

EXPLORING THE LINK BETWEEN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP PREPARATION AND PRACTICE: AN ANALYSIS OF FORMER STUDENTS' IMPRESSIONS ON THE RELEVANCE OF THEIR DOCTORAL EXPERIENCE AT SIX ELITE INSTITUTIONS

Introduction

For decades, politicians, policy analysts, and economists have critiqued the public school system for its lack of rigorous demands, rules, and sanctions for boosting academic performance (Furman & Lazerson, 2005). Thus, it should come as no surprise that the topic of leadership preparation has emerged as a critical topic within the larger discussion of educational quality.

In the report entitled *Educating School Leaders*, Arthur Levine (2005) criticizes leadership preparation programs as “inadequate to appalling,” citing, among other issues, the proliferation of off campus programming, the weakening of standards, and an unwillingness to engage in any measure of “systematic self-assessment” (p. 1). What makes these criticisms intriguing, however, is the lack of research currently existing around leadership preparation and reported outcome measures among graduates from elite programs now serving in leadership roles in schools.

To gather more information about perceived inadequacies of doctoral programs in public school administration and their graduates, the authors examined former students' perceptions of the overall quality and relevance to actual practice of their respective school leadership preparation programs. Since Levine (2005) and others tend to paint a broad brush across all doctoral programs in leadership education, we chose to evaluate six of the top ten most prestigious institutions in the United States. These six were among the top ten according to the 2006 *U.S. News and World Report* rankings (America's best, 2007, pp. 1–14). They are as follows: University of Wisconsin-Madison (1st), Harvard University (3rd), Stanford University (4th), Pennsylvania State University (5th), Ohio State University (6th), and Teachers College, Columbia University (8th). In addition, each of these programs has been in the top ten for approximately 20 years.

No prior studies have assessed top-ranked doctoral programs' ability to prepare successful public school leaders using outcome measures of graduates' reported success. This paucity of valid and reliable outcome-based measures to determine program effectiveness on preparing successful school leaders is perhaps the primary reason no leadership preparation programs have been eliminated in recent years. Only a few studies have ventured into the dark side of accountability to assess graduates' application of skills and knowledge gleaned from lower-ranked doctoral programs

with their ability to lead schools to greater efficiency and higher student achievement (Hatley, Arrendondo, Donaldson, Short, & Updike, 1996; Hoyle, 2005; Zimmerman, Bowman, Valentine, & Barnes, 2004). In spite of this gap of outcome data in the research literature, there is a common assumption among scholars and practicing school administrators that prestigious top-ranked research and doctoral universities prepare school leaders better than programs of lower rank do. For this reason the researchers aimed the interviews toward selected graduates of top-ranked programs now serving as leaders in high performing schools and school districts. The study was conducted under the assumption that top-ranked doctoral programs are benchmarks for programs of lower rank and that their graduates are better prepared as successful leaders for school improvement.

In addition, research assessing leadership preparation programs has overlooked the perceptions of former doctoral students. Thus, the purpose of this study is to assess whether former students from the six elite institutions indicate that their leadership doctoral program played a critical role in their success as school leaders. To document their perceptions, researchers gathered data through structured telephone interviews. They also analyzed documents and archives collected from each program containing background information related to student admissions, curriculum, committee structure, research projects, dissertations, and other features.

The following sections of the paper include the theoretical and historical contexts of educational administration as a professional field or discipline, and a discussion of quality regarding leadership education programs in the United States. Next, an overview about the *U.S. News and World Report's* system for program rankings is provided, followed by research procedures, data analysis and then findings regarding perceptions of the quality of preparation from former students currently serving as principals and system administrators who have demonstrated success in the field from the perspective of the program chair. The final section recommends strategies to integrate best practices from the six programs and suggests additional programmatic improvements gleaned from the research.

Theoretical and Historical Contexts

Since first documented in the early 1900s by Elwood Cubberley, Professor at Stanford University, the professional discipline of educational administration has had a knowledge base to solve problems of managing city school districts. The early knowledge base consisted primarily of principles of school management, teacher supervision, and anecdotes told by former school administrators turned professor (Moore, 1964; Hoyle, 1991; Papalewis, 2005).

By 1955 the Cooperative Program in Educational Administration (CPEA) funded by the Kellogg Foundation had provided 30 universities with grants to advance the study of school administration, including the

creation and support of new doctoral programs in leadership education. The six doctoral programs included in this study were among the 30 selected for foundation support. While today the professional discipline of educational administration continues in heated debate over its theoretical and applied dimensions, over the years the field has made documented improvements in leadership preparation (Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, & Creighton, 2005; Hoyle, 2007; Orr, 2006).

The Standards Movement

The standards movement emerged in the early 1980s to improve leadership preparation by assessing leadership outcomes of practicing school administrators. It gained visibility with the American Association of School Administrators' (AASA) creation of its *Guidelines for the Preparation of School Administrators* (Hoyle, 1982). From 1983 to 1993 these *Guidelines* became the primary distributed benchmarks for licensure and program approval in several states and were adopted by the National Council for the Accreditation of Colleges of Education (NCATE). The "footprint" competencies and skills listed in the *Guidelines* reappeared in the 1993 *AASA Professional Standards for the Superintendency* (Hoyle, 1993), in NCATE's accreditation procedures for 1995 and 2004, and in the most widely used standards, which were created in 1996 by the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC).

This standards movement perpetuated and promoted a "one best model" or "scientific skill model" (Cooper & Boyd, 1987) that relies on the social and management sciences and competency tests for administrator credentials and that remains in standards-driven curriculum today. The "footprints" are deeply embedded in the course work in all leadership education programs including the six programs in this study. This is true regardless of the concerns of some scholars that the social science model falls short of preparing leaders who can bring change to public schools that are mired in complex social and community issues of poverty, race, and gender.

