Perceptions of online credentials for school principals

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of human resource directors in the USA about online credentials earned by K-12 school principals and principal candidates.

Design/methodology/approach – In this mixed methods study, a survey was sent to a random sample of 500 human resource directors in K-12 school districts across the USA. Analysis was conducted on 105 surveys.

Findings – In contrast to a traditional face-to-face format, the majority of respondents reported beliefs that online courses and online degrees aimed at school principals required less work, were of lower quality, and could not adequately prepare leaders to tackle state-specific issues. Human resource directors in rural districts had a more negative perception of online learning, in comparison to their counterparts in suburban or urban districts. All preparatory courses, except technology leadership, were reported to be easier taught face-to-face, than online.

Research limitations/implications – Further research should be conducted to determine if and how these perceptions are shifting. Further research should also be conducted to determine the influence of location on perceptions of online credentials for school leaders. Comparing perceptions about online credentials cross-nationally may provide interesting insights and new areas of research.

Practical implications – Implications are for school administration programs, both traditional and online, that desire to create and build more accepted school administration programs that include online components.

Social implications – Students increasingly opt for online coursework; students in the field of school leadership and administration in the USA are no different. This shift to online learning must be juxtaposed with efforts to maintain quality, improve efficiency, and address the concerns of those persons who hire these candidates.

Originality/value – To date, no research has been published on the perceived acceptability of online degrees and online coursework for school principals in the USA.

Keywords Online degrees, Learning, Principals, Surveys, Individual perception, Rural areas, Urban areas, United States of America

Paper type Research paper

Technology advancements have changed how the general public views the delivery of educational content … or have they? During the Fall 2007 term, almost 3.9 million students in the USA were taking at least one online course (Allen and Seaman, 2008). In a

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poll conducted by Zogby International, a polling market research firm that focuses on US public opinion, 30 percent of adult respondents in the USA said they were currently taking or have taken an online course (Zogby, 2008). Looking at these enrollment data, it is clear that students are increasingly drawn to online learning. What is unclear, however, is how these online degrees and courses are perceived.

Online learning in the American postsecondary education system continues to gain popularity, as evidenced by the annual increase in enrollment numbers in online courses (Allen and Seaman, 2008, 2009a, b). Approximately two-thirds of two-year and four-year colleges in the USA now offer online, hybrid, or distance education courses. Nearly one in five postsecondary institutions has at least one wholly online degree program (Parsad *et al.*, 2008). Competition for scarce tuition dollars from private online universities such as the University of Phoenix, Walden University, and Cappella University has forced many traditional US universities (i.e. brick and mortar institutions) to rethink educational content delivery in an attempt to meet students' demands for greater convenience, more flexibility, lower costs, and a different kind of academic and intellectual engagement. There is no reason to believe that these trends will change in the near future.

Although the expansion of online learning is quite evident, less clear are the views of gatekeepers who vet those potential candidates who earn all or part of their credentials online. The current study investigated this issue within the context of online courses and online degrees for K-12 school principals in the USA. Through this study, we explore the perception of online learning by human resource directors: those gatekeepers knowledgeable of interviewing protocol, hiring practices, and advancement opportunities for school principals.

Review of the literature
There are wide discussions in the field of educational administration and educational leadership regarding the effectiveness and quality of leadership preparation programs. There are also many conversations in higher education administration occurring around quality online degree programs. However, there is very little scholarship at the intersection of those bodies of literature, where this study is situated. Therefore, we present a brief overview of both bodies of literature for context before discussing the few studies that focus on perceptions of online degree programs in the field of education, broadly, and educational leadership, more specifically.

High quality leadership preparation
Jackson and Kelley (2002) provide a historical background to the current debate taking place in the USA around the effectiveness of educational leadership preparation programs, situating it within a National Commission on Excellence in Educational Administration report from 1987 which detailed deficiencies identified in educational leadership preparation programs. The core deficiencies clustered around three areas: connection between the content and pedagogy of programs and the real work of the profession; lack of participants in underrepresented groups; and a lack of a shared understanding around "good" educational leadership. Jackson and Kelley continue by discussing approaches and structures that address these discrepancies, including problem-based learning, the use of cohorts, collaborative partnerships, enhanced and intensive field experiences, and the appropriate use of technology.

