

Early lessons for planning and implementing a program to prepare urban special
education academic leaders

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Abstract

The mission for Urban SEALS (Special Education Academic Leaders), a federally funded doctoral preparation program, is to prepare doctoral-level special educators, including those who are culturally and/or linguistically diverse (CLD) to assume leadership roles in the education of urban students with disabilities who are CLD. This paper provides information on program development, recruitment efforts, and participant evaluations of the first year of implementation.

The SEALS program of study was designed on the basis of several recommendations from the literature on retaining under-represented populations. Specifically, the program faculty incorporated a cohort model, service learning and other leadership activities, a curriculum and program of study that enfolded TESOL and/or Urban Education cognates, and financial support for tuition and fellowships. Following the recommendations of the AAUP (2001), the faculty had developed an inviting Exceptional Student Education (ESE) program with an urban special education leadership focus.

The program of study for Urban SEALS candidates was built on an existing infrastructure in the ESE doctoral program and the COE resources by enfolding principles articulated by Cochran-Smith (1999) to prepare urban leadership personnel who teach for social justice. Cochran-Smith (1999, p. 118-119) established six principles to be used when preparing urban teachers to teach for social justice: enable significant work for all students within learning communities; build on what students bring to school with them: knowledge and interests, cultural and linguistic resources; teach skills, bridge gaps; work with (not against) individuals, families, and communities; diversify modes of assessment; make activism, power, and inequity explicit parts of the curriculum.

The Urban SEALS program embeds these principles within the processes used by faculty and leadership candidates as they complete the course of study leading to the doctorate. In addition, the delivery of the coursework utilized researched best practices such as establishing collaborative learning communities through a cohort model, creating a focus on standards based-outcomes, utilizing problem based learning, and arranging

experiential-service learning as well as non-credit-generating activities such as guest lecturing, attending conferences, collaborating with faculty on research projects.

Method

Purpose

A descriptive study was conducted to assess perceptions of the first cohort of doctoral students in the Urban Special Education Academic Leaders (SEALS) program.

Participants

The demographics as reported by the 14 respondents match the data collected by the project co-PIs. There are 12 females, 2 males. They reported their ethnicity as Hispanic (N=7), Black (N=3), White (N=3), and Other (1). The majority of respondents categorized themselves as between 25-35 (N= 12), and 2 respondents categorized themselves between 36-45 years of age. For years of teaching experience, N = 5 for 0-5 years; N= 5 for 6-10 years; N= 4 for 11-20 years; and 0 for 21 years or more.

Instrumentation

The survey (included in Appendix A) is derived from an original questionnaire designed by the project co-principal investigators to assess recruitment and selection procedures (Nevin, Barbetta, & Cramer, 2006) which had been evaluated by the leadership advisory board (comprised of national and local experts in special education and urban education). Based on their feedback, the questionnaire was believed to meet the conditions required for face validity once minor format changes were made to the instrument (e.g., more space for responding to the open-ended questions). The project co-principal investigators modified the original instrument to reflect instructional procedures

implemented during the first year and first summer of coursework, preserving the content of as many items as possible.

The questionnaire was comprised of several sections. Part I asked respondents to briefly describe their experiences in the first year and first summer. Part II collected demographic data (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, years of teaching experience). Part III asked respondents to use a likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = a great extent) to rate various statements about their perceptions of the recruitment procedures. Part IV listed various design features of the program which were rated by those who applied to the doctoral program. Part V included open ended questions such as “What barriers or challenges, if any, did you experience in the recruitment process?”

Data Collection and Analysis

Subsequent to receiving approval from the university human subjects review board, the instrument was distributed to those who were admitted to the program in the Fall 2005 and who had completed the first year and first summer (N=14). They completed the survey during a regularly scheduled graduate course.

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2004), the researchers calculated frequencies for the demographic information and the ratings of program design.

Reliability

Cronbach alpha coefficients for reliability of respondents' ratings were calculated for survey items related to perceptions of fairness of the instructional procedures.

Cronbach alpha, also called the alpha coefficient, is a statistical measure of the degree to which the items consistently measure the same construct. In this study, alpha coefficient

of .787 was obtained for items paired for internal consistency (Q1, Q4, and Q5), as shown in Table 1. Overall, these results indicate good reliability; for example, Gall, Gall, & Borg (2003) report that alpha coefficients of .52 and above are considered evidence of good reliability in exploratory research such as this study.

