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Maximizing the Needs of School Leaders in Online Educational Leadership Coursework

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Abstract: A steady increase in online instruction occurred from the 1990s to 2019, with a swift change, during the pandemic. However, during an instructional delivery change, are university instructors prepared to shift to the virtual classroom that appropriately aligns with student expectations of a meaningful online course? This is significant since student evaluations of instructor behavior are often an influential measure in the university tenure process. This current study investigated the expectations of school leaders in a graduate program as they prepare for a career in the PK-12 setting. In this study, graduate students in a school leadership program ranked the most and least important instructor behaviors in an online course. Recognizing the priorities of the PK-12 candidate provides university faculty with guidance on how to best design and implement online courses to the needs and desires of graduate students while maximizing instructor resources and meeting accreditation criteria.

Keywords: online instruction, student satisfaction, school leaders, PK-12 administrators, graduate program, university faculty

Introduction

School leaders, specifically principals or superintendents, have become the fulcrum of responsibility for PK-12 student success. "School leaders hold the formal authority, responsibility, and discretion for creating the very conditions and supports that promote student achievement" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 562). The "primary work of school leaders is to enhance PK-12 student outcomes; they accomplish this work mainly through interacting with teachers and other adults in the community…[and] leadership is needed to create supportive conditions for teacher effectiveness" (Hitt & Tucker, 2016, p. 561). If school leaders play a vital role in student achievement, it is critical that education preparation programs (EPP) for PK-12 leaders provide quality courses and experiences where school leader candidates are engaged and prepared for the real world. A common goal for any school leadership preparation program should be to create "programs that develop [leaders] who can engage successfully in many of the practices found to be associated with school success: cultivating a shared vision and practices, leading instructional improvement, developing organizational capacity, and managing change" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 143).

EPPs, whether online or face-to-face, prepare PK-12 leader candidates for various roles, including curriculum specialists, school psychologists, school counselors, finance directors, principals, and superintendents at the building or district level. The qualifications for becoming a school leader can vary from state to state and in relation to the school leader's role; nonetheless, most EPPs use national standards (e.g., PSEL or NELP) to guide program design, accreditation review, and state program approval. Overall, school leadership programs require coursework that prepares leaders for various career options; however, it is uncertain how university faculty will create courses that meet the needs of candidates in leadership programs. This is significant in the ever-changing university environment where traditional in-person classes are changing to online courses to meet student needs, particularly in the recent pandemic. Furthermore, university faculty may devote time and energy creating and implementing an online course that does not meet the needs of the candidates or positively influence the course experience (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020). It is expected that university faculty are cognizant of the content necessary to include in educational leadership courses, but are faculty aware of how to best create an online course that meets the needs of their educational leadership candidates?

The landscape of online learning shifted in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic caused a worldwide shutdown of daily life. In response to the pandemic, approximately 1.725 billion learners were affected by university closures (Reddy et al., 2020), causing a significant increase in online learning for university students at all levels. However, even before the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the overall post-secondary student enrollment had seen a yearly decline of 1% to 2%, while the number of students taking online courses grew by 5% annually (Bailey et al., 2018). In the fall of 2018, there were 6,932,074 students enrolled in online courses provided by degree-granting post-secondary institutions (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2018b). It is no surprise that online programs are increasing enrollment with the convenience of video instruction (Kaltura, 2019) and

a desire to travel less to campus (KPMG International, 2015). Furthermore, according to Snyder et al. (2018), the percentage of graduate students who took online graduate degree programs increased from 6.1% in 2008 to 27.3% in 2016.

With an increase in online courses, faculty need to recognize that it is not a matter of uploading content from an in-person class into the university Learning Management System (LMS) (e.g., Canvas, Blackboard, Moodle, etc.) when creating online courses. Instead, creating online courses requires a systematic change in structure and approach to instruction and course delivery (Singh et al., 2021). If faculty are remiss in making a successful transition to online instruction, they may mistakenly opt to use an instructional approach that does not align with student expectations of online learning. For example, if an instructor expects students to have live sessions in a fully online class, this might appear to be a burden for some students who expect complete autonomy in a fully online course (Landrum et al., 2021). In addition, if faculty are unaware of the student's level of competence with the LMS used to deliver the online course, this could highly influence the degree to which students identify the course as satisfactory and useful (Landrum et al., 2021).

Securing student satisfaction is a standard practice in university courses—evaluation of online instruction is no exception. Universities regularly require student evaluations; in many cases, feedback plays a role in faculty promotion and compensation (McClain et al., 2018). Although other variables influence course creation (e.g., licensure and state requirements), "course instructors and higher education leaders need to analyze student feedback to create programs that reflect the [school leader's] preferences while maintaining the integrity of program design and standards" (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020).

Recent research investigating the satisfaction of online courses has occurred in aggregated undergraduate and graduate courses (Glazier & Harris, 2021; Hilton et al., 2020; Landrum, 2020), business programs (Baker et al., 2021; Landrum et al., 2021; Reisenwitz & Fowler, 2021; Mehall, 2021), and nursing (Pence, 2022). Data across these studies need to be carefully interpreted since the findings of online instruction satisfaction for students in one field of study cannot necessarily be generalized to another (i.e., education leadership). Furthermore, even though recent research has evaluated the satisfaction of candidates in online teacher preparation programs (Hamsher & Dieterich, 2017) and career changers in education (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020), outcomes of these studies in teacher education cannot necessarily be extrapolated and applied to candidates in an educational leadership program. Teacher preparation is guided by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP, 2020. Yet, the National Policy Board guides school leadership programs for Educational Administration (NPBE, 2018), which requires a distinct set of skills and qualifications.

