he monitors the Fellows and their progress and responsibilities, provides support to Fellows in a variety of ways, works with faculty, etc. S/he is seen locally and perhaps to the funding agency as a key person so needs to have the stature of a faculty member. An Advisory Committee composed of a faculty member from each participating department, with the Dean an ex officio member, should assist and oversee the Director's work and serve as liaisons to the departments.

Recommendations for Continuation of Current Program

1. THE PROSEMINAR NEEDS TO BE REORGANIZED WITHIN ITS CURRENT TWO-SEMESTER STRUCTURE.

Faculty and Fellows alike suggested the Proseminar needs revisions and made many suggestions for change. Fellows and faculty both need to be involved in planning for this change.

2. THE DRP SHOULD BE A FOUR-YEAR PROGRAM, SO SOME FORM OF STRUCTURED INVOLVEMENT BEYOND THE PROSEMINAR SHOULD BE REQUIRED.

The DRP experiences should build communities of scholarly inquirers and increase Fellows' understanding of interdisciplinary work while they pursue their own research. Anything planned should focus on these goals. Most Fellows now are expecting the Advanced Seminars to continue, so that might be the best route for the immediate future.

3. THERE SHOULD BE CONTINUED EMPHASIS ON FACULTY INVOLVEMENT.

This can be done through an active Advisory Committee, brown bag lunches, or involvement in the Proseminar.