Transcript of LADDER Information Session

Presented by:
Jessica Toste, Project Director, The University of Texas at Austin
Dr. Kristen McMaster, Co-Director, University of Minnesota

Video recording and slides available for download at www.jessicatoste.com/ladder

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Toste: Hi, everyone. Thank you for watching this information session about the LADDER Program. LADDER, which stands for *Leaders in Advancing Data Decisions for Educational Responsiveness* is a doctoral training program that we're very excited to tell you about today.

The faculty members who are involved with LADDER include faculty from The University of Texas at Austin and the University of Minnesota. My name is Jessica Toste, and I will be leading the project at UT Austin. My research is related to reading and reading intervention, and I specifically focus on methods for intensifying intervention for students with persistent reading challenges. I look at psychosocial factors that can help improve and support students in reading intervention, and also look at ways to support teachers in implementing data-based instruction.

McMaster: I'm Kristen McMaster. I'm faculty at the University of Minnesota, and I'm the co-director at that institution. My research focuses on reading, comprehension and writing for young students who are having difficulty in those areas or who have identified disabilities, including supporting their teachers in using data to individualize and intensify instruction.

Toste: The other two members of our team who are not here for this session today but we want to introduce you is our co-director at UT Austin, Chris Dobler. Chris focuses on STEM interventions for young students and supporting teachers and delivering those stem interventions, and Chris is a faculty member working at UT Austin on LADDER. And then we also have a project coordinator, Nicky Britton, who will be the one likely communicating with you about details and administration topics on this project.

A little bit about LADDER. As I mentioned, LADDER is a doctoral training program. It's funded by the office of special education programs in the US Department of Education. And this program really aims to support scholars in getting training that we all need and expertise we all need to address persistent educational inequities in access to appropriate supports and services for students with intensive needs, including students with learning disabilities.

The goal here is really to build expertise among scholars in how to improve delivery of intensive, individualized academic interventions and to also build expertise that is needed to advance the study of DBI Database instruction and effective implementation of DBI.

Scholars will have a number of competencies over the years that they'll work toward. And so these are the 5 big areas of competencies that all of the activities of LADDER will support scholars in developing. So first, they'll develop knowledge related to academic interventions in reading, writing, and STEM. Second, knowledge related to CBM or curriculum-based measurement and other assessment methods that are used to inform our instruction through database decision-making processes. Third develop the skills that we need to conduct high quality research related to DBI and then also disseminate that high quality research for teacher preparation skills. So being able not only to conduct this research, but then also translate that knowledge and train future teachers in pre-service teacher programs, but also professional development in the field.

And last develop a robust understanding of the expectations required to be successful in academia across a range of institutions of higher education. And so our goal is that doctoral scholars involved in this program will be leaders in the field, moving forward after they graduate.

A couple of points before we move in. And you listen to this entire information session. There are a few pieces of information that is helpful to know regarding eligibility for the LADDER program. So, in order to be eligible for LADDER scholars must be first admitted into a PhD Program based on the criteria set by UT Austin or the University of Minnesota, and at the end of this session we'll walk through the application process, and what that looks like. Scholars have to have a master's degree in special education, or a closely related field, strong academic performance across your prior and prior degrees. We're also looking for folks who have professional experience in special Ed or related fields ideally 3 or more years of experience. So that you're coming in with an understanding of how these systems work implementation issues in the field and working directly with students who have intensive learning needs. We're also looking for folks who have a commitment to seeking a leadership position in the field of special education. And because this is funded by the US Department of Education, scholars must be citizens or permanent residents of the United States.

This is a 4-year program with a full time commitment. Scholars will spend probably 20 or more hours a week on their coursework and the program requirements of the PhD. And then another 20 hours a week working on research projects and learning about knowledge in the field and skills in the field, and conducting research that helps me build those skills.