Table 1 Reliability of Survey Items: Cronbach Alpha Coefficients

Survey Item	Alpha Coefficient
Part III: Q1: <i>To what extent do you believe the courses you've taken at FIU were taught by faculty who were fair and unbiased?</i> Part III: Q4: <i>I believe the teaching strategies were fair and unbiased.</i> Part III: Q5: <i>I was treated respectfully by faculty.</i>	.787

Results

Results are described in the following sections.

Perceptions

Table 2 shows the mean and range of the ratings for questions 1, 4, and 5 so as to provide a sense of the perceptions of the graduate students. In addition, comments written by the respondents are included to show the depth of their thinking on the questions.

Table 2 Range, Mean, and Verbatim Comments for Perceptions of Program Fairness

Survey Item related to Perception Scale: 1=Not at all to 5= A Great Extent	Range	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. To what extent do you believe the courses you've taken at FIU were taught by faculty who were fair and unbiased? COMMENTS: <i>Some of the Urban Ed classes this summer talked too much about Blacks and not minorities in general.</i> <i>Some heard only what they wanted to hear and graded according to agreement with their beliefs.</i> <i>One faculty I felt was biased.</i> <i>I believe my instructors have been fair and unbiased in all aspects.</i>	3-5	4.5	.65
4. I believe the teaching strategies were fair and unbiased. COMMENTS: <i>Two professors in particular did not treat students respectfully or allow for individual ideas.</i> <i>In most classes with the exception of statistics.</i> <i>At all times.</i>	2-5	4.4	.65
5. I was treated respectfully by faculty. COMMENTS: <i>by both faculty and cohort!</i> <i>I had support whenever I needed it.</i>	3-5	4.7	.61

Ratings of Program Design Features

Table 3 shows the mean and range of ratings for each program design feature.

Table 3 Range and Mean of Ratings for Program Design Features

Survey Item	Range	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. diversity content and experiences	2-5	4.1	.86
2. cognate of courses directly related to the education of students who are CLD, (e.g., urban education and TESOL programs)	3-5	4.1	.73
3. community-based action research projects in the local urban, multicultural educational settings through the <i>COE Center for Urban Education and Innovation</i>	1-5	3.1	1.14
4. field experiences with diverse students through service-learning projects	1-5	2.7	.99
5. cohort model to promote and support group cohesiveness and motivate students to perform at an optimal level	3-5	4.7	.61
6. an existing learning community of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals	2-5	4.6	.85
7. ongoing student involvement and development through participation in a variety of non-credit leadership activities that require ongoing doctoral student development and involvement (e.g., presenting at conferences, teaching undergraduate courses, participating in community leadership projects)	2-5	4.1	1.03

Leadership Activities

Respondents were asked to list non-credit leadership activities in which they participated during the first year and first summer of the SEALS doctoral program (e.g., conferences attended, undergraduate or graduate courses taught for FIU, papers presented, professional development activities, research, involvement with the Center for Urban Education and Innovation, etc.) 11 of the 14 respondents completed this item.

Their responses are summarized in Table

Table 4 Leadership Activities

Activity Described	N
Designed a presentation on accountability	4
Submitted papers for conferences	3
Presented at state conference	2
Completed many research activities	6
Submitted book review for publication	2
Taught a course for FIU	1
Taught 1 class day during a course and taught another professor's class for one day	1
Serving as RA gave me myriad non-credit experiences	1
Guest lecturer at FIU Summer Institute for Science Teachers	1
Worked on research project for COE general and special education intern teachers (conducted research and presented content for the workshop)	1
Participated in professional development activities	1
Conducted service learning project in an Urban Ed class	1
Participated in Urban conference in Tampa FL	1
Networking activities (e.g., guest lectures by Dr. Hamer, Dr. Utley)	1

Responses to Open Ended Questions

The responses to the open-ended questions corroborate and instantiate the survey ratings. For example the question *Overall, how would you describe your experiences during the first year and first summer of the doctoral program?* 13 of 14 respondents entered a total of 38 statements. Of the 36 statements, 1 statement (3%) was coded as “neutral” (e.g., “It was difficult adjusting....” 12 statements (31%) were coded as “negatively valued” (e.g., “...first summer was very labor intensive and challenging” and 25 statements (66%) were coded as “positively valued” (e.g., “I was completely in awe by the quality of most (98.5%) of my classes.”) The most frequently mentioned challenge was the demanding expectations of the course load, particularly in the summer (N= 5). Appreciation for the cohort was the most frequently mentioned feature (N=4) of the program.

