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Ethel M. Arzu

The University of Texas Permian Basin, arzu_e@utpb.edu

Tia Agan

Angelo State University, tia.agan@angelo.edu

Gary J. Miller

University of Texas, Tyler, gmiller@uttyler.edu

Kevin Badgett

University of Texas Permian Basin, badgett_k@utpb.edu

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The Role of Stakeholders: Implications for Continuous Improvement in Principal Preparation

The Quality Measures (QM) Center for Program Assessment and Technical Assistance at the Education Development Center (EDC) has been a proponent of strengthening principal preparation programs since 2004 (Education Development Center, 2022). Research by Grissom et al. (2021) illustrate the importance of school principals on the success of student achievement and attendance, as well as on teacher efficacy and retention. In fact, Grissom et al. (2021) explained that an effective principal has a critical impact on K-12 education far greater than previously understood. The implications of the principal's impact point back to the importance of stronger and more focused principal preparation programs. Therefore, through its University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI), a national philanthropy established a system approach to improve principal preparation programs.

The EDC (2022b) engages principal preparation program faculty along with their district and state partners in conducting evidence-based self-assessments of program quality using a rubric of program domains and indicators as presented in their publication, *Principal Preparation Program Self-Study Toolkit, 11th Edition*. During this process, QM tools and protocols support self-study teams' reflection, dialogue, and identification of areas for improvement. In Texas, QM launched a six-year initiative led by the EDC and funded by a national philanthropy to include 32 programs with four cohorts each. As part of the QM Texas-based initiative, 14 Texas preparation programs have participated in the QM Principal Preparation Program Self-Study. In this article, three of those programs—one East Texas program and two West Texas programs—draw on data that include narrative reflection, formal/informal dialogues, technical documents, and phenomenological interviews to document their experiences with the QM self-study process.

Whereas this article does not produce generalizable knowledge, the knowledge is transferable (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This transferability indicates that readers can assess the usefulness of the narrative for their context and determine whether their situation and experience parallel those of the three programs whose experiences are documented and ascertain the value of participating in a future QM self-study process. Regardless, readers will gain a deeper appreciation for the collaborative role that stakeholders play in shaping and improving the quality of programs in higher education institutions through continuous evidence-based self-assessments.

Context for QM Texas Cohort

This section contributes to an understanding of how and why one East Texas program and two West Texas programs became involved in the QM self-study process. The questions that guided the narratives were as follows:

- 1) How did you first find out about QM?
- 2) Why did you agree to participate in the self-study?
- 3) What were the steps you took to identify a collaborative team of stakeholders?

Answers provided help to qualify why faculty and program leads believed it was worthwhile to make the time-consuming effort to participate in the QM self-study process.

East Texas University

In January 2021, the dean of the College of Education & Psychology at the East Texas University was contacted by Texas Education Agency's (TEA) Director of Educator Preparation, inquiring if he would be interested in joining the QM Texas Cohort One. During that

communication, the TEA Director provided the dean with an overview of the QM self-study and TEA's partnership with the EDC. Thereafter, the dean asked his program coordinator if he were interested in organizing and directing a QM self-study team to participate in Texas Cohort One. If he were interested in learning more, he would attend a Zoom presentation hosted by the EDC where the QM processes and protocols would be explained in detail. The program coordinator concurred and attended the Zoom presentation. Following the presentation, he was convinced that the QM self-study would benefit his program's effectiveness in delivering high-quality instruction to students. Moreover, engaging in the self-study would assist his faculty to measure their program's services through the QM's six domains, a "criteria lens" they were not familiar with in previous assessments. Lastly, he was honored that their educational leadership program was asked to join the inaugural cohort and did not want to miss the opportunity to collaborate with other program peers from around the state.

Next, the program coordinator was tasked to assemble his team of stakeholders. He wanted to include all those who had an integral role in teaching or implementing the program. This included full-time faculty members, adjunct professors, field supervisors, and district partners. In consulting roles were a student and a university office staff member.

West Texas University Number One

The Principal Preparation Resource Group (PPRG) is a network of several educational leadership program coordinators at higher education institutions from different parts of the state of Texas. Through this group, the program coordinator at one of the West Texas universities learned about the QM process from one of her colleagues who is the educational leadership program coordinator at the East Texas University. He had previously been through the QM process in Texas Cohort One, and during a PPRG meeting, he shared some processes initiated because of his participation in the QM self-study. On another occasion, the Educator Preparation Capacity Building Specialist at TEA sent an email about a special QM session that would occur during the Texas Educator Residency Summit. The West Texas university program coordinator attended the session to find out more about the QM process. After the session, she notified the TEA specialist that her university wanted to be part of Texas Cohort Three. She respects her colleague from the East Texas University and the TEA specialist, and knows the reputation of the Wallace Foundation and Education Development Center, so her interest was piqued from the very beginning. Additionally, she was impressed with the overview of the QM process at the residency summit and intrigued by the fact that it created a structured process for a team of stakeholders to use an evidence-based approach to determine the quality of principal preparation. As the only faculty member in the educational leadership program at her university, she deeply desired the opportunity to assemble a team to assess the quality of the program, and as this is a continuous improvement model, the decision to join was easy.

