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## Communities of Practice Along the Texas-Mexico Border: A University and School District Leadership Partnership

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## Chapter 5

# Communities of Practice Along the Texas–Mexico Border: A University and School District Leadership Partnership

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### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

*This chapter focuses on how one university leadership preparation program along the Texas-Mexico border made a deliberate and concerted effort to build a principal pipeline by establishing a local university school partnership with several local school districts along a border that is bilingual, bicultural, and binational. The preparation program focused on realigning to national standards, actively sought out collaborative feedback from district partners on the development of course assessments, the co-design of clinical experiences, establishing accessible in-district program scheduling, course instruction provided by highly qualified faculty, developing and implementing multiple program and course assessments, and established and implemented dispositions.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

The role and level of responsibilities for school principals has evolved over the past two decades. The job of the principal is beyond just managing afterschool bus duty, classroom schedules and the book room. Principals are now expected to serve as instructional leaders for their campuses. Whereas principals of yesteryear may

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have been promoted based on years of seniority, advancement to the top campus leadership position is now focused on a principal's ability to establish and sustain a collaborative culture, lead learning, understand the complexities of human capital, apply theories of leadership, implement strategic operations, and support & promote equity, diversity, and ethical decision making. Principals can no longer serve as all-knowing superheroes and autocratic leaders focused on managing only the building; instead they're expected to build a "community of learners that focus on the moral purpose of schooling which is improved student learning" (Pankake & Abrego, 2017, p. 6).

In this case study, the community of learners was driven by a shared concern about developing effective school leaders; thus, this common goal is the premise behind the creation of a community of practice. The community of practice [COP] consisted of university faculty and local school districts with a passion for developing effective leaders. The goal of the *COP partnership* was to strengthen principal preparation with the understanding that effective principal and campus leaders require learning opportunities created by the preparation program and local school district's principals and central office staff.

According to the Wallace Foundation (2016), strong university-school district partnerships are crucial to high-quality preparation but are far from being widespread. Furthermore, the Wallace Foundation reported that "district leaders are largely dissatisfied with the quality of principal preparation programs, and many universities believe that their programs have room for improvement and that the course of study at preparation programs does not always reflect principals' real jobs" (p. 5).

Coincidentally, the academic debate about principal & leadership preparation is not new and continues to be a major topic of discussion even as principal preparation programs continue to grow across the nation. There exists a growing number of literature regarding the matter. The issue of leadership preparation has been debated by a number of researchers (Young et al., 2018 & 2010; Bowers, Shoho, & Barnett, 2016; Levine, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2004; Basom & Yerkes, 2004; Hull, 2003; Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2003; Peterson, 2002). Consequently, concerns about how to address educational leadership preparation have become a priority for universities and school districts.

In response to that concern, numerous colleges have implemented a variety of program design elements and practices to address weaknesses and challenges. Hence, the case study for this book chapter will focus on how a community of practice along the Texas Mexico border, actually went about implementing best research practices – specifically, a) alignment to professional national standards, b) actively seeking out collaborative feedback from district partners on the development of course assessments, c) the co-design of clinical experiences with campus and central office leaders, d) accessible in-district program scheduling, e) course instruction provided

by highly qualified faculty, f) multiple program and course assessment practices, and g) the establishment and implementation of dispositions – all in an effort to influence the quality of campus and school district leader preparation, especially in an area that continues to be resilient even though there is a high number of English Learners and poverty.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The State of Preparation Programs**

The topic of educational leadership preparation has been hotly debated over the past two decades, numerous researchers (Young et al., 2018 & 2010; McCarthy, 2015; Bowers, Shoho, & Barnett, 2016; Levine, 2005; Leithwood, Seashore Louis & Wahlstrom, 2004; Basom & Yerkes, 2004; Hull, 2003; Knapp, Copland & Talbert, 2003; Peterson, 2002) have argued the inherent weaknesses in principal preparation programs.

For example, Levine’s findings reported, “collectively, educational administration programs are the weakest of all the programs at the nation’s education schools” (2005, p.13). In addition, numerous public schools across the country have faced a crisis in school leadership marked by high levels of turnover, challenges in finding replacements for principals that were either leaving the profession or retiring, and a perception that recently hired principals lacked the necessary skills to succeed in their present positions (Wang et al., 2018).