Therefore, to improve the quality of programs for school leaders, this study seeks to determine the learning environment best suited for school leaders in online coursework. Outcomes of the current research will then be used to provide university faculty with suggestions for course design and instructor resources to

maximize the online environment for school leader preparation programs. Specifically, this study identifies instructor behaviors related to online teaching that school leaders view as critical, so university faculty can create a supportive online atmosphere rather than speculating on which behaviors are most valuable to these specific candidates with the following three research questions:

1. Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do school leaders rank as the most important?
2. Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do school leaders identify as the least important?
3. How should educator preparation programs design and implement online courses to most effectively target school leaders' needs and desires while maximizing instructor resources?

Review of the Literature

Classroom educators decide to become school leaders for several reasons. According to Weiner and Holder (2019), classroom educators who want to become school leaders desire to address perceived inequity [in schools]; catalyze educational change; commit to teaching and learning; and have a moral imperative and altruism to work as school leaders. With such high aspirations, the job of school leaders can be daunting because, as stated earlier, much of a building's or district's student success falls in their range of responsibilities.

School leaders have a variety of characteristics and learning needs. When considering principals, the National Center for Education Statistics (2020) indicates that 62% of principals have a master's degree. In addition, 73% have nine or fewer years of experience (NCES, 2019), but principals experience a high annual turnover rate due to a mismatch between the required skill set for the position and the skill set they have developed (Beteille et al., 2012). The statistics indicate principals may benefit from instructors who have deep content knowledge and who are available to answer questions related to skills needed for the day-to-day roles of a successful school leader. Second, "many university principal preparation programs have a significant percentage of candidates who are full-time educators" (Nicks et al., 2018, p. 22). Therefore, these candidates would benefit from an online program that is flexible around the job and life responsibilities. Third, the demands of being a principal have expanded beyond supervising teachers and being instructional coaches. For example, principals are now required to address social justice issues (Rigby, 2014) and develop a caring and trusting community among staff (Louis et al., 2016). Thus, online EPPs for school leaders must stay current in content and pedagogy. Fourth, Nicks et al. (2018) further posit that school principals enrolled in online programs experience challenges while using electronic learning technologies that are "restrictive to online courses that are flexible, accessible, and innovative," especially if the program has shifted from face-to-face courses (p. 22). Thus, school leaders may benefit from seamless course implementation logistics.

Superintendents have different characteristics than principals. According to The School Superintendents Association (2019), nearly 60% of superintendents have a doctoral degree, the annual turnover rate is relatively low at 14-16%, most superintendents stay in the position for five to six years, and the mean age of

superintendents is between 54 and 55 years of age. These demographic characteristics suggest aspiring superintendents may benefit from higher-order cognitive tasks in their coursework—seeking to refine already acquired skills that match the skill set required in their job responsibilities. Secondly, a superintendent's responsibilities vary in depth and breadth to include developing and overseeing all the educational, facilities, financial, personnel, and various administrative operations, along with working with several different groups of stakeholders to accomplish the vision and goals of the district (Bird et al., 2013). Therefore, superintendents may benefit from an online course instructor's knowledge of content as well as opportunities to ask more questions.

Due to the demands and job responsibilities of principals and superintendents, it is essential for school leader programs to prepare candidates for all educational environments, including difficulties they may encounter concerning student success, community involvement, and national crises. To create an effective program, it is important to investigate school leaders' perceptions of course instructor behaviors as they influence candidates' unique learning needs and impact candidates' engagement in EPP coursework (Deschaine & Whale, 2017). Identifying the aspects that create a positive and engaging online environment is especially important when courses and class interaction lack face-to-face components.

Theoretical Framework

Therefore, the current study is grounded in emotional response theory (ERT). ERT was proposed by Mottet, Frymier, and Beebe (2006), who indicated that emotions play a part in students' engagement in the classroom. Specifically, ERT consists of three interrelated components: (a) instructor communication behaviors, (b) student emotional responses, and (c) student approach-avoidance behaviors. ERT posits that when instructors engage in communication behaviors, this engagement should elicit an emotional response in their students, which results in their students' use of either approach or avoidance behaviors in the classroom environment (Baker, Clark-Gordon, & Myers, 2019). These same authors suggest that whether a student exhibits approach (e.g., studying, attending class, remaining on task, completing homework) or avoidant (e.g., decreased motivation and engagement) behaviors depends on the degree to which they experience the emotional responses of pleasure (e.g., happiness), arousal (e.g., stimulation, excitement), and dominance (e.g., control, influencing, empowered) influences in the classroom. A graphic representation of ERT is found in Figure 1. Thus, the current study is grounded in ERT because it seeks to identify which instructor behaviors in the online environment contribute most to a creating an emotionally positive and engaging learning experience for graduate students in a school leadership online program

In previous discussions (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2017; Hamsher & Dieterich, 2020) of instructor behaviors in the online setting, teacher candidates noted specific instructor characteristics that are useful and others that were not as highly valued. First, emotional-rational behaviors demonstrated by course instructors are highly valued by students. These behaviors include humor related to instructional content (Wanzer et al., 2010), an interpersonal relationship with the instructor (Vonderwell, 2002), or instructor presence (Zhu, 2012) as part of the pedagogy of online

coursework. Additionally, different experts in online learning (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Callaway, 2012; Chang et al., 2015; Gallagher & LaBrie, 2012; Garrison et al., 2009; Hannigan & Gonzalez, 2019; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Kasiyah et al., 2019; Orso & Doolittle, 2011; Rao & Tanners, 2011; Rios, 2019; Shea et al., 2005; Sun & Chen, 2016; Vonderwell, 2002; Wanzer et al., 2010) suggest other instructor behaviors that create a positive online course, including clearly described directions; individualized, constructive feedback; ongoing communication; high expectations; higher-order cognitive activities; humor; credibility; and caring interactions. Notably, these instructor behaviors are associated with increased student engagement in online courses.

