Are Performance-Based Leadership Preparation Programs Effective? The Student Perspective*

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Abstract

Perhaps for valid reasons, the nation's educational leadership preparation programs are under scrutiny. The Wallace Foundation has written several reports, as has the Southern Regional Education Board, which make specific recommendations to reinvent traditional educational leadership programs. In response, the state of Georgia discontinued all traditional educational leadership certification programs and required universities to redesign a course of study which included a job-embedded, performance-based residency component as core. This case study details the student perspective during the first 18 months of implementation of a new performance-based Educational Specialist Degree in educational leadership at the University of West Georgia (UWG). The study employs a methodology that is mainly qualitative and includes a primary research question as to whether a performance-based leadership program that is 67% residency-based is appropriate and effective. The study includes a literature review, specific (UWG) program details, two former students' perspectives, findings, conclusions and recommendations.

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2 Sumario en espanol

Quizás para razones válidas, los programas educativos de preparación de liderazgo de nación están bajo averiguación. La Foundacion de Wallace ha escrito varios informes, como tiene la Tabla Regional del sur de la Educación, que hace recomendaciones específicas reinventar programas educativos tradicionales de liderazgo. En la respuesta, el estado de Georgia discontinuó todos los programas educativos tradicionales de certificación de liderazgo y universidades necesarias para volver a diseñar un estudios que incluyeron un trabajo-empotrado, componente de residencia de desempeño-basó como centro. Este caso detalla la perspectiva de estudiante durante los primeros 18 meses de implementación de un nuevo desempeño-basó Grado Educativo de Especialista en el liderazgo educativo en la Universidad de West Georgia (UWG). El estudio emplea una metodología que es principalmente cualitativa e incluye una pregunta primaria de investigación en cuanto a si un programa de liderazgo de desempeño-basó que es 67% residencia-basado es apropiado y efectivo. El estudio incluye una revisión de la literatura, específico (UWG) detalles de programa, las perspectivas de dos estudiantes anteriores, las conclusiones, las conclusiones y las recomendaciones.

NOTE: Esta es una traducción por computadora de la página web original. Se suministra como información general y no debe considerarse completa ni exacta.

3 Introduction and Review of the Literature

In an effort to adequately prepare leaders for the challenges presented in twenty-first century schools, universities are responding to state and national mandates for redesigned, standards-based, job-embedded learning (Fullan, 2009; Herbert, 2009). Such programs require students to spend at least a third of their time in field placements, doing the work of educational leaders and engaging in job embedded work, rather than the research-based thesis-style academia of previous generations. It is hoped that these performance-based programs, which follow the medical model, will develop skilled practitioners who are well versed in the practical work of educational leaders. The importance of leadership preparation is evident, as research holds school leadership second only to classroom teaching in its impact on student achievement (Leithwood, Seashore-Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Forty-six states have adopted leadership standards and many are pressing universities to re-design leadership preparation programs. Nearly seven in ten principals reported that leadership development at universities is "out of touch with the realities of what it takes to run today's school districts" (Wallace Foundation, 2008, p. 6). Arthur Levine, president of Teacher's College at Columbia University noted that educational leadership programs have become "graduate credit dispensers" and that they are persistently the weakest programs in schools of education (as cited in SREB, 2006, p. 9). Researchers from the American Enterprise Institute reported that principal preparation programs lack attention to important topics like the use of data, technology, and using data to evaluate personnel (as cited in SREB, 2006). The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) (2006) reported that many leadership faculties have been more concerned about saving existing courses, the rights of faculty to determine course content, the number of internship hours (rather than their quality), and potential loss of enrollment more than they are focused on designing effective programs (SREB, 2006, p. 9).

[1] http://www.ncpeapublications.org

A recent Wallace Foundation report (2008) summarized the weaknesses in many university programs, including: admissions standards that allow self-selection without displaying potential; curricula and knowledge that do not adequately take into account the needs of schools, districts, and students; weak connections between theory and practice; faculty who have little experience as leaders; and shallow or poorly designed internships and field-based experiences that are not sufficiently connected to the rest of the program (p. 4). The report holds that exemplary programs' curricula tend to be more tightly focused on instructional improvement and transformational leadership than traditional programs. Exemplary programs also integrate course work and field work, using case study method, journaling, and problem-based learning to continuously explore the connection between theory and practice. SREB (2007) also cited a gap between what is taught (law, finance, teacher evaluation) and what is really needed to improve academic programs. Darling Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, and Weeks (2006) reported that the curriculum often missed important topics related to effective teaching and learning and the design of instruction.

