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Special Issue
Providing Authentic Leadership Opportunities through Collaboratively Developed Internships: A University-School District Partnership Initiative

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Programs designed to develop future educational leaders must include practical learning experiences that connect the theoretical content of university coursework with the realities of the K-12 workplace. Internships, which offer a common method of providing these experiences, have been generally lacking in the degree to which aspiring leaders actually ever have a chance to lead. Wilmore (2002) suggests that internships should provide aspiring administrators the opportunities to do the things that real live administrators do each day. If leaders in real schools actually lead, then internships must provide opportunities for their participants to go beyond traditional observational roles and allow for real leadership experiences.

Just as other professions prepare their aspiring professionals to actually do the job they are being prepared to do through intensive, authentic residencies and internships, educational leadership programs must similarly provide candidates those same opportunities. Auburn University, through extensive collaboration with its K-12 partner districts, has designed an internship model that will integrate all learning into a set of practical activities that will allow students the opportunity to practice, through real life leadership, those skills they have developed in their academic studies.

The process of preparing leaders for K-12 schools has been the subject of much discussion and scholarly research in recent years. School reforms have focused on improving the quality of teaching and learning, but what takes place in school classrooms is inexorably linked to the quality of leadership in the school. Therefore, reforming K-12 classrooms without reforming

leadership preparation and practice seems somewhat futile. And while educational administration has undergone changes in its practice and the way in which colleges and universities prepare those entering the field, those changes have been mostly superficial and have failed to change the perception about the quality of administrator preparation as a whole:

> For the past 20 years, educational administration has been in the throes of a third era of ferment, one that appears to be accompanying the shift from a scientific to post-scientific or dialectic era in school administration. As was true in each of the proceeding two eras, this latest ferment is being fueled by devastating attacks on the state of preparation programs, critical analyses of practicing school administrators, and references to alternative visions of what programs should become (Murphy, 2006).

It is in this context of negative perception and uncertainty that educational leaders have gone about the process of trying to create leadership preparation programs that better meet the needs of schools and communities. Accomplishing this while creating graduates who have a strong grasp of the underlying theoretical, research-based foundations of what leadership looks like in successful organizations requires creative planning and a commitment to collaboration between K-12 stakeholders and higher education leaders. The challenge, as seen by reviewing the historical development of the profession, is a daunting one.

One of the most critiqued areas within the principal preparation arena has been that of the administrative internship, or field experience. As the Educational Leadership faculty and administration at Auburn University began the process of redesigning its Instructional Leadership Preparation Program (ILP) in 2005, research, discussion, and consultation of local LEA partners took place around this issue.

To address this issue and the criticisms present throughout the literature on past field experience opportunities for candidates in leadership programs, Auburn University's redesign team developed a curriculum that is integrated with multiple opportunities for students to engage in real life learning activities in partner school districts. A specific criticism of internships associated with educational programs has been that they are isolated and not relevant to the real experiences that students will have once they enter the workplace (Davis, Hammond, Lapointe & Meyerson, 2005). Furthermore, internships frequently resulted in students simply "shadowing" the person with whom they were placed and noting the activities that were part of the supervisor's daily routine (O'Neill, Fry, Bottoms, & Walker, 2007). While shadowing can have some value in terms of familiarization of the role of the administrator in the operation of a school or school district, the literature is clear that there needs to be an

opportunity for leadership candidates to move beyond observation. The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) publication "The Principal Internship: How Can We Get It Right?" points out that university programs to prepare aspiring principals typically do not offer internships that allow opportunities to lead meaningful activities in schools (O'Neill, Fry, Hill, & Bottoms, 2005).

Auburn University's ILP redesign provides for an integrated set of field experiences that meet the suggestions from research on the topic. But the program goes beyond the typical model in that field experiences are delivered via multiple sources and each and every one is thoroughly integrated with instructional content from the program curriculum. The review of literature on the topic will provide the basis for a discussion of program strengths and remaining challenges and will help demonstrate how the strong partnership between the university and numerous state and local partners created a program with many aspects that set a high standard for educational leadership programs across the region and nation.

Creating Quality Internships in Leadership Preparation Programs

The preparation of school administrators through university leadership programs has been criticized for an extended period of time (Murphy, 1999). Among the primary areas to be targeted in these criticisms have been administrative internships which are, in theory at least, supposed to provide future leaders opportunities to engage in authentic learning activities. The lack of success of these efforts may be somewhat attributable to the complexity facing university faculty as they try to develop meaningful field experiences for their students. As noted by Young, Petersen, and Short (2002), "the complex responsibilities faced by school leaders continue to pose challenges not only to practitioners but also to the programs that prepare them." Leaders, given these conditions, have the difficult task of creating authentic field experiences for a profession that is extremely complex and constantly changing.