We'll have 7 scholars that will be admitted into the program. So recalling, first, that these are scholars who are first admitted to the PhD in either institution. And then for LADDER, we'll choose 7 scholars for this additional training. The scholars will have their standard PhD coursework and program benchmark benchmarks. And then they'll have these very specific experiences and training opportunities set up through LADDER that will help build competencies in all of the areas I outlined before. So knowledge of academic intervention, knowledge of assessment and database decision making research skills, teacher preparation skills and higher ed leadership, knowledge, and experience.

I will turn it over to Kristen to talk a little bit more about our PhD programs.

McMaster: So as just mentioned to be considered for LADDER, you will first apply and be admitted to one of our programs, either at UT Austin or at the University of Minnesota. So at the University of Texas at Austin, the program you'd be applying for is the Learning Disabilities and Behavior Disorders in their department of Special Education. If you apply to the University of Minnesota, you would be applying for a Special Education PhD in the department of Educational Psychology.

Both of those programs follow a 4-year sequence that starts with coursework where you're very fully immersed in learning all the foundational information you'll need to succeed as a scholar in the field of special education. You'll spend time in that first year exploring and developing your own interest area, so you might have some idea of the research questions that you're coming in with. You'll have lots of opportunities to start reviewing the literature and talking to folks who do work in that area and starting to really hone in on that the more specific of that research that you'd like to spend your time on. And you'll have opportunities to get involved in research teams. Both of our institutions have lots of faculty and students who are actively doing research, whether it's on large federally funded grants or more independent projects, and you'll have the opportunity to get involved in those as a team member and start learning with a hands-on approach how to do the research.

In Year 2 you will continue with your coursework, and you'll keep working at refining your interest area, really honing in on the very specific aspects of that with specific research questions that you have. Along the way, you'll also continue building the specific research skills you'll need to answer those questions, and you'll have opportunities to contribute to disseminating research. So you'll have some chances to be part of a team to submit conference proposals and start building your own independent skills to be able to disseminate your own research in the future.

By Year 3 you'll be finishing up your coursework for the most part, and around then is when you'll propose your dissertation topic with a committee of folks who will support you in that process, and you'll continue to build your independence both in research and dissemination as you've been developing all along the way. And then in your final year, Year 4, you will conduct your dissertation by collecting data, you'll write it up and defend it, and you'll continue to build your leadership in research and dissemination.

Toste: The LDBD program at UT Austin is structured, as you can see on the screen, we have 3 what we call core areas where our courses fall. The first is what we call our professional core, and these are courses related to the professional skills of academia and higher Ed. So we have courses related to what we call professional seminar, where students work together with other colleagues in their cohort, to learn about the field of special education and history of the field and history of research in the field. We have a course on diversity and disability, contemporary issues related to the work that we do a course specifically on college teaching. And then we have what we call research mentoring, which is the research competency that students complete independently. And this is similar to what other PhD programs might call comprehensive exams or qualifying exams.

Then we have what we call our specialization core. As the name implies, that's where you're taking courses really related to your specialty area. In LDBD, we have a course on trends and issues in the field of LDBDLDBD, we have a seminar specifically on reading disabilities and a seminar on math disabilities and a little bit of flexibility there, where scholars can take other courses of interest within or outside of the department.

Then we also have a research core. And so the research core, our students in the LDBD program are required to take a course specifically on intervention, research, and LD, so that goes through designing an intervention research study. We take a range of courses on advanced statistical methods and most of our mostly our students will take courses in the Ed syph department on advanced statistical methods. And then we have another course on grant writing that students take a little bit further into their program that helps dive into all of the different funding agencies how to apply for funding and looking at different sample grant applications.

Then, of course, students complete a dissertation. It says, 6 plus credit hours here, that's just a minimum, that it takes a minimum of one semester for students to complete their dissertation. But it's usually done across one full academic year, sometimes more.

McMaster: At the University of Minnesota. We have kind of a similar program with similar requirements. It's a little bit different, though, because at the University of Minnesota you are in an Educational Psychology department and your PhD would actually be in Educational Psychology with a specialization in special education. So all of our students in Ed Psych are required to take 24 credits in the Ed Psych core. So that includes 9 credits of courses that focus on history and systems of educational psychology, social learning and cognition courses.

