

# Supporting Minority-Serving Institutions in Their Program Improvement Efforts: A Responsive Technical Assistance Approach

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To reform a special education teacher preparation program can be gratifying, difficult, complex, political, and urgently needed. The Monarch Center, a federally funded technical assistance center, was established to guide and support minority-serving institutions in their efforts to improve their teacher preparation programs. Four guidelines direct the Center's technical assistance approach: shaping new ideas to meet unique needs; understanding the impact of working simultaneously in shifting contexts; building relationships that foster learning "in context;" and nudging participants toward reaching their goals. The article discusses each guideline.

**Keywords: Teacher preparation reform; Technical assistance approach**

The mounting evidence that reveals the powerful impact teaching has on students' academic performance is stunning in its clarity and exciting in its implications. Powerful teachers graduate from well-conceptualized, rigorous, and comprehensive preparation programs (e.g., Cochran-Smith, Feiman-Nemser, & McIntyre, 2008; Darling-Hammond, 2006). More than ever, the teacher education community is effectively positioned to advance the argument that excellent teacher preparation programs are needed to graduate caring and competent teachers prepared to make positive differences in students' academic performance (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Simultaneously, teacher education programs have been subjected to considerable criticism for the lack of rigor and relevance in preparing future teachers to meet the learning needs of today's students (e.g., Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Kirby, McCombs, Barney, & Naftel, 2006; U.S. Department of Education, 2010). As the field strives to place a high-quality teacher in every classroom, the nature and success of teacher preparation programs comes under greater scrutiny. Therefore, the focus on designing and offering excellent programs is front and center in today's colleges of education.

Like all change initiatives, improving the quality of a preparation program can be gratifying; at the same time, it can be challenging, difficult, and fraught with thorny issues. Supports from a technical assistance center can be a critical factor in reaching successful outcomes. Below is information about The Monarch Center and the services it offers, guidelines that have shaped the Center's technical assistance approach, and suggestions for future research regarding program improvement reform.

## **The Monarch Center**

The Monarch Center is a national technical assistance center funded by the United States Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs, for nine years. The Center was established to provide services to minority serving institutions (MSIs) that offer special education and related services personnel preparation programs. The federal definition of an MSI is an institution that has, at a minimum, 25% minority enrollment. Examples of MSIs are Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Tribal Colleges, Predominately Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and those institutions serving multiple groups of minority students. The total number of MSIs eligible for services by the Monarch Center is 385.

Many faculty members at MSIs who have received technical assistance services from the Monarch Center have aimed for, and secured, grants to provide scholarships to their teacher education and/or related services candidates, as well as funding for program improvement initiatives. Among the technical assistance provided are workshops to learn how to develop grant proposals, and ongoing mentoring, guidance, and continual feedback when developing a proposal. Subsequent to receiving grants, the Monarch Center provides new grantees with a post-award session on how to manage a grant and respond to the funders' numerous requests. For those who achieve scores close to recommendation for the funding category, the Monarch Center provides an on-site session, wherein the grant writer receives guidance from mentors on ways to improve the proposal prior to its resubmission.

For MSI faculty members who aim to improve a specific dimension of their preparation program (e.g., the clinical component; the curricular content with greater attention to cultural and linguistic difference) or the entire program, the Monarch Center offers numerous forms of assistance. In our Year-Long Model, cohorts of institutional teams are formed; each cohort focuses on a specific program dimension. Working with professors who are experts on the targeted topic and strategic personnel preparation, the cohort engages in a knowledge exchange seminar to learn about the research and standards relevant to the topic and to shape that information into a strategy that will meet the program's unique needs. Each team develops an Action Plan that includes goals and objectives to be completed by the end of the year. After the seminar, the Monarch Center provides mentoring and other individualized follow-along activities that provide direction and feedback as well as suggestions for additional resources that are helpful to achieve goals and objectives. The Year-Long Model concludes with a "Comeback Session" in which each team reports on the extent to which it was able to attain each objective on its Action Plan. Time is also allocated for a discussion about strategies used to achieve the objectives, as well as a description of any barriers that were encountered. The Comeback Session is not only an information sharing session, but also a celebratory one.