A similar lack of confidence about leadership preparation programs has also been shared by university faculty. In 2003, the “National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation (NCAELP) met to discuss the preparation of leaders, consequently, the group developed several recommendations in five areas to help improve programs: university-stakeholder partnerships, program content and delivery, program evaluation and accountability, university institutional factors, and policy” (Hull, p. 13).

### **Influence of National Standards**

Similarly, due to changes in school conditions and academic needs of diverse student groups, several national policy organizations have developed recommendations and standards to meet the changing leadership needs of schools and preparation programs. According to UCEA (2019),

### **Communities of Practice Along the Texas-Mexico Border**

*the Council for Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) and the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) have led a significant effort to revise standards that guide preparation and practice for educational leaders in the United States. The standards, named the National Educational Leadership Program standards provide guidance around education leader preparation – particularly program design, accreditation review and state program approval.*

Thus, these national standards support the idea that campus principals play an integral part in schools. And further substantiate that principals have a direct influence on developing teacher leaders, the design and implementation of curriculum and instruction and overall morale and effectiveness of the school community (Pankake & Abrego, 2017). The National Educational Leadership Program standards (NELPs) were developed to help address the knowledge and skills gap identified by the changing needs of students and school communities. Filling that void has become a challenge for university leadership preparation programs and local school districts across the country. Consequently, partnerships require a passionate group of individuals with a shared vision of what successful school leaders should be able to do and accomplish in order to improve schools and increase student achievement.

### **Communities of Practice: Accreditation Journey**

According to Wenger (2002), “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4). One of the core values of a community of practice [COP] is managing knowledge and learning; as well as stressing that learning as an organization is valued. However, because the accreditation process requires a systematic and structured process to gather evidence, the actions of this particular COP reflect dimensions of a professional learning community (Hord, 2008), which encourage the following:

- Supportive and shared leadership
- Shared values and goals
- Learning and application of that learning as important to a learning organization
- Building trust and structures that support collegiality
- Creating opportunities to encourage members to share their expertise

These dimensions when implemented with fidelity support learning and collaboration in a learning organization.

## **Response to Call to Reform**

Subsequently, over the past decade, numerous preparation programs have successfully responded to the call to reform. According to Winn et al. (2016), data from the University Council for Educational Administration's (UCEA) INSPIRE Institute for the Evaluation of Educational Leadership Preparation, provided evidence from 113 different college-based preparation programs, that there is a growing pattern of high-quality principal preparation taking place. The following elements and practices were identified as influencing the success of preparation programs, they include:

*Alignment to Professional Standards, Partnerships with Districts, Mentoring for Candidates and Novice Leaders, Clinical Experience in Schools with Diverse Student Populations, Accessible Program Scheduling, Course Instruction Provided by Highly Qualified Faculty, Multiple Assessment Practices and Career Support (p. 33).*

The outcomes for this case study are supported by several of the elements and practices identified by the research. The community of practice based it's planning, discussions and implementation timeline on the following dimensions:

- Course Assessments
- Dispositions
- Developing Culturally Competent School Leaders
- Program Assessments
- Collaborative Course Redesign based on state and national standards; and Scheduling
- Clinical Co-design of field-based experiences

Furthermore, an interesting and more global perspective was presented by Edwards, Sikes, & Venezia, (2019), in which they stress a more systemic approach and recommend the need for state-level policies that support school district and university principal preparation partnerships.

The information in Table 1 presents the value of university partnerships over traditional programs. (Edwards, Sikes, & Venezia, 2019, p. 1).

Additionally, the group recommends very specific goals for state policymakers for the funding and development of stronger university leadership and school district partnerships by

- Creating financial incentives
- Leverage funding mechanisms
- Reform accreditation and licensure requirements, and

*Table 1.*

<b>Partnership Models as the Pathway Forward:</b>	<b>Comparing Partnership and Traditional Models</b>
<b>P-12 University Partnership</b>	<b>Traditional</b>
Principal as visionary leader	Principal as middle manager.
Provides training and leadership for success for different kinds of schools.	One-size fits all approach.
Leadership integrated into training and learning in schools.	Leadership preparation programs siloed from in-school training.
Principals as actively engaged leaders with all members of school community.	Principals as isolated managers.

