The author describes Fielding Graduate University’s unique scholar-practitioner, distributed learning model, which is intended for adult students whose professional and personal backgrounds are considered an integral part of their educational and development process.

PhD and EdD Degrees for Mid-Career Professionals: Fielding Graduate University

Judith L. Kuipers

Introduction

“The traditional eighteen to twenty-two-year-old full time undergraduate student residing on campus is a distinct minority today. The majority of students are over twenty-five, studying part time” (Stokes, 2005, p. 1). Similarly, at the graduate level, the traditional model of immediate entry to graduate school following the attainment of a bachelor’s degree is also changing. Adult professionals are continuing their learning over the lifespan entering graduate school in their thirties, forties, fifties, and, even sixties. Knowledge is the new economic currency today and the increasing rate at which new knowledge is generated in the global world requires continuous learning.

Visionary Founders and Pioneer Programs

Although much has been written about the adult learner in the past ten years, most of the literature has focused on the changing undergraduate population. However, as long ago as the 1970s, Malcolm Knowles and the founders of Fielding Graduate University envisioned that adults in the twenty-first century would need and desire to continue their education through graduate professional programs and certificate programs. These visionary founders assessed that mature adults would be employed full time, a majority of them as professionals. Most would be married with children younger than eighteen, living at home. They recognized that such learners would be facing
difficult challenges of balancing work, families, their own personal growth, and educational needs based on a changing global market.

In 1974, with the fever of educational innovation of the 1960s as a backdrop, Frederic M. Hudson, Renata Tesch, and Hallock Hoffman founded the Fielding Institute in Santa Barbara, California. Hudson was a scholar of human and adult development and human social systems, Tesch a writer for a German education magazine, and Hoffman a member of the Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions as well as Pacifica Radio. They all had been colleagues at Laurence University, an external degree graduate school.

These innovators identified an unmet need for flexible graduate degree programs designed for older, working adults who had already established themselves professionally and who wanted to continue their personal and professional development. Fielding's founders recognized that potential students were place bound, time bound, and profession bound and yet felt a deep desire and motivation to continue their learning. The founders held other ideas that were truly revolutionary at the time. For example, Fielding's graduate programs would be student-centered, learner-focused, and conducted largely on a foundation of trust and cooperation between students and faculty. The curriculum was contract-based and highly individualized for every student, harkening back to tutorial and Oxford models. These educators understood that adults learned in every sphere of their lives—in and out of the classroom. Excellence was seen not as the empty repetition of already established competence, but rather the extension of competence into new areas. These adult students would learn independently, facilitated by faculty assessors. Assessment methods were based on student competencies, both professional and personal, and on the basic assumption that adults needed not only lifelong professional and growth opportunities, but opportunities to redefine their life purpose at different points in the life cycle (Hudson, 1984, 1991).

At the time, the Fielding Institute's distributed, blended format of delivery was pioneering. The model supported graduate students through independent study and regional meetings with faculty and fellow students and alumni. The learning model also assumed a profound faculty–student mentoring relationship, which would generate dissertation research resulting in a collaborative learning experience that produced innovative solutions and improved practice. Further, this model was predicated on the notion that adults could/would learn in and through all of their various life contexts and experiences and that Fielding's role was to assess whether their level of competency met specified professional and academic standards. Fielding's role was seen by the founders not to teach, but rather to facilitate learning and assess competencies.

Finally, Fielding's founders and early faculty members thought of their work as an extension of engaging in social activism and social service,
rooted in a strong commitment to social justice. It was a value that would be lived within the learning community (Schapiro, 2005).

**Fielding Graduate University Today**

Thirty-six years later, Fielding Institute has evolved into the twenty-first century Fielding Graduate University, accredited by the Western Association of Schools and Colleges. Fielding has the distinction of having the only distributed clinical psychology PhD program in the country, which is accredited by the American Psychological Association. Other distinctions characterizing the Fielding of today include (a) it is the first university in the United States to offer a PhD in media psychology; (b) the only certificate program in evidence-based coaching in the United States accredited by the International Coaching Federation to award graduate credit; (c) the first master's degree concentration offered in California in charter school leadership; (d) the only online teaching certificate program that awards doctoral-level academic credit; (e) organizational development programs that are ranked in the top three by *OD Practitioner*; (f) one of the nation's two largest doctoral programs in adult development; (g) one of the top one hundred graduate degree producers in the nation for graduating minority students; (h) and classification by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching in 2009 for community engagement.

