

Selecting Top-of-the-Class Teachers for an Alternative Principal Preparation Program

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Abstract

In an attempt to improve training and development of principals, the General Assembly in North Carolina established a competitive grant program to transform the way principals are certified. This qualitative study aimed to inform principal preparation practices by examining the initial, critical steps of recruitment, screening, and selection of candidates to enroll in a non-traditional, university-based program. The grant that funded the principal preparation program specified that program providers partner with school districts to tap top tier educators to enroll as principal trainees. In this study, public school district partners conducted the recruitment and initial screening of aspiring candidates internally. Through interviews of district leaders and scrutiny of documents associated with recruitment, screening, and selection, the researchers of this study found that the multi-tiered process of recruiting, screening, and selection worked effectively. The challenges of a university-school district partnership are presented as lessons learned. Findings are discussed in terms of recommendations for universities and school districts as to how to work collaboratively, as well as some pitfalls to avoid to make the process equitable and fair to emerging leaders in public schools.

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With the principal pipeline failing to provide the number of strongly qualified candidates required to lead high-needs schools in North Carolina, the state's General Assembly established a competitive grant program to "elevate educators in North Carolina public schools by transforming the preparation of principals across the state" (North Carolina Alliance for School Leadership Development, 2016, p.5). In 2016, the North Carolina Alliance for School Leadership Development (NCASLD) was authorized by the state to oversee the grant process and awarded five organizations approximately \$1.3 million each to be used over a two-year period to prepare candidates for leadership in high-needs schools, using an alternative, innovative program. High Point University (HPU) was the only private organization awarded one of the five grants, as three others were public universities and one was a Regional Education Consortium.

In applying for the grant, the HPU conceptualized a one-year, innovative graduate-level program, unlike traditional principal-preparation typically comprising a two-year master's degree program to which candidates apply independently. The alternative program, referred to as the High Point University Leadership Academy (HPULA), offers thirty candidates in two cohorts, cooperatively selected by their districts and HPU, a one-year, experiential M.Ed. with principal licensure. HPULA is designed to meet characteristics of effective principal preparation programs as identified by the research and expected of the grantor:

The program will include a pipeline component to identify and train emerging leaders from education or non-traditional sectors, embedded participant assessments during the program, high-quality and sustained clinical practice in authentic settings, and commitment to data collection, reporting, and continuous improvement. The programs will prepare participants to provide instructional leadership, manage and develop talent, build a positive school culture, apply organizational best practices, and lead change for continuous improvement in student results. (NCASLD Principal Preparation Program Request for Proposals, 2016, p. 4).

Working with a Principal Leadership Team and an Advisory Board, consisting of district partners, university and affiliate members, HPU developed a three-round recruiting, screening, and selection process. One of the major innovations established was that districts would begin the three-round process of choosing educators to become certified as principals. The targeted candidates in recruiting were high performing teacher leaders with a demonstrated record of instructional impact and capacity to work with adults. The initial round of recruitment and selection began within each of the nine public school districts identifying top-of-the-class candidates within their respective districts, which was unlike traditional certification programs in which candidates self-select to apply for enrollment. Based on district leadership needs and their local context of highly impacted schools, district leaders recruited educators to enroll. The second round involved an intense assessment process at HPU. The assessment process was developed with input from the Advisory Board and Principal Leadership Panel. The third round involved a university team to make the final selection. The purpose of this study was to describe lessons learned from this rigorous recruitment and selection process for non-traditional enrollment in an innovative principal preparation program. Recruitment, screening, and selection processes were designed and implemented through a public school district-university partnership.

Background of the Study

Research describes the positive difference an effective principal makes in schools (Leithwood, Louis, & Anderson, 2012; Tucker & Stronge, 2005). School leadership is only second to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Roach, Smith, & Boutin, 2011). As a result of the potential impact of principals on school reform and student achievement, the need for effective recruitment and selection of candidates to become principals is heightened. This is especially true for rural communities. Beeson & Strange (2000) wrote about the growing difficulties to recruit and select principals in rural schools because of lower salaries and increased isolation of many districts. Before one can be selected as a principal, however, an educator must be trained in the art and science of school leadership.

Rigorous recruitment and selection were identified among seven key elements of effective leadership preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007) and again in the Quality Measures Rubric for Candidate Recruitment and Selection from the Principal Preparation Program Self-Assessment Toolkit (King, 2013), which was funded by the Wallace Foundation. Recruiting a strong pool of diverse, high quality candidates is a critical first step in developing high performing school leaders who will transform struggling schools. In their report, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen (2007) emphasized that preparation programs must be more selective in identifying promising leadership candidates, as opposed to using more open enrollment practices. Traditional programs have repeatedly been called into question for failure to produce leaders who successfully influence student achievement, especially those in low performing school districts (Southern Regional Education Board, 2016, p. 5). The Wallace Foundation (2011) advised that proven practices must include a rigorous and highly selective process to recruit expert teachers with leadership potential.

