

## Connecting Student Realities and Ideal Models: Changing the University of South Florida's Educational Leadership Program

Bobbie Greenlee, Ph.D.  
*University of South Florida*

Darlene Y. Bruner, Ph.D.  
*University of South Florida*

Marie Somers Hill Ph.D.  
*University of South Florida*

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*Educational leadership program evolution naturally creates tensions among institutional, national, regional, departmental, practitioner, and student cultures. Learning that has occurred during University of South Florida's educational leadership program's change process will be shared as well as national survey documentation examining student characteristics. The realities of the lives of our full time educators/part time students caused our program to reconfigure to accommodate student needs while moving toward more ideal models of principal preparation.*

Keywords: Educational leadership; Principal preparation; Student characteristics.

### Connecting Student Realities and Ideal Models: Changing the University of South Florida's Educational Leadership Program

For nearly two decades, criticism of traditional educational leadership programs has dominated the literature in the field (see for example Levine, 2005; Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, 2003). Nearly every program aspect has been described in mostly negative terms. Before this cloud of criticism, many educational leadership programs, preparing our nation's school principals, had already begun the business of changing. In other universities, programs simply vanished when no one stepped forth to champion the necessary reform. The critique of educational leadership programs assisted change agents by supporting the case they had been advocating. However, these criticisms ignore the advances of preparation programs in aligning content with national standards, providing meaningful practical experiences, and researching practice to advance the educational leadership knowledge base (Jackson & Kelley, 2002).

Educational leadership programs have evolved and as in any change process, involving people and institutions, friction slows and complicates the process. The path is often foggy and as Duffy (2004) noted, the path of change is never straight. Many transition points along the path are necessary and usually there are more than anticipated from the beginning. Through this friction and fog, the Masters program in educational leadership at the University of South Florida has morphed from a traditional ivory tower model of lone students randomly picking courses taught by faculty, with little or long ago real world experience, conveying their favorite topic. Program constructs have evolved to a more responsive, conceptual, collaborative model. Students are often part of cohorts. Faculty use real world examples and online school data for problem solving experiences. School districts participate with planning, candidate selection, practitioner sessions, and internship supervising. School personnel often serve as adjunct faculty.

The change process produces some dust. As it settles, conflicting visions of next steps and refinements are revealed. As our University of South Florida program emerged into a new model, directions for continual growth become apparent. Faculty dialogue around realities of the lives of full time educators/part time students prompted us to wonder if other programs share similar elements.

Using the results of a national survey of 25 educational leadership programs (Bruner, Greenlee, Hill, 2007) that focused on demographics of candidates, student mobility, graduates' pursuit of administrative positions, and student learning experiences, we identified student realities. Used for a previously published study, this survey instrument collected data from chairs of educational leadership programs identified in the 24<sup>th</sup> Edition of the Educational Administration (2005-2006), published by the National Council of Professors of Educational Administration (NCPEA). Survey results and resultant USF faculty discussions identified four student reality challenges that informed and guided our program change. Student realities were paired with aspects of the ideal model of principal preparation and reflected in the following chart:

Table 1. Student Realities and Ideal Models

	REALITY	IDEAL
I.	Because of financial and time constraints, many students need to take limited numbers of courses each semester on a random path.	All students move through the program forming learning communities as members of a cohort progressing through a sequenced plan of study.
II.	Students commonly teach in one district with limited examples of leadership and upon graduation seek to become a school leader in the same district.	Students have opportunities for wider, more global views of schools, pedagogy, and leadership.

III.	Students gather internship experiences by working after school, in the summer or during planning times in a haphazard manner in their home school.	Students are able to complete internships in large blocks in a variety of settings with carefully scaffold sets of field experiences.
IV.	Our local pool of teachers who then become school leaders are predominantly white women.	The diversity of our educational leadership students and faculty would mirror our K-12 student population.

The gap between reality and ideal was obvious and common to many other educational leadership programs. Some changes at University of South Florida have reduced the range of the gap. With the ideal clearly identified, our program keeps adapting our delivery model and continues to make progress. Planning the next steps requires designing other models that benefit our students. The purpose of this paper is to examine program innovations that address the major challenges of educational leadership student realities.

