

# Principal Perceptions of the Effectiveness of University Educational Leadership Preparation and Professional Learning

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



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*Principals and assistant principals currently serving in Florida and Georgia school districts were surveyed about their perceptions of university educational leadership preparation and professional learning. The results revealed that many principals and assistant principals agreed that university educational leadership preparation programs enhanced their overall preparation, school leadership, and school law. However, participants disagreed that leadership preparation programs assisted them in managing school budget, data analysis, and human resources. Participants overwhelmingly indicated that school districts provide meaningful professional learning opportunities and that they prefer job-embedded learning experiences over university preparation.*

## **Introduction**

Several factors impact the manner in which university educational leadership programs prepare school leaders, including state certification requirements, university accreditation criteria, and the need to prepare students for a role that changes based on location and school district. Local needs and partnerships may also impact how universities prepare school leaders.

University educational leadership curricula must be aligned with state certification requirements. States have the autonomy to require certification for school administrators, and nearly all states have established criteria (Hale & Moorman, 2003; Manasse, 1985). Typically, these include attaining a degree, passing a state examination, and receiving professional training. These requirements derive from state-developed and adopted educational leadership standards. State certification applicants must demonstrate mastery of these standards through university educational leadership preparation or alternative programs. In addition, states can develop several levels of principal certification that correspond to individual administrative appointments. For example, Georgia has multiple levels of educational leadership certification, and each level identifies the type of leadership position the applicants can hold. Florida also has multiple levels of certification with different criteria for attainment. University educational leadership curricula must prepare students to meet state requirements for certification.

States require that educational leadership programs be accredited by appropriate institutions (Hale & Moorman, 2003). Accredited universities must adhere to guidelines established by these bodies. Some universities are accredited by agencies such as the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), AdvancED, and the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). Institutions that grant accreditation require that universities meet and maintain specific criteria. As a result, accreditation criteria impacts university educational leadership curriculum.

University educational leadership programs prepare students to take on the complex and demanding responsibilities of today's school principal (Hess & Kelly, 2007). Successful principals must master human resources planning and supervision, school budget, facilities, and especially instructional leadership (Backor & Gordon, 2015; Lynch, 2012; Valentine & Prater, 2011). University leadership preparation programs have reassessed themselves due to the increased roles and responsibilities of the principal (Orr, 2006). In response these changes, the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO) revised Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) and National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) standards. The revised standards were designed to reflect the litany of changing expectations in the role of the principal (Superville, 2014).

## **Conceptual Framework**

This study was designed to contribute to the existing knowledge base on the effectiveness of university educational leadership programs. Based on the perspectives of current school administrators, I sought to inform the knowledge base and provide recommendations to educational leadership faculty. Several overarching concepts served as the theoretical basis for this research. Each concept provides a unique context for this study.

The effectiveness of educational leadership preparation programs is being debated. Some research supports the conclusion that these programs are ineffective in preparing principals (Farkas, Johnson, & Duffet 2003; Hess & Kelly, 2007; Levine, 2005; Orr, 2006). Other research

concludes that these programs are necessary and adequate in preparing students to become principals (Duncan, Range, & Scherz, 2011; Isik, 2003). Empirical research and evaluations of university educational leadership programs can contribute to the knowledge base on program effectiveness.

Both landmark and current research support the idea that well-developed principals have a significant impact on student achievement (Barber, Whelan, & Clark, 2010, Cowie & Crawford, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2004; Mortimore & Sammons, 1987; Odden & Odden, 1995; Pina, Cabrel, & Alves, 2015; Valentine & Prater, 2011; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003, 2004). Empirical research suggests that principals have, at minimum, an indirect impact on student outcomes (Hallinger, Bickman, & Davis, 1996; Liethwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010). The impact that principals can have on student achievement warrants further research into the effectiveness of principal preparation.

A body of research suggests that current school administrators are qualified to provide input on university educational leadership program effectiveness (Backor & Gordon, 2015; Baxter, Thessin, & Clayton, 2014; Cowie & Crawford, 2007; Duncan et al., 2011). This study examines perceptions of current school administrators to answer research questions about the effectiveness of university educational leadership programs in Florida and Georgia. School administrator perceptions provide an appropriate lens through which to view the effectiveness of principal preparation programs.