- Support development of new data systems

In essence, Edwards, Sikes & Venezia are promoting the idea that developing leaders should be a statewide collaborative effort and not just the responsibility of a few disconnected university preparation programs. The research group introduces an interesting proposal to strengthen university-school district partnerships.

### **Supporting Culturally Competent Educational Leaders**

Finally, because the leadership preparation program is located along the Texas Mexico border, it was important to the faculty to incorporate the tenets of culturally competent educational leaders, in essence the leadership preparation program believed it was important to prepare socially just leaders. Thus, the department established a series of courses to help develop culturally competent principals, superintendents, and teacher leaders. The leadership program included courses in School-Community Relations, Instructional Leadership, Socio-cultural Contexts, Instructional Leadership for Diverse Learners, and a newly designed course entitled Ethics, Equity and Diversity. Based on the work from Guerra, Zamora & Menchaca (2019), the courses were “revised to focus more explicitly on developing school and organizational leaders who understand cultural, social, and historical realities of students, their families, and communities” (p. 22).

Which begs the question, is creating a series of courses enough to increase the awareness of the importance of being a culturally competent leadership? According to some researchers, it’s a start in the right direction. A recent study (Barakat, 2015) on building culturally competent leaders concluded that going through a preparation program seemed to have had a positive effect on cultural knowledge and beliefs but did not necessarily motivate students to change their behavior.

To summarize, the literature review provides insight over the past two decades about the challenges and benefits of creating, implementing and sustaining university and school district leadership partnerships that support culturally competent educational leaders. Numerous researchers and national organizations have provided best practices to address issues, controversies and problems in the field.

## **UNIVERSITY AND SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PARTNERSHIPS**

### **Issues, Controversies, Problems**

#### **Traditional, Online and University School District Partnerships: Challenges With Multiple Pathways to Preparation and Certification**

Over the past two decades, according to Stevenson & Shetley (2015), the traditional principal preparation program model has evolved toward a more inclusive school district-university partnership model. The university is no longer the sole producer of educational leaders. In certain areas of the country, privately owned companies and educational service centers, can now legally certify principals. The educator preparation process has changed from a traditional semester-credit hour process to a workshop type style, and in some instances, students have access to online programs that offer an accelerated path to principal preparation and certification.

The development and use of an online medium to deliver content for leadership preparation programs has helped maintain or increase enrollment. McCarthy (2015), states in her legacy paper about the evolution of educational leadership preparation programs in the United States that, “the use of online instruction is the most striking recent change in delivery systems. Online courses, videoconferencing, and/or web-assisted instruction are now used in most leadership preparation programs” (p. 420). In other instances, programs have reduced semester credit hours and accelerated the process to maintain their competitive edge. Students can now finish faster with less courses.

Consequently, in this case study, the deliberate redesign of the principal preparation program may not have originated from a need to improve programs but more from a desire to sustain and or increase graduate enrollment, especially, from a newly created university that is expected to create new graduate programs, increase and sustain enrollment.

While online programs have increased, there continues to be a shift in attitudes and perceptions of the role, responsibilities and challenges faced by current campus principals. According to Wang et al., (2018), many school communities



have encountered a leadership crisis with a large number of principals leaving the profession, challenges in finding replacements and the perception by stakeholders that newly hired principals lacked the necessary skills to succeed in their positions.

How then, do university and school district partners address these shortcomings, challenges and perceived gaps in leadership readiness, knowledge and skills set and low enrollment? The purpose of this chapter is to describe how one university leadership preparation program developed a community of practice to help align the program to national and state standards, implement best practices in principal preparation and work collaboratively with community stakeholders to meet the needs of local school districts.

## Communities of Practice: Setting the Stage for Engagement

For the purposes of this chapter, the definition of communities of practice by Wenger is applied. According to Wenger (2002), “communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis” (p.4). The community of practice for this case study consists of two major players: The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley [UTRGV], one of the largest Hispanic Serving Institutes in the country, and several local school districts along the Texas Mexico border. UTRGV was established in 2015. The new university is a consolidation of two legacy institutions -- The University of Texas-Pan American and The University of Texas at Brownsville. The leadership partnership consists specifically of the Organization and School Leadership department [from the College of Education] and several local school districts.

