



Feature Article

Partnering in Principal Preparation Program Redesign to Develop a Context-Specific Theory of Action

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Abstract

Research findings have identified the importance of university/district partnerships in the preparation of principals along with points of dissatisfaction of traditional preparation programs outcomes. While change had and was occurring in some programs, impactful change in the quality of programs and program completers must involve all stakeholders including partnering districts and state agencies in the redesign of preparation programs. This paper examines the local and state context as foundational to the redesign process and the engagement of one university's use of Wallace Foundation funds to engage area school districts and the state Professional Standards Board in the re-envisioning of its principal preparation program.

Keywords: *Partnerships, Principal preparation, Program redesign*

We know that "principals, through their actions, can be powerful multipliers of effective teaching and leadership practices in schools. And those practices can contribute much to the success of the nation's students" (Manna, 2015, p. 7). We also know by directly impacting the classroom conditions, school conditions, and the teachers in their building, principals indirectly influence student achievement (Seashore Louis et al., 2010). Principals develop instructional and organizational capacity by providing content-focused, job-embedded, collaborative, sustained teacher professional development based on principles of adult learning theory. They can further develop capacity through coaching, expert

support, and dialogue focused on feedback and reflection (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017). Principals must lead their organizations to improve learning environments, climate, and culture where needed, and they should ensure robust multi-tiered systems of support to address students' needs (Darling-Hammond & Cook-Harvey, 2018; Seashore Louis et al., 2010). The challenge for principal preparation programs is how to best develop the necessary knowledge and skills in principal aspirants to meet these demands.

For two decades, the Wallace Foundation Educational Leadership unit focused philanthropic

efforts on the relationship between effective principals and student success. As part of this work, the Wallace Foundation launched a series of initiatives, notably the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI) and the Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI) – both focusing on district-level development of school leaders and ensuing positive impacts (Gates et al., 2019; Goldring et al., 2020). Their investment in principal pathways led to significant findings relevant to principal effect on student achievement. The focus on the development of school leaders through the PSI and PPI allowed the Wallace Foundation to engage others in research around principal preparation programs (P3s).

One theme emerging from this research was the importance of university-district partnerships in preparing principals and these relationships' inconsistent existence and quality. The report also surfaced that most superintendents believed policies requiring university-district partnerships were the most powerful state lever for improving P3s. Another theme was district leader dissatisfaction with traditional P3 models, which they perceived as often failing to connect theory and practice. In a survey disseminated by the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), 80% of superintendents responded, "improvement of principal preparation is necessary" (Wallace Foundation, 2016, p. 6). When superintendents ranked the preparedness of principal aspirants around 15 job responsibilities, four of the lowest-rated areas were among the most critical: "instructional leadership, team building, problem solving/decision making, and relationships/collaboration" (Wallace Foundation, 2016, p. 7). Some university P3s went through significant transformation in recent years, but 96% of respondents reported planned changes over the next two years, and over half planned moderate to significant changes (Wallace Foundation, 2016). These findings, coupled with district leader dissatisfaction regarding program quality and their beliefs that policies requiring universities to collaborate with districts were the most valuable lever to improve principal

preparation, reinforced the importance of partnerships.

PSI and PPI outcomes paved the way for the next Wallace Foundation initiative, the University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI), which launched in 2016. The UPPI challenged and supported universities in collaborating with exemplary P3 partners and local district leadership to transform P3s to meet the unique needs of the university's service area or region. The nature of the local context (rural, urban, suburban, town) influenced partnership selection and development. The UPPI-supported partnership between each university and its state agency reviewed program accreditation and principal licensure policies. These state stakeholders also engaged with universities as partners in program redesign (Wang et al., 2018). State stakeholders provided a valuable perspective to P3s in understanding the complex problems of equity and school improvement as presented in state and local contexts.

The UPPI was the next step to understand the importance of quality P3s and effectuate meaningful change by developing a triumvirate partnership among the state education agency, the local education district, and the university that serves the needs of both. In 2016, the Wallace Foundation selected Western Kentucky University (WKU) as one of seven universities to take part in this \$47 million initiative to develop models nationwide for exemplary P3s. The premise for the initiative was simple: Principal preparation requires partnerships and stakeholder input to create programs that reflect evidence of best practices for preparing principal candidates. Work completed in siloes would not adequately meet the challenge.

