

Collaborative principal preparation cohorts: The perception of graduates
from two similar graduate programs in two adjoining states

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Abstract

This study looks at the creation and development of cohort models in principal preparation programs at two midwestern universities. The similarities and differences of these models are reviewed as well as the opportunities and challenges their graduates face as they serve in administrative positions and reflect on their cohort experience in preparing them for these experiences.

Introduction

Nearly 30 years ago the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration, sponsored by the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA), issued its report and recommendations highlighting concerns about perceived deficiencies in principal preparation programs which included a lack of leader recruitment programs in schools, a lack of collaboration between school districts and universities, a lack of quality candidates for preparation programs, and a lack of a national sense of cooperation in preparing school leaders (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). UCEA convened the National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation in 2002 to identify needs related to strengthening school and district leadership. Since that time several innovative programs have emerged which utilize structures and systems that, up to that time, had been missing. They include the use of cohorts and collaborative partnerships between school districts and universities, areas explored in greater detail in this paper.

The cohort model of delivery in which students enter, move through, and complete the program at the same time has become quite popular over the past 20 years and many have reported positive outcomes for participants, both in the area of professional leadership competency and capacity and in leading and contributing to a positive learning community. McCarthy (1999) found that half of the UCEA units at that time used cohorts at the master's level and 80% used them at the doctoral level. Advantages include the development of stronger social and interpersonal relationships, increased contact with faculty members, better integration into the university, clearer program structure and course sequencing, higher program completion rates, greater cohesiveness, and the development of professional networks (Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, & Norris, 2000; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001). Disadvantages include tension and adversarial relationships that can develop, shifts in power relationships between students and faculty members, and the influence of a few dominant members (Barnett et al., 2000; Scribner & Donaldson, 2001; Teitel, 1997). The cohort model can lend itself to a focus on leaders' wellness through the network of support that can be created by students and their faculty members (both university faculty members and school district leaders serving in adjunct roles) in this model of delivery for school leadership preparation, in addition to addressing the challenge of school leader succession planning for school districts.

Theoretical Framework

Bruffee (1999) suggested colleges and universities should reacculturate students into the knowledge communities they strive to join. To best do this, Bruffee maintains students and professors should learn collaboratively. The cohort model provides an excellent way for students to feel a sense of community in which to learn and grow collaboratively. In the programs considered in this study, the professors guide the students through their educational experience using conversation and collaboration with the ultimate goal of helping them become members of the community of school leaders.

Overview of Programs

In this study the authors provide an account of the development and delivery of two university-based principal preparation cohort programs that have been in operation for many years. One program was first delivered in 2002 and cohorts have been developed in partnership with 14 separate school districts in a metropolitan area (population = 2 million) in Missouri. The other program was first delivered in 2007 and cohorts have been developed in partnership with eight separate school districts in a metropolitan area (population = 1.3 million) in Oklahoma. The unique characteristic of these programs is the intentionality of both universities to partner with area school districts, utilizing key K-12 personnel to identify potential students, serve on an advisory board, occasionally teach a class, and assign an exemplary administrator mentor to each student for the duration of the course of study. Opportunities gained and challenges faced by graduates currently in leadership positions are detailed.

In the sections that follow, information pertaining to the two universities and principal preparation programs, the purpose of the study, participants, methods, results, and a discussion of the findings are included. The two programs and the universities in which they are housed that are included in this study, the University of Central Oklahoma (UCO) and the University of Central Missouri (UCM), have much in common.

The University of Central Missouri and University of Central Oklahoma were both founded in the late 19th Century (UCM in 1871 and UCO in 1890). Both began as Normal Schools, focused on educator preparation. Both continue that tradition, serving as outstanding educator preparation institutions in their respective states.

UCM is located in Warrensburg, MO, approximately 40 miles from metropolitan Kansas City, with a campus also located in Lee's Summit, MO, a suburb of Kansas City. UCO is located in Edmond, OK, a suburban community 15 miles from downtown Oklahoma City. Both UCM and UCO are accredited through the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). Graduate programs in school administration at both institutions are recognized by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC).