Learning to do the job of a principal is a complicated process. Based on the criticisms in the literature about the poor job that university programs have done in this area in the past, it appears that learning how to do the things a principal must do has had to occur on the job while the principal is busy doing the job he or she should have been prepared to do during his or her graduate study. While the content of leadership curriculum is also an area that can be critiqued for its effectiveness, the internship is an obvious failure since its main purpose is to connect the theory of the curriculum with the realities of practice in the field. The SREB has done research in the area of internship practices in the states in their region and has found a troubling lack of practice that actually follows research-based suggestions for quality internship programs. In the 2005 publication *The Principal Internship: How Can We Get It Right?* this fact is lamented in their initial description of the problem.

This study of educational leadership degree programs in the SREB region reveals a sparsity of purposeful "hands on" experiences that would prepare aspiring principals to lead the essential work of school improvement and higher student achievement *prior to being placed at the helm of a school.* (O'Neill, Fry, Hill, & Bottoms, 2005, p. 3)

Linking Theory and Practice

As university faculty and administrators look for ways to rectify this problem, the central issue seems to be how to create a link between the theory from the classroom and the reality of practice in the field. Creating a way in which interns can experience this reality is a significant challenge that has not been met very successfully. Capasso and Daresh (2001) noted, "it became increasingly apparent that while people were learning *about* administration in university classes, they had problems translating theory into practice (p. 15)". The nature of the field of school administration makes this endeavor very difficult since matching theory with the reality of a given context is challenging to say the least. A principal's life is so fraught with reacting to crisis and changing demands that it makes learning on-the-job an unproductive and stressful existence for these school leaders. But, studies have shown that little connection exists between the realities of principal preparation programs and the realities of the workplace (Creighton and Johnson, 2002). The suggestion that the nature of the work assigned to interns during their field experiences should be steeped in the real world they will experience once they enter the field is consistent throughout the research. Wilmore (2002) emphasized this when she said that internships should "involve things real administrators do each day rather than busy work a mentor has delegated to interns that requires no synthesis or application of true leadership concepts (p. 105)."

One way in which university programs can work with school districts to provide the type of meaningful field experience suggested by these studies is to ensure that interns not only observe but actually have opportunities to do the things real administrators do. SREB (2005) recommends that interns should be engaged in a "continuum of practice" that begins with observational activities, but ultimately progresses to participating in and leading school-based activities that offer real life learning opportunities for them. This approach is sensible in that it provides a way for the intern to become familiar with the context, culture, and expectations in a given situation before they are allowed to enter into a leadership role. However, it also assures that both the intern and his or her mentor are aware that the ultimate goal is to lead and that those opportunities will eventually be part of the internship. While it is important that the internship includes leading activities, the nature of the activities must also be appropriate to create the type of learning that is desirable. Many feel that the main problem with university programs is that they "present knowledge about school administration, but do not help students develop skills that translate that

knowledge into practice" (Ginty, 1995). So university faculty must be careful to include opportunities for interns to observe, participate, and lead, but they must also make sure that those opportunities connect to activities in the field. SREB (2005) found that fewer than 25% of internships required aspiring principals to lead activities, where they worked with teachers, in important instructional areas such as assessment, curriculum implementation or curriculum alignment which are typically expected of successful instructional leaders. This is an alarmingly low percentage of interns having practical experience doing the kinds of things we think are the most important things for principals to do.

Timing of Field Experiences

In order to enhance the connectedness of the curriculum to practice in the field, it is also important to weave the practical experiences (internships and other field-based activities) throughout the curriculum instead of having them exist in one place during the graduate program experience. This weaving of the field-based learning throughout the curriculum (Creighton and Johnson, 2002) provides numerous opportunities for students to make the connection between the classroom and the lab instead of having it exist as a one-time endeavor. This can be accomplished partially by ensuring that internship experiences always reflect state and national professional standards upon which the program is based (Murphy, 2006; Wilmore, 2002). Another key part of the philosophy of weaving the practical experiences throughout is to not offer field-based internships only as a "capstone" activity, which has been common in university preparation programs (SREB, 2003).

