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Challenges in Designing and Implementing a Meaningful Field Experience for Future School Leaders

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Introduction

During the past decade, educational leadership programs have faced significant criticism for degree programs not adequately preparing students for the current demands of school administration, particularly for not providing meaningful field experiences. Leadership programs have been challenged to replicate experiences provided in “model” programs, contain discrete and multi-month formalized internships in which candidates are released from teaching responsibilities. Unfortunately, such programs are highly dependent upon both external grant funding and significant financial support from universities and school districts.

This paper examines the solution reached by one large suburban institution in Georgia when required to redesign its master’s degree program in educational leadership.

Literature Review

In 2005, Columbia’s Arthur Levine (2005) propelled the discussion of educational leader preparation into the national forum with the publication of “Educating School Leaders” (Levine, 2005). While theorists had debated the utility of educational leadership preparation for more than twenty years (Erickson, 1977; Murphy, 1992, 1999; Bridges & Hallinger, 1992, 1995; Deal & Peterson, 1990), Levine’s report engendered a national debate. This report included both a survey of more than 900 school administrators and an analysis of the curriculum of numerous educational leadership programs investigating the relationship between graduate educational leadership preparation and leaders’ perceptions of the subsequent utility of that training in school administration (Levine, 2005). The results were disquieting, particularly in the perceived lack of value in “clinical,” or field-based, instruction, which comprised a significant element of many graduate programs (Levine, 2005). Despite a meaningful internship being recognized as an essential element of effective leadership preparation programs (Levine, 2005; National Policy Board for Education Administration, 2002), Levine asserted that the clinical instruction contained in most leadership preparation programs was largely disconnected to students’ academic instruction and expectations of administrative practice. Instead, it often consisted of largely irrelevant principal-created and supervised tasks “carried out with a wink and a nod.” (Levine, 2005 p. 40). Levine suggested that educational leadership programs must improve the relationship between content-based instruction (such as courses in instructional leadership, law, and facilities) and application of this learning in the school environment (Levine, 2005).

Subsequent studies by Fry, Bottoms, O’Neil, Gray & (2005, 2006, 2007) and Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen (2007) echoed many of Levine’s conclusions and recommendations. These researchers recommended a continuum of academic content and field application, providing students an opportunity to apply, practice and reflect on “concepts, skills and procedures that improve schools” through purposefully designed and implemented field experiences (Fry, O’Neil & Bottoms, 2006 p. 30; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007; Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007). Leadership preparation field experiences were most beneficial when

provided in schools and under the guidance of “accomplished” or “highly skilled” school leaders capable of modeling desired behaviors (Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007 p. 31; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007; Fry, O’Neil & Bottoms, 2006).

By contrast, researchers suggested that in “traditional” leadership programs, the practicum experiences focused on students “logging” a certain number of hours while engaged in activities of marginal relevancy to future administrative practice, often including a creative reframing of teaching responsibilities (such as attending faculty meetings) as administrative tasks (Fry, O’Neil & Bottoms, 2006; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007). These practicum experiences were largely created and guided by a student-selected, in-building “mentor” whose participation stemmed largely from access and convenience (Fry, O’Neil & Bottoms, 2006; Risen, 2008; Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007). Few of these activities related to the course material candidates were studying in their graduate programs and, as a result, were of widely differing levels of utility to future administrative practice (Fry, O’Neil & Bottoms, 2006; Levine, 2005; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007). As a result, mentorship largely devolved to “a random act of benevolence[,] resulting in unreliable quality [and] inconsistent experiences[.]” (Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007 p. 21).

This disconnection was not only observed by researchers, but echoed within practitioner ranks. In a 2006 study of eighty (80) university-identified mentor principals in a sixteen (16) state region, school-site mentors self-reported seldom creating opportunities for interns to lead activities through which they could “demonstrate essential knowledge and skills” necessary for leading a school, such as understanding the change process, developing high expectations for learning, or providing quality professional development (Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007 p. 16). Instead, they were likely to assign activities such as “observing faculty meetings” – a task required by seventy-nine percent (79%) of responding mentors (Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007 p. 16). Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neill demonstratively quoted one assistant principal’s characterization of his field-based experience as a “joke,” fulfilled through collusion with his building principal by monitoring a student hallway, attending athletic events, and “troubleshooting” technology problems (Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007 p.20). While varying in suggesting alternatives, the literature consistently concluded that the traditional clinical component of educational leadership programs served neither the interests of the students nor the system (Fry, Bottoms, & O’Neil, 2005; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007).