Generally, studies of leadership development programs have found little evidence of job-embedded or performance-based learning, but recent studies identified eight programs that showed clear evidence of job-embedded learning (Darling-Hammond, Orphanos, LaPointe, & Weeks, 2006; Darling-Hammond, Meyerson, LaPointe, & Orr, 2009). These studies found that all effective programs (1) recruited teachers, leaders and faculty members who were focused on transforming leadership and learning, (2) had strong partnership agreements between the universities and school districts, (3) included a curriculum that combined theory with practice, (4) included coaching models that included skilled supervision in field-based internships, (5) had a standards-based curriculum that included the management of change, development of the organization, and instructional leadership, (6) combined coursework and field-based experiences that were developed such that participants learned in a logical manner from faculty instructors and leaders in the field. The experiences included case studies, problem-based learning, and assignments that required students to practice and deliver learning on-the-job. Additionally, effective programs also organized participants into cohorts that allowed for networking, support and collaboration, and emphasized clear values about leadership.

The Wallace Foundation Study *Developing District Leaders* (2010) also reported the importance of strong partnerships between the university and school district. In fact, some school districts viewed themselves as "consumers" with choices and options that lead to true "collaborator status" with universities (Wallace Foundation, 2010, p. 5). Options increase the likelihood that leadership preparation programs will be tailored to the needs of the district. Important also is the nature of the relationship with the university. Tightly coupled partnerships are more conducive to system-wide change (improvement) than those that are loosely coupled. Other important elements of the Wallace Report (2010) include the value of applied learning experiences, balancing theory and practice, and improving alignment of leadership preparation programs to district reforms.

The Wallace Report (2010) also provided direction regarding course content useful for leadership preparation programs. Instructional leadership, change leadership, and district operations and policies were consistent throughout the exemplary leadership programs. The length of the internship is also vital, with the study recommending at least one year.

Darling-Hammond et al (2006) further noted a number of state policies that positively impacted the professional development and preparation of school leaders. These included: (1) adopting and incorporating the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards into the development, approval, and monitoring of certification programs, (2) conducting program reviews and principal assessments that meet rigorous standards, (3) creating assessments for principal licensure based on ISLLC standards, (4) requiring administrative internships under the supervision of experienced principals, and (5) supporting new principals for three years with focused professional development planned specifically for new principals.

Fullan (2009) noted that all exemplary programs were successful because the participants were placed in schools that had proven success in student achievement over a three-year period. In addition, they had cultures of collaboration, focused on data and effective instructional practices, engaged in appropriate networking, and showed evidence of distributive leadership. While these programs developed participants' skills to lead schools similar to those in which they had their internship, graduates may not have been prepared to lead in less than exemplary school settings. Fullan argued that leadership development programs should

focus more on improving the organization and its culture, rather than the individual. He distinguished between job-embedded development of the individual and organizational development, and made the argument that effective leadership development programs should focus on both.

Most recent literature espouses action for leadership development not as a singular process but as part of whole-system reform. This systemic change and improvement involves working with the entire teaching profession. It includes capacity building, selecting smaller numbers of priorities, analyzing data, disseminating effective practice techniques using comprehensive intervention strategies that are not punitive, and providing the funding to make these changes possible. Large scale instructional improvement should involve focused and collaborative state, district, and school-based initiatives (Fullan, 2009; Louis, et al., 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2006, 2009). This reform must involve teachers, in classroom observations and instructional rounds, with the focus on student work and success. District personnel must collaboratively, and with purpose, set the standards for classroom behaviors such as analyzing and discussing student work, and organize personnel into professional learning communities (City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; DuFour & Eaker, 1998).

