

Local Impacts of Walden Ed.D. Project Study Capstones

Paul Englesberg, Ed.D.*

Abstract

The perceived impact and potential impact of Walden University Ed.D. project study capstones on educational improvement in K-12, higher education and community settings were investigated through a field-based case study and a document analysis of 169 projects completed between 2009 and 2013.

Problem

Walden University introduced the Ed.D. Doctoral Project Study [DPS] as an option in 2008 and as a requirement for students who enrolled in January 2009. Over 170 of these studies were completed between 2009 and mid-2013. The project component, developed following the analysis of research data, is a practical application designed to address a local educational problem, but project implementation is not required. No institutional tracking or assessment of the impact of the projects existed.

Purpose

To evaluate the benefit of this unique doctoral capstone model, it is important to examine the goals for these projects and their potential impacts. The purpose was to study these impacts through interviews with stakeholders in selected local settings and analysis of a larger sample of completed projects.

Relevant Literature

- Applied research projects have been suggested as an effective means to **provide opportunities for doctoral candidates** in professional doctoral programs and to implement research-based solutions **to address local problems** (Coghlan, 2007; Copland, 2007; Lee, Brennan, & Green, 2009; Limerick & Clarke, 1997; Olson & Clark, 2009; Perry & Zuber-Skerritt, 1994).
- Application-oriented capstones with a **social change orientation and community benefit**, have been valued by many universities as a professional objective for graduates (Archbald, 2008; Fielding Graduate University, 2009; Texas State University, 2009; University of Toronto, 2009).
- How research capstones **benefit local stakeholders and institutions** is an area worthy of investigation (Raymond, Bortnik, & Gould, 2004).

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* Part of this study was conducted with Michelle Robbins-LaVicka, Ph.D. as co-researcher.

Research Questions

1. What were stakeholders' perceptions of the potential impacts of completed DPS projects?
2. What were the institutional context, intended audience and scope, and project type of DPS capstones completed 2009-2013?

Procedures

The field-based component focused on 9 cases. Individual interviews with the doctoral graduate and stakeholders were conducted on-site to understand the local problem in the community and institutional context.

The university's dissertation database was searched to obtain completed Ed.D. DPS documents.

Data Analysis

For the case study, interview data were analyzed by open coding and development of salient themes. Document analysis of the projects was conducted by tabulation across fields: specialization, project type, institutional setting, and intended scope. Frequencies and percentages were calculated for these fields.

Findings

Case study findings (N = 9)

