

Reform Under Turbulence: Leveraging Accreditation to Improve Principal Preparation Programs

This manuscript has been peer-reviewed, accepted, and endorsed by the International Council of Professors of Educational Leadership (ICPEL) as a significant contribution to the scholarship and practice of school administration and K-12 education.



David L. Conrad
Governors State University

Jeannine Klomes
Governors State University

One principal preparation program in Illinois experienced severe turbulence following the statewide redesign of all principal preparation programs. Myriad problems contributed to a cascading turbulence that negatively skewed stakeholder perceptions of program quality. In addition, the program failed two national accreditation submissions and faced the looming deadline for a final submission attempt. Using the conceptual framework of Turbulence Theory, this self-study illuminates how the program leveraged the accreditation process to quickly lower the turbulence level. Accreditation brought focused reflection and improvement, resulting in program stability, improved program outcomes, and full national recognition. Principal preparation programs are encouraged to use accreditation for collaborative reflection, study, and improvement.

Keywords: principal preparation, higher education accreditation, Turbulence Theory, Council for Accreditation of Educator Preparation, self-study

Once enrolling over 600 candidates, the principal preparation program at one Illinois university was popular with educators seeking Illinois administrative licensure. However, a series of dynamic events destabilized the program and caused a steep decline in enrollment and candidates' perceptions of the program—precipitated by the mandated statewide reform of Illinois principal preparation programs between 2010 and 2014 (Haller et al., 2019). These events included faculty retirements, failed faculty searches, transitory leadership, unstable University funding, declining program enrollment, and incomplete assessment data. Meanwhile, the program was charged with submitting Specialized Professional Association (SPA) accreditation reports for the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). The program had failed two submissions and was facing a third and final attempt to earn accreditation.

Using the conceptual framework of Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2020), this study uses the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices methodology (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015) to illuminate how the program leveraged the accreditation process to quickly implement changes that stabilized the program, lowering the turbulence level and improving program outcomes. The program earned full national accreditation. Contrary to the research literature suggesting that rapid accreditation changes destabilize higher education programs (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010), the accreditation lever—in this local context—decreased the cascading turbulence and motivated changes to strengthen the program.

Literature Review

Accreditation in higher education has evolved from a concept of peer review in which outside peers use established criteria to evaluate their peers for quality assurance (Woolston, 2012). According to Berliner and Schmelkin (2010), higher education accreditation serves multiple purposes:

Accreditations are third-party verifications of quality. At the extreme, accreditations can be gatekeepers—without the accreditation you cannot operate. Other accreditations are more or less voluntary depending on particular state policies. Most programmatic accreditations, however, are voluntary and serve the verification function. Accreditation can also provide a roadmap to continuous quality improvement through feedback on a program or a school. Even preparing for an accreditation visit has a positive effect, assuming you believe in the standards being applied. (p. 1)

Other benefits of accreditation include peer review for improvement, improved quality control and accountability, faculty reflection, institutional and program prestige, improved faculty recruitment and retention, and increased rigor of instruction (Hail et al., 2019; Wheelan & Elgart, 2015).

Accreditation occurs on multiple levels within an institution, such as the entire university or an individual program of study. Universities as institutions seek accreditation from the Higher Learning Commission or similar organizations. For institutions who prepare educators, the prevailing accreditation process is CAEP. This organization evolved from the merger of two prior accrediting efforts—the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Within CAEP, some disciplines have an added accreditation through the SPA accreditation process. For educational leadership programs, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) created the national standards. Previously known as Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium

(ISLLC) standards, these standards were revised and replaced by the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) in 2015 (CAEP, 2016; Young, 2020).

Many scholars have questioned the value of higher education accreditation. Nationwide, the aggregate costs for accreditation in 2015 were estimated at \$3 billion (Wheelan & Elgart, 2015). Institutions must allocate significant human and financial capital needed to collect, analyze, and report the data (Groves, 2019; Hail et al., 2019; Woolston, 2012). Smaller and rural institutions are particularly disadvantaged due to fewer available resources to meet extensive reporting requirements—with fewer personnel assigned to more responsibilities (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010; Groves, 2019). Taubman (2010) asserted that accreditation minimizes the professional judgments of skilled faculty when assessments are distilled into quantifiable data. And Hail et al. (2019) pointed out that once accreditation standards are met, some institutions abandon the processes until the next accreditation cycle arrives.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2020) illustrates how contextual factors influenced the cascading turbulence level of the program. Turbulence Theory provides a useful lens to analyze the degree of challenge facing educational organizations. Though created as a model to measure the challenge level when implementing reforms in an elementary school, Turbulence Theory can be applied to all educational organizations facing pressures from accountability, regulation, and reform forces. The intensity of turbulence is measured by four intensity levels that mirror the definitions used by pilots to define turbulence in-flight. These levels are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Degrees of Turbulence in Educational Organizations

Level of Turbulence	Description
Light	Associated with ongoing issues, little or no disruption in normal work environment, subtle signs of stress.
Moderate	Widespread awareness of the issue, specific origins.
Severe	Fear for the entire enterprise, possibility of large-scale community demonstrations, a feeling of crisis.
Extreme	Structural damage to the reform movement is occurring. Collapse of reform seems likely.