Some scholars believe in the inherent value of rationalistic-based social systems theory in the curriculum of leadership education (Hoy & Miskel, 2007; Lunenburg & Ornstein, 2004). Others take a more applied position and view the field as a theory-based practical skilled craft (Griffiths, 1988; Creighton & Young, 2005; Hoyle, 2007b). Since the early 1990s several scholars have extolled the value of transformational, servant, and moral leadership (Sergiovanni, 2006; Dantley, 2003; Hoyle, 2002a; Fullen, 2005; Bolman & Deal, 2006). Through efforts to apply less quantitative and to promote postmodern and qualitative processes to understand organizations and leadership, naturalistic inquiry emerged to seek diverse research methods to broaden understanding and insight into the growing and changing knowledge base (Greenfield, 1975; Foster, 1980;

Capper, Hafner, & Keyes, 2002; Lincoln, 1985). Recent calls have focused on democratic practices (Crow & Slater, 1996; Gale & Densmore, 2003), social justice (Tillman et al., 2003), unconditional love (Hoyle, 2002a), and the spiritual side of leadership education (Houston & Sokolow, 2006; Hoyle, 2002b; Wheatley, 2002).

In sum, the rapid infusion of preparation standards into leadership education has caused tensions between faculty and accrediting agencies who adhere to the “one best model” based on social systems, social psychology, and management theories and other faculty and agencies who stress courses in epistemology, social justice, learning communities, and other less measurable postmodern curriculum approaches to prepare school leaders.

Program Quality Issues

Most of the criticism in leadership education has been directed at second-tier, un-ranked universities’ educational leadership doctoral programs with limited faculty and financial resources that produce large numbers of graduates seeking passage into upper level public school administrator positions. Some of these programs were labeled as “cash cows” supported by university administrators to help provide financial support for other degree programs. The criticisms of these “vocational” doctoral programs come primarily from professors at top-tier leadership education programs sensing the increased competition from public universities for potential students who are attracted to the more flexible residency requirements, lower tuition costs, and greater emphases on clinical knowledge and applied research at second-tier universities. (Farquar & Piele, 1972; Pitner, 1982; Hoyle, English, & Steffy, 1985; Achilles, 1988; Peterson & Finn, 1985; Cooper & Boyd, 1988; Griffiths, Stout, & Forsyth 1988; Creighton, 2002; Levine, 2005)

Number of Doctoral Programs

Three hundred and seventy one (371) educational leadership preparation programs existed in the U.S. and Canada in 1994 (McCarthy & Kuh, 1997). In 2004, Creighton, Lunenburg, Irby, and Nie (2004) counted 371 programs in the U.S. alone. While only 38% of the 342 programs in 1978 offered the doctorate, the percentage in 1986 increased to 54%. Today nearly 57% (211 of the 371) programs offer the doctorate. Since 1978, the Ed.D. accounts for most of this increase. In addition, over 80% of Ed.D. students are enrolled part-time while holding full-time jobs and belonging to cohort groups. The residency requirements for part-time Ed.D. students consist of a combination of attendance on weekends, intensive six-week summer classes for two consecutive summers, or other arrangements that include Wednesday attendance over a two-year time period.

Currently 116 programs offer only the Ed.D., 44 programs only the Ph.D., and 59 both the Ed.D. and Ph.D. (Creighton et al., 2004).

Some years prior to the Levine report there were several notable calls to close some doctoral programs and improve the quality of others. These efforts have been chronicled by numerous commissions, the National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration (NCEEAA), NCATE, the Executive Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC), and in scholarly papers, journals, and books. Then came the “shot across the bow” by Levine (2005) that called for the elimination of the Ed.D. and limiting the number of Ph.D. programs. However, in spite of these critical reports about the growth and quality of doctoral programs in educational leadership, positive signs of improvement are emerging. According to Young, Crow, Orr, Ogawa, and Creighton (2005), positive changes are underway to improve graduate programs in leadership education. They concur that “across the nation, many scholars, policy makers, policy analysts, school leaders, professional organizations, and foundations have been addressing this need for years” (p. 1). Some observers believe that university preparation of school principals and superintendents has never been better. They base their opinion on evidence of higher admissions standards, greater ethnic and gender diversity of the students and faculty, and more positive support for reforms in leadership preparation coming from both practicing administrators and professors (Hoyle, 2005; McCarthy, 1999; Glass, Björk, & Brunner, 2000; Jackson & Kelly, 2002). Thus, the authors have attempted to focus a microscope on six of the top-ten doctoral programs in educational administration and their effects on the leadership success of their graduates now serving in public school leadership positions.

Program Quality and Ranking

For 24 years, the *U.S. News and World Report* has conducted the most visible and controversial rankings of graduate programs in education, specifically educational administration and supervision. The ranking methodology employed by *U.S. News and World Report* is based on two types of data: expert opinion about program quality and statistical indicators that measure the quality of a program’s faculty, research productivity, and students (Clark, 2004). According to Clark (2004), these rankings create controversy because of the criteria and the weighting of the indicators of quality. However, in spite of flaws in the ranking system, the researchers found each of the six programs in this study proudly displaying their high rankings on brochures and web pages. Other graduate program rankings are conducted by The National Research Council through its most recent Faculty Scholarly Productivity Index. While some claim that these agencies use more scientific and accurate measures than *U.S. News and World Report*, they do not carry the same national influence and prestige.

