

# ALIGNED OR ASKEW: FACULTY PERCEPTIONS OF PRINCIPAL PREPARATION PROGRAMS\*

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## Abstract

This study was conducted to focus attention on the issues involved in the preparation of school leaders and to provide an enhanced profile of the perceptions of faculty members involved in principal preparation. Results were used to provide information on the current status of principal preparation programs, suggestions about additional areas needing reform, and recommendations for long term, broad-based research efforts in developing a comprehensive understanding of Educational Administration and Leadership Departments.



NOTE: This module has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and sanctioned by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of education administration. In addition to publication in the Connexions Content Commons, this module is published in the International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, <sup>1</sup> Volume 4, Number 3 (July - September, 2009). Formatted in Connexions by Theodore Creighton, Virginia Tech.

## 1 Introduction

For the better part of three decades, PK-12 practitioners, scholars, and policymakers have debated issues surrounding school reform and how best to achieve two important goals: enhancing school effectiveness and increasing student achievement. While it has been generally agreed that the teacher plays a critical part in

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\*Version 1.1: Jul 1, 2009 7:41 am -0500

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improving student learning, recent scholarship has come to focus more on the central role of the principal: “school leadership is second only to teacher quality in its impact on student achievement, especially in high-needs schools” (Vitaska, 2008, para. 2). Without strong and effective school leadership, the primary goals of school reform and the effectiveness of the most talented teachers will be thwarted.

As the interest in school leadership as a reform strategy has grown, research has focused increasingly on three issues: 1) the desired attributes of an effective school leader for the post-modern era, 2) the graduate training program designs most likely to foster these attributes in candidates, and 3) the progress in reforming principal preparation programs accordingly. Following a brief overview of findings on the first two issues, this inquiry will focus on the status of traditional university-based principal preparation programs in relation to the reforms now widely endorsed in the literature to address how faculty responsible for these programs perceive their progress toward achieving these recommendations.

## 2 Background Literature

*What attributes make an effective school leader?* Today’s school leader functions in a dynamic and complex environment such that the Institute for Educational Leadership (2000) called for communities to “reinvent the principalship” to equip leaders to meet the challenges of the new millennium (p. 3). Salazar and Jorissen (2007) noted that “the emphasis on accountability for student learning, coupled with federal legislation, has placed greater demands on the role of the secondary school leader than ever before” (pp. 2-3). That role is often centered on the principal as instructional facilitator, rather than school manager, and requires a new style of leadership. The effective school leader is pivotal to leading organizational change and to improving teaching and learning for all students (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 1). Accordingly, the principal is held accountable for student learning, for recruiting, supporting, and developing excellent teachers, and for guiding colleagues in curricular and instructional enhancement. Salazar and Jorissen (2007) summarized the demands on today’s principals who, as instructional leaders, must be able “to understand effective instructional strategies, to regularly observe and coach classroom teachers, and to analyze student achievement data to make more effective instructional decisions” (p. 3). Drawing upon their study of exemplary preparation programs, Darling-Hammond et al. concluded that the successful principal is one who is capable of “cultivating a shared vision and practices, leading instructional improvement, developing organizational capacity, and managing change” (p. 143). Finally, Salazar and Jorissen noted that it is up to the school leader to create a collective expectation among teachers concerning student performance (p. 3).

*What are the preferred components of a principal preparation program?* Several policymaking entities have examined principals’ roles as instructional leaders and the programs intended to prepare them. Notably, the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) has conducted extensive research on these topics and has established a regional initiative to promote reform of principal preparation programs among member states, tracking progress in the region regularly. The Wallace Foundation has supported these efforts as well as those of the Stanford Educational Research Institute and recently released the publication *Becoming a Leader: Preparing School Principals for Today’s Schools* (2008).