When HPU sought high-need public school districts as partners for the grant, the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) stated that the collaborative process of recruiting and selecting candidates for the principal preparation program would be co-designed by the partners. The grant guidelines specified that the pipeline component to identify and train emerging leaders from education settings was to be cooperative, which is a break from traditional enrollment practices in a university-based principal preparation program in which candidates self-select to enroll. It was also different in that the HPULA grant was written to cover tuition and training costs associated with the graduate education program. The state was willing to invest in principal preparation in order to have “highly effective future school principals in North Carolina” (NCASLD Principal Preparation Program Request for Proposals, 2016, p. 6).

HPU partnered with nine public school districts (six rural, one suburban, and two urban) to select candidates for two cohorts ($n = 30$). The design of the grant called HPU and districts to work collaboratively to prepare aspiring principal candidates to return to their home districts to provide leadership that has potential to transform low-performing schools into learning environments that result in high performance for all students. One other feature of the HPULA is the semester-long placement of candidates in full-time residencies. This placement requires the aspiring leader to leave behind his or her current role as an educator for one semester to fulfill internship responsibilities with an administrative team at a school, or schools, within the district.

In the spirit of authentic partnership to implement the innovative principal preparation program, public school district leaders were invited to join the Principal Leadership Team (PLT) and Leadership Academy (LA) Advisory Board, along with university professors, to plan recruitment, screening, and selection processes. The PLT consisted of former graduates from HPU's master's and educational leadership doctoral program who had received distinction or recognition in their school districts. All participated in actual screening of candidates, which added validity to the interview process during the second round of selection.

This level of screening at the public school district-level in selecting potential candidates for the university-based principal preparation program was unprecedented, in that HPU had never involved districts in admissions decisions to this extent. The screening and selection rubric was adopted as a tool to be used during the district's candidate screening process. The rubric, using a scale of four scores, ranging from "excellent" to "poor" had six elements:

1. Must have three years of teaching experience or equivalent
2. Licensure: "Teacher" means a person who holds at least a current, not provisional or expired, certificate or a regular, not provisional or expired, vocational certificate issued by the Department of Public Instruction whose major responsibility is to teach or directly supervise teaching, who is classified by the State Board of Education, or is paid either as a classroom teacher or instructional support personnel and who is employed to fill a full-time, permanent position.
3. University Criteria: Most recent degree minimum GPA of 3.0, two reference letters, and official transcripts from all degrees.
4. Evaluation Data: Some districts used North Carolina Teacher Evaluation data as evidence that the candidate had a track record of teaching that produces growth of an accomplished/distinguished teacher. Superintendent/human resources Administrator will consider performance over the three most recent school years. Personnel file will be reviewed by superintendent/human resources administrator to verify a pattern of excellence.
5. Leadership Evidences: Must demonstrate evidences of leadership with adults in schools.
6. Communication: Must exhibit the ability to articulate in writing and verbally the needs of the staff and students.

Although the criteria were not unlike some selection criteria used in university-based principal preparation programs, it was unique that school district leaders were the ones making initial decisions about five of the six elements by assigning a score using their district review process. The districts had an allocated number of "slots" in the HPULA, based on district size, with the largest district having seven slots in Cohort I and four slots in Cohort II, and the smallest districts having one slot.

Based on the HPULA Advisory Board recommendation, the districts would forward candidates' names and data to HPU on a 2:1 ratio. For example, if the district had seven slots, they forwarded records of 14 candidates to HPU, and HPU then invited the district-nominated candidates from all of the participating districts to HPU for a day-long interview for Cohort I and a half-day interview process for Cohort II. Rounds two and three of the selection process, which

took place at HPU, narrowed the district-nominated candidates to the final candidates invited to enroll in the cohort.

Candidates who were selected in December for Cohort I began the program in January 2017 with plans to complete a full-time residency from August through December 2017. Cohort II began in May 2017 with their clinical semester beginning in December 2017. The innovative principal preparation program requires that candidates participate in experiential learning and seminars with HPU faculty and practitioners, as well as learning from experiences provided through the Center for Creative Leadership, the BB&T Leadership Institute, RTI International, Piedmont Triad Education Consortium, and LEGO Education. This engagement of many entities to provide training and development is one of the main features of the innovative methods used in the HPULA in that the graduate degree is not university-professor dependent. The innovative program also features intense use of former principals trained as executive coaches who provide support to candidates during the full-year program both on site and virtually. Candidates who successfully complete the HPULA earn 36 graduate credits (12 from experiential learning activities), are eligible for state licensure for school leadership, and earn their master's degree in education.