Note. Gross (2020, p. 17).

Turbulence Theory (Gross, 2020) defines three drivers that influence these turbulence levels. The first element driving turbulence is positionality or the perspectives of the various actors, their groups, and coalitions. Urgency worsens turbulence by limiting response time, hindering careful analysis of positionality. Leaders often engage in long-term analyses of positionality to prepare for potential but currently unknown future challenges. The second element of Turbulence Theory is cascading. This element also drives increasing turbulence since challenges rarely occur in isolation but are dynamic, resulting from interacting forces and events.

Each turbulent event builds upon another, increasing the intensity of turbulence as multiple forces act upon each other. Cascading occurs at all intensities of turbulence and in all turbulent situations. According to Gross (2020), leaders may respond to cascading in three ways:

The first kind of leader finds a way to be an effective lightning rod by somehow grounding the danger safely away from the innocent so that the school and district can function while still dealing honestly with the turbulent incident. The second kind of leader takes the power of the turbulent incident and, instead of grounding it safely away from others, sends it directly into the organization. The third kind of leader actually amplifies the imagined dangers of the critical incident and then sends it in exaggerated form into the organization. (p. 32)

The third element of Turbulence Theory is stability—the dynamic relationship between the program and the forces acting upon it. Organizational stability “is achieved and sustained through movement, not by being rigid” (Gross, 2020, p. 33). Stability in universities is perceived by measures such as reputation, admissions selectivity, enrollment, and awards or recognitions.

Turbulence Theory was chosen as a framework to understand how cascading turbulence faced by one higher education program was stabilized by the lever of accreditation. Dynamic forces increased turbulence levels to severe until the final pressures to meet SPA accreditation standards brought reforms that stabilized the program and lowered the turbulence level to light. This analysis focuses on the turbulence drivers of cascading and stability.

Methodology

This study employed the Self-Study of Teacher Education Practices (S-STEP) method (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015) to describe the events and experiences from one professional case—a University principal preparation program in Illinois undergoing accreditation. Self-study is often used in teacher education research literature to help scholars and practitioners understand the complexities of local contexts and improve their own professional practices. In S-STEP, authors function as both researchers and participant-practitioners as professors in teacher preparation programs, using their lived impressions and perceptions to inform the narrative. In addition to the authors’ first-hand experiences, self-study uses multiple methods to strengthen the findings, but primarily uses qualitative methods. In this study, the authors analyzed University documents and other data to support their personal impressions and make sense of the events.

Several limitations must be acknowledged for this self-study. First, this case represents the experiences of one higher education program. The findings and recommendations may not be generalizable to other contexts, especially given the influence of statewide policy changes unique to principal preparation in Illinois (Haller et al., 2019). Second, as first-hand participants in the events, the authors’ interpretations were influenced by biases that may affect the trustworthiness of the narrative (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To mitigate this problem, rich examples and detailed narratives were written to “interpretatively reconstruct” (Vanassche & Kelchtermans, 2015, p. 522) what occurred. These impressions were reviewed between the authors, with a peer checker at the University who was familiar with the program, and by presenting a draft paper at a peer-reviewed conference for public critique. Third, although data from completer exit surveys suggested program changes improved candidates’ experiences and perceptions of program quality, more study is needed to understand how these program changes informed candidates’ perceptions of the program.

Findings

The findings will be reported in two sections. The first section describes the dynamic events that caused cascading turbulence (Gross, 2020) that challenged the program. The second section describes how the accreditation process reduced this cascading and lower the turbulence level. Following this section, the discussion of the findings will offer insights and recommendations for professional practice.

Cascading Turbulence Hindered Program Success

The principal preparation program experienced cascading turbulence (Gross, 2020) between 2013 and 2018. Interaction of several events negatively affected program quality, decreased enrollment, and lowered candidate satisfaction. These were triggered by mandated statewide reform of principal leadership programs in Illinois which resulted in a precipitous enrollment decline. The program also experienced unstable staffing, loss of program leadership, statewide financial instability, and transitory division- and college-level leadership, all of which contributed to two failed SPA submissions for CAEP national accreditation.

Enrollment Declined Following Reforms

In the 2000s, scholarship began questioning the rigor of educational leadership programs, including low admissions standards, weak curricula, and candidates who completed the degree for salary advancement only, resulting in an overabundant supply of graduates for the marketplace demand (Levine, 2005). During this period, Illinois underwent several reform efforts to improve these programs (Hackmann & Malin, 2016; Haller et al., 2019; White et al., 2016). The Illinois General Assembly passed Senate Bill 226 with extensive reforms to principal leadership; the bill was signed into law by Governor Patrick Quinn in May 2010.