Method

This study utilized educational leadership faculty from a large metropolitan university to define and frame student realities and ideal models of leadership preparation programs. The data analysis process began with a compilation of our unique student realities and characteristics of exemplary practices in programs of educational leadership. Faculty discussion focused on the actual practices in our program and explored promising models of delivery.

This research is a descriptive case study that examines a large educational leadership program’s evolution from disconnected, irrelevant and unresponsive to coherent, meaningful and informed.

*Multiple Cohort Approaches*

In some fashion, redesigned and evolving educational leadership programs throughout the country have considered, implemented, tinkered with, or even tried and then abandoned organizing students into cohorts. Since the mid 1990’s, educational leadership literature has extolled the idea of students moving forward together throughout their program. Members of cohorts have reported that the experience fostered a sense of community, enhanced their social capital, and expanded affiliation and professional collaboration (Hill, 1995; Tareilo, 2006; Whitaker, King, & Vogel, 2004). Barnett and Muse (1992) found that the new atmosphere of professional collaboration supported students’ “desire to obtain additional skills and knowledge to become successful school leaders” (p. 187). Students in Whitaker, King, and Vogel’s 2004 study reported that the cohort model was the most important aspect of their program.

Increasing social capital and enhancing learning leads to a third benefit for advancing through an educational leadership program as a member of a cohort. Tareilo (2006), Hill (1995), and Norton (1995) suggest that students are more likely to complete their degree.

This finding has been confirmed at University of South Florida where according to records kept since 2002, 91% of cohort students have graduated. Students have reported that they sometimes pulled each other along toward graduation. The cohort member that was fading, struggling, or disengaged was easily identified and other members of the cohort moved forward to draw their colleague back toward success.

Cohort opportunities can be an educator's first experience with working within a learning community which can be translated to become part of their repertoire when they assume school leadership roles. This learning community experience is critical when considering the evidence that schools that have developed into true learning communities are identified as being the most successful at improving student achievement (Newmann & Wehlage, 1995).

Durden (2006) studied the cohort effect with a group of educational leadership students in a New York City program. Students noted the richness of their learning experiences and the advantage of working together to complete a degree. Durden concluded that the cohort experience was able to "evoke an image of the type of collegiality that will serve as a model for these aspiring leaders in their future roles" (p. 124). This framework for the program influences the future school leader's skills of building a collaborative school culture as much as the curriculum.

Cohorts within educational leadership programs have gradually become the prevalent model. Norton in 1995 had identified that 50% of Masters Programs at University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) institutions provided cohort structures. Five years later in 2000, the number was a little higher when Barnett, Basom, Yerkes, and Norris identified that 63% of programs used cohorts. Our 2006 survey of 25 randomly selected national educational leadership programs found that 76% employed some type of cohort model (Bruner, Greenlee, & Hill, 2006).

Regardless of the strong case supporting cohort models, only about half of educational leadership students are organized into cohorts. Within those programs surveyed, faculty reported that 52% of their Masters students were participating in a cohort program (Bruner, Greenlee, & Hill, 2006). The cohort structure in the overall educational leadership program varies widely. The survey of 25 programs revealed that roughly a quarter had no students in cohorts, another quarter operated with all students in cohorts, and about half offered a mixture of non-cohort and cohort options.

Several institutional and student realities influence the use of cohorts within graduate educational leadership programs. Institutionally, smaller programs are especially challenged to offer courses in an exclusive cohort sequence. Mandates for student credit generation influencing program survival and support sometimes do not allow for an "all or none" message to students to be part of the cohort or go somewhere else for a degree.

Larger programs have the luxury of being able to support dual tracks of cohorts and non-cohorts. With about 400 M.Ed. students, dual tracks are easily offered at University of South Florida. The first cohort started in 2003 in collaboration with one school district and still continues now with its third group. During fall 2006, another school district collaborated in a second cohort and a third was formed from students teaching in a variety of school districts.