Bolstered by the work of Leithwood et al. (2004); Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, and Orr (2007); and Farkas (2001), much of this research has considered exemplary or innovative programs and has given rise to a consensus about some important design characteristics of the most effective PK-12 leadership development paradigms. Favored program features include reflecting present research on school and instructional leadership, exhibiting “curricular coherence,” facilitating “experience in authentic contexts,” utilizing “cohort groupings and mentors,” and ensuring “collaborative activity between the program and area schools” (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005, p. 7). Although they do not guarantee program effectiveness, these models nonetheless stand as reliable building blocks for program redesign.

*How are university-based programs viewed?* As there is consensus about what constitutes promising program redesign, so is there agreement that university-based programs may not meet the needs of the profession. Specifically, the literature reflects concerns about curricular design, program effectiveness and relevance, and program quality. Driven by state credentialing standards, programs tend to amass courses in discrete disciplines rather than to take an integrative approach or to develop interdisciplinary themes

(LaPointe, Meyerson, & Darling-Hammond, 2006, p. 8). The SREB reported that most member states' standards "do not substantially emphasize a principal's knowledge and skills related to student learning, and focus instead mainly on organizational management" (p. 7). Hess and Kelly (2005) described the lack of proof that "principal-preparation programs are designed in ways to introduce students to a broad range of management, organizational, or administrative theory and practice" (p. 24).

Levine (2005) called into question program effectiveness, noting that the research has yet to show "whether school leadership programs have any impact on student achievement in the schools that graduates of these programs lead" (p. 5). SREB (2007) compared its member states across six indicators designed to show their progress in achieving a "learning-centered school leadership system" (p. 1) and concluded that their progress was only "modest" (p. iii).

With respect to relevance, the literature has noted that curricula are often disconnected from the realities practitioners must confront, lack linkages between theory and practice, and fail to offer relevant, quality clinical experiences. Levine (2005) reported that "almost nine out of ten (89 percent) of program alumni surveyed said that schools of education fail to adequately prepare their graduates to cope with classroom realities" (para. 11). In contrast, Butler (2008) found that "many principal training programs focus on the new role they assume in instructional leadership amid accountability pressures to raise student achievement" (para. 5).

During times of increased competition between principal preparation programs, the appearance of on-line degrees, and the growth of for-profit institutions, universities are challenged to demonstrate the quality and effectiveness of their leadership programs. Educational administration literature frequently includes discussion of the quality, or lack thereof, of these programs. According to LaPointe (2007/2008), "unfortunately, too many principals are ill-prepared for the coach and mentor role because too few universities offer the coursework and internships necessary to develop leadership skills" (p. 17).

Substantial improvement in student performance requires effective school leaders (SREB, 2007). To produce such cutting-edge school principals capable of making schools learning-centered, modern principal preparation programs are needed. As a response, this study was conducted to determine how university faculty in educational administration or leadership from various states perceive their respective programs in light of the reform literature. Areas of inquiry included programs' learning-centered standards, internship experiences, programmatic redesign, and stages of collaboration with stakeholder school districts (SREB).

### 3 Methods

In this quantitative study, the researchers reviewed current literature and utilized the method of survey research to focus on the current status of Educational Administration or Leadership programs and gather first-hand information from university faculty members engaged in these programs. A review of the literature was conducted to identify topics around which questions should be developed. The Tailored Design Method (Dillman, 2000) was utilized to create the survey.

The researchers implemented several measures in an effort to augment the instrument's construct validity and to reduce measurement error. The instrument was validated through a jurying process, using input from subject-matter experts. Reviewers provided feedback on each item: whether the question was properly worded and whether it was necessary. The researchers also compared the close-ended questions asked to other questions previously addressed in the literature in an attempt to decrease repetition and add to the knowledge base. Modifications were made to improve the clarity of the survey items based on the feedback received. The final survey consisted of 68 total questions: 65 closed-ended questions that required respondents to select from a series of response categories, and three open-ended questions.

Study participants were professors of Educational Administration or Leadership attending the first general session of a conference hosted by a professional organization comprised of professors who teach in university-level educational administration or leadership programs designed to prepare school leaders. Of the 137 surveys distributed at the conference, 55 were completed and returned, yielding a response rate of 40%.