You'll have statistics and measurement. We have at least 9 credits of that. And then also research methods at least 2 courses of research methods, including single case design for students in the special education PhD program.

Then, in addition to that, since the focus will be on special education. There are core requirements for special ed. There's 18 credits of that very similar to UT Austin. We have a couple of professional seminars where you're learning foundational issues in the field of special education. You're learning to read and write about the literature in special education. We also have a grant writing class, where you learn all about the different funding agencies and have the opportunity to both write and review grant proposals. And then you'll also have some electives that you can take within the department or beyond depending on your areas of interest, and you'll have 9 credits of those.

Then along the way as you're doing your coursework, and then beyond, you'll have several milestones which include a pre-dissertation project. So you'll do a small research project from beginning to end and have hopefully a little publication from that. You'll take written preliminary exams and then later oral prelim exams that help you start honing in on your dissertation research focus. And then, finally, you propose your dissertation with a prospectus and then you will be earning credits towards your thesis, which again, in your final year you'll be developing, conducting, and defending your dissertation.

Toste: Alright. That is the overview of the PhD program. And so now, LADDER, as we mentioned at the beginning of this session, LADDER is a training program. That is, in addition to what you're already getting in the doctoral program. And so what LADDER will look like is in order to develop these competencies in these 5 big areas.

We have organized a number of training opportunities. We have LADDER seminars that students take across their 4 years in the program. We have a summer institute that we will organize each summer. And then throughout the 4 years we have what we call our LADDER projects and experiences, and these are different training opportunities that are set up really strategically across the 4 years. So I'll give you a little bit of an example of what this looks like. You're starting off with 4 years. It looks like a blank slate as you come in.

Across these 4 years, you can see at the bottom, ongoing is scholars will be involved in school-based research. So they'll be working with faculty members or other ongoing projects in order to have the experience of working on a research team, seeing research being implemented. Depending on what projects you're working on, some might be early in conceptualization. So you get to be involved in really thinking about the design and the development of the study or the design and the development of the intervention. Some might be further along, so you're actually in schools helping with data collection or implementation. And then also across that helping with dissemination. So analyzing the data, writing up findings, presenting those findings across your 4 years.

All scholars will start in fall of Year 1. So that's fall of 2025, and then the LADDER seminars happen each semester of the fall and spring. And the LADDER seminars are set up so they have a different focus each semester and we go through. We have across our two sites, we come together for either monthly meetings where we have sort of very purposeful training sessions or guest speakers or a journal club where we're reading new publications, and we talk about it where we have presentations that we analyze together. So really, each semester, we'll have an area of focus and we'll all come together to talk in detail about that area of focus. We're excited to have a number of guest speakers across the 4 years to help build that knowledge as well.

In each summer we'll have our LADDER Summer Institute. This will look like us coming together for a number of days in order to dive deeper into a topic. Each Summer Institute will have an umbrella topic as well that we're focusing on, and we'll come together for 2 or 3 days to have working groups, trainings with guest speakers or faculty members at both institutions, opportunities to work with your colleagues, opportunities to work with faculty members and network and talk about the work you're doing, and just getting into things in a little more depth while we're together. Each summer the LADDER Institute will change locations, and so in Year 1, we will be at UT Austin, everyone will come here. Year 2, we may go elsewhere. Year 3. We'll go to University of Minnesota. And we'll go to different places, but we'll be together physically for our summer Institute each year.

Then we have, as I mentioned, these LADDER projects and experiences, so these really happen consistently across your whole program. They're shown here. These are the ones that we have sketched out that folks will complete. And I'll give you a couple of ideas of what these will look like. But the way that they're set up is that they're strategically planned out and mapped across the program so that you're building skills in those 5 competency areas and having opportunities to gain new knowledge. So some things, some of the things you might be involved in are working on conference proposals. So we've created these experiences, so that early on, scholars have the opportunity to participate in writing and submitting a proposal for a conference. And then, as you move through the program you'll take the lead. On preparing a proposal for a conference.: I have the logo here of the Council for exceptional children, which is not the only conference we would attend, but it is a conference that many of our scholars and faculty members attend.