However, without prioritizing these behaviors, course instructors merely theorize which behaviors impact school leaders the most in their course learning experience. As a result, instructors spend valuable time and resources (i.e., effort) establishing which behaviors have the greatest meaning. Then, instructors may determine practices that have a minimal positive influence on the student's online experience.

According to Nicks et al. (2018), it is vital to seek candidate feedback and "create a body of evidence that may guide those responsible for [school leader programs] to provide appropriate learning experiences" (p.23). Therefore, higher education leaders and instructors must analyze and reflect upon contemporary school leaders' preferences while maintaining the integrity of program design. Designing courses and programs that meet the specific learning needs of specific groups may be a solution to the projected small pool of learners due to flatlining enrollment (NCES, 2021), the effects of the recent pandemic, and the increase in costs associated with higher education. These projects are a genuine concern for public and private institutions as the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) projects enrollment between 2017 and 2028 to increase by only 3% and 2%, respectively.

EPP Programs for School Leaders

EPP online programs for school leaders have been studied in recent years in a variety of contexts. For example, the impact or effectiveness of instructor-made videos (Kimbrel & Ganter, 2021), problem-based learning (Bravender & Staub, 2018; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017; Winn, 2020), mixed reality (Ceballos et al., 2020), technology leadership preparation (Borel et al., 2019; Brown & Jacobsen, 2016; Musgrave & De Wet, 2017), supervision course creation (Hartman & Morris, 2019), internships (Nicks et al., 2018), social justice (Allen, Harper, & Koschoreck, 2017); immersive simulations (Voelkel, Johnson, & Gilbert, 2016); and the effectiveness of research courses (Bustamante & Combs, 2011) have all be analyzed.

However, several studies of online EPP programs for school leaders are relevant to the current study. First, Blakey and Major (2019) studied how school leaders conceptualize and recognize student engagement in the online setting. The study found school leader candidates need to experience cognitive engagement (i.e., leading a discussion, completing tasks that are active like WebQuests, and developing authentic projects) and emotional engagement (i.e., assignments that are reflective, introspective, encourage creativity, and collaborative; instructor

shows personality and open-mindedness, as well as provide rubrics/expectations and time to respond to posts) for a positive and engaging online experience.

A second study related to the current one compared the outcomes of the Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium state licensure assessment between online and face-to-face school leader candidates (Markson, 2019). The study found no statistical differences in programs, except for the higher effectiveness of the practicum experience in the online program.

Third, Deschaine and Whale (2017) conducted a qualitative study to determine aspects of online delivery formats that affect school leaders' engagement. The study found that candidates' inconsistent technological capabilities (e.g., bandwidth, software and hardware), incompatibility of university learning management systems with candidates' access to technology, not integrating content from varying perspectives, distractions from students' environments, not implementing new technology capabilities, lack of faculty's pedagogical skills, and not considering candidate's needs can all inhibit engagement of school leaders in online preparation programs.

Finally, Gray and DiLoreto (2016) studied the relationship among course structure/organization, learning interaction, student engagement, and instructor presence on student satisfaction and perceived learning of school leaders in an online educational leadership program. The study found a strong relationship between course structure and student satisfaction; course structure and perceived learning; learner interaction and student satisfaction; and instructor presence and student satisfaction. There was no significant impact between instructor presence and perceived learning. Lastly, Gray and DiLoreto (2016) suggest that student engagement can partially mediate the effect that instructor presence has on student satisfaction. Furthermore, student engagement might have a mediating impact on "instructor presence and learner interaction" ("Instrumentation," para. 1) on perceived student learning.

Current Study

While previous studies described variables that were viewed to impact candidate engagement in online preparation coursework, no study ranked variables from most important to least important. Distinctive to this study is the ranking of variables. This allows instructors to systematically determine how they will focus their time and university resources to create a positive and engaging learning experience. Nationally, enrollment has decreased across higher education, particularly in private institutions. Fewer students, and less tuition, equates to fewer institutional financial resources (Nietzel, 2022; Moody, 2022). How best can universities and professors offer online courses students see as meaningful? Thus, the authors of the current study asked the question, what approach to online courses for a school leader can a private institution take to set itself apart from a less costly state institution?

Therefore, this study aims to provide institutions of higher education, particularly private organizations, with guidance on how to encourage faculty to create online programs for school leader candidates that are meaningful and meet the

candidate's needs. A framework used in this study is one implemented in two previous studies that surveyed teacher candidates to determine instructor behaviors that influence the online course atmosphere (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020; Hamsher & Dieterich, 2017).

One study (Hamsher & Dieterich, 2017) investigated traditional undergraduate teacher candidates' ratings, revealing that they valued variables related to organization and feedback the most. These logistics aspects include (a) *Clearly described directions and requirements*; (b) *Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback*; (c) *Consistent and timely feedback*; and (d) *Instructor updates home page involved in discussion and provides announcements*. Findings also suggest that traditional teacher candidates do not value emotional behaviors, such as (a) *Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor* and 2) *Humor related to instructional content*. Other items that were academic in nature ranked in the mid-range, including (a) *Instructor-held high expectations*, (b) *Opportunity to ask more questions*, and (c) *Higher order cognitive activities.* There was an academic-cognitive aspect; however, that ranked third out of 11, *Instructor knows content*. When synthesized, the results of this study suggest that teacher candidates in online courses have a strong desire to "check" courses off the list in an efficient manner (i.e., low rank for a relationship with the instructor, high rank for a desire for clear leadership and timeliness), and a desire for pragmatic and "real world" assignments (i.e., low rank for higher order cognitive tasks, high rank for unmet expectations on assignments).