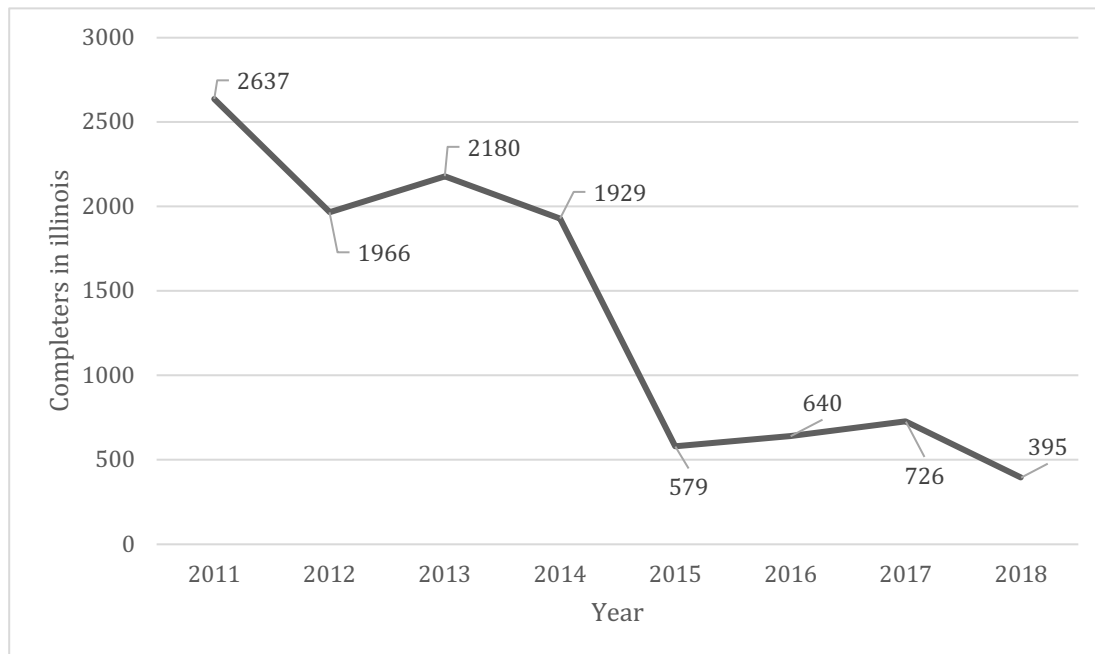
The subsequent creation of regulations resulted in numerous changes to licensure, standards, internships, and candidate selection. The General Administrative (“Type 75”) endorsement was retired and replaced by the new Principal as Instructional Leader licensure. This change reflected a broader realignment with the research on the influence of principal leadership on student learning improvement in schools (e.g., Leithwood et al., 2004; Louis et al., 2010). Subsequently, standards for coursework and internship were adopted to reflect this research. As a result of new statewide policies, all principal leadership programs in Illinois were required to be redesigned and submitted for Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) approval by September 2014 or close. Final opportunity for candidates’ admission into programs under the old rules was September 1, 2012. The final “Type 75” endorsements were issued in 2015 (ISBE, 2020). This program’s application for redesign was approved in October 2012 (White et al., 2016).

Following the implementation of redesigned principal leadership programs in Illinois, the enrollment at all Illinois principal preparation programs declined precipitously (Hackmann & Malin, 2016; White et al., 2016). Many candidates had rushed to enroll under the old General Administrative programs prior to September 1, 2012, to earn their licensure under the old rules, concerned that a new program would be more rigorous. Potential candidates were also confused about new internship requirements, falsely believing they would be required to resign from current employment to complete unpaid, one-year internships (Hackmann & Malin, 2016). Figure 1 illustrates the decline statewide in principal leadership program completers between 2011 and

2018 (Figure 1). ISBE defines *completers* in principal leadership programs as those graduate candidates who meet the following criteria: completion of the degree program, passing the licensure exam, and, beginning with graduates from redesigned programs, completion of initial evaluator training (ISBE, 2020).

