Making Selective Admissions More Meaningful*

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Abstract

Accreditation bodies, state departments of education, learned societies, and critics of educational leadership programs have emphasized the need for such programs to recruit and select the candidates who have the greatest potential of becoming effective school leaders. To meet this challenge, most university principal preparation programs have attempted to add more rigor to the selection process through a variety of ways. Unfortunately, many of the procedures have become perfunctory in nature, and have not been good predictors of future success as school leaders. This article discusses the challenges, and possible solutions, for making selection procedures more meaningful and valid.

NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a scholarly contribution to the knowledge base in educational administration.

1 INTRODUCTION

Recommendations, or mandates, to reform principal preparation programs have included more selective admissions of students to such programs. Murphy (1992, p. 104) laments "the general absence of standards at the point of entry into preparation programs." Murphy (p. 82), after citing other scholars in the field, comes to the conclusion that current selection processes are ineffective and are "often perfunctory."

The Southern Region Education Board (SREB, 2003, p. 7) echoes Murphy's argument and concludes that current selection practices, while perhaps indicating potential for success in graduate school, "offer few clues about his or her aptitude for success as a leader in an elementary, middle or high school."

The author's home state required all universities offering principal preparation programs to redesign their master's degree programs, and also called for a more selective process of admitting candidates. When submitting new programs for approval, universities were to "describe the process that will be used to screen

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and select individuals who will become candidates for the program. Identify the screening tools and the criteria that will be used to place participants in the program (Louisiana Board of Regents, 2003, p. 19)."

Accrediting bodies for principal preparation programs also scrutinize admission practices to determine whether or not programs meet their standards. The National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA, 2002, p.17) asks universities to "describe your admissions process and criteria used to evaluate potential candidates for each program." Additionally, NPBEA requires universities to report on the acceptance rate.

As a result of these recommendations and mandates, most universities have worked diligently to develop entrance criteria that are, at least on the surface, more rigorous than the "self-selection" used in the past. Selective criteria are only effective, however, if they have validity and serve as true predictors of a candidate's potential success as a school administrator.

2 TYPES OF SELECTION

Before continuing, for reference purposes, it would be prudent to define the three types of admissions processes: open, selective, and competitive.

An open selection process is the type for which principal training programs have been criticized. They are also known as self-selection programs through which candidates enter by meeting minimum requirements such as numbers of years of teaching, undergraduate grade point average, or GRE scores.

A selective process is one that uses more rigorous criteria (e.g., writing samples, interviews, past experience, reference letters), but that admits all students who meet the criteria. This is most likely the type of selection process most programs have initiated in order to meet state or accreditation mandates.

The final type of selection, competitive, chooses only a finite number of candidates for the program, the "cream of the crop," if you will. Most programs do not have this luxury and, therefore, probably use the selective process — a compromise between the open and competitive options. Literature in the field suggests that critics of current principal preparation programs would like to see processes become competitive, but that is probably not realistic.

3 THE GOAL: ELIMINATION OR REMEDIATION?

Assuming that most institutions are using a selective process, as described above, there seems to be two schools of thought regarding what the goal of a selective admissions program should be. Some believe that the purpose should be to analyze prospective candidates' skills, past experiences, dispositions, or test scores for the purpose of selecting only the strongest candidates. The belief is that there are certain skills a candidate should have before entering the program (e.g., oral and written communication skills). Some faculty members are of the opinion that there is already enough to teach candidates about administration without having to be English or speech teachers as well.

If some programs are to survive, from an enrollment standpoint, they might be forced to accept students with deficiencies with the hope of remediation before they exit the program. Some faculty believe that since principal preparation programs are to prepare prospective principals in all the skills they need to function as school administrators, such programs should work with candidates to develop these skills (e.g., writing, oral presentations), just as they help develop other skills necessary for school administrators. This approach would necessarily require a determination about what skills or attitudes can be remedied by the time the candidate exits the program. It would also require an ongoing analysis of the individual candidate's skill levels over the course of the program. Each faculty member would need to be aware of any deficiencies in order to assess them periodically as each candidate progresses. Such a process could be cumbersome and, unless faculty members communicate effectively with each other, could see many candidates "fall through the cracks" with respect to the identified deficiencies.

Whether to use the selection process as a means of selecting candidates who show promise but might need remediation in some areas, or to have a strict set of standards that eliminates some prospective candidates is something each institution and program must decide after taking several factors into consideration. Despite

gallant recruitment efforts by programs, some institutions would have a difficult time surviving by taking a more hard-line approach to candidate selection, something that could exacerbate the problem of too few principals. By the same token, not having standards at all puts programs right back in the place that caused the criticism in the first place. Institutions need to find a proper balance to meet their individual needs.

4 WHAT SHOULD BE ASSESSED?

Before determining what should be assessed in the selection process, it is incumbent upon faculty to decide what the overall purpose of the selection process is. Students don't like to "jump through hoops," nor do faculty members. Admissions processes that fail to actually assess a candidate's strengths or deficiencies, or reject prospective candidates if that is the goal, can cause a morale problem for faculty. Faculty members sometimes give of their time, perhaps on weekends, to participate in some selection protocol that doesn't accomplish what it is meant to accomplish. Hence, the process proves to be nothing more than another "hoop" through which students jump and that ends up wasting the time of students and faculty alike. This need not be the case, however.