NCATE Standard 7 states that internships "are planned occurrences during the entire course of the program", a suggestion mirrored throughout the literature Many issues drive the selection of internship sites, including such considerations as timing, location and convenience. Internships that are designed based on these considerations are less likely to provide the type of experiences needed by the students than if they are based on a desire to provide leadership standards-based learning. These problems make it difficult for students enrolled in programs without well-designed internship plans to gain anything useful from this part of the graduate school experience. Therefore, it is important for the clinical experiences to be "integrated throughout the program" rather than being targeted at the end (Hackmann, Oliver & Tracy, 2001, p. 15). This provides the opportunity to have clinical experiences for students that are connected with each course and helps to produce the kind of authentic learning that is necessary to bridge the theory and practice disconnect previously described. By moving toward this type of distribution of field experiences throughout programs we can begin to accomplish the goal of exposing students to what they will actually do in real life situations as opposed to what they might do based on considerations of theory as has been the case in

traditional programs of preparation (Creighton & Johnson, 2002).

Providing Quality Mentors

One of the great values of a clinical activity completed under the mentorship of a highly competent practitioner is the lessons a student can learn from his or her experiences in the field. Our best principals in the field need to be able to communicate to our aspiring leaders the knowledge and invaluable life lessons learned through experience in ways that enhance the learning of theory and research that university programs tend to excel at providing:

> We need to be able to transfer the learning of practitioners who are currently struggling with the chaotic and ever changing work on to the next generation of school leaders at an accelerated rate. Programs designed to give educators practice as school leaders at the same time that they are becoming conversant in the theory behind the practice provide them with learning opportunities that incorporate the best practices of working practitioners, as well as the thinking, writing, and reflection on the theoretical framework from which that practice evolved (Stein & Gewirtzman, 2003. P. 9).

But, while highly skilled practitioners can communicate important contextually relevant information about the jobs that aspiring leaders will face once in the field, the internship still must be based on a set of standards that successfully connect the learning from the university classroom to the field laboratory of the school building. If the partnership between the university and the school district is not such that this connection is well-established, internships run the risk of being just another exercise that is disconnected from the theory of university coursework. Indeed, SREB found in their research about administrative internships that only 39 % of mentors reported modeling the competencies specified by the university. This has largely to do with the lack of significant partnerships where university personnel and school district leaders communicate about expectations and details of the leadership preparation program and about a lack of training of those individuals recruited to serve as mentors (SREB, 2005).

The selection and training of mentors for the internship is an element so important to the success or failure of the field experience that it must be considered in any discussion of research-based suggestions for university programs. If mentors are to be successful in their job of providing guidance to interns, universities must have a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of the mentors. Their lives are already filled with great challenges, and their workload certainly does not lend itself to investing significant time figuring out what to do to make an internship experience a beneficial one; henceforth, universities must be very purposeful about how mentors are identified, trained and

supported (Harris, Crocker & Hopson, 2002). The issue of training is important because mentors must be aware of what the university wants them to focus on (standards) and what research says interns expect and need from their clinical experiences. Only 38% of mentors responding to an SREB survey indicated that they had received any training prior to serving as a mentor (SREB, 2007).

Selection of the internship site is important because where the experience takes place and who supervises it can make or break the quality of the activity. The location of the internship should ideally allow for a variety of grade levels and different types of schools (Wilmore, 2002). Yet site selection is typically a haphazard process without much planning about how and why mentors and locations will be determined. Sixty-two percent of respondents to an SREB survey (O'Neill et al., 2007) indicated that selection of a site was as simple as the intern's choice, and less than twenty-five percent reported the mentor's record of leadership for the improvement of student achievement was a consideration. As important as these considerations are for the intern, the partnership between the university and school district in regard to these field experiences should not only be beneficial for the intern or the university program. Another important issue that planners on both sides of the partnership should focus on is how to make the internship "help your sponsoring school district develop and deliver better services to its students" (Capasso & Daresh, 2001, p. 25).

Duration of Field Experiences

As the internship process is designed, an important consideration is always how long to make the experience and where in the program it should be placed. NCATE standards call for the ideal duration to be a six month equivalent full-time experience and others have suggested that a full year is the preferred solution (Wilmore, 2002). But at what point in the program should the internship take place? It seems most appropriate that the placement of field experiences be spread throughout the program and not serve as a "capstone" experience (SREB, 2002). Weaving the internship experience throughout the coursework (Creighton & Johnson, 2002) creates a greater degree of connection between each course and the practical experience, a condition that certainly is worthwhile. This is further confirmed by NCATE Standard 7 (related to field experiences) which states that "experiences are planned occurrences during the entire course of the program…." (2002, p. 17).