Her next step was to assemble a team of stakeholders. The program coordinator reviewed the stakeholders who work with principal candidates. She knew a diverse group was needed so that she would have various perspectives represented, but it was also important for the team members to feel valued and to be given an opportunity to provide input and suggestions for program improvement. Therefore, she first wrote down the roles of the team members—field supervisor, recent graduate student, university professor in another certification area, adjunct, and district partner. Once those were established, she listed the person who was the most knowledgeable in each area and whom she would consider exemplary stakeholders. After emailing each one, she received a unanimous agreement to enthusiastically join the QM self-study team.

West Texas University Number Two

The Educational Leadership Department Chair at the second West Texas University received an email directly from the TEA specialist inviting his university to join QM Texas Cohort Three. Initially, he suspended agreement to join the cohort pending a review of the QM materials, internal discussions, and a visit with one of his colleagues at said East Texas University. Ultimately, he decided to participate for multiple reasons. First, he believed there was great significance in reviewing their programming and thinking about continuous improvement. Second, he valued the discretion provided by the process that allowed his team to consider locally determined operational definitions for ideas that are central to the rubric. This supported meaningful deliberations and explorations and the eventual development of an improvement approach tailored to meet their program and constituents' needs. Lastly, given the situation of the work in being connected to both national and state-level initiatives, participation also gave his university an opportunity to participate in and influence discussions about what continuous improvement could look like. Ultimately, his team's deliberative process supported their ability to jump into this work with enthusiasm.

Next, this department chair engaged in internal discussions with his dean and department to assemble a team of stakeholders. The discussions about who to select were shared and deliberative. Importantly, he knew he wanted his team to be anchored by faculty whose primary instructional responsibility was connected to principal preparation. Being sensitive to limitations in the number of team members, he wanted a mix of individuals who were connected to the program but not involved in the comprehensive work. In summary, he determined groups represented should include active practitioners, someone from his field supervision group, a student (past or present), and practitioners from different school systems.

Review of the Literature

Stakeholder Engagement

This study draws upon stakeholder theory (Freeman, 1984) and uses it as a framework to conceptualize the collaborative role that stakeholders play in shaping and improving the quality of education in higher education institutions. Stakeholders are those who interact directly with the institution such as students, faculty, alumni, community, labor market, and education agencies (Langrafe et al., 2020; Turan et al., 2016). Given that stakeholders have considerable impact on the effectiveness of the university's quality assurance process, especially in the areas of curriculum and program design, active stakeholder engagement has become more visible and universities are expected to engage stakeholders in continuous dialogue (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Leisyte et al., 2013).

According to Chandler and Werther (2014), stakeholder engagement implies involving stakeholders in institutional decision-making processes around the quality of education. Undoubtedly, stakeholders are a unique source of information and different groups of stakeholders bring diverse knowledge, skills, and experience to the discussion table (Langrafe et al., 2020). Consequently, they may hold systematically different views regarding a matter (Turan et al. 2016); nonetheless, the differences may be valuable and can contribute to a more effective and inclusive discussion about the quality of education. Beerkens and Udam (2017) agreed and posited that stakeholder engagement is encouraged because of the various expertise, commitment, mutual understanding, legitimacy, urgency, and accountability that such engagement creates and brings to the institutional process.

University Principal Preparation Programs

Through the UPPI, a systematic approach to improve principal preparation programs using evidence-based principles and practices was established (Herman et al., 2022; Wang et al., 2018). According to Mendels (2016) and Grissom et al. (2019), principal preparation programs are the primary pathway for school leaders and aspiring school leaders to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to lead their schools effectively. Piggot-Irvine (2011) concurred and stated that the responsibility to develop school leaders who can lead, initiate, make effective decisions, solve problems, and execute leadership practices that can influence teacher effectiveness and student learning fall on university preparation programs. These “programs can prepare leaders to analyze the situations they face to understand *how* to approach various situations and decisions and to articulate the *why* that undergirds their actions and decision making” (Cunningham et al., 2019, p. 75). This means that meaningful preparation and the quality of principal preparation to successful school leadership matters (Orphanos & Orr, 2014; Walker et al., 2013). However, several studies have documented inadequacies in principal preparation (Grissom et al., 2019; Mendels, 2016; Young & Crow, 2017) while others have highlighted effective and exemplary principal preparation practices (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Herman et al., 2022; Orphanos & Orr, 2014). Given that principal preparation programs influence leadership practices in the PK-12 school setting, it is imperative to understand what distinguishes effective principal preparation from ineffectual principal preparation.

