

2018


## Student Perceptions of Enhancing the Internship Experience for Online Principal Preparation Programs

Bob Nicks  
*Lamar University*

Tilisa Thibodeaux  
*Lamar University*

Gary Martin  
*Lamar University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr>

 Part of the [Educational Administration and Supervision Commons](#), [Educational Leadership Commons](#), and the [Online and Distance Education Commons](#)

[Tell us](#) how this article helped you.

---

### Recommended Citation

Nicks, Bob; Thibodeaux, Tilisa; and Martin, Gary (2018) "Student Perceptions of Enhancing the Internship Experience for Online Principal Preparation Programs," *School Leadership Review*. Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 3.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.sfasu.edu/slr/vol13/iss1/3>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Secondary Education and Educational Leadership at SFA ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in School Leadership Review by an authorized editor of SFA ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact [cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu](mailto:cdsscholarworks@sfasu.edu).

## ***Student Perceptions of Enhancing the Internship Experience for Online Principal Preparation Programs***

*Bob Nicks<sup>i</sup>*  
*Lamar University*

*Tilisa Thibodeaux*  
*Lamar University*

*Gary Martin*  
*Lamar University*

---

Principal preparation programs understand the need for relevant internship activities that bridge the gap between theory and practice (Anast-May, Buckner, & Geer, 2011; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen (2007). Principal preparation programs utilizing distance technology are also charged with meeting this expectation and the electronic learning technologies have changed learning from restrictive to flexible, accessible, and innovative (Tseng & Gardner, 2016). The internship is a widely accepted program component of principal preparation that provides the student with actual administrative experience during the certification process; however, despite the mandates from national accreditation organizations and state certification agencies, the literature is replete with criticisms concerning the effectiveness of the internship experience (Cheney & Davis, 2011; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neill, 2005; Perez et al., 2011). Limited data in the form of student feedback, especially as it pertains to learner perceptions of the internship experience, have been collected (Gordon, Oliver, & Solis, 2016). According to Thiede (2012), it is important for faculty to seek out and study what students are thinking and saying about online education as most higher education institutions’ future enrollments may be predicated upon quality online courses.

While the structure, delivery, and practice of principal internships will vary between the traditional face-to-face delivery model and the online internship, key elements to a successful internship experience are important to both delivery models. Goldsmith (2012) accentuates the importance of utilizing technology in principal and superintendent practicum programs as it has been done in the social sciences and medicine. Additionally, school district superintendents are pressuring universities preparing candidates for school leadership positions to align programs with the realities of the practice (Williams & Szal, 2011). Further, many university principal preparation programs have a significant percentage of students who are full-time educators and while this arrangement affords the individual student opportunities to access an appropriate internship setting, it is a challenge for preparation programs to provide an intense, comprehensive internship to meet the needs for working educators seeking principal licensure (Guillaume & Vitucci, 2014; Brown, 2017). For this reason, it is important to seek student

---

<sup>i</sup> **Bob Nicks** may be reached at [renicks@lamar.edu](mailto:renicks@lamar.edu).

feedback and create a body of evidence that may guide those responsible for principal internship content to provide appropriate learning experiences for interns in principal preparation programs.

### **Review of the Literature**

Internships provide opportunities for learners to connect theory to practice within the context of the learning environment (Cunningham, 2007; Havard, Morgan, & Patrick, 2010). Current school administrators have reported that aspiring school administrators need more opportunities to understand the culture of the schools in which they work to meet the demands of today's learners (Anast-May et al., 2011). Still yet, other administrators emphasize the importance to engage in curriculum development and analyze student data (Lehman, 2013). Anast-May et al. (2011) suggested that the growth of internship programs in educational administration warrants exploration into the types of activities that should be considered as part of the internship experience. As such, the institution of a more structured set of field experiences for future school principals is centrally important to the entire program reform effort (Williams & Wintringer, 2016). To examine the types of activities that should be included, the literature was consulted to describe the alignment of internship activities to state standards, supervision and support in the online learning environment, collaborative opportunities, and overall design of the internship.

### **The Need for Alignment of Internship Activities to State Standards**

According to the Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) Handbook (2016), state and national program standards for principal internship experiences encourage relevant activities and faculty analysis of program quality. Continuous improvement of the internship is also an objective of a program seeking national recognition and by design, feedback from students who have recently completed the internship are important to this process. Gathering and analyzing evidence such as student feedback to enhance the quality of a preparation program is required by CAEP. In contemporary society, the changing issues and responsibilities of the building principal are constantly evolving and this presents a challenge to principal preparation programs to present learning opportunities that are relevant in the preparation of effective school leaders (Anast-May et al., 2001). While it is understood that the internship is an integral element to properly preparing future principals, many internship programs do not offer needed experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Havard et al., 2010).