This article chronicles two concurrent work streams in Kentucky resulting from the UPPI: the policy context, which included the statewide work, and the program redesign occurring at WKU. Bryk and colleagues (2015) described the first principle of improvement science as "make the work problem-specific and user-centered" (p. 21). WKU,

supported by program partner Urban University (UU, pseudonym) sought to redesign our program by applying improvement science principles. We also sought to embed these principles within the program to substantiate continuous improvement. The UU cycle of inquiry model and previous redesign experiences influenced the process as they facilitated our effort. The first step of UU's model, "Identify root cause problems" (Cosner et al., 2015, p. 21), led us to collect and review multiple data sources to understand program strengths and opportunities for improvement. Data collection and analysis supported problem identification. After understanding root cause problems, we surfaced our beliefs and constructed our theory of action. This work reflected the first organizational principle of P3 redesign: "program philosophy as a clearly articulated theory of action" (University Council for Educational Administration, 2012, p. 2).

The Spectrum for Understanding and Evaluating Public Engagement (International Association for Public Participation, 2014) offered a framework to describe the partners' engagement. The spectrum includes five levels providing the public with increasing impact on decisions: inform, consult, involve, collaborate, and empower. This article considered WKU's partner engagement in the initial redesign phases through the lens of the framework's first four levels. Our goals at each level of engagement were to:

- *Inform*, we sought to provide partners with information about our program's strengths, problems of practice, and viable solutions;
- *Consult*, we sought to understand our problems of practice and context better through the unique perspectives of our partners and garner their feedback before making final decisions;
- *Involve*, we sought to engage partners directly in our work. This participation might be attending UPPI Professional Learning Communities alongside us or providing input on the design of clinical experiences;

- *Collaborate*, we sought to work with partners to develop and identify solutions.

In working with our partners, we created a program to serve our principal aspirants, districts, and, subsequently, P12 students by better reflecting the work of the principal.

Understanding the Policy Context of Kentucky

An underlying principle in this work was the importance of context, both state and local, in redesigning our program. While WKU participated in the Wallace Foundation UPPI work, RAND Corporation concurrently engaged in research to learn lessons from the collective efforts of the seven UPPI programs. This project elevated the work of state entities in transforming P3s as the seven UPPI programs engaged with the state agencies responsible for approving and monitoring programs. Gates and colleagues (2020) also noted the informal influence of political officials, boards, and nonstate entities in this relationship. Their work identified the following levers for states to improve P3s: principal standards, program recruitment, licensure, evaluation, professional development requirements, and data systems to inform improvement (Gates et al., 2020; Grissom et al., 2019; Manna, 2015). All states in the study engaged in setting standards, encouraging the use of those standards, establishing prerequisites to P3s, and determining licensure pathways and requirements (Gates et al., 2020).

Knowing the importance of quality P3s and even realizing some levers might lead to substantive change did not always mean doing. Challenges faced by the seven state entities included limited personnel and funding at the state level to specifically address principal preparation, political issues related to the boundary between state and local control, and prioritization of other educational concerns (Gates et al., 2020). Within these levers and challenges, the RAND research identified three primary ways states can influence principal preparation, "setting direction through legislation and funding, shaping the direction

more precisely through regulation and oversight, and providing resources and services" (Gates et al., 2020, p. xiii).

WKU's invitation to join the UPPI was based partly on the willingness of the Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB) to change policy and adopt research-based standards, one of the UPPI program selection criteria. Kentucky's statewide commitment to preparing school leaders dated back to the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA, 1990). According to O'Day and Smith (1993), KERA started a reform movement in Kentucky to address the need for developing new policies, content standards, authentic assessments, and an ambitious curriculum along with changes in teacher preparation and reducing regulations governing the profession. Those changes increased the emphasis on the school leaders' roles and preparation.

In 2006, reform efforts associated with school principals included separate but aligned initiatives. One initiative was related to the preparation of school principals. The second set of initiatives focused on the roles and responsibilities of the principal via an amendment to existing legislation (16 KAR 3:050). The amendment addressed university-district partnership efforts, including screening candidates, identifying mentors, and the co-construction and delivery of courses based on district needs.