These accomplishments are partially accounted for by the fact that the Fielding community has stayed true to its founding assumptions, values, vision, and mission, though each has evolved and matured over time. Its larger vision—of professional adult learning and leading in the service of social change—continues to permeate the fabric of Fielding Graduate University. This is reflected in the most current mission statement: “Fielding Graduate University serves a community of scholar-practitioners dedicated to transformational learning and social justice” (Fielding Graduate University, p. 4).

To fulfill its mission, Fielding Graduate University is organized into three schools: human and organizational development (HOD), educational leadership and change (ELC), and psychology. These schools serve approximately 1,500 graduate students distributed across the nation and some from around the globe. Twenty-five percent of these students are ethnically and racially diverse. Core full-time faculty (108) and adjunct faculty (46) are also distributed across the United States and Canada. A diverse staff of ninety members in Santa Barbara serves and supports students, faculty, and more than 3,000 alumni in fifty states and twenty-six countries.

In addition, the university includes a number of centers and initiatives. The Institute for Social Innovation offers students, faculty, and alumni opportunities to conduct research, participate in continuing education courses, and work on teams that blend theory and practice. This includes
the Transforming Communications Project bringing together world-renowned scholars, researchers, and practitioners to transform practices and ideas in ways that promote social justice (Pearce, 2006). The Institute for Social Innovation also hosts the Creative Longevity and Wisdom project (Tower, Bentz, and Rogers, 2008) and the Dialogue, Deliberation, and Public Engagement Project (recipient of the 2009 Jim Creighton Award). The Alonso Center for Psychodynamic Studies is an independently endowed center with the mission of educating public and professional communities about the value of dynamic psychotherapy and the centrality of the psychotherapist-client relationship in the provision of effective mental healthcare. The Alonso Center brings together psychologists and psychiatrists, educators, writers and artists, organizational development experts, and the general public to strengthen our understanding of and support for adaptive, resilient relationships in human life (Osherson and Hatcher, 2007). Fielding is also home to the Worldwide Network for Gender Empowerment. The Worldwide Network for Gender Empowerment is a virtual network of scholars and activists from around the world who are committed to research and action in support of knowledge and change, related to women’s and gender issues (Kalayjian, Zielke-Nadkarni, and Oneko, 2008).

Fielding Graduate University Scholar-Practitioner Model

Numerous Fielding scholars have documented the university’s thirty-six-year history of integrated social sciences research, practices, and education to create doctoral scholar-practitioners. In a series of articles, Sewell provides a review of literature related to scholar-practitioner models (Sewell and DiStefano, 2002; Sewell, 2005). This includes work by members of the Fielding community that has produced descriptions of learner characteristics (Barner, 2003); integration of cognitive, personal, and behavioral elements in education outcomes (McClintock and Stevens-Long, 2002); the importance and role of graduate education in adult development (Stevens-Long and Barner, 2004); descriptions of the Fielding learning model (Shapiro, 2001); and the nature and characteristics of the scholar-practitioner (Sewell and DiStefano, 2002). These were in addition to summary articles published in edited volumes characterizing various elements of distributed education for scholar-practitioner environments (DiStefano, Rudestam, and Silverman, 2004; Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read, 2002). All of these literature reviews are related to adult education pedagogy, transformative learning, and an extended model of scholarship.

Assumptions and Definitions. The scholar-practitioner model starts with the assumption of self-directed, collaborative learning among researchers, practitioners, educators, and students to produce scholar-practitioners. Scholar-practitioners are those who apply their scholarship to practice to develop and create new knowledge to inform their work and
the work of others (Shapiro, 2001). In essence, from its inception, a crucial assumption has been and continues to be that all members of the distributed Fielding community are co-learners. Further, educational and research outcomes lead to improved practice in their respective communities of teachers, leaders, coaches, managers, consultants, and clinicians where every participant has expertise to contribute. It is assumed that learning is continuous and lifelong in the community and it is achieved through conscious, critical self-reflection as well as reflection on and integration of education, research, and practice.

**Curriculum, Learning Contracts, and Delivery Modes.** Curriculum and learning intersect as doctoral students and faculty negotiate learning contracts in required and elective knowledge areas in their respective fields within educational leadership and change, psychology, and human and organizational development. Knowledge areas are similar in principle to courses, though the requirements for content and skill mastery are often much deeper and broader than typical courses. Contracts include educational objectives, areas of knowledge to be acquired, and methods and timetables for learning. Most students develop knowledge area contracts that incorporate two or three components: “Overview” examines a broad range of literature relevant to the knowledge area including theory and conceptual frameworks; “in-depth” is a deep exploration focused on a subset of the content of the overview including relevant research; “applied” integrates learning with practice to demonstrate mastery in the real-world setting(s) available to the student. These adult professionals take a pivotal and active role in their own learning with faculty facilitation and mentoring to create their own learning objectives, their own cognitive personal and professional meaning (McClintock and Stevens-Long, 2002).