A 2009 report produced by The Center for the Future of Teaching and Learning noted that states were moving toward the adoption on the ISLLC standards for school leaders. Programs which adopted these standards outline areas of proficiency including developing and communicating a vision of learning, setting goals, promoting an effective instructional program and school culture, providing a safe learning environment, responding to diverse settings and needs of families, acting in an ethical manner, as well as understanding the social, economical, and cultural aspects of the school leader's responsibility. These standards require that leaders have competencies in the areas of instructional leadership, organizational development, and competent use of data. The report cites states such as California that have moved to a credentialing system that is tiered wherein the novice administrator is issued an initial pre-service temporary certificate, typically valid for five years. Upon completion of successful in-service performance-based work, the administrator is issued a clear credential which is renewed every five years. This is the model that has been adopted in Georgia (Georgia PSC Rule 505-2-.300) and which is the subject of this case study.

4 Description of the University of West Georgia Leadership Program

In response to changing certification requirements in the state of Georgia, the University of West Georgia (UWG) redesigned its leadership preparation program to become a performance-based Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree based on the aforementioned ISLLC standards which were allocated across fourteen performance areas. The degree program relies upon cohort arrangements and partnership agreements with local districts or educational agencies that specify particular areas of support, recommendations of students, and assurances that the students serve in qualifying leadership positions in their schools and or districts. Each student is assigned a Beginning Leader Support Team (BLST) made up of the student, a performance coach who is generally an employee of the university, a sponsor who is the student's supervisor, and the university professor who serves as the leader of the cohort of students. All members of the BLST meet with and observe students multiple times in their work settings. Students develop individual Induction Plans aligned to the fourteen performance areas which outline the experiences the students will implement to meet or exceed the standards. Students develop a number of artifacts, including authentic video, which serve, in part, to demonstrate proficiency. This Induction Plan is developed in conjunction with the BLST after a comprehensive pre-assessment of the students' knowledge and skills. The pre-assessment includes a rating of student dispositions.

The degree program is one year in duration. Students who enter the program may have a previous degree in educational leadership and hold clear certification, or may enter the program with provisional certification and little or no course work in leadership. Those in the latter category are generally required to complete two traditional classes in educational leadership as prerequisites. Once the cohort begins work on the actual Ed.S., they move, as a group, through the program under the facilitation of one professor who is responsible for leading the BLST, guiding the development and approval of the Induction Plans, overseeing the residency-based portion of the degree which makes up 18 of the minimum 27 required semester hours, or 67% of the program, and facilitating a series of day-long topical seminars. The additional nine hours involve

three traditional leadership classes, although these may be fully or partially online. The degree relies upon the use of technology and distance learning for seminars, classes, discussion boards, and maintenance of the students' portfolios. Students are assessed from the pre-assessment through final assessment on the Georgia Department of Education's *Leader Keys (2009)*, a comprehensive leader evaluation instrument that is aligned to the 14 program standards, and includes detailed rubrics which outline four levels of performance ranging from not evident to exemplary. Successful completion of the program is defined by on-the-job demonstration of at least the third level (proficient) on a selected number of *Leader Keys*. In addition the degree has two tracks: one for students who serve in school-level positions and one for those in district-level jobs. Due to the intense nature of the leadership experiences and an insistence on authentic work, only students who hold leadership positions, as determined by their district and who are released from classroom teaching responsibilities at least half the day, are eligible for admission.

5 Research Methods

5.1 Overview

The primary research question is whether curriculum that is 67% performance-based is appropriate or too much for a specialist degree? In other words, does the program overemphasize practical performance learning in the field, such that content (i.e., graduate academic learning and theory) is inordinately minimized? This case study explores the question primarily from the perspective of the student participants. Supporting research questions are as follows:

- In what ways did the Beginning Leader Support Team (BLST) assist student learning?
- Did the program have sufficient course content, particularly for students who had no previous coursework in educational leadership?
- Did students' dispositions change over the course of the program? Did students view attention to their disposition development as an important part of the program?
- Were intended learning outcomes for the 14 field experience areas achieved?
- Which aspects and components of the program provided the most learning? (Residency courses, content courses, seminars, among others)
- Which instructional methodologies provided the best opportunity for learning?
- How does a residency-based program compare to traditional course-driven degree programs?

Due to the uniqueness of the UWG program and the limitations of the case study method, readers are cautioned regarding the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, each of the researchers is a participant in the program bringing their own subjectivity. Researchers have chosen the case study method, however, because of its appropriateness to study a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life context (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003). The context of the UWG program is highly pertinent to the phenomenon of study.