Concerns about principal preparation

Principal preparation can have a positive effect on the way school leaders lead and manage and therefore, programs should be designed carefully. However, several studies have cited concerns regarding the quality of principal preparation. For example, Mendels (2016) reported that the curriculum does not always mirror learning opportunities that reflect principal’s roles and responsibilities and that adequate clinical experience to engage aspiring principals in authentic leadership and reflective practice experiences was lacking. Johnson and James (2018) concurred and asserted that some preparation programs do not meet the needs of their students because principal input is missing from the university curriculum planning and because the leadership does not understand the skills and abilities needed to lead and manage schools from a practitioner point of view. Considering that school leaders work in varied and diverse school settings that require different skill sets and contextual needs, Johnson and James (2018) queried whether preparation programs can adequately prepare school leaders to lead effectively. Supporting district leadership in this endeavor is therefore critical in developing principal leadership training opportunities.

Effective preparation practices

Preparing effective school leaders and determining the indicators of effectiveness of high quality or exemplary principal preparation programs have been the subject of a growing body of research (Dickens et al., 2021; Herman et al., 2022; Walker et al., 2013). Perhaps more significant, is that many of these programs have adopted innovative approaches to effective preparation (Hallinger & Bridges, 2017; Kearney & Valadez, 2015). For example, effective instructional leadership is at the heart of school reform and is essential to effective school leadership (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Herman et al., 2022).

Being proactive about recruitment and selection of candidates (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022), using cohort structures to support aspiring leaders (Orphanos & Orr, 2014), and engaging students in action research or problem-based projects (Cunningham et al., 2019) have also been described as key features of effective preparation. Other key areas include establishing mentored internships and other field-based experience (Grissom et al., 2019) and engaging in collaborative

partnerships with local districts (Pannell et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2018). With the increased accountability on principals, these practices make it clear that principal preparation merits considerable attention by researchers and policymakers (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Hallinger & Bridges, 2017).

Our Self-Study Journey

This section illuminates the experience of the QM self-study process for the three university program coordinators with particular attention to three key areas:

- 1) How did you collect evidence for each domain and how long did it take you?
- 2) How did you structure your team meetings to review evidence and how did you develop consensus in your self-ratings?
- 3) Did you utilize the equity-centered focus in your evidence review?

The program coordinators used the QM Principal Preparation Program Self-Study Toolkit (Education Development Center, 2022b), which is a set of research-based tools and protocols designed for teams of stakeholders, to engage in a focused self-study about our principal preparation programs. The toolkit contains standards for high quality principal preparation organized around six program domains: 1) candidate admissions, 2) coursework, 3) pedagogy-andragogy, 4) clinical practice, 5) performance assessment, and 6) graduate performance outcomes. Each domain rubric has specific indicators with clear criteria to support discussions and self-ratings.

Before engaging in the self-study process, the East Texas University program participated in an online orientation while the two West Texas Universities programs participated in a half-day, in-person orientation session within their respective cohorts. Both online and in-person sessions were facilitated by EDC representatives. During the orientation, program coordinators were introduced to the QM tools and protocols and the process for gathering evidence and determining preliminary ratings. In addition, EDC QM lead facilitators and QM facilitators in training were assigned to each of the programs for support in this exercise. After the conclusion of the review process orientation, program review teams returned to their institutions to begin their collaborative work. While there was distinctiveness in the review process for each program, there were also some similarities in how the work was approached. The narratives below highlight some similarities and distinctiveness in how evidence was collected for each domain.

How did you collect evidence for each domain and how long did it take you?

East Texas University

Our first meeting was an orientation where I provided each member a digital copy of the QM Self-Study Toolkit. After we reviewed the six domains, indicators, and criteria as a group, I asked the members to think about which domain review they would like to facilitate. (Responsibilities would include sending out reminders to all team members to submit artifacts for the supporting evidence for each indicator and keeping the domain's Google Drive folder in order). I suggested that the domain selected by each member be an area that he/she was an expert in, but it was not a requirement. Then, I created our Google Drive link containing empty folders for each domain for uploading supporting evidence (Domain 1-6 Artifacts) and documents from the toolkit for scoring (Domain 1-6 Files). All team members had editing rights, so everyone could upload artifacts to any folder.

West Texas University Number One

As I am the program coordinator for principal preparation, I was in the best position to collect all of the evidence. Therefore, I had the sole responsibility for this part of the process. I created a shared Google Folder, and I organized the evidence into folders aligned to the QM

domains and indicators. I went through each domain and indicator individually, and I analyzed the criteria and found evidence to support each part. I wrote a narrative in the evidence chart for each one, and I provided hyperlinks to the actual artifacts in the evidence folders. I did not keep a time log, but I spent countless hours (at least 40 clock-hours) over the course of three weeks. It was very time consuming, but I enjoyed the process because it allowed me the opportunity to analyze my program.

