

## **External Reviewer Report**

University of Tennessee at Chattanooga

Learning and Leadership Doctoral Programs (PhD and EdD)

**Reviewer:** Dr. Alicia Cotabish, University of Central Arkansas

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## **Part 1 – Learning Outcomes**

The Learning and Leadership (LEAD) Doctoral Programs at University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC) provide a comprehensive and well-aligned set of student learning outcomes for both the PhD and EdD pathways. These outcomes are appropriately rigorous for graduate education and tailored to the distinct goals of each degree. The PhD pathway emphasizes theoretical analysis, advanced research design, and knowledge generation, while the EdD pathway focuses on applying research to solve complex real-world leadership challenges.

The program's mission, vision, and learning goals are clearly defined and aligned with UTC's broader strategic goals related to workforce development, community engagement, and regional leadership. Program outcomes are systematically assessed using a combination of direct measures—such as milestone evaluations (comprehensive exams, dissertation or project defenses)—and indirect measures like course evaluations, alumni surveys, and faculty reflection.

The department actively uses assessment results to improve the program. For example, comprehensive exam procedures were revised to better scaffold students' research development. Alumni feedback has informed curricular emphasis on leadership in non-educational sectors. The program also makes strategic use of institutional research data and tracks student completion and satisfaction metrics.

Students are embedded in research and applied practice from the start of the program, with many using their workplace as a site for inquiry and capstone work. This integration supports high levels of relevance and impact. Overall, the learning outcomes are clearly stated, measurable, consistently assessed, and meaningfully used for program enhancement.

## **Part 2 – Curriculum**

The curriculum is appropriately rigorous for doctoral-level study and reflects a well-articulated distinction between the PhD and EdD. It is grounded in a framework of research, leadership theory, and professional practice. The curriculum is mapped to specific learning outcomes, with clear scaffolding across research, theory, and applied content areas.

The cohort-based, lockstep structure ensures consistent course availability and timely progress toward completion. Each cohort follows a designated course sequence, and students who need to pause have clear re-entry points. This design supports student retention and reduces time-to-degree variability.

Curriculum review is systematic and data-driven. Regular faculty meetings, assessment reviews, and student feedback are used to revise course content and delivery. Recent curricular revisions included greater alignment of research design courses with students' dissertation/project needs and enhanced clarity in course expectations.

The curriculum includes literature reviews, applied projects, and original research, ensuring students engage with current disciplinary knowledge. Both modalities—online for EdD and hybrid for PhD—include synchronous and asynchronous components and are regularly assessed for quality and learning equivalency. Pedagogical innovations such as flipped classrooms, breakout groups in Zoom, and scaffolded writing assignments enrich the experience.

### **Part 3 – Student Experience**

Students in the LEAD programs report high levels of satisfaction with their academic experience, despite noting that the EdD program (66 credit hours) and PhD program (76 credit hours) are lengthy compared to other comparable programs. Cohorts of 20–30 students create a supportive peer learning environment and ensure sufficient interaction across disciplines. Students are diverse in background and sector, representing education, healthcare, business, and government.

Course and faculty evaluations are regularly collected and reviewed by program leadership. Results inform faculty development and instructional adjustments. In addition to regular coursework, students have the opportunity to participate in a Spring Research Conference and have opportunities to present, collaborate on research, or engage in professional development activities.

Advising is a strength of the program, with faculty providing consistent support through all phases, including dissertation or project supervision. Academic services are readily accessible, and students benefit from UTC's centralized resources like library instruction, writing support, and online database access.

Course materials represent multiple perspectives, and faculty encourage application of leadership theory in diverse organizational contexts. Opportunities exist and could expand enrichment activities—such as writing retreats or guest speaker series—to further strengthen the program's scholarly environment.

### **Part 4 – Graduate Faculty Quality**

Faculty in the LEAD programs are well-qualified, experienced, and deeply involved in doctoral education. All meet SACSCOC credentialing standards, holding terminal degrees in fields aligned with program needs. Faculty specialties span education, business, psychology, leadership, and research methodology, enriching interdisciplinary

instruction. Supervision of dissertations and projects is factored into workload calculations, ensuring students receive individualized attention and mentorship.

Faculty are actively engaged in curriculum development, student assessment, and continuous program improvement. They participate in ongoing professional development, including national conference presentations, certifications, and university-sponsored workshops on research, pedagogy, and instructional technology.

Although the department has a diversity of perspectives in terms of academic background and professional expertise, representation across racial and gender identities could be further diversified. The program is making efforts in this area and should continue intentional recruitment strategies aligned with UTC's priorities.

### **Part 5 – Learning Resources**

The program benefits from strong institutional support for learning infrastructure. Classrooms are equipped for hybrid instruction with smart technology, and online delivery is supported by robust platforms including Canvas and Zoom. These tools are used effectively to foster interaction and learning continuity across delivery formats.

Library resources are extensive and include access to key databases (e.g., SAGE, JSTOR, ERIC) as well as qualitative and quantitative research tools. Students have full access to interlibrary loan services and can request research consultations with librarians.

Faculty and students reported general satisfaction with the available technology and resources. Library personnel are engaged in supporting doctoral students, particularly in research methodology and citation management. Continued growth in research output could be supported by expanding editorial, publishing, and digital dissemination resources for student scholarship.