In 2011, Kentucky leadership programs went through another redesign which moved principal certification to a post-master's degree program as another step toward reform. In 2013, programs required aspiring leaders to take 30 additional credit hours above a master's degree to become certified. During that period, WKU made significant changes to the curriculum and program structure, including adopting a curriculum aligned to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium standards, a hybrid delivery model, and a co-teaching model to partner faculty with exemplary practitioners in the field.

The reform initiatives of the early 2000s resulted

in an overhaul of the preparation of school leaders at all 11 universities housing Kentucky's school leadership programs. Nevertheless, ten years after this reform began, few, if any, of the state's P3s were working with districts beyond screening candidates for admission and identifying and selecting mentors to support students. Despite WKU embracing a co-teaching course delivery model using practitioner partners, there was little further interaction with districts for co-constructing curriculum based on actual problems of practice or understanding contextual issues unique to the region and state. Likewise, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (now Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) accreditation requirements did not motivate or facilitate partnership, only compliance. Therefore, educational leadership programs focused on aligning with standards and accreditation requirements, assuming this alignment met the needs of the districts served.

Kentucky has taken a leadership role in preparing school leaders, and conditions and policies in the state have been supportive of a transformational process (Wallace Foundation, 2016). From KERA to the present, constituent groups across the Commonwealth have developed and implemented policies associated with P3s. This spirit of stakeholder collaboration has provided a solid foundation for the transformation of programs across the Commonwealth.

Transforming Policy in the Commonwealth

EPSB and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) engaged with WKU in the UPPI work from the very beginning. Perhaps even more importantly, they facilitated a parallel stream of transformative work among the 11 Kentucky P3s as WKU faculty and stakeholders engaged in their program redesign. The transformation process in the Commonwealth of Kentucky included input from multiple statewide stakeholder groups and a review of all school and district leadership regulations and standards. At the beginning of the UPPI, Kentucky had five different regulations for preparing educational administrators based on

the following roles: superintendent, supervisor of instruction, director of pupil personnel, director of special education, and principal. Stakeholder groups included representatives from all higher education institutions preparing principals, regional educational cooperatives, school administration professional associations, higher-education agencies, and business and industry. EPSB and KDE posed the following questions to the stakeholder groups to inform their work:

- What skills do principals need, current and future?
- What skills, strategies, and practices do principals need?
- What do you see as the current gap between practice and what is needed? (E. Proffitt, Personal communication, September 10, 2018)

EPSB and KDE staff facilitated monthly meetings with representatives from each of Kentucky's programs and consulted with attending stakeholders on the state policies related to the preparation of school leaders. At regularly scheduled meetings, stakeholders reviewed the Kentucky Administrative Regulations for the five leadership certificates and provided input (EPSB, 2018a). After the review process, the UPPI Stakeholder Committee on Advanced Educational Leadership provided recommendations to EPSB (EPSB, 2018a).

Recommendations Submitted to EPSB

The recommendations developed and submitted by the statewide committee appeared in the Agenda Book of the EPSB as an action item. These recommendations included combining all advanced leadership programs under one set of regulations, aligning all programs to one set of standards, and mandating uniform testing requirements for all programs. These recommendations eliminated the Kentucky Specialty Test requirement, references to Dimensions Dispositions of School Leaders Document, and the post-master's degree

requirement for principal certification. The Board accepted the recommendations in December 2018, 18 months into the initiative (EPSB, 2018b, Action Item A).

Kentucky now required all Advanced Education leader programs to align with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and all individuals seeking certification to meet the testing requirement. The structure remained five certification areas but became one regulation entitled Advanced Educational Leaders. The Rank structure that included Rank I and II options and was associated with pay increases remained, as did the bi-level certification process.

Engaging Partners in Program Redesign to Prepare Ready-to-Lead Principal Aspirants

WKU's P3 redesign did not occur due to Kentucky's revising regulations of advanced leadership programs. Instead, both streams of work occurred concurrently. At times, the concurrent nature mandated shifts in thinking about the program framework. This section describes two phases of the redesign conducted by faculty and partners that required us to make the work problem-specific and user-centered and resulted in our program's theory of action. Although described in a linear sequence, the work was not linear. Also, the shift in Kentucky regulations to remove the Rank II requirement expanded our thinking to include a master's degree option for the program.