The cohort model followed at UCO involves working with school district leaders to solicit applications and make selection decisions collaboratively. Many area district leaders have embraced this approach to succession planning through "growing their own" principals in light of anticipating many retirements in both the teaching and administrative ranks in coming years. School districts sign a Memorandum of Understanding with UCO which outlines expectations including a designated school district liaison to coordinate course planning and delivery and other logistics with program faculty members.

The program, a Master of Education in Educational Leadership, is recognized by the ELCC and coordinated within the Teacher Preparation Unit as part of the overall accreditation progress with NCATE and CAEP. The only difference in the actual curriculum delivered in the cohort model is an emphasis on merging learning outcomes with district culture and systems, with an emphasis on helping participants learn how to apply knowledge, skills, and competencies within the administrative and operations systems within that particular school district. This is enhanced by the fact that each cohort (with only two exceptions) has included only one school district. Each cohort is made up of participants including those preparing for leadership positions at all (elementary, middle school, high school) levels. Since 2007, 209 students have entered the

program (not including those currently in the program) and 197 of these individuals graduated. Of those completing the program, there are currently 37 serving in leadership positions.

The cohort model followed at UCM's Collaborative Principal Preparation Program (CPPP) involves working with school district leaders from 14 metropolitan Kansas City, Missouri school districts to solicit applications and make selections of those candidates who have the potential to lead in their respective districts. District liaisons are appointed by their superintendents (usually assistant superintendents either primarily responsible for human resources or academic achievement) to work with the coordinator of the CPPP to review the program and to offer insights and recommendations on the curriculum that will enable graduates to enter into administration in their districts prepared to lead. These administrators also approve each candidate's participation from their district. Additionally, the district liaisons work with the program coordinator to assure that each candidate is paired with an appropriate building level school leader who will serve as the candidate's mentor throughout the program.

Teaching responsibilities are primarily the responsibility of full-time faculty, but each semester at least one course is taught by a current, district-level leader in one of the CPPP school districts. All courses are offered at the Lee's Summit, MO campus to allow students to complete their program close to their home districts. Students enter, progress through, and complete the program together as a cohort over the course of two years (six consecutive semesters). For the last decade, there have been enough students to have an elementary and a secondary cohort move through separately. No students are admitted after the cohort has begun the first semester.

The UCM principal preparation program is state approved and aligned with both national standards (ELCC) and the Missouri Standards for Professional Educators (MOSPE). State requirements also set the curriculum and practicum requirements of 300 hours of administrative observations and/or activities. CPPP students, with a mentor assigned at the beginning of the program, are able to start logging administrative experiences from the onset of the preparation program.

Since its inception in 2002, 385 students have participated in UCM's Collaborative Principal Preparation Program. Since 2009, 184 students have entered the program (not counting those currently in the program) and 181 of these individual graduated. Of those completing the program there are currently 125 serving in leadership positions.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to examine the perspectives of program graduates currently employed in school leadership positions in the areas of opportunities provided and challenges experienced. Additional studies will be conducted to explore more fully the areas related to ways to improve the cohort experience. That aspect of the ongoing study and those data will be part of the ongoing program improvement efforts at UCO and UCM.

Research Questions

The following research questions guided this study:

1. What opportunities have graduates of a collaborative leadership preparation cohort who are serving in a leadership position experienced?
2. What challenges have graduates of a collaborative leadership preparation cohort who are serving in a leadership position experienced?

Methods

Participants

Participants included 76 program graduates currently employed in school leadership positions, including 36 from UCO and 40 from UCM. Of the 36 UCO participants, 17 returned completed surveys. Of these, eight were from the large, urban metropolitan school district which is the largest in the state. UCO participants also included nine individuals from five area suburban school districts. All of these districts are somewhat similar and typical of suburban districts, having higher overall property values and tax bases, student populations which are considerably less diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, and levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, and considerably higher levels of success in the area of student academic performance. UCO participants included five principals, eight assistant principals, one district director of fine and performing arts, and one President/CEO of an independent education software and consulting business focused on managing performance and records of English learning students. These participants all have five to 10 years of prior teaching experience and between one and eight years of administrative experience.