University educational leadership programs are necessary and can impact principal behavior (Isik, 2003). These programs provide applicants the necessary coursework to obtain state certification. In addition, they offer curriculums that helps prepare applicants for the state certification examinations. States sanction universities with principal preparation programs to offer curriculums that are aligned to administrative certification (Gumus, 2015; Roberts, 2008). Successful principal preparation is a shared concern among universities, states, and local school districts (Browne-Ferrigno, 2011). These concepts accentuate the need for continued research to help university educational leadership programs meet the preparatory needs of 21st-century principals.

### **Purpose**

This research examined existing principals' perceptions of the effectiveness of their university educational leadership preparation programs. It also sought to examine principals' perceptions of their professional learning needs based on the demands of their role. Many university educational leadership professors are unaware of the day-to-day experiences of principals (Farkas et al., 2003; Levine, 2005). As a result, an ancillary purpose of this research was to provide current principals the opportunity to share their insights of the educational leadership research field. For the purpose of this research, the term "administrator" refers to both principals and assistant principals.

### **Literature Review**

A myriad of research on various aspects of principal preparation exists. This literature review focused on studies that contribute to the general knowledge base regarding principal preparation, suggest overall university principal preparation is inadequate, spotlight specific university

principal preparation programs providing adequate preparation, and promote novel and innovative principal preparation programs.

### **General Knowledge Base**

Backor and Gordon (2015) conducted research to examine the perceptions of principals, professors, and leaders in teaching regarding the needs of principal preparation programs. They grounded their research in the premise that instructional leadership and student achievement are connected. In this qualitative research, researchers interviewed three groups of participants to gather their perceptions on how university principal preparation programs should ready candidates for instructional leadership. All three groups of participants revealed that the following should be included in principal preparation programs: a comprehensive applicant screening, functions of instructional leadership, the knowledge, skills, and dispositions best suited for principals, teaching and learning strategies, field experiences, and induction plans. The researchers provided suggestions for implementation of each recommendation. In addition, they made recommendations for future research to improve principal preparation programs.

One way to assess the effectiveness of educational leadership preparation programs is to seek input from those who participated in them. Baxter et al. (2014) explored how school leaders employed effective leadership practices developed during preparation programs in their current administrative roles. The researchers wanted to understand how to best prepare school leaders for success, so they sampled 19 school leaders in a qualitative research study. They defined communitarian leadership as assuming the responsibility of decision-making with others in mind. Using the premise that communitarian leadership may be associated with improved student outcomes, the researchers sought input from school leaders, asking them to discuss how their preparation programs affected their engagement with communitarian leadership. The researchers examined the prevalent themes that were most valuable to participants. The most frequent communitarian themes included communication, relationships, values, and beliefs. The researchers recommended educational leadership programs accentuate community-based learning, cohort models, field experiences, aligned curriculums, and program recruitment.

Orphanos and Orr (2014) conducted research to understand the influence of leadership preparation and practice on teacher satisfaction. The sample included 175 teachers whose principals completed exemplary university educational leadership preparation programs and 589 teachers who completed traditional leadership preparation programs. The results revealed that the exemplary programs had statistically significant, direct effects on those principals' practices and indirect effects on teacher collaboration and satisfaction. The results from this research suggested that the quality of educational leadership preparation can influence the effect principals have on teachers, who have the largest impact on student achievement (Leithwood et al., 2004).

Hallinger and Lu (2013) conducted research to examine educational leadership preparation in schools of business management and public administration. They conducted online research to analyze 31 MBA, MPA, and MBA programs with concentrations in education. They also examined curricula, instructional strategies, and the structure of these programs and identified any value-added components that potentially could improve university educational leadership programs. The results revealed that educational leadership programs generally did not include components of MBA and MPA programs that may deserve closer examination. These areas included project management, data-based decision-making, customer orientation, strategic

management/planning, and attaining global perspectives. These areas are aligned with some of the expanding roles of the principal (Murphy, 2001).