Recent criticisms of the effectiveness of school leadership preparation programs offered in traditional brick and mortar institutions continue to discuss the same deficiencies (Chenoweth *et al.*, 2002; Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007; Hale and Moorman, 2003; Levine, 2005; Olson, 2007). Specifically, Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) showcase exemplary programs which have many of the characteristics mentioned by Jackson and Kelley (2002, p. 143). The empirical findings of their study show "the principals who participated in the preparation and professional development programs selected as exemplary reported being significantly better prepared, holding more positive attitudes, and engaging in more effective practices on average than did the principals in their relevant comparison groups".

Darling-Hammond *et al.* (2007) continue by detailing common characteristics of an exemplary program's design. These characteristics are:

- standards-based curriculum;
- philosophy aligned with school improvement and instructional leadership;
- student-centered instruction with high-quality faculty;
- use of a cohort structure with mentoring;
- targeted recruitment of teacher leaders; and
- rigorous internships.

Similar characteristics are discussed across the critical literature, including a large-scale study funded by the Wallace Foundation (Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2005, p. 2) that found "effective programs are research-based, have curricular coherence, provide experience in authentic contexts, use cohort groupings and mentors, and are structured to enable collaborative activity between the program and area schools".

None of the contemporary criticisms of best practices research regarding educational leadership programs mentioned address preparation of leaders in an online fashion, other than in connection with online professional development tutorials for in-service professionals or as a supplement to face-to-face instruction. We could find no empirical studies addressing the quality or effectiveness of online educational leadership preparation. Therefore, in the following section we provide a brief discussion of the literature around high quality online programs, in general.

High-quality online degree programs
In the USA, general attitudes about online learning remain apprehensive at best. We identified many articles that debate public perceptions of online learning in the popular press and academic press, such as *The New York Times* and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. There also is recent scholarly literature around concerns connected with online degree programs, such as attrition (Patterson and McFadden, 2009) and academic fidelity and integrity (Gambescia and Paolucci, 2009).

Many articles debate the acceptability of these degrees in various fields and disciplines (Bejerano, 2008; Benson, 2003; Ghezzi, 2007; Rodgers, 2005; Toth *et al.*, 2008). Of these, only Ghezzi (2007) and Rodgers (2005) explicitly speak to online degrees in the education field. A central issue in the debate around online learning is the acceptability of online courses and online degrees by potential employers. There is some indication that "academic leaders do not believe that there is a lack of acceptance

of online degrees by potential employers" (Allen and Seaman, 2009b, p. 3). The data however points to a contradiction. A Vault Inc. (2008, p. 1) study of 172 hiring directors across various industries within the USA found that only a small proportion of these hiring directors believed a Bachelor's degree (28 percent) or a graduate degree (28 percent) earned online was a credible credential. Vault's CEO noted that "though more and more Americans are getting educated online, there is still a bias toward traditional classroom education, especially for high-end careers and top-ranked companies". One Vault Inc. survey respondent said "I don't think online degrees reflect a serious commitment to education on the part of the degree-holder" (Vault Inc., 2008, p. 4). This negativity is also present in the educational sector. In "Online credentials: A state of wariness", Richardson (2010, p. 19) reported that district superintendents often felt that "online credentials and online universities were not highly regarded".

Concerns expressed throughout the literature that debates the acceptability of online degrees include many aspects of the question of the quality of the online degree programs and whether students in them face the same rigor as traditional programs (Bejerano, 2008; Benson, 2003; Ghezzi, 2007; Rodgers, 2005; Toth *et al.*, 2008). Other concerns focus on a perceived lack of student-instructor interaction, perhaps stemming from a historical view of online learning as distance education or correspondence programs where students have limited contact with their instructors or their peers. Many of these concerns can be aligned with the criticisms of leadership preparation programs discussed in the previous section. However, there is no literature that does so explicitly.

The increase in the number of online courses and online programs does not equate to an increase in positive attitudes and opinions about them. For example, Allen and Seaman (2009b) found that, as of Fall 2006, only 32.9 percent of academic leaders in higher education believed their faculty accepted both the value and legitimacy of online education. These attitudes however do seem to be shifting towards greater acceptance. According to the same authors, a year later close to 50 percent of academic leaders thought their faculty accepted both the value and legitimacy of online education (Allen and Seaman, 2008). In a 2007 poll, Zogby (2008) found 27 percent of respondents agreed that online colleges are equal in quality to traditional colleges whereas 62 percent of the respondents disagreed. Zogby also found that of those respondents who had taken or were taking an online course, just one in eight said "the overall quality of the course was better than an on-site course, while 40 percent said it was worse" (Zogby, 2008, pp. 81-2). Conversely, a 2009 meta-analysis conducted by the US Department of Education (2009, p. ix) found "on average, students in online learning conditions performed better than those receiving face-to-face interaction".