In the second study (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020) with career changers as teacher candidates, the findings were similar to the first study, where candidates also ranked variables related to logistics the highest, including: (a) *Clearly described directions and requirements*; (b) *Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback*; and (c) *Consistent and timely feedback*. Conversely, lower ranked items were associated with academic-cognitive behaviors, including (a) *Instructor-held high expectations* and (b) *Higher order cognitive activities*. Other items ranked in the relative midrange reflected all three areas (i.e., including academic-cognitive, logistics, emotional-rational) (a) *Instructor knows content*, (b) *Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor*, (c) *Opportunity to ask more questions*, and (d) *Instructor updates home page, involved in discussion, provides announcements*. One emotional-rational behavior, *Humor related to instructional content,* was ranked tenth out of the ten items. Overall, the findings from this study in 2020 are similar to the previous survey in 2017 and suggests that career changers, like traditional teacher candidates, have a strong desire to complete the online course and "check it off the list" (i.e., high rank for desire for clear leadership and timeliness), and they want online course assignments that are pragmatic and translate to the real world (i.e., low rank for higher order cognitive tasks).

Are school leaders just as likely as traditional teacher candidates and career changers to value the logistics involved in implementing online courses since they have demanding work responsibilities? In contrast to traditional teacher candidates and career changers, are school leaders more likely to assign a higher rating to academic-cognitive behaviors because their work responsibilities require higher-

order cognitive tasks (i.e., analysis and synthesis when making decisions)? With answers to these questions, instructors in school leader preparation programs can design meaningful instruction to maximize the efficacy of the online course design and instructor resources while meeting the unique needs of school leaders.

Methodology

Participants

This study was conducted with current aspiring principals and superintendents enrolled in a College of Education at a Midwestern private institution. The candidates were enrolled as graduate students in two licensure areas (i.e., principal and superintendent) in a school administration fully online program. Participants were surveyed using Survey Monkey during the fall of 2020. Of the 146 candidates who received a survey, 68 candidates responded for a 44% response rate. The demographics of the 68 respondents (see Table 1) indicate that their ages span from 23 to 48 years and older, with 48 years and older representing the most frequent age range (n = 20). Over half of the total sample fell within the 38-48 and older age range (n = 47). Nearly the entire sample was enrolled in the principal licensure program (n = 63), while roughly 7% were enrolled in a district-level superintendent licensure program (n = 5). The higher number of respondents in the principal licensure area compared to students in the district-level superintendent licensure area parallels the enrollment at this university. Both programs run a cohort-like model with three starts per year (i.e., January, May, September). This means that candidates had a choice of three different months of the year to enroll in the program. Therefore, at any given time during the year, more candidates were enrolled in the principal licensure area compared to the district-level superintendent licensure area.

Each program is on trimesters (i.e., three 16-week terms) and lasts approximately 16 months. Each term has two eight-week courses per term. Each program's final two courses include an internship spanning two 16-week terms. Each workshop in each course has a discussion related to course information, tips, help, and support using live video streaming (i.e., Zoom). Participation in the discussion was expected, but candidates could choose to participate synchronously during the live video stream or asynchronously by responding to the questions in an online discussion thread. These discussions represent six percent of a candidate's grade.

Materials and Procedures

The candidates were asked to rank order ten instructor behaviors that contribute to a positive online course atmosphere. Two previous studies (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020; Hamsher & Dieterich, 2017) used this survey with career changer-teacher candidates and undergraduate teacher candidates, respectively, as compared to the school leader sample in the current study. As noted by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017), a review of the literature was completed to create items for the survey to gather student feedback related to instructor behavior in online courses (Arbaugh & Hwang, 2006; Jaasma & Koper, 1999; Meyer, 2014; Teven & Hanson, 2004; Vonderwell, 2002; Wanzer et al., 2010). To ensure survey validity, a third-party reviewer evaluated the survey based on Fowler's (2009) work on survey development, including evaluating survey questions and prompts for ambiguities

and inappropriately worded prompts. Participants in this current school leader study followed the same procedures established for the survey delivered to undergraduates and career-changers by ranking the survey items from most to least important (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2020; Hamsher & Dieterich, 2017). To provide supporting qualitative data, participants were also asked to identify up to five instructor behaviors that negatively impact the online course atmosphere. As Merriam and Tisdell (2016) noted, pairing quantitative with qualitative responses increases internal validity.

At the onset of the study, instructors in the online educational leadership program received an e-mail notice regarding the nature of the study along with a copy of the directions and participant survey. Following this initial contact, instructors received an additional e-mail that they forwarded to students (i.e., potential participants) in their online classes explaining the study and a link that directed students to the survey. A reminder e-mail was sent to instructors during the last two online sessions requesting that they forward the reminder to the online students if the students did not complete the survey.

Results

Overall, the item *clearly described directions and requirements* ($\bar{x}$ = 8.41) was ranked as the most desirable instructor behavior by the school leader participants. This was followed by three items that were relatively close in ranking *individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback* ($\bar{x}$ = 6.41), *instructor knows the content* ($\bar{x}$ = 6.35), and *consistent and timely feedback in e-mails and assessments* ($\bar{x}$ = 6.00). Most of the items were ranked within the mean range of 4.00 to 4.63, including *encouraging and caring communication from the instructor*, *instructor-held high expectations*, *opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor*, *instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements*, and *higher order cognitive activities*. One last item, *humor related to instructional content* was by far ranked the lowest ($\bar{x}$ = 2.96).