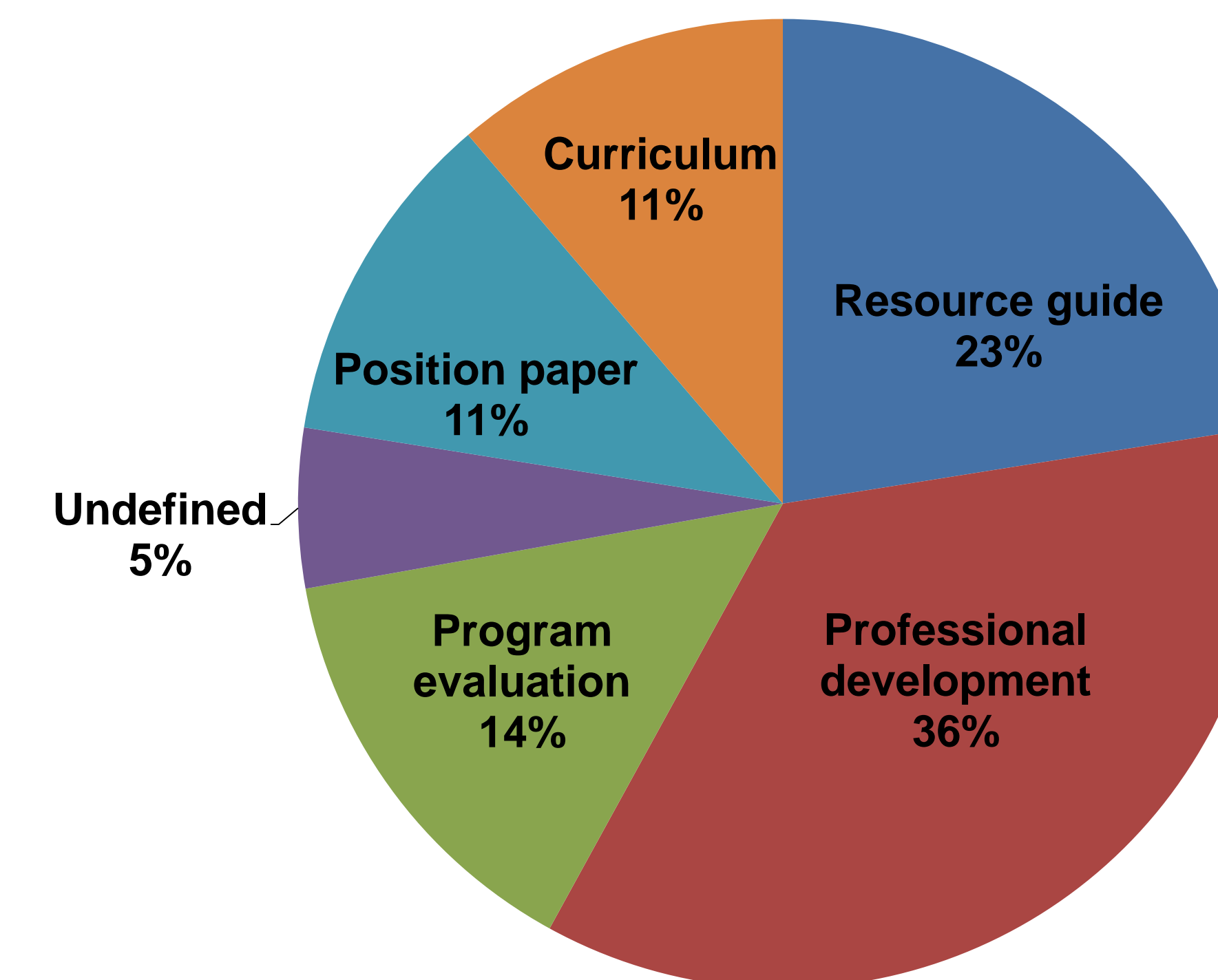
- Short-term impacts: Walden graduates [WG] and stakeholders [SH] both reported tangible impacts of projects as well as qualitative changes (e.g. changes in attitudes, strategies, and feelings).
- Long-term impacts (anticipated): WG and SH expected longer-term effects for teachers, students, and parents, but evidence was lacking at the time.
- Wider impact of projects developed by school administrators was expected (beyond local setting).
- Potential impact of projects by teachers was limited to a single school or specific grades at one school where the local research problem was identified.
- SH often did not distinguish between the research activities and the application (project).
- Project implementation was often dependent on institutional factors beyond the control of many WGs.

Findings (cont.)