The grant covered costs of salaries up to \$50,000 for full-time residencies, which afforded selected candidates an opportunity to earn a master's degree in educational leadership. All districts provide any additional funding to ensure full salary of the full-time resident, which added the feature of district investment in the aspiring leader candidate. While salary and tuition costs were covered by the grant with in-kind monies from HPU, the request for proposals (RFP) requirement that grantees must use rigorous screening methods in selecting candidates provided a unique opportunity to study recruitment, screening, and selection methods.

Methods

Design of the Study

This qualitative study was designed to describe lessons learned from the recruitment, screening, and selection processes that were used in selecting candidates for HPU's Leadership Academy (HPULA). Through interviewing district and university representatives and analyzing recruitment and selection documents, the researchers of this study planned to obtain perspectives about how districts engage in the process of recruiting, screening, and selecting future principals. Furthermore, the researchers sought to understand challenges of a public school district-university partnership designed to work cooperatively in recruiting and selecting candidates for enrollment in graduate programs.

According to Creswell (2013), one of the approaches in qualitative design is a phenomenological method. The researchers of this study, who were all involved in either teaching in the HPULA or members on the Advisory Board, believed that phenomenological approach to this study would allow them to describe the essence of candidate recruitment, screening, and selection. It was a new approach to graduate program admissions, and the researchers believed much could be learned from interviewing participants and studying documents related to the new innovative program of principal preparation. The researchers also believed influences that impacted the processes could be revealed through a study of the phenomenon. By conducting in-depth

interviews and reading through documents, the researchers spent several months observing the processes.

Questions of the Study

1. What major themes emerged from recruitment, screening, and selection of candidates for the principal preparation program?
2. What were similarities and differences in tactics used by each of the nine participating school districts in identifying aspiring principals?
3. What factors influenced university and district processes in selecting final candidates?
4. What were major challenges in selecting aspiring candidates for the university-based principal preparation program?

Participants

Data were collected from nine district leaders and a university administrator using a semi-structured interview protocol (Creswell, 2013). Creswell suggests between five and 25 interviews are needed in a phenomenological study to be able to provide the rich descriptive essential to the integrity of the study. By conducting ten interviews, including a representative from each of the nine districts participating in the HPULA and an administrator from HPU involved in the final selection stage, the researchers believed that a pattern of perspectives, including both similarities and differences, would emerge to help inform the findings of this study. Multiple cases of documents and interviews added to the validity of findings.

Among the ten participants of the study were nine districts leaders. They are described (Table 1) by position, district type (urban, suburban, and rural) and the number of slots their districts were awarded based on size of the district. Four district leaders were female and five were male. HPU participation is also described, along with characteristics of the university represented in this study. Six participants were district-level administrators from rural school districts. One representative was a district office leader from a suburban district with 37 schools. Two participants were district leaders from urban districts, one with 122 schools and over 72,000 students and the other with 81 schools serving over 54,000 students.

Table 1
Participants of the Study

Participant	Position	Urban, Suburban, or Rural District/IHE	Number of Slots in Principal Preparation Cohorts I and II
Brenda2	District-level Leader	Suburban	3
Brenda3	District-level Leader	Rural	1
Carl6	District-level Leader	Urban	11
Admin1	University Administrator	IHE	2
Carl7	District-level Leader	Rural	1
Brenda4	District-level Leader	Rural	1
Brenda5	District-level Leader	Rural	1
Carl8	District-level Leader	Rural	3
Carl9	District-level Leader	Urban	4
Carl10	District-level Leader	Rural	3

Note: The district’s urban district status was derived from the Rural Center at <http://www.ncruralcenter.org/rural-county-ma>

Procedures

The recruitment, screening, and selection processes involved a layered approach to final selection. First, each of the nine districts of the study conducted a recruitment process within their districts. Recruitment practices were decided locally with the option to have the HPU liaison hold an information session about the program in the district. Each district had a predetermined number of slots for the 15-member cohort.

After recruitment, the districts used various screening techniques including primarily a screening rubric. The screening rubric had basic elements that guided the selection of candidates from the district. Once the district nominated their candidates, HPU then invited them to the second round of the selection process.

The second round of the selection process took place at HPU on a Saturday and was quickly called the “interview day” for the HPULA. Members of the Principal Leadership Team and Advisory Board, as well as a representative from each of the participating districts, served as facilitators for the four major activities of the day, which included an inbox activity involving role play, a one-on-one interview, and two simulation exercises, one which involved the candidate using school data and the other which addressed social media use. The district-nominated candidates were invited to HPU and provided an agenda for the day, which did not include the specific interview questions, but rather that only the questions would be aligned to leadership standards.

A few modifications took place between the interview day for Cohort I and the interview day for Cohort II. The Advisory Board debriefing that took place following the interview day for Cohort I revealed that Board members believed the interview day process to be rigorous. In some cases, they believed anxiety of candidates overcame their performance and suggested some tactics to help prepare the candidates for the rigor of the interview day, such as providing the simulation scenarios ahead of time so that assessors could score and use the time to have candidates further discuss. This time would also allow assessors more time to get to know candidates. In addition, the Advisory Board believed that principal leadership is team leadership, and they wanted to assess the candidates in a team activity. The team activity was added to the interview day for Cohort II.