Using the categories (i.e., Logistics, Academic-Cognitive, and Emotional-Rational) generated by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017), three of the four highest rankings related to Logistics (i.e., *clearly described directions and requirements*, *individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback,* and *consistent and timely feedback)* according to school leaders. Only one Logistic item (i.e., *instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements*) received a low ranking. Conversely, almost all Academic-Cognitive items were ranked as the least important instructor behaviors (i.e., *instructor-held high expectations*, *opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor*, *higher order cognitive activities*). On the other hand, one Academic-Cognitive behavior was highly ranked (i.e., *instructor knows the content*). Finally, two Emotional-Rational items varied in ranking. *Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor* ranked as the fifth most desirable, but *humor related to instructional content* was ranked as the least desirable instructor behavior for online instruction.

A content analysis was completed for qualitative responses. Open coding was first implemented with three main categories (see Table 3) emerging from the data that aligned with the categories from the quantitative data. Then axial coding was

implemented, relating main categories to subcategories. Lastly, selective coding combined and refined categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The subcategories included factors that negatively influence an online course atmosphere. Two raters sorted all 205 statements using a forced-choice method to determine the reliability of the eight categories related to instructor behaviors, resulting in a .86 interrater agreement. Categories were further classified into the three themes that aligned with the overall themes in the quantitative data. Academic-cognitive was defined as the instructor's knowledge of course content, opportunities to ask questions, higher order activities, and holding high expectations (e.g., not knowing course content, misleading advice, uploading documents that are not relevant, and inconsistent expectations). Logistics was defined as maintaining course operations (e.g., clearly describing directions; providing feedback; prompt e-mail responses; updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements; poor classroom management). Emotional-rational was associated with instructor affect (e.g., distant, impersonal, not meeting individual needs, and apathetic). Complete frequency and ranking of qualitative responses are found in Table 3. Samples of participant responses that guided the development of categories and subcategories is found in Table 4.

When comparing the open-ended qualitative data with the quantitative ranking data, Logistics items occurred the most frequently across both forms of data. Similarly, data was ranked by the school leaders consistently for Academic-Cognitive instructor behaviors, with lower rankings for the quantitative items and fewer concerns identified in open-ended statements. Overall, from a quantitative and qualitative framework, school leaders identified an instructor's logistical and organizational behavior as the most critical for an online course with less concern for assignments, meaningful activities, or instructor's sense of humor.

Discussion

The findings of this study, where school leader candidates were asked to order and describe course instructors' behaviors that influence an online course atmosphere, provide insight into which aspects of online course design and implementation should be most aggressively pursued and strategically executed. The first research question in this study asked: Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do school leader candidates rank as the most important? The quantitative and qualitative data results suggest that school leader program candidates want a predictable experience. They want clear guidelines, expectations, and feedback from their professors. They do not have the time or energy to determine how a course instructor grades their work.

Practicing school leaders are often over-extended (Bird et al., 2013; Nicks et al., 2018), highly stressed, and in a time-consuming and complex role (Hancock et al., 2019). Therefore, it is reasonable to assume that when they sit down to complete coursework during a limited window of time, they need to have a clear set of expectations and evidence of the instructor's knowledge of content. This would include timely feedback with rich content from the instructor informing any adjustments candidates need to make on the next set of assignments immediately assigned in the next module, which is often the following week, in accelerated

online programs. Clear instructions with timeline and content-rich feedback allow school leader candidates to make the best use of the time they set aside to complete assignments and ultimately move forward in coursework.

Interestingly, school leaders also desire the instructor's emotional-rational behavior of *Encouraging and caring communication*. This suggests that school leaders, who are near the top of their field, appear to desire an autonomous and logistically well-designed online course experience coupled with instructors who show they care about them as well as praise and encourage them during their coursework. The finding is supported by Louis et al. (2016), who indicate that school leaders are expected to develop a caring and trusting community among staff. Thus, it makes sense that school leaders would have this same expectation of their course instructors.

The second research question asked: Which instructor behaviors related to online courses do school leader candidates identify as the least important? When collectively looking at the rankings of the academic-cognitive aspects of *Instructor-held high expectations*, *Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor*, *Higher order cognitive activities*, the mid-to-low rankings suggest these candidates do not place a high value on going deeper into the material than what is presented. They appear to be educational pragmatists—no need to belabor assignments with extemporaneous writing. There is also no need to build into courses excessive opportunities to ask more questions only to wait for responses from the instructor. Thus, these candidates, who are near the top of their field and with their own high expectations for themselves, possibly view instructor-held high expectations as unimportant to a positive online course experience.

In addition, the low ratings of the logistics behavior *Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements* and the emotional-rational behavior *Humor related to instructional content* suggests that school leaders do not need any "extras" from the instructor to have a positive online course experience. School leaders do not place a high value on the instructor's excessive communication—logistically or otherwise. These behaviors can be a nice touch, but they are not important for school leader candidates to have a positive online learning experience.