To provide the technical services that are needed by faculty, the Monarch Center maintains a cadre of professors, primarily from MSIs, who have expertise in a wide range of special education topics, grant preparation, accreditation procedures, and teacher education reform. Regularly scheduled sessions are held for these mentors to discuss their roles and responsibilities as well as to problem solve around specific mentoring issues.

The Monarch Center also maintains an extensive online Professional Library that holds four major collections, including: (a) modules for program improvement assistance; (b) tutorials for grant proposal development support; (c) materials that were distributed to participants in the knowledge exchange seminars; and (d) numerous resources (articles, books, university classroom materials, reference lists, and links to websites). Within each collection, the resources are organized around specific topics, such as Autism, Collaboration, Early Childhood Education, and the Development of Logic Models.

Finally, to encourage participants to disseminate their work, the Monarch Center provides mentoring to faculty who want to transform program improvement and grant proposal results into articles for publication in special issues of journals and other nationally recognized journals. The Monarch Center also invites participants to join panels to present their work at local, state, and national conferences.

Over a nine-year period, the Monarch Center has worked with 279 institutions and 1,010 participants. As evidenced by evaluation data, participants have been extremely satisfied with the technical assistance provided by the Monarch Center. For example, when asked to provide their general satisfaction using a scale of 1 to 10 ranging from extremely dissatisfied to extremely satisfied, 83% of participants indicated that they were extremely satisfied (10); another 11% reported being slightly less than extremely satisfied (9). Moreover, the data indicated that when participants received grant proposal development support, they had a 40% greater chance of securing the grant. Lastly, approximately 70% (150 MSI teams) that completed the program improvement Year-Long Model significantly enhanced the quality of their programs, and 12 institutions designed and started new programs.

### **The Monarch Center: Technical Assistance Guidelines**

Our initial conceptualization of the Monarch Center's technical assistance was based on various domains of scholarly work, including understandings of teacher education reform, K-12 professional development, and systems change initiatives, which, as we learned from our experience of providing technical assistance, was modified and ultimately developed into guidelines. In reality, these "guidelines" are post hoc value statements that reflect the culture that is building within the special education teacher preparation community at MSIs through our technical assistance approach. The guidelines, then, function more like a compass than a blueprint. Below is a discussion of the guidelines.

#### **Guideline 1: Shaping New Ideas to Meet Unique Needs**

The technical assistance approach that the Monarch Center uses is one that continually seeks to find the balance between maintaining evidence-based practices, national and state priorities, and accreditation procedures on the one hand, and the institution's unique needs, norms, and values on the other. To achieve this balance, we gently steer the faculty member or faculty team toward these practices, priorities, and procedures while encouraging them to shape decisions and determine actions within the context of programmatic needs and the institution's culture. In other words, this technical assistance approach balances generalized, evidence-based strategies for obtaining program improvement with a consideration of the nuances and context of the

individual institution. It is based on the idea that institutional culture strongly influences the success, or lack thereof, of a change initiative (Kezar & Eckel, 2002).

With regard to steering faculty members and teams from the top, the Monarch Center places particular emphasis and attention to enhancing the quality of the preparation programs with the goal of graduating future professionals who are prepared to work with racially, ethnically, and ability diverse PreK-12 students. The aim is to assist MSIs in the design and implementation of programs that prepare individuals who can provide effective and appropriate services to children and youth with disabilities from linguistically and culturally diverse backgrounds. The focus on diversity reflects a commitment to embody the culture and traditions commonly found in the academies we serve, and a responsibility to the children and youth the graduates of those academies will teach. Additional examples of the Monarch Center's "steering from the top" approach include incorporation of national, state and accreditation priorities; attention to relevant sets of standards; and a focus on evidence-based practices.

With regard to the institution's unique needs, norms, and values (bottom-up forces), the Monarch Center's approach involves careful attention to the participants' goals and interests. Needs assessment surveys are used to gather information and scanned for patterns in topics and issues raised in work session discussions. Additional information is gathered based on reports of mentoring interactions, email exchanges, and an examination of Action Plans. Interviews of faculty members from HBCUs, Predominantly Hispanic-Serving institutions, and Tribal Colleges provide information regarding barriers to the process and the institution's unique needs. Our stance is that any effective technical assistance for faculty must have the flexibility to attend to institutional culture and the circumstances of the home campus.