Figure 1

Illinois Statewide Principal Completers

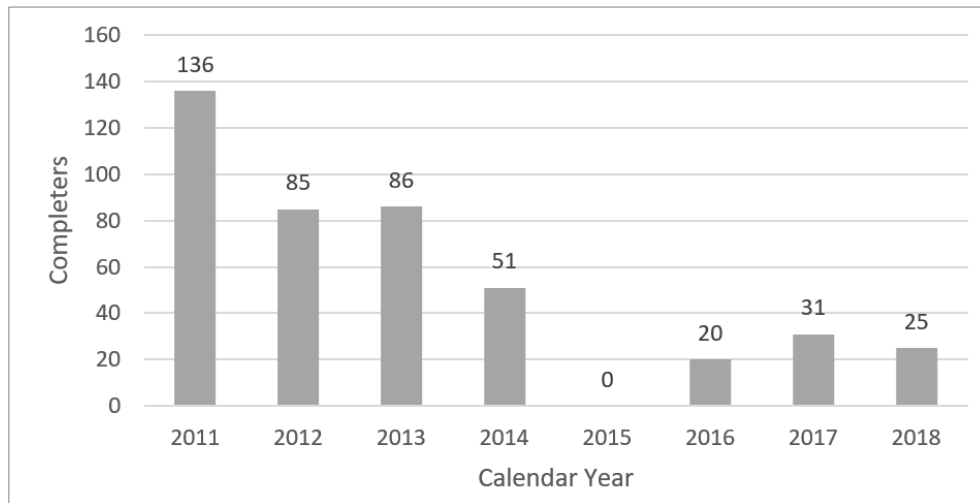


Note. ISBE (2020).

This program experienced similar declines in completers. In 2011, the program graduated 136 completers, but by 2015—the final year to earn licensure under the old General Administrative rules—no program candidates were completers (Figure 2).

Figure 2

Program Completers: 2011-2018



Note. ISBE (2020). 2015 was the final year the retired “Type 75” endorsement was issued.

Loss of Faculty, Failed Searches, and Shared Appointments

As happened for other Illinois programs, the program’s faculty size decreased following the reforms (Hackmann & Malin, 2016). By August 2016, through retirements, only two full-time faculty remained in the program. One remaining full-time faculty member accepted a new workload assignment with a .625 full-time equivalence (FTE) in union leadership that reduced their teaching load of principal preparation courses. As a result, the program relied heavily on adjunct professors to teach the program’s courses. Additionally, vacant positions went unfilled. Four national searches failed to secure new faculty, creating a loss of institutional knowledge and human capital to implement program improvements.

Vacant Program Leadership

In addition to faculty vacancies, the Program Coordinator role was vacant between 2012 and 2018. When neither full-time faculty member affiliated with the program was willing to accept these duties, the Division Chair of Education assumed program leadership responsibilities, adding to the burden of their other administrative duties. During this period, adjunct professors received minimal support, resulting in quality control challenges. When surveyed, candidates expressed frustration with poor communication and inconsistent messaging. Another consequence of this void in program leadership was a backlog of candidates who had not completed their licensure examinations, hindering their earning education salary advancement or seeking leadership positions. Without leadership to ensure program advising about test preparation and the testing process, many candidates were stalled.

Statewide Financial Instability Affected Public and Private Universities

The State of Illinois did not pass a working budget between 2015 and 2017, rocking the financial plans of all state universities. Higher education in Illinois endured two years of instability due to significant reductions in state appropriations, including operating revenue reductions for public universities and severe delays and reductions in college student financial aid for both public and private universities. As a result, credit agencies downgraded the debt of all Illinois public universities and public and private institutions were pressured to support their students who depended on state assistance (State of Illinois, 2019).

In response to the budget impasse, the University closed education programs in science and special education, leaving the principal preparation master's degree as the only advanced-level program eligible for SPA accreditation. While the principal leadership program was spared closure and teach out, the program continued to be unable to fill vacant positions due to retirements and suffered a reputational decline. Moreover, because of publicity about closing the science and special education programs, practitioners who might have enrolled in the principal leadership program (and other programs at the University) erroneously believed that many or even all University education programs were in jeopardy and thus lost confidence in completing a degree at the University. This false perception is believed to have contributed to lower enrollments in all University education preparation programs during this period of budget impasse in the State legislature.

Transitional Administrative Leadership and Gaps in Oversight

The division- and college-level leadership roles were in transition. New appointments to the positions of Interim Dean of the College of Education and Chair of the Division of Education were made. Before and during these transitions, the processes vital to meeting accreditation standards lacked oversight. The newly appointed Division Chair addressed these issues by creating and filling new positions for an Assessment Coordinator to monitor data collection and assessments and a Director of Educator Preparation to oversee the certificated education programs and candidates' entitlement for graduation and licensure. The importance of these positions and the qualified human capital necessary to manage the education programs were supported by two examples of problems discovered after these positions were created and filled. First, the Director of Educator Preparation discovered that several master's degrees had been issued in error to candidates who did not meet University degree requirements. Several degrees were recalled. Second, the Assessment Coordinator discovered many professors and adjunct instructors had not completed required collection of assessment data—including the disposition assessments for each course—due to lack of accountability and oversight.

Failed Accreditation Submissions

During the 2018-2019 academic year, the College of Education faced two accreditation deadlines. First, the principal leadership program faced an imminent deadline for submission of their third and final report attempt to earn SPA accreditation. This report was due on September 15, 2018. In two prior submissions, no national standards had been met. As the program reviewed these reports, many problems including missing data, only tangential alignment to standards, and failure to document program changes became clear. Second, the entire Education Preparation Provider

(EPP) unit—including all education programs offered by the University in the College of Education and two other colleges—was due for an accreditation visit on April 28-30, 2019. The principal leadership program was the only EPP graduate program eligible for accreditation and was responsible for CAEP documentation for all advanced programs.