The third round of the selection process involved a HPU team of administrators. They reviewed district scores from rubrics, and the interview day scores from rubrics aligned to each activity. HPU administrators considered each third of the selection process as critical to final selection, from the district's nomination and rubric scores to the HPU interview day scores and the final round to decide who would be in each of the two cohorts. HPU administrators scrutinized all of the candidates and processes used in each district. They applied HPU requirements for entrance into a graduate program, which included the letter of recommendation, an essay, the graduate school application, a curriculum vita, and GPA from the most recent college transcript. They also assigned a leadership potential score based on leadership experiences they gleaned from application materials. The top scoring applicants from each district, based on assigned slots, were selected. They also identified two alternates, not district specific, in case selected candidates decided not to enroll. In Cohort II, two of the slots were assigned to the HPU graduates as they wanted to select high quality teachers who were interested in pursuing principalships. Only one candidate from Cohort II was replaced with an alternate.

In addition to interviews, the major source of data for the study, the researchers reviewed documents from Advisory Board meetings and Principal Leadership Team meetings, as well as district rubrics used in the recruitment, screening, and selection process. Documents included copies of recruitment emails, recruitment flyers, the admissions rubric, simulation rubric, and inbox rubrics. The Project Manager for the grant placed all documents in One Drive, a document sharing site. The request for proposals (RFP) for the grant, as well as grant submission documents, were available for review. The North Carolina Alliance for School Leadership Development was administering the grant program as authorized by the State Education Assistance Authority (SEAA). Through the process of document review and interviews, the researchers learned districts were informed that they were to select candidates from a talented pool of career status K-12 teachers with a proven record of teacher leadership excellence. These candidates were targeted for enrollment in the principal preparation program, but they would engage in a competitive, rigorous screening and evaluation processes.

Data Collection

After recruitment, screening, and selection were completed for both cohorts of enrolled students, the researchers of this study conducted interviews with each of the nine district representatives, along with the HPU administrator. The document review of recruitment materials, screening rubrics, and interview day descriptions of each of the four activities, took place during the month that researchers were interviewing. However, the primary data used were collected during semi-

structured interviews with the participants of the study. Each interview, some held face-to-face and others through WebEx, was recorded, transcribed, data coded, and analyzed for common themes and experiences.

Each interviewee was given an opportunity to expound on his or her district's or university processes throughout the course of the interview. The interviews were conducted using a set of questions designed to inform the essence of candidate recruitment, screening and selection. Two of the researchers conducted all ten interviews, which ranged in time from 30 to 60 minutes. The interviews were recorded and uploaded to a data transcription service, which generated transcripts of the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data from documents and interviews proved to be a rich source of data, initially coded using preset codes determined from the literature, principal leadership standards in North Carolina, and the research questions of the study, such as *communication, diversity, leading adults*, and others. The researchers read through the coded data to identify categories and themes which evolved through an emergent analysis process. Themes were highlighted and aligned to the research questions of the study. The researchers also identified significant quotations from transcripts regarding recommendations to improve the recruitment, screening, and selection processes. The themes that emerged from data coding revealed that there were similarities and differences in the recruiting, screening, and selection process. These were aligned to findings related to challenges faced in the selection process.

Results of the Study

From a macro-perspective, HPU met with the Advisory Board to plan recruitment and immediately a network of collaborative processes began to be shared across districts. District representatives shared rubrics, PowerPoints, and discussed their unique needs that would inform their recruitment and screening processes. HPU acted in an advisory capacity and facilitator role, as districts naturally shared processes and recruitment tools.

All of the nine districts involved in the study were very actively involved in sharing strategies and appreciated the district-university network sharing across districts involved in the grant. While they were collaborative in designing their recruitment and screening plans, the districts also understood the unique role of HPU having to select from among their nominees those who met graduate school admissions standards and protocol. The first major finding is that the recruiting, screening, and selection processes were multi-tiered. The district had major responsibility in the initial tier of recruiting and screening within district in round one. In round two, HPU and districts co-screened nominated district candidates. In round three, HPU had sole responsibility for final selection of candidates. As opposed to a co-selection process from beginning to end, the multi-tiered process worked to narrow the field of top-of-the-class candidates to the final selected candidates, who all accepted admission into the HPULA.

The district-university partnership at first sought to identify high-performing teachers, as evidenced through teacher leadership and highly-rated performance scores, as top-of-the-class candidates for enrollment. However, as districts recruited aspiring principal candidates, several

candidates holding positions outside the classroom emerged, many with master's degrees who held such positions as counselor, speech pathologist, instructional and technology coaches, coordinators of academically gifted and exceptional children's programs, psychologist, and instructional facilitator. In the end, the thirty top-of-the-class candidates selected for enrollment, 15 in Cohort I and 15 in Cohort II, were 22 high performing classroom teachers, along with eight others who held roles as described in the previous sentence.