Cohort delivery has been part of massive program changes. With only about a quarter of our M. Ed. students in cohorts, we must inquire about how we can offer alternative iterations of the model to accommodate the needs of other students. Frameworks of our present model have been adjusted according to student feedback. For instance, the first cohort beginning in 2003 completed a M.Ed. in five semesters. During their final semester, surveyed students strongly supported a four semester model. As cohorts complete the program additional surveys are completed to inform scheduling.

Time and money are large factors in being able to opt in or out of a cohort. Many students cannot afford tuition for three courses a semester. Our cohort classes meet on Saturdays again reflecting student preferences. But for many students, Saturday classes conflict with working a second job on weekends and for others with scheduled family events. A different M.Ed. cohort model was tested beginning summer 2007 with two courses a semester over a longer period of time with classes meeting in the evening. Our plan is to gradually increase the percentage of Masters' students moving through the program as members of cohorts each semester.

A new doctoral cohort began fall 2006 consisting of practicing administrators in one school district. Potential cohort members were identified by the school district administrators. With input and cooperation of the school district all classes and subsequent research based were around four themes to serve needs identified by the district. The themes surround topics of urban school restructuring, achievement gaps, community literacy, and ethics. The school district agreed to early release during the week for 24 practicing administrators for their first semester. They attended classes from 1:00 p.m. to 8:00 p.m. once a week meeting within a centrally located school within the district. During subsequent semesters, classes met on Saturday. Infinite scheduling possibilities exist, Peabody College has a cohort of principals and assistant principals that meet for two weeks during the summer and then on Wednesday evenings and Saturdays twice a month during the school year (Goldring & Sims, 2005).

During Spring Semester 2007 another cohort iteration began. Six administrators in one school district inquired about embarking on a doctoral program. After meeting with the administrators in one of their schools, a smaller form of a cohort, we call a *cadre*, was formed. Their courses will be charted for their progress together until their research agendas separate them into different paths and different courses. They identified their own research themes within their small cadre. Other doctoral students moving through the program on their own schedules were part of their classes.

The department can systemically facilitate informal cadre development through doctoral programs. The most appropriate form of community for each group will be sought. Learning communities will take on a variety of meanings, sizes, and forms. Faculty must value and champion development of, both formal and informal, learning communities of masters and doctoral students.

Transitioning from the student's reality dictated by financial and time concerns to our ideal model where everyone moves forward in a degree comfortably ensconced within a learning community requires presenting a variety of options. Programmatically more and more students can become part of assorted cohort models folded into schedules over many semesters.

*Expanding Horizons*

In a survey with 136 responses, 70% of University of South Florida's Masters degree seeking students indicated that they intend to seek administrative assignments within the district where they are presently employed. Further, 20% of our students have three or less years of teaching experience. When limited encounters with school and district settings are coupled with relatively few years of teaching experience, during a time of widespread administrative vacancies, the potential exists that could potentially provide schools with very young and inexperienced leaders.

This worst case combination is not unfamiliar in many parts of the country, especially in rapidly growing urban areas. In our national survey of 25 randomly selected educational leadership programs, faculty report that 17% of their students have less than three years of teaching experience, about 48% receive an administrative job within one year of finishing the program, and 73% remain employed in the same school district after they graduate (Bruner, Greenlee, & Hill, 2006).

Because of these factors, educational leadership programs are challenged to find ways to expand students' horizons beyond their limited school experiences. A very young student complained that our program neglected to train him to complete bus referral forms for his district. We carefully explained that we felt responsible to help him find ways to analyze causes of problems and to develop solutions, policies, and procedures so that there were fewer bus referrals. Stretching students' visions is essential.

Expanding horizons largely rests with the quality of the curriculum students' experience. When program content based on national standards like NCATE and ELLC is mapped through the program of study, students receive a full spectrum of basic knowledge. Considered more deeply, course content and assignments must envelope authentic work based on real world examples. Authentic content, assignments, and assessment not only engage students but also provide them with patterns of practice to replicate and problem-solving experiences to serve them later.