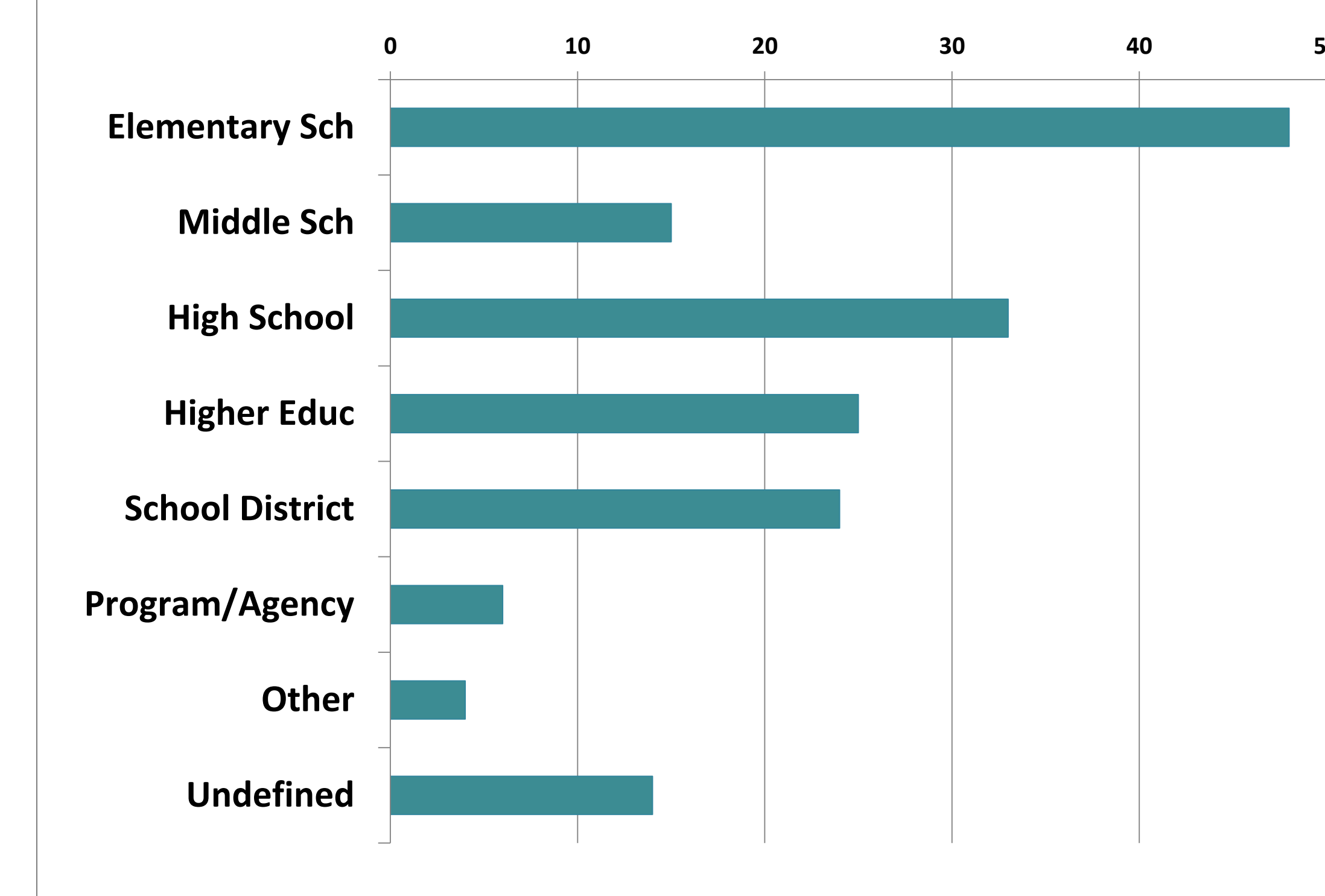
Document analysis (N = 169)

- Project types: Professional development projects were the most frequent; program evaluation and resource guides were also common; curriculum and position papers were the least frequent types.
- 57% of projects were developed for implementation at a single school or college; 25% at a school district.
- 71% of projects targeted K-12 levels (elem. and sec. balanced); 15% focused on the tertiary level.
- Inconsistent understanding of expectations for the project component among students and faculty was evident in some completed DPS.