Acceptance of online degrees within the education field in the USA
The data indicate that faculty members of institutions of higher education in the USA also tend to think less of online learning than traditional face-to-face learning. Adams and DeFleur (2005) researched whether doctoral degrees earned totally or partially online have the same value to higher education faculty hiring committees as a doctoral degree earned from a traditional brick-and-mortar institution. Adams and DeFleur sought to answer the question: "Are distance learning and traditional degrees equal in the eyes of academic gatekeepers?" (Adams and DeFleur, 2005, p. 70). Their analysis of 109 questionnaires administered to hiring committee chairs found that 98 percent of

respondents would choose the candidate with a traditional degree over a candidate with a wholly-online degree. The authors concluded that "those applying for a faculty position in the [higher education] institutions included in this analysis would have virtually no prospect of gaining employment if they had earned their doctorate solely online" (Adams and DeFleur, 2005, p. 79). This was also true if a candidate completed a significant part of the coursework online. Only 11 percent of the respondents would consider hiring a candidate with a degree earned partially online. The committee chairs in the study were primarily concerned about issues of experience, quality, and interactions. Adams and DeFleur further noted an important ethical problem. Hiring committees are concerned about the delivery of coursework, so much so that they would not even consider them for the post, but most university transcripts do not indicate the mode of delivery of a particular course or program; therefore, "the question of full disclosure becomes a focal point for legal and ethical challenges to those degrees" (Adams and DeFleur, 2005, p. 83).

In a national survey conducted by Zogby (2008), only 8 percent of the respondents reported thinking online courses are equally accepted by academic professionals in contrast to traditional university courses. Only 19 percent of the sample reported thinking employers equally accepted online courses compared to traditional courses. Although many faculty members at higher education institutions in the USA believe online degrees deserve less respect and credence than traditional, face-to-face degrees, it appears that "the greater an institution's experience with online education, the more positive its attitude is toward the quality of an online degree" (Allen and Seaman, 2009b, p. 20). Primary barriers to the widespread acceptance and adoption of online learning include the need for increased student discipline and focus, lack of acceptance by faculty members, low retention rates in online courses, higher costs to develop and deliver online courses, and the lack of acceptance of online degrees by employers.

Huss (2007) reported on the attitudes of 326 principals in Indiana, Kentucky, and Ohio about hiring teachers with online degrees. Almost every responding principal (99 percent) reported they would be somewhat or very concerned about a teacher candidate who received a wholly online degree. A resounding 95 percent of the participating principals noted that an online degree does not carry as much credibility as a traditional degree. If the decision came down to two equally qualified teachers, where the only difference was an online degree compared to a traditional degree, 99 percent of the principals reported that they would hire the traditionally-trained teacher candidate.

Napier (2009) reported on the debate about teachers who earned an online degree versus teachers who earned a traditional degree. Napier found that in the USA an increasing number of online teaching degrees are being earned by retirees looking to secure a second career. Employers noted that the gravest concern with online teaching degrees was the lack of field experiences. Many recruiters noted however they would have difficulty knowing if a particular degree was earned online, which may actually benefit online degree earners. The authors found that the "critical shortage of teachers in math, science, reading and special education is opening doors for applicants with online degrees" (Napier, 2009, p. 3). It was noted that these market conditions might shift how employers view the credibility of candidates with online degrees.

The studies described above provide rich insights into the attitudes about online education in general but fail to inform the field of educational administration specifically. Given that the number of partially or wholly online school leadership

programs is increasing in the USA, it is vital to understand the acceptability of these degrees for school leaders. The current study thus focused on answering the following research question:

RQ1. What are the perceptions of US K-12 school districts with regard to hiring or promoting school principals who completed part or all of their administrative preparatory courses online?

Methods
The current study used a mixed methodology. Results from a quantitative survey were combined with qualitative comments from open-ended questions attached to the survey to inform the findings. Patton (2002, p. 248) describes how "a rich variety of methodological combinations can . . . illuminate an inquiry question". Further, Patton noted how "understanding inconsistencies in findings across different kinds of data can be illuminative" and thus the point of mixed methods is to "*test* for [author's emphasis] such consistency" (Patton, 2002, p. 248). What follows is a description of the instrument, sampling procedures, and response rates.

Instrument development
A focus group consisting of five experts in the field of educational leadership and human resources in K-12 schools generated an initial set of questions about leadership preparation and online learning. These questions were analyzed and compiled into a pilot survey. The pilot survey was distributed to each of the five focus group participants to gain content and format suggestions. These suggestions were incorporated into the final survey. Last, the final instrument was distributed to three human resource directors to get feedback on how best to solicit responses from their peers.