All students plan and complete a comprehensive exam that demonstrates and documents four major competencies. The first is a comprehensive integration and synthesis of knowledge across knowledge areas. Second is the integration of theory, research, and practice. Communication demonstrating doctoral competencies as specific learning outcomes forms the third element. Finally, critical reflection on identity as a scholar-practitioner is demonstrated. As in the majority of doctoral institutions, the dissertation process is the culminating learning and discovery experience. Every doctoral student develops a dissertation proposal. The most distinctive aspect of dissertation research at Fielding is that it stems from the student’s (rather than the faculty’s) academic and professional passions. Committees are formed with the purpose of providing as much methodological and substantive guidance as possible. In addition, each dissertation proposal and completed dissertation must be reviewed and approved by an external examiner with established expertise in that specific area.

By allowing students to focus on topics that emerge from their scholar-practitioner lives, the new knowledge that is created investigates research spaces where theory, research, and practice intersect and interrelate.
Throughout the university, students play a critical role in supporting each other's dissertation work and progress. Both formal and informal research groups help students persist in their studies and produce research products of which all can be proud. In the School of Human and Organizational Development and the School of Educational Leadership and Change, students serve as official readers on a dissertation committee. Because Fielding's older adult students are typically accomplished practitioners and developing scholars, they serve as powerful learning resources to each other and to dissertation committees.

**Faculty.** Faculty members are seasoned, experienced graduate educators from distinguished universities across the nation and the world. Unlike traditional universities, the faculty, as experienced practitioners as well, integrates education, research, and practice. As continual learners themselves, they are constantly reflecting on research and practice and the co-creation of learning environments to broaden knowledge of and for scholar-practitioners. Faculty members are attracted to Fielding's diverse adult student population, its scholar-practitioner learning model, its distributed nature, and opportunities for creative collaboration. The faculty facilitates development of doctoral skills such as mastery of scholarly literature, identification of relevant problems, development of processes of inquiry and reflexivity, logical criticism, creative and original thinking, and clinical and communication skills. They encourage students to find and use their personal voices; to integrate personal, professional, and intellectual knowledge; to employ alternative perspectives; and to enhance their understanding of justice and diversity.

No relationship at Fielding is more important than the faculty–student relationship. These distinctive, co-learner, relational processes result in close, lifelong relationships between faculty and students. The faculty's primary role is to facilitate the co-learning process through coaching, facilitating, stimulating, and mentoring graduate students in problem definition, reflective dialogue and deliberation, and action-oriented collaborative practice. In addition, the faculty assists students in the development of needed doctoral skills.

Stevens-Long, Schapiro, and McClintock (*forthcoming*) reported in their research on educational outcomes and processes that adult professional students most appreciate relational learning that has self-reflective and self-directed structure and interactive opportunities. Further, peer and faculty relationships that have equality, support, acceptance, and inclusion of diverse perspectives are highly valued. The fact that learning is problem-centered rather than limited to a content-centered approach leads to transformation in perspective and often in practice. This is evidenced in the faculty and students' academic papers, dissertations, journal articles, and books. That work is often focused on the following themes: psychological models in practice; transforming learning for social justice; media, health,
and forensic psychology; educational change through collaboration; information society and learning organizations; and organizational development and action research.

**The Role of Student Support Services.** Student and faculty support systems are nontraditional in the sense that they are integral and integrated components of the holistic student learning environment model. The university advising office employs professional advisers whose primary responsibilities are to know the academic programs and faculty well and to learn to know each graduate student. They not only answer frequently asked questions but also form a relationship with each student that facilitates and supports progress toward graduation, addressing systems as well as personal barriers with the students. As mature students face the daunting task of balancing family, personal, and work lives with the challenges of doctoral work, these advisers play a crucial role assisting students to find that balance.

Instructional technology learning support services and library services fall under the broader responsibility of the associate provost for research and learning/chief learning officer. Long before the development of the Internet, Fielding understood that graduate students, particularly older adult professionals, could progress through a “blended” model of education supporting independent learners by providing the capacity for “just enough” face-to-face or technology-supported meetings between faculty and student colleagues. Now, revolutionary Web-based technologies provide students with a wide array of online learning opportunities such as learning or course management systems, Web-based seminars, tailored chat rooms, and classes in Second Life. A key lesson in the evolution of structuring learning environments is that technology is a powerful tool in improving learning. Students and faculty can research and problem solve online while computer and Web-based resources enrich their learning (Pelletier, 2010).