Shortly before transitioning to one university, the University of Texas at Brownsville [UTB] had received national recognition for its leadership program from NCATE (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education). However, the consolidation required that the new college of education resubmit for national accreditation through CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation), which is now the current accreditation body for educator preparation programs.

As a relatively new university, the initial discussion to design and implement a leadership program may have focused on national accreditation but at its core it was a desire to create and implement a leadership program that met the real needs of the community of practitioners. Wenger states that the first goal of any community of practice is “to draw potential members to the community” (p. 53) – therefore, our members consisted of practitioners from the field and university faculty.

## **The Case Study**

According to Darling-Hammond et al., (2007), traditional programs have come under attack because they fail to connect theory with practice, do not reflect the current needs of campus school leaders, and are not aligned to commonly recognized leadership theories. In addition, the curriculum for traditional programs have lacked focus on “topics related to effective teaching and learning, the design of instruction and professional development, organizational design of schools that promote teacher and students learning, or the requirements of building communities across diverse school stakeholders” (p. 10).

In an effort to address program shortcomings as described by Darling-Hammond et al., the leadership preparation program began to shift how it used the leadership advisory council. The advisory council consists of local superintendents, principals, central office administrators, university faculty and other local school organizations. The council meets once every semester during the regular academic year and is traditionally used as an opportunity to share information with local stakeholders about the leadership preparation program as well as provide updates about certification and licensure requirements.

However, since the consolidation of the university during the fall of 2015, the leadership preparation program prioritized the redesign and alignment to national standards in order to meet CAEP accreditation requirements. Thus, the case study focuses on the program’s journey of continuous improvement as it interacts with the advisory leadership council. What was once traditionally a series of meetings to share information and updates with local school districts and campus leaders, has now shifted toward a learning community that focuses on co-design of clinical experiences, courses, and assessments; essentially the group reflects a life-long learning collaborative process between partners of a community of practice.

The case study begins the fall of 2015, at which time, two different leadership faculties from two separate universities, who were separated by a little over 50 miles, consolidated into one university, and began their work toward national accreditation. The consolidation was determined to be beneficial to the area and would allow access to state funding that was not previously available to either university.

Furthermore, in an effort to meet the challenges with sustaining continuous improvement, the leadership preparation program began to examine the work that would be required to transition from a traditional preparation program, which was only aligned to state standards, to one that would be aligned to national standards and continue its work on recruiting students from the surrounding local school districts using a cohort model.

## **Examining Local Contexts of the Community of Practice: The Local School Districts**

In order to better understand the complexity of the relationship of a traditionally Hispanic and marginalized underserved area, it's important to frame the discussion from a local context. According to RGV Focus (2020), a state-wide education organization, "the Rio Grande Valley has a long history of educational disparity. And, in recent decades, as the region has transitioned from a largely agricultural economy to a 21<sup>st</sup> century economy, there has been a growing need to expand access to higher education and career success among the region's student population".

However, this underserved area has some of the poorest counties in the nation. The New Yorker (2004) published an article about the area, and is entitled, *The Churn, Creative Destruction in a Border Town*, and provides insight into the extreme level of poverty so prevalent in the area. In one particular instance, the author, Katherine Boo, followed one particular family and described how access to resources was not as easy for some families of poverty. Her interview with Lupita, a local resident of the area, described the financial burdens of poverty and access.

*Lupita knew the tricks of low-budget householding: when even Wal-Mart is out of your price range, secondhand clothes can be purchased by the pound, the pallet, or the bale; the Port of Brownsville contains enough fresh crabs for three days' dinner, if you have a bit of raw chicken and some string to fish them out.*

According to a recent review of the United States Census Bureau (2020, online), the area in general continues to be the poorest area in America. Nevertheless, several of these school districts have successfully increased student performance in spite of the challenges they face every day. The local newspaper, The Monitor (August 2018), quoted a state researcher's interest in learning more about local school's performance,

*"The performance there is so impressive because the Rio Grande Valley has the most number of children who grow up low income of any region in Texas, yet it has the most number of schools with an A or B grade in our school ratings," said Andy Canales, director for social measurement and evaluation at Children at Risk.*

The director was responding to a state report about school performance. The accountability report cards from the Texas Education Agency (TEA, 2018 & 2019), which designate official A-F grades at the district level and covers the following Region I areas -- the Hidalgo, Cameron, Jim Hogg, Starr, Willacy and Zapata counties, reported recently that several Region I schools & districts out performed

other regions [Texas has 20 Regional Education Service Centers /areas] on most of the designated testing categories.

