

RESEARCH UTILIZATION BRIEFS:

THE IMPORTANCE OF PROGRAM PURPOSE AND COHERENCE



UNIVERSITY COUNCIL FOR EDUCATIONAL ADMINISTRATION

MAY 2010

In their research on effective leadership preparation, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, and Cohen (2007) found that “how principals are initially prepared and subsequently supported by their districts is significantly associated with how they lead and what kind of school improvement gains they achieve” (p. 62). Specifically, they identified key program features associated with the preparation of strong educational leaders. According to this research, high quality leadership preparation programs likely have the following attributes:

- Clear focus and clarified values about leadership and learning;
- Rigorous selection that addresses prior leadership experience and initial leadership aspirations and that gives priority to underserved groups, particularly ethnic minorities;
- Standards-based content and internship experiences;
- Active, student-centered instructional practices;
- Supportive organizational structures to facilitate retention and engagement;
- Coherent, challenging, and reflective content and experiences; and
- Appropriately qualified faculty.

PROGRAM PURPOSE

Among the central features of effective preparation programs is “a clear sense of purpose for student learning” that is coherently woven through program goals, learning activities, and assessments (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 42). Importantly, the programs examined by Darling-Hammond et al., which qualified as highly effective, had articulated program purposes and exemplified high levels of program coherence. Moreover, graduates of the exemplary leadership programs rated their programs highly for comprehensiveness and

coherence. As a participant in the Bank Street Institute stated,

I think the program is structured in a way that makes you think critically. You are constantly connecting what you learned in the past to the real world. I think that is important. A lot of programs are designed to just get through, and at the end you get a masters or a certificate. But this program truly prepares you to become an effective leader. (as cited in Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 37)

This finding makes a great deal of sense and is supported by research on adult learning indicating that programs with well-defined and well-integrated theories of action for learning are more likely to promote adult learning (Kaagan, 1998). Leveraging this research, recent program improvement initiatives have focused much more closely on program purpose (Orr & Pounder, 2007). That is, program faculty members have dedicated more energy to designing programs specifically to develop particular kinds of leaders for certain types of contexts. This contrasts to conventional programs, which tend to be designed around more generic forms of leadership.

PROGRAMS WITH A PURPOSE

The majority of programs engaged in the Urban Leadership Development Program have very distinctive purposes articulated for the preparation of urban leaders, and they have begun to reexamine and revise their programs’ content, pedagogy, and other program features to better align to the positions their students take after graduation (Young, in press). For example, Temple University’s Democratic Ethical Educational Leaders (New DEEL) program for urban principals has redesigned the preparation experiences, including the content, practical

experiences, and internship, around democratic and ethical educational leadership. New York University redesigned its program around leadership and advocacy. Master's students work on problems of practice as a group, within educational and community contexts.

Program faculty at The University of Texas redesigned their program to produce educational leaders who can support social justice in their schools. Specifically, they used collaborations with major urban districts in the state to collaboratively redesign a more coherent program around district needs and the tenets of social justice leadership. Similarly, with the support of a Wallace Foundation grant, New Mexico State University designed a principalship program for urban border school leaders. All aspects of the program, from content to pedagogy, were redesigned to ensure that leaders were prepared to work effectively within the border context.

HOW PURPOSE MATTERS

According to Darling-Hammond et al. (2007), effective preparation programs have explicit program purposes; however, having a purpose in and of itself is not enough. Indeed, the purpose of the program must be coherently embedded in the program. It must be articulated in program descriptions, vision statements, the curriculum, and assessments.

Using the work of the Urban Leadership Development Program as an illustration, participants articulated that the purpose of any urban leadership program should focus on developing the intellectual performance and moral capacity of leaders who will be serving in urban schools and districts and on developing leaders who can work collaboratively in their roles as leader, teacher, researcher, and advocate. Once articulated, participants then considered how to coherently weave this purpose throughout program coursework, clinical experiences, and outcome measures. "Courses, no matter how appropriate their topics, are more powerful if wrapped around reinforcing clinical experiences that illustrate the principles under study and employ field-based inquiries, action research, case studies, and other tools that connect theory and practice" (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007, p. 150).

A clear implication of the growing base of research around effective leadership preparation is that the design and implementation of high-quality preparation (including recruitment) is a complex undertaking. It is complex because to do it well requires institutional communication and collaboration in articulating the kind of leadership the

program intends to develop, a theory of action for how that will be accomplished. Moreover, it requires expertise with leadership standards, research, and theory as well as with the principles of adult learning. However, university faculty and their district partners increasingly are engaging in this work, cooperating in the development of purposeful, coherent, and comprehensive leadership development.

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This brief, developed by Michelle D. Young, is part of a Research Utilization Brief series co-sponsored by UCEA and The Wallace Foundation. The intent of the series is to highlight and share recent empirical research regarding effective leadership preparation and development, particularly research commissioned by The Wallace Foundation, with faculty, staff, and leaders at the program, institutional, and state levels, as these individuals are in positions to use this research to make positive changes.

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