

Evaluating Practice-Oriented Dissertations: Practical Guidance from the Dissertation Quality Assurance Framework

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Abstract

This concept paper examines a persistent challenge facing dissertation chairs in practice-oriented doctoral programs: institutional evaluation rubrics are often adapted from research-oriented PhD standards without accounting for how evaluation criteria should differ when a doctorate is designed to improve professional practice. Drawing on a structured, multi-institution comparative review of ten dissertation evaluation documents spanning the PhD, EdD, and DBA, this paper introduces the Dissertation Quality Assurance Framework (DQAF), which separates dissertation quality standards into two categories: Core Domains that should remain constant across doctoral degree types and Differentiated Domains that should vary according to a degree's stated purpose. The paper explains why four domains, methodological rigor, ethical conduct, clarity of scholarly writing, and coherent logical argument, should not change based on degree type, while three domains, nature of contribution, primary audience, and standard of relevance, may differ. The DBA serves as the principal working example because the underlying evidence speaks most directly to business doctoral education. Using institutional evaluation criteria and illustrative committee feedback scenarios, the paper shows how research-oriented standards can be misapplied to practice-oriented dissertations. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for proposal review, chapter review, and final defense, along with a five-question checklist dissertation chairs can use to evaluate applied doctoral research more consistently.

Keywords: dissertation quality, doctoral education, practice-oriented dissertations, DBA, dissertation evaluation, applied doctoral research, dissertation chair

Introduction/Background

As practice-oriented doctoral programs continue to expand, dissertation chairs and committee members are increasingly asked to evaluate research intended to improve professional practice rather than extend academic theory. Institutional rubrics provide general guidance, but they often offer limited direction on how evaluation standards should differ across doctoral degree types. This challenge is especially evident in Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) programs, where faculty must balance expectations for scholarly rigor with the degree's practical mission. This paper therefore focuses on the DBA as the primary working example, although the underlying comparative review also included PhD and EdD evaluation documents.

The DBA's growth has outpaced the development of clear evaluation standards. What began as a smaller, specialized credential has become one of the fastest-growing doctoral offerings in business education, driven by demand from working professionals who want doctoral-level credentials without leaving practice. Business schools have responded by building DBA programs quickly, often by adapting existing PhD infrastructure rather than building new evaluation standards from the ground up. The result is a degree that has grown in enrollment faster than in evaluative clarity.

Much of the resulting confusion falls on dissertation chairs. Many chairs were trained, examined, and mentored entirely within PhD programs, and they brought that training into DBA committee work because it is the only evaluative framework most of them have ever been taught. That is not a failure of judgment. It is a predictable consequence of asking experienced faculty to evaluate a different kind of doctorate using the only mental model they have been given.

Institutional rubrics have not closed that gap. Most were written to satisfy an accreditor's requirement for a formal evaluation instrument, not to teach a chair how DBA quality differs from PhD quality. They tell a chair what to check. They rarely tell a chair why the DBA version of that check should look different.

The professional doctorate is not new, but its current scale is. Degrees like the EdD and the DBA have existed for decades, originally built for practitioners who wanted doctoral-level training without pursuing a research career. For most of that history, enrollment in these programs was modest, and the institutions offering them were often the same ones already running long-established PhD programs. When those institutions built dissertation standards for their new professional doctorates, they had an obvious template sitting in front of them: the PhD rubric they already used.

Borrowing that template made sense then. Professional doctorates were new, enrollment was small, and building an entirely separate evaluation infrastructure for a handful of students each year was hard to justify. Modifying the PhD rubric, adding language about practical application and organizational problems while leaving the underlying evaluative logic untouched, was a reasonable shortcut. It let institutions launch new programs without the years of development a fully separate framework would have been required.

As DBA programs have matured, that shortcut has become less appropriate. Professional doctorates, and the DBA in particular, are no longer a small, secondary offering running alongside a research-oriented PhD program. At many institutions, they are now the larger and

faster-growing degree. Rubrics built as a modified PhD standard, meant to serve a handful of practitioner-students each year, are now being used to evaluate the primary doctoral output of many business schools. The shortcut that made sense for a niche program does not scale well to a major doctoral program.

This paper draws on years of dissertation chair experience, along with a structured multi-institution review of how ten universities define dissertation quality, to offer a clearer answer to this problem. This paper introduces a framework that identifies which evaluative expectations should remain constant across doctoral degree types and which should legitimately differ, and translates that framework into guidance a dissertation chair can use directly in committee work.