As a consequence, the performance results from across the Rio Grande Valley break from preconceived notions of a correlation between high-poverty areas and low-performing districts and campuses.

This group of schools and perception of high performing schools represents the partners in this case study. The university-school district partnership is located in the southern most region of Texas which borders Mexico. The university is surrounded by 20 school districts with varying socio-economic needs that also bring into the fold, a student population that is bilingual, binational and bicultural. Additionally, as mentioned earlier, these neighboring school districts are some of the poorest in the nation.

This particular case study consists of partnerships between 8 individual school districts and one university. The 8 cohorts have completed the program.

The information in Table 2 presents each of the cohorts and their status.

*Table 2.*

School District Partner	Number of Cohorts	Area of RGV & Status
District 1	2 cohorts	Mid valley – graduated
District 2	2 cohorts	Upper valley -- graduated
District 3, District 4 and District 5 are one group	2 cohorts consisting of members from District 3, 4 & 5	Mid valley -- graduated
District 6	1 cohort	Lower valley – graduated
District 7	1 cohort	Lower valley – graduated
District 8	1 cohort	Lower valley – graduated

## **Collaboration**

According to the Wallace Foundation (2016), “superintendents reported that current university-district collaboration is limited: Nearly 89 percent reported that collaboration occurred only sometimes or almost never. Further, in focus groups the superintendents indicated they lack involvement in university decisions” (p. 8). Thus, the premise behind the design of the university-school leadership partnership focused on developing an infrastructure that promoted working collaboratively with school districts.

One particular avenue that was already established but was not used efficiently was the Advisory Leadership Council. Part of the problem with collaboration in this particular instance is that the initial design and use of the advisory leadership council was established to meet state compliance requirements. In essence, the leadership preparation program met once a semester to share information and updates about the master's and certification program with local stakeholders. The meetings were hierarchical in nature.

However national standards pushed for a more concrete method of collaboration with stakeholders, thus a more direct effort to create strategic partnerships between schools and the university was encouraged. In other words, accreditation through CAEP requires a focus on continuous improvement and part of that improvement is based on the quality of the collaboration process. In our case study, the Advisory Leadership Council was required to take on a more active role as a co-partner in the design of assessments and clinical experience. Our students and program would no longer operate in isolation but would work collaboratively along-side local school districts to develop and support future campus leaders. The next section shares the narrative on how the university-school district partnership went about re-examining its purpose and goals and the steps it took to redesign the program collaboratively.

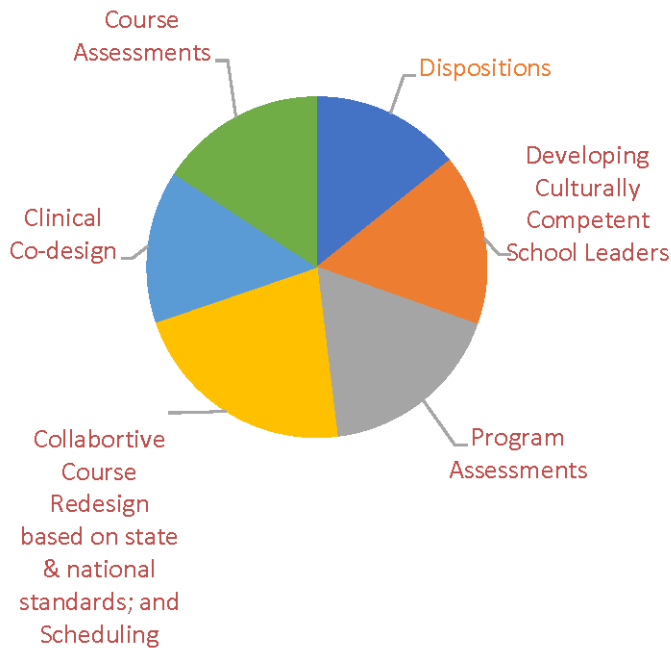
## **SOLUTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

What follows are lessons learned and a discussion regarding recommended solutions from a community of practice involved in implementing a university-school district partnership. Hence, the case study for this book chapter elaborates on how a community of practice along the Texas Mexico border, actually went about implementing best research practices – specifically, a) alignment to professional national standards, b) actively seeking out collaborative feedback from district partners on the development of course assessments, c) the co-design of clinical experiences with campus and central office leaders, d) accessible in-district program scheduling, e) course instruction provided by highly qualified faculty, f) multiple program and course assessment practices, and g) the establishment and implementation of dispositions.

