

# University Strategic Planning: A Process for Change in a Principal Preparation Program

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*This study describes a strategic planning process used for developing an educational leadership program that prepares principals for leading 21<sup>st</sup> century schools. The plan is based on recommendations received from the External reviewers representing Southern Association of Colleges and Schools, the Texas Education Agency, survey responses received from former students currently serving in school leadership positions, and focus group forums. Recommendations received were used to develop a strategic plan that resulted in a more rigorous and accessible, field-based program to better prepare school leaders.*

*Keywords: strategic planning, principal preparation, leadership development*

Historically, institutions of higher education have used traditional long-range planning to guide their actions and determine how to best use resources available. There has been a movement, more recently, for institutions of higher education (IHEs) to utilize a more “strategic thinking approach” which gives a new meaning to the strategic planning process. Essential components of this process include developing mission and vision statements; conducting internal and external environmental scans, setting strategic priorities, and developing an action plan (Hinton, 2012; Luxton, 2005; Paris, 2003). Implementing a strategic thinking approach, it is more sensory and stakeholder driven because it requires IHEs leaders to analyze and synthesize information that is presented by all stakeholders (Evans, 2007). This study focuses on the creation of a strategic plan by stakeholders comprised of the department of educational leadership faculty, school district personnel, school board members, and business community representatives. The importance of strategic planning and how the process was used to reignite an educational leadership program that remained stagnant for several years is discussed in this study.

## **Review of Literature**

### **Strategic Planning**

Strategic planning by Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) emerged in the 1970’s as a proactive solution to meet the changing demands of stakeholders. Since its inception, it was considered a means for IHEs to articulate a compelling mission and vision and to prioritize resources available. The process provided stakeholders an opportunity to collaborate in planning the direction of the IHEs. Due to lack of purposeful implementation of plans developed, the planning process was viewed as ineffective (Hinton, 2012). In the 1990’s, with increased demands for accountability, IHEs were required to develop strategic plans to fulfill accreditation requirements. Institutions of Higher Education were and continued to be expected to demonstrate the extent to which they are fulfilling their intended mission. Paris (2003) viewed strategic planning as the means by which “a department or university... will identify its unique niche... focus its resources on a limited number of strategic efforts, abandoning activities that could be, should be, or are being done by others” (p.1). Paris touts engagement of stakeholders as a key to creating advocacy. Rowley and Sherman (2001) expressed it is important “colleges and universities understand the competitive nature of their niche and determine a strategy that will reduce competitive pressures or allow the university to operate with a less confrontational approach to the marketplace” (p. 102).

Numerous planning models for use by IHEs emerged over the last two decades (Hinton, 2012; Luxton, 2005; Lerner, 1999) as accreditation standards have increased. Moreover, accreditation commissions have required that IHEs develop strategic plans to fulfill accreditation requirements (Hinton) which are an important aspect of strategic planning. The accreditation gives the IHEs the opportunity to be proactive in shaping its future and determining how it will respond to emerging challenges spawned by factors such as student enrollments, changing demographics, emerging technologies, increasing standards, and funding.

Strategic planning provides leaders a systematic, structured, and collaborative approach for examining current issues and future trends and their impact on the organization’s capacity to attain its mission. It assists leaders to create a vision of what the organization must become to exist in new environment effectively. It further engages stakeholders in meaningful dialog to

determine significant issues that are of concern to stakeholders and the organization. Strategic planning provides a setting for exploring and identifying actions required to respond to concerns and expectations of stakeholders and the organization (Metcalf, 2008). Moreover, strategic planning helps leaders ensure the organization is responsive to the clients it serves.