Therefore, this study focuses on six of the elite top-ten programs

ranked in the 2005–2006 academic year by *U.S. News and World Report*. According to their editors, graduate programs at 276 schools with programs in educational administration and supervision were surveyed. This represents 74% of the 371 universities offering educational leadership programs listed by Creighton et al. (2004). Also, as a caveat, only 211 of the 276 schools included in the rankings offered either the Ph.D. or Ed.D. or both. Of the 276 schools contacted by *U.S. News and World Report*, 242 responded and 240 provided the data needed to calculate rankings based on a weighted average of 12 quality measures described in Appendix A. Thus, the rankings could lack the purity desired for measuring the quality of the special applied discipline of K–12 educational administration/leadership. In addition, while the criteria listed in Appendix A are important to assess, other measures are of equal importance. According to Toch and Carney (2007), *U.S. News and World Report* and other rankings are based on measures of “advanced research, such as journal articles published and Nobel Prizes won.... (E)fforts should be made... [to invest in] new ways to gauge the quality of teaching and learning and by requiring taxpayer-subsidized colleges to disclose their performance to the public” (p. A10). For example, weight should be given to programs that assist graduate placement into leadership positions, conduct evaluations of job success of each graduate, provide mentoring and professional development, and offer faculty outreach that includes collaboration with local and regional school districts. These additional criteria should be included in the assessment of successful leadership preparation programs.

Procedures and Methods

Structured interviews were conducted with current program faculty and selected former students along with analysis of original and secondary documents about each program. The bulk of the data is framed by questions drawn from the research literature and grounded in the authors’ long term work in reviews of doctoral programs, the preparation and standards movement, leadership preparation, future studies, policy research, and education law.

Data Collection

On-site interviews were conducted in the fall semester of 2006 at six top-ranked doctoral leadership preparation programs in educational administration. In addition, records and documents pertaining to student admissions processes and criteria, numbers of applicants and percentage of students admitted each year, type and amount of student financial aid, brochures describing the program, working documents describing the curriculum and other program revisions, required student examinations, dissertations, and contact information about successful graduates now serving

in public school leadership roles were provided by program coordinators. Interviews were conducted with individual program advisors and faculty (see questions in Appendix B). Interviews were then conducted with 25 former doctoral students. Program professors identified former students with at least three consecutive years as principals or system administrators in public or private schools or districts who had demonstrated leadership success (e.g., Blue Ribbon designation or success working with diverse students and communities, dropouts, or teacher turnover). Researchers conceded the halo effect could lead to the assumption that graduates from top-ranked programs would lead higher performing schools. However, Levine (2005) and Murphy (2000) conclude that virtually every leadership preparation program is inadequate in preparing leaders for America's schools.

As a whole, interview questions (see Appendix C) aimed to have former students reflect on their leadership experiences in order to gather insight on the usefulness of their graduate program. Two questions (#1 & #4) sought information pertaining to social interactions and program experiences and influences, such as identifying specific moments or people that have impacted their practice in various ways. Two questions (#2 & #3) gauged the relevance of their theoretical or methodological course work for their current work responsibilities. Participants were also asked (#5) whether they were currently engaged in habits of scholarship and, if so, which, while another question (#6) invited the respondent to identify weaknesses or suggest changes that were needed to improve or update the program. Using a 5-point scale, the final question captured participants' overall sense of the relevance of their entire program to practice.

Method of Analysis

This study employed a quasi-mixed methodology. Utilizing pattern coding techniques suggested by Miles and Huberman (1984), the researchers developed thematic clusters based on subjects' responses across multiple sites to questions gauging the relevancy of their doctoral program. As Miles and Huberman (1984) contend, it is critical for the researcher to "reduce and channel the stimuli with which he or she is being bombarded into a smaller number of chunks that can be mentally encoded, stored, and readily retrieved" (p. 68). To avoid improperly labeling responses with codes, the researchers relied on memoing to verify thematic assignment and to assure clarification and validity.

Transcriptions of audio-taped interviews were analyzed to gauge if the successful former students from each institution felt similarly about the relevance of their program to practice. Respondents had earned their doctorates at least three and at most twenty years prior. Archival records and documentation were additionally examined to provide background and context for the interviews. Member checks were completed to ensure

that the information presented was accurate and properly interpreted. In addition, quasi-triangulation was possible using multiple data-collection methods, data sources, and analysis to check the validity of the findings. Two errors were caught and changed during the member check procedure. The researchers sought trustworthiness through interviewing and document evaluation procedures and stressed neutrality of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993). Using a descriptive statistical approach, the researchers then calculated percentages of programs where a particular theme emerged among the responses. For instance, if at least one student in three separate programs acknowledged the quality of mentoring as a strong attribute, 50% (i.e., 3 of 6 programs) would serve as the indicator. This same theme was also analyzed using the private and public program distinction as an additional factor when relevant.

Limitations

Given the scope of the data and narrow sampling of programs, the primary goal of this study was to call greater attention to an overlooked marker in quality determination of leadership preparation; that is, the student's perception. Twenty-five successful school leaders were purposely selected from a comprehensive list of graduates from the past 10–15 years. From these lists the researchers selected those with successful track records in leading their school or district to higher student performance based on high stakes examinations and other benchmarks of school success. While the findings of this research may not be representative of all graduates in the past 10–15 years, the 25 chosen for interviews were clearly successful in leading higher performing schools. Regardless of this limitation, the findings are intended to generate more data-grounded discussion about the characteristics, features, and practices that make up a relevant and successful doctoral program for school leaders.

Findings

Program Descriptions

The initial phase of this study involved structured interviews with the program chair or coordinator and three to seven selected K–12 program faculty in each program. This section includes data on the numbers of full-time faculty and full- and part-time students and categories of student financial support, admissions, and selection procedures. In addition, the curriculum and internship requirements are compared and comprehensive examinations and dissertation requirements are discussed.