SREB's extensive research and policy initiatives around the topic of internships resulted in the production of several publications to assist university leaders in the preparation of quality field experience programs. In their publication "*The Principal Internship: How Can We Get It Right?"* they list eight core components recommended to produce an effective internship. These components provide a good summary of the suggestions from the previously discussed literature and should be considered by university and LEA partners who truly are concerned about the quality of the clinical experiences

that are used to prepare our future leaders. The following is a list of the core components required by SREB for "Getting the Internship Right":

1. Collaboration between the university and school districts that anchors internship activities in real-world problems principals face, provides for appropriate structure and support of learning experiences, and ensures quality guidance and supervision;
2. An explicit set of school-based assignments designed to provide opportunities for the application of knowledge, skills and ways of thinking that are required to effectively perform the core responsibilities of a school leader, as identified in state standards and research, and incorporated in the preparation program's design;
3. A developmental continuum of practice that progresses from observing to participating in and then to leading school-based activities related to the core responsibilities of school leaders, with analysis, synthesis and evaluation of real-life problems at each level;
4. Field placements that provide opportunities to work with diverse students, teachers, parents and communities;
5. Handbooks and other guiding materials that clearly define the expectations, processes and schedule of the internship to participants, faculty supervisors, directing principals and district personnel;
6. Ongoing supervision by program faculty who have the expertise and time to provide frequent formative feedback on interns' performance that lets them know how they need to improve;
7. Directing principals who model the desired leadership behaviors and who know how to guide interns through required activities that bring their performance to established standards, and
8. Rigorous evaluations of interns' performance of core school leader responsibilities, based on clearly defined standards and exit criteria and consistent procedures (SREB, 2005, p. 7).

Program Development Processes

The development of the redesigned program for instructional leadership preparation at Auburn University was driven, as are all decisions within the college of education, by the college's vision and mission, which is best reflected in the college's conceptual framework that focuses on competence, commitment and reflection. With this in mind, the design of the program was built with a focus on competence through rigorous research-based course content and experiences; commitment through

teaching ethical practices, a belief in all students and an appreciation of diversity; and reflection through ongoing opportunities for students to critique their own work, the work of fellow students and the practices of the partner districts in comparison to what the literature to which they are being exposed contends are best practices in the field. The reflective component of the framework is particularly visible throughout the implementation of the program as students are expected to engage in reflection about a wide variety of topics and experiences throughout the duration of the four consecutive semester experience (Table 1).

A key issue in the development process was how to get real involvement from the various stakeholder groups who have a vested interest in the successful preparation of future leaders. A key part of the redesign process at Auburn University was the involvement of key stakeholders. Although everyone who provided input into the development of the program was important, no group was more purposefully involved than those individuals representing the interests and perspectives of the local education agencies (LEAs) in the area.

The faculty and administration of the Department of Educational Foundations, Leadership, and Technology (EFLT) at Auburn intentionally sought out school district leaders from around the region for their ideas about what a redesigned program should look like. After a series of discussions and a review of data about issues such as which districts had existing partnerships with the college of education in other areas and which local districts had previously provided the most students in the Educational Leadership program, it was determined that seven LEAs would be invited as official partner districts.

Each of the seven districts were engaged in detailed conversation about the direction of the process of redesign and eventually signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with Auburn University EFLT that provided the details of the working agreement between the entities. This agreement outlined the responsibilities of each partner (Auburn University College of Education and the K-12 district) in the relationship and clarified commitments in areas such as the district's agreement to provide release time for interns, allowances for data collection for program evaluation purposes in the future, and each entity' coordination of field-based coaches in the district to assist university interns in the learning process. In addition, each LEA was represented on numerous committees that were formed to guide the process of evaluating programmatic aspects of the new vision for leader preparation. Committee involvement included membership on an advisory committee that had oversight responsibilities over the entire redesign process and major responsibilities on each of the four major program area committees.

The 4 major program committees included a combination of university faculty, university administrators, LEA leaders, and other stakeholders. The committees were designed to address the four major areas of partnership,

curriculum, admissions, and assessment/accountability. Each of these committees served vital functions throughout the redesign process, but the curriculum committee was the one charged with the development of a meaningful field experience process for all students in the program. Their mission was to research the literature on the topic of field experiences and find a structure that would provide the most benefit for students while meeting the needs and conditions determined to be most important to the partner LEAs.