Valesky, Carter, and Huene-Johnson (2007) described that reviewing internship activities and making changes to the internship program must not only reflect the changing nature of the principal position, but also incorporate appropriate rigor and a pre-determined objective for each activity. Further, when internship activities lack key elements such as purpose, structure, and rigor, the benefits normally associated with a quality internship are not met. Historical studies on principal program internships report that aspiring administrators were not provided enough opportunities within the internship to be successful with challenges schools face today (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2012). Johnson (2016) found that alignment to state mandates, accrediting bodies, school district needs, learning needs, and community stakeholders are among those that should be considered in the internship preparation program.

### **The Need for Internship Supervision in the Online Learning Environment**

Goldsmith and Martin (2009) noted that online courses and programs are a growing trend to meet the diverse needs of learners. Marter and deBettencourt (2012) indicated that online learning has flourished and been recognized as a viable alternate instructional delivery method in higher education. While Dotson and Bian (2013) recognize that online delivery of graduate education programs is increasing; however, questions arise as to the effectiveness of the online facilitated graduate school internship. Research by Gray and DiLoreto (2016) interviewed 187 graduate students in an online educational leadership program with the purpose of examining learner perceptions of the relationship between student satisfaction and perceived learning and course structure, learner interaction, student engagement, and instructor presence within the online environment. The researchers hypothesized that course structure, learner interaction, and instructor presence would have an impact on student perceived learning and student satisfaction. Student engagement was hypothesized to mediate and support the relationship between the instructor and learner experience. Findings from the study reported that course structure, instructor presence, and learner interaction had a significant impact on perceived learning, although learner interaction was the only variable that did not have a major impact on student satisfaction. The researchers commented that the findings of this study conflicted with previous studies regarding the relationship between course structure and perceived student learning.

Winslow, Eliason, & Thiede (2016) noted that the quality of the internship directly impacted the quality of the supervision, indicating that administrator's overall beliefs about supervision influenced their supervisory practice. Further, Gray and DiLoreto (2016) noted that student engagement and levels of perceived learning within the online learning environment were contingent upon variables such as course structure, learner interaction, and instructor presence where student engagement partially mediated the impact of the variables. Continuous supervision between expert faculty members and interns in regard to desired leadership behaviors are essential for aspiring administrators (Havard et al., 2010). Based on the research, we conclude that supervision in the online learning environment is relevant to consider when investigating student perceptions and recommendations for improving the principal internship in an online environment.

### **The Need for Opportunities to Collaborate**

To build a school culture, potential administrators need the opportunity to connect and collaborate with others on campus (Anast-May et al., 2011). One benefit of conferencing is the ability to provide learners with the opportunity to collaborate and reflect on specific instances within their schools to help them learn how to solve problems immediately or think of ways to solve issues when confronted with similar situations in the future (Figueiredo-Brown, Ringler, & James, 2015). Building and maintaining collaborative relationships was one of the five performance areas ranked to drive the curriculum of a principal program in the state of Arkansas (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016), confirming the need for interns to build necessary relationships between the university instructor and students within the internship context. Further, Hart (2012) identified a sense of belonging to a learning community, peer support, and communication with the instructor as key elements to a successful online experience.

Yang & Chang (2012) found that online technology has enabled a more interactive learning process between instructor and students. Dialogue that occurs within smaller groups of like-

mindful individuals helps people collaborate and envision an outcome that will help solve problems (Figueiredo-Brown et al., 2015). Reviewing videotapes of conferences, essentially observational videos, assisted students in learning about their own conferencing skills (Gordon et al., 2016) when working with other people.

The University of Pennsylvania uses a cohort model in which collaboration is the most authentic learning component in the program where discussions are organized into four areas: instructional, organizational, public, and evidence-based leadership. The cohort model helps interns reflect and collaborate to make necessary shifts in theory and practice with ongoing feedback from professors and peers. The model offers various opportunities to connect via coaching and mentoring, meetings, innovations lab, simulations, and fellowships (Gordon et al., 2016). At Lethbridge University in Alberta, Canada, one of the most notable experiences shared by interns was that the internship provided an arena for students to meet, collaborate, and solve problems (Mombourquette & Bedard, 2012). After consulting several studies, we have identified that opportunities to collaborate are an essential component for internship programs in educational administration.