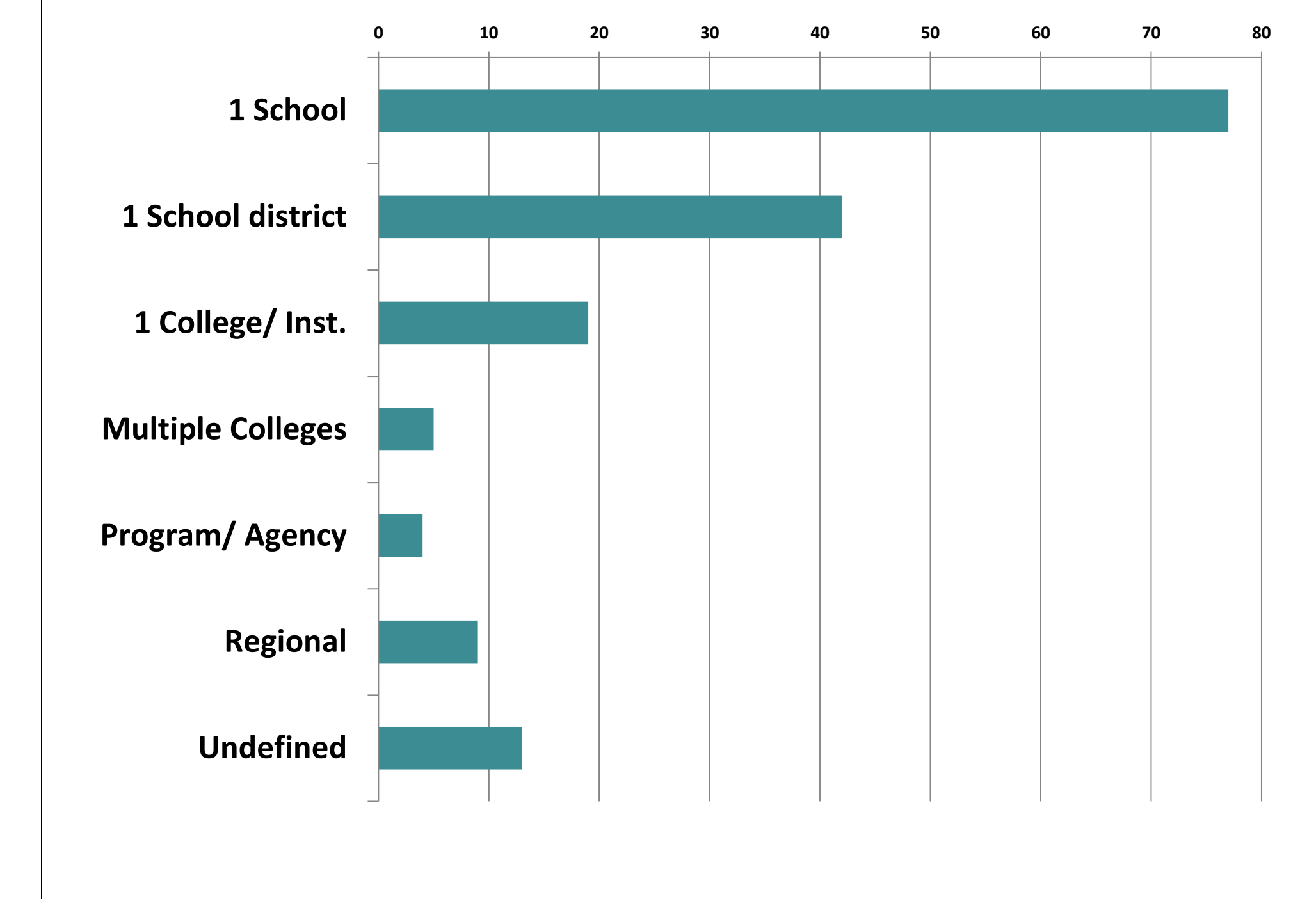
Project Type, N=169



Project Site, N=169



Intended Project Scope, N=169



Limitations

The case studies included only 9 of the earliest completed DPS, and were not representative.

Document analysis of projects was limited to each author's description of the intended impact and scope.

Actual implementation and impact of projects on stakeholders were beyond the scope of this study.

Conclusions

1. Factors that may **optimize** the potential impact of DPS projects include: development of plans for dissemination, district and regional scope for implementation, and presentations to multiple stakeholders.
2. Factors that may **limit** the potential impact of DPS projects include: specific grade level and school adaptation, lack of outreach to counterparts in the district and region, and quality of projects.
3. Significant **challenges** for doctoral candidates and faculty with implementation of DPS expectations should be addressed by the university.

Social Change Implications

The projects completed as part of the Ed.D. DPS will continue to have an impact on educational change in schools, colleges, and communities. This study has the potential to assist faculty and administrators in guiding Ed.D. candidates in developing future projects which will address educational problems and needs in diverse contexts.