Sampling
The simple random sampling procedure sought to address the three characteristics of a sample frame as described by Fowler (2002):

(1) Comprehensiveness;
(2) probability of selection; and
(3) efficiency.

The researchers used a random number generator and selected 500 school districts out of 14,276 school districts nationally using the Institute of Educational Statistics (2004) school district database. The dissemination of the survey used the tailor design method of mail and internet surveys developed by Dillman (2000). A teaser postcard was sent indicating a survey would be forthcoming, followed by the survey one week later. A follow-up postcard was mailed three weeks after the initial postcard. The participants were invited to take the survey in either a paper format or via a link to an online survey tool provided on both the survey and the postcard.

The human resources director was chosen as the unit of study for two reasons. First, in the USA the human resource director is responsible for collecting transcripts, letters of recommendation, and supporting documents for all staff in the school district. This person is best versed in each employee's educational background and credentials. In most US school districts, this person is the first point of contact in the hiring process.

Thus, the human resource director is responsible for ensuring each candidate meets the minimum requirements for the position. Second the human resource director in US school districts is responsible for adjusting salary schedules when current school staff members successfully complete a combination of university credits and professional development opportunities. Employees must submit proof of completion to the human resource directors. It was thus believed that this person was best suited to inform the researchers about what type of credits and degrees are acceptable in their respective school district. It is noted that the superintendent in many districts may play a larger role in the actual selection of principal candidates. Through the expert pool of five leaders in the field of educational leadership and discussions with human resources directors in K-12 school districts in the USA however, we felt the human resources director would be better versed in detailing district perceptions, policies, and actions.

Response rates
The response rate was 21 percent with 107 surveys returned. Two surveys were removed because the respondent indicated they were not human resource directors. Thus, analysis was conducted on 105 surveys. The low response rate, although a concern, is common in the current literature. Baruch (1999) explored response rates of published papers in leading journals on management and behavioral sciences and found there has been a decline in response rates since 1975. As of 1995, the average return rate for top management personnel was 36.1 percent with a standard deviation of 18.2. Baruch (1999, p. 432) noted that "based on the present sample, it was found that the level of RR [response rate] has decreased steadily through the years". Likewise, Dey (1997) found response rates have decreased from 58 percent in 1961-1962 to 21 percent in 1987-1991. In a meta-analysis of response rates using internet-based surveys, Cook *et al.* (2000) found the average response rate was 39.6 percent with a standard deviation of 19.6 percent. This data was based on 49 studies.

In the current study, surveys were received from human resource directors of school districts in 34 states. With regard to location, 7.9 percent classified themselves as urban school districts, 17.8 percent as suburban, and 74.3 percent classified their school districts as rural. Student populations in these districts ranged from 20 to 54,000.

Validity and reliability
Content validity of the instrument was achieved using an expert focus group to develop the test items. Face validity was enhance by having an outside human resource manager complete a talk aloud of the instrument. In this process, the representative member of the population simply read the questions, answered appropriately, and talked about the thought process involved in determining the response.

Prior to analysis, reverse scaled items were flipped to enhance clarity of interpretations. As reported in Table I, internal consistency reliability of the constructs was determined using Cronbach's alpha. The constructs of familiarity, concerns, and personal beliefs about online learning achieved relatively high internal consistency while the construct of having difficulty determining if principal preparation was completed online had an acceptable level of internal consistency.

Terminology and US specific school leadership training
In the USA, traditional courses and degrees are offered by physical universities where students attend classes with their peers in a face-to-face environment. These classes can be offered on campus or off campus at remote sites. In the current study, courses or programs that are referred as online are offered through the internet with or without the guidance of an instructor. These courses or programs could be offered by a traditional university or by a wholly online, for-profit university. Hybrid courses or hybrid programs are usually offered from traditional universities and include both face-to-face coursework and online coursework. The split between face-to-face and online content delivery depends entirely on the instructor and/or the program.

In the USA, the term "distance education" can refer to different things. Distance education (pre-personal computers) referred to correspondence courses where materials are mailed to the student, completed, and returned to an instructor. With the advent of television, distance education has meant synchronous meetings where some students are physically in a classroom with the instructor while others are in various locations interacting via cameras, microphones, and video screens. Remote, off campus, and distance education teaching however is not too pedagogically different than face-to-face because it is still led in real-time, with an instructor. The only difference is the classrooms may not share the same physical space.