The collected survey data were entered into an Excel spreadsheet and then imported into and analyzed with Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) computer software. The results were compiled and

reported from the perspective of participants on how well their respective university programs meet the needs of aspiring school leaders, schools, and students.

## 4 Findings

Of the 55 survey participants, 50% were established faculty with eight or more years in the profession. Almost 58% held the rank of associate professor or professor. Four were lecturers or part time, and three did not indicate their status. Almost 70% were 55 years of age or older. The 49 providing a state of residence represented 19 states and the District of Columbia, with 36% coming from California and Texas. Faculty represented programs of varying sizes, ranging from fewer than 50 students (4%) to more than 300 students (10%). Programs with 50-100 students comprised 36% of the sample, and those involving 101-300 students were 49% of the sample. As noted above, data are presented in four areas: learning-centered standards, internship experiences, programmatic redesign, and university/school district collaboration.

*To what extent have universities adopted learning-centered standards?* In this era of accountability, principals are increasingly judged by their students' learning outcomes: according to Public Agenda (2003), "fully 63% of superintendents say student achievement is the biggest part of how they evaluate their principals" (para. 9). Butler noted that principals are called upon "to improve student performance, resulting in school leaders' transitioning from a more administrative role to becoming more heavily involved in assessment, instruction, curriculum and data analysis" (para. 2).

When asked their respective programs are learning-focused, over 86% of survey participants judged that their programs significantly promote standards that emphasize principals' knowledge and skills related to student learning. Respondents agreed that school principals need to know how to increase student achievement and facilitate post-PK-12 education preparation (94%), lead the development of a school mission statement focused on student achievement (94%), and facilitate the use of data to steer remediation efforts (94%). Faculty acknowledged the importance of principals knowing how to use research-based techniques to improve instruction (94%), to develop a caring climate conducive to student success (94%), and to facilitate stakeholder involvement to assist in improving student achievement (92%). According to the faculty, principals should also be able to lead continuous school improvement efforts (94%), employ resources to facilitate school improvement (94%), work effectively with school stakeholders (94%), and share best practices (87%).

*What criteria should guide internship experiences?* Survey questions about internships were designed to explore issues cited in the literature: Martin and Papa (2008) wrote that "understanding theory and the larger conceptual framework of leadership is critical to effective practice and improvement; however, leadership is best learned by doing" (p. 14). Over 85% of respondents indicated that interns in their programs are required to provide leadership on at least one endeavor to improve student learning. Over half of the respondents (53%) reported that interns must observe improvement activities in a variety of school settings and 45% stated that interns are required to participate in improvement activities in a variety of school campuses.

Stevenson, Cooner, and Andrea (2008) wrote that the internship "is grounded in the need to blend principal leadership theory and practice for participants" (p. 9). Three-quarters (75%) of the respondents reported that their principal preparation programs were making considerable progress in bridging the theory/practice gap. Just over 17% of professors stated that their programs were making satisfactory progress and 8% said that their programs were making minimal progress. Over half (55%) of the faculty said that their program's internship experience requires the candidate to solve substantial school issues, and 78% reported that their programs are making significant strides in providing opportunities for the intern to demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills to lead school improvement.

Levine (2005) asserted that school leadership programs do not offer effective clinical experiences because candidates are not afforded adequate time, variety of experiences, and mentoring (p. 4). Respondents described a different situation entirely, where practicing school administrators and university personnel work together to supervise most principal interns. The majority (82%) of participants stated that their programs require students' PK-12 campus supervisors to evaluate them and also reported that the university supervisor conducts an evaluation (92%). Students must obtain a specified number of clock hours during the internship, according to 84% of the faculty members surveyed. Other internship results were more surprising: 88% of

the faculty reported that candidates may choose their own internship sites and 86% of faculty indicated that interns may select their own mentors. Only 53% of faculty reported that the intern's choice of site or mentor may be denied.