Of the 40 UCM graduates in administrative positions who were asked to participate, 25 returned completed surveys. They all were in school districts surrounding Kansas City, MO. A total of 60% of the respondents serve in suburban districts with higher overall tax bases, student populations which are less diverse with respect to race, ethnicity, and levels of socioeconomic disadvantage, and considerably higher levels of success in the area of student academic performance. Seven of the administrators serve in three districts that would be considered urban and more closely aligned with the demographics and achievement challenges of the Kansas City School District. These districts range from having 60-85% of their students living in poverty, minority majority populations, and academic achievement in one of the districts not meeting state standards. Three administrators taking part serve in rural school districts outside of the suburban rings surrounding Kansas City. They have student populations with 50% living in poverty, little racial diversity, and meet the academic standards set by the state.

Data Collection and Analysis

A principle investigator at each site sent emails to their respective program graduates who were in leadership positions. Those emails included a request for participation, informed consents, and surveys. The principle investigators removed identifying information, and organized the survey data. The principle investigator and research team members independently analyzed the survey data according to emerging themes (Thomas, 2006). Research team members met and came to consensus on identified themes upon which the following results are based.

Results

Results are reported according to participants' perceptions of opportunities that resulted from their cohort experience, as well as the challenges encountered and how they managed them. Results from both UCO and UCM are very similar and are combined under each section.

Opportunities Realized

The common themes that emerged from this question were (1) the network of professionals who became lifelong colleagues and friends because of their cohort experience,

and (2) moving into leadership positions more quickly because of the strength of the program. As outlined in the sections that follow, the perceived value of the cohort network was directly related to how many participants believed they had managed challenges and the stress associated with their administrative positions. One participant, who served as an assistant principal for one year and was in the sixth year of the principal-ship in an urban district, noted, "It provided an amazing network of colleagues and friends from across the district that I now work on a daily basis with as an administrator. Also feel I have a network with UCO professors." Most of the participants expressed the value of the cohort experience with respect to forming a professional network/community and how they came to rely on one another. One noted, "The best experience I had was in meeting and bonding with my cohort classmates. We still get together every couple of months and will forever be lifelong friends." This response from an elementary principal was typical of many received:

I feel that the cohort model provided me with instant colleagues in the field of educational leadership. Because we were part of the same program, we shared the desire to continue our careers in school leadership roles, and learning alongside like-minded people is incredible. Now that I am in an administrator position, I often reach out to cohort colleagues to collaborate and share ideas. This is directly related to the relationships we built during the experience. We became comfortable with each other and, because we developed trust within the group, we were willing to share our own experiences and take risks when asking questions.

Additionally, because the cohort experience allows students to have certain professors multiple times, a closer connection can be made as relationships grow over the course of the program. A typical example shared by one administrator was, "...the professors demonstrated so much care for each person in the cohort and they took the time to really get to know us. That attention and care from instructors is one of my favorite things about the cohort model. It is truly like a family."

Many reported their transition into leadership positions had occurred quickly (within the first year of having completed the program). The first administrative opportunity most commonly reported was assuming the role of assistant principal. One participant explained, "I started working as an assistant principal in January the following year after graduation and the completion of summer classes. I feel my cohort experience prepared me for interviews in this field." Another noted how the cohort experience had provided a keener sense of the culture of the district and hiring practices, saying "My cohort experience gave me insight into how things truly operate within my district. Because I participated in the cohort I had an advantage in my interview process because I knew how (the district) operated."

There was a strong perception that the reputation of the programs was helpful in giving graduates an advantage when interviewing for administrative positions. A typical response came from this secondary administrator, "I believe that having administrators in my district that had been through the CPPP program, or were aware of the program, helped me jump ahead of the pack. They knew what type of graduates came from this experience." Responses from other CPPP graduates that supported this recognition included this comment from an assistant high school principal, "I was able to get an administrative position while I was still in the program. The district knew the program I was in the process of completing. It is well respected and highly regarded in my district." Another response from an elementary principal in another school district stated, "I can say with utmost and absolute certainty that opportunities would have passed

me by had I not participated in the CPPP cohort experience. It allowed me to begin my administrative career much earlier than even I had anticipated.”