Beyond the course curriculum, University of South Florida Educational Leadership & Policy Studies department established Special Session evenings at four points during each semester as well as a symposium during the academic year and annual advisory board conferences. These experiences expressly expand student lenses. A Special Sessions evening involves two different presentations by local administrators about a topic they know especially well. For instance, a charter school principal will provide background about the challenges she faces in developing governance and parent involvement. Other sessions may include a principal relating his unplanned-for surprises in opening a new school, a district human resource director noting the challenges faced in hiring scores of new teachers, or a director talking about the latest innovations to keep schools safe. Practicing school and district level administrators have an opportunity to tell their stories, relate their experiences, and engage with energetic aspiring school leaders.

Special Sessions take place in schools in various school districts. At the start of each session, our prospective school leaders are asked to recount the things they have learned about the school and its culture from the parking lot to their seat in the media center, auditorium, or cafeteria. Comparing and contrasting examples they encounter helps them develop a vision of the kind of school they might like to lead in the near future. They discuss

their overall first impression of the school based on: how they are greeted; are directions provided; are rooms clean and prepared; are the facility and grounds cared for; and pleasing décor.

Our symposia invites students and faculty from throughout the College of Education to join as expert panels explore a topic or theme. Topics commonly thread educational leadership with other departments for examinations of a fast changing dimension of schools such as special education law or statewide principal shortages. The symposia serve as models of collaboration around common areas of interests for aspiring administrators and teachers.

Usually advisory boards meet annually to review program content and delivery. Looking to connect with those we serve, the department changed the advisory board from a review board to a “think tank” that engaged department faculty in discussions of current issues facing schools and districts. Listening to the school and district leaders challenged faculty to stay informed and to incorporate current topics within our program. Teacher and administrative retention was the latest theme on which practitioners and academia shared solutions and research. The “think tank” concluded with action steps districts can take and responsibilities for preparation programs to incorporate. Extracurricular activities such as Special Sessions, symposia, and think tanks are vital to provide opportunities for our students to expand their horizons, network with educators from other districts, experience new approaches to assisting teaching and learning, as well as time to think about the leadership style they are developing.

Traditionally, preparation of school administrators and their career professional development have been provided by separate entities. Universities and school districts each address a separate phase of a continuum of preparation and learning. By establishing partnering relationships between school districts and universities, it is possible to establish policies and practices that provide for sharing of resources and expertise; mentoring and support; and mechanisms for translating theory into practice. The efforts to expand our students’ experiences has benefited the department, the university, the participating school districts, and created more opportunities to work collaboratively to prepare aspiring school and district leaders.

### *Field Experiences*

Field experiences are points throughout an educational leadership program where the truest connection between theory and practice occurs. These experiences naturally support authentic curriculum and assignments. Geismar, Morris, and Lieberman (2000) argued that field experiences are the most essential component of preparation programs. Jackson and Kelly (2000) posit that innovative and exceptional programs provide students the opportunity to connect the knowledge based content with carefully designed field experiences integrated throughout the academic.

Field experiences should be integral to every course. Within our program, “critical tasks” for each course, developed by teams of faculty, provide a common group of experiences students encounter regardless of who is teaching the course. There are two “critical tasks” for each course – one academic and one field-based. Critical tasks have now been further developed into more in-depth field experiences with faculty enriching the experience and reaching for a 15 hour goal for each activity. For example, in a course on

school finance, students work with the school bookkeeper or principal to receive an overview of the school budget. They then analyze the budget priorities for the school, correlate budget items with student learning, and prepare an annotated version of the budget. Upon returning to the classroom, students assemble, compare, and synthesize their findings from the school settings. In another class, students prepare a school/community problem-based project where they analyze an educational issue that relates to racial/ethnic, social, and/or economic relations in schools. After examining the relevant research literature, incorporating demographic data, and other ground work, students interview representatives or advocates of a targeted population within their school community.

Presently, the culminating practicum experience is 125 hours and work is underway to move toward a second semester of 125 more hours. With two semesters of practicum and field experiences in each course, our program is still short of more ideal measures of 600 or more hours and full time internships found in a few elite programs (Jackson & Kelley, 2002). Though it is not where it needs to be, our practicum at this point in time is a revolutionary change from a few years ago when the practicum was an elective taken by very few students. Again, we are gradually moving toward the ideal while considering the realities of our full-time educators/part-time students. Our realities are also shared with other educational leadership programs. Our national survey of 25 randomly selected educational leadership programs revealed those faculties report 93% of their Masters students are employed as full time educators (Bruner, Greenlee, & Hill, 2006).