Differences between Fielding and traditional universities become clearer in the examination of Fielding’s library support system for graduate students in a distributed, independent learning environment. There is no physical library building. Fielding’s online library provides access to dozens of online research databases and journal packages that Fielding has licensed for student and faculty scholarly research. These databases not only include indexes and abstracts of scholarly literature but full-text articles from thousands of periodicals, dissertations, holdings of academic libraries, electronic books, and conference proceedings. There is also a subsidized document delivery service to obtain articles and books that cannot be accessed online. This service allows students to draw upon the vast print collection of the University of Michigan Libraries (one of the largest academic library systems in the nation) and have needed information delivered to them.

More than these resources, however, the Fielding library staff exemplifies and becomes part of the collaborative integrated learning environment through the relationships they develop with the students, faculty, and
alumni. They offer instructional seminars on library-related topics using a synchronous Web-based collaboration platform, as well as face-to-face seminars at periodic sessions held in various regions of the United States. The seminars are designed to increase student competencies accessing online information for meeting curriculum requirements, comprehensive exams, and dissertation research. Video resources, "How Do I" guides, library discussion forums, and online and library guides (guides on performing online literature searches) are among the many tools designed to facilitate learning and research. Fielding alumni have access to many of these library services after graduation.

Two books edited by Fielding Graduate University faculty illustrate the issues and opportunities within the growing discipline of adult pedagogy and distributed education (Palloff and Pratt 2007; Rudestam and Schoenholtz-Read, 2002).

**Role of Administration.** Much has been written about higher education leadership and organizational change (Clark, 1998; Keller, 1983; Rowley and Sherman, 2001). As an avid reader of such literature and having served in leadership positions in land grant institutions and comprehensive institutions, I have observed that many of the traditional roles of a president of a higher education institution in the United States apply at Fielding Graduate University. Presidents articulate the vision, mission, and goals and make clear the objectives to be accomplished. They are responsible for creating a positive working environment, recruiting an effective leadership team, and raising and providing resources to achieve those goals and objectives. Most effective presidents energize their universities to new levels of success. They build partnerships and foster teamwork, garner trust, reward initiatives and achievement, and celebrate and give credit where credit is due. They are, in truth, the "face" of the university (Lawrence, 2006).

In professional adult graduate universities like Fielding, all of the previously described elements are critically important, but there are differences (DiStefano and Witt, 2002). Three areas, in particular, call for innovative presidential leadership: alignment of mission and vision, program planning and institutional capacity, and administrative structures. The president must be conscious at all times that mission and vision must be both preserved and continually updated in the face of changing technologies and student expectations. Planning must engage the distributed constituencies and be responsive to circumstances that go far beyond a campus footprint or regional set of expectations. Administrative structures must be collaborative and permeable so as to increase transparency and efficiency.

In a nontraditional university like Fielding, all administrative leaders are also an important part of the community of learning and practice. The president and the members of the university leadership team actively participate as learner-facilitators in the semiannual national sessions, as well as orientation sessions for new doctoral students. Some serve on doctoral committees. Therefore, leaders must exercise their designated authority with a
thorough understanding of and a commitment to the scholar-practitioner graduate learning model. Fielding uses a servant-leadership model that is collaborative, strategic, and outcome-based, while maintaining a deep commitment to inclusion, diversity, and social justice. In essence, there is an added responsibility of the president, the leadership teams, and the community to understand and be vitally engaged in collaborative relationships in ways not expected in traditional institutions.

Lessons Learned

Many lessons can be learned from nontraditional doctoral institutions serving mid-career adult professionals. This chapter concludes with two.

Alternative, student-driven learning and research work well with adult learners, as do integrated, collaborative, competency-based learning models. These older mid-career adult professionals have as their primary goals working in communities of practice and continuing scholarship and research. Both PhD and EdD graduates participate in communities of practice all over the world. They apply their knowledge, experience, and research to problems and issues in health care, business, mental health, environmental sustainability, and numerous social justice issues and programs.

Second is the transformative nature of the Fielding doctoral experience. By moving from being “passive consumers” of knowledge to becoming those who construct, apply, and refine knowledge, especially in the context of the most current “real-world” issues, students are pushed through to new levels of integrative growth and self-awareness (Sewell 2005; Sewell and DiStefano, 2002). This type of developmental experience frees students from outdated images of themselves and the world.

In conclusion, the combination of independent, self-directed learning within a distributed community that values relationship and collaboration speaks to the paradox and power of the Fielding learning model.

References


**Additional Resources**


---

**Judith L. Kuijpers** is the former president and current distinguished scholar of Fielding Graduate University.