### **The Need for an Authentic and Diverse Internship Design**

Several studies suggest that a diversified internship experience with multi-dimensional learning opportunities are relevant to develop future leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Figueiredo-Brown et al., 2015; Lehman, 2013; Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). Transforming leadership preparation programs is important if we are to prepare individuals for increasingly diverse schools and a myriad of difficult situations they will face daily (Guerra & Pazy, 2016). Opportunities to work with multiple stakeholders such as parents, students, and staff are a critical component for principal preparation programs and internships (Pijanowski & Peer, 2016). Learners value activities such as problem-based learning, simulations, collaboration about experiences, and case studies (Gordon et al., 2016). However, Mombourquette and Bedard (2012) noted that fitting internship activities within semester timelines does not “jive well with the rhythm of the field” because the activities become an additional requirement instead of the core of the program (p.16), therefore timing of the internship activities should be considered. The appropriate use of technology tools appeals to multiple learning styles and leads to participant satisfaction (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008), thus, identifying the appropriate amount of work required of students is also important. Lehman (2013) noted that principal interns identified a wide array of hands-on experiences, but that a great mentor and university support were among the top two categories (Havard et al., 2010). Further, recognition of, and preparation for, cultural diversity needs in terms of diverse populations needs were identified as a key component to build into the internship experience (Kemp-Graham, 2015).

Historically, the value of principal internships in preparation for authentic learning opportunities has been a constant topic of debate (Lehman, 2013). Figueiredo-Brown et al., (2015) reported that the learner environment must be carefully constructed to enhance the internship experience. Part of the learning context requires that universities consider the learners’ ability to observe topics and implement strategies as an integral part of the internship experience. For example, interns that plan for and participate in the change process learn to identify and own the process with opportunities to lead rather than observe or participate. This activity lends itself to giving interns opportunities to lead an initiative to support a new program for the campus and learn how

to plan for change and develop innovative ideas. Further, giving potential administrators authentic projects to complete could enhance personal satisfaction and allows for learners to truly understand the culture of the school environment in which they exist (Anast-May et al., 2011).

Gordon et al. (2016) found that interns described the need for course-embedded field experiences that were long-term in nature. Embedded field experiences provide authentic learning opportunities for interns that result in an increased ability in the area of instructional leadership, reflective practice, collegiality, and collaboration. As such, these experiences were perceived to be more meaningful to administrators in the field than university preparation programs (Johnson, 2016). Browne-Ferrigno and Muth (2006) found that authentic learning experiences positively impacted interns' knowledge and skills about classroom practices. One educational leadership preparation program that Gordon and his associates examined was at Manhattanville College; the school was identified as having an innovative leadership program. Learners at this school explained that authentic learning opportunities and feedback helped them reflect upon their teaching practices that impacted their instructional leadership performance. Reform efforts of the principal internship provided insight that learners needed more opportunities to apply their learning in authentic settings (Cunningham, 2007; Havard et al., 2010).

The literature identifies various aspects that signify the importance of the principal internship experience in preparing future school administrators. As such, the following research question guided this study: What are student recommendations for enhancing the online principal internship experience? This study examined student perceptions of the internship experience in one M. Ed. Program and analyzed candid course discussion boards to measure the perceptions of 340 online students as to their perceptions of improving online internship experiences. Student recommendations provide guiding information pertaining to desired internship activities, recommendations for supervision, support, and collaboration, and overall design of the internship experience.

### **Method**

This study aimed to examine student perceptions for enhancing the internship experience to discover common threads that students felt would improve their experience for online Principal preparation programs. To do this, the method for data collection needed to be open-ended for students to provide candid responses. In qualitative research, the data is meant to be analyzed to provide “descriptions and themes using text analysis [to] interpret the larger meaning of the findings” (Creswell, 2012, p.16). Therefore, this study used a phenomenological approach which focused on revealing the experiences participants have in common with one another to explore those experiences and analyze the data into themes (Creswell, 2012). Open-ended questions, as part of online discussion boards in the program, were used to seek their perceptions of the internship experience for the purpose of gaining ideas for program enhancement.

### **The Program and Setting**

The regional university in this study has a fully online educational leadership program that has approximately 1,800 graduate students seeking principal certification each year. The program began as an online program in 2007. The M. Ed. program is a 36-hour and 18-month program that includes a 15-month internship. Following a review of the research and various national accreditation standards and state requirements for internships, the faculty determined that the

design of the internship must include a minimum of 300 hours, be long term to the extent that opening and closing of school activities would occur, students would be active interns while taking courses to ensure theory to practice reflection, adequate monitoring of progress was provided, and that an acceptable alternative to onsite observations be developed and implemented.