First Question of the Study

What major themes emerged from recruitment, screening, and selection of candidates for the principal preparation program? In this study, several themes emerged about the recruitment, screening, and selection processes that resulted in major findings of the study. First, the recruitment themes that emerged were: tactical approaches, collaborative processes, and competitive processes. The districts involved in the study all designed a recruitment approach using various strategies to communicate the HPULA opportunity. The capacity to lead a high-need school was emphasized in the recruiting materials.

Tactical approaches in recruitment. The targeted pool for recruitment was high-performing teachers, as stated in grant guidelines. Districts, however, discussed qualities they were seeking in aspiring principals and communicated to others within the district that they were seeking nominees for HPULA who had demonstrated leadership, which was a major focus in recruiting. Therefore, seven of the nine districts emphasized that first contacting the principal about potential recruits was a specific tactic used in recruitment. One district leader was very direct in stating, "I think for the recruitment standpoint, it was more first educating the principals, then having the principals to approach..." One of the districts that did not inform principals first about the opportunity expressed regret, as they learned through the process how valuable principals were in selection of aspiring principal candidates.

Another very common tactical approach to recruitment, employed by eight of the nine districts, involved issuing open invitations through district email, or other communication methods using technology or face-to-face information sessions, to explain the aspiring leader, graduate program, and to answer questions by those interested in pursuing principal certification. One of the district leaders summarized the recruitment process within the district:

We used our obviously, our email. We got out all our correspondence through our assistant principals, principals, and our curriculum facilitators, and anybody that was in CNI received the information. Then, we have a professional development website, and leadership development, and it was posted on there, and still is. Then we used the district's website. We have some scrolling information out there, but on the front of the webpage to get this out. Then it was posted in our leadership action updates, which is an internal communication document that we have for all of our building leaders, assistant principals, and such.

While eight of the school districts opened the opportunity to apply to the HPULA to all interested educators, one district by design did not open the invitation for all to apply. Instead, they targeted educators in the district who had demonstrated emergent leadership to apply. The district leaders referred to this targeted approach, rather than an open approach, as a tactic to tap potential school leaders who demonstrated "leadership without a formal title" to apply. Using a

district-level team, they identified 25 educators who met their criteria of a “leader,” with 3-5 years’ experience, whom they saw as “growers.” This district was explicit about qualities they wanted, used a team to screen, and then they recruited from the pool who met the criteria. One district described their screening and recruitment as a strategic approach.

We were very strategic in our recruitment process. We started by first going to our district leaders and identifying a cabinet and pool of individuals who we thought had demonstrated leadership capacity or leadership abilities without a title. So, we were looking for future leaders at the school level who had been with a district a minimum of three to five years that we saw as growers.

Another tactical approach in one urban district, not only involved issuing an “open invitation to all in the district,” but also specifically contacted some African-American male educators in the district who had demonstrated leadership potential. This district sought to have a diverse pool of candidates and recognized the need to increase the numbers of African-American male principals in the district. A few districts employed this tactic of targeting distribution groups and personalization in recruiting (curriculum facilitators, teacher leaders, and curriculum and instruction faculty). One district looked for candidates who had a love for “students of poverty.” One district emphasized the capacity to lead adults.

Collaborative processes in recruitment. The second recruitment theme was that recruitment was viewed as a collaborative process. From a micro-perspective within districts, all nine districts engaged current leaders in the district, including district office leaders and/or school principals, in the recruitment, screening, and recruitment process. Within the collaborative process, seven of the nine districts highly engaged sitting principals as key informants about potential school leaders who should be tapped to apply. District teams, who would serve in the role as decision makers regarding candidates to nominate to HPU, included principals or principal reference letters in their process. In one rural district, the superintendent used a sitting teacher leadership team to initiate recruiting and then involved principals and the open invitation call to recruit.

To be quite honest, I think it was from the recruitment efforts of our principals and assistant principals identifying those teachers, and leaders within the building, and demonstrating potential to be an assistant principal. I think from the applicants that we had conversations with that advanced, most of them cited that my assistant principal encouraged me or my principal reached out to me. So by far, I think that had the most impact.

Competitive processes in recruitment. The third recruitment theme that emerged was that of competition, which impacted to some extent the number of interested applicants. In one district, the superintendent posed the recruitment process as an “honor” for the candidates to apply. By making the recruitment personable and honorable, informing candidates “you were recommended,” the superintendent thought it helped increase the number of candidates to accept the district’s offer to interview for a slot.