*How are universities progressing with programmatic redesign?* SREB (2007) reported a disconnect between principal preparation program content and the competencies school leaders need to be effective: traditional graduate programs with disproportionate emphases on law, finance, and teacher evaluation do not prepare principals to make instructional and organizational changes necessary to raise student achievement. SREB reported that “only three SREB states—Alabama, Maryland, and Texas—have standards that focus more on student learning-focused knowledge and skills” (SREB, 2007, p. 8). Hess and Kelly (2005) found that about one-third of classes dealt with the operational issues and programs “pay little attention to data, productivity, accountability, or working with parents” (para. 29).

When asked to prioritize what principals should know, respondents indicated that the heart of the principals' knowledge base should be improving academic programs (73%). Second, respondents listed teacher evaluation (48%), followed by school law (49%) and finance (71%), thus emphasizing a significant, growing emphasis on student achievement as the foundation of their programs. Yet a small percentage strongly disagreed. Finally, professors expressed confidence that their respective internships provide a good array of experiences for interns (see Table 1).

### Internship Experience Opportunities

Survey Item	Minimal Progress	Satisfactory Progress	Significant Progress
Learn about curriculum	8%	27%	65%
Learn about instruction	4%	9%	65%
Learn about solving school problems	0%	26%	74%
Demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills to lead school improvement	4%	18%	78%

**Table 1**

*Note.* Participants were asked to assess their preparation programs based on whether progress was being made to provide interns with specific learning opportunities.

Perceptions of programmatic evaluation efforts were not as strongly affirmative. There were 44% of faculty who shared that their programs were moving significantly toward allocating ample resources for program redesign and evaluation and 35% who reported progress in conducting follow-up evaluations to determine whether program graduates are leading school improvement. In contrast, Hess and Kelly (2005) found that “forty-two percent of courses on technical knowledge of school law, school finance, and facilities did not entail a final assessment to ensure that students have mastered the content” (p. 1).

*What trends of university/school district collaboration were reported?* The level of university/school district collaboration in schools has been contested, but the importance of such collaboration is widely endorsed. Partnering with area schools improves “program consistency” and facilitates “a sense of shared purpose and a common vocabulary between districts and local colleges of education” (Davis et al., p. 11). Several researchers have identified additional advantages: LaPointe et al. (2006) pointed to resource sharing and program comprehensiveness as benefits; Martin and Papa (2008) found the relationships helpful to integrating theory and practice; the SREB (2007) recognized collaboration as a strategy for improving upon the “volunteer pipeline” (p. 11) in favor of a more selective and rigorous recruiting process for school leaders; and Lashway (2003) suggested school districts can “work with university programs to identify promising candidates, host meaningful internship experiences, and provide advice on program content and delivery”

(para. 21). Institute for Educational Leadership (2000) affiliates affirmed that “state and local school systems, higher education, businesses, and principals themselves will need to work together to fortify the professional ‘pipeline’ to ensure that, in the coming decade, schools have the highly qualified leaders they need” (p. 19).

In *A District-driven Principal Preparation Program Design The Providence School Department and the University of Rhode Island Partnership* (2005), the SREB concurred that successful principals will seek resources to enhance student learning outcomes, whether through grants or partnerships with other entities. The SREB concluded that,

***4.1 until there is collaboration between districts and universities, a serious disconnect will continue between what districts and schools need principals to know and do and what universities prepare them to do. As a result, many aspiring principals will receive outdated, ‘one-size-fits-all’ training that is long on management theory but short on knowledge, skills and dispositions needed to ensure the academic success of all students. (p. 2)***

Surveyed professors affirmed university/district collaboration in field-based preparation; 86% of the professors reported cooperation with school districts to plan and oversee internships. Yet in other areas, the partnership did not seem as strong. For example, only 16% of respondents said their program involved school district administrators and university faculty in decisions about allowing a student to remain in the program whereas 57% reported little or no progress. Similarly, when asked if their program assessed whether district leadership needs were being met, only 29% reported significant progress, and 44% reported minimal or no progress. Finally, in regard to expectations for the clinical experience, 72% of respondents indicated there was a written statement addressing the roles of the university, district, mentor and intern; but only 58% reported the existence of a formal agreement between the two agencies.