Folks will also be involved in publications—writing journal articles for publication. And again, those are structured across the 4 years, so that very early on in the program, scholars have the opportunity to contribute to a publication as a co-author. And then later, as they move through the program, they take more ownership and leadership over a publication and, I should say, related to research as well. We also have scaffolded opportunities to complete journal reviews. So, working with a faculty member or another leader in the department to support them in reading a masked submission to a journal and writing a review that would then go to those authors. And having the opportunity to do that several times throughout your program. You get an understanding of how the review process works when we submit journal articles of our research.

Our scholars will also complete a micro credential from ACUE. Which is the Association for College and University Educators. And so this is an online credential that scholars will complete. We'll do this over one summer, so scholars will be able to work on your own time to complete the micro credential. It's focused on the effective teaching practice framework. And so you'll have the opportunity to get in depth, kind of theory and research and practice related to college teaching. And then you'll get this certification, this micro credential, that you can also put on your CV when you're done.

And then we also have a project built in. In addition to the school-based research that everyone will be doing, scholars will also do a Knowledge Translation Project. And that will be set up so that scholars will be able to speak with someone, either a teacher at the classroom level, folks at the school level, or potentially, even the district or state level to talk about an issue around intensive intervention or DBI that the teacher or the administrator or the district is really thinking about and figuring out implementation around or answering questions around. And so scholars will have the opportunity to build a project related to a real practice based issue that comes from the field, and you'll be able to work with the folks in the field to answer the question that they have. So these projects will look very different. They'll be very individualized, based on who we're collaborating with and in the areas of interest of the scholars. But our goal here is to really work on using our knowledge and skills that we've been building to answer a real question of practice. And so this will be structured that scholars kind of work through an idea for a proposal for their project, and then they complete it in participation with folks in the field, and then present it to our team to report back on what they did. All right.

McMaster: So now I will talk about the support that our scholars will receive as part of the LADDER program. So for all scholars enrolled in LADDER. Everyone will have tuition and health coverage for 2 long semesters that's fall and spring, and for the summer semester for 4 years. Total. So that's starting in 2025, and going through the academic year 2028/29.There will also be a monthly stipend of $2,750 a month, which comes out to $33,000 a year. And again, that's across each of the 4 years of the LADDER program. And then everyone will have travel funds that will allow them to go to conferences and to the Summer Institute that just talked about. And you'll notice that the amount varies across the different years, and that is because some years you'll need to travel more than other years. For example, if you're a student at UT Austin and we're having a summer institute there

that summer, you won't have to travel, but then on other years we'll be going other places so that might vary a little bit, but there will be travel to, or funds to cover all of your travel for the project. You'll also receive funds for materials. In the first year you'll have access to funds to purchase a laptop and then across additional years some more funds for materials like software or other things you might need to complete your requirements in your program.

And then you will also receive research support, specifically to help you with the research projects that you're doing, the independent projects that you're building up towards your dissertation. That could include anything from materials to incentives to help recruit people or to participate in the research. So there is substantial funding there to support the work that you'll be doing above and beyond the stipend that you'll be receiving.

Toste: A little bit about the application and selection process. So, as I mentioned at the very beginning when we were talking about the PhD. Program. There are a couple of different steps involved in being accepted to the LADDER program. So the first is applying to the PhD Program, and then the second and third step are really, when we select LADDER scholars from the group of students who have already been admitted to the PhD. So Kristen will talk a little bit about applying to the PhD Program, and then I'll jump in and finish talking about how we'll then select LADDER scholars.