Literature Review

Dissertation evaluation has long been recognized as inconsistent, even within a single degree type. Holbrook, Bourke, Lovat, and Dally (2004) analyzed hundreds of PhD examiner reports and found substantial variation in how examiners weighed evaluative criteria. A later study by the same research group (Holbrook, Bourke, Fairbairn, & Lovat, 2014) likewise documented variation in examiner commentary. Johnston (1997) reached a similar conclusion in studying doctoral examiners more broadly, while Mullins and Kiley (2002) showed that experienced examiners relied on judgments that were not always easily reduced to a single stated standard. Lovitts (2005, 2007) extended this line of research by arguing that institutions should make dissertation performance expectations more explicit rather than leaving them largely to individual examiner judgment. A recent scoping review shows that these concerns remain current. Laflamme et al. (2026) reviewed 19 peer-reviewed studies published between 2009 and mid-2025 and identified recurring examiner attention to contribution, literature review, methodology, analysis and findings, publication, and communication and presentation. The review also found that it remains unclear whether examiners weigh or interpret these criteria comparably.

This body of research establishes that evaluation inconsistency is a long-standing problem even within the PhD alone, before degree-type differentiation is introduced. The problem becomes more acute once practice-oriented doctorates enter the evaluation landscape. Harvey and Green (1993) argued that higher education has never had a single accepted definition of quality, identifying five distinct ways institutions conceptualize it: exceptional performance, consistency, fitness for a stated purpose, value for the resources invested, and transformation of the person completing the work. Their framework suggests that many disagreements about dissertation quality are, at bottom, disagreements about which definition is being used, and are question institutional rubrics rarely address directly.

Internationally, responses to this kind of ambiguity have moved toward explicit, jointly governed standards. The Standards and Guidelines for Quality Assurance in the European Higher Education Area (ESG, 2015), developed jointly by European quality assurance bodies and adopted by education ministers across the Bologna Process, establish shared expectations for both internal and external academic quality review. No comparably explicit, jointly governed standard exists in the United States for dissertation-level quality specifically, despite the same underlying need.

The literature on professional doctorates specifically has documented the same PhD-versus-practice tension found in this paper's DBA-focused analysis. Archbald (2008) argued that education leadership doctoral theses face a structural conflict between a research orientation borrowed from the PhD and a problem-solving orientation appropriate to practicing administrators, and that most institutions had not resolved which orientation their evaluation criteria should follow. Banerjee and Morley (2013) traced the same tension in management education specifically, arguing that professional doctorates in business require a practice-based approach to evaluation that most business schools have not yet fully developed. AACSB International (2016), the primary accrediting body for business schools, has itself drawn an explicit distinction between the PhD as research-oriented and the DBA as practice-oriented, though accreditation standards stop short of specifying how that distinction should translate into dissertation-level evaluation criteria.

Within the parallel literature on the Doctor of Education, the Carnegie Project on the Education Doctorate (CPED) has pursued a similar distinction under the banner of the Dissertation in Practice. Perry (2015) described CPED's effort to redefine the EdD as a practice-oriented credential built around solving problems of practice, and Storey et al. (2015) examined how a range of CPED-affiliated institutions began implementing that redefinition. The Council of Graduate Schools' research (Denecke, Kent, & McCarthy, 2017) reached a related caution: in the U.S. context, a single outcomes framework spanning professional and research doctorates may not serve either form of doctoral education well. That concern is directly relevant to any effort, including this one, to develop a framework spanning multiple doctoral degree types. More recent comparative work (Foster et al., 2023) confirms that EdD programs nationally show substantial variation in culminating project requirements, further supporting the conclusion that no single, settled standard currently governs practice-oriented doctoral evaluation.

Reyes and Zhang (2024) conducted a systematic comparative analysis of fifty EdD programs nationally and found substantial inconsistency in dissertation requirements even within the same degree title, underscoring that the differentiation problem this paper addresses is not confined to comparisons across degree types alone; it also appears within a single degree type across different institutions. Waterman (2016) reached a related conclusion when comparing PhD and EdD dissertation methods within educational leadership programs, finding that methodological expectations diverged in practice even when program documentation suggested otherwise.

This literature establishes three things clearly. First, dissertation evaluation is inconsistent even within a single degree type, in part because evaluative expectations are not always made explicit or applied consistently. Second, the definition of quality itself varies depending on which purpose, exceptional performance, fitness for purpose, or another conception, an institution has in mind, whether it says so. Third, practice-oriented doctorates face a recurring tension between inherited research-oriented standards and the professional purpose the degree is meant to serve. The existing literature does not provide a framework that names which evaluative domains should remain constant across degree types and which should legitimately vary, applied consistently across the PhD, EdD, and DBA using institutional evidence rather than degree-specific case studies alone. This gap shaped the underlying research program and the Dissertation Quality Assurance Framework (DQAF) it produced.