5.2 Participants

The first cohorts of students began the newly designed Ed.S. in the summer of 2009 and completed the degree in the spring of 2010. At the end of the spring semester, student focus groups and interviews were held to receive student feedback on their experiences. Six months following completion of the program, two students were selected to write their personal reflections. The selection was stratified random, with one selected from those who entered the program with a prior degree in leadership, and one who had no previous leadership studies. The two students were encouraged to include information which they believed was significant, incorporating both positives and areas for program improvement.

Participants included 60 students clustered into four cohorts and ten coaches who worked one-on-one with candidates in the field. Students were practicing educators who were employed in leadership positions in their school systems and were selected by their districts to participate. School systems established written partnerships with the university before students entered the program.

The four cohorts represented a continuum of partnership arrangements with UWG. Two cohorts functioned as single school district partnerships, which permitted UWG personnel to tailor program outcomes to meet the specific needs of each district. The third cohort was a partnership between the university and two school districts, and the fourth was a partnership between the university and a regional educational service center. Students in this fourth cohort worked in five different school districts.

Four university faculty members also participated in this case study.

5.3 Collection of Data

Data were collected through focus groups, interviews, surveys, reflective journaling, direct observation, participant observation, and document reviews to include students' records (e.g., admission test scores, course grades; baseline, midpoint, and exit assessments). Researchers facilitated several focus groups and conducted structured interviews of cohort groups and Performance Coaches. Focus groups and interview participants included students, coaches working in the program, former students, and university faculty members working in the program. Researchers developed field notes and audio-taped the sessions. Audio tapes were transcribed verbatim for analysis. Researchers agreed to a common protocol for focus groups and interviews which helped to increase reliability and in developing a common line of inquiry. Researchers rotated the data collection process, meaning that no professor interviewed the cohort group or members that he/she was assigned to. In order to help to ensure trustworthiness in data, researchers used multiple data, multiple collection methods, and multiple researchers.

The data collection methods were employed primarily at the end of the spring semester 2010, when the first group of students was completing their course of study. The former student narratives were completed in fall of 2010.

5.4 Analysis of Data

Researchers carefully triangulated data sources, as information was gathered from students, coaches, former students, and university faculty members. Methods included document reviews, analysis of student and coach surveys, transcript reviews of student interviews, discussion of written student narratives, and debriefing sessions with university faculty. Researchers developed a matrix of categories and placed evidence within such categories. Researchers developed theoretical explanations for the categorical placements, as well as considering rival explanations. Researchers triangulated by collaboration processes and worked toward consensus regarding categorical placements, explanations, and whether to accept alternative explanations (theory triangulation). Researchers also triangulated by using multiple evaluators. As noted above, researchers collected and analyzed data from students who were not assigned to them as advisees. Researchers also completed member verification checks to ensure that participant ideas were accurately represented.

The analysis was done near or at the end of the spring semester 2010, when the first group of students was completing its course of study. The former student narratives were added to the matrix in fall of 2010.

6 Findings

For reporting purposes, the focus group discussion themes were summarized into responses that fit within the following six broad questions:

1. What components and methodologies of the performance-based Educational Specialist (Ed.S.) degree provided the greatest learning?
2. What were the most challenging aspects of the Ed.S. program and what are your recommendations for improvement?
3. To what extent do you feel proficient in the 14 critical leadership areas around which this degree is designed?
4. How were you supported by the members of the Beginning Leader Support Team (BLST) and your peers?

5. How has the emphasis on dispositions influenced your development as a leader?
6. How would you compare a traditional master's degree program with this Ed.S. performance-based program?

With regard to question one, students were almost unanimous in their opinions that the performance-based, job-embedded learning was superior to traditional classroom learning, although they also valued the traditional classes which were included in the program of study. They rated the knowledge and skills of their professors, as well as the assessment tool (*Leader Keys*) as positive program attributes. The performance-based program seemed to be ideal for school-level administrators such as principals and assistant principals, more than highly specialized leadership positions since these roles tend to interact more with the 14 program strands. Students placed very high value on the cohort group configuration in terms of peer interaction and support. Many cited this as a critical attribute of the experience. They liked standard templates for Induction Plans and most felt that a time period longer than six weeks was needed to develop the Induction Plan.