West Texas University Number Two

As project lead and given that I was in the best position (by experience and longevity) to do so, I took on the initial responsibility to organize an electronic folder system, reviewed the EDC rubrics and created a repository of resources that were aligned to the rubric. I dropped files into respective folders and developed a narrative reflection for each domain that explored why I selected the resources I selected. Then, I developed robust communication pieces/emails that addressed nuances in thinking and organizational structure for the work along with a series of hyperlinks to the resources. I did not clock the time but it took ‘a lot!’ It had to have been at least 40 real hours of work time to collect, organize, and communicate.

Having a purposeful discussion about program artifacts gathered and evidence that aligned with each QM indicator was an important aspect of our review process. Rating each indicator along a four-level evidence strength continuum—Level 4 (strongest), Level 3 (stronger), Level 2 (strong), and Level 1 (weak)—was also vital and, in this process, each team was guided by two questions: 1) to what extent does the evidence demonstrate the criteria for the respective indicator, and 2) does the evidence reflect the criteria program-wide? The narratives below describe how we structured our self-study teams to review program evidence and how we developed consensus in our self-ratings.

How did you structure your team meetings to review evidence and how did you develop consensus in your self-ratings?

East Texas University

Throughout this process, we met several times via Zoom. At each meeting, each lead person presented the supporting evidence and artifacts submitted for each indicator of their respective domain. Then, using the criteria, we discussed the self-rating each member scored for that indicator. As more artifacts were gathered, individual self-ratings could change for each indicator and from meeting to meeting. In our final Zoom meeting, we reached consensus after reviewing the supporting evidence documented for each indicator in each domain. Thinking back on our meetings, I cannot recall any team member being so far off from the thinking of the rest of the group. All individual ratings were clustered together with no outliers. This made reaching consensus easy. I attribute this to the thorough work of gathering the artifacts.

West Texas University Number One

I sent a Google Poll to my team to determine the best days/times to meet in one-hour Zoom. From the results, I scheduled five meetings so we could review the evidence. To structure the team meetings, I assigned each team member a specific domain to review. We decided to have one-hour meetings to analyze one domain at a time except for Domains 1 and 6 as those two domains had the fewest number of indicators and evidence. Prior to each meeting, each team member analyzed their domain by reviewing the criteria for each indicator and viewing the evidence provided. They were able to come up with a preliminary self-rating. During each Zoom, my role was to talk about the evidence for each domain and indicator and share the artifacts with the team. Then, the team lead would explain their analysis of the data and their preliminary rating as each of the other team members provided their own self-ratings and

defended their decisions. From the discussions, the team members input their self-ratings into a chart, and I was able to calibrate them for a final overall score for each one.

West Texas University Number Two

We had five meetings; the first four were one hour long and the last was one hour, 30 minutes. In the first meeting, we explored operational definitions, process structure, and assignment of responsibilities. In the second meeting, we reviewed Domains 1 and 2. Domains 3 and 4 were addressed in the third meeting, Domains 5 and 6 in the fourth meeting, and we reviewed the whole process, conducted a dry run for EDC summary presentation, and processed “clean-up” discussions in the final meeting.

Initially, we agreed that we would only lead in the deliberative discussions relative to the Domain(s) we were primarily responsible to lead; however, one of our team members did an excellent job of pre-scoring and leading the conversation about ‘*why*.’ We then agreed to change our approach going forward to match the work that team-member did; however, execution was inconsistent. This means that some pre-scored and some did not. Either way, we had rich, collaborative discussions throughout.

To develop consensus in our ratings, we had deliberative discussions at each meeting. The discussions were led by the individual with primary responsibility for a given Domain. That person shared their evidence points, some notes about rationale, and then we discussed. Scores were rarely changed but it did happen sometimes. It was also the case that we typically showed deference to the Domain leader. Given the formative role I have played in construction of our programming, I was sensitive to ensure as much as I could that my “voice” was “sized” in a way that was appropriate/constructive to the discussion and deliberations.

The narratives below describe if we used an equity-centered focus in our evidence review.

Did you utilize the equity-centered focus in your evidence review?

East Texas University

As part of cohort 1, the QM Self-Study Toolkit did not have discussion prompts focusing on equity-centered leadership. However, interestingly, our team discussions did include conversations about equity. In 2021, Dickens et al. reported that it was important to equip aspiring principals with the knowledge and skills to lead for equity. According to Dickens et al. (2021), this practice would ensure a pipeline of effective school leaders. Similarly, one of our primary goals as preparation programs is to prepare equity-minded leaders for the Texas PK-12 school setting who can work “to provide a socially just education for *all* students” (Cunningham et al., 2019, p. 83). Therefore, we used guided bracketing (Bevan, 2014; Hoffding & Martiny, 2016), to determine if we utilized the equity-centered focus in our evidence review.