The strategic planning process requires leaders to identify needs, create a clear and compelling vision, determine priorities, set bold and pragmatic goals, and delineate strategies and resources required to become the organization envisioned by the stakeholders it serves (McKay, 2001). The strategic planning process also helps leaders focus resources available on the major strategies designed to help stakeholders better and attain the IHE's purpose (Paris, 2003). Strategic planning serves as a management tool to improve the performance of an organization (Carron, 2010). Performance measures are set to monitor progress and ensure that all organization members are focused on agreed-upon goals and strategies. Strategies and actions are controlled, monitored, and adjusted based on results attained and emerging needs. Ultimately, the strategic planning process yields "decisions about the future of the organization that will most likely lead to the best use of human talent and material resources" (Edwards, 2000, p. 48).

### **Planning Models and Associated Processes**

A considerable amount of literature exists about different models of strategic planning. Strategic planning models have similar components that guide the planning process. IHEs utilize the model and associated method that best fits the needs of the institution. Usually, the planning process progresses through each of the models' components in sequence (Hinton, 2012). Although strategic planning occurs at the institutional level, strategic planning models may be applied at the college and department level.

Developing the vision and mission statements is the initial step in the process. The vision statement describes what the organization aspires to become. The vision statement communicates "what the institution *wishes* to be, whom it *wishes* to serve, and how it *intends* to get there" (Luxton, 2005, p. 23). The mission is a succinct statement of the institution's purpose and what it aspires to accomplish. Together, the vision and mission statement provide a compelling direction that guides overall development of the strategic plan (Hinton, 2012; Luxton). During the internal and external environmental scans, the institution conducts an analysis of internal and external strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT). The analysis is followed by a gap analysis in which results are used to compare the institution's current status and desired future (Luxton). The gaps identified will inform "development of specific strategies and allocation of resources to close the gap" (Lerner, p. 21). After conducting the gap analysis, needs identified are prioritized. The strategic priorities guide the focus in the direction of the institutions' vision. Identification of strategic priorities leads to the setting of goal priority areas for which targets and strategies are developed. Strategic priorities help determine how resources may be best allocated for the benefit of the institution and its stakeholders (Hinton).

The action plan delineates what will be done to achieve the desired future. It identifies strategic priorities and similar focus areas, goal statements, and strategies to be implemented. An action plan identifies what will be done, by whom, when, and how. In addition, included in the plan are resources to be allocated and performance measures to be applied in determining progress made (Hinton, 2012; Lerner, 1999).

A planning committee that includes representatives of both internal and external stakeholders typically guides strategic planning at the institutional, college or department level. Luxton (2005) writes, “whatever the size of the institution and whoever the major players in the strategic planning process will be, a central committee is needed to coordinate the planning” (p. 13). By participating in the process, stakeholders provide valuable feedback pertinent to strengths, needs, opportunities, and threats to the institution. Getting faculty engaged at every phase of the process, particularly in the implementation phase, is critical (Lerner, 1999). Engagement provides “stakeholders the opportunity to understand the nature of the competing demands on resources” (Hinton, 2012, p. 27). Engagement coupled with clear communications helps stakeholders understand the rationale for decisions made. Engagement fosters confidence in what the IHE is doing to attain its vision and goals (Luxton). Overall, engaging stakeholders in the planning process ensures that their recommendations are considered and engenders their support and commitment (Hinton).

### **Principal Preparation**

In the United States, researchers in the field of educational leadership have affirmed that the capacity of leadership required by school and district leaders is highly dependent on the quality of their leadership preparation experiences (Baker, Orr, & Young, 2007; Archer, 2005; Azzam, 2005; Hess, Kelly, 2005). Over the last five years, according to Michelle Young, Director of the University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA, 2011), researchers in the field of educational leadership have made extraordinary advancement in acknowledging the features of university-based leadership preparation programs that are identified with effective leadership practice. Hence, increasing numbers of educational leadership programs, particularly those in UCEA institutions, are engaged in restructuring programs to demonstrate these new research findings and to create programs more efficacious for the leaders they prepare.

