

IMPLICATIONS FROM UCEA

Candidates in Educational Leadership Graduate Programs



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In 2009, an essential new Handbook was published by UCEA, the *Handbook of Research on the Education of School Leaders*. The handbook provides a rich resource for researchers, policy makers and those who prepare educational leaders. The chapter discussed in this issue of *Implications* addresses the leadership candidates enrolled in educational leadership preparation programs. This *Implications* research brief also underlines existing knowledge gaps, initiatives and work that address these gaps, as well as points of departure for future research.

Principal Candidates

Producing leaders able and willing to be effective educational administrators in schools and districts, and building effective programs that help shape these future leaders, are essential tasks for improving schools, those who teach in them, and student-learning outcomes. However, research on the individuals enrolled leadership preparation programs is sparse. Researchers know little about participants in preparation programs and slightly more about practicing principals, and only recently have they begun to build databases on both. Most research about candidates in programs is located in dissertations and thus not widely disseminated.

The limited data from studies and national statistics indicate that program participant and graduate groups are not diverse, though they are more diverse today than they were a decade ago, particularly in terms of gender. In most programs women tend to outnumber men. Although evidence suggests that the number of minority program participants is growing, minorities in principal positions remain few relative to the

to the increasingly diverse student population nationally. The age of program candidates and their prior leadership experiences vary widely, though recent research indicates that individuals are entering preparation programs at earlier points in their career today than was the case even five years ago.

Candidate Career Intentions

School administration is a career aspiration for educators who seek greater responsibility within their education organizations. However, the proliferation of preparation programs over the last decade has increased enrollments but reduced the number of program candidates who aspire to school leadership positions. Moreover, the numbers of licensed job candidates far surpasses national and most state replacement needs. This overproduction of leadership candidates is both unnecessary and expensive.

Many individuals who enroll leadership preparation programs are seeking graduate degrees for salary-not career-advancement. Although an increasing number of universities take great care in their selection of leadership candidates, research indicates that this has not always been the case. Furthermore, because universities controlled entry to the profession for decades, they have been criticized for the abundance of graduates who are unwilling to become principals.

The Question of Program Quality

Interestingly, the concern with over-production quickly became conflated with quality of production, with critics claiming that universities do not produce quality candidates. Such universal condemnations of

university-based preparation are not only inaccurate, as there are multiple types of preparation programs with varying levels of quality and focus, but they oversimplify the reasons why graduates choose to take (or not) an administrative position after they have completed their preparation program. Reasons include job-related issues (e.g., low salary for time and work requirements, limited decision-making power, increased job-related stress) as well as placement challenges (e.g., gender and racial biases, low principal turnover, limited candidate mobility). Selection and preparation are only part of the equation.

Special interests and critics of university preparation programs suggest that the deregulation of the school-principal profession will assure sufficient quantities of quality applicants. However, the data used to make such arguments are generally anecdotal, selective and incomplete. Thus far, the field has not responded quickly or intentionally to such criticisms through research-based arguments about candidate needs, career decisions, or job performance—because limited research is available.

Implications

Research on candidate experiences *while engaged in preservice preparation* is desperately needed, and the research that has been conducted through dissertations should be disseminated through peer-reviewed and professional publications. The field needs accurate accounting about who aspires to be principals, why they do, and what impact program participation has on their future careers.

There are several steps that could be taken to facilitate a robust research agenda on leadership program candidates. First, stakeholders in the field must find ways to extend and build on research supported by the UCEA/LTEL SIG Taskforce on Evaluating Leadership Preparation Programs and organizations like the Wallace Foundation. Second, researchers need to systematically collect and meta-analyze papers presented at annual conferences as well as dissertations that speak to the field of preparation and practice. Third, professional organizations like UCEA and AERA-A should continue to foster research agendas focused on preparation and practice issues and outcomes that serve the interests of faculty, doctoral students and

the needs of the field. Fourth, through these processes, efforts to standardize data-collection procedures could assist cross-program and multi-state research strategies as well as macro-studies of the impact of principal preparation on teacher practices and student-learning outcomes. Fifth, data from these four strategies should then be fed back into preparation-program design and conduct, setting the stage for ongoing evaluation studies providing foundations for continuing the cycle of studies outlined.

References

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