Together, these cascading forces (Table 2) created a severe turbulence level. If the program failed national accreditation, the turbulence level would increase with new cascading problems. Candidates would be notified that the program had lost its accreditation—creating uncertainty about licensure and degree completion, further eroding program reputation. The program’s websites and promotional materials would have the accreditation logo removed. Partner districts would lose confidence in the program and would refer fewer candidates for enrollment. Ability of program faculty to maintain their appointments could be jeopardized.

Table 2

Cascading Forces

Event	Approximate Timeframe
Vacant Program Leadership	2012-2018
Enrollment Declined Following Reforms	2014-2018
Loss of Faculty, Failed Searches, and Shared Appointments	2014-2018
Transitioning Administrators and Oversight Gaps	2015-2017
Statewide Financial Instability Affected Public Universities	2015-2018
Two Failed SPA Accreditation Submissions	2016-2017

Cascading Towards Stability

Faced with a final SPA accreditation deadline, the program needed rapid changes to satisfy accreditation requirements. This section discusses seven major program reforms that were influenced by the accreditation lever. The Program Coordinator vacancy was filled—providing leadership to create partnerships, improve documentation and recordkeeping, realign and modify program assessments, improve candidate support for the state licensure examination, and engage candidate voices in program evaluation and improvements. These changes all contributed to achievement of full national accreditation.

Program Coordinator Secured

A new faculty member was hired and began work on August 1, 2018. This new assistant professor was assigned Program Coordinator duties, including responsibility for revising the final SPA accreditation report due 45 days later on September 15, 2018. Although this was this new faculty member’s first experience in higher education and accreditation, their human capital was needed to implement and document the necessary changes and reforms. The University provided a three-credit hour release for Program Coordinator duties during each semester, representing a course release of .29 FTE. Working to meet the SPA deadline, the Coordinator was given wide latitude to make rapid changes. With limited time, the program benefited from the final year of “phase-in”—a CAEP accreditation procedure whereby programs could demonstrate plans to implement

future changes. Since many reforms could not be implemented by the new Program Coordinator within the 45 days remaining until deadline, the program created plans for future procedures (CAEP, 2016).

Partnerships

Accreditation requires higher education to show evidence of partnerships with PK-21 stakeholders for the co-creation of program elements (CAEP, 2016). The program found this requirement challenging. Within the immediate market area of the University, the program had established some partnerships with districts but had not found a school district partner who needed an ongoing, scalable principal pipeline partnership. Illinois school districts are decentralized, with over 850 school districts, including many districts that are standalone elementary or secondary schools, plus hundreds of cooperatives, vocational schools, alternative schools, and other entities. These school districts may not have the need nor the resources for a pipeline partnership (Browne-Ferrigno, 2011). Given this challenge, the program addressed enhancing the kind and number of partnerships with several strategies.

Because most school leaders are hired for their first leadership position in the district where they are employed as educators (Bastian & Henry, 2015), the program reframed all embedded field experiences and internships as a “grow your own” program whereby candidates complete their fieldwork in the partner school and district where they are employed. This formalized existing district relationships while embracing the research on career pipelines. These partners and others were invited to join the new Partnership Advisory Council (PAC). The PAC including practicing school leaders and current program candidates to advise the program on curriculum, assessment, and policies. The first meeting was held virtually in November 2019; principals discussed the kinds of technology skills and knowledge they needed in the roles as principals while candidates compared technology expectations in the program curriculum to those they encountered in the field. Collaboratively, the PAC recommended several revisions to the curriculum.

The program collaborated with leadership from a regional division of the Illinois Principals Association (IPA) to co-create assessments for the internship. For example, during one internship seminar meeting, candidates were organized into small groups, each with an assigned IPA region leader. Candidates and leaders worked together to design an internship assessment that reflected both the relevant leadership standards and the daily work of principals in the field. Faculty also began attending regional meetings of the IPA to gain insight for program improvement. The Program Coordinator was also appointed as the higher education representative for a regional division of the IPA.

In addition, the program engaged with an advocacy group that collaborates with higher education partners to provide mentoring and career advancement support for principal leadership candidates working in one large public school district. This arrangement allowed the University to partner with a school district on a scale commensurate to the program’s resources. The Program Coordinator attended regular meetings and engaged with the partnership on planning, review, and internship design. As a result, program candidates who were employed in that district were eligible to apply for the mentoring program starting in August 2020. For the 2020-2021 school year, six program candidates who were eligible to apply were accepted into the mentoring experience.