The Wallace Foundation supported six urban school districts to address the critical challenges of supplying schools with effective principals (Turnbull, Riley, & MacFarlane, 2015). The results of this policy study revealed steps school districts might consider as they engage in strengthening school leadership. Numerous researchers have suggested that one critical component of an exemplary principal preparation program should be the inclusion of field-based experiences in the program (Creighton, 2005; Lauder, 2000; Reams, 2010). However, other researchers have found that just increasing the amount of time spent in the field is not sufficient to create an effective principal; the activities must be of high quality, relevant to the future leader’s responsibilities, and well-structured (Bizzell & Creighton, 2010). Kersten, Trybus, and White (2009) suggest aligning the activities to professional standards. Such measures may be derived from state or organizational policy. Field experience activities have the greatest impact when incorporated continuously throughout the program, based on course content (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007). Darling-Hammond, et al., also stipulate that excellent program field-based activities help interns construct new knowledge, facilitate opportunities for deep reflection, and help interns link theory to practice by using actual real-world experiences within the school and community.

To add to the discourse, a 2006 survey by Public Agenda, a nonprofit research organization that reports public opinion and public policy issues, found that nearly two-thirds of principals believe that traditional graduate leadership programs “are out of touch” with today’s realities. Principal preparation programs place too much emphasis on lectures, theory, and not

enough on the application (Martin & Papa, 2008). The Southern Regional Education Board (2005) states that “traditional models of training principals are still out of sync with the challenges faced by today’s leaders” (p. 3). Therefore, it is prudent that principal preparation programs become more innovative and include extensive authentic coursework and field experiences (Orr, 2006).

The demand for a continuous increase in student achievement and school improvement has spawned much debate about whether leadership preparation programs have stayed abreast of the changing requirements of the field. Several studies have documented the lack of principal preparedness (Archer, 2005; Azzam, 2005; Hess, et al., 2005). In a 2003 survey, 67% of the administrators revealed that leadership training in schools of education did not develop them for their role as instructional leaders (Farkas, Johnson & Duffett, 2003). Again, in 2007, 69% of the principals shared the same sentiment (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007).

The accountability requirements, both at the state and at the national level, with the No Child Left Behind legislation, also place tremendous pressure on principals to improve student achievement. In this era of high-stakes testing, the role of the principal has developed into one of an instructional leader (DiPaola & Hoy, 2008; Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005). This new principal role is more defined in the area of instructional leadership, which includes expertise in instruction, curriculum, assessment, data analysis, and data-driven decision-making.

Baker et al., 2007, ascertain that the multitude of preparation programs currently available have no means of evaluating how well they are accomplishing their goals due to the lack of data and support for program improvement.

## **Method and Procedures**

The strategic planning process guided the researchers in determining data collection methods, analysis procedures, and needs identification. A mixed method approach was employed to determine the perceptions and attitudes of the respondents and suggestions from external program reviewers. The research design facilitated the collection and analysis of data by using a combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods to respond to the research problem (Creswell, 2012). Overall, this descriptive design allowed the researchers to review the attitudes, knowledge, and opinions of the survey participants (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2007). The following section explains methods and procedures utilized for examining a university’s educational leadership preparation program.

### **Participants**

Participants in this mixed-method research included elementary, middle, and high school campus principals and assistant principals in six school districts along the Texas-Mexico border. These participants consisted of practicing university educational leadership program graduates. Out of 121 participants, 42 responded to the survey. The focus groups were composed of school superintendents, central office staff, practicing principals and assistant principals representing all school levels, school board members, and business leaders.

### **Instrumentation**

*Survey.* A Likert-scale survey, which included one open-ended question was designed and used to gather both quantitative and qualitative data. The rating scale consisted of four choices: strongly disagree, disagree, agree, and strongly agree. This survey was completed by practicing principals and assistant principals.