McMaster: It's really critical that you go ahead and submit an application to the program that you would like to apply to and conveniently, both of our programs have a deadline of December first. So whichever university you're applying to make sure you submit that application by then. Those applications will include a form that you fill out, your transcripts that show completion of your Bachelor's and Master's degree programs from accredited university, a satisfactory GPA. And then, really important, is a personal statement that you'll write that describes your interest in becoming a doctoral candidate in special education, your research goals. What? What got you there? Anything that is relevant to why you were applying to this program. It's a good idea in writing that personal statement to express your interest in the LADDER Program, so that we know that you are interested in participating in that. We will review all of the applications to our programs to select from everybody who applies, but if we know that there is specific interest that will be really helpful in having us focus in on particular candidates who might benefit from being in the program. I also strongly encourage you to be really clear about your research interests and goals. If there are particular faculty member whose research you're interested in, you're more than welcome to mention that. The more clear and specific you can be, the more clear it is for us to make decisions about admission into our programs and into the LADDER Program.

You'll also include your CV or resume, along with 3 letters of recommendation from people who can speak to your academic performance. So it could be former professors of yours, but also your experience. So if there's folks you've worked with in schools who can really speak to your school based experience, those will be really valuable as well. And in both of our programs the GRE is not required.

Once you submit your application, the next steps will be that faculty members at the institution that you applied to will review your application. And they will discuss all of the applications with their faculty colleagues. And then they will notify those students who are selected for admissions via email. And that will be an email that comes from the department you applied to. The letter will indicate that you were admitted to the program, and that a financial offer will follow later on. So at this point, we've just decided whether you're admitted to the PhD. Program. And then additional steps will be taken to determine if you're going to be admitted to the LADDER Program, and we will let you know if you're being considered for the LADDER Program, because there will be some additional steps for you to take at that point.

Now, as you're going through that initial application process. If you have any questions about admissions in general, you have contacts at both UT. Austin and the University of Minnesota. Those are on the screen here, so feel free to reach out to those contacts just with general questions that you might have about admissions.

Then after that we will begin the LADDER selection process. The first thing is that faculty will conduct a secondary review of the applications to identify candidates who are eligible for the LADDER program. So, looking to see whether candidates fit those initial eligibility criteria that Jess shared earlier, and then looking more specifically at sort of the goals and how well those align with the LADDER focus. Then we'll send out invitation emails. Those will come from LADDER program faculty, and we will work together to identify people who we will want to talk to about coming into our program. So at that point we'll reach out to folks who we would like to apply to our program. There will be a really brief application form. It won't be a lot of information -it'll be quick for you to fill out. And then we'll schedule an interview with faculty from both of the institutions, so that will include a faculty member from the institution you applied to, possibly an advisor which could be one of us but it could be another faculty member from our institution, and then somebody from the other institution that you didn't apply to. So they can also have a chance to get to know you and have questions. We will share those questions in advance, so you'll know what to prepare for in that meeting. So all of that will be sent to you ahead of time, and then we'll have our interview, most likely via Zoom. And then our offer notification will come in April. There's sort of a universal acceptance decision deadline, which is April 15.th So by then we will have all our final decisions in place, and we'll know who our LADDER Scholars will be.

Toste: Great. And Kristen mentioned earlier that when folks are admitted to the PhD program, you'll get an offer email and it will say that a financial offer will follow. So your financial offer that follows for those scholars who are accepted to the LADDER Program, it will include the details of the financial package that you would get along with the LADDER program.

We hope that we will see lots of applications and be able to go through and talk to you a lot of great people who are interested in intensive intervention and DBI.

So, we will leave it there. You probably have already visited this website if you're watching this recording, but you can also download the slides here. If you want to refer to them again.Our contact information is available on the website. So if you have questions specifically about the LADDER program, how it works, what it would look like, we encourage you to reach out to either of us, depending whether you're interested in UT Austin or the University of Minnesota. And also can please reach out to faculty who you might be interested in working with and talk to people about their research, their research team, their advising. So that when you submit your application and write your personal statement, you have a good idea of who you might want to work with and you can be really clear about your goals coming into the doctoral program. So I will see if Kristen has any other final tips, and we will leave it here.

McMaster: I don't think so. We're just really excited about LADDER and can't wait to hear from you. So please reach out if you have questions, and we look forward to reading your applications.

Toste: Thanks for watching!