To create a climate in which attention to unique needs and interests can occur, program designers must value teacher educators' existing knowledge base, professional experiences, and life experiences that may differ from the dominant culture. This viewpoint embraces the co-construction of knowledge by linking current knowledge to new knowledge. This co-construction of knowledge provides an outlet for learning opportunities across several venues for a sustained period of time.

Thus, shaping new ideas to meet the participants' unique needs is a critical element in the Monarch Center's approach to technical assistance. Similar to considering change initiatives in K-12 schools, the issue of balance is important. Fullan (2007) emphasizes this stance— "The solution, in my view, is to develop strategies that integrate top-down and bottom-up forces in an ongoing dynamic manner, achieving what I call "permeable connectivity" (p. 262).

## **Guideline 2: Working Simultaneously in Shifting Contexts**

Understanding the importance of working simultaneously in shifting contexts is critical. Consider, for example, the extent to which a program improvement initiative must be accomplished within multiple contexts. Teacher education reformers, working at various levels in their institutions (committees, departments, colleges), must know the practices and procedures, as well as the requirements, relationships, and resources at these different levels. Because of certification or licensure requirements, reformers must work with numerous state

requirements and the ease, efficiency, and stability, or lack thereof, with which they function. Typically, reformers must also incorporate standards and reporting procedures of one or more accreditation agencies. Finally, the reformer's work is influenced by the nation's priorities and mandated requirements as well as the local school district's unique personnel needs.

The hundreds of teacher educators with whom the Monarch Center has worked indicated the challenges of having to work in several different contexts simultaneously while remaining flexible to accommodate shifting agendas and requirements. An analysis of interview data and content of the Year-Long Model final reports indicate that working in several shifting contexts simultaneously can be a barrier to accomplishing program improvement goals, or result in a major shift in the nature of the goals. Examples of shifting contexts that strongly impact a reformer's work include: a state-initiated change in the standards for teacher preparation programs; a switch in the department chairperson (or other key administrator) that results in a new set of priorities; a change in the accreditation agencies' requirements; and an unexpected loss of resources (human and otherwise).

An element of this "shifting context" phenomenon—the frequent need to change—is receiving attention in the organizational change literature. When organizations engage in initiative overload or change-related chaos, the symptoms can include widespread employee anxiety, cynicism, and burnout. "The results? Not only do relentless tidal shifts of change create pain at almost every level of the company and make organizational change harder to manage, more costly to implement, and more likely to fail, but they also impinge on routine operations and render firms inwardly focused on managing change rather than outwardly focused on the customers these changes should serve" (Abrahamson, 2004, pp. 2-3). Elmore (2004) describes this same "tidal shifts of change" phenomenon as it pertains to the K-12 setting in this manner: "Local reform initiatives are typically characterized by volatility-jumping nervously from one reform idea to the next over relatively short periods of time and superficiality-choosing reforms that have little impact on instruction or learning and implementing them in shallow ways" (p.2). Thus, this notion of "change-related chaos" or "tidal shifts of change" is an important feature the special education community should consider as it engages in program improvement initiatives.

The recognition of the impact of context on the reformer's work is a critical guideline in our technical assistance approach. As Kennedy (2010) stated, "...they must accommodate the rules and customs of their academic institutions, and of the content area programs on their campuses, not to mention their state education agencies, their accreditation agencies, their alumni and their students" (p. 4).

To support teacher education reformers in these demanding and shifting contexts, the Monarch Center has sent mentors to campuses to meet with administrators to discuss reform efforts, to guide institutions through state approval procedures, and to assist with various accreditation procedures (e.g., NCATE). Additionally, the Monarch Center personnel have met with administrators, faculty members, and grant writers to discuss the contextual factors that act as barriers to program improvement and how those barriers may be replaced with supports.

### **Guideline 3: Building Relationships that Foster Learning**

Building relationships that foster learning “in context” has had an unintended positive effect of allowing those who have been successful in navigating this type of situation to share their strategies and solutions with those who are new to the endeavor. This critical guideline addresses the importance of organizing teacher educators in ways in which they can learn from each other. The Monarch Center establishes a connection between MSI faculty so they have the opportunity to exchange ideas, provide feedback and advice, and support and encourage each other with regard to program improvement and grant proposal development efforts. A substantial body of research points to the positive impact of creating mentoring arrangements as well as professional networks or learning communities when an organization is engaged in a change initiative (Senge, 1990).