Discussion of the Topic, Evidence, and Analysis

DQAF in Brief

One of the first observations made during the DQAF research was that not every aspect of dissertation quality should vary by doctoral degree. Some expectations should remain constant regardless of whether the student is completing a PhD, EdD, or DBA. Others should legitimately differ because each degree serves a different purpose. This realization became the foundation of the Dissertation Quality Assurance Framework.

DQAF calls the first group of expectations Core Domains, and it names four of them.

Methodological rigor

This matters because a dissertation's conclusions are only as trustworthy as the process used to reach them. It does not change by degree type. A DBA candidate makes a claim, just as a PhD candidate does, and that claim needs a defensible method behind it, whether it aims to advance theory or solve a workplace problem. A DBA case study built on a poorly designed research protocol is no more trustworthy than a PhD dissertation built on one.

Ethical conduct

This matters because dissertation research touches real people, real data, and real organizations, and candidates are expected to handle all three responsibly regardless of degree. A DBA candidate studying their own organization faces ethical questions- informed consent, confidentiality, conflicts of interest- that are just as serious as anything a PhD candidate encounters in a university lab, and in some respects more delicate, because the candidate often has an ongoing professional relationship with the people being studied.

Clarity of scholarly writing

This matters because a dissertation that cannot be understood cannot be evaluated, applied, or trusted, regardless of the intended reader. This standard is not lower for a DBA dissertation. What changes, as addressed below, is who the writing is for, not whether it needs to be clear.

Coherent logical argument

This matters because a dissertation is, at its core, an argument: here is a problem, here is how I studied it, here is what I found, and here is why it matters. That chain must hold together whether the problem is theoretical or organizational. A DBA dissertation with a strong literature review, a strong methodology, and a strong findings chapter that never connects clearly back to the original problem has the same coherence failure a PhD dissertation would have.

The second group of expectations, DQAF calls Differentiated Domains, and it also names three. Here, DQAF says the PhD and the DBA should be held to different expectations, not because one degree is less rigorous than the other, but because the two degrees exist to produce different kinds of value: nature of contribution, primary audience, and standard of relevance.

Where the Standards Actually Diverge

The three Differentiated Domains show up concretely once you look at how individual institutions write their standards, and each one follows a similar pattern: a reasonable

assumption, carried over from PhD committee work, that produces the wrong judgment when applied without adjustment to DBA work.

Nature of contribution. Chairs trained in PhD committee work often assume that a strong dissertation must propose something new: a new model, a new theoretical lens, a new explanation for an existing phenomenon. That assumption is reasonable for a PhD, where the degree aims to extend the field's theoretical knowledge. Applied without modification to a DBA dissertation, the same assumption sends a chair searching for theoretical novelty the study was never designed to produce and reading its absence as a weakness rather than as the study doing exactly what a DBA dissertation is supposed to do.

DQAF changes the evaluation by asking a different question of DBA work: not what new theory it proposes, but how effectively it applies established theory to solve a real organizational problem. Trident University International's own comparison of its dissertation and DBA capstone requirements states the distinction directly: PhD candidates are expected to extend existing theory, while DBA candidates are expected to apply existing theory to a practice problem. This is not a lower bar. It is a different bar. This distinction is not unique to Trident, and it is not merely institutional preference. AACSB International, the primary accrediting body for business schools, draws the same line at the accreditation level: the PhD is positioned as research-oriented, built to extend theory, while the DBA is positioned as practice-oriented, built to apply research to organizational problems. When an accreditor and an individual institution's own dissertation guidance independently draw the same distinction, that strongly signals the distinction is real and not a matter of one program's preference.

Primary audience. Chairs often assume that scholarly writing means writing for an academic audience, dense with theoretical framing and disciplinary language, because that is the style most PhD committees were trained to expect and to produce themselves. Applied to DBA work, this assumption penalizes the kind of direct, practitioner-facing prose the degree is supposed to produce, treating clarity and accessibility as a lack of sophistication rather than a match for the intended reader.

DQAF changes the evaluation by asking whether the writing fits its actual audience, not whether it resembles academic prose. Trident's institutional comparison draws the audience distinction directly: PhD work is written for the academic and scholarly community, DBA work for applied practitioners. A DBA dissertation that speaks to practitioners rather than academic peers is meeting its audience, not falling short of one. A chair marking down plain, direct, practitioner-facing language in favor of denser academic prose is optimizing for the wrong reader.