### **Part 6 – Support**

The LEAD programs operate with a sustainable budget that aligns with the scale and scope of the program. Funding supports core operations, instructional needs, limited student travel or research support, and technology upgrades. Program leadership effectively manages resources to maintain high quality despite some fiscal constraints. The soon-to-be implemented differential tuition should help alleviate these constraints.

Enrollment and graduation data reflect a healthy trajectory, with steady admissions and high persistence. Graduation rates are strong, and the time-to-degree is appropriate for part-time doctoral students balancing professional commitments.

The program is responsive to state and regional workforce needs. The shift from a primarily K–12 education focus to broader leadership domains has been intentional and

well-executed. Program marketing and curriculum adjustments have attracted students from multiple sectors, enhancing relevance and reach.

Alumni tracking occurs through exit surveys and periodic outreach, but more structured systems could enhance visibility into long-term outcomes. This data could support program planning, marketing, and accountability reporting. Additionally, expanding formal engagement with employer and alumni stakeholders could further align program offerings with labor market needs.

## **Part 7 – Summary Recommendations**

The Learning and Leadership Doctoral Programs (PhD and EdD) at UTC are exemplary models of interdisciplinary, work-embedded doctoral education. The programs demonstrate a strong commitment to adult learners and professional leadership development, with clear structural distinctions between the EdD and PhD pathways. The rigor, focus, and curriculum design of each pathway are intentionally aligned with the students' academic goals and professional contexts.

Program strengths are numerous. The cohort model is especially effective in fostering student persistence, peer learning, and community building. Faculty are deeply engaged in both instruction and assessment, demonstrating a culture of continuous improvement. Curriculum design is intentional and directly maps to clearly defined learning outcomes. In addition, the hybrid and online delivery models are not only pedagogically sound but also inclusive, offering flexible access to a wide variety of student population across sectors.

At the same time, the program has strategic opportunities to expand its impact. As students engage in research and leadership practice, additional support could be provided to help them disseminate their work through conferences and publications. The development of more structured enrichment opportunities—such as writing workshops, speaker series, or student symposia—could strengthen scholarly identity and intellectual community. Similarly, while the program is responsive to a broad range of professional sectors, continued efforts to diversify faculty and to document alumni career impact would further enhance program visibility and value.

The program has a solid infrastructure and is well-positioned to scale its influence over the next five years. The recommendations below reflect areas of high potential return and strategic alignment with UTC's mission and institutional goals.

## **Opportunities for Growth / Forward-Looking Recommendations**

- Restructure dissertation preparation into earlier, sequential coursework. Transform the dissertation process into a series of structured classes beginning as early as the second year of the program, allowing students to incrementally develop their research focus, literature review, and methodology while progressing through core coursework. This approach would enable students to make substantive dissertation progress earlier in their academic journey, potentially reducing time-to-completion, particularly in the PhD program, and addressing student concerns about program length and timely graduation compared to peer institutions.
- Reduce both doctoral programs by at least 6 semester credit hours. Streamline the EdD (currently 66 credits) and PhD (currently 76 credits) programs by eliminating redundant content and consolidating coursework, bringing them more in line with comparable doctoral programs at peer institutions. This reduction would address student concerns about program length while maintaining academic rigor through more efficient curriculum design. Combined with the restructured dissertation process beginning in the second year, this change would significantly improve time-to-completion rates, enhance student satisfaction, and potentially increase program competitiveness and completion rates.
- Enhance scholarly enrichment and writing development opportunities for students.
- Strengthen support for student dissemination of research (conferences/publications).
- Improve long-term (post-graduation) tracking of graduate outcomes and impact.
- Continue efforts to diversify faculty and ensure inclusive representation to align with student demographics.
- Implement a scheduled series of virtual information sessions to effectively reach and engage potential applicants who may be interested in the EdD and PhD programs. These virtual events would provide opportunities to showcase program strengths, clarify expectations, answer questions about the restructured dissertation process, and highlight the diverse backgrounds of current students across education, healthcare, business, and government sectors. This recruitment approach would expand the program's reach beyond geographic limitations while creating an accessible entry point for working professionals considering doctoral studies.
- Transition the PhD program to 100% online instruction while maintaining periodic optional on-campus experiences such as research symposia, writing retreats, and networking events. This flexible approach would significantly expand the applicant pool beyond geographic boundaries, accommodate working

professionals' schedules, and position the program for substantial growth while preserving valuable face-to-face engagement opportunities. The online format, combined with earlier dissertation preparation in the second year, would create a more accessible and efficient pathway to degree completion while maintaining academic rigor and quality.

- Implement a formalized executive sponsorship agreement where incoming students secure a mentor from their professional field (healthcare, business, government, education, etc.) who commits to serving as a mentor during their doctoral journey. These industry leaders would provide real-world contextual support, ensure research relevance, and potentially serve on the student's dissertation committee when meeting university criteria. This structured agreement would strengthen the program's connections across diverse sectors, enhance the application of leadership theory to varied organizational contexts, provide students with invaluable field-specific mentorship, and expand the pool of expertise available to doctoral candidates. The executive sponsor agreement would create a sustainable model for integrating practitioners' perspectives while maintaining academic integrity and broadening the program's impact beyond educational settings.