West Texas University Number One

Yes, we did utilize the equity-centered focus in our review. Before we dove into the domain criteria, evidence, and analysis, we wanted to explicitly define equity-centered leadership for our program. It is: “The degree to which the educational leadership program prepares candidates to understand and demonstrate ethical leadership that advocates for all children and ensures student access to effective educators, programs, and services through a positive, collaborative, and equitable school culture.” This definition was created by compiling the competency statements in Texas Administrative Code (TAC) §241.15.

West Texas University Number Two

We did utilize an equity-centered focus, and we operationally defined equity-centered in this way, “Equity-centered leaders ensure excellence, equity, and a quality learning experience

for every child in every classroom, every day.” We value the importance of explicit understanding and learning activities that reinforce the importance of leadership that meets *every* student where they are. This furthermore speaks to the degree to which our program is orienting and training candidates to understand the needs of the students and community(ies) they serve and ensure their leadership is responsive to contextual and cultural values, norms, needs, and expectations. Related, we found the rubric to be very aspirational in nature. In some respects, this complicated our abilities to “*drill down*” to identify relative areas of strength and opportunities to grow because rubric indicators frequently called on the review team to consider multiple aspects within an indicator that were not always directly connected.

In summary, the QM process provided an equity-centered lens and stretched the university program coordinators to look at other areas of our students’ experience through our program. Notably, this process was time-consuming and required a commitment from all stakeholders. Understanding the processes and protocols while preparing and gathering artifacts for the evidence review session was a task that could not have been completed on a couple of weekends. Having acknowledged the work and organization involved, the payoff was well worth the effort because the process was valuable for continuous improvement beyond TAC compliance. Therefore, we encourage other program coordinators to engage in a guided self-study process and use the thick, rich description of our lived experiences to arrive at their own conclusions about how well this specific process may fit them.

Narrative Reflection of Quality Measures Evidence Review and Ratings

Consistent with a narrative approach, this section draws on data generated from narrative reflections, informal and formal dialogues, self-rating data, and phenomenological interviews where we co-generated data by engaging in reciprocal interactions of our self-study process (Hoffding & Martiny, 2016). To ensure validity, we conducted bracketing in order to fully describe and make sense of our lived experiences during the self-study process (Bevan, 2014). The narrative below offers a reflection of our programs at different points in the refinement process of the QM self-study with two of the West Texas university-based principal preparation programs coming out of a process that has just recently ended and the East Texas one having had close to a year to develop refinements. Because this work is a shared activity, such reflections are collapsed with little information to distinguish any one of the three represented programs outside of a small number of representative quotes.

Domain 1: Candidate Admissions

The rubric for Domain 1: Candidate Admissions, offered all of our programs an opportunity for meaningful conversations about opportunities for improvement; this domain’s rubric helped to shine a light on structure and process pieces that have been undeveloped, underdeveloped, or where ongoing refinement is needed. Team leads for each of the represented programs indicated there was either substantial work to do in the area of Mission, Vision, and Goals statements or that the product of work connected to Domain 1 needed additional attention.

One participant noted that, despite having a greater level of refinement in this area, particularly in the area of screening processes that ensure candidates “meet admission standards including evidence of prior experience leading change, fostering collaboration, and supporting the growth and development of professional staff,” enrollment remains an ongoing challenge. The other participants indicated they were at different points in the continuum of development and refinement connected to the establishment and use of mission, vision, and goals statements that explicitly articulate values connected to preparing equity-centered leaders.

In addition to reflecting on the role and place of mission, vision, and goals, we also

reflected on the importance of refining structures and approaches to ensure admission screening tools and the processes for applying those tools reflect a shared set of values and expectations. The “shared” piece was framed as needing to involve stakeholders from appropriate groups in the process. As stated in the QM Toolkit, program leads were encouraged to include program faculty, affiliated school district representatives, and other program stakeholders in their self-study teams. For the purpose of this study, representative stakeholders are individuals connected to the principal preparation program as faculty, partners, administrators, or completers. Table 1 depicts a representative team of stakeholders, their roles, and the rationale for including them in the QM self-study.

Table 1

The Role of Stakeholders on QM Self-Study Teams

Stakeholders	Role	Rationale for QM Team
Lead Professors / Program Coordinators	Design, revise, coordinate, and teach principal preparation courses; serve as the QM Team Lead for the respective university	Lead faculty members have historical knowledge and insight into the educational leadership program in the various domains.
Adjunct Instructors	Teach principal preparation courses	Adjunct instructors have inside experience with the courses, curriculum, assessments, pedagogy, and andragogy part of the principal preparation.
Colleagues in Educator Preparation	Design, revise, coordinate, and teach principal preparation courses	Faculty have knowledge of program procedures and TAC requirements for accreditation and compliance.
College Deans	Provide university leadership in the College of Education	University administrators have knowledge of the processes for principal preparation, including admission requirements, marketing, recruitment, and exit criteria.
District-Level Administrators	Lead school districts in the regions affiliated with the universities	Partner district administrators have a unique perspective of the performance of graduates employed as assistant principals and principals in their respective districts.