Similar distance education practices (e.g. correspondence, remote teaching, televised lectures, and online course) have been common internationally and are often referred to as open university options. The UK has been successfully using this model since the mid-1970s. Internationally, various modes of distance education including intensive-face- to-face, distance learning, open universities, and online coursework have been generally accepted for the professional development of school leaders.

It should be noted that many traditional, face-to-face institutions in the USA have offered distance education options to educators and school leaders for decades to address the needs of rural educators. These distance education practices (as defined above) are well accepted in the USA and well accepted by school districts. In recent years, the meaning of distance education in the USA has morphed to become synonymous with online education. These online distance education practices however have only recently found their way into school leadership education programs.

With the widespread adoption of the internet, private, for-profit universities were created that predominantly or wholly offered their degrees online under the umbrella of distance education. In the USA, approval of these degrees comes through a voluntary, regional accreditation process; although there are no federal laws detailing what can or cannot be called a "university" or mandating that universities be accredited. Thus, the internet has introduced into the USA the question of what is a

Construct	Number of items	Cronbach's alpha
Difficulty determining if principal preparation was online	2	0.74
Familiarity with online programs	4	0.84
Concerns about online learning	2	0.81
Personal beliefs about online principal preparation	11	0.81

Table I.
Reliability of instrument
using alpha coefficients

"real university" and what is a "real degree". Within the scope of this issue, US school districts are struggling to determine the acceptability of online credentials for school leaders.

In the current study, face-to-face refers to traditional, brick and mortar universities. Online institutions refer to private, for profit universities that conduct all of the courses and degrees via the internet. In the USA, the distinction has become slightly blurred since traditional universities are now offering courses online or in a blended environment (partially face-to-face and partially online) and are even offering some degrees/licensure programs totally online. We attempted to make these distinctions in the results that follow.

Results

Concerns about online preparation programs

Respondents were asked if they would have any special concerns about principal candidates who were trained online. Slightly over 85 percent of the human resource directors reported they would have concerns about a principal candidate who was trained wholly online. If the principal candidate were trained partially online, slightly less than 60 percent of these human resource directors would have concerns. Nevertheless, 64 percent reported they would treat a wholly online prepared principal candidate differently, whereas 43 percent reported they would treat a partially online prepared principal candidate differently. Interestingly, only four out of ten human resource directors reported they would not care whether a principal preparation program was online or face-to-face as long as it was accredited by their state.

Perceptions of quality of online coursework and online degrees

Table II details the perceptions of the human resource directors about online courses in contrast to face-to-face courses. Although the majority of respondents reported perceiving that principals-in-training did less work in online programs, a majority reported thinking these programs were lower quality in contrast to face-to-face programs. More than three out of four respondents reported that face-to-face programs did a better job preparing candidates to be school leaders.

Principal preparation courses

Human resource directors were asked to indicate which principal preparation courses were more difficult, less difficult, or equally difficult to teach in an online format compared to a traditional face-to-face format. Table III reports the findings for this set of questions. One in three respondents reported that technology leadership was easier to teach online and one in five reported that school policy and politics was easier to teach online. Nearly 78 percent reported the internship would be more difficult to teach online than face-to-face while 69 percent reported that employee supervision and evaluation would be more difficult to teach online. Administration of special education was reported to be equally difficult to teach either online or face-to-face by slightly more than 45 percent of the human resource directors.

Perceptions of quality by location

The section above details the human resource directors' perceptions of online courses and degrees for principal candidates across the USA. Looking at the same data

Questions	Agree (%)	Disagree (%)	Mean[a]	Standard deviation
Online principal preparation programs are of lower quality than face-to-face programs	65.7	34.3	2.28	0.894
Students in online principal preparation programs do less work than they would in a traditional face-to-face program	43.0	57.0	2.65	0.892
Traditional face-to-face principal preparation programs do a better job than online programs of preparing candidates for the demands of the principalship	76	24.0	1.96	0.975
It is easier for students to cheat in online principal preparation programs than in a traditional face-to-face program	59.2	40.1	2.41	0.868
It is more difficult to assess the quality of online principal preparation programs than traditional face-to-face programs	80.6	19.4	1.89	0.779
The quality of in-state online principal preparation programs is higher than online programs offered by out-of-state institutions	23.5	76.5	3.02	0.859
The quality of principal preparation programs that are partially online is higher than those that are wholly online	53.6	46.4	2.52	0.879
Online principal preparation programs offered by traditional colleges and universities are of higher quality than those offered by wholly online institutions	74.0	26.0	2.06	0.862
Compared to traditional colleges and universities, institutions that are wholly online are more concerned about making money than providing a quality education	60.8	39.2	2.32	0.846
Traditional face-to-face principal preparation programs do a better job than online programs of teaching about local and state-specific issues	83.2	16.8	1.74	0.856
Principal candidates that take one or more courses online are more technology savvy than those that only take traditional face-to-face courses	54.9	45.1	2.47	0.920