Program Documentation and Procedures

The accreditation process required evidence of various policies and procedures. To streamline the submission documents, new handbooks were created for the one-year internship and for the program overall. A new candidate progress referral procedure was developed and significant corrections and revisions to the course catalog and marketing tools were completed. New procedures were implemented to ensure the benchmark process was followed for candidate advancement through the benchmarks to degree issuance. These documents were used in the CAEP reports and with candidates, faculty, and staff to ensure consistent procedures throughout the program.

Assessment and Data

Accreditation also requires significant data collection and analysis. A new, full-time Assessment Coordinator position, focused on managing data collection and analysis using a cloud-based software VIA, was created and filled. This Coordinator increased faculty accountability for data collection and created tables and grids of data to help faculty in analyzing their data as a basis for program improvement. To assist faculty in data collection, at the conclusion of each term, the Assessment Coordinator audits the database and notifies professors when data are missing. Prior problems with missing or incomplete data were solved.

In preparing the final SPA report, the program responded to concerns about assessments. First, accreditors asked for significant revisions to the internship rubrics. This revision was challenging for the program because Illinois already required use of three statutory rubrics. Therefore, program faculty created a fourth internship rubric to align with accreditation and national standards while maintaining alignment to Illinois' standards in the three original internship rubrics. Second, all Key Assessment rubrics were revised, expanding the original three evaluative ratings to the four CAEP-required ratings. New rubric language was also created to improve alignment with the ELCC standards (CAEP, 2016). Third, the program created a phase-in study of graduates to measure their preparation and influence on student learning in P-21 schools. Finally, research was conducted to document the validity of the ISBE-required teacher evaluation assessment that was used as a Key Assessment for the program.

State Licensure and Assessments

Accreditation data analysis revealed lower rates of candidates taking the two Illinois licensure exams, with some candidates having difficulty passing the second exam. To address this problem, the program created a test preparation intervention to be presented during a final internship seminar. This initiative evolved into a workshop now offered once each semester on Saturdays. In addition, program faculty integrated practice test questions into their courses and created practice questions for an online practice test now offered to candidates.

Communication and Candidate Voice

Accreditation requires collection of various data from program completers, including their perceptions of their program. New exit surveys—created by the Director of Educator Preparation for the accreditation review—suggested completers were dissatisfied with program

communication and structure. In response to this finding, the new Program Coordinator communicated frequently with candidates, informing them about program deadlines, program changes, and program benchmarks. The Program Coordinator also assumed a new advocacy role to help candidates manage the bureaucracy of the University. Frequent surveys of current and former candidates were conducted to understand textbook preferences and perceptions of the Illinois licensure exams; exit surveys of all candidates were implemented by the EPP in August 2018. And, with high expectations for the depth of the qualitative data to be collected, a phase-in study of program completers working in school leadership roles was created and implemented, later replaced with outcomes data provided by ISBE.

Issuance of National Recognition and Improved Candidate Perceptions

The program expected to learn the final decision regarding the third and final SPA submission by February 1, 2019. On the morning of January 31, 2019, the Division Chair and other University administrators received an email from CAEP announcing their decision for the principal preparation program. This notification of failing the final accreditation submission raised the turbulence to extreme as faculty considered how this decision would damage the program.

The Director of Educator Preparation immediately phoned the CAEP representative who coordinated the accreditation process with the EPP to inquire about this disappointing and unexpected result. Within an hour, CAEP rescinded the initial negative report and apologized for sending an inaccurate document. CAEP confirmed the principal preparation program had earned full SPA accreditation on the third and final submission, effective February 1, 2019, through February 1, 2025. This welcome news quickly lowered the turbulence to a moderate level.

Following receipt of national accreditation, the program observed several outcome measures to determine the turbulence level. In August 2018, the program began collecting annual exit data during the concluding session of the final internship. The purpose of this data collection was to inform program improvements and monitor trends in candidate satisfaction. Because most accreditation reforms were implemented between August 2018 and April 2019, comparing exit survey data from August 2018 with data from the following two years captures the perceptions of one group prior to the reforms and two groups following the reforms. When candidates were asked if they would enroll at the University again, positive responses increased by 82.60% in August 2019. The increase in program reputation gained through accreditation had contributed to the stability of the program (Gross, 2020). A chart of selected questions from the exit surveys is provided in Table 3.

Table 3

Candidate Exit Satisfaction Surveys

Question	August 2018 Positive Responses	August 2019 Positive Responses	August 2020 Positive Responses
Survey Participants	N = 23	N = 18	N = 23
If I were to begin my education experience (most recent degree, license,	38%	68%	85%

or endorsement) all over again, I would attend (the University).

