

## **Leadership and Learning: The Journey to National Accreditation and Recognition**

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### **Abstract**

The process for accreditation provides the opportunity for the transformation of higher education settings from traditional teaching and learning institutions into organizations that embrace improvements through accountability models. The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the process and preparation of the Specialty Professional Association (SPA) report submitted by the educational leadership faculty at Southeast Missouri State University. The multi-year journey resulted in nationally recognized programs by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC).

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Transforming education settings from traditional teaching and learning institutions into organizations that embrace improvement through accountability is a goal for most schools today. With the focus on increasing student achievement, schools have implemented a variety of strategies to answer the challenges of current accountability and assessment systems. This is true for PK-12 learning environments, as well as for institutions of higher education. Accountability for improvement is often addressed by providing evidence of growth that is aligned to standards. This evidence is reported to state, federal, and professional organizations as a means of accreditation and recognition.

The Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Southeast Missouri State University is one such organization that has recently provided evidence of growth through an accountability and assessment model aligned to the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC) standards. By complying with the requirements of the ELCC, Specialty Professional Association (SPA) reports were developed for both the building and district level programs of study.

The purpose of this article is to provide an overview of the process and preparation of the ELCC SPA reports submitted by faculty at Southeast Missouri State University. Embarking on a multi-year journey, the faculty engaged in leadership strategies which ultimately led to the implementation of a self-analysis model used to inform practices for program improvement at

both the master's and specialist degree levels. The program report submitted resulted in national recognition by the ELCC.

### **The Southeast Journey**

School administrator preparation within the department is based on policy standards for educational leadership. The present program is based on curriculum that incorporates national policy standards (ELCC) as well as the state Missouri Standards for Teacher Education Programs (MoSTEP). The program is also aligned with the College of Education (COE) Conceptual Framework which promotes the principles of *competent, reflective, caring* professional practice in school administration. In addition, the school administration program embraces the use of *technology* for the purpose of making informed educational and management decisions in schools, understands the importance of *diversity* in the educational setting, and demonstrates *literacy* skills through written and printed communication.

### **Understanding the Development of the ELCC Standards**

In 1988, ten national leadership organizations combined to form the National Policy Board of Educational Administration (NPBEA). The bylaws of this organization included two major goals: (1) develop common and higher standards for the state licensure of principals, and (2) develop a common set of guidelines for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) for advanced programs in educational leadership (NPBEA, 2002). The objective of this second goal was to provide consistent criteria for preparing candidates for a broad range of leadership roles. NCATE is an accrediting agency established to help increase the quality of departments, schools, and colleges of education.

Consequently, standards were developed to assess principal preparation programs guided by the Educational Leadership Constituent Council (ELCC). This council includes four organizations: American Association of School Administrators (AASA), Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development (ASCD), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). The purpose of this council is to review university-based educational administration programs that seek NCATE (National Council of Accreditation of Teacher Education) accreditation using national standards developed by the National Policy Board for Education Administration (NPBEA, 2002). The national standards used by ELCC in its review process, are entitled Standards for Advanced Programs in Educational Leadership.

In preparing the SPA document, the seven 2002 ELCC Standards provided the foundation for the report. Standards one through six focused on key elements of school leadership. The seventh standard included the effective application and synthesis of knowledge and skills learned in the previous standards in a capstone internship experience (NPBEA, 2002).

### **Collaborative Planning**

As a means of professional development, the faculty and department chair attended a preparation session provided by representatives from the ELCC organization. Discussions included how to develop assessment rubrics, the manner in which to collect data, and what were

the expectations regarding the analysis and use of the data to inform programmatic practices. Samples of reports, assessments, and assessment rubrics, as well as the SPA report template, were distributed for use by participants. The 2002 edition of the ELCC standards were addressed during the session. Since that time, a new set of ELCC standards were approved in 2011. Programs could choose to use either set of standards through Fall 2012. In Spring 2013, programs submitting reports must use the new set of standards.

Reeves (2003) suggests that with the implementation of standards, there is an inevitable move to reform curriculum. With the ELCC standards providing the foundation of the preparation experience, the faculty began addressing curriculum reform relative to program improvement efforts, which ultimately led to the development of the assessments included in the SPA report. At the forefront of the process, as further suggested by Reeves (2005), the faculty embraced the idea that the fundamental purpose of schooling was to ensure that all students acquired the knowledge, skills, and dispositions essential to their success as learners, and that the need for improvement was immediate and imperative. Although Reeves was addressing schooling in a more PK-12 manner, the faculty maintained the same concept when addressing program improvement efforts in the higher educational setting.