The responses to open-ended questions in Part V were equally revealing. In response to the question, *What supports were in place to help you be successful during the first year and first summer?* 14/14 (100%) of the respondents completed this item. Specifically mentioned supports included the cohort (N= 8, 57%); professors (N=6, 43%), the co-PIs (N= 4, 28%), staff such as Melissa and the POS coordinator (N=2, 15%).

In response to the question, *What barriers or challenges, if any, did you experience?* 13/14 respondents completed this item. 2 of the 13 listed no barriers or challenges. Of the 11 who did list barriers or challenges, six (54%) mentioned course expectations, work, and time. Four respondents (36%) mentioned challenges related to instructors, e.g., challenges related to ineffective and/or closed-minded professors and a writing-for-publication class that was demanding. One respondent (10%) mentioned “being out of university for so long” as a challenge.

Recommendations in response to the question, *Do you have any recommendations for modifying or improving the program?* included adding more specifically focused experiences (e.g., teaching at University level, team building, infusing urban education and service learning, leadership/solution focused activities. Other recommendations focused on scheduling classes (e.g., avoid pairing 2 difficult demanding classes in the same semester).

Respondents recommended changes in the communication as well (e.g., increase communication between urban and special education program faculty) and monitoring the instructors that are selected to teach the Urban SEALS coursework (e.g., program coordinators should sit in on classes).

Discussion

An important component of successful recruitment is the subsequent retention of candidates and graduation. The literature on retention of people from culturally and linguistically diverse populations as well as ethnically different populations indicates that peer groups and mentoring must be established early in the program. Part of the success of cohort models appears to be related to the extent to which cohort members support and mentor one another (Teitel, 1997). Towards that end, several of the SEALS candidates have affiliated with the Center for Urban Education and Innovation which hosts a number of prominent eminent scholars and have taken course from the Center faculty as well as Urban Studies faculty. Institutional support at this level also includes the presence of student organizations, academic and tutorial supports such as a writing center, and a writing-for-publication class for doctoral students (Marshall-Bradley, Tucker, & Wilson, 2006). The SEALS program of study includes a one-credit seminar which formally establishes processes that allow for the advanced graduate students to serve as mentors and buddies to the incoming cohort. In addition, scheduling cohort members into the same courses is another method the faculty use to create affiliations that will sustain participants through the program.

The results of the first year and first summer of coursework as represented by ratings on program features and the open ended survey responses are similar to those found by Twale and Cochran (2000) who reported that the cohort experience was personally and professionally rewarding and promoted friendships and idea exchanges.

Challenges exist, nonetheless. For example, participants were critical of faculty who over-emphasized the discrepancies in achievement of Black populations at the

expense of considering other minorities. This is especially critical in the southeastern metropolitan cultural mix of Miami-Dade County Public Schools (the majority of participants come from this environment). It should be noted that the faculty are intensely aware that the mere presence of candidates from culturally and linguistically diverse populations may not be enough to ensure that they will be assimilated into the university culture. Certainly race and ethnicity and social injustices perpetuated either by institutions or individuals are rarely a topic of “polite” conversation. However, a recent study by Johnston (2006) provides a possible method to surface the typically unspoken issues. She described the efforts of her colleagues at a mono-cultural mid-western university to make their teacher education program more sensitive to issues of race and social justice and thus better prepare both mono-cultural students and students of color to be culturally sensitive teachers with diverse students. Students of color comprised 8% to 20% of the student population, and a subgroup were tapped to serve as cultural consultants who met with the faculty to help them recognize and deal with racism in society and occasional incidents within the program itself. These conversations with “cultural ambassadors” helped to surface what had previously been unspeakable. Johnston (2006) concluded, “Their diverse opinions gave us insights that led to changes in our teaching and personal insights, hopefully making us more responsive to our students” (p. 27).

The goal of Urban SEALS is to prepare doctoral-level leaders in urban special education, particularly those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. Research has shown that new teachers in urban schools leave at a higher rate than their suburban counterparts (Haberman & Rickards, 1990; Ingersoll, 2001). However teachers from

culturally or linguistically diverse backgrounds are more likely to stay in urban schools (Clewell & Villegas, 2001). CLD leaders are needed to prepare and support CLD teachers in urban schools which, in turn could have a positive impact on the retention of teachers in urban settings. It is clear that the current cohort of doctoral students in the Urban SEALS program have established working relationships that have sustained and supported them throughout the first year and summer of the rigorous coursework typically associated with the first year of doctoral work, thus increasing the probability that they will continue until graduation. In addition, the participants are actively engaged in thinking about program improvement through enhancing existing coursework and creating meaningful controls that will allow for better program planning for future cohorts.