Beyond the quantitative attempts to expand field experiences by counting hours, the quality, depth, and breadth of experiences are major considerations. With a two semester opportunity, interns will explore their leadership abilities in more than one setting. A few students have already ventured out to enhance their practicum experiences. Three educational leadership interns completed work within a community collaborative for families and children. Field experiences in a variety of settings with larger blocks of time assist our students to expand their horizons and explore other dimensions of leadership.

Within the practicum, students are responsible to develop a project, plan the tasks involved, and measure results around an activity that in some way promotes teaching and learning. This project and other practicum activities are encouraged to be substantial chunks of experience rather than vague and happenstance events squeezed into a teacher's planning periods. Virginia Tech University's intern guidelines echo this sentiment stating, "The internship is more than accruing hours; it is achieving substantive objectives during unencumbered blocks of time. Large blocks of time are preferred to small blocks of time. Days are preferred to half days and hours" (Guidelines for interns, 2004, 20).

Extensive dialogue and a trusting relationship are necessary for school principals to relinquish responsibilities to interns and to make the schedule adjustments necessary for teachers to have large blocks of time. Whitaker, King, and Vogel (2004) examined student perceptions about their internship experience and received mixed reviews on its value. The reviews correlated with the commitment of the school supervisor. Stronger principal commitments strengthen the practicum experience for aspiring school leaders.

The entire school district must support and value the practicum as necessary to the development of its future leaders (Lashway, 2003). Extending strong university and district partnerships creates the natural place for this dialogue and understanding (Frye, O'Neil, &

Bottoms, 2006). The largest barrier to forging partnerships with districts often involves piercing the strong academic culture of autonomy (Jackson & Kelley, 2002) to be able to establish a foundation to listen, share, and exchange. Goldring and Sims (2005) developed an in-depth partnership between Peabody College and the Nashville school district. They found that the partnership required “two functions central to the cooperative stance of the partnership, establishing mutual commitment and building a shared culture” (p. 245).

#### *Finding Leaders That Mirror Our Student Population*

Educational leadership programs shifted from a long history of being white male students taught by white male faculty to, in the last short decade or two, to a majority of students being white female. The change is mirrored in school leadership demographics. Our 2006 study of 25 educational leadership programs found that faculty report that 65% of their students are female (Bruner, Greenlee, & Hill, 2006). Our department’s enrollment is slightly higher with 71% of our M. Ed. students being female.

Meanwhile, our public school student population has exploded in greater diversity. Urban districts were once the areas that experienced most of the range of language or ethnic difference. Now kindergartens in which three or four languages are spoken can be found even in remote and rural areas. As our teaching force grows slightly more diverse, educational leadership programs have the potential to prepare a pool of more diverse school leaders. However, the lack of diversity in educational leadership continues to be a critical issue. Despite the significant impact future leaders can have on the educational experiences of underrepresented students, program reformers rarely articulate an approach to increasing the diversity of the pool of school leaders.

To support diversity of educational leadership faculty and students, the program culture must include several elements. School/community/university partnerships must be healthy, continual alliances with channels in place to exchange ideas and assist in curricular design, content, and delivery. Cohorts assist groups of diverse students to find a voice, a group role, a “place at the table” more successfully. However, development of cohorts that represent the ethnic population of the school districts will not happen by chance. In fact, the first cohort recruited and selected by the largest school district in the university’s service area had few minority participants. Universities in partnership with school districts must set out to create diverse cohorts.

Similarly, administrative intern placements in diverse settings help build rapport among various communities. Purposeful appointments of educational leadership practicum students provide structured ways to create more authentic learning experiences around the issues of cultural and social justice. Diverse schools and community agency placements extend the traditional principalship definition to the larger spectrum of community development leaders and promotes understanding of diversity in substantive ways.