Standard of relevance. This domain differs by degree purpose, but the degree title alone does not determine whether the evidence is adequate. Research intended to support broader claims may require a different scope of evidence than research intended to address a bounded problem of practice. Within either context, however, the sample and design must be judged against the research question, methodology, analytic requirements, and claims being made. In quantitative research, sample adequacy may depend on statistical power, effect size, model requirements, and the intended population-level inference. In qualitative research, adequacy depends on the methodological design and the depth and sufficiency of evidence needed to support the study's bounded or contextual claims. A small sample is therefore neither weak nor strong by itself.

DQAF changes the evaluation by separating two questions that can easily be confused. Methodological rigor asks whether the design, sample, analysis, and evidence are adequate for the method and the claims being made. Standard of relevance asks whether the scope and type of those claims fit the purpose of the doctorate and the problem the study was designed to address. Trident's guidance makes the distinction concrete: its guidance calls for roughly 200 participants for a PhD dissertation and roughly 15 for a DBA capstone. Those numbers should not be treated as universal measures of doctoral rigor. Institutional sample expectations should therefore be read in the context of the research design and intended claims, not as evidence that one degree is inherently more rigorous than another.

An Important Finding

During the comparative analysis behind this framework, one finding stood out as particularly interesting, and it did not fit neatly into any of the domains above. Although institutions generally agreed that dissertation expectations should differ by degree type, they did not agree on how to organize those differences. Some developed entirely separate standards for each degree. Others grouped all professional doctorates under a single set of differentiated expectations and distinguished them only from the PhD. Still others tied the applicable standard to the type of culminating project a student selected, rather than to the degree title itself, so that two students in the same EdD program could be held to genuinely different standards depending on which capstone pathway they chose.

This suggests that higher education has reached broad agreement on the underlying principle that dissertation expectations should differ by degree purpose, without agreeing on how to structure that principle in an evaluation document. For a chair who has only worked within one institution, this is easy to miss. From the inside, it can look like there is a single obvious way to organize these standards, because that is the only version the chair has ever seen. Moving between institutions, or reading guidance built for a different program, quickly reveals otherwise.

What This Looks Like in Practice

The clearest way to see the difference is to compare how the same instinct plays out in committee feedback written for a PhD candidate versus a DBA candidate, each raising what looks, on the surface, like the same concern. The three examples below follow the three Differentiated Domains in order.

Example 1: Standard of relevance. Consider a bounded qualitative case study examining a specific organizational problem. PhD feedback might read: "The study's sample of 18 participants, drawn from a single organization, limits the generalizability of your findings. Before this chapter is complete, address how these results might extend to other organizational contexts." DBA feedback, written by a chair applying the same instinct, might read: "Your sample of 15 managers within one organization is too small to support your conclusions. Consider expanding your sample size before proceeding to your findings chapter." Neither comment can be judged by participant count alone. The first is appropriate only if the PhD study was designed to support claims beyond the bounded case. The second is inappropriate if the DBA study's qualitative design, evidence, and analysis are sufficient for the localized claims it makes. Expanding the sample would not automatically make that study more rigorous. The right question is whether the sample fits the methodology and whether the resulting claims stay within the scope the study can support.

Example 2: Nature of contribution. PhD feedback: “Your findings largely confirm what prior research has already established about employee engagement. To strengthen this chapter, identify a theoretical contribution that extends beyond existing models.” DBA feedback, written by a chair applying the same instinct: “Your findings largely confirm what prior research has already established about employee engagement. To strengthen this chapter, identify a theoretical contribution that extends beyond existing models.” Here the two comments are identical, and that is the point. The comment is correct for the PhD candidate, whose job is to extend the field's theoretical knowledge, and it is wrong for the DBA candidate, whose job was to apply an established engagement model to a specific organizational problem and show how well it worked. Confirming that an established model holds in this organization, and describing exactly how it was applied, is the contribution a DBA capstone should make.

Example 3: Primary audience. PhD feedback: “Chapter 5 reads more like a memo to management than a scholarly discussion. Reframe your recommendations in terms of their contribution to the literature.” DBA feedback, written by a chair applying the same instinct: “Your recommendations section reads more like a business memo than a scholarly discussion. Consider reframing your findings in terms of their contribution to the academic literature on organizational change.” The first comment fits a PhD dissertation aimed at an academic audience. The second comment is not appropriate for a DBA capstone aimed at practitioners and decision-makers. A direct, action-oriented recommendations section, one that reads like something an executive could use, is exactly the right register for a DBA capstone meant to be acted on, not just read.