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**Urban SEALS (Special Education Academic Leaders) Survey *
 (Fall 2006)**

Please help us evaluate the Urban SEALS program design and procedures utilized by project personnel. We'd appreciate your candid appraisal so that we can accurately assess our procedures. Your responses will be treated anonymously, and no personally-identifiable information will be reported.

Sincerely, *P. Barbetta, E. Cramer, and A. Nevin*, Project Co-Principal Investigators

Part I: Overall, how would you describe your experiences during the first year and first summer of the doctoral program? [Please write 3 to 4 sentences explaining your reactions.]

Part II: Demographics
Directions: Please fill in the blanks or check the items that apply to you.

Gender: <input type="checkbox"/> Male <input type="checkbox"/> Female	Ethnicity <input type="checkbox"/> American Indian or Native Alaskan <input type="checkbox"/> Asian or Pacific Islander <input type="checkbox"/> Black (non-Hispanic) <input type="checkbox"/> Hispanic <input type="checkbox"/> White (non-Hispanic) <input type="checkbox"/> Other (specify)	Age: <input type="checkbox"/> 18 - 24 <input type="checkbox"/> 25 - 35 <input type="checkbox"/> 36 - 45 <input type="checkbox"/> 46 - 55 <input type="checkbox"/> 56 -
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* Note: This survey research project has been approved by FIU's Institutional Review Board under the Exempt category of review on September 18, 2006. The approval number is 091806-00.

Experience teaching: _ 0 - 5 years _ 6 - 10 years _ 11 - 20 years _ 21 years +	
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Part III: Perceptions						
<i>Directions: Please use the following scale to rate your perception of each statement, where 1 = not at all and 5 = to a great extent N/A=not applicable to you</i>						
1 To what extent do you believe the courses you've taken at FIU were taught by faculty who were fair and unbiased? COMMENTS:	1	2	3	4	5	NA
2 To what extent are you satisfied that your first year and first summer experiences were facilitated by project personnel (project co-Principal Investigators, Project Coordinator, or faculty)? COMMENTS:	1	2	3	4	5	NA
3 To what extent do you believe the first year and first summer of coursework and experiences were designed for culturally and linguistically diverse individuals to be successful? COMMENTS:	1	2	3	4	5	NA
4 I believe the teaching strategies were fair and unbiased. COMMENTS:	1	2	3	4	5	NA
5 I was treated respectfully by faculty. COMMENTS:	1	2	3	4	5	NA

6 I felt supported throughout the first year and first summer of coursework.	1 2 3 4 5	NA
COMMENTS:		

Part IV: Program Design		
<i>Directions: Please indicate to what extent the features of the Urban SEALS doctoral program were reflected in the coursework and experiences you faced during the first year and first summer, using the following scale to rate each feature, where 1 = no influence and 5 = a great influence.</i>		
8. diversity content and experiences	1 2 3 4 5	
9. cognate of courses directly related to the education of students who are CLD, (e.g., urban education and TESOL programs)	1 2 3 4 5	
10. community-based action research projects in the local urban, multicultural educational settings through the COE <i>Center for Urban Education and Innovation</i>	1 2 3 4 5	
11. field experiences with diverse students through service-learning projects	1 2 3 4 5	
12. cohort model to promote and support group cohesiveness and motivate students to perform at an optimal level	1 2 3 4 5	
13. an existing learning community of culturally and linguistically diverse individuals	1 2 3 4 5	
14. ongoing student involvement and development through participation in a variety of non-credit leadership activities that require ongoing doctoral student development and involvement (e.g., presenting at conferences, teaching undergraduate courses, participating in community leadership projects) Please briefly all non-credit leadership activities in which you participated during the first year and first summer of the SEALS doctoral program (e.g., conferences attended, undergraduate or graduate courses taught for FIU, papers presented, professional development activities, research, involvement with the Center for	1 2 3 4 5	

Urban Education and Innovation, etc.)	
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Part V: Program Procedure

1. What supports were in place to help you be successful during the first year and first summer?
2. What barriers or challenges, if any, did you experience? (Please explain.)
3. Do you have any recommendations for modifying or improving the program?

Thank you for completing this survey.