Make the Work Problem-specific and User-centered

The initial phase of redesigning the program focused on the first principle of improvement science, "make the work problem-specific and user-centered" (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 21). Bryk and colleagues instructed those teams leading improvement to understand how contextual factors shape their work. WKU partnered with UU to define the work context, establish norms and processes, identify goals, and collect data. We developed a shared understanding of what data were available and relevant. We reviewed data and artifacts including student surveys, stakeholder

interviews, course documents, standards for school leaders, feedback from district and state leaders, background readings from UU, artifacts from UU's work, and accreditation requirements.

WKU and UU developed a shared understanding of our program and state and district context in our initial meetings. Understanding the nature and influence of state policies, the role of the Green River Regional Educational Cooperative (GRREC, our regional educational cooperative), and how these differed from UU's state and local context was essential for their facilitator role. Understanding the context of the program helped guide decision-making processes and the development of strands to align the program more tightly.

WKU P3 faculty used data sources to evaluate the program and identify problems of practice. The Quality Measures (QM) Baseline Program Assessment, a self-assessment conducted by the university program and created by the Education Development Corporation in 2013, required the engagement of state and district partners. The process involved program faculty informing partners of their self-ratings and evidence of the ratings in the following areas: candidate admissions, course content, pedagogy and andragogy, clinical experiences, performance assessments, and graduate outcomes. Stakeholders then provided their input on the ratings. Our first QM assessment used the 2013 QM Tool Kit. Each UPPI team participated in this process. Wang and colleagues (2018), in their evaluation of the UPPI, described "the QM exercise as a foundational experience that helped partners learn about one another's organizations and perspectives and that facilitated relationship-building" (p. xiii).

Positive findings from a data review included a strong focus on instructional leadership throughout the program, the cohort and hybrid format, and authentic partnerships with districts and practitioner-instructors. Stakeholders agreed on the anchor assessments as the most catalytic experiences, but implementation varied. Though a

program strength, there was a need to update these assessments to scaffold learning across the program, ensure assessment reliability and validity, and calibrate grading and feedback.

The university and stakeholders agreed on the following problems of practice that guided much of the work:

- Our program needed a more intentional focus on equitable leadership and diversity. Assuming the program embedded equity throughout meant that only a limited number of assignments explicitly addressed equity issues.
- We also needed to refocus on organizational management. District partners perceived the 2013 program as developing instructional leaders but perhaps neglecting some skills required to create effective building managers. When asked to prioritize the skills needed to lead and manage schools, our partners ranked relationship development, strategic planning, communications, and fiscal management as the most important.
- Finally, faculty sought greater program coherence through vertical and horizontal alignment with a logical learning progression across all semesters.

Develop a Theory of Action

Not only did the work adhere to Bryk et al.'s (2015) initial stage of improvement science, procedures mostly aligned to the University Council for Educational Administration's (2012) curriculum mapping guide for P3s. We surfaced our current program theory and assumptions. We explored National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) and PSEL standards and identified essential learning. Essential learning strands that emerged from group activities were *instructional leadership*, *equity*, and *cycles of inquiry*. The instructional leadership strand would address the question, "What will learning look like?" The equity strand would address the question, "How will we make sure all students succeed?" The cycle of inquiry

strand will answer the question, "How will we use data to lead continuous improvement?"

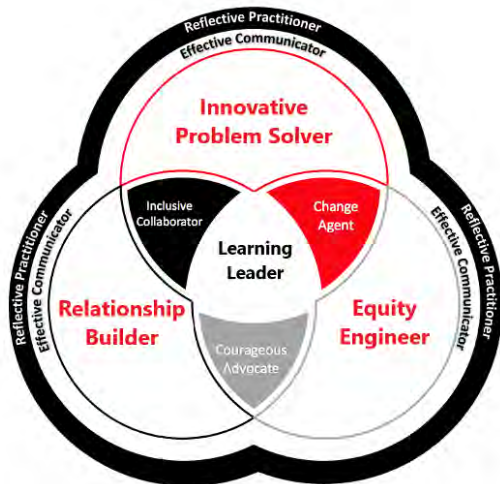
Superintendents were particularly concerned about the communication skills of new principals leading to a fourth strand, communication, that would answer the question, "How will we communicate with all stakeholders?" Included in this concern were abilities to build internal and external relationships, but especially the skills needed to engage in difficult conversations. The program developed from these questions a conceptual framework conveying the curricular emphasis and intended outcomes (see Figure 1).