### **Inadequate Preparation**

Hess and Kelly (2007) researched what was specifically being taught in university principal preparation programs. The researchers examined 210 syllabi from 31 elite, nonelite, small, and large programs. They investigated how much time was devoted to seven major leadership strands: managing results, personnel, and classroom instruction, developing technical knowledge, leading both in school culture and externally, and maintaining norms and values. The results revealed that little time was spent on accountability, managing school improvement, instructional management, hiring and retention practices, and public relations. In addition, empirical research rarely informed practice. A large portion of time was spent on technical processes such as law, finance, and operation, but with no assessment of learning. Programs used a limited number of textbooks and did not take advantage of the most influential educational and management thinkers. The results of this study suggested that university educational leadership programs did not address many entrepreneurial skills that are paramount to principal success. The researchers recommended reformation of educational leadership programs to meet the needs of 21st-century principals.

Levine (2005) published a report that further supported the need for university educational leadership program reform. Levine asserted that “the majority of the programs that prepare school leaders range in quality from inadequate to poor” (Levine, 2005, p. 1). These results derived from a four-year study of U.S. schools of education. In his report, Levine identified nine points by which schools of education must be evaluated: purpose, curricular coherence, curricular balance, faculty composition, admissions, degrees, research, finances, and assessment. His research revealed that most administrators are trained in the educational leadership departments of schools of education and that the poor quality of many of these programs has led to scrutiny. The study found six major flaws in university educational leadership preparation programs: curricular disarray, low admission and graduation standards, weak faculty, inadequate clinical instruction, inappropriate degrees, and poor research. Levine offered three recommendations for university educational leadership departments: eliminate incentives that favor low quality programs, set and enforce minimum standards of quality, and redesign educational leadership programs (2005).

Some researchers have identified specific curriculum needs that are not included in university educational leadership programs. Blasé and Blasé (2004) conducted qualitative research to explore the importance of preparing leaders for the negative aspects of leadership. The researchers believed that most studies on university educational leadership programs focused on effective leadership and did not address the negatives. Fifty teachers who were mistreated by their principals were interviewed, and results revealed that their principals engaged in similar behaviors. The researchers analyzed questionnaire data from over 400 administrators and teachers and responses confirmed that participants would like preparation and development in the negative aspects of leadership, finding that “what not to do as an educational leader, is as important as just studying the positive, effective things” (Blasé & Blasé, 2004, p. 261). The results suggested the need to caution against the negative aspects of leadership in university educational leadership curriculums.

Many principals do not believe that their university educational leadership programs properly prepared them for their roles as principal. Farkas et al. (2003) revealed several disturbing themes from survey results of 900 principals and 1,000 superintendents. Over 95% of the surveyed principals believed that peer assistance was more beneficial than their university leadership preparation programs. In addition, over 65% of surveyed principals believed that their university preparation programs were disconnected from the realities of the job. The surveys suggested that principals do not have confidence in university educational leadership programs. These data were collected from individuals undergoing the daily demands of the principal position, and they contribute to the demand for a reexamination and reform of university educational leadership programs.

Elmore (2000) wrote about the need to restructure public schools and school systems to meet the demands of standards-based reform. He asserted that if school systems continue status quo reform efforts, failure is inevitable and public trust will continue to erode. Elmore declared that the solution to this problem is “dramatic changes in the way public schools define and practice leadership” (2000, p. 2). He stated that public school leaders are not equipped to successfully assume the responsibilities that the job requires. Elmore’s notions align with the idea that university educational leadership programs and school districts are not preparing students for administrative roles adequately. He offered several external solutions for improving school leadership preparation. In his paper, Elmore (2000) recommended and elaborated on five principles that could yield comprehensive improvements to school systems: maintaining a tight instructional focus sustained over time, routinizing accountability for practice and performance in face-to-face relationships, reducing isolation, allowing direct observation, analysis, and criticism of practice, exercising differential treatment based on performance and capacity, not on volunteerism, and decreasing discretion of practice performance.

### **Adequate Preparation**

Boyland, Lehman, and Srivier (2015) conducted research on new principal performance based on the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) and state-level content standards for principal preparation. Superintendents were asked to rate new principals who recently completed university educational leadership training programs. The results demonstrated that superintendents rated new principals proficient in most categories and highest in the integrity category. The lowest-rated category was financial management. In all other categories, new principals were rated as proficient. Notwithstanding the limitations of this study, the results suggested that based on the ELCC and Indiana Content standards, some university educational leadership programs are preparing students to become effective principals.