Meet Our
Urban SEALS Doctoral Students





★
Lisa Barracos
Special Educator



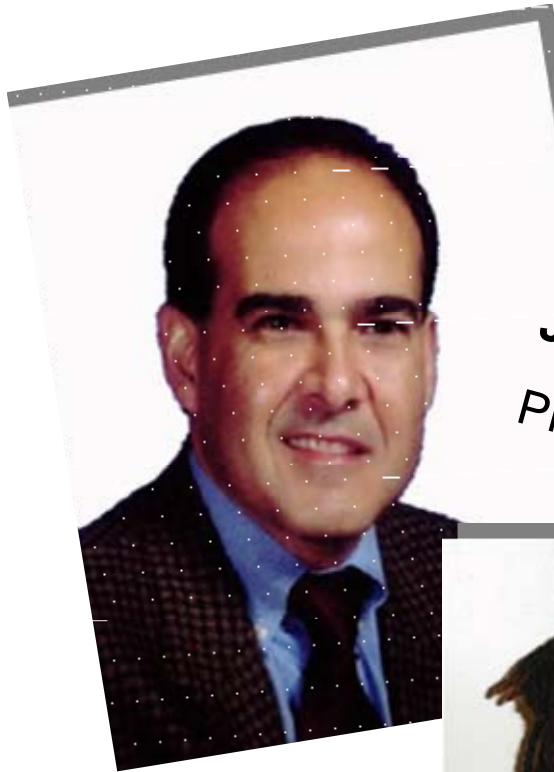
★
Eduard Bijlsma
Business Technology
Teacher



★
Jacques Bentolila
Principal



★
Christine Cuervo,
Former Special Educator



★
Jose Dotres
Principal



★
Delsue Frankson
Special Educator



★
Mary Kristina Gonzalez
Special Education
Dept. Head



★
Liana Gonzalez
Inclusion Teacher

★ **Deidre Marshall**
Inclusion Facilitator



★ **Magda Salazar,**
Faciliator, (Beginning
Special Educator
Mentor Program)



★ **Yvette Perez,**
Staffing Specialist



★ **Whitney Moores-Abdool,**
Former Social Worker, FIU GA/RA

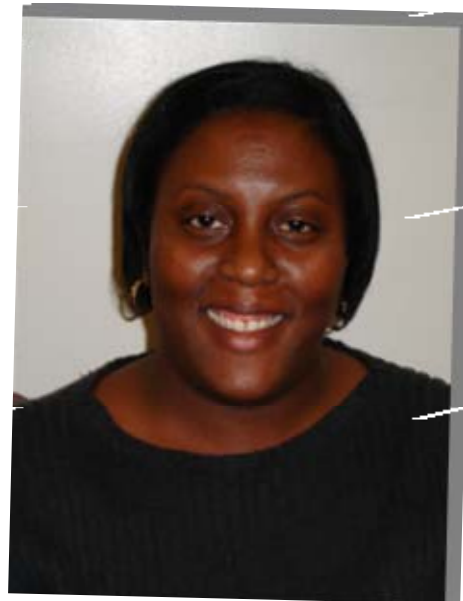




Lydia Vidal, Reading Coach



Jorine Voigt FIU Associate
Director for Upward Bound



Cheryl White-Lindsey, Reading Coach



Delores Vasquez.
General Educator



★ **Raul Esparza**, Special Educator



★ **Valerie Morris**, General Educator

Brief Author Biographies

Dr. Patricia M. Barbetta, FIU Associate Professor, Project Urban SEALS co-PI is a well-published author of research articles several interest areas: the education of urban students with emotional handicaps, instructional strategies, instructional/assistive technology, classroom management, and peer-mediated instruction. With 11 yrs. of experience in an urban school for students with emotional disabilities, she has extensive administrative experiences [Department of Educational and Psychological Studies Chair from 1998-2002 and Special Education Program Leader from 2001 to present]. She can be reached at barbetta@fiu.edu

Dr. Elizabeth Cramer, FIU Assistant Professor, co-PI of Project Urban SEALS with research interests in students who are culturally and linguistically diverse and teacher preparation in inclusionary practices. She was a 2003-2004 recipient of a Laser Project grant designed to investigate the needs of urban general and special educators to effectively instruct all learners. She can be reached at cramere@fiu.edu

Dr. Ann Nevin, FIU Visiting Professor and Professor Emeritus at Arizona State University, is a co-PI of Project Urban SEALS and an international scholar and expert in the field of collaborative consultation and inclusion about which she has co-authored several well-recognized books and research articles. She can be reached at nevina@bellsouth.net

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