## 5 Discussion and Recommendations

Inclusively, the professors surveyed shared optimistic perceptions about the quality of their respective university principal preparation programs. Although the SREB (2007) reported that the states studied had not made progress overall, this study’s respondents described programs that offered content responsive to many of the preparation-related concerns revealed in leadership literature. Conversely, several results were surprising and more aligned with research critical of preparation programs.

A great majority of study participants stated that their universities collaborated with school district stakeholders to plan and oversee internships. Rather than collaborate formally with an entire school district, however, university faculty tended to work with individual campus principals. Although the idea appears at first to be reasonable, more official partnerships would offer the advantage of endowing the internship with greater prestige and recognition as well as formalizing district-level administrators’ support of participation in field-based experiences. Such formal agreements favor institutionalization of the activities and promote their longevity.

The need for collaboration between university-based programs and school districts is supported by literature (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000; LaPointe et al., 2006; Lashway, 2003). Participants shared that collaboration existed between their respective preparation program and area school districts, however, as a rule, each student was expected to intern at only one school. Interns did not always have opportunities to observe or assist at other schools. Engaging in field-based activities at multiple school sites could provide interns with a wider variety of experiences, especially valuable because some interns may later be employed at a different grade level site than originally planned.

Surprisingly, 8% of professors reported that university-assigned supervisors do not evaluate interns. Additionally, the interns enrolled in the majority of the programs represented were allowed to choose the campus where they would intern as well as their supervising PK-12 campus mentor. Although perhaps a daunting task, it is recommended that strides be taken to assign interns to be guided by mentors who have specific expertise in school improvement and who have been trained to the mentoring role. Hoyle (2005) wrote that “the opportunity for aspiring school leaders to observe successful mentors and to have meaningful roles as

interns is one that must be taken immediately by all preparation programs” (para. 32). A possible obstacle to selecting mentors based on expertise may be the large internship enrollments of many universities which “are forced to reduce costs and increase revenues by raising student enrollments, lowering admission standards, and hiring low-cost part-time faculty” (Levine, 2005, p. 62).

A preponderance of participants cited progress being made in providing students with opportunities during the internship experience to demonstrate the necessary knowledge and skills to lead school improvement, but a small number of professors reported no progress. With public schools and higher education being held increasingly accountable for student learning outcomes, universities need to prepare for the time when they may be held responsible for the learning outcomes of students whose schools are led by the very principals they have prepared.

## 6 Recommendations for Further Research

Data for this study were collected at a national meeting of professors of educational administration. A purposeful sample representative of all 50 states should be attempted to gather data on programs from additional locations. Although the study is limited in that not all university preparation programs were represented, professors from 19 states and the District of Columbia participated, thus representing a few more states than were encompassed in the 16 state SREB (2007) study or the exemplary program study conducted by Darling-Hammond et al. (2007).

A recommended next step in research of this topic would be to conduct qualitative interviews to provide additional depth and explanation of participants’ responses. Faculty members, department heads, and college deans could be asked to share their views on their university principal preparation programs. Additionally, data may be collected from former students and their supervisors to ascertain whether they perceive student teaching and learning were affected by knowledge and skills mastered in the school leader preparation program.

## 7 Summary

School leaders face increasing accountability burdens. Forward-looking principal preparation programs are needed to facilitate the development of cutting-edge principals capable of leading learning-centered schools. Program faculty must be willing to change as school leadership positions transform; “in short, the demands placed on principals have changed, but the profession has not changed to meet those demands—and the tension is starting to show” (Institute for Educational Leadership, 2000, p. 3). The employment and development of quality faculty members are key to ensuring first-rate preparation as program merit is “dependent upon faculty ability to blend relevant educational theory and practice and to create powerful and effective learning experiences for students” (Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005, p. 5). Since “principals will be expected to lead in an atmosphere of constant, volatile change” (Institute for Educational Leadership, p. 4), preparation programs must stay current, emphasize teaching and learning, restructure as necessary, and ensure that the administrators of today are prepared to lead the schools of tomorrow.

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