To ensure adequate monitoring of progress throughout the internship, the program of study includes six credit hours of internship. The first internship course is a required course at the halfway point (7<sup>th</sup> course) where students are expected to have completed 150 intern hours and have a formative evaluation completed by the campus mentor. The final internship course is at the end of the program (12<sup>th</sup> course) where students must have completed the required 300-hour minimum to enroll. The final internship course includes submission of logs and reflections, a summative evaluation completed by the campus mentor, passing a multiple-choice and scenario exam similar to the State certification test, and passing the comprehensive exam. Various other activities and assignments are included in both internship courses. Interns have access to various educational supervisors during the program. All students have a trained campus mentor which is typically the school principal. Additionally, there is a full-time course professor that oversees the intern, a university field supervisor that assesses leadership videos, a university practicum coach who conducts three online conferences during the program, and an instructional associate (IA) that grades class assignments. The IA's in the program are practicing school superintendents.

In order to meet the State requirement of three 45-minute onsite observations of the intern, the online program requires students to submit three 45-minute videos of participating in or leading an intern activity. At least one video must be leading the activity. The use and experience of creating and submitting videos align with the State's new certification requirements. Each video is reviewed and feedback given in regard to the ability to meet a specific State competency versus an older tradition of simply logging hours of generic activities in a leadership area. New State standards require intern activities to be authentic experiences that are directly tied to competencies.

Students also are required to attend three web conferences with a university professor to discuss progress and learning. This alternative approach to the traditional onsite observation has proven to provide greater insight into the intern's performance whereas traditional onsite visits occur during the student's conference period. An outline of the progression through the program is as follows:

1. The first course is an orientation and introduction to educational leadership. Students seek and receive permission from a certified campus mentor to oversee their practicum/internship. Campus mentors undertake an online mentor training. The internship plan with required activities is given to students at the end of the course.
2. The second course covers educational research and students develop an action research plan. They begin logging hours from the internship plan and begin their research study. Hours compiled on the action research study count as overall intern hours.
3. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> courses, interns continue to log hours from the intern plan and submit one video and attend one web observation conference.
4. The 7<sup>th</sup> course is the first internship course designed to assess progress and evaluate performance at the halfway point. Students are expected to have completed 150 of the

required 300 hours and have adequate evaluations completed by campus mentors. They also submit a second video and attend a second web observation conference.

5. In the 8<sup>th</sup> - 11<sup>th</sup> courses, student complete the internship and submit the third video.
6. The 12<sup>th</sup> course is the final internship course designed to collect all internship documentation and reflect and share learning from the experience with fellow interns. Students must submit the log and reflections, attend a final web observation conference, pass a comprehensive exam, and pass a multiple-choice competency exam similar to the State certification exam. Final campus mentor evaluations are collected and assessed. Students are required to complete intern activities in 38 areas of school leadership. Examples include opening and closing school, instructional leadership, general office administration, food service, transportation, discipline, etc. Interns are expected to move from early observation and interviews to participation and then to leadership of the activity.

### **Participants**

The population for this research study comprised 340 current students enrolled in the online educational leadership M. Ed. Program in the southeastern part of the United States. All students were employed in PK-12 settings and were completing their final program internship course. Of the 340 students that participated in the study, 226 were female, making up 66% of the total population of this study and 114 were male, making up 34% of the total population. The demographic makeup included 269 Caucasian students, 37 African American students, 22 Hispanic students, 7 American Indian students, and 5 Asian students. Out of these students, 316 were residents of the state of Texas and 24 were out-of-state students. For the purpose of identifying key elements that enhanced the internship program, a demographic breakdown was not necessary, but including such information does depict the overall makeup of the group studied. Follow-up research will explicate student responses based on demographic information for common themes and threads that emerge within particular groups of people.

### **The Research Questions and Our Research Focus**

Open-ended discussion board questions were used to determine the perceptions of the internship experience for the purpose of reviewing internship activities for program enhancement. The following prompts were used to elicit candid student responses:

1. What internship activities should the university keep in its requirements?
2. What additional internship activities or requirements should be included in the internship program?
3. What internship activities and requirements should be changed or deleted?
4. Additional comments and recommendations?

### **Qualitative Data Collection**

Responses from 340 students from the Fall of 2016 and the Spring of 2017 were obtained from three different cohorts. Complete anonymity of research participants was ensured by removing all identifying information such as the participant's name, grade, and location. Written responses to the online discussion boards were reviewed and those that addressed the research questions were extracted for data analysis.



### **Qualitative Data Analysis**

An analysis of student narrative discussion boards was conducted in the final course in the program, the Internship. To do this, written responses were analyzed to reveal key aspects that interns felt were important to the internship, as well as aspects that should be included to enhance the overall program. Conventional content analysis was used to develop broad categories of recommendations for the internship as perceived by the participants (Creswell, 2012). Broad categories were identified and coded into themes that are shared in the findings of this study.