The information in Figure 1 presents the dimensions that guided the work of the community of practice.

Some of the practices and dimensions identified in the above diagram were adapted from the literature (Winn et al., 2016), synthesized from feedback provided by the community of practice which consists of the advisory council participants, and from data gathering sessions of various school district stakeholders. In addition, part of the design was influenced by professional development on the national standards.

*Figure 1. Community of practice: Dimensions of a university-school district partnership*



The journey from a traditional program to a redesigned program involved a series of deliberate transitions.

### **Continuous Improvement Journey: A Series of Transitions**

#### **Acknowledging the Change Process in Merged Programs: Traditional to Pipeline**

How did the community of practice address the issues, controversies and or problems when implementing a university-school district partnership? It began with and continues with a series of transitions. It's important that faculty and partners understand the challenges of implementing the change process and the hard work involved in leading in a culture of change (Fullan, 2001, 2002, 2003, & 2005).

The most difficult transition began with the consolidation of two independent universities. It was followed by another transition, the acknowledgement that the merged educational leadership programs would be seeking national accreditation. Consequently, since Fall 2015, the Department of Organization and School Leadership [OSL] has been working closely with several local school districts to collaboratively

develop a pipeline of school leaders, specifically, campus principals via a cohort model.

## Decision to Align to National Standards

The goal of creating the pipeline was to deliberately realign the leadership preparation program to not only state standards but align and redesign based on national standards. The partnership focused on helping local school districts prepare campus principals based on the individualized needs of each local school district.

## Use Current Structure to Facilitate Collaboration and Input

Thus, even though the course work and assessments were not initially designed by the partnership, through the use of an existing platform, the advisory leadership council, is now encouraging school districts and other partners to provide feedback and input on assessments and the clinical experience. The process of inclusion and collaboration has evolved. This feedback and input is gathered through collaborative data gathering sessions. Partners are invited to attend sessions to review and provide timely feedback on assessments and program issues.

## Being Mindful That It's Important that We Prepare Culturally Competent Leadership

Another transition involved the redesign of specific courses that help prepare culturally competent leadership. School district's feedback and input are necessary, especially, in light of the fact that the area consists of a high influx of recent immigrants and is faced with numerous socio-economic challenges as a result of high poverty. The local families and recent immigrants bring with them specific academic challenges and needs that local school districts and the university must learn to address if the area schools are to succeed.

Part of that mindfulness to developing culturally competent leadership is to use instruments to survey students before and after going through the leadership program (Barakat, 2014). The goal, even though it is difficult, should include a means of measuring cultural competence. Which explains why the leadership preparation program is currently administering post-graduate surveys and is working on developing employer surveys to help monitor growth in various leadership areas, cultural competence, etc.

## **Community of Practice: Lessons Learned Based on the Dimensions of an Effective University-School Leadership Partnership**

As shared throughout this book chapter, the narrative of this particular university-school leadership partnership is best explained by elaborating on the following elements and practices, identified as influencing the success of preparation programs:

### **Alignment to Standards**

The work of Darling-Hammond et al., (2007) and Leithwood, Seashore Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, (2004) further stress that alignment to professional standards strengthens instructional leadership and school improvement. Since the fall of 2015, the leadership preparation program has worked to align its courses, syllabi, assessments and practicum to national standards. The push for continuous improvement has been influenced by the work to meet national standards. It created a paradigm shift within the program and faculty; discussion and planning moved from a traditional program that was faculty-focused to one that encouraged the co-design of assessments and clinical experiences with stakeholders.