Full-time faculty. The number of full-time faculty dedicated to the preparation of K–12 school leaders in the six doctoral programs ranged

from 30 at Harvard to none at Stanford where there are instead 14 “Concentration faculty” of Social Sciences, Policy and Educational Practice (SSPEP) or Administration and Policy Analysis (APA) none of whom is advising students toward careers in public school administration. Columbia University-Teachers College and Penn State University each include 13 full-time faculty, all focusing on K–12 administrator preparation; the University of Wisconsin has 11, and the Ohio State University K–12 faculty consists of nine. In each of the six programs, professors also taught courses and advised students seeking master’s degrees. With the exception of the Stanford program, the others espouse a dual mission of producing school administrators and future university professors or policy analysts. Stanford focuses only on the latter. While the “practitioner” designed Stanford Ed.D. program of the 1980s remains on the books, no Ed.D. student has graduated since 1989–90.

Full-time and part-time students and financial support. Seven full-time doctoral students were enrolled in the APA program at Stanford during 2006–07 and each student was awarded an assistantship equivalent to \$50,000 each academic year. These full-time Ph.D. students serve as research assistants and usually complete their degrees in approximately five years. The Harvard Ed.D. program accepts 40 full-time students each year including seven selected for the Urban Superintendency Program (USP). The USP program is a cohort with a standard curriculum within the Harvard School of Education while the non-cohort student degree plans include courses from the School of Education and other Schools, e.g., Kennedy School of Government, Economics, Sociology, etc. Harvard doctoral students are awarded approximately \$50,000 for the first year and jobs and other financial support equal to that amount for the remaining years. This funding covers tuition, health benefits, meals, and housing. The USP cohort students complete their degree requirements in approximately three years including a six month partially paid full-time internship in an urban setting. The younger non-cohort full-time students serve as research assistants and expect to complete the degree in five to six years.

Doctoral students at Ohio State, Penn State, Teachers College, and University of Wisconsin are a mixture of full-time younger students with little or no public school administrative experience and older experienced school administrators attending full-time or maintaining full-time employment while carrying a full- or part-time course load. The career intention of the older students is promotion to system administrative positions, and most of the younger full-time students aspire to faculty positions in higher education. Student numbers vary from six full-time students at Ohio State, 11 at Penn State, approximately 10 at Teachers College, and 13 at the University of Wisconsin. The full-time students at Ohio State, Penn State, and University of Wisconsin are awarded assistantships ranging from \$10,000 to \$15,000 each year including tuition and health benefits. Part-time students cover their own expenses through savings or short-term loans.

Teachers College full-time students receive a \$30,000 package their first year and are assigned jobs to help defray costs the next two to five years. These younger students complete their doctorate in five to six years. The part-time Ed.D. students at Teachers College are enrolled in one of two cohort programs: "Inquiry in Education Leadership Practice," which is a long-standing program for school administrators from many states, or the "School Year Doctorate—Public School Building Leadership or Public School District Leadership." Both Ed.D. degree programs include consecutive six-week summer on-campus sessions and a series of fly- or drive-in weekend on-campus seminars over a three year period. The curriculum requirements for the "School Year Doctorate" require area candidates to meet the New York State School Building or District Leader state certification. The doctoral faculty is in the process of "placing a moratorium" on the "Inquiry" national program because of the large numbers remaining in the "unfinished pipeline." Students with serious intent to complete requirements will be mentored, while others who have lost interest for whatever reason will be dropped from the program. A new "Inquiry in Educational Leadership Practice" will eventually blend with the "School Year Doctorate" designed primarily for New York area aspiring and current school administrators who also seek state licensure. In addition, the "School Year" localized program will improve program efficiency, enhance student and faculty interactions, and allow more time for faculty research and writing. These cohort students support themselves through personal funds or short-term loans and usually complete the doctorate within three to four years.

Student selection criteria. Four of the six programs require a minimum score of 1100 on the Graduate Record Examination while Stanford and Harvard require 1200. The six programs base selections on combinations of GRE and/or Miller Analogy scores, letters of recommendation, interviews and writing samples, graduate and undergraduate grade point averages, and types and quality of professional experience. While some programs prefer face-to-face interviews with faculty selection committees, some prospective students from greater distances are interviewed via conference calls. Each program director emphasized that, while the committees seek students with sterling academic credentials, selecting diverse cohorts each year is a high priority. The acceptance percentages provided below are based on the best data available with the caveat that each program admits students each fall, and while the GRE scores and other criteria are listed, selection committees will admit students with lower GRE scores if they meet or exceed other criteria expectations.

Approximately 500 individuals express interest in the Harvard Ed.D. program each year, but only 50 or 10% are selected. Five to seven are currently in the USP cohort. Stanford accepts approximate 15-20 Ph.D. or 50% of applicants each year, but only seven are currently in the Administration and Policy Analysis program. None of the seven plans a career in public or private school administration. The percentage of acceptance at

Ohio State is approximately 33%. In each of the past three years 60 students applied for the doctoral program, 20 were accepted, and 13 enrolled. Over each of the last three years Penn State has admitted around 49% of their applicants. Teachers College accepts approximately 50% of the applicants applying for both the Ph.D. and Ed.D. programs. Even though only 50% are accepted, the numbers became a management issue for adequate faculty/student interactions. As mentioned above, a moratorium has been placed on the national "Inquiry" doctorate and the faculty will place greater weight on GRE scores as a way to reduce the numbers selected each year. At the University of Wisconsin 65 students apply for the doctoral program each year. Of the 30 or 46% admitted, 12 are either aspiring or current school administrators.