Stakeholders	Role	Rationale for QM Team
Education Service Center Staff	Work as employees of the region centers affiliated with the universities	These staff members provide a vital partnership in preparing principal candidates through training and support. They have a deep understanding of the demographics and needs of regional school districts and are able to provide input regarding continuous improvement efforts.
Field Supervisors	Serve as the university liaisons and evaluators of principal candidates in clinical practice	Field supervisors have first-hand experience in clinical practice and are able to provide input regarding effective preparation procedures and processes tied to the QM domains.
Program Graduates	Former students in the educational leadership program who have stepped into administrative positions	Recent program completers have a thorough first-hand understanding of the experience in the principal preparation program from start to finish. As new administrators, they are able to provide information regarding the thoroughness and effectiveness of their preparation.

Note. This is a comprehensive list of stakeholders among the three programs.

As described by Langrafe et al. (2020), stakeholders are a unique source of information and different groups of stakeholders bring diverse knowledge, skills, and experience to the discussion table. Realizing this, the program coordinators utilized the QM Principal Preparation Program Self-Study Toolkit (Education Development Center, 2022b) to assign each stakeholder a specific domain—candidate admission, course content, pedagogy-androgogy, clinical practice, performance assessment, graduate outcomes—to review. Importantly, each domain rubric describes specific indicators of high-quality practice with clear criteria to support discussions and self-ratings. With this in mind, two of the three program coordinators collected evidence relative

to each domain, created a shared Google Folder, organized evidence into folders aligned to the QM domains, and provided stakeholders with hyperlinks to the actual artifacts (rubrics, assessments, student feedback, course/program survey results, handbooks, syllabi, etc.) in the various evidence folders. The other coordinator used a different approach. Instead of collecting evidence, all stakeholders were encouraged to collect and submit artifacts for the supporting evidence for each indicator. A Google Drive link was created containing empty folders for each domain, so stakeholders could upload supporting evidence and documents from the toolkit for scoring. Regardless of the approach used to collect evidence, individual stakeholders analyzed their assigned domain by reviewing the criteria for each indicator, reviewing the folder that provided evidence of current practice relative to each indicator, and determining a preliminary self-rating. Throughout this process, stakeholders were guided by two questions: 1) To what extent does the evidence demonstrate the criteria for the respective indicator, and 2) Does the evidence reflect the criteria program-wide? To facilitate evidence review, each program conducted self-study team meetings in which stakeholders explained their analysis of the data and engaged team members in conversations about ‘*why*.’ The involvement of stakeholders in this self-study process supports the research literature regarding the collaborative role that stakeholders play in discussion surrounding program quality and design (Beerkens & Udam, 2017; Leisyste et al., 2013).

Summarily, we also reflected on the aspirational nature of the rubric and the importance of being aware of where the rubric supported review team efforts to isolate specific areas of relative strength and opportunities for growth when a given indicator collapsed multiple and distinct elements into one screening statement. We identified Domain 1 as a consensus opportunity for growth, or what we learned to call a “growing edge,” and we are excited to support one another in efforts to refine practices in this area.

Domain 2: Coursework

This domain was consistently identified as an area of greater strength across all three of our programs. Indicators 1 through 7 summarily assert courses are standards grounded, purposefully organized and structured to prepare and equip candidates for leadership informed by principles of equity, and that they offer a reasonably consistent experience irrespective of who serves as the course instructor. While there are certainly some growing edges, we offered evidence that framed this domain as a greater shared strength than Domain 1.

Concerning areas of strength, we determined that all our programs are dedicated to continuous improvement tied to state-of-Texas requirements outlined in the TAC and the Principal as Instructional Leader preparation standards. We noted courses are logically sequenced, consistent in assessment practices within a course irrespective of the instructor, and that some kind of purposeful or cyclical review characterizes the quality monitoring process. Furthermore, we noted intentionality in course design that included clear learning goals and implicit, though intended, instruction in principles of equity.

Having identified this domain as including a number of relative strengths, we did identify an important growing edge. While our respective review teams acknowledged the presence of intentional instruction that was designed to orient candidates to their roles as equity-centered leaders, we recognize that more work can be done to advance how that instruction is made explicit. This growing edge was therefore noted as a real opportunity to enrich our coursework. For instance, in developing or revising course content, an equity evaluation tool can be utilized to ensure that instructional approaches, assignments, and assessments meaningfully engage candidates in cultural responsiveness. Notably, “Cultural responsiveness is not a practice; it’s

what informs our practice so that we can make better teaching choices for eliciting, engaging, motivating, supporting, and expanding the intellectual capacity of ALL our students” (Hammond, 2014, vii).