Challenges and How They Are Managed

Two common themes emerged related to participants’ perceptions of their challenges and how they managed them. They were: (1) managing time, and (2) finding good teachers.

Time management and keeping up with the many demands placed on school leaders were mentioned by most participants. One noted:

Currently, managing time is my greatest challenge. As simple as it sounds, I think it is really true. As it true for many leadership positions, I feel that I’m doing the work of at least two people. I think the cohort taught me to consider what is most important, put my greatest efforts there and streamline the rest. In hindsight, I’m glad to have gone through the cohort during a busy time in life – my children were younger and my personal life was definitely busier. I had no choice but to maximize learning time by using technology more efficiently and finding ways to streamline my classwork and teaching prep. This definitely prepared me for the demands of my very busy but rewarding position as arts director.

Another, an elementary assistant principal, explained, “The biggest challenge is meeting all the deadlines and pushing forward all the initiatives. Having deadlines in a fast-paced program helped me deal with deadlines now.” Another elementary assistant principal shared, “My greatest challenge has been prioritizing my time to meet the always increasing demands of school administration. I have been prepared to handle this challenge by learning to prioritize, delegate and always keep an open ear for more efficient methods and best practices used by others.” A secondary administrator responded:

Toughest challenge would be time management. The day will be over before you know it. Prioritizing your time, and juggling the myriad of responsibilities you have on a day-to-day bases is paramount. I prepare for each day with a couple of items in mind, first and foremost, the students we serve. Every decision I make or am a part of, I try and keep, ‘what’s best for them,’ at the focal point of the decision. Lastly, the ‘systems effect’ is something I attempt to have in mind. I feel it is key to think about all effects of any decision that is made. Every decision could possibly have a ripple effect for your entire school, and maybe the district.

An elementary administrator shared:

I believe the greatest challenge is time management and organization. Just like a teacher, I spend many hours and nights preparing and creating to make all of the above items happen. I have many organizational documents and a well-structured calendar that helps me make sure I am making deadlines and completing tasks. At the end of the day, none of the responsibilities I have are successful unless I am maintaining positive relationships with staff, families and students. So I try to do the paperwork at home in order to be present and available in my building.

Finding, retaining and supporting good teachers was another major theme noted by many participants. This challenge was clearly expressed by one participant this way:

My greatest challenge was finding, interviewing and hiring teachers to fill vacant positions. When I was hired as an assistant principal, the administrator that hired me left due to health issues. I had to hire approximately 19 out of 24 positions. With the challenges of not having enough people and good quality candidates it was very challenging. In addition, I had a couple of weeks left to ensure each class had a teacher. I

felt very much unprepared for this. I used the past experiences and relied on specific individuals to either guide me through the process or help me look for teachers. We also had a climate and culture problem at our school. I knew there were some problems, but didn't know how deeply they ran. I felt like I was always "reacting" rather than being "proactive" which I don't like.

The human element is always a challenge as new administrators arrive on the scene. Much depends on the groundwork of trust and instructional leadership that the previous principal put in place. If that has not been done, challenges can occur. One elementary principal stated:

The previous administrator was more of a manager and didn't offer much insight into curriculum or being an instructional leader. I come from an instructional coach position so it's natural for me to be knowledgeable about curriculum, classroom management and instructional practice. While my teachers are appreciative of this, they are not used to this style of leadership. It is, however, one of the main reasons I was hired.

Discussion

The findings presented in the previous section provide insights into how participants perceive the opportunities, challenges, and stress associated with their roles as school leaders and, in some cases, how the cohort experience prepared them for these. To better understand and place these findings in context this section outlines factors related to the state economy, recent trends in educational policy, and begins to address some of the questions raised in terms of how cohort programs can and might be crafted.