Curriculum and other requirements. The number of hours or credits required for the doctorate is similar across the six programs. Stanford and Ohio State require a minimum of 135 quarter hours with approximately 90 hours taken beyond the master's level. Penn State and Wisconsin require 75 credit hours of graduate work or 45 hours past the master's degree plus at least 15 hours of upper level work in research methods for the dissertation. The Doctorate in Education Leadership at Teachers College requires 90 points/credits with up to 40 points transferable from another graduate institution. Doctoral candidates at Harvard are required to take a minimum of 16 three-hour courses, seven core courses and nine electives, generally in two to three years. This is approximately 48-50 hours, excluding the number of hours for research projects, internships, and the dissertation.

All six programs include a similar core of courses that include organizational/administrative theory, social and political contexts of education, leadership in educational organizations, economics of education, sociology of education, educational finance, instructional leadership, school improvement, research methods (qualitative and quantitative), and legal aspects of education. While the cohort groups consisting of aspiring or current school administrators followed a prescribed degree plan including courses listed above, the non-cohort full-time doctoral students are enrolled in some of the cohort classes, but also take classes in other colleges, i.e., statistics, economics, sociology, public administration, management, and finance. The cohort student groups at Ohio State, Wisconsin, Penn State, and Teachers College are usually full-time employees primarily in school districts, their classes are scheduled at night, weekends, Wednesdays, and summer sessions. In addition some of the cohort members in these four programs without an administrator license will add course work aligned with state licensure driven by NCATE and ELCC standards. This licensure requires an internship of approximately 150-450 hours (Teachers College and New York licensure requires 450 full-time supervised hours) working with a mentor administrator. Full-time students on assistantships requiring 20-hour work weeks have the flexibility to take courses offered in other colleges and departments during the day. Thus, full-time

students have a more clearly defined minor or cognate area outside educational administration than the cohort groups. The number and type of research methods classes are similar across the programs but may vary based on students' research interests and the recommendation of committee chairs. However, all students were required to take a course or courses in both qualitative and quantitative methods.

Comprehensive examinations and dissertation requirements. Penn State, Wisconsin, and Ohio State require comprehensive written exams over the major and cognate/minor areas. The written exams are a combination of course materials and/or other assignments by each professor. The length and time spent on the written exams depends on the advisory committee and the academic background of the student. If the student's written response is inadequate, individual professors establish the parameters and time line for another examination. None of these three programs requires an oral exam following the written portion.

Harvard, Stanford, and Teachers College do not require comprehensive written exams over course work. At Stanford the students undergo two qualifying steps during their third and sixth quarters. The students produce a qualifying research paper, oral examination, or both. This is done to determine the student's readiness for dissertation research and to determine the student's qualification for candidacy. To qualify for candidacy at Teachers College, the student conducts a case study (Field Based Capstone Project) of a school or school district and writes a qualifying paper that serves as a prospectus for the student's dissertation. To qualify for candidacy at Harvard, the student proposes a research topic for the dissertation during the second or third year. It may come in the first year for the Urban Superintendency Program (USP). This requirement assists the USP students to complete dissertation and graduate in three to four years while full-time non-cohort students finish in five to six years.

A dissertation is required in each of the six programs but the research prospectus may vary according to program. Students at Stanford present a proposal to the committee adviser and two faculty members. After the proposal approval, three additional committee members are selected jointly by the adviser, student, and office of the dean as the reading committee. The final defense of the dissertation is conducted by at least five members of the university faculty. The student at Harvard proposes a research topic; the committee adviser and two more committee members are selected according to their specialty and willingness to serve. The final defense is conducted by the committee chair and the two other members.

Former Student Responses

The above findings about each of the six top-ranked programs frame the results discussed in this section. The researchers focused the interview questions on issues of course quality and type, academic rigor,

teaching effectiveness, types of research activities including the dissertation, the value of mentoring by committee chairpersons and other faculty, program reputation, and interpersonal relationships with classmates, and the impact of all these on graduates' leadership skills, habits of mind, and ability to improve schools and their students' achievement (see Appendix C). The most frequently reported themes are listed in Table 1 and featured in the findings detailed below.

Table 1*Most Frequently Reported Themes Among the Six Programs^a*

Inquiry area	Response themes	N and percentage of programs ^b	
General impact	Intellectual rigor	6	100%
	Student support	6	100%
	Rich interactions	6	100%
	Theory and practice	4	67%
Applicability of coursework	Policy and/or politics	5	83%
	Case study, problem based, simulation, non-traditional experience	4	67%
Research orientation	Practicality	4	67%
	Academic research	4	67%
Intangibles	Mentoring	5	83%
	Attitude and demeanor	4	67%
Need for improvement	Lack of specific courses	4	67%
	Mean		SD
Overall program assessment	1.10		.355
Public university graduates	1.08		.289
Private university graduates	1.12		.416

^a Themes reported in at least four of the six programs.

^b Themes reported by at least one student within each program.

General impact. The first question sought to capture the totality of the doctoral experience and its impact on the former students' current leadership practices. Five general themes emerged from the interviews. Students from all six programs credited the "intellectually stimulating" environment and "access to highly skilled faculty" for their success as school leaders. Graduates from all programs also praised the efforts of faculty in dissertation guidance and generally recognized professors as "role models" who instilled "norms of excellence" and credited the "rich interactions" with other students and faculty (e.g., the interactions with

various stakeholders). Two comments best capture two former students' impressions of coursework and quality of faculty, in particular:

[The coursework] was tough and I had to read his assigned articles four times before they made sense, but once I understood, it opened new doors of intellectual thinking.

My experience there... clearly, the people around you is [as] much a part of what makes it excellent as the highly skilled faculty, the highly renowned faculty.... We continue to work on projects that I think advance the field of education; we work on both acute and chronic challenges.

Students from three programs called attention to community aspects of doctoral programs and how this realm influenced their leadership practice. One student commented on value-added opportunities that resulted from enrolling in the doctoral program:

The cohort members were my family and remain so. I could call them in the middle of the night and get advice. During an eight-day strike, I called my classmates about interpersonal dealings with the union and I was able to bring the strike to a close. Superintendents without that support were fired for their lack of interpersonal skills.