While expectations of school leadership to address issues of diversity and social justice have increased, educational leadership faculty continue training candidates for traditional school environments (Hale & Moorman, 2003; McCarthy, 1999) and show minimal understanding of social justice issues (Anderson, 1990). Furthermore, many aspiring educational leaders enter preparation programs with educational and social experiences that are different from the students they will serve (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

Educational leadership faculty hold some responsibility for developing school leaders who hold a social justice agenda and are prepared to forge democratic communities, attack inequitable treatment, and champion advocacy-oriented action so success of all children can become a reality. Professional development opportunities are needed to prepare them for differences in cultural and generational styles. Important dialogue must take place within the academic community regarding maintaining program rigor and demanding quality while accommodating a wider range of views, new leadership styles, and ways to deliver and communicate content.

For that reason, there has been programmatic commitment to include course work that focuses on preparing leaders who ethically promote democratic principles, social justice, equity and diversity. Issues of diversity would be dealt with in course content topics that include school financial equity; historical and social forces that shape multicultural and bilingual education; laws and policies that combat discriminatory practices; ethnic and racial issues influencing programs; social justice; and achievement gaps. Not surprisingly, even with the faculty's enhanced commitment to integrate diversity and social justice in the curriculum actual implementation has been uneven. Diversity concerns are included in courses based on individual faculty commitment and are not yet systematically integrated throughout the curriculum.

Moreover, diversity amongst our faculty is essential for developing school leadership that forges and sustains democratic learning communities and organizational culture that champions real learning for all students. Importantly, ethnic and gender diversity within our faculty promote new kinds of scholarship; provide role models and mentors for underrepresented students; and establish links to communities not often connected to higher education institutions. However, minority faculty hires must be protected from tokenism. For instance they are often overly committed to committee assignments to represent their ethnic group. As new faculty, their time must be focused on the directions that will assure their tenure and promotion to include research and publication.

Just as our educational leadership students and faculty are becoming more diverse, the vision of the focus of future school leaders is wider and more encompassing. Davis (2006) writes about urban education requiring the preparation of future school leaders as community development leaders. Broad community leadership has become more and more the responsibility of school leaders who must combine the talents and services of many agencies to serve families. The more inclusive concepts of school leaders as community development leaders again challenge educational leadership programs to assure that their program elements support nontraditional directions.

### *Continued Paths*

The purpose of this study was to examine one educational leadership program's efforts to improve preparation of aspiring administrators through the lens of unique student realities. University of South Florida's educational leadership department has been involved in building collaborative relationships, bridging theory and practice, and self-assessing to inform its continual improvement efforts. To move preparation programs toward the ideal, a complex intertwined set of circumstances must occur. The educational leadership program must have commitment and actions that reflect:

- A critical mass of faculty wanting to move forward. The champion of the movement cannot work in isolation.
- Good relationships with local school districts to allow for continuous interchange of energies, mutual needs, and ideas.
- Meaningful field experiences are essential to connect theory and practice.
- Flexibility in schedules, models of delivery, and continuous examination of course content is important and necessary for program improvement.

Above all, the development of coherent collaborations is critical for sustainable improvement. For universities and school districts to collaborate on leadership development, all parties must come to the table to share their best thinking, to learn from each other and to acknowledge their interdependency for training pre-service administrators. Young, Short and Petersen (2002) emphasize that preparation of aspiring school leaders must be approached collaboratively in order to activate the collective potential to achieve common goals. This requires both new structures and new ways of thinking and interacting. Thus, as mutual dependency increases so does shared accountability. Cambron-McCabe and Cunningham (2002) caution that the challenge to all groups represented is to come together to advocate the common goals, interdependency, and shared accountability and not just to protect vested interests and positions.

Dialogue between USF and surrounding school districts, like all communications, depends on the players at the table. Coupled with changing personnel at the university and in the school district, it is always evolving and changing. School and district personnel have been very cooperative in volunteering for special sessions and symposiums and generous in hosting them in their schools. In turn, departmental efforts to establish the district partnership model, utilizing the advisory board as a think tank instead of a rubber stamp for program approval, and seeking and acting upon input from constituents demonstrates our commitment to revise and redesign our curriculum content to produce quality entry-level administrators. These relationships are being built slowly over time in both formal and informal networks. Our journey is like others who are always on the road to continued improvement.

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