Duncan et al. (2011) designed a study to obtain input from principals that would influence the content and practice of the educational leadership preparation program at the University of Wyoming. They surveyed 286 Wyoming principals to analyze their perceptions of preparation program strengths and weaknesses, new principal professional development needs, and district-provided professional learning. The researchers wanted the collected data to fill gaps in their university principal preparation program. Participants identified more overall strengths than weaknesses in their principal preparation programs. However, the results yielded many inconsistencies in perceptions of strengths and weaknesses. This variation may be attributed to differing content at participants’ preparation institutions. Principals valued the internship because it exposed them to the routine practices of the job. The results also suggested that principals

believed that school districts did not provide adequate professional learning opportunities in building relationships and solving conflicts.

The concept of university educational leadership preparation programs preparing principals is supported by the research of Isik (2003), who wrote, “There is no special principal certification program in Turkey” (Isik, 2003, p. 2). Isik conducted research evaluating the effectiveness of principals who completed administrative preparation and those who did not using a direct effects model. Using a researcher-developed, 24-item instrument, data were collected from 240 teachers who had worked with principals trained in an administrative preparation program and former principals who were not. Results revealed that administrative preparation had substantial impact on principal behavior. The results also supported the idea that university educational leadership programs can impact principal practice. The debate is generally not about whether there is a need for university educational leadership programs, but the effectiveness of new and existing programs.

### **Innovative Preparation**

Some researchers have examined in-depth perspectives of innovative university principal preparation programs. Kearney and Valadez (2015) conducted research at a public university in Southwestern United States. The researchers examined three classifications of innovation: enhanced entry criteria, increased field-based experiences, and support after graduation. In an effort to redesign a traditional university educational leadership preparation program, professors sought the input of local key stakeholders. These stakeholders included program graduates who were currently school administrators; university faculty and administration; educational leadership faculty from different universities; school district leaders; and school leaders from 11 surrounding districts. Based on the feedback from the local stakeholders, three primary features were recommended and implemented: co-teaching, district course locations, and in-service training for current leaders. The next step is to evaluate reforms by hiring external evaluators, monitoring graduation and state certification pass rates, distributing self-assessments, and examining hiring rates data, longevity, value-added measures of graduates, and student success rates. The full effects of the redesigned program can be measured fully in a few years. However, the redesign adds to the knowledge base of current models of innovative efforts in improving university educational leadership preparation programs.

Davis and Darling-Hammond (2012) conducted short case studies and cross-case analysis of five innovative principal preparation programs. These programs shared several characteristics that warrant closer examination: a strong focus on instructional leadership as a core element, a blend of practical application and empirical research, a highly selective matriculation process, an included internship, collaboration with local school districts, a cohort model of students, and authentic problem-solving investigations. In addition, all the programs have endured the challenges of university educational leadership preparation programs over long periods of time. Survey results revealed that graduates of these programs have strong confidence in their preparation, are highly effective principals, and have impacted their schools. More developed research on the outcomes of these programs is needed to extend this research.

## Methodology

This research examined current administrators' perceptions of the effectiveness of their university educational leadership preparation program. These administrators operate in the present age of accountability. The rationale for targeting this population is that they are among the most qualified to answer the posed research questions:

- a) What are existing principals' perceptions of university educational leadership preparation?
- b) What do principals perceive as the most valuable knowledge gained from university educational leadership preparation?
- c) What do principals perceive as the least valuable knowledge from university educational leadership preparation?

The researcher developed an online survey using Qualtrics to ascertain administrators' perceptions of the overall and specific aspects of the effectiveness of their university educational leadership programs. The survey was delivered digitally to a convenience sample of 168 principals and assistant principals in Florida and Georgia. An informed letter of consent attached to each email provided a description of the importance and purpose of the study, researchers' contact information, procedures, time required to complete the survey, and other important information related to the study (Creswell, 2013). Of the delivered online surveys, 38% ( $n = 64$ ) were completed by principals and assistant principals, yielding an acceptable researcher response rate (Cook, Heath, & Thomson, 2000) and surpassing the average web-based survey response rate of 34.6%, based on a meta-analysis by Cook, Heath, & Thomson (2000).