### **Findings of the Study**

An analysis of discussion board responses to the three research question prompts indicated key findings concerning the enhancement of internship activities. Further analysis of responses to the open-ended additional comments yielded recommendations addressing three areas for enhancement. The three areas were additional support and supervision, increased collaboration, and changes to the overall design of the internship experience.

### **Recommendations for Internship Activities**

First, researchers identified six types of internship activities most desired by interns completing the program; (1) internship activities that aligned with standards, (2) shadowing campus mentor and other administrators, (3) case studies as a teaching and learning method, (4) leadership use of technology, (5) leading faculty professional development experiences, and (6) working with community members. Overlapping comments were extracted from the student narratives and were included to assist in the interpretation of the findings. Also included under subsequent headings are the additional findings that students identified that would enhance the internship.

The first activity indicated a desire for internship activities to be aligned with specific state and national standards. Interns wanted to have a clear understanding of the standard the activity was targeting. Responses indicated that students believed they needed to measure their content and skill level with what the national and state standards cited as being required for successful school leadership. Additionally, they noted that greater familiarity and experience with each standard better prepared them for the state certification exam.

“I liked the way the professor associated required activities to the course objectives – we knew why we were being asked to do an assignment.

“Understanding why we were doing certain activities, such as preparing for the state exam, gave relevance to the work we were doing.”

The second activity, shadowing opportunities for interns, was noted as being a strength in the internship program. Student responses indicated a desire that more shadowing activities be required in the program as respondents perceive this activity as an opportunity to spend quality time with the site mentor. Intern recommendations also included a request for opportunities to shadow school administrators from different campuses and grade levels in order to view the challenges presented to other administrators in the school district.

“It would be great if we could shadow administrators on different campuses and at different grade levels.”

“Shadowing activities was very beneficial and gave me a feel for the principal position.”

Third, respondents noted the value in real-world case studies and scenarios and believed more activities for case studies would be merited. Students reported that the intern is often not allowed to be directly involved in sensitive or serious issues but case study and scenario analysis gave them this opportunity.

“Case studies helped me understand the relationship between theory and administrative problem solving.”

“Scenarios that include problems for the principal are good because they will prepare us for scenarios on the state exam.”

Further, participants wanted additional opportunities to use technology (software programs) that assist the school administrator in guiding and managing campus programs. Interns understood that the ability to generate, manage, and use data was essential in making effective decisions.

“Internship activities gave me an opportunity to work with administrative programs and data management at the campus level.”

“Data driven decision-making should rely on good data and while my principal showed me which data is used to make certain decisions I feel that we need more activities that require technology.”

The fifth activity noted was that students felt that opportunities to lead faculty professional development should be increased, if possible. They noted that leading a staff development activity gave them credibility among their peers. Additionally, they noted that presenting to teachers was much more difficult than presenting to students. They felt leading professional development was a crucial skill for a school administrator.

“I developed the material and led my grade level in a professional learning activity. It was a good experience.”

“I liked having the flexibility to choose the type of professional development activity that we could lead. My site mentor helped arrange the activity and it was an important part of my internship.”

Additionally, students recognized the importance of working with the community and providing information to campus stakeholders as an important element to becoming a successful principal. Opportunities to work with campus decision-making teams that included community members, parent-teacher organizations, campus business partners, and others during the internship experience was seen as a positive requirement by students.

“Working as the campus administrator assigned to the volunteer program and contact person for the Parent-Teacher Organization was a learning experience for me during the internship. This administrative responsibility is something I knew little about as a teacher.”

“School partnerships with business and the community was a great topic and it demonstrated how to increase campus resources when there is no money in the school budget.”

### **Recommendations for Supervision and Support**

Based on student responses, researchers identified two individuals associated with the online internship that were instrumental to having a successful internship experience. Students valued

access to the course instructor and campus mentor for opportunities to speak about individual questions or issues as being extremely important. Virtual office hours, web conferences, discussion boards with instructor feedback, email access, and access to cell phone number of the instructor were strategies utilized to encourage communication between student and instructor and each identified as needed and appreciated.

“The availability of web conferences provided an opportunity to ask questions each week.”

“Most instructors would post an announcement each week in the courses and the information was usually very helpful. It provided me with assurance that I was doing everything I should be doing.”

The site mentor is a required element for administrative internships in most states and usually this role is filled by the campus principal or other certified administrator on the campus where the intern will be completing university requirements. The site mentor in this online certification program also formally evaluates the intern during the program and validates that required activities have been completed. The site mentor plays a key role in guiding the student during the internship and it is not surprising that this supervisory position was the focus of many student responses and is a significant theme based on the number of responses.