The third research question asked: How should educator preparation programs design and implement online courses to most effectively target school leaders' needs and desires while also maximizing instructor resources? The results of this study suggest several implications for the design of education preparation programs for school leaders. Although education leadership programs are held to a national standard, this does not necessarily indicate that university faculty cannot heed the interest of the leadership candidates. Faculty can provide programs and courses that meet the needs of the candidate needs in the virtual environment without compromising program integrity. It appears from the findings of this study that a best practice would include sound, well-developed course materials (i.e., syllabus and modules) that are concise with clearly written expectations that allow for autonomy. As noted above, candidates are busy, often juggling various

responsibilities. Providing materials that identify clear expectations will enable them to proceed at their own pace with assignments without frequent inquiries, which can delay their progress. In addition, school leader programs should provide activities and assignments that are pragmatic with real-life examples that can be completed independently within the virtual environment. This recommendation is particularly important since it appears candidates are looking for a practical experience without tedious tasks that have little meaning to their future work as a school leader. One example is using a case study-based learning approach by applying knowledge to everyday situations (Poorvu Center for Teaching and Learning, 2021), allowing candidates to brainstorm practical solutions they can implement in their leadership positions. Whether in groups or individually, a case is presented, candidates reflect on facts, and problem-solve solutions where they integrate knowledge and practice. In the virtual environment, the instructor can provide the feedback students desire in real-time in a shared document or later in a submitted assignment.

To maintain a theme of useful and practical, it is suggested to minimize tasks such as discussion boards that are only reflections and opinions. Instead, course design should move toward activities that encourage the candidate to reflect on their school district. For example, have candidates select a school policy that they can post and promote a discussion to determine if the policy is legally compliant with state and federal laws. After a discussion, with feedback from the instructor and peers, candidates can create a presentation using various platforms (e.g., PowerPoint, Google Slides, Panopto, VoiceThread, etc.) to present their revised policy to the group. Similarly, have students work as one group on a school issue that is common among school districts (e.g., bullying). They can connect via a virtual platform (e.g., GoToMeeting, Yammer, Google Hangouts, Facebook, Rocket.Chat, Podio, etc.) to debate via video discussions, sending messages, or sharing documents to develop and refine the policy that meets the state and federal requirements. Candidates can then submit a final document as an individual or a group.

Finally, recognizing candidates′ desire for informed feedback from the instructor in a timely manner, the virtual environment allows for relatively immediate feedback through shared documents through various platforms (e.g., Google docs, OneDrive, DropBox), which are more efficient than sending assignments through e-mail. If documents are uploaded to an LMS, candidates can link their documents to a shared file where faculty can provide ongoing feedback in real time. Within the context of feedback, faculty should provide critical comments to improve the candidates′ work and positive feedback that the candidates can use in subsequent assignments. Feedback can also take the form of peer-to-peer reactions to encourage colleagues to develop skills as "critical friends" who provide positive feedback, but also suggestions for improvement. This opportunity allows candidates to receive the feedback they desire, but also encourages the development of feedback skills for their role as educational leaders.

This current study replicates the two prior studies by Hamsher and Dieterich (2017, 2020); thus, it is relevant to discuss the findings of all three studies (see Table 5).

Most significantly, the three samples from each of the three studies (i.e., traditional teacher candidates, career changers, and school leaders) ranked the same four instructor behaviors the highest: *Clearly described directions and requirements; Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback; Instructor knows the content;* and *Consistent and timely feedback in e-mails and assessments*. Notably, traditional teacher candidates and school leaders ranked the four behaviors in the exact order. Career changers, however, placed *Consistent and timely feedback in e-mails and assessments*, and *Instructor knows the content* third and fourth, respectively. This similarity suggests the importance of designing online courses for educators at all levels in the profession with clear directions and easy course navigation to allow instructors to give timely, detailed, and individualized feedback.

Another similarity among all three samples from the studies is the mid-level ranking (i.e., fifth or sixth) of the emotional-rational behavior, *Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor*. This finding suggests that regardless of where education candidates are in their professional journey, they need to be encouraged and cared for along the way.

The final similarity among the three samples across the studies is the low ranking (i.e., eighth or ninth) placed on the academic-cognitive behavior *Higher order cognitive activities*. This finding speaks to the need for online education courses to be pragmatic rather than theoretical. Educators must be able to create, plan, implement, and problem-solve on the first day on the job. Therefore, assignments must be hands-on and relevant to the candidates′ respective education practices.

The difference with the most disparity among the three samples across studies is the ranking of the logistics behavior *Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements.* The traditional teacher candidates rated this behavior fifth, making it desirable; however, the career changers and school leaders ranked this item seventh and eighth, respectively, making it less desirable. This disparity in ranking suggests that education candidates beginning their professional practice need more logistical support than older candidates with more life or professional education experience.

Limitations

While the findings of this study add to the body of research related to school leaders′ experience in online courses, there are a few limitations in the current study. First, the sample size in this study was only 68 students. Second, the sample represents only school leader candidates from one Midwestern university. These first two limitations inhibit the ability of the finding of this study to be generalized. Third, even though the number of each type of candidate is representative of the program at the university, there was a disproportionate number of candidates in the principal licensure program compared to the superintendent licensure program. This limitation indicates that the majority of feedback from the participants in this study represented principal licensure candidates instead of a balance between both programs. Finally, there are mediating variables such as administrative, operational, and policy factors that can influence instructional behaviors (e.g., university curriculum committee policy, LMS, faculty support, and faculty

involvement in course design) (Hammond, Coplan, & Mandernach, 2018). These variables were not a focus of the current study; however, these variables may have affected the instructor behaviors school leaders experienced.

Due to these limitations, additional research should be conducted at other universities, including both private and public nationally and internationally, as well as in specialty education programs, such as special education, content-specific, or English as a New Language (ENL) programs. Additional research should also be conducted with learners outside education, including individuals seeking coursework in other professions requiring a license (e.g., social work, nursing, engineering) and non-licensure professions (e.g., psychology, biology, business). Do candidates place different values on instructors' behaviors related to the type of institution, the location of the institution, the type of specialized education program, or the type of licensure- or non-licensure program? The answers to this question can provide substantive guidance on where institutions of higher education should spend their time and resources when designing online programs.