Students spoke highly of the methodologies used in the program. These included the online learning and flexibility that it provided, discussion boards and the opportunity to have high level, reflective interactions with peers. In addition, they cited the value of the summer seminars, use of data across performance areas, onsite visits by professors, and clear expectations for the traditional courses which were included in the program. In one single-district cohort, university personnel and central-office staff worked collaboratively to incorporate a number of professional development seminars and experiences into each student's Induction Plan.

In discussing issues related to question two and the challenges of the program, students indicated that the breadth of the required Induction Plans was overwhelming at times, with 14 field experience areas and required artifacts in each one. The lack of sample work demonstrating exemplary, acceptable, and unacceptable artifacts made it difficult for them to know the expected standard of performance. They also wanted greater flexibility to change Induction Plans throughout the school year, as more information became available or circumstances changed in their job environments. They felt that the Induction Plans should be more closely linked to the *Leader Keys*. The sequencing of seminars was, at times problematic, since students had to develop Induction Plans around a topic that may have not been addressed at the time that the plans were due. Students indicated that the coach and the sponsor did not always provide the student with consistent information which caused confusion and frustration. They also had concerns about the lack of distinction between the school and district program tracks, as elaborated upon in the next section. A few students suggested a lengthier period of time, beyond three semesters, may be needed for some participants to complete the degree.

In discussion question three above, students were asked if they felt proficient in all 14 leadership areas in which they were required to demonstrate proficiency. A common observation was that the Ed.S. program is best suited for the principal or assistant principal, while other building-level leadership positions such as instructional coaches were more challenged to find opportunities to engage in performance areas that were outside their jobs. Similar sentiments were expressed by those individuals who were in the district-level track of the program. Generally, it was difficult for them to include in their plans performance areas such as managing operations, school safety, human resources, and finance, because their jobs did not include opportunities to interact with these areas. Many felt that they had engaged in professional development and instructional arenas within their work so they felt more competent in these strands. Those students who held leadership degrees and/or certification prior to enrollment in the Ed.S. degree tended to feel more proficient in all areas but, even among these, finance was cited as an area of further study. Students suggested additional visits by professors, sponsors working more closely with the *Leader Keys* to help students develop Induction Plans, and specific suggestions by coaches as areas for improvement. The required courses, including *School Law*, *Ethics*, and *Diversity* were cited as providing valuable information and skills. Given all the challenges, most students felt that they were exposed to all 14 areas and were proficient in most.

Question four examined the role of the Beginning Leader Support Team (BLST) which includes the Performance Coach, sponsor (generally candidate's immediate supervisor), university professor, and the

student. In addition, students were asked to discuss the role their peers and others played in providing support as they progressed through the Ed.S. degree.

Generally, the professors were seen as supportive, knowledgeable professionals who provided feedback and encouraged students. Students would have liked to have had more specific feedback and to have additional onsite visits from their professors. Students also indicated professors would have been better equipped to help with individual induction plans if they had been more familiar with the students' work responsibilities early in the program. Student job descriptions could have provided this information.

In some cases the Performance Coach was seen as the most critical person on the BLST. In these cases, the coach consistently contacted the students and engaged in conversations and provided resources. Often the Performance Coach acted as a cheerleader and encouraged the student. Students noted that, at times, there appeared to be a lack of communication among Performance Coaches, sponsors, and the professor and that additional training for BLST members may be beneficial.

Students generally felt supported by their sponsors as they could go to the sponsor if need be, but the sponsors did not actively reach out with regard to helping create or implement the Induction Plan. Many also indicated that their sponsors did not understand or know the *Leader Keys*.

Students indicated that their peers within the cohorts gave them a good opportunity to network, get suggestions from others, and be exposed to different roles, levels, and job responsibilities. They were positive regarding the interaction, discussion, and personal relationships that they developed with their cohort peers. In a few cases, students relied on other administrators at their sites rather than the designated sponsor for assistance and support. They also indicated that exposure and interaction with professors who taught the additional courses in the program gave them further support and valuable learning experiences.

Question five explored the emphasis on dispositions which was included in the program. Course sequencing caused this to occur either first or second semester, depending on the cohort. Students indicated that this should have been done first semester with all cohorts. There was some concern that they were being graded by others in this area, but many stated that they benefited from rating themselves and personally reflecting on their own ratings. Students indicated that there was benefit in discussing the dispositions in class and that some dispositions, such as communication skills, can be learned and acquired. Perhaps tending to these behaviors may help identify individual areas of growth.