## Participants

After the Institutional Review Board approved the study, principals and assistant principals (administrators) listed as members of a professional educational organization in Florida or Georgia were invited to participate. The researcher also gathered names and email addresses of existing administrators in various school settings (urban, suburban, rural, and independent/charter) from several school district websites in Georgia. These administrators were sent informed consent cover letters, the survey link, and were asked to complete the survey.

## Instrument

The researcher designed a 25-item survey to gather demographic and perception data from participants. The survey was vetted for validity and recommendations by university and school-based educational experts in Florida and Georgia. The survey consisted of three sections. The first section (items 1-11) was designed to obtain demographic information from participants. The second section (items 12-22) assessed participants' perceptions of the effectiveness of their university preparation programs via Likert scale items (1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3 = neutral, 4 = agree, 5 = strongly agree). The second section also addressed the following perceptions of participants' university preparation programs: a) overall preparation for administrative role; b) preparation in the area of school law; c) preparation in the area of school data analysis; d) preparation in the area of school finance and budget; e) preparation in the area of school leadership; f) preparation in the area of human resources; g) the usefulness of



preparation; h) the type of field experience included in preparation; i) job-embedded learning experiences; and j) the assistance of district-level professional development. Reliability of these eight items was measured using Cronbach's Alpha, which yielded an acceptable rate,  $\alpha = .795$  ( $n = 8$ ), (Cronbach, 1951; Hatcher, 1994). Cronbach's Alpha estimates how well a set of items consistently measures the same construct to demonstrate internal reliability.

The third section solicited responses to three open-ended questions related to: 1) perception of skills that participants did not learn but would have liked to have learned in their university training; 2) skills learned that they frequently use; and 3) skills learned that they rarely use.

### **Analysis of Data**

Participant data from the leadership preparation surveys were analyzed in three ways. The initial section that assessed the demographics of the administrators is reported in the demographics section. These data were analyzed using Qualtrics and describe the descriptive statistics of the administrators, the school settings in which they work, and where they obtained their university preparation. The second two sections asked questions regarding participant perceptions of specific areas of leadership via a Likert scale. These data were analyzed and reported using quantitative reports prepared in Qualtrics. The third section asked administrators to answer open-ended questions on their perceptions of their university preparation. These data were analyzed to identify any commonalities in administrator responses.

### **Findings**

Sixty-four ( $n = 64$ ) administrators responded to the surveys, and their responses were recorded into Qualtrics. Of the 64 participants, 33 (51.56%) were principals and 31 (48.44%) were assistant principals. Thirty-nine (60.94%) were male and 25 (39.06%) were female. Thirty-two (50%) of the participants were African American and 32 (50%) were Caucasian. Of the 64 respondents, all were employed by public school districts; 19 (29.69%) worked in elementary schools, 19 (29.69%) in middle schools, and 26 (40.63%) in high schools. Twenty-six (41.27%) listed working in an urban school setting, 28 (44.44%) listed suburban, and 9 (14.29%) listed rural. One participant did not respond to the school setting question. The average years of experience were eight for principals and five for assistant principals. The average number of years spent with current school was five years. Principal preparation ranged from 24 universities in 10 states, with the most from Florida (28) and Georgia (20). The years in which principal preparation programs were completed ranged from 1969 to 2015, with the mode being 2004.

### **Perceptions of University Leadership Preparation Programs**

Table 1 displays administrators' perceptions of specific areas of university preparation.

Table 1  
*Response Number/Percentage to University Administrative Preparation Questions*

Questions	Strongly Disagree		Disagree		Agree		Strongly Agree	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Overall Preparation	1	1.59	5	7.94	45	71.43	12	19.05
School Leadership	0	0	4	6.35	39	61.90	20	31.75
School Law	0	0	9	14.29	40	63.49	14	22.22
School Budget	2	3.17	29	46.03	27	42.86	5	7.94
School Data Analysis	2	3.17	22	34.92	32	50.79	7	11.11
Human Resources	0	0	19	30.16	37	58.73	7	11.11
Routine Use of Learned Skills	1	1.61	10	16.13	41	66.13	10	16.13
Application of Theories Learned	3	4.76	12	19.05	34	53.97	14	22.22
Prefer Job-Embedded Learning	0	0	5	8.33	23	38.33	32	53.33
Dis./Sch. Professional Learning	2	3.17	6	9.52	39	61.90	16	25.40