Conclusion

This study asked school leader candidates to order and describe course instructors' behaviors that influence an online course atmosphere, which provided insight into which aspects of online course design and implementation higher education institutions should pursue and execute. School leader candidates identified that they highly value course logistics, including *Clearly described directions and requirements*, *Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback,* and *Consistent and timely feedback*. Conversely, academic-cognitive aspects of *Instructor-held high expectations*, *Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor*, and *Higher order cognitive activities* were rated low by school leaders. Interestingly, both traditional teacher and career-changer candidates similarly rated these items. The findings related to school leaders specifically support the results of previous studies (Dieterich & Hamsher, 2017; Hamsher & Dieterich, 2020) who found both groups in the earlier studies place a high value on online coursework that is organized with clear directions with constructive, individualized feedback and caring communication from the instructor.

To further understand how to design online courses to fit the needs of school leaders, additional research is needed at public institutions where there are potentially more candidates and other private institutions in different parts of the United States or other countries. Studying the online course experiences at various institutions in different locations will provide more diverse perspectives and experiences that will contribute to the body of research. While the three studies studying the online course experiences of traditional teacher candidates, career changers, and school leaders suggest similarities among the learning needs of educators at all points in their professional practice, further research related to the experiences of educators in other licensure areas (e.g., special education, ENL, content-area specific), as well as the online experience of individuals in other disciplines, should be studied. Academic areas often attract individuals with different personalities (Wille et al., 2012). Thus, further research within education

and in disciplines outside education will yield important findings that can guide course design that will match different learners' needs.

The current study provides evidence related to the instructor behaviors that school leaders value most and the behaviors that school leaders value least when creating a positive online course experience. The results suggest that EPPs for school leaders should design courses that are logistically sound (i.e., clearly described directions and requirements, constructive feedback, consistent and timely feedback in e-mails and assessments, and course organization) with embedded opportunities for course instructors to provide constructive, content-rich feedback as well as demonstrate care and encouragement. However, school leaders do not value instructor behaviors that seem like "extras" (i.e., *Instructor-held high expectations*, *Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor*, *Higher order cognitive activities*, *Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements, Humor related to instructional content),* which can potentially impede the autonomous online experience they value.

Finally, of particularly critical importance is how this study can shape program, departmental, and university-level policy. Findings suggest that students are satisfied with an online course when an instructor maximizes specific instructor behaviors, which can guide the use of financial and instructor resources invested by higher education institutions to provide meaningful courses. However, university courses need to align student satisfaction with program quality. Questions need to be asked by university faculty at all levels on how to design a high-quality program that also meets student needs. A next step would be to begin a conversation at the state and national levels regarding the efficacy of online instruction for school leadership online programs with the expectations of consistency across delivery of online instruction regardless of the individual faculty instructor.

Online instruction is in a nascent state—evolving and emerging with changes in technology and culture. Therefore, educators need to consider to what extent there is a purposeful design of online instruction and not flipping a face-to-face course to increase enrollment or continue programs in the face of the pandemic. This requires constructing online courses from an instructional design mindset. Specifically, establishing departmental and university policies to ensure high-quality programs align with high-quality course offerings—within the context of appropriate instructional design. One model that forwards the purposeful design of online instruction is Quality Matters, with the goal to "ensure course quality — that courses would be equivalent — for their students, regardless of where the course originated" (Quality Matters, n.d.). Should universities, states, or even national accrediting bodies expect programs to demonstrate not only student outcomes and student satisfaction, but also overall course quality design? Having satisfied students is critical for the bottom line of university programs, particularly when programs may exist by word of mouth. However, as educators, we are expected to maintain a standard beyond "customer satisfaction" to create school leaders who have experienced a high-quality school leadership program. Ultimately, it is the

responsibility of university faculty, state leaders, and national organizations to develop policies that provide graduate students with courses that they rate as highly satisfactory, meet their academic needs, but are also constructed within a highly-quality instructional design framework.

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Table 1

Demographics of Respondents

Variable	*f*	%
Age Range		
23–27	2	2.94
28–32	8	11.76
33–37	11	16.18
38–42	17	25.00
43–47	10	14.71
48 and older	20	20.00
Licensure Area		
Principal	63	92.65
District Level	5	7.35

Note. *N*=68.

Table 2

Rank Ordering of Online Instructor Behaviors and Positive Course Atmosphere

Online behavior descriptor	M	Median	Mode	SD
Clearly described directions and requirements	8.41[1]	9	10	2.63
Individualized, detailed, and constructive feedback	6.41[2]	6	6	2.30
Instructor-held high expectations	4.63[6]	4	4	2.24
Higher order cognitive activities	4.00[9]	3	2	2.27
Humor related to instructional content	2.96[10]	3	1	2.07
Instructor knows the content	6.35[3]	7	7	2.28
Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, and provides announcements	4.41[8]	4	3	2.31
Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor	4.57[7]	5	2	2.18
Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor	4.89[5]	5	1	2.77
Consistent and timely feedback in e-mails and assessments	6.00[4]	7	8	2.76

Note. *N*=68. Online behavior descriptors appear in order presented on the Survey Monkey. Means are ranked in order of highest to lowest rating.