While the curriculum committee enjoyed considerable latitude in the development of the field experience portion of the program, their work was always guided by a set of standards. In 2004, the Governor's Congress on School Leadership was formed, and it recommended a set of standards that would provide the focus for all leadership preparation programs in Alabama. Each of the thirteen programs in the state was tasked with redesigning existing leadership preparation to reflect these new standards. In addition to following the direction established by this set of standards, the committees also reviewed other standards by national and regional bodies interested in the field of leadership. For example, the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards (1996), which have been developed and sanctioned by the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), have been recognized as a national set of standards for educational administration for decades. These standards along with the new state standards and standards from other agencies, such as the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), formed the parameters within which the committee was able to work in developing content and performance standards for the program.

An important goal of the curriculum committee was to establish a set of courses, classroom activities, and field experiences that would be integrated into the program. From reviewing the literature on shortcomings of past leadership preparation programs, the group was aware of the historical criticism that much of the preparation of future leaders was disconnected from the realities of the workplace. A conscious effort was made to focus all aspects of student learning in ways that were interconnected and supported a focus on real world application. To that end, all field experiences have been designed to be directly related to content from the coursework in which students are engaged in a given semester. For example, if a student is taking a course in curriculum leadership, the internship experience should largely focus on activities related to being an instructional leader. If the course topic for the semester is school finance, then the internship should focus on aspects related to leadership in the financial planning and implementation portions of an administrator's job. All other field experience activities are similarly designed to be integrated with curricular content that students are engaged in at any given time. Also of significance is the integration of courses to ensure that learning in the classroom is not fragmented. The course sequence

was created to support an integration of instructional design and delivery among faculty so that the content in all courses is seamlessly connected. This interconnectedness of learning experiences is critically important in allowing students to make sense of the real world and is directly responsive to suggestions of best practice.

A final product of the work of the curriculum committee is the internship handbook which guides the implementation of the field experiences for all students. The handbook consists of program standards that are directly linked to the internship: a delineation of responsibilities for mentors, students and university supervisors; selection processes for mentors, and a detailed list of evaluation processes and forms for the performance of those evaluations. The handbook is a very important part of the program in that it keeps all participants focused on the best practices upon which the program was constructed.

Program Components

The field experiences in the ILP are not limited to the internship experience. The curriculum committee, through review of research and brainstorming with LEA partners, determined that in order to make learning more directly applicable to real world situations, the program should engage students in multiple learning activities related to this worthwhile goal. In addition to the internship experience, students also engage in a think tank activity each semester. This activity is designed to give them experience in developing creative, collaboratively developed solutions to real world problems that a partner district is experiencing. An additional opportunity to engage in applied learning occurs through a Capstone Project action research activity. This process begins in their first semester of enrollment and flows throughout the entirety of the program with a presentation that serves as a culminating exercise. These program components are represented in Table 1. The integration of these activities into the coursework provides an excellent example of how a program can make learning connected while allowing students to meaningfully engage with the concepts that they learn during their study of leadership theory.

Table 1
Instructional Leadership Program Components

Course	Course	Course	Internship	Other Activity
Summer Semester				
Principal Leadership	Leadership and the Learning Organization	Instructional and Curricular Development	10 consecutive days	Summer Institute Think Tank #1
Fall Semester				
Action Research and Data Analysis	Planning and Continuous Improvement		5 consecutive days	Think Tank #2
Spring Semester				
Financial Resource Management	Legal and Ethical Issues		5 consecutive days	Think Tank #3
Summer Semester				
Educational Systems and Communities	Supervision and Personnel Issues		10 consecutive days	Think Tank #4 Capstone Project

Internship

The centerpiece of the field experience portion of the program is the administrative internship. In consideration of recommendations from the literature about the importance of a realistic, in-depth experience, the faculty and administration discussed the possibilities of internships of significant duration. A suggestion of a semester of release time for students in the program from the districts in which they are employed was considered an ideal and was offered as a preferred option based on research about best practices (Wilmore, 2002). After considerable discussion, it was determined that the full semester internship was an option that partner LEAs considered unmanageable. The seven partners working with the university in the development process are small to medium sized school districts (enrollments in the seven districts range from approximately 2,100 to 9,900 students). Leadership in the districts supported the need for a meaningful internship experience but also maintained that having to release valuable instructional employees for an entire semester would create a significant hardship for them both financially and in terms of the quality of service they provide for students.