After identifying this vision of what our program graduates would know and be able to do, we crafted a logic model of where we were currently and then updated that to reflect the goals for our

After identifying problems, surfacing core values, and making initial structural decisions, the team proceeded with a theory of action. A theory of action involves more than a vision statement. According to the University Council for Educational Administration (2012), P3 theories of action should include a clear understanding of the following components and their intersection: leadership principles, effective andragogy, and experiential learning. WKU faculty and UU colleagues revisited the core characteristics of a logic model to frame our theory of action and surface program theory and assumptions about preparation and candidate outcomes. Specifically, we explored the power and utility of how a logic model can quickly communicate program values and structure to our partners. UU shared concrete examples of their logic models to stimulate our thinking. Faculty members from WKU took the first steps in developing an organizing framework for our program. We developed a theory of action and logic model around our vision for the program. The external facilitator took information from our context and developed a draft theory of action of the current program. Each faculty member critiqued and refined the document, considering numerous theoretical perspectives and how the program might bridge the gap from theory to practice. The final iteration stated,

The WKU principal preparation program in partnership with schools, districts, and state agencies prepares and develops school leaders for rural and urban districts in Kentucky. The program admits qualified post-master's degree applicants into a cohort-based program. Applicants are selected based on their experiences as effective educators as well as their demonstration of equity-driven values and norms, student-centered instructional leadership, and aspirations to lead schools to improve student learning outcomes. The program is committed to engaging leadership candidates in a range of challenging on-line, face-to-face, and site-based performance assessments that develop and assess their leadership learning capacities through

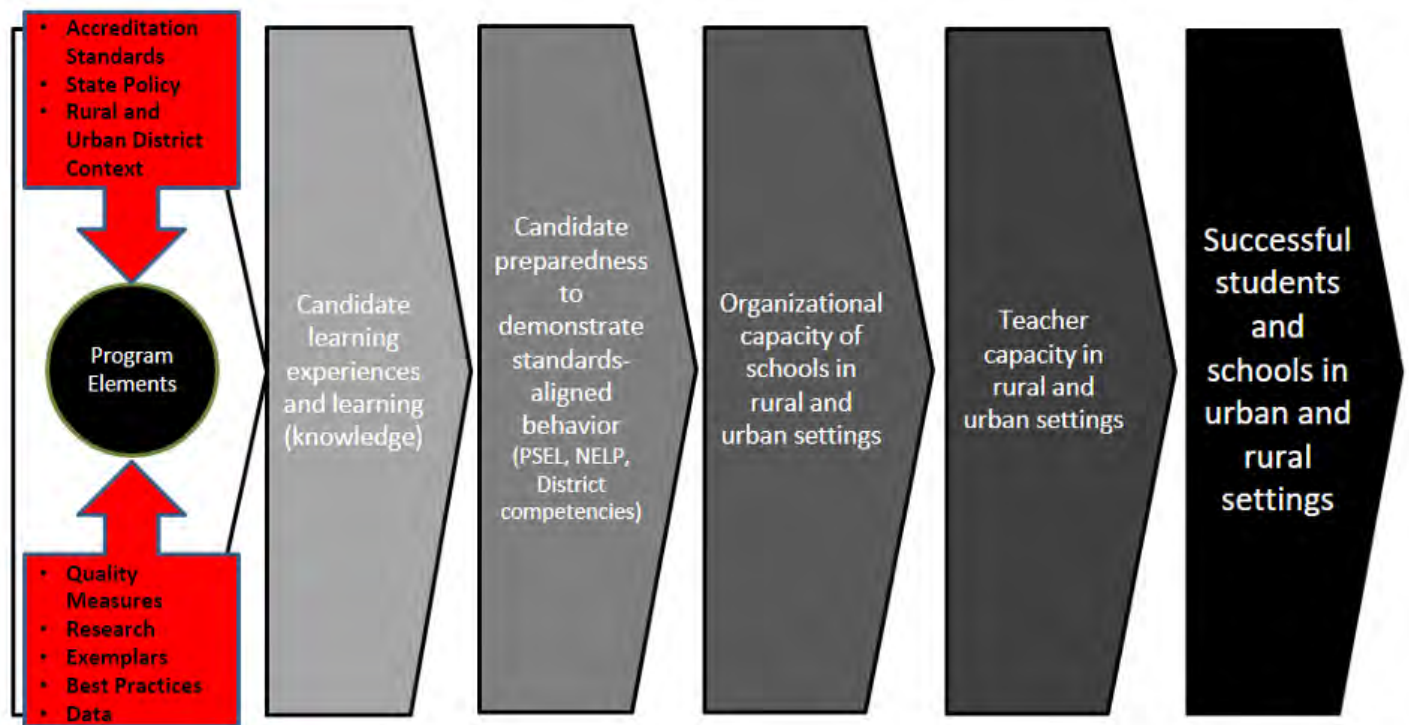
Figure 1. WKU Program Conceptual Framework