Domain 3: Pedagogy and Andragogy

The area of Pedagogy/Andragogy was another area of shared strength among our programs. Domain 3 summarily addresses accessibility, culturally responsive teaching practices, active learning strategies, experiential learning activities, reflective practices, exemplars, and formative feedback. Program work connected to this indicator is rich and deep. Courses in our programs are offered in an online format with synchronous and asynchronous elements. Asynchronous elements are supported through things that include but are not limited to rubrics, standardized and customized feedback, instructor access, and support that is meaningfully differentiated. While sometimes more implicit (Domain 2), principles of equity and values connected to equity-centered leadership inform assessment rubric construction and explicit feedback offered during submission review.

Our candidates are offered learning experiences that include but are not limited to project- and case-based learning, course-embedded internship requirements, and opportunities for an application of learning to a candidate’s life experience (as compared with a more abstract application). Feedback is personalized and targeted to candidates. When feedback is standardized, faculty/instructors use that feedback only when and if the standardized feedback is appropriate to a given student/assignment. Our students also have opportunities to advance their own learning through revisions and student-created, content standards-aligned extra credit. These practices support an equitable and structural approach to meeting individual student learning needs as they develop the knowledge, skills, and mindsets that are appropriate to the context in which they will lead.

Despite opportunities for growth, we also identified growing edges in this area of the EDC rubric. As this rubric prompted the review team to consider program-wide work and opportunities to grow, team leads were confronted with the need to reflect on how individual practices map across a program and across instructors. Areas for tighter coordination were identified and include but are not necessarily limited to training in culturally responsive teaching for adjuncts, a more ubiquitous and standardized process for using exemplars, and making the equity lens more explicit, particularly in the area of real-world learning opportunities for candidates.

Domain 4: Clinical Practice

Through its indicators, this domain focuses on clinical design, placements, quality, coaching, supervision, and evaluation. This Domain was highlighted across programs as an area of strength and possibly the strongest collective area of strength. Part of the rationale for this appraisal is the connection of this work to a relatively refined set of compliance standards found in TAC §228.35. As all three programs produce candidates for certification, our programs are accountable to the state of Texas and the TAC that governs our work. This area has been an ongoing area for refinement and updating over the past five years. Such work has positioned this area well as an area of relative strength.

Specific points of reflection include but are not necessarily limited to coordinated candidate supervision; this refers to supported university-assigned “field supervisors” and district/campus appointed “site supervisors,” clear and explicit, standards-aligned evaluation criteria, and follow through from design/intent to application/implementation. Refinement in programmatic approach to implementation in the area of clinical experiences is also supported by

ongoing deliberative support we receive through membership in the statewide Principal Program Resource Group (PPRG). The PPRG is an initiative that was started almost a year before the EDC efforts began with Cohort One and serves as a Professional Learning Community/Community of Practice that primarily serves programs with small numbers of faculty.

Even in what is a relative area of strength, there are opportunities for growth. For example, we noted challenges that included, but are not necessarily limited to, the depth of coordination between program faculty and district personnel that can be accomplished around formalized clinical placements. The importance of standardization in how we prepare part-time field supervisors for how they prompt candidates to reflect on and plan for coaching around equity-centered supervision and the need to safeguard against fatigue were also opportunities for growth. Though we have strong practices in this area, vigilance is necessary to support ongoing refinement and improvement in practice.

Domain 5: Performance Assessment

Domain 5 focused on performance goals, assessment purpose, quality, and methods. We observed that the impact of assessments during and at the completion of a program is another area of shared strengths across our programs. Specific points of reflection noted assessment across our programs is purposeful, useful for and used to inform instructional decisions, and embedded across the course work with consideration for content/course alignment and relevance. Candidates are charged to self-invest in work that is applied to their context and connected to needs in their school environment. Principles of equity are honored in the distinctiveness of application to context/school and candidates are further challenged to reflect on and deepen their own learning through policies built into the structure of instruction and programming (i.e. through course policies that incentivize deeper learning). Detailed feedback is offered across courses and programs and implementation was found to map well against design and intent through the program self-study process.

Here again, we offer a clear-eyed appreciation for the necessity of guardedness in protecting program quality in this area. Opportunities for refinement and ongoing diligence were acknowledged and included but may not be limited to more explicit discussions with candidates about how they are reflecting on their learning and how they are using their own data to diagnose opportunity for growth. An appreciation for the importance of stakeholder input about our assessment practices was also noted.

Domain 6: Graduate Performance Outcomes

Domain 6, which addresses issues connected to certification, job placement and retention, candidate job performance, continuous improvement and program responsiveness was similar to Domain 1 in that this was identified as a clear growing edge and an area for attention. Specific areas of Domain 6 where improvement is needed are found in how we track candidate job placement, performance, and persistence. This improvement could happen through better structures for data collection and may include more focused use of surveys (e.g., Microsoft Forms, Qualtrics, or Survey Monkey).