Unfortunately, the preferred alternative identified in research – internships in which students were released from teaching responsibilities to engage in observation, participation, and completion of administrative tasks under the purposeful guidance of a “highly skilled” (and compensated) veteran administrator – was unlikely to find policy support at the master’s degree level. Subsidized internships identified in model programs ranged in cost from \$23,700 to \$78,900, relying extensively on financial participation by grant organizations and the student’s school district (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr & Cohen, 2007). Similarly, Fry, O’Neil, Bottoms & Gray forecast that meaningful internships would require a significant financial commitment by states and school districts (Fry, O’Neil & Bottoms, 2006; Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O’Neil, 2007).

The Challenge of Redesign

In 2005, Georgia joined a number of other states requiring universities to redesign educational leadership programs to uniform standards. Under mandates from the Georgia Professional Standards

Commission (“PSC”), which governs educator licensure in Georgia, and the Georgia Board of Regents (“BOR”), departments of educational leadership were directed to evaluate their current programs against PSC and BOR standards, designing new programs responsive to the needs of 21st century Georgia learners and research in educational leadership.

The new requirements represented a significant shift from the curricular discretion university programs historically enjoyed. The PSC required programs seeking approval to conform to six (6) “core knowledge standards,” largely derivative of ELCC standards. These standards are divided into twenty-seven (27) elements and include two hundred and ten (210) specific performance indicators. These performance indicators include both discrete tasks – “Create a functional system of communicating with parents and other stakeholders about student and school progress, local policies, Georgia law, and other important information through handbooks, newsletters, websites and other tools.” – and less-concrete indicators – “Make and explain decisions based on ethical and legal principles.” The BOR also provided ten (10) “strands” and seventy-two (72) elements that redesigned programs must include for continuing approval. While less numerous, these elements were daunting in their scope. Degree candidates, for example, would have to demonstrate the ability to “[u]se technology tools for data analysis” and “[e]ngage teachers in the use of assessment data to design and adjust instruction to maximize student achievement.” If PSC and BOR standards and strands did not sufficiently convey this by implication, PSC representatives were very explicit in communicating that degree programs not incorporating both PSC and BOR standards and strands would not be approved.

One large suburban Georgia institution responded in a fashion typical of many academic departments, referring the redesign of its master’s degree in Educational Leadership to the department’s curriculum committee. The Educational Leadership curriculum committee included six faculty members who volunteered to serve in this capacity. The committee deduced that these new requirements – many of which were not contained in existing courses – would require either reconsideration and elimination of current courses or significantly expand the current degree program. The committee did not believe the latter a viable option. Comparing master’s degree programs at other BOR institutions, the committee determined that political and market toleration for a master’s degree program was approximately thirty-six (36) semester hours. Even if only two (2) new courses were added to the existing thirty-two (32) hour program, a thirty-eight (38) semester hour master’s degree was unlikely to find support from the university, school districts, or students. Adopting a “zero-based” curriculum approach, the committee accepted that current courses would have to be eliminated or redesigned to meaningfully incorporate PSC and BOR standards and strands.

The university’s existing master’s degree program in leadership included a three (3) hour “portfolio” experience and a two (2) hour “practicum,” constituting approximately sixteen percent (16%) of the degree program’s hourly requirements. The portfolio class extended across two (2) semesters, requiring students to reflect on their course assignments and practicum experiences relative to the ELCC. The practicum was fulfilled by the performance of approximately one hundred and fifty (150) hours of school-based experiences in each of two (2) consecutive semesters in the middle of a candidate’s degree program. Relevant practicum experiences were suggested in a departmental handbook; however, the actual design of the experience and activities contained therein were left entirely to the student’s self-selected school-site mentor and dependent upon his or her time, ability, and commitment. The formative and summative assessment required in the practicum consisted of two (2) single-page Likert scale evaluations completed by the student’s mentor at the conclusion of his or

her practicum. These evaluations solely consisted of the mentor's perception of the student's performance and his or her dispositions for leadership. Additionally, of particular concern, the average student's practicum experience concluded two (2) semesters prior to the completion of his or her degree program, resulting in the student having no opportunity to "field test" concepts learned in approximately one-third of the program's coursework.