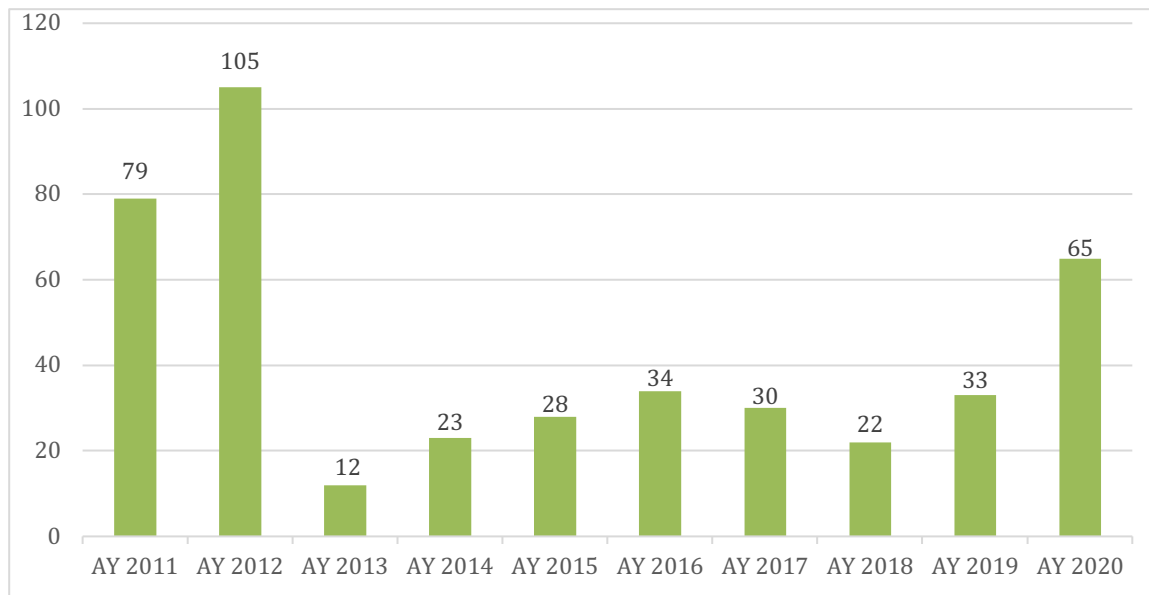
My program prepared me for the principal licensure exam.	53%	88%	75%
Perceptions of Program Quality			
Instruction	57%	88%	95%
Selection/Acceptance Process	41%	76%	85%
Sequence of Courses	52%	76%	80%
Portfolio Assessment	48%	76%	75%
Preparation to Implement:			
Curriculum Process	64%	94%	100%
Professional Ethics	77%	94%	100%
Human Resources	57%	88%	95%
Evaluation Process	64%	88%	100%

Note: University documents.

This reputation increase is one indicator of stability, as is enrollment (Gross, 2020). The program experienced a 195% increase in enrollment between AY 2018 and AY 2020—following the implementation of changes during accreditation (Figure 3).

Figure 3

Annual New Student Enrollment (AY 2011-2020)



Note: University documents.

Discussion and Recommendations

In their discussion of accreditation, Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) contended that “major changes cannot be made at the last minute without undercutting the stability of a program” (p. 1). However, this program’s experience suggests that rapid accreditation changes produced greater program stability. Like Lewin’s concept of unfreezing an organization (1958), the accreditation turbulence created an “emotional stir-up” (p. 344), a sense of urgency to refocus the organization on needed changes. Gross suggested that organizations operating as learning systems could use turbulence as “an opportunity to reflect, innovate, and actually profit” (Gross, 2020, p. 33) because reaching stability requires flexibility and change.

Deadlines may not allow organizations time to engage in deep sense making and reflection when “the need for a rapid, well-considered response is too acute” (Gross, 2020, pp. 29-30). While accreditation pressures initially increased the turbulence level of this program, the process brought focused reflection and improvement, resulting in program stability, improved program outcomes, and full national recognition. The cascading turbulence was caused by the program’s inability to change, caused primarily by the lack of human capital and leadership. However, the employment of a Program Coordinator in August 2018 who believed in the potential of the program—coupled with the accreditation lever—provided “the needed energy to respond in measured flexible ways” (Gross, 2020, p. 33).

Now that accreditation has been achieved, the program must plan for the next accreditation cycle to avoid the cascading turbulence of the previous cycle. Local procedures must be monitored and regularly reviewed to ensure ongoing documentation and fidelity of implementation. In addition, though stability was achieved, the timelines left little opportunity to reflect or study. The positionality of program faculty was not a major driver in the reforms. The Program Coordinator worked in isolation and minimally engaged other program faculty to participate in accreditation revisions. For continual improvement processes to have lasting influence, all program faculty must engage in the processes.

Consistent with the research literature, the lack of human capital for implementing the accreditation processes significantly hindered program stability (Groves, 2019; Hail et al., 2019). However, once the EPP added additional positions for assessment and educator preparation, these non-faculty personnel began work to draft reports and reform local procedures. With the Division Chair, these two dedicated staff members spent many evenings and weekends during 2017 and 2018 working to correct past accreditation problems. The new Program Coordinator began their accreditation work in August 2018, in addition to acclimating to a new faculty position with teaching, service, and research expectations. Research cautions that personnel assigned to accreditation tasks may be challenged by the workload burdens and suffer negative personal consequences from the stressors of the position (Hail et al., 2019; Woolston, 2012). University leadership must monitor and support these personnel to reduce burnout potential.