Note: [a]Means range from 1-4 where 1 indicates agreement and 4 indicates disagreement

Table II.
Perceptions of quality of
online programs/courses
by human resource
directors

disaggregated by location provided the researchers with a slightly different picture. Given that the sample is skewed toward rural respondents, the data were analyzed by percentages of each group to determine if patterns emerged.

In total, seven out of ten human resource directors who thought online principal preparation programs were of lower quality compared to traditional face-to-face programs were from rural school districts. Human resource directors were also asked if traditional face-to-face principal preparation programs do a better job than online programs of preparing candidates for the demands of the principalship. Half of urban school districts agreed with this statement. In contrast 88.9 percent suburban and 76 percent rural school districts agreed with this statement.

Principal preparation course	More difficult to teach online than face-to-face (%)	Easier to teach online than face-to-face (%)	Equally difficult to teach online or face-to-face (%)	Standard deviation
Administration of special education	44.4	10.1	45.5	0.953
Collective bargaining	49.5	10.3	40.2	0.947
Curricular/instructional leadership	52	11	37	0.936
Employee supervision and evaluation	69	11	20	0.810
Organizational/leadership theory	38	17	45	0.913
Personnel/human resource administration	57	7	36	0.946
Principal internship	77.8	7.1	15.2	0.737
Principalship	62	4	34	0.944
School finance/budget	47	16	37	0.916
School law	41.4	15.2	43.4	0.926
School policy/politics	40	20	40	0.899
Technology leadership	29	33	38	0.818

Table III.
Perceptions of ease in teaching typical principal preparation courses

Half of urban and suburban human resource directors thought students who take online principal preparation programs do less work than they would in traditional face-to-face programs; this compares to 40.8 percent of rural school districts. Suburban and rural school districts were much more concerned about cheating in online environments. Nearly 60 percent of these school districts reported agreeing that cheating was easier in an online program than in a face-to-face program in contrast to only 37.5 percent of urban school districts. Assessing quality of an online course compared to a face-to-face course was reported to be equally difficult across locations (75 percent urban, 79.7 percent rural, and 83.3 percent suburban).

One in three human resource directors in suburban school districts thought in-state online principal preparation programs were of higher quality than out-of-state programs. In contrast, 85.7 percent of urban and 78 percent of rural school districts disagreed that in-state online principal programs were higher quality than out-of-state programs. Around half of each location group reported that partly online programs were of higher quality than wholly online programs. However, 88.8 percent of human resource directors in suburban school districts thought online principal preparation programs offered through traditional colleges and universities were of higher quality than online institutions. This is in contrast to 75 percent of urban school districts and 70.4 percent of rural school districts. More than eight out of ten respondents in suburban schools reported that wholly online colleges and universities are more concerned with financial gains than providing a quality education. In contrast, 37.5 percent of urban and 57.5 percent of rural school districts reported this belief.

When asked if traditional face-to-face principal preparation programs do a better job than online principal preparation programs preparing school leaders about local and state specific issues, 100 percent of urban, 88.8 percent of suburban, and 79.2 percent of rural school districts agreed with this statement. When asked if principal candidates who take one or more online courses are more technology savvy than those who take only traditional face-to-face courses, 50 percent of urban, 33.3 percent of suburban, and 47.9 percent of rural disagreed with this statement.

Essential characteristics of high quality online programs
An additional goal of the current research was to inform institutions of higher education about how to build and develop better online courses and programs to meet the needs of K-12 public schools. Human resource directors were asked "If a principal preparation program was striving to be both online and of high quality, what essential characteristics or components should be included?" Responses fell into five main thematic categories:

(1) human interactions;

(2) mentoring;

(3) quality content and instruction;

(4) essential skills development; and

(5) quality assurance.

Theme 1: human interactions. Human resource directors were concerned by the perceived lack of face-to-face contact in online programs. The respondents mentioned that virtual synchronous meeting spaces are acceptable substitutes for many face-to-face aspects of traditional learning. One human resource director noted that online programs "must have a time that the entire class comes together either online to chat or in a traditional face-to-face meeting". In this statement, the issue is not format, but real-time interactions. Three respondents noted that in an effort to build camaraderie, a cohort model is needed in online principal preparation programs. A concern was also expressed that students in online programs need to engage in the same discussions that would be covered in a traditional, face-to-face course.