“Working closely with my campus principal throughout the internship has given me the opportunity to get to know him better and he has had an opportunity to get to know me as well.”

“The site supervisor provided support for my internship and without his help in scheduling presentation options I could not have completed all of the internship requirements.”

A significant number of student responses focused on the support needed to complete the internship requirements. This included technical support for manipulating spreadsheets and tables, filming and uploading videos, and scanning and submitting assignments to the online learning management and data management systems. Other responses included APA and professional report writing assistance as well as reflective writing expertise. Further responses noted the need for emotional support in the areas of making adequate progress and assistance with getting through difficulties that arise while serving as an intern.

“I appreciated having access to university staff when it came time to submit key assessments during the program.”

“The first time I loaded an artifact into the data management system it was hard, but after reaching out for help it was easier. Toward the end of the program it was not difficult.”

### **Recommendations for Collaboration**

Student responses indicated the importance and need for collaboration with supervisors and fellow interns. Students appreciated course discussion boards where each student posted comments to a prompt and were required to respond to at least two other student postings. Web conferences were also cited as an excellent opportunity to collaborate with the professor and other cohort members. Other responses included weekly overviews and announcements posted by the professor were helpful along with student use of Facebook. Email to professors and fellow students was deemed crucial.

“The discussion boards allow us to share our experiences and view the perspectives of others. I enjoyed the activities that required collaboration and would suggest that even more activities be provided for this purpose.”

“The web conferences provided a means for cohort members to grow closer by getting to know each other. I found that having access to the professor by attending web conferences gave the online courses the benefit of face-to-face courses with the convenience of online learning.”

### **Recommendations for the Design of the Internship**

Student responses indicated they appreciated the 15-month internship with the first course in the certification program dedicated to the development of the internship plan and the capstone course at the end of the program dedicated to the assessment of their intern experiences. The 15-month internship provided opportunities for administrative activities at the beginning and end of a school year and allowed students to participate in long-term projects during the school year. Student responses also indicated an appreciation for having an internship checkpoint at the mid-point of the program. The checkpoint provided feedback to the student as to the quality of their internship and assurance that they were on schedule with completing program requirements. Student responses also indicated appreciation for flexibility in selecting internship activities that could be chosen based upon specific needs of the campus and in the case of out-of-state students, the opportunity to select activities associated with individual state initiatives.

“I have truly learned a lot and grown as an educator thanks to this program. My knowledge of what goes on “with the other side” has been enlightening. During the semester that I got to fill in as an assistant principal was a huge learning experience and the design of the internship was really beneficial.”

“The checkpoints in the internship were very helpful.”

### **Implications for Future Research**

Several findings from this research study are prime for future research opportunities. Whereas the current study found a student desire to shadow other leaders than their principal, a crucial goal for future research is to discover which comparative shadowing experiences would lead to the greatest degree and value of learning. Examples would include but not limited to principal versus assistant principal, male versus female, large versus small, urban versus suburban or rural school settings as well as differing concentrations of various ethnic populations. A second goal of further research is to isolate needed intern activities where students report not being allowed to gain direct experience. Such activities may include faculty dismissal or reprimands, serious and/or sensitive student or parent issues, building administration meetings or planning at the district level, and various opportunities to display independent leading. The findings of this research could lead to the most appropriate topics for case studies and scenarios.

Further implications could examine the use of technology in administrative and instructional roles. Questions about how to navigate administrative technology and pull data for the purpose of understanding and interpreting state accountability reports could be explicated. Additionally, technology for teaching and learning could be investigated further. For example, interns may desire to learn methods that would enhance the learning environment and could ultimately inform decisions made about purchasing technology on their respective campuses.

## **Limitations**

As described in the Methods section, all participants came from one M. Ed. degree program at one regional institution. Data from one program may not fully represent the viewpoints as it applies to other master's level students. In reference to the online internship, not all master's students in other programs participate in a fully online master's degree program in educational leadership, therefore, the study findings are most comparable to those institutions that use online learning or blended learning.

Additional limitations lie in the findings of the study because some of the students may have spoken favorably about a program they are currently in; however, there is no reason to believe this occurred based on the candid student responses for recommendations to the internship program. Additional studies that sample students in other courses or master's degree programs could strengthen the findings of this study. Follow up questions and interviews would enable the researchers to acquire a more in-depth view of the learners' perceptions.

## **Conclusion and Recommendations**

The purpose of this study was to seek recommendations from online principal internship students as to elements of the program they found most beneficial and to make suggestions for program enhancement. The literature review grounded and confirmed the study findings. Several categories/themes of internship activities emerged from intern responses and three additional areas that provided guidance for program enhancement of the online principal internship program.