For question six, students were asked to compare the performance-based Ed.S. program to the traditional master's degree. It should be noted that all students hold a master's degree and about half of these hold their master's degree in the area of educational leadership. Overall, students felt that the performance-based degree was superior to their traditional programs. The performance-based nature of the program allowed them to engage in experiences that prepared them to be educational leaders. They felt that the program was student-focused and was structured such that it engaged the students in a high-level process of reflection. Some students felt that there should have been greater emphasis on the *Leader Keys*. Several stated that some traditional courses, which were required for this degree, such as *School Law, Ethics*, and *Diversity* were important, needed components of the program.

7 Narratives from Two Former Students

7.1 Narrative 1: Student Reflection on the Performance-Based Ed.S.

Education was not my first career choice. In fact, I went to college believing that I would one day work for NASA and be among the handful of people to journey into outerspace. However, my matriculation through undergrad led to soul searching that eventually dropped me right at Education's doorstep. My introduction to the field was through a summer program in Andover for aspiring minority educators. While I was still unsure about my career path at the onset of the program, my experience quickly awakened a skill set that I had not explored prior to this setting. It was clear that teaching was a gift that I could offer the world.

True to form, I also "found" my way into educational leadership through a non-direct route. I had been teaching high school Economics in a suburban Atlanta school district. After working on the testing team for about a year and a half, an Assistant Principal position opened. It happened to have also been the Testing

Coordinator position. While I had not previously aspired to school leadership, as teacher leader on the testing team, it seemed like a natural fit. I was fortunate because only months prior to this turn of events, Georgia enacted changes to its leader preparation program which opened the door to successfully pass the GACE and be eligible for a leadership position.

I passed the GACE, applied for, and was chosen to be the Assistant Principal. The school has about 2,100 students, an International Baccalaureate program, is 65% free and reduced lunch, 60% African American, 35% Caucasian, and 5% Latino/Asian. The school is housed in six buildings and 22 trailers and sits on a major street in the city. Given my lack of experience in educational leadership and the complexity of offerings and demographics at this school, I decided to immediately pursue the Performance-Based Ed.S. at the University of West Georgia. While I was clearly qualified to hold the position from a day-to-day working aspect, there was a plethora of theoretical knowledge that I lacked having not studied leadership prior to this program (I hold a M.S. Ed. in Education and Social Policy and a B.A. in Economics.)

Deciding to start the program in my first year as an Assistant Principal had its advantages and disadvantages. One of the major advantages was that I had complete access to the school in a way that I would not have had were I still in the classroom. The required field experiences were quite organic for me because they fell squarely within the realm of "normal" duties for a school leader. Likewise, when the field experience did not fit into my everyday duties and responsibilities, I had the latitude to create an experience that was not simply manufactured for the performance-based program, but also served a real need in the school.

On the other hand, my learning curve as a building leader was really steep. I had to "prove" myself as a leader which required quite a bit of extra time and effort – as it would of any new leader. The sheer time factor to successfully be a full-time student and a new building leader was overwhelming. There were many nights, sitting in class, that I debated quitting the program. I wanted to be a scholarly student and a phenomenal Assistant Principal but felt that I was missing the mark on both ends. It was humbling at best and frustrating at worst.

Time factor aside, the job-embedded nature of the performance-based program was beneficial beyond measure. I approached my work in a much more thoughtful and theoretical manner. Instead of aimlessly walking through a field experience, I carefully created plans and thought through potential obstacles as well as viable course-corrections. This disciplined approach leadership has proved invaluable, even in this year beyond the program.

The one most notable down-side was the vague nature of the program. Each student reported to three different people – professor, supervisor and coach. While each of these people was helpful in guiding the field experiences, it also created a bit of confusion because their personal interpretations of what was suitable for each field experience did not always match. Having so many "bosses" seemed bureaucratic and somewhat redundant. I was particularly fond of each member of my Beginning Leader Support Team (BLST) however, the lines between the coach and professor were often blurred.