These data collection techniques suggest a mixed method approach for the study. Collectively, these data provided evidence about the research questions (Creswell, 2012). When one combines quantitative and qualitative data, it creates a potent complex mixture of a social phenomenon for study (Miles & Huberman, 2014; Greene, Benjamin, & Goodyear, 2001). This survey was completed by practicing principals and assistant principals.

*Focus Groups.* The researchers facilitated stakeholder focus groups on three, two and half-hours sessions. In the first session, participants were divided into small groups of six to identify strengths, challenges, and opportunities. The responses were transcribed and grouped by the researchers. In the second group session, participants prioritized the challenges into focus areas and related goals. In the third session, participants were asked to review the strategies and actions to be implemented. At each session, participants worked in small groups and presented to the whole group for validation of their feedback.

## **Research Questions**

To address program needs, the researchers created the following research questions to guide the study:

1. What do program graduates who are practicing school administrators say about the principal preparation program in an IHE?
2. What do focus groups composed of stakeholders say about a principal preparation program in an IHE?
3. How does the process of strategic planning in IHEs inform the need for change in a principal preparation program?

**Quantitative data.** Surveys were sent to principals and assistant principals from 38 school districts along the Texas – Mexico border. Frequency counts were used to determine the administrators' perceptions in various program areas addressed in the survey. The survey questionnaire consisted of two sections. The first section contained 12 items and used a 4-point Likert-type scale to assess cognitive dimensions to identify educational gaps. Participants responded to 12 items by selecting one of four possible choices: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.*

**Qualitative data.** Data were collected from practicing principals and assistant principals by including one open-ended question on the survey. The open-ended question on the survey asked participants "How can the Department of Educational Leadership better prepare public school administrators?" Four questions guided the focus group Discussions. Those questions were:

- What are the strengths of the current program?
- What are the challenges experienced by the current program?
- What opportunities exist and what recommendations do you have for strengthening the current program?

One set of data consisted of the summarization of the responses to the open-ended question expressing understandings and insights from school administrators and their familiarity with the Department of Educational Leadership. The second set of data included the responses

to the four questions asked in the focus group discussions. The researchers assembled the responses from the focus groups into strengths, challenges, opportunities, and recommendations. Responses to the questions were further analyzed and collated into themes based on similarity of intents as agreed upon by the focus group members. Each theme identified served as the basis for the goals addressed in the strategic plan.

## Results

Results of the two data sets collected are described in the following sections. The data gathered from surveys indicate perceptions of practicing principals and assistant principals. The data gathered from the focus group sessions yielded program strengths and challenges as well as opportunities and recommendations for improving the program.

The data from the survey responses are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1

*Administrators' Responses to Questions on Survey*

	SD	Percentage		
		D	A	SA
1. Admission criteria into the principal preparation program was rigorous	2.5	22.5	67.5	7.5
2. Prepared with knowledge of different programs to aid in student achievement	4.9	9.8	70.7	14.6
3. Prepared with knowledge about programs that educate the Rio Grande Valley student populations	7.3	19.5	56.1	17.1
4. Courses emphasize building interpersonal relationships and group process skills	10.0	12.5	50.0	27.5
5. Prepared to be a data-driven decision maker	10.0	25.0	42.5	22.5
6. Prepared to address the socio-cultural issues of English Language Learners and Economically Disadvantaged students	7.3	19.5	48.8	24.4
7. Prepared to be a curriculum and instructional leader	9.8	12.2	61.0	17.1
8. Prepared to apply the appropriate supervisory and leadership strategies to meet teachers needs best	4.9	17.1	58.5	19.5

9. Prepared on the function of staff development for continuous improvement	4.9	19.5	56.1	19.5
10 Equipped with knowledge of state and federal accountability systems	7.5	21.0	55.0	17.5
11. Your enrollment into the master's program was a result of recruitment by the Educational Leadership department	34.1	53.7	12.2	0
12. Your enrollment into the master's program was a result of a recommendation from a school administrator	19.5	26.8	26.8	26.8

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*SD = Strongly Disagree, D = Disagree, A = Agree, SA = Strongly Agree*

The data helped determine perceived program strengths. Program strengths were determined by totaling the percentage of responses indicating *strongly agree* and *agree*. To determine perceived program areas needing improvement, the percentage of responses indicating *strongly disagree* and *disagree* were totaled.