Oklahoma's economy remains highly dependent upon the energy sector. In recent years the price of oil and gas has dropped considerably. In fiscal year 2016 this led to a \$1.3 billion shortfall in the state's budget. The result was drastic cuts to the budgets of schools, school districts, and agencies throughout the state. The most drastic example of the impact of these cuts was on the major urban school district where many of this study's participants serve as school leaders. This district had \$30 million cut from the budget which resulted in the elimination of 200 teaching positions and 100 administrative positions. This, in turn, led to the closure of some school buildings, the elimination of some programs, increased class sizes, and reductions of instructional budgets. Support for teacher and administrators, including professional development, was negatively affected. Other area schools staffed by other participants in this study were similarly affected. The negative impact of these budget reductions on the climate in many schools was evident as related in many of the participants' responses.

Missouri's educational landscape was also negatively impacted by the recent economic recession and subsequent years of lower state revenues for both PK-12 and higher education. CPPP districts, as most districts across the state, cut programs, increased class sizes, and reduced their professional development budgets. A pattern that particularly impacted the CPPP program was the reduction of many intermediate positions such as instructional coaches and administrative interns, often providing the first step into future leadership positions.

Like many states, Oklahoma's and Missouri's education policy trends have been heavily influenced by a reform ideology. State legislation, influenced by recommendations from their respective State Boards of Education, has caused constant changes in academic standards for students in PK-12 schools over the past several years.

As a result of the Common Core State Standards (and associated assessment systems including the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers - PARCC) controversy, recent Oklahoma legislation has eliminated those standards and caused the creation

of an independent set of Oklahoma Academic Standards in English/Language Arts and Mathematics. Work toward the development of standards in other subject disciplines is underway, as are associated assessments. Similar legislative mandates have impacted the educational landscape of Missouri, with the creation of new standards to replace the Common Core and the development of new, more rigorous, state assessments for students.

Both states have also been impacted by recent trends to make the evaluation of individual educators and school systems a priority within their public education accountability systems. The past several years have seen the development and deployment of the A-F School Grade system in Oklahoma, and the use of the Annual Performance Report as a numerical system of rating and ranking public schools in Missouri. Both states have implemented new systems for evaluating teachers and principals. Both of these initiatives are still works in progress in Oklahoma, and it appears that value-added measures as a component of the evaluation system may not be included and that the formula used for the A-F system will be revised to eliminate what has been a high relationship between grade and concentrations of minority and economically disadvantaged students. Recent changes have been made to reduce the number of required tests for students.

Oklahoma currently faces a teacher shortage in most disciplines and grade levels. While a shortage has existed for many years in the areas of special education, mathematics, science, and foreign languages, the shortage now also includes other subject areas, elementary education and early childhood education. This has led to an increasingly large number of teachers being certified alternatively and for the past two years a record number of emergency certificates having been issued. The vast majority of teachers practicing with an emergency certificate are in the two large, urban districts in the state including the one described earlier where many UCO participant administrators are serving.

These reform measures have not been limited to PK-12 schools. Missouri's educator preparation programs are now being held accountable by the State Board of Education via a published Annual Performance Report. The AOR includes admission-completion rates, student grade point averages, pass rates on the state assessments for certification, and first year principal survey results. As institutions react to these new mandates, a perceived value to the cohort system is the ability to coordinate and reinforce efforts to improve these data sets. For example, the CPPP has incorporated the State's Performance Tasks within a number of its courses, providing students with a system of seamless support as students' progress from one semester to the next, culminating with the submission of the tasks during the students' internship course. While the initial results are not yet public, CPPP students have reported successful pass rates on both the performance tasks and the new content test.

The leadership preparation models at UCM and UCO explored in this study utilize a cohort model that is highly collaborative and heavily involves administrators and mentors from participating school districts. The opportunities and challenges faced by graduates of the programs are aided by the cohort model and the collaboration between fellow students, administrators and professors.

The results of this study have shed light on some of the practices being employed with respect to the cohort program. However, they raise other questions that will be explored in the future. Much of what has been found in other cohort studies was found in the current study, but more remains to be learned in order to best know how to design and deliver this type of delivery model for prospective school leaders.

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