Since graduating from the program, I have been promoted to Assistant Principal of Curriculum and Instruction at the same school. More than any concrete field experience, the greatest benefit from the program is my ability to confidently analyze situations and make decisions as a building leader. By matriculating through the cohort model, I have established a network of other leaders, within my county, whom I trust and on whom I am able to rely. Although I never experienced a traditional leader preparation program, the real-time, job embedded nature of the field experiences cannot be duplicated by reading a book or simply conducting observations. Before the performance-based program, I was a person who knew how to lead, since completing the program I am now a proven leader.

7.2 Narrative 2: Student Reflection on Performance-Based Ed.S.

Reflecting on the Specialist (PL-6; Performance Leadership) program that I completed this past year at the University of West Georgia, I have learned much from this program and feel more prepared for a leadership role. I have worked at a high school in Douglasville, Georgia for the last nine years. For five of those years I taught social studies at all levels, and for the past four years I have been a Graduation Coach, working with at-risk students through our alternative programs. The school is in a suburban area west of Atlanta and

currently has about 1,800 students. Of those 1,800 students 75% are African-American, 22% are Caucasian, 1% are Hispanic, and about 2% are multiracial. About 60% of our students qualify for free and reduced lunch.

For the last four years I have been working toward my Master's and Specialist degrees in educational leadership at the University of West Georgia. When I entered the Specialist (PL-6) program, I had already completed a traditional theory-based Master's program in educational leadership and held an L-5 certificate. I believe that experience has helped me to have a better perspective on comparing these two very different programs.

Although I learned a great deal from my Master's program, the knowledge that I obtained was almost all in theory and very little in practice. I have always believed it ineffective to teach someone about leadership theory and practice for a couple of years, certify them, and then say that the person is ready to step into an administrative role straight from the classroom. The PL-6 program that I completed was really the opposite. The program had nine semester hours of theory-based course work and 18 hours of job-embedded course work. I received core area courses that I needed in ethics, human resources, law, and finance, but the other 18 hours were on-the-job training.

In this program, the University of West Georgia did a good job of breaking down the program into a series of field experiences. These experiences are divided into areas that a student would receive in theory-based instruction in a traditional program. The best part of the program was that I had some freedom to pick and develop the experiences that I would complete with the help of my sponsor (building principal). This allowed me to focus more on areas that I felt deficient, while focusing less on areas that I was already proficient. The level of support received is crucial to success in the program. I was fortunate to have a principal who was very supportive of the program and it helped tremendously in the developing and completing of the field experiences. This program allows for individualized and differentiated learning, based on the students' current ability level and the real needs of the school.

The most challenging part of the program was changing my mindset from that of a traditional program. I already had three college degrees before entering this program and so theory-based programs were embedded in my mind. A person must really be able to be flexible and open-minded to be successful in this program if he or she comes from a traditional theory-based educational background. In the PL-6 program your field experiences do not always take you where you expect. There is no clear end when you begin the experience. However, along the way each field experience offers great learning opportunities and very often these experiences branch out into new areas of learning and experience.

Overall, this was the best degree program that I have taken part in. Not everyone enters a program with the same knowledge base and this program allows you to customize your learning in a way that you touch on your proficient levels, while focusing intently on your deficient areas. Upon completing this program I know that I could step immediately into an administrative position in a high school and be much more ready for the task than I was after completing a theory-based leadership program.

7.3 Discussion of Student Narratives

Both student case studies offer a similar perspective on the impact of the performance-based program to their development. Both students articulated the benefit of a real, genuine, and authentic learning experience rather than a contrived classroom activity. Because the UWG program relies so heavily on the student's work-site context and the subsequent induction plan, both students stressed the value of applying theory directly to their work context. One student mentioned that because the program involves a support team which consists of several members, clear communication and coordination are sometimes problematic. These findings are consistent with student interviews and focus groups. Both students strongly endorsed the performance-based program as superior to a traditional one.

8 Conclusions

This case study has provided invaluable information on perceptions of the UWG program, including strengths, weaknesses, depth of content, and skill development. While the focus of this case study is from students, feedback from Performances Coaches, sponsors and the lead professors for each cohort was triangulated before recommendations for change were made. Several of the forthcoming recommendations were implemented during 2010-11, the second year of implementation and others are scheduled for the 2011-12 academic year.