Consistently with national trends, students reported varying degrees of satisfaction with their practicum experience, with students' perceptions of the program's benefit largely dependent upon the level of experience and engagement of the student's mentor. Students perceived the quality of the field experience depending greatly upon current demands on the administrator's time (including both professional responsibilities and the number of students the administrator was currently mentoring). Additionally, students indicated a preference for assignments replicating experiences they would face as school administrators that required them to demonstrate their knowledge through case studies and simulation exercises; however, they were often assigned tasks that were purely monitorial, such as "bus duty," "dance supervision," and "supervise football game."

The committee was also cognizant of another national trend present in the program – a perceived lack of cohesion between coursework and subsequent practice (Levine, 2005; Fry, O'Neil & Bottoms, 2006; Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O'Neil, 2007). The program relied upon traditional "paper" assignments, in which students were required to demonstrate mastery of course content largely through papers and group presentations – not the "real life" school application on "authentic" instruments and tasks required of administrators. As with field experiences, students expressed a preference for assignments they perceived having utility to their future administrative practice.

To fulfill its mission to "streamline" course content for "new" courses required by the redesign, committee contemplated integrating the practicum into courses, "embedding" subject-specific field experiences in courses in which the content was taught. By embedding field experiences, the committee recovered two (2) semester hours currently devoted to the practicum; however, and more importantly, it would provide students with a field experience extending across their entire degree program – not just in the third and fourth semesters of a six-semester program.

Conceptually, students would learn content in a discreet content-area course, undertake "in class" exercises related to that content, with a culminating experience requiring students to apply course content through field experiences completed in schools. As students progressed through the program, the assignments would gradually build on previously applied knowledge, requiring the candidate to increasingly demonstrate more sophisticated application of research-validated leadership practices. Field experiences would replace at least one-third of the "traditional" assignments in each course, requiring the student to demonstrate mastery of course content through completion of a field experience. The committee envisaged this accomplishing several purposes:

First, an embedded field experience would provide students the "authentic" learning experiences they desired and research identified that they needed, transforming the focus of the field experience from "logging" a certain number of hours to the completion of a discrete and purposeful project. Field experiences would be developed in consultation with both practicing school administrators and former program alumni, focusing on tasks and instruments students would be required to complete as administrators.

Second, it would control for wide variability in the mentoring experience by providing students with purposefully designed activities related to the course content they were studying. By moving performance assessment from the uncompensated mentor to the professor in whose class the content was taught, assessment of student performance would be both consistent and aligned with instructional expectations. It would also transform the mentor's role, eliminating the requirement that the mentor create and oversee field experiences – a task for which he or she was generally too busy to complete – to primarily ensuring the student had access to school opportunities and facilities necessary to complete his or her field assignments. The mentor would still be involved; however, quantity of time would be exchanged for quality, allowing the mentor to meaningfully reflect with the student on relevant elements of field assignments (such as how the principal developed and communicated the school "vision"). Further, exceptionally engaged mentors and interested students could work with faculty to substitute or supplement field experiences with mentor- and mentee-designed projects aligned to the same performance standards.

Third, it would significantly deepen the field experience – initial estimates were that field experiences would extend the amount of time involved in field application in the program from three hundred (300) hours to approximately four hundred and twenty five (425). Students would also experience relevant field experiences extending across the program's curriculum.

Finally – and solving a significant problem for the committee – eliminating the "stand alone" practicum would provide an additional two (2) semester hours that could be assigned to a new course in data analysis and school improvement – a significant requirement of the PSC and BOR standards and strands.

In order to recover additional hours, the committee also recommended eliminating the three (3) hours devoted to a "portfolio" class, instead permitting students to compile their portfolios while completing the classes in which field experiences were completed. All students would be required to include faculty-identified artifacts relevant to mastery of each ELCC standard and BOR strands. These exhibits would be the field experiences contained in the classes in which the content was taught and on which the student's performance was assessed by the professor most familiar with the content.

Representative of this process are the field experiences contained in the introductory course of the redesigned program. The first field experience students are required to complete is a modified Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) leadership evaluation focusing on indicators of "best" leadership practices for improving student achievement. This assignment requires student familiarity with content related to these research-based leadership practices designed to increase student achievement. Students are required to evaluate the leadership practices in their school building. They must justify their ratings and, where deficiencies are noted, make specific recommendations for improvement. This field experience is followed by a unit focusing on school culture for which students are required to conduct a National Staff Development Council culture audit in their school, making specific recommendations for improving elements of the school's culture. A school "change" project and analysis of the school's improvement plan are also required field assignments for this course. At the course conclusion, the average student produces approximately fifty-one (51) pages of narrative work on field projects and logs and spending approximately one hundred (100) hours engaging in field experiences.

