**Litmus Test for a Doctoral-Level Research Problem**

**Background on these “litmus test” questions**

* The distinguishing characteristic of doctoral-level research (as opposed to masters level) is that it must make an original contribution to the field. However, students may struggle to identify what will *authentically* contribute to their field or discipline.
* The most critical step in making such a contribution is to first identify a research problem with the 4 doctoral hallmarks below. Identifying a doctoral-level research problem is “necessary, but not sufficient,” to produce doctoral-level capstone.

**REQUIRED DOCTORAL HALLMARKS OF THE RESEARCH PROBLEM**

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|  | **In Walden’s scholar-practitioner model, a research problem shows promise of contributing meaningfully to the field ONLY if the answer to ALL of the following questions is “yes.”** | **Yes** | **No** |
| 1. JUSTIFIED? | Is there evidence that this problem is significant to the professional field?   |  | | --- | | There must be relevant statistics (expressing an unjust inequality, financial impact, lost efficiency, etc.), documentable discrepancies (e.g., two models that are difficult to reconcile), and/or other scholarly facts that point to the significance and urgency of the problem. The problem must be an authentic “puzzle” that needs solving, not merely a topic that the researcher finds interesting. | |  |  |
| 2. GROUNDED IN THE LITERATURE? | Can the problem be framed in a way that will enable the researcher to either build upon or counter the previously published findings on the topic?   |  | | --- | | For most fields, this involves articulating the problem within the context of a theoretical or conceptual framework. Although there are multiple ways to ground a study in the scientific literature, the essential requirement is that the problem is framed in such a way that the new findings will have implications for the previous findings. | |  |  |
| 3. ORIGINAL? | For research doctorates (Ph.D.):  Does the problem reflect a meaningful gap in the research literature?  For the professional doctorates (Ed.D. and D.B.A.):  Does the problem describe a meaningful gap in practice? |  |  |
| 4. AMENABLE TO SCIENTIFIC STUDY? | Can a scholarly, systematic method of inquiry be applied to address the problem?  The framing of the problem should not reveal bias or present a foregone conclusion. Even if the researcher has a strong opinion on the expected findings, scholarly objectivity must be maximized by framing the problem in the context of a systematic inquiry that permits multiple possible conclusions. |  |  |