Another student commented on the benefits of diversity in the student community in the classroom. This student believed that diversity of perspective and voice broadened the scope of potential responses to problems, which she argued allowed her to evaluate problems from multiple frames, hence improving her leadership.

Students from four programs alluded to specific experiences that strengthened the link between theory and practice. For instance, students remarked about the instrumentality of using case studies and problem-based approaches to demonstrate the practicality of theory. Another student recalled various instances where professors bridged theory and practice, including videotaped simulations and guest practitioners. As one student remarked, "my professors taught the theories I use each day—decision-making, leadership, etc. I minored in statistics, in agriculture and psychology. Even though I do not use advanced statistics in my job as an [assistant principal], I use data analyses on test scores, staff development, etc." Overall, the data reveal that former students praised the intellectual rigor and the student and faculty interaction and support, while instances of community and collegiality and activities linking theory to practice were reported but to a lesser extent.

Applicability of coursework. The second question, which resulted in the greatest variation in response, asked former students to identify courses inside or outside the discipline that have contributed to their success as a school leader. Overall, students found the politics and policy classes (students from 5 programs) and the case study/problem-based coursework (students from 4 programs) to be most helpful to their leader-

ship practice. Students commented on the knowledge gained from policy courses, particularly those covering school reform and the accompanying political complexities that manifest within big school districts, as well as other “big issues” and “turning points” (e.g., Coleman report, legislation, John Dewey’s ideas). Students from four programs acknowledged, once again, the advantages of problem-based approaches. A student from one public program recalled a finance and business course which utilized a “hands on” approach to teach budget management and theory. Another student commented on the value of case study approaches to grasp the complexity of change and organizational responsiveness. A course using simulation exercises and guest lecturers in one program provided a dimension particularly relevant to one student’s practice:

During the [program], our vision statements were critiqued by professors and journalists. Also, they videotaped our role playing about conflict or interpersonal communication problems to help us learn skills in a safe, simulated environment.

A student from another institution remarked about heightened cultural awareness after having taken a course in a very diverse sector of a large metropolitan city. Other courses such as foundations courses, leadership and decision making, and other general educational administration fare were mentioned less frequently in terms of their impact. What is especially noteworthy is that outside courses and other key core requirements in leadership doctoral curricula (i.e., cultural, law, finance, and organizations) were the least reported with respect to helpfulness.

Research orientation. The relevance of research courses to school leadership is often debated. Students from four out of the top six leadership doctoral programs recognized both practical and research benefits and resourcefulness of standard research courses (e.g., qualitative and quantitative methods). One student remarked that the research courses were “rigorous and taught [the individual] as a practitioner to be a wise consumer of research reports.” Another student spoke of the ability to use methods to address policy problems. Students from these institutions perceived the relevance of these courses for analyzing school performance data, learning about leadership and decision making, and evaluating problems “holistically.” When one student was asked to elaborate on what it meant to assess data holistically, the student remarked about how such courses stressed creating “defensible positions” through research methodologies. The student issued the following comment:

A combination of qualitative, empirical, quantitative data to develop a defensible position is something I certainly experienced.... From a technical standpoint I walk through with our staff ways in which they can collect and tabulate data and help them understand that...more than anything else, I encourage our people to develop a defensible position for their work, and whatever it is they elect to use to support that position...is secondary to an indication that

they have given some thought and some critical professional consideration to their work.

A second student from the same institution spoke about how the research courses at her institution stressed data analysis in a positive, very developmental way rather than framing the process as a means to avoiding sanctions. Students from four institutions reported that the primary or partial goal of the research sequence was to encourage both “critical consumption” of research and engagement in scholarly activities such as presenting at conferences and publishing. This was especially the case at one institution where research courses were seemingly designed with the intent of preparing students for academic research and careers in higher education and policy. One former student made the following remark regarding the perceived aims of the program:

The faculty in the [doctoral program] never intended to create a typical preparation program for school administrators and most of us went into higher education. Some however, became superintendents.

The remaining three programs offered a balanced approach, but stressed scholarly outcomes to a fair degree. Benefits of scholarly critique and writing skills were reported to a lesser extent when compared to other benefits.

Intangibles. The mentoring by former faculty was most often mentioned as being instrumental to leadership success (students from 5 programs). Generally, former students described faculty as “heroes,” “role models,” “motivators,” and “energizers.” One student referred to advice from professors to “always focus on what is best for kids and to act out of integrity.” Whereas former students from two programs acknowledged mentoring by way of dissertation and other academic forms of support, students from other institutions recalled professors who stressed leading with “conviction” and to always “challenge the status quo” as well as others who consistently made reference to powerful leadership concepts. Students also underscored the infectious attitude and demeanor of faculty and its impact on their practice. One graduate shared the following:

[One professor’s] course taught me to build and manage a budget. He used problem-solving simulations and scenarios to create a serious problem to solve in a safe setting. It was fantastic.

In addition to attitude on research and scholarship and steady support, others commented on the “inspirational” nature of coursework and the manner in which professors communicated and interacted with students. One former student referred to a specific professor who instilled a selfless approach to leadership. As this student recalls, it was a brand of leadership whereby “quality work” was normalized to a point where the behavior was considered neither unique nor outstanding. The former student shared the following regarding the impact of this professor’s outlook on leadership on her own perspective:

If you think about the people that you see who are good leaders, and you say what makes you that way or what makes your district

that way, and people often respond with “we’re just doing are job, nothing special, this is just what we do”...so that was interesting and I think that’s really true.