One conclusion is that partnership agreements among the university and local school districts should continue since they allow for collaborative planning and outline the responsibilities of each entity. The partnerships provide a mechanism for including job-embedded experiences that (1) meet the standards adopted by the university, and (2) are tailored to the needs of the district. The partnership agreements in this study stipulated that students could not self-select but must have been recommended by their districts. This recommendation is consistent with the research on the need for strong partnerships in order to develop exemplary leaders (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; Wallace Foundation, 2010).

More content seminars should be included at the beginning of the program to better equip students in writing effective Induction Plans. Since these plans must be written during the first semester to allow students to participate in a performance-based program, most of the content-rich seminars should occur during the same time. Students who entered the program without previous leadership classes felt a great urgency to have more content at the beginning. As the focus groups and two student narratives substantiate, students with provisional certificates felt that they had a "greater learning curve" at the beginning. More content knowledge in the areas of managing operations, school finance, and human resources is needed for the UWG program. These seemed to be areas of priority, even for students who had previously studied these disciplines. Some students had difficulties engaging in performance-based experiences in many of these areas because they were not even distantly related to their job responsibilities, especially positions such as instructional supervisors or coaches. Some content areas such as understanding the political environment, it might be argued, do not lend themselves to an intentional job-embedded experience. It appears that, while it is important to have leadership preparation programs that adequately combine course content with job experiences as found by Darling-Hammond et. al (2009), the timing of the courses in the program of studies is important. In a highly individualized, job-embedded program in which individual plans are developed, students need more content classes early to give them an adequate amount of knowledge and skill to develop sufficient plans.

Distinct tracks and criteria should be developed for school-based and district-office students. Opportunities must be created for highly specialized school-based and central office staff to engage in performance-based learning in the required areas that do not intersect with their areas of responsibility. Both strands should include studies and practice in instructional supervision, change, policy, and district operations as indicated in the Wallace Report (2010).

Another recommendation is to organize Induction Plans around themes so that students have the opportunity to address overlapping standards. This may involve three or four Induction Plans, rather than 14. The number of artifacts should be manageable and provide substantive evidence of performance. Establish a template for the plan and provide students with samples of emerging, proficient and exemplary work. These plans should be clearly linked to the assessment tool, *The Leader Keys*. Allocate a longer period of time for the development of plans, such as a six to eight week period, and allow flexibility in making changes as circumstances may dictate during the year. Induction plans should continue to be aligned to ISLLC standards, as this positively impacts the preparation of school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2006).

Cohort professors should provide training for sponsors and Performance Coaches so that there are clear, common understandings of the performance-based program and the roles and responsibilities of the BLST. Topics should include training on *The Leader Keys*. It was evident in the focus groups and at least one of the narratives that there was sometimes a lack of clarity in the expectations from different members of the BLST. Trained, skilled mentors are key elements in many successful leadership preparation programs (Darling-Hammond, et al., 2009; SREB, 2007). The UWG has, and should continue to, recruit faculty who have K-12 administrative and practical leadership experience to oversee the preparation program. Further

the UWG organization of cohorts that emphasize collaboration and networking, and the use of case studies, journaling, written reflections and problem-based learning reflect the findings research findings on best practices (Darling-Hammond et al., 2006, 2009; Wallace Report, 2008).

This research suggests that ways to provide additional time for students who cannot complete the program in the prescribed period of time should be examined. Additionally, the UWG should seek avenues to allow classroom teachers in the program since many teachers engage in leadership responsibilities and would benefit from the knowledge and skills that the degree promotes. The job-embedded, three-semester residency appears to be a particular strength of the UWG program in that it is authentic work and the job of the participants. Both student narratives strongly made this point. Recommendations from the literature range from a 6 month to one year internship (SREB, 2007; Wallace Report, 2010.)

Implement a consistent time period for assessment and discussion of dispositions across all cohorts. This should occur early in the first semester of the program. In fact, this change was implemented with the cohorts that began in summer 2010.

A final recommendation is to continue to offer and refine the performance-based degree program in educational leadership. Throughout the data triangulation process, there was an overwhelming agreement that the job-embedded, performance-based and standards-driven program created more meaningful learning experiences than previous traditional degree programs. In addition, continued research and evaluation should occur such that data is collected from students, coaches, sponsors and professors in a longitudinal manner to ensure that the standards are met and the implementation of the degree reflects the data from current research. To date and according to program participants, the UWG educational leadership program is effective and the performance- based aspect is considered one of the strongest components.

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