As indicated in Table 2, over 85% of administrators agreed or strongly agreed that overall, their university leadership preparation programs prepared them for their current roles as school administrators in overall preparation, school leadership, and school law. However, over 30% of administrators disagreed or strongly disagreed that their university leadership preparation programs prepared them in the areas of data analysis, human resources, and school finance/budget. In addition, over 76.19% of administrators agreed or strongly agreed that they routinely use skills learned in their university leadership preparation and that they apply the theories learned in their university leadership preparation program. Fifty-five of 60 (91.66%) administrators agreed or strongly agreed that job-embedded learning experiences have been more

meaningful than university preparation leadership preparation. Fifty-five of 63 (87.3%) administrators agreed or strongly agreed that their districts provide professional learning that helps them in their roles as administrators.

Table 2

*Percentage of Combined Responses to University Administrative Preparation Questions*

	<b>Strongly Agree/Agree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree/Disagree</b>
Overall Preparation	90.48%	>10%
School Leadership	93.65%	>10%
School Law	85.71%	14.29%
School Budget	50.8%	49.2%
School Data Analysis	61.90%	38.10%
Human Resources	69.84%	30.16%
Routine	82.26%	17.74%
Use of Learned Skills		
Application of Theories	76.19%	23.81%
Learned		
Prefer Job-Embedded	91.66%	<10%
Learning		
Dis./Sch. Professional	87.3%	12.7%
Learning		
School Law	85.71%	14.29%

### **Types of Field Experience**

Fifty-three of 63 (84.13%) administrators reported that they completed field experience as part of their leadership preparation. Practical application courses were the most reported, with 33 (52.38%) administrators reporting this type of course completion. This was followed by internships, which were reported to have been completed by 19 (30.16%) administrators.

### **Administrator Preferential Areas of Preparation**

Administrators identified 57 areas in which they would have liked to have received more preparation in their university leadership preparation programs. Among the skills listed, two emerged in multiple responses: budget, which was listed 19 times, and achievement data analysis, which was listed 10 times. Other areas identified included parental involvement, dealing with difficult parents, professional learning, stakeholder relationship, and human resources.

### **Most Frequently Used Areas of Preparation**

Administrators identified 58 areas that they learned in their university leadership preparation programs and used most frequently in their careers. Law and leadership were the most consistently identified skills. Law was listed 20 times, more than any other skill, and forms of leadership were identified 16 times. These included transformational, multi-cultural, general,

instructional, ethical, and organizational leadership. Other areas identified as frequently used included curriculum design and data analysis.

### **Least Frequently Used Areas of Preparation**

Administrators identified 53 areas that they learned in university leadership preparation programs and do not use frequently in their careers. The three areas most consistently identified included: N/A, budget, and theory. Administrators listed none, or N/A, 17 times and budget 11 times. Listed 17 times, theory was also consistently identified as an area not used frequently.

### **Implications**

Data from the literature review yielded a noteworthy revelation in regards to the time period of the empirical studies reviewed. General studies included data ranging from 2013 to 2015; innovative studies ranged from 2012 to 2015; adequate studies ranged from 2003 to 2015; and inadequate studies 2000 to 2007. While studies do not represent an exhaustive synthesis of principal preparation literature, these data demonstrate variation in findings. The noted studies that proposed overall inadequate principal preparation at the university level were older than the studies that revealed adequate or innovative preparation. The findings in this study point to overall perceptions of effectiveness of university principal preparation rather than ineffectiveness. This aligns with the findings of research conducted by Duncan et al. (2011).

A diverse group of current principals and assistant principals working in public schools in Florida and Georgia perceived that the leadership training they received from 24 universities in 10 states overall prepared them for their existing roles as administrators. The data suggest that these same universities are adequately preparing leadership candidates for their roles as assistant principals and principals based on the perceptions of the administrators in this study. Despite administrators' perceptions that university leadership preparation programs prepared them for existing administrative roles, the results of this study provide some considerations for faculty within university leadership preparation programs and the field of educational leadership. These data warrant consideration since every participant in the study is a current public school administrator with direct knowledge of the skills and abilities they need and use on the job.