The top-ranked strength revealed by 85.3% of the participants was that program graduates were prepared with knowledge of different programs to aid in student achievement. The second-ranked strength identified by 78.1% of the participants was that program graduates were prepared to be a curriculum and instructional leaders. The third-ranked strength indicated by 78% of the participants was that program graduates were prepared to apply the appropriate supervisory and leadership strategies to meet teachers' needs.

Results revealed that 35.0% of the participants expressed program improvement was required in developing leaders to be data driven decision makers and 28.5% of the participants indicated the need in preparing leaders with knowledge of state and federal accountability systems. Furthermore, 26.8% of the participants indicated the need to address the socio-cultural issues of English Language Learners and economically disadvantaged students.

Items 11 and 12 were not intended to procure perceptions about the principal preparation program. The purpose of these questions was to determine potential factors that influenced enrollment in the program. Only 12.2% indicated the enrollment into the master's program was a result of recruitment by the Educational Leadership Department. In contrast, 53% reported the enrollment into the master's program was a result of a recommendation from a school administrator.

**Themes from Open-Ended Questions.** In addition to the 12 Likert-type survey items, practicing school administrators responded to one open-ended question at the end of the survey. The Course Preparation section summarizes the results of the open-ended question that asked respondents to provide suggestions on how the department could better prepare future school leaders. Data were analyzed, and responses were divided into two themes: course preparation and pedagogy.

**Course preparation.** Respondents were complimentary of the program's faculty. Feedback received indicated that the "Educational Leadership Department is doing a marvelous job preparing public school leaders. Students are coming out of the program more prepared to



assist and lead.” The program faculty was perceived as being devoted to the program and supportive of students. One respondent stated, “Professors were devoted to teaching them.”

**Pedagogy.** The faculty’s experience was lauded as a program strength. Sharing real-life experiences by professors was perceived as a positive aspect of the program. One respondent commented, “Professors had a broad range of experiences as professors.” A different respondent indicated that he/she “would have benefitted a lot more if the professor would have shared real-life experiences from scenarios they have dealt with as opposed to (hearing) from other students ... who have not been administrators before.” Respondents indicated appreciation for program pedagogy as evidenced by the following comment. “I do appreciate the methodology, research-based practices, and training I received in the program.”

Several pedagogical challenges were pointed out. Respondents indicated the program needed to increase its emphasis on instructional leadership, data-driven decision-making, instructional practices to address the needs of diverse learners, and field-based experiences.

About instructional leadership, a respondent stated, “there is a great need for instructional leaders in our schools. We need leaders in our schools that know all aspects of running a school, the managerial, and the instructional. We should be curriculum experts.” Another indicated there is a need for a “heavy dose of instructional leadership and best practices” essential for creating more effective schools.

Survey responses indicated the need to prepare data-driven school leaders. One respondent stated, “The statistics course should be tailored to (help us) understand our state reports and how to use them for instructional curriculum decisions.” Another respondent said, “More emphasis needs to be placed on knowing about PEIMS data and how it affects the campus.” PEIMS is the state’s Public Education Information Management System. A third respondent expressed the need to “prepare administrators by teaching them how to desegregate data that will drive instruction and assessment.”

The urgency for the program to better address needs of diverse learners was also noted. Responses submitted by the participants indicated a need to “include using data to make instructional decisions to help close the achievement gap and provide a heavy dose (of strategies) for the creation of a positive school culture.” The respondents also stated there is a need to better prepare candidates in special education “by informing them of programs such as 504, RTI, and dyslexia.” A respondent also mentioned that inviting practicing school administrators to present about real-life experiences related to what is being taught in class would strengthen the program. One responded a need exists for the program to “include classes targeting the different instructional programs relevant to our student population. (Also needed is) an intense focus on the importance of creating a climate and culture that fosters organizational excellence.”