### **Partnerships With Districts**

A recent policy brief by the University Council for Educational Administration (Edwards, Sikes & Venezia, 2019) stresses that state-level policies should support the formation and implementation of viable school district and university principal preparation partnerships because they improve opportunities for principals and provide schools and districts with more effective leaders, see below a table that compares partnership and traditional models (p. 1). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond et al., (2007), share that even though university and school district partnerships take effort to establish and implement, they ultimately improve the quality of preparation programs and help produce stronger leaders.

The push to create district cohorts created opportunities to recruit a pool of applicants and also create a network of leaders connected back to the community. The partnership encourages the exchange of ideas based on the real-world of practicing administrators. Furthermore, it created an atmosphere that promoted high expectations for the preparation and certification of educational leaders.



## **Mentoring for Candidates and Novice Leaders**

The partnership encouraged the gathering of specific data, for example, an expectation of aligning to national standards included the co-design of field-based experiences. The practicum is more than just a series of hours logging different campus activities; instead the community of practice focuses on the work required to build relationships. Mentoring a candidate is serious busy and requires an extraordinary amount of time. Mentoring is more than just war stories from the field, instead they focus on building the leadership capacity of the candidate through real campus-based problems. Thus, practicum activities are aligned to the specific needs of the campus but more important, the activities and projects are aligned to leadership behaviors based on best practices.

## **Clinical Experience in Schools With Diverse Student Populations**

UTRGV is a Hispanic Serving Institute (HSI) and is one of the largest HSIs in the country. The university student population reflects the high percentage of Hispanics from the surrounding communities. Thus, the clinical experience may seem to have limited opportunities since the area is predominately Hispanic but the program has managed to focus on different types of student diversity, for example, the academic needs of rural, suburban and urban local school districts help address questions of diversity. In addition, other areas of diversity continue to be examined, that is, poverty and English Learners.

## **Accessible Program Scheduling**

To help meet the needs of the local cohort, a memorandum of understanding is initiated for every different cohort. The memorandum outlines the location of the teaching site and expectations from the university and local school district, in terms of the course schedule, expectations of collaboration, the selection process of candidates to participate in the cohort and certification requirements.

## **Course Instruction Provided by Highly Qualified Faculty**

Good instruction is based on faculty that continuously participate in professional development opportunities in order to build the knowledge and skills required to improve teaching and learning in educational leadership. This type of quality attainment is ongoing and continues to be a challenge due to limited funds to attend national and international leadership conferences and workshops.

## Multiple Assessment Practices and Career Support

One of the strengths of the partnership, included the design and implementation of various program and course assessments. The goal is to have access to purposeful data for program and curriculum redesign and improvement. In addition, an assessment to measure dispositions was created and implemented. The goal of creating dispositions is meant to provide feedback and if needed interventions to help support the growth of an individual's leadership knowledge and skills.

Through a propriety-based survey that focuses on leadership preparation programs, the partnership has gathered post-graduate feedback on the preparation program from its graduates. The goal is to use the feedback to update and address any weaknesses in the program.

## Culturally Competent Leaders

With regards to preparing culturally competent leaders, it's important to note that this continues to be an area of weakness, even though the preparation program created courses to help students build their cultural competence, cultural beliefs & motivation, cultural knowledge and skills; the community of practice is currently working on how to measure the effectiveness of changing behavior in order to build culturally competent leaders. Measuring culturally competent learning is much more complex and continues to be a challenge. Thus, substantial work still remains in terms of building the skills focused on building culturally competent leaders.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

Over the past two decades, online programs have increased and do not seem to be slowing down. In light of the advances in technology and the different needs of millennials, leadership preparation programs and school districts should plan accordingly. Thus, university faculty should work collaboratively with local school districts on recruitment and retention plans to ensure that the needs of the community are met.

## **CONCLUSION**

Partnerships reflect complex organizations and thus require a certain level of collaboration to succeed. According to Davis (2016), one of the themes from the field, based on research, suggests that high-quality programs should include both

faculty members knowledgeable in particular fields of expertise and practitioners. Therefore, leadership preparation programs should work diligently to establish ongoing partnerships between the university and school districts in an effort to produce effective principals.

In this case study, faculty learned to adapt the preparation program to the real needs of local school districts, to lead through a culture of change, and to work collaboratively to address real problems in the field through the shared design of specific assessments and clinical experiences.

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