Any assessments should be for the purpose of predicting candidates' chances for success in the program and, ultimately, their efficacy as future school leaders. Any number of assessments might be used, but some of the more common include grade point averages, GRE scores, minimum years of teaching, writing samples, and some sort of oral assessment, whether it be an interview, group discussion, or presentation.

Determining what assessments should be used is very important as far as validity is concerned. Although used widely, the cut-off scores for the GRE or for grade point average can be arbitrary. Does an undergraduate grade point average of "at least a 2.5" mean a candidate has a better chance of succeeding? Or, are there better predictors? The same can be asked when considering GRE scores.

Some programs take into consideration a prospective candidate's prior leadership experiences in his or her school. Sometimes this is determined through an essay, letters or recommendation, or through a personal interview. SREB suggests looking for "evidence of using professional development, student achievement data and technology to improve his or her teaching; evidence of working with others to improve school and classroom practices; (and) assessments of personal qualities that would make them effective school leaders (SREB, p. 8) ."

Often included in the selection process is an assessment of written skills. Students might be asked to respond to a hypothetical situation, explain their philosophies of leadership, or write on some other topic. Depending on the topic, the writing sample not only can reveal a prospective candidate's ability to organize and write coherently, but it also can shed light on a candidate's dispositions toward certain educational issues (e.g., inclusion, diversity, etc.).

Oral assessments are commonplace in selection procedures, although they might take varying forms. If, for example, the purpose is to determine the candidates' dispositions, motivation for becoming an administrator, or ideas on improving education, a personal interview using well-crafted interview questions might be in order. If, however, the purpose is to find out how candidates work with others, a group process might be used in which a small group of prospective candidates discusses a particular issue. Perhaps the goal is to determine if candidates can express themselves in front of a group and think on their feet. If so, having candidates make short, impromptu presentations might be the best method to use. Or, candidates might be required to participate in more than one type of oral assessment.

Regardless of what type of written or oral assessments are used, faculty must 1) determine how important the particular assessments are in predicting a candidate's potential for success, and 2) use well-designed rubrics for scoring. It must then be decided what weights will be assigned to certain assessment criteria and what types of low scores might be cause for rejection or remediation. Just as written or oral assessments need carefully crafted rubrics, selection committees must also determine how much (if at all) GRE scores and grade point averages will be weighed in the process.

Regardless of what selection criteria are chosen, faculty and students must know that the process serves the desired purpose and is not just a perfunctory exercise. And, to reiterate, the desired purpose is to predict candidates' chances for success in the program and, ultimately, as school administrators.

5 THE INTRUSION OF OUTSIDE INFLUENCES

Sometimes a College of Education or Graduate College policy already specifies a required grade point average or GRE scores. Unfortunately, there is sometimes little that can be done by program faculty to change this. This can be frustrating when faculty members know that certain candidates would be good fits for the program and would be excellent administrators, but they don't meet criteria set by academic units above the department level.

Two other things, both political, can intrude on a true selective admissions process. As universities try to get enrollment numbers up, will university administrators embrace a program that only admits, for instance, ten students in a given semester? Outwardly the message is, "We have a rigorous program," but sometimes the message filters down that "you need to get your numbers up."

Another strong push for principal training programs is to work collaboratively with public schools, both in the selection process and in field placements. This can be a marvelous partnership, until a local administrator lobbies for admittance of a particular candidate when that candidate doesn't meet the department's objective criteria. Some school districts might even prefer that one of their teachers not be admitted. Departments and colleges need to be willing to stand their ground, as difficult as it might be politically.

6 CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, whether or not candidates become effective school administrators won't be evident until they exit the program and get their first administrative jobs. The best that principal preparation programs can do is to base selection on the most valid predictors possible and develop assessment materials that will objectively measure those predictors.

Universities and colleges of education must do their part as well. They must be willing to put quality before enrollment numbers or political considerations. Otherwise, the selection process risks becoming a routine procedure with little rigor, or a process that allows under-qualified "exceptions" to be admitted to programs.

Departments need to constantly assess how effective their selection procedures have been and fine-tune as the need arises. Selection of candidates with the greatest potential to succeed is not an exact science, but there are things that can be done to improve the process.

Finally, many recommendations have been made by critics of principal preparation programs. While implementation of some of these recommendations would no doubt improve program quality, they tend to be, in some cases, unrealistic. It is fine to suggest that states provide funding for the recruitment of principal candidates, but the fact remains that most don't. Some of the recommendations, particularly regarding the selection of high quality candidates, assume that there is a large supply of such candidates from which to choose, or that recruitment efforts will convince promising teachers to become administrators. The truth of the matter is that some teachers, regardless of their leadership potential, prefer to stay in the classroom and don't aspire to an administrative role.

Sadly, we don't live in a perfect world with ample funding for administrative recruitment, training, and compensation. Nor do we have an unlimited supply of educators who have the necessary potential, or perhaps the inclination to use that potential in an administrative capacity. Given these harsh realities, the best we might be able to do is to continue to examine and fine-tune selection procedures so they are as fair, objective, and valid as possible.

7 REFERENCES

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