Respondents commented that field-based experiences could be enhanced by “providing real-world opportunities through more rigorous mentor/mentee relationships and an inquiry-based internship.” Another respondent also indicated the need for candidates to “work with the cooperating principal and his/her campus leadership team to desegregate data and map out instruction for the school.” A respondent indicated that the program “could better prepare candidates as public school administrators by allowing candidates to work in close collaboration with experienced school administrators and candidates get assigned a mentor that comes and observes them at least twice through the semester working on different administrator duties.”

## **Focus Group Sessions**

Distinct themes surfaced in the focus groups' responses, which aided in answering the three focus group questions of the study.

**Strengths.** The focus group identified specific strengths of the education leadership department and its graduate program. Patterns emerged suggesting that the department's faculty were experienced in school leadership, familiar with its local population and its culture, knowledge of the accountability systems for public schools and formed personal connections with students. The university's proximity to and accessibility with the surrounding school districts was also cited as a strength.

The faculty's knowledge of personal and cultural needs of both the graduate students and the local school districts was viewed as a positive aspect in program development. The "graduate program faculty's ability to understand our graduate student on a personal level is a plus," stated one focus group member. Another participant added the "program's ability to be very familiar with the needs of local school districts helps in creating potential school leaders that are culturally responsive to the needs of local school students and school districts."

**Challenges.** The focus groups voiced leadership skills that graduates needed to develop further while in the graduate program and several concerns that were programmatic in nature. Their responses produced the following themes, as priority needs:

- Prepare graduate students to have appropriate supervisory skills to meet teacher needs;
- Emphasize the building of interpersonal relationships and group process skills in curriculum coursework;
- Actively recruit potential graduate students at their place of employment;
- Prepare graduate students to be managers and instructional leaders in schools;
- Make the admission criteria into graduate program more rigorous; and
- Prepare graduate students to educate at-risk students such as English Language Learners, bilingual and special needs students.

Focus group members also voiced that the graduate program must meet the needs of the "technology savvy" students. One response was, "Develop all traditional graduate programs - Master's in Educational Leadership, superintendent, and doctoral - into online programs." Another response was, "Make graduate program courses more accessible across the geographical area and online."

**Opportunities and Recommendations.** The focus group identified specific opportunities and recommendations for the education leadership department and its graduate program. Their responses produced the following suggestions:

- work closer with the local Regional Education Service Center;
- develop a better partnership with members of the K-12 Educational Community;
- create cohorts of school administrators in school districts;
- connect current students working on their Bachelor's Degree in the Educational Leadership Program;
- continue to develop all programs (master's, superintendent, and doctoral) coursework to an online program; and
- continue to develop administrators that are responsive to the unique demographics of students: English-language Learners (ELLs), the importance of being bilingual and bi-literate, and the importance of serving our special needs students.

## Discussion

The strategic planning process employed by this university was similar to strategic planning processes used by other Institutions of Higher Education. The process provided the Department of Educational Leadership faculty the opportunity to examine its institutional capacity by identifying strengths and areas that needed attention. Stakeholders comprised of superintendents, principals, district level administrators, school board members, and business community representatives were engaged throughout the process in providing valuable insights and recommendations.

The faculty received feedback from stakeholders to make changes in the program that would affect the development of school leaders. The outcome of this particular planning process was a strategic plan comprised of a mission statement that accentuates a commitment to improving leadership development and goals aimed at eliminating needs that were identified via the survey. Important outcomes that emerged were strategies and actions supported and strengthened by recommendations procured from surveys and focus groups, resources and funds required for implementation, and formative and summative measures essential for monitoring progress made and determining program effectiveness.