... We didn't send it out district-wide because we were searching for a specific candidate, and self-nominating doesn't always end up getting the best candidates, so we had principals understand what the criteria was... I think what helped for us was that we made it an honor. You were recommended by and it was driven from the superintendent's office. Now in a larger district, maybe it couldn't have happened. It couldn't have been as

personal as we have. But what I've found with all of our folk, they were so honored that the superintendent called them into a meeting, because I've met with each of them individually to say that, "You were recommended by your principal and we've looked at your background." So that meant a lot to them to feel somehow that even though they didn't have a title, they somehow were being recognized. I think that helped with the long term mindset of those individuals that their work is recognized. It's valued and we see them as not only a leader now, but also as a future contributor to the district.

In Cohort I recruitment, where the turnaround time was limited to one month for the districts to recruit, screen, and select their nominees, it appeared that educators in two districts, knowing the districts had only a few slots, self-selected themselves out of the running based on the competition. This view of the competitive process seemed to decrease the number of applicants. Enrolling in a graduate program to seek an advanced degree is often a personal decision, but the process of applying for a slot in a funded program became more competitive. For example, one district, which had issued an open invitation vis-a-vis email, with the text, "Are you an aspiring school leader who would like an opportunity to work collaboratively with 21 other educational leaders to obtain your principal licensure at virtually no tuition cost? The High Point University Leadership Academy may be for you!," nominated only one applicant to HPU. In this district with only one slot, once the Teacher of the Year (TOY) applied, the district had no one else complete the application. Some who had indicated early interest decided, upon seeing the competition, that the TOY would get the slot and withdrew from the process.

Following recruitment, the nine districts of the study began to screen applicants. While some districts had many applicants (25-30), smaller districts had few (1-6). The themes that emerged from screening candidates who applied or who were nominated within the district were two: performance data and knowledge data.

Screening and use of performance data. After recruiting an applicant pool, a team within district began to narrow the applicant pool by using scores based primarily on prior performance. All of the districts used rubric scores in the screening process, making the process formal and data-directed. In reviewing applications, they scored candidates based on performance data, such as how well their students performed, and how well the candidate had performed indicated by their performance appraisal, communication skills, writing skills, etc. They used North Carolina's Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) or similar evidence that the candidate had a record of accomplishment of teaching that yielded student growth. The major screening factor, however, was evidence of demonstrated leadership through varied experiences, such as school improvement team leader or professional learning leader. They also scored evidences of leadership with adults in schools. These performance data were scored, yielding an objective perspective of the applicants.

Screening and application of knowledge factor. However, equally important was the knowledge factor. In smaller and rural districts, the screening process was objective, but the subjective perspective was taken into account more prevalently. The screening process seemed less formal, as six of the districts made reference to "knowing our people." The informality of the review process increased as the candidates were "known." As one district described:

So our process for screening is very in depth. Not so much based on a piece of paper where you fill out ... one, two, three... but it's more of our knowledge, because we are small, of all these characteristics that I've just talked about. Because we're small we know the whole candidate and so those... that picture of these candidates really helps inform who we think might be the good leaders for our schools.

Another district leader viewed the knowledge of the district's people as a strength, which was helpful when opportunities such as HPULA presented. They used their knowledge of their people to influence their screening process.

Again, that's a benefit of being very small, having four schools, lots of interactions with our staff members, but I could see how in larger districts that may not be the case. Now, the principal may know, but in some schools that are much larger even the principal may not know, but we talk a lot. One thing that we share with our employees is that we're here for you. There's a lot of dialogue, and we try to support our employees going into a master's program and for school administration, or maybe it's to add licensure in other areas or maybe it's just to continue in the current area and to expand their knowledge and capabilities. We try to get involved. We seem to know who those candidates are...

Another aspect of the knowledge factor was found in the more subjective assessment of interviews. The interview, which was used across seven of the districts as a screening tool, was scored as districts listened for the qualities they were seeking in aspiring principals. All seven spoke of the value of listening to the aspiring candidates, which added depth to the performance scores. They were able to hear "commitment," and they were also able to assess why candidates wanted to be part of an aspiring principal program. In the words of one district leader, "we interviewed them and got the feel as to where they were and why they really want to be in this program and grilled them pretty good on what their commitment would be if they got in this program and why did they want to be there and what could they offer after they went through this process." The "feel" factor, which seemed to emerge was a more subjective assessment, as the performance data yielded the objective assessment during screening.

In screening aspiring principal candidates for enrollment in a leadership program, the interview, "to get into their heads" as one district described, proved to be most helpful in the process. The university interview day, where nominated candidates participated in interviews and simulations, helped to "see" and "hear" potential candidates in action. Finally, objectivity was the goal throughout the process, but in smaller districts, they acknowledged the role of subjectivity in selection. They know their people, see them often, and have perspective over time. Larger districts depended more heavily on total scores from a review of rubric scores and interview scores. Smaller districts revealed how difficult it is to remove historical interactions they have with their "folks" from the screening process.