This study found several promising themes for school districts and university leadership preparation programs. Administrators perceived that overall university leadership preparation programs prepared them for their roles. In addition, administrators perceived university leadership preparation programs prepared them in the areas of school law and leadership. Eighty-two percent of administrators surveyed reported that they routinely use the skills learned in university leadership preparation programs. School law and leadership were areas in which administrators agreed university leadership programs prepared them and were also areas that administrators stated they frequently use. This suggests that there is alignment in some areas of university leadership preparation and the skills that administrators report to use frequently. Eighty-seven percent of administrators agree or strongly agree that schools and districts are providing professional development that helps them in their roles. This finding is important because the role of the principal is influenced by local needs (Isik, 2000), accentuating the need for collaborative relationships between university leadership preparation faculty and local school district officials (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012). Fifty-three administrators (84%) reported that they had some type of field experience during university leadership preparation. This finding suggests that some universities are providing field experiences as part of their leadership

preparation programs, which is supported by several studies (Davis & Darling-Hammond, 2012; Dobson, 2014; Kearney & Valadez, 2015). Another important finding was the frequency in which administrators responded N/A to the question about the least frequently used skill learned in university preparation. This suggested that administrators generally are using the skills gained during university preparation.

While administrators who participated in this study overall believe that university preparation programs effectively readied them for administrative roles, data from the study suggested other noteworthy considerations. Data clearly and consistently suggested that a considerable percentage of administrators do not agree that university leadership programs prepared them in school finance/budgeting, data analysis, and human resources. These findings were consistent with administrators' perceptions of areas in which they would have liked to have more preparation and areas that they used less frequently.

In addition, an overwhelming percent (92%) of the administrators in this study believed that job-embedded learning experiences have been more meaningful than university preparation programs. This is not a negative reflection on university leadership programs but a reality of the evolving roles and needs of the administrators (Murphy, 2001). In addition, it aligns with ideas of on-the-job development (Duncan et al., 2011). A significant number of administrators (87%) agreed or strongly agreed that their schools and districts are providing professional learning opportunities that help them as administrators. Participants may prefer job-embedded learning over university preparation because many principal duties are learned in the process of gaining experience. This preference underscores the notion that university programs cannot fully prepare students for the roles they will play as principals, and on-the-job training is an ongoing requirement (Duncan et al., 2011).

Theory was listed among the least-used areas taught in university leadership preparation programs. This finding supports the belief that preparation programs are based too heavily in theory and, not in practice (Martin & Papa, 2008). However, this finding cannot explain why participants heavily agreed that university educational leadership programs prepared them both overall and in school leadership, which is based in theory. For principals to have a comprehensive understanding of leadership and their work, theory cannot be separated from practice. This finding may suggest that participants simply are not connecting practice to theory, which could warrant further consideration by university educational leadership preparation programs.

### **Limitations**

Limitations of this study included the use of convenience sampling to collect data from participants, which limits generalizability to the population (Creswell, 2014). The return rate and sample size were acceptable but limited, considering the number of school administrators across the country. In addition, the participants were public school administrators currently practicing in Florida and Georgia only.

### **Conclusion**

University leadership programs play a critical role in the process of preparing leadership candidates for administrative roles. Meaningful leadership preparation is a process, and universities are not the sole dispensers of preparation for leader candidates. Foundational preparation should begin at the university level. However, adequate preparation will require a

continuum of aligned professional learning experiences collaboratively delivered through universities, state boards of education, local school districts, individual leaders in candidate needs, and community stakeholders. As administrator roles and needs change continually, it is incumbent upon university leadership preparation faculty to continue exploring realistic and aligned preparation practices. University educational leadership curriculum should require (1) strategic alignment to state mandates and university accrediting bodies; (2) alignment with the needs of local school districts; and (3) alignment with the needs of individual leaders and community stakeholders. This alignment will require collaboration, research, and a willingness to periodically revise university leadership preparation programs as the dynamics of the principals' role continues to change. University faculty must embrace the idea that the responsibility of effectively preparing leadership candidates rests on alignment in these areas and that the preparation process is fluid. Studies on university leadership programs yield inconsistent results, as reported in this study's literature review. Accordingly, university leadership programs cannot be meaningfully examined with general evaluations. Instead, local variables must be measured when evaluating the needs and effectiveness of university leadership programs.

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