Given that the strength of the partnerships between the university and the seven partner LEAS was considered by all as one of the strengths of the program, the level of concern the LEAs had regarding the semester-long internship made that an unrealistic pursuit. Consideration of this issue presented a critical point for the advisory committee. The literature is

clear about the need for extensive, ongoing field experiences, and the members of this committee embraced the concept. Not being able to provide an entire semester was somewhat of a concern, but the manner in which internship hours were spread out over the 15-month long program and the fact that each semester would include another practical experience for students around the content being studied that semester, made the amount of time dedicated to field experiences a strength and not a weakness.

As discussion continued around the amount of time interns would be available, it was agreed that a process that was spread out over the duration of the program would be preferable to a large chunk of continuous time. Spreading the internship over the duration of the program is also consistent with research the committee used to make these decisions. Ultimately agreement was reached that 30 days spread over the four semester program would be the optimal situation for the partners and would meet the program needs of the university. The 30 days is divided into four separate internship experiences, one each semester that students are enrolled in the program. The first and last internship (which occurs during summer when K-12 schools are not in full session) are 10 days in duration and must be 10 successive days. The fall and spring semester internships are 5 days in duration and are also successive.

The inclusion of an internship experience for each semester that a student is enrolled in the program is a key element in terms of creating a sustained effort at real world connections. The link between the field experience and the theoretical base of the curricular content is also retained by ensuring each semester's internship requires participation in activities that are framed by the curriculum standards of the courses being taken that semester. This approach creates a direct linkage between theory and practice that is essential for establishing deeply rooted understandings about how school administration practice is grounded in sound organizational and learning theory.

Mentors As Field-Based Coaches

A key factor considered by the committee was the availability of a knowledgeable and willing pool of mentors. In keeping with sound practices suggested in the literature on the topic of mentoring, the decision was made by the committee to refer to mentors for the internship as field-based coaches. This decision was based on the desire to have these individuals coach interns on a one or two week basis in the areas identified as essential to their learning. A mentor, by contrast, tends to be based on a more long-term relationship that includes coaching the mentee, but also includes being an ongoing counselor, supporter and confidant (SREB, 2007). Since the decision was made that students would not serve all of their internships in the same school, the coaches would not likely develop a relationship that truly met the requirements of being a mentor. Just as coaches in a sports context provide the technical expertise needed for an athlete to apply skills in an

authentic environment, field-based coaches help leadership candidates apply the skills needed by principals in the real world setting of a school.

The selection of field-based coaches was given considerable attention by the committee and was addressed as an essential element. The committee eventually developed five guiding principles to aide in the selection of coaches. A coach must: a) have a minimum of three successful years in his or her current administrative position, (b) be respected as a leader by peers and supervisors, (c) be able to document success in leading school improvement activities, (d) demonstrate a willingness to spend time mentoring aspiring school leaders, and (e) a willingness to participate in training sessions presented by university faculty about the nature of their important task as a field-based coach. These principles guided the selection of coaches and the strength of the partnership formed between the university faculty and the seven district partners contributed significantly to developing a cadre of coaches that would provide excellent learning experiences for the interns.

Each district, in consultation with the program coordinator for the ILP program, also provided a field program coordinator, a key point of contact for the university. These individuals provided the program coordinator someone who knew the district personnel well and could assist in the selection of coaches and scheduling of internships. As potential coaches were discussed, the five guiding principles previously mentioned were used as a lens through which to view the candidates. By utilizing the knowledge of these field program coordinators, the ILP program coordinator was able to ensure that coaches were selected who embodied the traits that are desired of these future leaders.

In preparing field-based coaches, university faculty developed a training program designed to acquaint coaches with best practices and research-based ideas about what an intern wants and needs from a coach or mentor (Harris, Crocker & Hopson, 2002): each field-based coach is required to participate in an initial training session which consists of some of the best practices literature related to the internship experience, an orientation to the Auburn University Instructional Leadership Program requirements, and an explanation of the course syllabi and standards for the courses being taught in the upcoming semester. An internship plan, which lists the essential standards and required activities for each standard, is provided for each coach and is explained in detail. This plan must be signed by each coach and the intern and is intended to focus the internship experience on those activities that will most directly relate to the learning from that semester's standards.

Think Tank Activities

Integration of all learning opportunities for students was an important goal for the committee during redesign. The internship is the centerpiece of that process, but does not serve as the only way in which students can benefit from authentic application of learned content. A creative way in

which this goal has been further accomplished is through the development and implementation of a think tank activity each semester. Think tanks are generally thought of as research activities designed to produce policy analysis. Similarly, the ILP think tank activities in the leadership preparation program are action research exercises designed to analyze school district policies, issues, or problems for the purpose of developing potential solutions for LEA partners.