The mission statement and goals provide direction and serve as catalysts for the strategies and actions identified. Hence, presented next is a synopsis of the department's mission statement and goals. "The mission of the Department of Organization and School Leadership is to continuously improve leadership development through teaching, research, and service that includes the cultural and linguistic history of the Texas-Mexico border." The goals identified are listed below:

1. Develop and implement rigorous criteria that will ensure identification of highly qualified candidates;
2. Develop a marketing plan for recruiting;
3. Develop a systemic, broad-based planning, research and evaluation process, the ongoing pursuit of departmental effectiveness and continuous improvement among programs (Master, Principalship, Superintendent, and Doctoral) services and personnel;
- 4a. Develop capacity to implement instructional strategies that will enhance student technical, personal/interpersonal, and process skills;
- 4b. Develop leaders who can lead schools for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century;
5. Create university - district partnerships for enhancing leadership effectiveness and conducting investigations of educational policies, practices, and issues that are of importance to the university, districts, and the educational community;
6. Evaluate the principal preparation program continuously to ensure candidates are prepared to lead schools in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century; and
7. Host an Annual International Critical Issues Leadership Conference.

The creation of university and school district partnerships to enhance leadership development was one of the most significant goals of the strategic plan. The success of these partnerships was the creation of a diverse pool of talented professionals committed to collaborating with each other for needed change. Perhaps the greatest challenge was gaining the commitment of districts to engage in partnerships specifically designed to help districts build their leadership capacity. These partnerships provide aspiring leaders' real-life, district-based field experiences that will assist them to become successful change agents.

The school districts and the university benefitted from the strategic plan in that a stronger and more talented pool of candidates will be admitted to the leadership program thus creating a

higher caliber of prospective principals. Because of the strategic planning process, a stronger relationship between the schools and the educational department was created. The IHE and districts served have a vested interest in developing school leaders with the knowledge and skills necessary for leading schools that meet the needs of diverse learners.

Implementation of a strategic planning process that utilizes “strategic thinking” was essential for bringing together a diverse group of stakeholders to determine strengths, challenges, opportunities, and recommendations for developing a strategic plan. The planning process provided the department of educational leadership a venue to re-establish trust and credibility with its stakeholders. Praiseworthy was the stakeholders’ willingness to engage in a one-year strategic planning process that required open and honest discussions essential to recreating the principal preparation program. Moreover, after this one-year process, these stakeholders agreed to serve on the department’s leadership council to support, monitor, and adjust the strategic plan over the next five years.

### **Conclusion**

In this study, researchers employed a mixed-method approach to gather data and ascertain the effectiveness of a principal preparation program. Also, a strategic planning process was utilized to develop a strategic plan that addresses the needs expressed by its stakeholders. As a result of this process, the educational leadership department re-established trust and credibility with its stakeholders. A significant outcome of the process was the formation of a leadership advisory committee to maintain relationships created and to elicit feedback for continuous improvement. The strategic planning process resulted in the following actions being implemented to enhance the principal preparation program: (1) new admissions criteria; (2) increased marketing and recruitment; (3) improved scheduling for program accessibility; (4) revised program curriculum (5) created university – school district partnerships; (6) committed to a program evaluation for continuous improvement; and (7) establish an annual international critical issues leadership conference.

The stakeholder feedback was aligned to the latest research and best practices espoused by the features of the UCEA Model for Principal Preparation. Areas one through six is consistent with the features of the UCEA Model for Principal Preparation that is associated with effective leadership practices (Baker et al., 2007). Action seven emerged in response to the need to keep educational leaders abreast of major trends and issues affecting education.

This study enabled the department’s faculty to celebrate strengths and proactively address needs and challenges that compelled the department to review and revise its educational leadership preparation program. The strategic planning process employed by this Department of Educational Leadership provides valuable insights that inform and facilitate the work of faculty in IHEs who are responsible for preparing school leaders for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

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