Selection finding. The major theme that emerged from the final selection process was top-of-the-class. The review committee at the end of recruiting and screening processes observed some variance in qualifications across candidates from the seven districts, but observed, using HPU criteria (e.g., GPA, demonstrated leadership, and reference checks) that the nominated candidates for admissions were clearly outstanding candidates. The final process, therefore, allowed HPU to

be highly selective. All nominated through the rigor of recruiting and screening made final selection competitive. The candidates demonstrated a strong record of instructional foundation.

Second Question of the Study

What were similarities and differences in tactics used by each of the nine participating school districts in identifying aspiring principals? The major finding related to this question can be summarized in the phrase: leadership mattered. All wanted candidates with strong instructional leadership capacity who had demonstrated evidence of visible leadership within the district. They wanted candidates who could relate to parents, and who knew how to use data to direct an instructional program. All considered demonstrated leadership as a heavily-weighted factor in selection. Superintendents in two districts described specifically what they were looking for related to leadership potential:

We're talking about teacher leadership capacity at the school level or at the district. So they could have served as a teacher leader in a building, department chair, grade level chair, committee chair, leadership team, taken on additional responsibilities, say intervention. Some of them have been leaders, some of them have been data team leaders, some of them have been parent engagement coordinators. One individual took on, had been doing things at the district level in terms of professional development in terms of teacher training, in terms of technology. We've looked for where they have taken opportunities to step forward and lead their colleagues and also to step forward to help the district meet its goal. So we've looked at, and some of those were individuals tasks, but some of those were just being willing to serve. A lot of them were serving on district committees, a lot of them are serving on school committees, a lot of them are leading school committees, a lot of them were doing a lot of independent work on curriculum in the summers. We were looking for people who were leaders without the title. That kind of became our mantra. We wanted leaders who didn't have the title, people who would step forward to be leaders and who did not have official titles to do so. The things we were specifically looking for: Leadership, and that's a broad term, but we need someone who others will follow and others will work hard for. Staff members will be motivated because of. We were looking for that. We also wanted to make sure that we had a deep background and experience as an academic leader, and that is something that across the state, across the nation that schools are doing a better job of, districts are doing a better job of, but we need leaders to have instruction. No longer can we accept principals and assistant principals that have a limited background in these areas.

The major finding related to differences in selecting ideal candidates is that the two urban districts seemed concerned with diversity of the candidate pool, whereas diversity did not factor into decisions made in rural districts. Rural districts take pride in knowing their people first-hand, and wanted best candidates, whereas urban districts actively sought out minority candidates. While rural, suburban, and urban districts wanted applicants who showed potential to work in high-need schools, personal antecedents, such as gender and race, only seemed to matter in urban district recruitment and screening.

Third Question of the Study

What factors influenced university and district processes in selecting final candidates? One major finding was that aspiring principal candidates need outstanding communication skills and

evidence of impactful performance. Communication skills weighed heavily in candidate screening and selection. School districts and HPU weighed communication skills, including writing and speaking, heavily as rubric elements. Reviewers of essays and applications paid attention to details of grammar and spelling. Interviewers listened for diction, organized responses, and articulation of ideas. Districts are more likely to select aspiring candidates who have demonstrated strong communication skills in school leadership responsibilities. Reviewers of applicant materials and observers of applicant behaviors also placed heavy emphasis on prior performance as an educator. District leaders targeted those who had evidence of preparedness and readiness to take on school leadership responsibilities, especially those who had demonstrated capacity to influence other adults through professional learning. One district leader stated:

We also wanted people who we felt like were good communicators, who could, because I mean part of the job of being an Assistant Principal and a Principal is dealing with, you know working with parents, so these folks needed to be able to be able to sit down with parents, have conversations with them, and work through any issues.

Fourth Question of the Study

What were major challenges in selecting aspiring candidates for the university-based principal preparation program? The quality of the public-school district and university partnership was enhanced by the role of the HPU grant manager. All districts specified the quick response time to questions and the willingness of the program manager to attend district information sessions as a factor that helped the partnership work in selecting candidates for the principal preparation program. However, there were several challenges that emerged as considerations for improvement in the process. HPU played a key role in advising and supporting districts, even as districts are co-participants in the process. Helping districts identify specific recruitment criteria depicting the characteristics of the type of the candidate they are seeking is key. In addition, to help the screening process remain more objective and less inflated when scoring the people “they know,” HPU may need to conduct some training in inter-rater reliability. One participant stated, “More focus and training on inter-rater reliability when using rubrics would be helpful. It was difficult to know if some scores were inflated by some raters, which places candidates in a competitive selection process at a disadvantage.”