Table 3

Rank Ordering of Qualitative Responses for Behaviors Contributing to Negative Course Atmosphere

Instructor Behavior	*f*	Rank	Type
Feedback concerns	61	1	Logistics
Overall disposition	38	2	Emotional-Rational
Availability	25	3	Logistics
Lacks organization	23	4	Logistics
Virtual Experience	23	4	Logistics
Meaningful content	16	5	Academic-Cognitive
Problematic assignments	13	6	Academic-Cognitive
Grading procedures	11	7	Academic-Cognitive
Issues with technology	0	8	Logistics

Note. Based on a total of 205 qualitative responses.

Table 4

Examples of Participant Qualitative Responses to Instructor Behavior

Categories	Subcategories	Subcategory Examples
Logistics	Feedback concerns	"Little to no feedback on assignments." "Not providing feedback in a timely manner."
	Availability	"Unavailable when trying to contact them." "Does not respond to communication in a timely manner."
	Lacks organization	"Instructions and expectations are not clearly presented." "Last minute changes in assignment expectations."
Emotional-Rational	Overall disposition	"Not understanding to life circumstances." "Lack of empathy."
Academic-Cognitive	Virtual Experience	"They dominate the zoom call." "Lecturing more than engaging students in discussion."
	Meaningful content	"Not explaining the content or providing examples." "Unfamiliar with content."
	Problematic assignments	"Unnecessary busy work." "Assignments that are unrelated to the topic/subject/class."
	Grading procedures	"Unclear grading practices." "Lack of supports (rubric, exemplar projects, etc.)."

Note. A select sample of the total 205 qualitative responses.

Table 5

Rank Order Comparison of Quantitative Data from All Studies

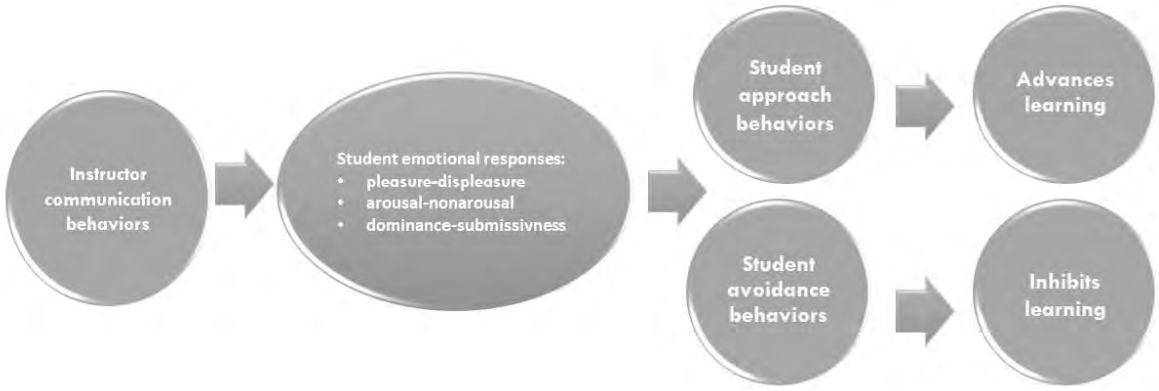
Traditional Teacher Candidates			Career Changers			School Leaders		
	M	SD		M	SD		M	SD
Clearly described directions & requirements (Logistics)	8.61	3.32	Clearly described directions & requirements (Logistics)	8.47	2.60	Clearly described directions & requirements (Logistics)	8.41	2.63
Individualized, detailed, & constructive feedback (Logistics)	7.63	2.57	Individualized, detailed, & constructive feedback (Logistics)	7.05	2.18	Individualized, detailed, & constructive feedback (Logistics)	6.41	2.30
Instructor knows the content (Academic-Cognitive)	7.33	2.72	Consistent and timely feedback in e-mails & assessments (Logistics)	6.98	2.44	Instructor knows the content (Academic-Cognitive)	6.35	2.28
Consistent and timely feedback in e-mails & assessments (Logistics)	7.30	2.83	Instructor knows the content (Academic-Cognitive)	6.47	2.34	Consistent and timely feedback in e-mails & assessments (Logistics)	6.00	2.76

Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, provides announcements (Logistics)	5.86	2.40	Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor (Emotional-Rational)	5.82	2.72	Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor (Emotional-Rational)	4.89	2.77
Encouraging and caring communication from the instructor (Emotional-Rational)	5.61	2.71	Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor (Academic-Cognitive)	5.17	2.24	Instructor held high-expectations (Academic-Cognitive)	4.63	2.24
Instructor held high-expectations (Academic-Cognitive)	5.33	2.69	Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, provides announcements (Logistics)	4.96	2.55	Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor (Academic-Cognitive)	4.57	2.18
Opportunity to ask more questions to the instructor (Academic-Cognitive)	5.22	2.79	Higher order cognitive activities (Academic-Cognitive)	4.14	2.21	Instructor updates home page, involved in discussions, provides announcements (Logistics)	4.41	2.31
Higher order cognitive activities (Academic-Cognitive)	4.58	3.05	Instructor-held high expectations (Academic-Cognitive)	3.77	2.52	Higher order cognitive activities (Academic-Cognitive)	4.00	2.27
Humor related to instructional content (Emotional-Rational)	3.97	3.47	Humor related to instructional content (Emotional-Rational)	3.65	2.95	Humor related to instructional content (Emotional-Rational)	2.96	2.07

Note. This table demonstrates a comparison of three separate studies conducted by the authors to survey behaviors that participants identify as creating a positive online atmosphere for traditional teacher candidates (n =36), career changers (n = 97), and school leaders (n = 68).

Figure 1

Emotional response theory



Note. This figure provides a graphic representation of the student response pattern as explained by emotional response theory.