The proposed program was given to the faculty of the Educational Leadership department for

consideration. While the faculty evidenced concerns, most related to the additional amount of work placed on faculty, who would now be required to seemingly supervise field experiences while teaching an academic content course. Faculty members were concerned that they would have to make visits to schools to meet with students' mentors. In the old program which included a "stand alone" practicum, a faculty member would make between two (2) and three (3) short visits to the student's school to meet with the student and his or her mentor and discuss the student's progress on mentor-designed projects. Faculty members observed that the amount of time commuting to and from the student's school site was more extensive than the amount of time spent with the student and mentor. In response to this concern, the redesigned program eliminated this requirement. The course instructor would be able to gauge the student's progress and mastery of content by assessing the products created in his or her field experiences instead of relying on highly variable reports from the student's mentor. Any communication needed between the faculty member and the student's site mentor could either occur telephonically or could be arranged by appointment.

This led to a concern that students might fabricate the amount of hours necessary to complete field experiences. It was observed that without requiring mentors to "sign off" on field experiences logs, students could misrepresent time spent in completing the project. It was observed that this could have occurred in a "traditional" practicum (as Gray, Fry, Bottoms & O'Neil found); however, this was less likely in a field experience in which students had to produce a discrete product instead of simply "logging" hours. To address this concern – as well as the research-identified need for students to purposefully reflect on their performance on field experiences – students would continue to complete field logs, recording time spent on projects and demographic data relating to populations served. While mentors would no longer be required to "sign off" on these logs, the logs did provide faculty with baseline data for determining whether a student was exaggerating hours by allowing a comparison of hours reported on a particular project against that of the student's current and former peers.

A major challenge of the redesign was obtaining college acceptance that educational leadership classes could no longer enroll between twenty (20) to twenty-five (25) students. Embedding field experiences increased workload on faculty. In some classes, each student was forecast to generate sixty-nine (69) pages of narrative grading. The faculty agreed that each class should enroll approximately fifteen (15) students, which would provide faculty members with an opportunity to give students meaningful feedback on their assignments.

Following approval by the departmental faculty, the redesigned program (and its embedded portfolio and practicum) was approved by college and university curriculum committees. When submitted to the BOR and PSC, the program was approved with no recommendations for change. Several other Georgia institutions also embedded the practicum and portfolio as components of their redesigned degree programs.

Conclusion

After a year of implementation, the embedded portfolio and practicum remains integrated into courses. Expected (and unexpected) implementation problems occurred. The new program required significant effort by faculty, and the new, more rigorous, course requirements significantly increased faculty workload. One section of Leadership Theory and Practice generated more than nine hundred (900) pages of grading—a difficult feat at an institution in which faculty are expected to teach three (3)

graduate courses a semester. Interestingly, students and – for the most part – their mentors viewed the new program favorably. Initial evaluation for program improvement demonstrated that students perceived all the field-based assignments as “relevant” or “extremely relevant” to their future practice as school administrators. To present, only one (1) school site mentor has expressed dissatisfaction with the embedded practicum, observing that he had previously planned a number of tasks for his graduate “intern” (virtually all of which were of a clerical nature). By contrast, a number of administrators have requested students build on their experience by conducting a “deeper” version of field assignments begun in the previous semester, such as a school-wide culture audit or leading data teams in schools.

Undoubtedly, challenges will emerge as the program continues forward and is refined. However, as a beginning point, the embedded practicum holds promise as a cost-effective method of providing students with a meaningful field experience. It is certainly one in which more educational leadership programs will have to consider. The proposed revision to the “internship standard” of the ELCC standards *requires* embedded field experiences to fulfill the “internship” standard (ELCC 7.1) – “Candidates participate in planned and authentic field experiences embedded within courses during the entire duration of the program assigned by institution faculty and approved by the on-site mentor” (National Policy Board for Educational Administration, 2009).

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Students reported mentors contemporaneously supervising up to ten (10) mentees from varying institutions. Fry, O'Neil & Bottoms noted administrators concurrently "mentoring" up to thirty-five (35) students (Fry, O'Neil & Bottoms, 2006).

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