Consider the research on professional development for Pre K-12 teachers, one of the most heavily studied areas in education. The evidence is clear. Professional development activities should be designed so that teachers have opportunities to learn from their peers. Not only does this allow teachers to receive feedback, but it also gives them opportunities to analyze their performance and evaluate their results. Teachers advance in knowledge, abilities, and skills when working in peer-to-peer and group or network formats (e.g., Millett & Johnson, 2004; Smith, Hofer, Gillespie, Solomon, & Rowe, 2008).

The research on professional development for higher education faculty mirrors this same finding. Effective models provide opportunities for professors to support each other. These opportunities may come in the form of mentoring arrangements, monthly seminars, and “dinners” (e.g., Wangberg, Nelson, & Dunn, 1995), peer coaching (Brancato, 2003, Huston & Weaver, 2007; Sorcinelli, 2000; Tillman, 2001), and online discussions (Becker & Schaffner, 1999). Positive outcomes include feeling less isolated, improving faculty morale, increasing attention to pedagogical choices, and improving collaborative work (Cook-Sather, 2010; Plumb & Reis, 2007). As teacher educators come together, they develop new competencies, access new ideas, co-construct the design of target program dimensions, collaborate for innovation, and motivate each other to keep learning.

The strength of this approach is not based solely on the notion of “bringing teacher educators together;” it is also heavily influenced by the fact that their professional learning is occurring “in context.” Learning “in context” means the participant is learning to do the right thing in the setting where he or she works (Fullan, 2009). It refers not only to the structural changes in the setting (e.g., time to meet and talk, physical proximity), but also to the re-culturing that may occur (e.g., openness to improvement and change, a willingness to experiment and reflect upon the results in the company of colleagues, the demonstration of respect and trustworthiness for colleagues’ ideas). Monarch services provide sessions that act as springboards to the participants’ work that is expected to be carried out primarily on the home campus.

### **Guideline 4: Nudging Participants Toward Reaching their Program Goals**

One of the challenges of providing technical assistance to a large number of MSIs across the nation is to find ways to nudge participants to keep striving toward their goals. How does the

Monarch Center prod the faculty member who attended a grant proposal development workshop and received mentoring to actually write the proposal and submit it? How does the Monarch Center prod a faculty team who attended program improvement sessions toward carrying out the work and reaching their program objectives? The research indicates that the reliance on solely external accountability measures seldom works because this method cannot re-culture the organization to create the beliefs and actions necessary for change (e.g., Fullan, 2007). Therefore, the amalgamation of some external accountability strategies (better labeled “positive pressure”<sup>1</sup>), internal accountability measures, and capacity building may result in getting participants to attain their goals.

The Monarch Center uses several strategies to hold participants accountable, which are undergirded by the concept of “positive pressure”. For example, each program improvement team must develop an Action Plan and submit it before the team leaves the session. The Action Plan (which consists of goals the team plans to attain, proposed activities to reach those goals, deadlines, responsible persons, and potential facilitators and barriers) reflect how the participants shaped new ideas to meet their program’s unique needs. Moreover, each team must participate in two follow-up conference calls to describe their team’s progress and provide advice and suggestions to others in the cohort. Finally, twelve months later, each team must attend a final session wherein the team “reports out” to others in the cohort regarding the status of their work. Another example pertains to grant proposal development. Prior to attending a grant proposal development workshop, participants are required to write a draft abstract that includes the significance of the grant proposal, the specific area they plan to address in their proposal, the goals they aim to attain, and the procedures they will use. Subsequent to the proposal preparation workshop, a mentor is assigned to assist during the writing process. Participants are required to work closely with the mentor and to send drafts of the proposal to him or her. Mentors are required to notify the Monarch Center if the process fails. These are a few examples of strategies used by the Monarch Center to apply “positive pressure” to move participants toward their desired outcomes.

The Monarch Center approach also includes an internal accountability strategy. Across the technical services, participants are encouraged to self-regulate or monitor their progress. This is done by asking participants to contact their mentor on a regular basis and to provide drafts of documents for feedback. The program improvement conference calls and final session have caused participants to more carefully pace their work. Self-reflection is encouraged through the various self-determined products (e.g., goals, activities, deadlines). Finally, participants have reported that working in a team format within a cohort results in feeling accountable to their colleagues on the team as well as to others in the cohort.