Respondents were passionate that online programs for school leaders had to include significant opportunities for students to interact with other principal candidates. One human resource director said "being a principal requires development of 'people skills' which cannot be done through online courses. Content ... is only 25 percent of the course. The other 75 percent is face-to-face interaction".

Repeatedly, respondents expressed concerns about the internship and the need for principal candidates to spend quality time in real school settings and thus actually work in the position of a school administrator. There needs to be "a means of providing some hands-on training" and online programs must "include some face-to-face experiences in school settings". Multiple human resource directors suggested increasing the time commitment of the internship for online principal preparation programs.

Theme 2: mentoring. A concern expressed by various respondents was the need for mentoring in online coursework. One human resource director said there is a need to "establish learning communities for participants [and] have some required experience in a district along with the program". This theme was also evident when another respondent said there is a need for "practical input from administrators who are currently employed". Mentoring was noted to be necessary at the building level as well as at the district level. This theme was similar to the concern over an in depth quality internship. One director said there is a "need to have a principal mentor working with the candidate" while another noted "there would need to be a component of so many hours whereby the candidate interned with an experienced principal and would write up his experiences and be interviewed for knowledge he gained". Here mentoring was

discussed as a way of building a face-to-face component while also providing a traditional mechanism for quality assurance.

Theme 3: quality content and instruction. The human resource directors in the current study reported that online principal preparation programs should include:

- in depth discussions, activities, and assignments;
- interactions with current school leaders; and
- be led by quality instructors.

One human resource director expressed concern that assignments and papers should "reflect a synthesis of information". Another human resource director said online students need "to openly discuss issues that may happen in schools ... the possible solutions are extremely important". Suggestions included scenario role-playing and project-based activities that are developed around local issues. With regard to content a pervasive argument was that online programs "must teach what we need to know to be effective on the campus – theory, personnel issues, discipline, how to work with parents and staff, as well as curriculum issues".

Human resource directors suggested that online degree programs that prepare school leaders should include significant contact and interactions with current and past school leaders. One respondent noted "there should be opportunities for students to interact with principals and other administrators in order to learn what textbooks don't or can't teach". Another human resource director stated that there needs to be "opportunities for reflection and working with recently hired professionals".

Respondents additionally noted the need for quality professors in online programs. "Professors must provide meaningful feedback to students" and students "need personal contact with the instructor". Another human resource director said that professors need to ensure students get an "up-to-date, research based anthology of literature on the subject of the course work". A caveat was noted that coursework must include theory as well as the practical application of that theory.

Theme 4: essential skills. Human resource directors reported that principal candidates trained online should have content knowledge, research abilities, strong interpersonal communication skills, technological presentation skills using technologies such as PowerPoint or Keynote, and effective networking skills. It was stated that there needs to be "a method of monitoring all students that would ensure that they have practical and hands-on experiences, that they know state laws ... that they understand contract law, [and that they have] a thorough knowledge of fund accounting practices and budget development". Another respondent suggested that online programs need to ensure the development of certain leadership dispositions. "He/she should be able to put theory into practice. He/she should be able to think out of the box". To increase the quality of online programs, it was suggested there needs to be "higher standards and alignment with ISLLC [Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium] standards" in addition to "rigorous assessments, benchmark products and papers that would require in depth thinking and use the knowledge gained from the readings".

Theme 5: quality assurance. With regard to quality, a dominant concern centered on academic dishonesty and cheating. One human resource director said there must be

"documented steps to make sure work is completed by the certified student". Another respondent noted, "I would want to be assured of who did the work for the grade".

It was often noted that online degree programs that prepare school principals need to be rigorous and relevant and that there needs to be a system of accountability. Nonetheless, a few respondents held a rather negative perception of online degrees. One respondent said, "I am not sure online programs can be truly of high quality". Another human resource director said "I don't believe that an online program could adequately prepare a candidate for the principalship". To be convinced of quality, rigor, and relevance, it was suggested that there needs to be "research data showing past graduates [of online programs] are very successful school administrators".

While not outright negative, one human resource director expressed ambivalence by saying there needs to be "verification of credentials and experience assurance so that there isn't fraud". Another respondent noted that there needs to be "some type of quality assessment offline where quality and aptitude can be documented". Multiple respondents noted that online degrees for school principals need to be regionally and/or state accredited.