Based on these findings, we can assume that universities looking to develop online educational leadership programs should consider the recommendations by students currently in an online program. Recommendations included:

- Aligning internship activities to professional standards
- Internships should span the length of the program
- Flexibility in selecting internship activities
- Incorporating feedback opportunities
- Opportunities for collaboration and interaction between instructors and students
- Adequate supervision and mentoring

Narrative responses included three additional recommendations: internship supervision and support, collaboration with supervisors and fellow interns and the design of the internship – all of these are important to consider when constructing internship activities. These findings suggest that interns associate a trajectory of value of the program based on program consistency, collaboration and a carefully constructed learning environment that promotes their goals of becoming a future administrator. From this, we generated a set of recommendations from the analysis of student narrative discourse and our own experiences in designing the internship experience. The brief rationale below describes the list of recommendations:

Align internship activities with state and national standards and communicate the relationship to students so that they will understand the rationale for the assignment and the association to professional expectations in the field. This alignment should include practices that best prepare interns to pass their respective state certification exams whether it be the use of creating videos,

writing constructive responses to field-based scenarios, or the demonstration of degree of mastery to specific elements of competencies or standards.

Design a long-term internship that spans the duration of the program coursework and identify relationships of the internship assignments to course content. Provide for discussion and feedback within the internship that identifies the relationship of theory to practice.

Out-of-state students should be allowed flexibility in selecting activities that are meaningful to specific state initiatives to ensure relevance. All students should be given opportunities to select internship activities that are meaningful to their educational placement. Allowing the student to have input in developing the internship plan at the beginning of the program encourages a successful internship experience.

Discussion board activities, multiple checkpoints during the internship that provides information to the student, and opportunities for interns to discuss program issues with the course instructor during web conferences are examples of feedback and collaboration between instructor and student. Student feedback is valuable both during the internship and as an overall evaluation technique at the end of the program.

Establish strategies within the internship that promotes professor/student and student/student collaboration and interaction. Utilize virtual office hours, web conferencing, course announcement, email, and phone communication to promote collaboration and interaction. Minimize the number of individuals participating in web conferences to encourage maximum opportunities for personal attention to student needs. Encourage students to develop blogs, face book pages, and other social media for the purpose of collaboration and development of professional relationships between students.

Online internship experiences require additional staff for supervision and mentoring due to the nature of the delivery model. Providing field experience supervisors, specialists to assist students with video and data management program uploads, and site supervisors are needed support mechanisms for online internship delivery models. Access to the course instructor is also an important element to the student in understanding assignments and other program requirements.

Online principal certification programs and the accompanying internship are gaining in popularity as more students are choosing this delivery model each year. It is imperative that the preparation program offering online certification develop course and internship content that meets state and national standards and prepares future administrators with the knowledge and skills needed by successful school principals.

### References

- Anast-May, L., Buckner, B. & Geer, G. (2011). Redesigning principal internships: Practicing principals' perspectives. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 6(1), 1-7. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ972878.pdf>

- Brown, C. (2017). The Persistence and Attrition of Online Learners. *School Leadership Review*, 12(1), 47-58.
- Browne-Ferrigno, T., & Muth, R. (2006). Leadership mentoring and situated learning: Catalysts for principalship readiness and lifelong mentoring. *Mentoring and Tutoring*, 14(3), 275-295.
- CAEP Accreditation Handbook (Version 3 – March 2016). *Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation*. Retrieved from [caepnet.org/accreditation/caep-accreditation/caep-accreditation-handbook](http://caepnet.org/accreditation/caep-accreditation/caep-accreditation-handbook)
- Cheney, G. R. & Davis, J. (2011). Gateways to the principalship: State power to improve the quality of school leaders. *Center for American Progress*. Retrieved from <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k-12/reports/2011/10/24/10461/gateways-to-the-principalship/>
- Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative and qualitative research* (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Education.
- Cunningham, W. (2007). *A handbook for educational leadership interns: A rite of passage*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.
- Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M. T., & Cohen, C. (2007). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute. Retrieved from <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/Documents/Preparing-School-Leaders.pdf>
- Dotson, K. & Bian, H. (2013). Supervision on site: A critical factor in the online facilitated internship. *Quarterly Review on Distance Education*, 14(2). Retrieved from <http://www.infoagepub.com/qrde-issue.html?i=p54c3c39c59eed>
- Figueiredo-Brown, R., Ringler, M. C., & James, M. (2015). Strengthening a principal preparation internship by focusing on diversity issues. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 10(2), 36-52. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1083098.pdf>
- Fry, B., Bottoms, G. & O'Neill, K. (2005). The principal internship: How can we get it right? *Southern Regional Education Board – Challenge to Lead*. Retrieved from [https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/05v02\\_principal\\_internship\\_0.pdf](https://www.sreb.org/sites/main/files/file-attachments/05v02_principal_internship_0.pdf)
- Goldsmith, L. (2012). A case for an online educational administrator practicum: A TCPEA position paper. *School Leadership Review*, 7(2), 3-10.
- Goldsmith, L. & Martin, G. E. (2009). Developing and implementing an effective online educational leadership internship. *International Journal of Educational Leadership*, 4(1), 1-12. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1068484.pdf>
- Gordon, S. P., Oliver, J., & Solis, R. (2016). Successful innovations in educational leadership preparation. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 11(2), 51-70. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1123995.pdf>
- Gray, J. A. & DiLoreto, M. (2016). The effects of student engagement, student satisfaction, and perceived learning in online learning environments. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 11(1), 1-20. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1103654.pdf>