The chairs who wrote the misapplied comments in each example were not careless. They were applying standards that had served them well for years of PhD committee work. The problem is not their judgment. It is the absence of a stated distinction telling them when that judgment applies and when it does not.

Using This Framework in Committee Meetings

Knowing the difference between Core and Differentiated Domains is only useful if it changes what happens in a committee meeting. A few concrete habits make that translation easier.

At the proposal stage, before a student collects any data, a chair can ask explicitly what kind of contribution the study aims for and whether the proposed methodology, sample, and analytic plan can support the claims the student intends to make. Raising this distinction before the student has invested months in data collection prevents the far more difficult conversation that occurs when a completed practice-oriented dissertation is criticized for a sample that is appropriate to its design but not to a different research tradition.

At the chapter review stage, when a committee member raises a concern, pauses and asks whether the concern is a Core Domain issue or a Differentiated Domain issue. A concern about unclear writing, an unsupported claim, an inadequate method, or a missing ethical safeguard applies regardless of degree type and should be treated as a real weakness. A concern about theoretical novelty, intended audience, or the scope of relevance requires a second question: is the criticism appropriate to the purpose of the degree and to the claims the study was designed to support?

At the final defense, disagreements between committee members are often, underneath the surface, disagreements about which standard applies rather than disagreements about the work itself. A committee member trained primarily in PhD supervision may raise a concern that a committee member familiar with DBA work does not share. Naming that disagreement explicitly, rather than treating it as a difference in rigor, tends to resolve it faster and more fairly than either side simply asserting their view more forcefully.

Beyond the DBA

This paper has used the DBA as its principal working example because the evidence behind it speaks most directly to business doctoral education. The underlying comparative review, however, included PhD, EdD, and DBA evaluation documents, and the same distinction between universal doctoral quality and degree-purpose expectations is relevant across those three-degree types. Applying DQAF to other practice-oriented doctorates may be plausible, but the evidence examined here has not demonstrated it and future work should test it.

Recommendations and Conclusions

This paper's central recommendation is straightforward: dissertation chairs and committees evaluating practice-oriented doctoral research should explicitly distinguish Core Domain concerns from Differentiated Domain concerns before finalizing feedback or evaluation decisions. The DBA remains the principal example here because the evidence speaks most directly to business doctoral education. Four specific recommendations follow from the analysis above.

First, institutions and individual chairs should treat methodological rigor, ethical conduct, clarity of scholarly writing, and coherent logical argument as non-negotiable regardless of degree type. Expectations for theoretical contribution, intended audience, and standard of relevance should be evaluated against the purpose of the degree. That distinction does not excuse inadequate methods or unsupported claims; it prevents treating a research-oriented expectation as a universal measure of doctoral quality.

Second, programs should introduce this distinction at the proposal stage rather than the final defense, since correcting a misapplied standard is far less costly to a student before data collection than after it.

Third, committees should treat disagreements among members as, most often, disagreements about which standard applies rather than disagreements about the quality of the work itself and should name that distinction explicitly when it arises rather than resolving it through seniority or force of argument.

Fourth, programs should consider adopting the five-question checklist introduced in this paper (Figure 1) as a standing tool for proposal review, chapter review, and final defense discussions. The checklist is deliberately brief enough to use during a committee meeting and is grounded in the distinction between universal doctoral quality and degree-purpose expectations developed in this paper. It is intended as a practical tool a dissertation chair can use without replacing institutional standards or faculty judgment.

**Figure 1. Five Questions Every Dissertation Chair Should Ask Before
Recommending Revisions**

1. Am I evaluating the dissertation against the purpose of this doctoral degree?
2. Is my concern about methodology actually a rigor issue, or am I treating a degree-purpose difference as a methodological weakness?
3. Is the intended audience appropriate for the study?
4. Does the claimed contribution align with the mission of the program?
5. Would I make this same criticism if this were a different type of doctorate?

Ultimately, clearer evaluation standards benefit everyone involved in the dissertation process. Students gain more consistent feedback, committee members have a clearer basis for their recommendations, and institutions strengthen confidence in the quality of their doctoral programs.

Every dissertation chair wants to make fair, consistent, and academically sound evaluation decisions. The challenge is that fairness does not necessarily mean applying identical expectations to every doctoral degree. It means holding every dissertation to common standards of rigor, ethics, clarity, and logic while judging contribution, audience, and relevance in light of the degree's purpose. The Dissertation Quality Assurance Framework was developed to clarify those distinctions. It is not intended to replace institutional judgment or faculty expertise. It provides a common language to help dissertation chairs evaluate doctoral research more consistently while preserving each doctoral degree's distinct mission.

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