Conclusions

The study has two major limitations. First, the low response rate is a concern. Although the low response rate is reflected in the current literature, it is unclear if other factors impacted the response rate. The second limitation is that 74.3 percent of the population analyzed self-reported their district as being rural. Results reported concerning differences by location must therefore be looked at with caution; the results may represent a rather conservative perspective about online learning. The results may be different if the sample were repeated using a stratified sampling procedure. The findings of the current study may be more pertinent to rural districts versus suburban or urban school districts.

If the study were repeated and improved, incentivizing respondents to increase the return rate and stratifying the sample may increase the robustness of the results. Future areas of research should include:

- Do superintendents view online learning the same as their human resources directors?
- What are some models of high quality online principal preparation programs?
- Do school districts in different locations (i.e. urban, rural, suburban) view online principal preparation differently?
- Are perceptions of online credentials different across different countries?

The current study found that principal preparation degrees and course offered online in the USA are, at best, only peripherally accepted by those who vet K-12 school principals. Zogby (2008, p. 81) noted that "online education suffers from and will continue to suffer from an 'enthusiasm gap' so long as it lacks the imprimatur of the traditional standard-bearers of higher education". The findings of the present study indicate this is likewise the case for school administrators. Thus, traditional brick-and-mortar universities may have an advantage given that nearly nine out of ten respondents believed these institutions were doing a better job of preparing school

principals online than a wholly online university. This is despite the fact that no data either confirms or refutes this perception.

Richardson (2010, p. 22) stated that "educators should realize that school districts may be hesitant to hire online-credentialed administrators and prejudiced against online preparation". However, an interesting finding of this study was that experience with and exposure to online course work and degrees for school administrators increases their acceptability. It is perhaps with the passing of time and the felt need by stakeholders that a perceptual shift will occur.

The current study, nonetheless, is alarming, in one regard. Many school administrators today have completed part or all of their coursework online or in a hybrid setting. Yet there does not appear to exist a segment of the principal applicant pool that finds themselves jobless due to the environment in which a degree or coursework was completed. However, the bleak picture painted by the current study is not completely telling. It may be the case that the sample responding to the study (predominantly rural) was biased against online learning or the sample had limited exposure to online coursework/programs for school administrators. It also could be the case that what happens theoretically and is expressed as a perception is not what happens in reality.

The current study is quite useful in that it determined themes programs and universities could focus on to both improve the actual quality of their courses and programs and to increase the perception of the quality of these courses and programs. Similarly, educational leadership preparation programs offering or developing online degrees can align their offerings with the characteristics of high quality programs espoused in the current literature around effective leadership preparation (e.g. Darling-Hammond *et al.*, 2007; Hale and Moorman, 2003; Levine, 2005; Olson, 2007). It is through a focus on human interactions, mentoring, providing quality content and instruction, ensuring students acquire a core set of basic skills, while developing mechanisms to ensure and report out quality that online degrees and courses for school administrators will be perceived to be at least equal to face-to-face options.

Addressing these themes could occur in a multitude of ways. One simple strategy would be for institutions to provide specific, clear, and explicit literature about how their online programs and courses address these concerns. This literature should not be written from a marketing perspective as a means to attract more students, but rather from a full disclosure perspective where the general public and potential employers can easily locate the information and become more informed. This shifts the focus to academic fidelity and integrity of the degree offerings, rather than simple flexibility and convenience that, although important, may contribute to online degree offerings being seen as "less than" their on-campus counterparts (Gambescia and Paolucci, 2009). As the current study found, it is through exposure that acceptance of online learning for school administrators increases.

There appear to be many contradictions when the issue of online coursework or online degrees is included in the discussion of school leadership preparation in the USA. The current study finds that school districts require more accountability, want more fact checking, and demand higher quality from online courses and degrees while simultaneously assuming that these aspects are inherent in programs and courses offered by traditional brick-and-mortar institutions. In fact, the current literature

indicates the opposite may be true (Hess and Kelly, 2005; Hoyle, 2007). Thus, despite data indicating otherwise, human resource directors tended to perceive that face-to-face coursework offered by traditional brick-and-mortar institutions is superior to any form of online learning, especially online education offered from wholly online universities.

The millennial budget woes that plagued many US institutions of higher education will only expedite the call for more online learning opportunities. This invariably will mean that more courses and programs will be developed and offered to leaders desiring school administration licensure or for current school leaders who need to maintain their current credentials. Thus, this research is timely and needed. Since online learning is here to stay in the field of school leadership and school administration, we all must work to ensure systems, policies, and guidelines exist to increase the acceptability and quality of online courses and degrees for school leaders.

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