Habits of scholarship. Some former students reported still being engaged in scholarly activities such as presenting at conferences (students from 3 programs) and in some cases publishing papers with professors (students from 3 programs). One student along with his or her professor co-authored an article in *Phi Delta Kappan* and a book, while two other students published either articles or a book. Presentations were considered the norm at these three institutions. Former students spoke at length about their continuing involvement in scholarly activities. Students from one institution currently present at conferences statewide and nationally (e.g., National Community Education, Women and Emerging Leaders). One former student and current superintendent from the same program requires his school leaders to engage in academic endeavors (e.g., a conference presentation and a paper proposal for publication).

Need for improvement. Programs must adapt to changing conditions in schools. Former students from four of the programs noted that adding courses based on particular topics or subjects could have enhanced their doctoral preparation. Former students from one program commented on a loose connection between courses and state licensure and regretted the fading relationship between the program and schools and school leaders. As one former student expressed, “there are [currently] very few faculty connections to superintendents and schools on a regular basis.” The former student further remarked students were not required to take a course in organizational behavior or theory and were exposed minimally to aspects of administration. A former student from a separate institution made a similar observation about a politics course with respect to topical relevance: “We needed the professors to stress practical and school board and community politics to help us prosper in a political world of public schools.” Students at three institutions questioned the applicability of coursework to practice. For instance, students doubted the relevance of courses that they believed were overly theoretical. According to one former student, “the law classes were too theoretical and too much on federal law rather than state law that I use daily.” A former student from a different program made a similar observation regarding a professor’s lack of practical experience. The former student remarked, “not all was wonderful—I had one [professor] who had no practical base upon to teach—it was all theory and not much use to me.” Former students also questioned program design and student selection methods. According to one, time and calendar changes were needed to accommodate working professionals. With respect to student selection methods, a former student from another university challenged criteria for program admission and expressed the following sentiment:

The skills and knowledge were professor specific and it was excellent, but my classmates were mostly younger and very bright but had

little practice in schools and offered very little to my experience.

A fourth and final issue concerned faculty support of students. One former student described students' experiences with dissertation advisors the following way:

The advisor makes all the difference. The right one gets you through by demanding the best and helping you become the best you can be. Other students became frustrated because of the advisor-advisee relationship. They met with them too infrequently, were inconsistent in support, uninspiring in mentoring, and were not as helpful as other mentors in helping a student succeed.

Overall program assessment. Former students interviewed issued high marks for their programs, generating an overall mean of 1.1 (i.e., a score of 1 being extremely relevant and 5 being not relevant at all) ($N = 25$, $SD = .355$). A slight difference appeared between ratings of former students from public and private programs. Students at public universities rated their experience an average of 1.12 ($N = 13$, $SD = .416$) whereas students at private programs rated their experience slightly more favorably at an average of 1.08 ($N = 12$, $SD = .289$). On the whole, however, the ratings seem to reflect a very positive assessment of the relevance of their doctoral education.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to seek answers for closing the obvious gap in the literature tying doctoral programs' preparation of school administrators to their results as school leaders. On the whole, there was general agreement among former students from the six elite programs across several program attributes. Students for the most part praised the overall quality of the experience, the intellectual stimulation, rich interactions with faculty and fellow students, and mentoring during and after degree completion. Greater variation in responses seemed more apparent when students were asked to identify the courses, models, or strategies (including research) most relevant or critical to successful practice. While the former students viewed their doctoral experiences as very relevant to their roles in creating successful schools and school districts for students, they are concerned about changes in programs since they graduated that appear to be less relevant and more theoretical. Concerns were expressed by at least one student in three of the six programs. Other graduates expressed concern that some faculty had little or no public school experience and fewer contacts with school superintendents, principals, and state policymakers.

In his report entitled *Educating School Leaders*, Levine (2005) lists nine critical elements for creating a comprehensive leadership preparation program. Reflections from former students interviewed in this study suggest that two of the nine elements implicated above—curricular coherence (rele-

vant and reflects main purposes of program) and curricular balance (the nexus between theory and practice as well as university and schools)—could evolve into formidable issues for several of these programs.

Levine (2005) holds that leadership preparation programs seldom engage in self-assessment, which in his estimation inhibits their capacity and ability to be responsive to external forces and change. While programs should be encouraged to reevaluate and in some cases redesign, results from this study demonstrate that most students perceived a great degree of relevance and applicability of their doctoral experience to practice. Students from the programs studied shared many experiences that refute accusations of “a race to the bottom” and instead suggest that the top institutions place a premium on knowledge and skills and not on counting credits. The glowing assessment by former students of the doctoral experience and its relationship to practice is indicative of the high quality in delivery and process. This is positive evidence that these top-ranked beacons of preparation do prepare school administrators with the knowledge and skills to lead schools and school districts to higher student performance.

While the findings are not meant to be representative of the experiences of the general former student population who earned doctorates in leadership, several implications for future research and policy emerge. For instance, greater insights are needed to maintain high quality doctoral programs for full-time and part-time students. The new models, e.g., on-line, weekend, summers, and off-campus sites, offer more streamlined processes to earn the doctorate in educational administration. Professors and program planners must narrow the quality gaps between programs to assure that our current and future graduates who lead schools and school districts gain more than a diploma earned on-line or on-campus. Conversations should be greatly increased between public school leaders and policymakers to share in creating doctoral programs with scholarly insights into organizational and social change leading to high performing schools and success for all students. Greater collaboration must occur among university programs in education, public administration, management, and public policy to recruit the best and most culturally responsive leaders for careers in public education. This collaboration is needed to address PK–16 and other efforts to unify the higher education and public school systems. Additionally, degrees in educational administration should not attempt merely to mirror degrees in philosophy, sociology, or psychology, but incorporate vital components that draw on best practice, human learning, applied research, history, and models of human justice and opportunity.