Then, just as areas of strength in the rubric were complemented by clear-eyed considerations of partner opportunities for growth, this domain, while an overall growing edge, also included practices that shine across our program. We recognized that continuous improvement (Indicator 4) is important both principally and in practice. One of our colleagues reflected on structured review processes that are a normal part of ensuring their programming is continually updated and refined. Another shared faculty are “regularly and consistently engaged in cycles of program-level continuous improvement and draw on multiple sources of data to

identify areas for program improvement” in a way that supports quality assurance in both compliance and elective processes and frameworks. Summarily then, Domain 6 is a clear shared area for growth that has a strong foundation on which to build.

Tables 2, 3, and 4 illustrate the domain ratings for each program. Ratings occurred along a four-level evidence strength continuum—Level 4 (strongest), Level 3 (stronger), Level 2 (strong), and Level 1 (weak).

Table 2

Domain Ratings for East Texas University

Domains	Ratings
Clinical Practice	3.25
Course Content	3.0
Pedagogy and Andragogy	3.0
Performance Assessment	2.5
Graduate Performance Outcomes	2.25
Candidate Admissions	2.25

Table 3

Domain Ratings for West Texas University Number One

Domains	Ratings
Performance Assessment	3.6
Clinical Practice	3.3
Pedagogy and Andragogy	3.14
Course Work	3.07
Graduate Performance Outcomes	2.6
Candidate Admissions	1.57

Table 4*Domain Ratings for West Texas University Number Two*

Domains	Ratings
Clinical Practice	3.5
Performance Assessment	3.28
Pedagogy and Andragogy	2.78
Course Work	2.35
Graduate Performance Outcomes	1.21
Candidate Admissions	1.07

Conclusion

The QM Principal Preparation Program Self-Study Toolkit provided us with a research-based framework for examining program content, practices, and evidence-based performance outcomes as indicators of overall preparation program strength across various dimensions of our programs. In using the toolkit, we discovered that each of our programs has a foundation of strength and opportunities for growth.

We were also intrigued by alignment found across programming. Whereas there was not perfect alignment, we did find consistent themes connected to the various domains and in many cases at the indicator level. The review process created the ability to walk through a guided self-study process that offered structure to deliberative discussions with our various stakeholders about distinct program needs. This process is something that may help coordinate how we think about improving practices and “re-envision what principal preparation programs could or should be” (Kearny & Valadez, 2015, p. 27).

Implications for Practice

Education systems are notoriously bureaucratic (Strauss, 2021), and university-level principal preparation programs are no exception. Nonetheless, this article provides valuable information that can inform policy and practice through further examination of the QM tools and processes. In addition, the information can illuminate the work of principal preparation programs that are engaged in guided self-study efforts to evaluate and strengthen the quality of their programs in evidence-based ways. Given that this work is connected to both national and state-level initiatives, the process can be replicated by school districts that wish to collaborate with principal preparation programs to create a pipeline of high-quality school leaders effectively prepared to lead in our PK-12 school setting. It can also be replicated by state education agencies who wish to support the work of preparation programs in preparing competent and equity-centered school leaders.

The preparation program is an avenue for school leaders and aspiring school leaders to develop the knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to lead their schools effectively (Mendels, 2016, Grissom et al., 2019). Given that demographics are constantly changing, these programs should evaluate their role in the society as well as their collaborative relationships with various stakeholders and the communities they serve (Abidin, 2021). Thus, collaborating with school districts, states, and other stakeholders can support universities to align their PPPs in

evidence-based ways, thereby making fundamental changes needed to prepare school leaders for today's 21st century schools (Held and Pescatore, 2022).

Limitations and Recommendations

This article is limited to documenting the experiences of three of the 14 principal preparation programs that have participated in the QM self-study process, thus far. This narrative is based on the assumption that the reality of any situation can only be experienced by the participants within their context and the meaning they construct about their experience or associate with their experience can only be fully understood by them (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). Having established that, the experiences of the three principal preparation programs are not generalizable; however, they are transferable (Merriam & Grenier, 2019). This implies that other preparation programs, school districts, or state education agencies who wish to engage or collaborate in a guided self-study process to elevate the quality of preparation programs using evidence-based principles and practices can determine the usefulness of the lived experiences of the three principal preparation programs for their context.

Grissom et al. (2021) claimed that the educational leadership field “requires a new investment in a rigorous, cohesive body of research” (p. 93). According to Dickens et al. (2021), this is important because leadership preparation programs not only prepare school leaders for their state, but for nationwide leadership in a myriad of contexts. Therefore, we enthusiastically share our experience with the QM process and recommend that readers consider whether and to what degree this specific tool and process may be helpful to their efforts to sharpen how they engage in program improvement efforts. We posit that rigorous evidence on leadership preparation has consequences for policymakers (Grissom et al., 2019). This implies that we need educational stakeholders capable of modeling the use of an evidence-based framework that can be replicated by others. Therefore, we recommend purposeful and sustainable professional training and development to prepare educational stakeholders in the use of an evidence-based framework that can be used to collect data to inform improvement efforts aligned to state standards, certification requirements, district expectations, and rigorous principal preparation requirements.

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