Prior to each semester, ILP faculty and an LEA partner will work together to determine a current policy, problem or issues that the district would like to submit as the topic of a mini-action research project. Then, during a semester where course content related to the topic is being studied, students will work collaboratively, as a small professional learning community to find potential solutions for the partner LEA. At the end of each term, students will make a formal presentation to Educational Foundations, Leadership and Technology (EFLT) faculty and partner LEA leaders where they will explain the solutions they have identified and the rationale for those solutions.

Assessment of the think tank (as well as internship and other field-based experiences) was conducted using a model that establishes a collaborative method for scoring student work. The responsibility for this assessment is distributed as follows: 51% of the student's grade comes from the university faculty, 29% from field-based coaches/LEA partners, and 20% from self and peer review. This interaction is designed to strengthen student reflection and understanding of the need for quality, authentic work and to further the bond between the university program and field-based partners.

The think tank activities accomplish several important program objectives. First, the interaction between students and partner LEAs is another important activity in the ongoing effort to create strong links between the university and local school districts. Second, these activities provide another valuable way to involve students in activities that integrate classroom learning with the realities of the workplace. Finally, one of the curriculum threads that runs throughout the content of the program is that of professional learning communities and collaborative teams. The opportunity for the students in the cohort to participate as a collaborative team each semester is intended to provide substantial practice at functioning as such a team. The combination of the important skills learned through these activities will supplement the internship as ways in which the authentic learning connections are made.

Capstone Project

The practical application that is a central concern for quality programs in instructional leadership also must provide a strong connection with quality research. Students in the instructional leadership program are provided this opportunity through a Capstone Project. This is an action research effort that begins the very first semester that the students are involved

in the program. The project focuses on a salient issue or problem that connects with the content standards from the program. It includes a real world need or interest from student's work in the local schools, and the research spans the entirety of the fifteen month master's program experience.

The Capstone Project provides one additional way in which student learning is interconnected to authentic contexts while at the same time it provides an introduction to the type of scholarly focus on research that should inform their future practice. The final product from this effort is presented at a celebration held at the end of the cohort's learning experience in the degree program and includes ILP faculty, the entire cohort body, and leaders from local schools and school districts. Once again students will be reminded of the importance of the connection between their academic study at the university and K-12 schools.

A final consideration in the conduct of the research piece of the ILP program is that it further elucidates the importance of relevance in all aspects of a student's learning experiences. It is essential that the program components and faculty behaviors provide a model of best practices from the field. Students will continuously be reminded that as instructional leaders we must insure that curricula in our schools provide relevance in the learning experience for students if they are to embrace and be motivated by those experiences. It becomes imperative, then, that their learning opportunities meet this critical requirement. Inclusion of a rigorous research activity that is wholly connected to their learning is intended to provide a culmination to the program that clearly signifies the importance of relevance and in learning.

Participant Roles and Responsibilities

The faculty and staff of Auburn University's EFLT Department have embraced the suggestions from research about the importance of applied, interconnected learning opportunities for students. As the program was developed, they worked closely with all other stakeholder groups to keep the focus on making sure that every aspect of the program consistently met these challenges. Despite the fact that the duration of the internship was not ultimately what the faculty initially had hoped for, other aspects of the experience were strengthened to insure that the experience was of high quality.

A concern that was raised as the committee worked on program components was how to provide the kind of university oversight of the internship experience, , connection, and support for partner districts that is so important (Young, Petersen & Short, 2002). The administration was able to get support from the university to hire a clinical supervisor who provides program oversight, LEA interaction, and coordination of all activities related to student field experiences. This is an extremely important feature of the program and creates a link between the university, LEAs and the students that many programs do not enjoy. Since the clinical supervisor is not expected to have ongoing teaching requirements nor

research expectations, he or she is able to provide the kind of quality-assurance focus on the internship that is so desperately needed but rarely found.

The partner LEAs role in the internship is obvious by the fact that students must complete the required thirty days of experience in the schools. But the connection between the schools and the university is much more dynamic in regard to all aspects of the field experience. The partners were critical in discussing ways in which their involvement would be ongoing and not limited to traditional patterns where they provide the learning laboratory for these activities with little input into other aspects of the program. Partners are an important part of reviewing student work in other experiences such as the think tank activities and Capstone Project presentation.

The partners are also involved in annual review of the program through a partner meeting held each fall. A report on the state of the program, including evaluation data about program effectiveness, will be shared with partners annually and their input into future directions will be solicited. They also share the decision-making role about when or if to add partners, how to make changes to programmatic aspects when needed and about what the future involvement of their own districts in the overall implementation process should look like.