Conclusions

The authors find the six programs analyzed in the study to be of high quality. Also, there is clear evidence of high quality students. Respondents for each program noted respected faculty members who care about

the students, focus on academic rigor and writing and research skills, and design value-added student opportunities such as field experiences, simulations, and seminars with noted policymakers in city and national agencies. Thus, these six top-ranked programs are beacons to show the way to the other doctoral programs in educational administration. The authors suggest that program directors adapt the structured interview questions in Appendices B and C to conduct their own quality assurance studies. Studies conducted elsewhere may bear similar results and produce evidence that mirrors the top-ranked programs. However, all programs must continue to seek answers to the perplexing question: Do our doctoral programs prepare individuals who can lead schools and school districts to high performance for every student?

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John R. Hoyle is a Professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.

Mario S. Torres, Jr. is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Educational Administration and Human Resource Development at Texas A&M University, College Station, Texas.

Appendix A

U.S. News and World Report Criteria for Ranking Educational Leadership Programs

Quality Assessment (weighted by .40)

Peer Assessment Score (.25)

In the fall of 2005, education school deans and deans of graduate studies were asked to rate programs in educational administration and supervision on a scale from “marginal” (1) to “outstanding” (5). A school’s score is the average of all those respondents who rated it. About 50% of those surveyed answered.

Superintendent Assessment Score (.15)

School superintendents nationwide in a sampling of school districts were asked to rate programs on the same scale from “marginal” (1) to “outstanding” (5). Those individuals who did not know enough about a school to evaluate it fairly were asked to mark “don’t know.” About 26% of those surveyed answered.

Student Selectivity (weighted by .18)

Mean GRE Verbal Scores (.06)

The mean verbal scores of the Graduate Record Examination were examined for doctoral students entering the 2005–2006 academic year. Where mean GRE verbal scores were not available for entering doctoral students, mean GRE verbal scores for all entering graduate students are substituted, if available.

Mean GRE Quantitative Scores (.06)

The mean scores on the quantitative section were examined for doctoral students entering the doctoral program in 2005–2006. If GRE quantitative scores were not available, mean GRE quantitative scores for all entering graduate students are substituted, if available.

Acceptance Rate (.06)

This is the determination of the proportion of applicants to the doctoral program who were offered admission for the 2005–2006 academic year.

Faculty Resources (weighted by .12)

Student-Faculty Ratio (.02)

The 2005 ratio of all full-time degree seeking to full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty.

Percent of Faculty With Awards (.025)

The percent of full-time tenure-track faculty that held awards or editorships among selected education journals in 2004–2005.

Doctoral Degrees Granted (.05)

The number of doctoral degrees in educational administration/supervision granted in 2005.

Percent of Students in Doctoral Programs (.025)

The proportion of the fall 2005 degree-seeking graduate students who were in the doctoral programs.

Research Activity (weighted by .30)

Total Research Expenditures (.15)

The total education-school research expenditures averaged for the 2004 and 2005 fiscal years. Expenditures refer to separately funded research, public and private, conducted at the school.

Average Expenditure per Faculty Member (.10)

The average research expenditures per full-time faculty member averaged over fiscal years 2004 and 2005. Expenditures refer to separately funded research, public and private, conducted at the school.

Percent of Faculty Engaged in Research (.05)

The proportion of full-time faculty who are engaged in education-school research during the 2004–2005 academic year.

Overall Rank

Data were standardized about their means, and standardized scores weighted, totaled, and rescaled so that the top school received 100; other schools received their percentage of the top score.

Specialty Ratings

Specialty ratings are based solely on nominations by education-school deans and deans of graduate studies from the list of schools surveyed. They selected up to 10 top programs in Educational Administration and Supervision. Those with the most votes are listed.

Appendix B

1. How many full-time faculty are engaged in the K–12 doctoral program?
2. How many full-time doctoral students are enrolled in the K–12 program, and how many are part-time?
3. What admission criteria and processes are used in selecting K–12 doctoral students?
4. Do you offer both the Ed.D. and Ph.D. degrees for the K–12 program?
5. Are the course and research requirements the same for Ed.D. and Ph.D. students?
6. What percentage of applicants for your doctoral degree program(s) in K–12 are accepted into the program?
7. What are the program requirements both inside and outside the department?
8. What is the structure of your doctoral committees? How many advisees do you and your colleagues have?
9. Do you require comprehensive exams at the end of course work?
10. Do all students complete a dissertation or its equivalent?
11. What kinds of financial support are available for full-time and part-time students?
12. What types of internships are available to full-time and part-time K–12 administration students?
13. Does your doctoral program include student cohorts, and how are they selected?
14. How many semesters/quarters does it take for a student to complete his/her doctorate?
15. Are your programs NCATE accredited, and are you members of UCEA or NCPEA?

Appendix C

1. Since completing your doctorate, what experiences, people, and activities do you recall that have been influential in your success as a building/district school leader?
2. What specific courses inside or outside of your major have been helpful or relevant to your success? Provide examples of how specific theories, models, strategies, or methods have helped.
3. What research or methods classes or projects help you today in collecting, tabulating, interpreting, reporting, and distributing data about student, staff, or financial performance?
4. What words of wisdom, knowledge, interpersonal or communication skills have been important to your success as a campus/district leader? Explain.
5. What habits of scholarship, i.e., reading scholarly journals, seeking on-line research findings, book reading, making speeches, and conducting your own research, are a direct result of your doctoral student experiences?
6. What part of your doctoral experience could have been more relevant to your work today in public education? What would you like to see changed in the program?
7. On a scale of 1–5, what is your overall impression of the relevance of your doctoral program in shaping your career as a school leader for all students? 1 = extremely relevant; 2 = very relevant; 3 = relevant; 4 = not very relevant; and 5 = not relevant at all.

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