Authors adapted this figure from the WKU program's working documents, rubrics, and presentation slides. Faculty used the following four overarching themes to develop program coherence: learning leader, relationship builder, equity engineer, and innovative problem solver. Communication and reflective practice served as encompassing themes.

program (see Figure 2). We were not alone in developing logic models. Each UPPI team developed a logic model to guide their work that included both informing and consulting partners (Wang et al., 2018). The envisioning work cultivated team building and a greater shared understanding of the entire initiative.

Figure 2. WKU UPPI Logic Model



This figure is adapted from the UPPI logic model developed by WKU faculty and contained in program working documents and presentations.

required, elective, and personalized experiences. Courses are sequenced to ensure that students are developing their abilities to lead people and systems to support continuous school improvement and are thematically organized to develop candidates' proficiency in (a) instructional leadership, (b) leading improvement, (c) leading for equity, and (d) effective communication. Program graduates are prepared to lead schools to respond to the cultural, economic, and educational challenges of the 21st Century. (S. Tozer, personal communication, June 14, 2017)

The final theory of action that guided our P3 redesign was organized into inputs, processes, and outcomes (see Figure 3).

Final Thoughts and Outcomes

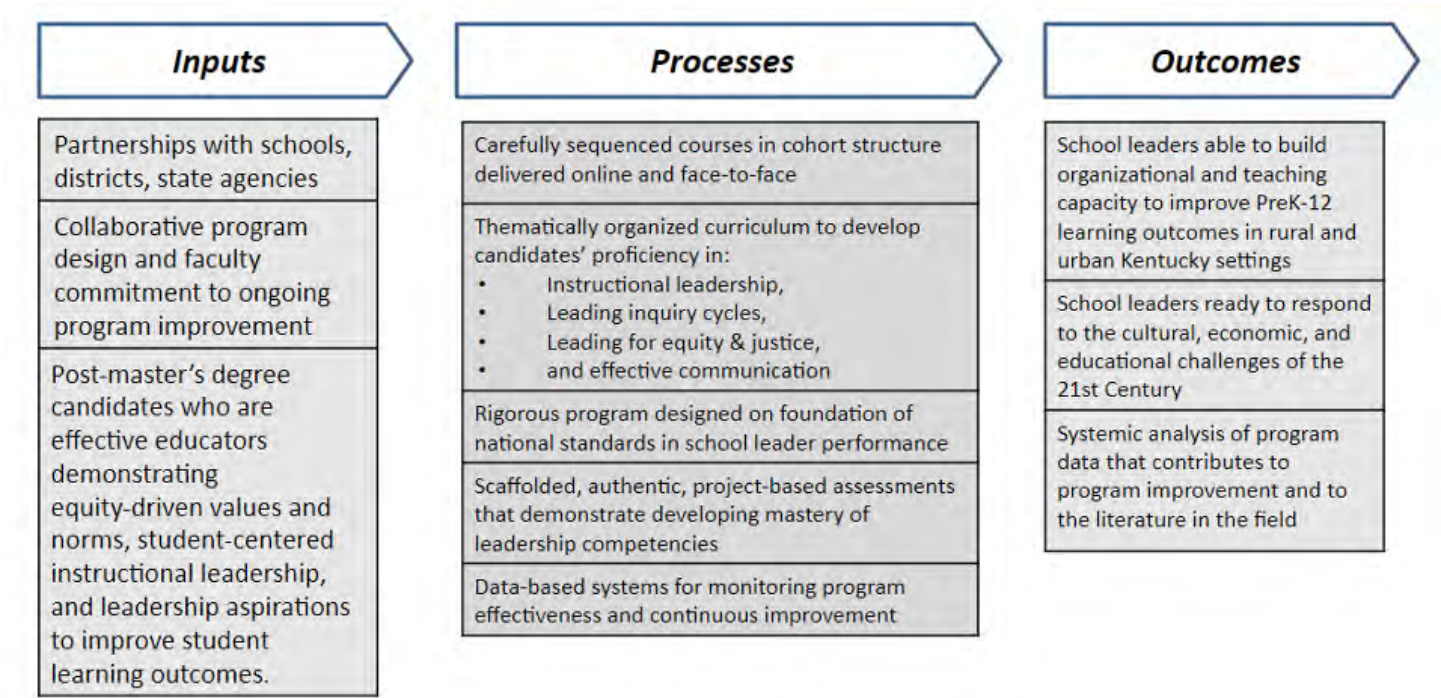
Our work included engaging partners at three levels: our district partners, our state partners, and our peer institution partners. The work began with the leaders who fostered collaborative