- Guerra, P. & Pazez, L. (2016). Transforming educational leadership preparation: starting with ourselves. *The Qualitative Report*, 21(10), 1751-1784.
- Guillaume, C. & Vitucci, A. (2014). Quality M.Ed. principal Licensure degrees + conscientious students = leader principals. *Forum on Public Policy: A Journal of The Oxford Round Table*. Retrieved from <https://www.questia.com/library/journal/1G!1497796511/quality-m-ed-principal-licensure-degrees-conscientious>
- Hart, C. (2012). Factors associated with student persistence in an online program of study: A review of the literature. *Journal of Interactive Online Learning*, 11(1), 19-42.
- Havard, T. S., Morgan, J., & Patrick, L. (2010). Providing authentic leadership opportunities through collaboratively developed internships: A university-school district partnership initiative. *Journal of Research on Leadership Education*, 5(12.6), 460-480. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ913599.pdf>
- Kemp-Graham, K. Y. (2015). Missed opportunities: Preparing aspiring school leaders for bold social justice school leadership needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century skills. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 10(21), 1-33.
- Johnson, A. D., (2016). Principal Perceptions of the effectiveness of university educational leadership preparation and professional learning. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 11(1), 1-17.
- Lehman, L. (2013). Principal internships in Indiana: A promising or perilous experience? *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 8(1), 121-139. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1012998.pdf>
- Marter, T. J. & deBettencourt, L. U. (2012). Using a hybrid model to prepare special educators to teach students identified with ASD Rural. *Special Education Quarterly*, 31(3), 12-19.
- Menchaca, M. & Bekele, T. (2008). Learner and instructor identified success factors in distance education. *Distance Education*, 29(3), 231-252.
- Mombourquette, C. & Bedard, G. J. (2012). The internship and school leader preparation: An inquiry and reflection. *International Studies in Educational Administration*, 40(2), 3-17.
- Perez, L. G., Uline, C., Johnson, J., James-Ward, C., & Bason, M. R. (2011). Foregrounding fieldwork in leadership preparation: The transformative capacity of authentic inquiry. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 47(1), 3-17.  
doi:10.1177/0011000010378614
- Pijanowski, J. C. & Peer, D. K. (2016). Launching a principal preparation program for a high needs rural school. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation*, 11(2), 104-115. Retrieved from <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext.pdf>
- Thiede, R. (2012). Student Perceptions of Online Courses for School Administrators. *School Leadership Review*, 7(2), 64-76.
- Tseng, H. & Gardner, T. (2016). Enhancing students' self-efficacy, elaboration, and critical thinking skills in a collaborative educator preparation program. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 17(2), 15-28.
- Valesky, T. C., Carter, C., & Huene-Johnson, S. (2007, November). *Developing a collaborative internship program using SREB guidelines*. Paper presented at the Southern Regional Council of Educational Administration Conference. Kansas City, KS.
- Williams, H. & Szal, D. (2011). Candidates assessment of a principal preparation program. *Education*, 131(3), 481-485.



- Williams, H. & Wintringer, J. (2016). An analysis of a school administration internship experience. *Education*, 136(3), 307-311. Retrieved from <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/prin/ed/2016/00000136/00000003>
- Winslow, R. D., Eliason, M., & Thiede, K. W., (2016). Comparing the effect of two internship structures on supervision experience and learning. *Journal of Organizational & Educational Leadership*, 1(2), 1-26.
- Yang, C. & Chang, Y. S. (2012). Assessing the effects of interactive blogging on student attitudes toward peer interaction, learning motivation, and academic achievements. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 28(2), 126-135.