HPU’s vulnerability in sharing control and ownership in the selection of graduate students to enroll was challenging due to graduate school policies and accreditation considerations, as well as districts seemed to want more involvement from HPU in providing direction on selection criteria and a presence of the university within district for recruiting purposes. Follow-up with non-selected candidates was handled at the district level, but HPU could play a role in potential development of the candidates. One of the candidates selected by a district was working in the US with a temporary visa. HPU was not able to admit teachers working in this country on a visa to a degree program. The fact that a respected faculty member was the district-university liaison helped mediate the issues as they arose. The district-university partnership involved HPU’s visibility in schools and also helping districts identify characteristics of principals with capacity to lead high-impact schools in order to shape their selection practices. Lastly, HPU can play a major role in follow-up with candidates not selected in final stages as they become candidates for grooming for future top-of-the-class candidates to enroll in a principal preparation program.

Discussion: Lessons Learned

The High Point University Leadership Academy offered insight into recruiting and selecting the most desirable candidates for admittance into a principal preparation program. Formal and informal processes occurred within each phase of recruiting, screening, and selection. As the researchers analyzed practices that were formal or informal, there were many lessons learned for future consideration in recruiting, screening, and selecting candidates in a co-designed process involving a district-university partnership.

First, the researchers found strong evidence to suggest that personalized, tactical recruitment is the key to achieving top-of-the-class candidates. While the evidence was clear and convincing that the tactic of targeting specific individuals and specific groups of individuals, especially with principal input during recruiting, one caution that emerged is that the pool of recruits dependent on “tapping” may result in an inequitable pool. With such a highly personalized approach and process, there can be both advantages and disadvantages as potential outcomes. In a competitive process where districts have only a specified and minimal number of open slots for designated candidates, this use of strategic targeting may leave some potential candidates unidentified, and out of the running, as potential candidates chose not to apply, as they were not part of the targeted population. As documented with one particular district, the district was offered one slot for a potential candidate to be admitted into the program. In the end, the district offered only one name as a possibility, suggesting a crippling of the recruitment process which may have deterred some candidates from even applying, if they suspected “known candidates” would be more likely to achieve the slot.

The second lesson learned is that subjectivity and objectivity play a role in identifying leadership applicants. Bennis (2009) observed, "To an extent, leadership is like beauty: It's hard to define, but you know it when you see it" (p. xxx). While objectivity is always the goal, in rural districts, stakeholders did in fact acknowledge the role of subjectivity throughout the recruitment and selection process. In rural districts, decisions about tapping educators as future principals were made based on personal and professional knowledge of the candidates, and personal antecedents, such as gender and race, did not seem to be factors in recruitment. However, in urban districts, there was an open and active process of recruiting minority candidates. The major objective data points used by rural, suburban, and urban districts, strongly influenced by the Advisory Board in a proactive effort to increase and strengthen objectivity, were:

- Years of experience
- Education Value-Added Assessment System (EVAAS) data
- Demonstrated leadership experiences within the district

Although screening and selection were designed to be objective purposefully from beginning to end, subjectivity also played a part in the process as school administrators assumed a role in tapping potential candidates. Data suggested that district leaders relied heavily, and in some cases 100%, on principal perceptions when it came to naming candidates who might be eligible for participation within the HPULA. Leadership is a human enterprise and prior knowledge, a variety of relationships, and numerous data points play a significant role in both candidate recruitment and selection.

The third lesson learned comes in the form of recommendations. When planning and implementing a recruitment, screening, and selection effort, key recommendations are:

- Acknowledge and purposefully plan for the potential impact that subjectivity can have on recruiting, screening, and selecting candidates for a principal preparation program. Ensure a diverse candidate pool as an outcome of recruitment.
- Utilize personalized recruitment efforts with explicit criteria of leader characteristics, competencies, and behaviors to attract the candidate pool the district needs. Decide upfront the role of diversity in candidate screening and selection. However, be cautious of decreasing the candidate pool, which may limit interest by underrepresented populations.
- Advocate for all schools related to leadership needs and place strong emphasis on the specific and unique needs of each individual school during recruitment and selection, as opposed to advocating for people with whom an allegiance may be obvious.
- Use recruitment and selection processes not only as a means to choose candidates for acceptance into principal preparation programs, but also as a means to foster and develop the talents and skillsets represented within a candidate pool. Be prepared to follow up with candidates who were not selected now, but demonstrate potential leadership.
- Identify and secure additional sources of revenue to increase the number of non-traditional principal preparation programs with quality recruitment and selection efforts.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that recruitment, screening, and selection tactics have an impact on the quality of candidates chosen to participate in a principal preparation program. It is pivotal that educational leaders create a successful and meaningful pathway to the principal position for those who are interested and highly capable of leading. Building a strong and effective pool of aspiring principals is a necessary springboard for educational change, growth, strengthening, and transformation. Future research to continue exploring effective, high-yield strategies for the recruitment, screening, and selection of the most qualified individuals for school leadership programs is warranted. This study yielded insight into district practices to identify ideal candidates to meet leadership needs of public school districts with high-need schools. After graduation from the HPULA, aspiring leaders will return to their home districts where they will begin their three-year commitment to remain in their home districts to serve as a school-level administrator at a high-need school. Only time and future study can address their preparedness for the principalship.

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