The final prong of the fourth guideline is capacity building. The Monarch Center places great importance on capacity building and helps each institution build capacity by assisting with the coordination of top-down, bottom-up forces in formats that allow those in the professional community to work in interactive ways. The Monarch Center also helps to advance knowledge, skills and competencies, provide resources, and re-culture organizations toward becoming effective learning settings.

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<sup>1</sup> For additional information about “positive pressure,” see Fullan (2007).

## Factors Needed for an MSI to be Successful: Emerging Patterns

The Monarch Center collects various data sets to determine needs as well as engage in continuous progress monitoring and summative evaluations. These data sets include needs assessment surveys; participant satisfaction questionnaires; interviews; OSEP reports pertaining to grant funding; and content analyses of Action Plans, conference call discussions, final reports, and participants' written unsolicited comments. From these data analyses, institutional qualities emerge that have the potential to predict the institution's likelihood of success in reaching its program improvement goals. At the *local department or college level*, these qualities include a commitment to a process of continual program improvement that results in ongoing learning and holding each other accountable; a teacher education reformer to guide the effort; a stable environment in terms of leadership, vision, policy, and procedures; strong partnerships with K-12 schools; substantial resources, including a critical mass of faculty as well as space and time to meet, think, discuss and decide; and a culture that recognizes program improvement work as something to be highly valued in terms of promotion and tenure. At the *state level*, it is becoming clear that program improvement can best occur when state-level policy environments put forth innovative and reasonable standards and requirements that are based on research that provide support and resources that are stable and do not create "change chaos." Finally, it is our view that *external technical assistance* that balances top-down and bottom-up forces that allows teacher educators to work in professional communities is extremely useful in assisting them in reaching their goals.

### Future Research

Although our knowledge of the teacher education program reform process is scant, but growing, we were able to identify a few areas of these programs that need to be investigated.

Exploring the idea of "readiness" is the first critical area for investigation. Specifically, which MSIs are ready to engage in a program improvement initiative? What qualities should they demonstrate? What structures, cultures, and commitments are needed for the possibility of success? As a corollary to these questions, we recommend determining the factors and contexts that result in small, piecemeal, incremental work as compared to the factors and contexts that are needed to support a transformative effort.

A second area in need of investigation pertains to the qualities, characteristics, and circumstances of the participants, especially those who have worked with the Monarch Center more than once; specifically, the need to understand the individual who functions as the leader of the program improvement initiative (e.g., the author of the grant proposal; the teacher education reformer). Our experience suggests that like outstanding K-12 teachers, these individuals possess not only research-based knowledge, but also craft knowledge, which is local, contextualized, and accumulated via experience (Barth, 1988).

A third area of investigation relates to our understandings of the types of problems and challenges that surface when improving a program. For example, technical problems are those in which current knowledge is sufficient to address the problem; adaptive challenges are more complex and suggest that the solutions may go beyond what we know. An example of a technical

problem may be a concern about the number of teacher candidates who do not pass their state's licensure subject matter knowledge and basic skills test. An example of adaptive challenges may be our current requirement of designing and implementing assessment systems that provide us with information that links a teacher candidate's performance to their students' academic gains. It may be useful to know the nature of these types of problems, how frequently each type is addressed, institutions' success rates, and the factors needed for success.

A final area for future investigation pertains to the idea of repetitive change syndrome. As described above, these "tidal shifts of change" may be creating havoc with reform initiatives. Do they occur? What is the nature of these changes? Who initiates them? What is their effect? In other words, how does the policy arena impact personnel preparation change?

### **Final Thoughts**

This article focused on the technical assistance offered by the Monarch Center to guide and support faculty at minority-serving institutions as they aim to improve their special education personnel preparation programs. By discussing the work of the Monarch Center and focusing on the guidelines that direct the work, we think the message is clear. Meaningful and lasting program change is often complex, political, and urgently needed. While there is no magic bullet that will address all that is involved in reforming a program, those in our professional community have increased our understanding of the teacher education reform process, and when we work collaboratively on these initiatives, the likelihood of success is strong.

### **AUTHOR NOTES**

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