Another important function of the partners is to work with the clinical supervisor to provide high quality field-based coaches for internship candidates. As previously mentioned, the level of skill and the motivation of the field-based coach to serve in this capacity are critical to the success of the field experience. Partner LEA leaders provide a very important role in the selection of coaches who exhibit these traits but also must support the kind of learning activities expected of interns. Providing an opportunity for students to lead activities in the school requires a different level of commitment and cooperation than the traditional internship based on observation and shadowing. By supporting these learning opportunities for students, the partners have demonstrated their commitment to a quality program and their understanding of the necessity for interconnected learning for these future leaders.

Finally, the involvement of students must be considered in this process. Students are expected, in the design of this program, to go beyond traditional expectations in numerous ways. First is the requirement that they lead activities in the schools in which they are doing their internship. This is a sometimes uncomfortable proposition for them since they have limited leadership experience and may be leading a faculty in a strange school or district. But the experience of leading is critical to their understanding of the dynamics of instructional leadership. Their role as a member of a cohort also requires a level of commitment to a team and an ability to work as a member of a professional learning community throughout a rigorous fifteen month experience.

Students also learn through partaking in the process of assessment and evaluation of the program on

multiple levels. Students participate in program evaluation activities throughout the program and the ability to do so will create a level of reflection on quality that is desirable. They will also, as part of the learning community of the cohort, serve as peer performance evaluators for their fellow students. One of the three key components of the conceptual framework of the Auburn University College of Education is to create reflective practitioners. These activities are part of a continuous focus on reflection as an essential part of the learning process and represent a commitment of everyone involved with the program to fostering graduates who meet the college's vision.

Challenges and Successes

The implementation of the field-based experience portion of the redesigned Instructional Leadership Program at Auburn University has been a great experience for the faculty, partners and students. There have been tremendous improvements in important design issues compared to past efforts. However, as with any new program, there have been implementation challenges.

The initial effort at developing and implementing a think tank activity for the first summer of the program was postponed because of many difficulties associated with start up of a new program. The students' initial experience was a week-long leadership institute which exposed them to notable leaders in the field from around the state and nation. But scheduling the institute as the initial experience in the summer semester created a timing problem in which students had to struggle to balance their course meeting times and complete their project work. After considering what was most beneficial to the students and how to distribute their workload in a reasonable manner, it was determined by program faculty that it would be prudent to postpone the initial think tank until the fall semester.

Additionally, the first semester internship experience presented some challenges. The design of an experience that lasts ten successive days during the summer months is a challenge in that schools do not have the same instructional programs taking place during this time as they do during the regular school year. The course content for the summer term was related largely to standards about learning organizations. To provide experiences related to that content, the activities needed to focus on issues related to working as collaborative teams and focusing on student results. But with teachers largely absent from the daily routine at most schools, creating the environment for these activities to take place in meaningful ways was a challenge.

While these challenges made faculty do some additional planning and consideration regarding how to avoid these complications with future cohorts, there were many great successes that directly indicated how well the design committees had focused their work on best practices that really work. The feedback from students and field-based coaches has indicated a connection of the activities in which

students are engaged with things that real administrators do on the job. The involvement of field-based coaches in a training process where program goals and issues can be discussed openly prior to interns arriving at their site has been a very positive step in creating this positive experience.

All sixteen of the students in the initial cohort have also completed the conceptualization of an action-research plan that will lead to their Capstone presentation. These projects all have a true application to real issues facing the schools in which they work. By being allowed to pursue a topic of interest based on their professional experience as classroom teachers, a natural connection to their view of K-12 environment, problem-based learning has been established. In addition, by participating in this research effort the students developed an ability to approach school problems from a research-based perspective and hopefully have developed a greater appreciation for the need to use research as a resource for making good decisions in their future experience as school leaders.

Finally, the initial effort at a think tank activity has provided a great connection to each partner school district as it addressed their belief in the importance of continuous school improvement. Students were provided an additional opportunity to collect and analyze data from an authentic context, search the literature for research on a real school issue, and work as a collaborative team to analyze, discuss and come to consensus on ways to address an existing problem in a school or school district. Experiences such as this cannot be provided only through traditional classroom instruction. Connection to the real world of work that students will face once they have completed the graduate program and become administrators is critically important to our goal of increasing the capacity of administrative leadership in school districts across the state and nation and field experiences such as these will help insure that connection is made successfully.

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