

**EDUCATIONAL LEADERSHIP AND POLICY STUDIES**  
**FALL 2003 DOCTORAL COHORT**  
**SUMMARY FOCUS GROUP REPORT**

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**BACKGROUND**

The Research Institute for Studies in Education (RISE) conducted two focus groups with the Fall 2003 ELPS doctoral cohort. The purpose of the focus groups was to solicit feedback from students regarding overall reactions to the doctoral experience, thoughts about communication, aspects of the program that influence learning, and other insights regarding the program.

**METHOD**

The two focus groups, which lasted approximately one hour, consisted of a series of semi-structured questions focusing on the participants' overall assessments of the ELPS doctoral program. The focus group protocol is attached as an appendix to this report. The two focus groups occurred during the April weekend seminar. One seminar included students with an emphasis in higher education and educational administration. Six students from this seminar participated in the focus group. Of these six participants, four were full-time students, five had a higher education emphasis, and five were women. The other seminar included students with an emphasis in community colleges. Five individuals volunteered for this focus group, all of whom were women.

**ANALYSIS**

Several major themes emerged from the participants' feedback. The analysis of the data focused on common themes to both focus groups, however, other observations are provided for areas addressed in individual focus groups. In this section, each theme is presented.

**THEME ONE: Overall, students have enjoyed a positive doctoral experience.** Participants noted several aspects of the ELPS program that helped to make the experience both rewarding and enjoyable. Students indicated that the program offers high quality teaching and is applicable to their professional careers. Students also noted that the program offers a stimulating and rigorous curriculum.

**THEME TWO: Formal and informal support structures offer students important assistance in their transition to the doctoral program.** Support structures that the participants noted included: the cohort, mentors, support staff, and students with assistantships in the department. Students also offered suggestions for ways to improve the transition experience further.

**THEME THREE: The cohort experience enhances students' learning and provides an important source of support.** Respondents in both focus groups indicated the positive impact of the cohort experience, which exposed them to different perspectives. Readers should note that the impact of the cohort experience is reflected in later comments regarding aspects of the program that enhance student learning.

**THEME FOUR: Direct communication, particularly about program requirements and details of the program structure, is lacking between students and faculty.** Respondents indicated that they would like more guidance regarding the program structure and requirements. They explained that information comes from a variety of sources including mentors, advisors, faculty, staff, and students who are further ahead in their program of study. Individuals in both groups noted times when information was not consistent. Respondents provided suggestions for ways to improve communication.

**THEME FIVE: Several aspects of the program enhance students' learning experiences.** Respondents explained that aspects of the program such as the learning activities, exposure to others' ideas, interaction with faculty, and learning environment all contributed to a positive experience. Respondents also specified areas that detracted from their learning, noting areas for improvement.

**THEME SIX: Students expressed concerns regarding the structure and content of the seminar courses.** Respondents indicated that the seminars on "Problem Solving and Planning" and "Governance, Politics, and Policies" contained similar content. Participants also indicated they were not certain that the seminar information contributed to their learning.

**THEME SEVEN: Respondents from each of the two focus groups made comments regarding tension between students from different ELPS concentration areas.** While the comments supporting this theme were not extensive, it is noteworthy that students from both groups expressed concerns about this tension and used language that indicated separation (e.g., traditional students, traditional program, community college people).

**THEME EIGHT: Respondents from both focus groups indicated various challenges with scheduling courses.** Concerns included difficulty in getting into required courses, conflicting times for required courses, anxiety about the workload, and the scheduled time for specific classes (i.e., summer courses, seminar courses).

### **CONCLUSION**

The general tone of the participants' feedback was positive, indicating that their experience in the ELPS doctoral program has been of high quality. Respondents noted the rigor of the curriculum, quality of learning experiences, and positive aspects of the cohort experience as aspects that contributed to a positive doctoral experience. Many participants noted the need for formal and informal support structures to assist with the transition to the program. They suggested that improvements to the program orientation and overall communication could facilitate students' transitions. Respondents provided constructive feedback in the areas of the seminar courses and course scheduling. Additionally, both groups noted tension between different areas of concentration.

## Appendix

### Focus Group Protocol for ELPS Doctoral Students

1. We're interested in your general reactions to being a doctoral student in the ELPS department, so let's start with a relatively broad question: What has it been like to be a doctoral student this year?
  
2. We're also interested in your thoughts about the communication flow between the department/faculty and you. Could you comment a bit on the communication flow this year?
  - a. How might it be improved?
  
  - b. When you have questions, how do you get them answered?
  
3. We are especially interested in your learning this past semester. What factors or aspects of the program contribute to or detract from your learning?
  - a. Contribute to...
  
  - b. Detract from...
  
4. Are there other topics or issues that you would like to discuss related to your experiences as a doctoral student that we have not talked about today? (Use the prompts below if they have no responses).
  - a. Thoughts about the weekend seminars...
  - b. Thoughts on understanding and planning for capstone...
  - c. Thoughts about understanding and preparing portfolio...