Overall, principal preparation programs are encouraged to use this research to shape their own improvement processes and avoid the challenges described here. Rather than making changes merely for compliance, however, programs are encouraged to use the process for collaborative reflection, study, and improvement. Accreditation can be an important credential for external validation of program quality, but this case has shown how programs can leverage accreditation to motivate program reform. The authors hope others will benefit from this study and use accreditation to improve their own programs.

References

- Bastian, K. C., & Henry, G. T. (2015). The apprentice: Pathways to the principalship and student achievement. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 51(4), 600–639. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0013161X14562213>
- Berliner, H. A., & Schmelkin, L. P. (2010). *Accreditation best practices and implications in a resource constrained environment* [Policy report]. TIAA-CREF Institute. <https://www.tiaainstitute.org/publication/accreditation-best-practices-and-implications>
- Browne-Ferrigno, T. (2011). Mandated university-district partnerships for principal preparation: Professors' perspectives on required program redesign. *Journal of School Leadership*, 21(5), 735-756. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105268461102100505>
- Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). (2016). *CAEP accreditation handbook* (3rd ed.). Author. <http://www.caepnet.org>
- Gross, S. J. (2020). *Applying turbulence theory to educational leadership in challenging times: A case based approach*. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315171357>
- Groves, S. (2019). *Ethical considerations in the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Oklahoma]. SHAREOK. <https://hdl.handle.net/11244/320326>
- Hackmann, D. G., & Malin, J. R. (2016). If you build it, will they come? Educational leadership program coordinators' perceptions of principal preparation redesign in Illinois. *International Journal of Educational Reform*, 25(4), 338–360. <https://doi.org/10.1177/105678791602500401>
- Hail, C., Hurst, B., Chang, C. W., & Cooper, W. (2019). Accreditation in education: One institution's examination of faculty perceptions. *Critical Questions in Education*, 10(1), 17–28. <https://academyedstudies.files.wordpress.com/2019/01/hail-et-al-final.pdf>
- Haller, A., Hunt, E., & Baron, D. (2019). Setting the stage for state policy change involving principal preparation in Illinois. In E. Hunt, A. Haller, L. Hood, & M. Kincaid (Eds.), *Reforming principal preparation at the state level: Perspectives on policy reforms in Illinois* (pp. 3–27). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315098098-1>
- Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE). (2020). *Historic principal preparation completer data* [Data set]. Author.
- Leithwood, K., Lewis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning* [Research review]. University of Minnesota, Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement website. <http://purl.umn.edu/2035>
- Levine, A. (2005). *Educating school leaders*. The Education Schools Project. <http://edschools.org/pdf/Final313.pdf>
- Lewin, K. (1958). Group decision and social change. In E. E. Maccoby, T. M. Newcomb, & E. L. Hartley (Eds.), *Readings in Social Psychology* (pp. 197–211). Holt, Reinhart, & Winston.
- Lincoln, Y. S., & Guba, E. G. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry*. Sage.
- Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Learning from leadership: Investigating the links to improved student learning*. The Wallace Foundation. <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/>
- State of Illinois. (2019). *Consequences of Illinois 2015-2017 budget impasse and fiscal outlook* [Policy report]. Office of the Illinois Comptroller.

<https://illinoiscomptroller.gov/financial-data/find-a-report/special-fiscal/consequences-of-illinois-2015-2017-budget-impasse-and-fiscal-outlook/>

- Taubman, P. M. (2010). *Teaching by numbers*. Routledge.
- Vanassche, E., & Kelchtermans, G. (2015). The state of the art in self-study of teacher education practices: A systematic literature review. *Journal of Curriculum Studies*, 47(4), 508-528. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00220272.2014.995712>
- Wheelan, B. S., & Elgart, M. A. (2015, October 22). Accreditation's real cost (and value). *Inside Higher Ed*. <https://www.insidehighered.com/views/2015/10/22/real-costs-accreditation-and-processs-value-essay>
- White, B. R., Pareja, A. S., Hart, H., Klostermann, B. K., Huynh, M. H., Frazier-Meyers, M., & Holt, J. K. (2016). *Navigating the shift to intensive principal preparation in Illinois: An in-depth look at stakeholder perspectives* [Policy report]. Illinois Education Research Council at Southern Illinois University. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED567016.pdf>
- Woolston, P. J. (2012). *The costs of institutional accreditation: A study of direct and indirect costs* (UMI 3542492) [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California]. ProQuest.
- Young, M. D. (2020). Professional standards for educational leadership. In *Oxford research encyclopedia of education*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.722>