engagement. Leaders across the UPPI institutions facilitated relationships at each stage,

The dedication, enthusiasm, management, and team-building skills of these leaders kept the initiative on track. There was a strong emphasis on building and nurturing relationships among partners. Most partners recognized that openness, trust, and a culture of collaboration within teams were essential when working toward change. In part, this was accomplished by establishing a common vision. (Wang et al., p. xv)

Our partnerships with districts during this initiative resulted in collaboration that moved beyond superficial feedback to becoming true partners in co-constructing a P3 and institutionalizing data-driven cycles of inquiry to continuously improve our program. District partner participation throughout our work allowed us to (a) reflect more honestly on our program, (b) better understand the context-specific role for which we were preparing aspirants, and (c) learn with our partners the

Figure 3. WKU P3 Theory of Action



This figure is adapted from the theory of action developed by WKU faculty and contained in program working documents and presentations.

theory and practice relevant to effective school leadership. Now that we have fully implemented the redesigned program, we continue to partner with districts in (a) identifying and selecting candidates, (b) refining our curriculum and ensuring its relevance by co-teaching with practitioner partners, and (c) addressing problems of practice related to the principal pipeline as they arise.

From our peer institutions in this work, we were able to adopt and adapt processes and products from their work related to improvement, design, and cycles of inquiry. We were in a unique position through the UPPI to partner with peer institutions but engaging with peers encouraged us to slow down our work to learn “fast to implement well” (Bryk et al., 2015, p. 7). At a larger scale, our state partners formed the policy context in which our work is situated and provided understanding of our context at the state level. Most programs recognize curricular changes are needed to equip principal aspirants with the necessary capacity to improve K12 student achievement. Most superintendents also recognize the need to improve principal preparation (Wallace

Foundation, 2016). We know the principal role is important, and research demonstrates that principals are second only to the teacher in influencing student achievement (Manna, 2015). Therefore, we must ask why more programs nationally are not engaging with partners to improve their practices? The principles guiding our work are neither new nor innovative. For almost two decades, the keys to success for designing effective university-based principal preparation programs have been in plain sight (Davis et al., 2005; Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012), and the work of other institutions provides us with vicarious learning experiences (Cosner, 2018). Programs serve their own unique context which impacts the problems of practice and viable solutions partners may bring to the table, so the redesign process and outcome will differ. Nevertheless, the immutable role that partners play is in bringing a greater depth of understanding as to what future principals should know and be able to do and where gaps between knowledge and practice occur during those critical first years of school leadership.

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