

Applied vs. Traditional Dissertation Pathway

A Decision and Alignment Framework

Accessible format note: This version converts the original one-page infographic into a linear, screen-reader-friendly document with searchable text, descriptive headings, table headers, and a logical reading order. The visual decision flow is provided as numbered text so it does not rely on arrows, color, or spatial layout.

How to use this framework

Use the following decision process to determine which pathway best aligns with the study purpose, context, and goals.

Decision process

- Where is the problem rooted?** Is the problem situated primarily in a specific organization, program, or professional context? If yes, the applied dissertation pathway may align. If no, the traditional dissertation pathway may align.
- What is the primary intent of the study?** Is the intent to generate evidence and insights to inform practice or decision-making? If yes, the applied dissertation pathway may align. If no, the traditional dissertation pathway may align.
- Who is the primary audience for the findings?** Are the primary stakeholders organizational or professional leaders? If yes, the applied dissertation pathway may align. If no, the traditional dissertation pathway may align.

Pathway comparison

Criterion	Traditional Dissertation Pathway	Applied Dissertation Pathway
Focus	Addresses gaps or debates in the scholarly literature to extend theory or explain phenomena.	Addresses a defined problem of practice in an organizational or professional setting and aims to generate evidence to inform decision-making.
Context	Primarily grounded in the broader disciplinary or theoretical context.	Grounded in a specific organizational program or professional context.
Purpose	Generates generalizable knowledge or theoretical advancement.	Generates evidence and insights that inform decision-making in practice.
Research questions	Often broader, conceptual, or theory-driven.	Narrowly focused and framed for practical decision-making.
Typical designs	Quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods commonly used in disciplinary research.	Applied approaches such as mixed methods, case study, action research, program assessment, and needs analysis.

Criterion	Traditional Dissertation Pathway	Applied Dissertation Pathway
Scholarly deliverable	A five-chapter dissertation manuscript organized by disciplinary conventions.	A set of practice- and publication-ready artifacts, including an Applied Research Report, Executive Summary, and Reflective Research Log.
Intended audience	Scholarly and academic audiences.	Academic audiences and professionals or organizational stakeholders.
Primary contribution	Advances theory, explains phenomena, or contributes to scholarly conversations.	Provides credible evidence that informs practice, policy, programs, and organizational understanding.
Dissemination	Scholarly journals, academic conferences, and academic channels.	Academic, professional, and organizational venues, including presentations and reports.

Foundational requirements and constraints shared by both pathways

Requirement or constraint	Accessible description
Access and data	Access to participants, data sources, or organizational context as appropriate.
Ethics and IRB	IRB approval is required before data collection, along with adherence to ethical and data protection requirements.
Time and scope	Time, scope, and resource limitations influence design, data strategies, and analysis.
Researcher role	Researcher role, positionality, and alignment among problem, purpose, questions, design, and data strategy.