Following a variety of models regarding improvement, the faculty first relied on the work of DuFour, Eaker, and DuFour (2005) as they addressed the use of professional learning communities. Clarifying their purpose, the faculty began asking “what do we want our candidates to know” relative to student proficiencies, and “how will we know when candidates have mastered the learning,” reflecting candidate outcomes. These discussions were collaborative in nature and resulted in much discussion relative to the challenges school leaders face today and what must be included in a preparation program to ensure success.

To further their efforts toward improvement, assessments *of* and *for* learning were addressed by the faculty. As suggested by Stiggins (2007, pp. 61-69), there are key factors to consider when assuring that assessments are productive in providing evidence for candidate success. These factors include the following:

- Begin with a clear purpose for the assessment, giving a sense of why the assessment is being used.
- Include a clear achievement target, reflecting the vision of what needs to be assessed.
- Design an assessment that accurately reflects the target and satisfies the purpose.
- Communicate the results effectively to the intended users of the assessment.

With candidate outcomes measuring success as the focus, the faculty collaborated on the use and development of assessments within the programs. Evidence *of* student growth was discussed as well as how to use the assessment process *for* learning. The first measure was viewed as an accountability factor, with the second supporting candidate growth (Stiggins, 2007, p. 70).

In addition to the collaborative work of the faculty, a focus group of local practicing administrators was convened to gather additional information regarding current practices in the field. According to Creswell (2008), focus groups can be used to collect shared understanding from several participants as well as to get views from specific people. Purposeful sampling was used as the method to identify highly effective school leaders at both the building and district

level. The faculty of the educational leadership department submitted names of regional leaders to the department chair. Potential participants were sent a letter of invitation that described the purpose of the study and asked if they would consider participating in a focus group. Representatives included superintendents, an assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and building level principals from both the elementary and secondary levels. A department faculty liaison was the focus group leader who developed questions and lead the discussion.

A key to conducting successful focus group interviews is to identify the appropriate questions to be used during the session, with five to six questions encompassing the desired purpose of the study (Villard, 2003). Again, the faculty determined that the six Educational Leadership Policy Standards of 2008 would be appropriate as a framework in order to develop the questions used during the group session. In addition to the standard itself, each has a variety of function statements that address leadership knowledge, skills, and dispositions related to building and district level administration. Learning from others produced a broader understanding of issues and assumptions that may otherwise be narrowly characterized (Mertens, 2005). The results of this focus group offered considerable perspective on how the educational leadership faculty might transform the preparation experiences.

Once this information regarding leadership practices was collected and the faculty had addressed the purpose for improvement, an additional model was utilized. Following the work of Wiggins and McTighe (2001), the faculty embraced the Understanding by Design model that incorporates a backward mapping process. Candidate goals, aligned to leadership standards, were developed that reflected desired outcomes. Assessment evidence was an important facet of the conversation, in that rubrics would be required to be developed and submitted as a measure for accreditation that reflected criteria for performance. Finally, learning activities were discussed in order to plan for authentic performance tasks aligned to leadership practices required for school administrators at both the building and district levels.

### **Transition Points and Document Revisions**

Department syllabi were addressed in order to revise goals, objectives, assessments, and instructional activities. Faculty members divided the work of addressing each syllabus among the members, deciding on a timeline for task completion. Each syllabus was examined to determine the alignment of current standards, and to ensure there were no gaps in program requirements. Course assignments included student projects and activities that would provide evidence of meeting the standards as required for the SPA report. Program reviews for the ELCC process include a minimum of six assessments in addition to the state licensure test in the content.

Each syllabus was also aligned to the College of Education Conceptual Framework. Department syllabi were then approved at the department, college, graduate council, and academic council levels within the University.

In addition to syllabi revisions and the development of assessment rubrics, transition points within the program were determined. These transition points represent multiple learning opportunities that are research-based and designed to prepare all candidates for futures roles in leadership positions. Five points provide benchmarks for student progression throughout the program. These steps include 1) admission to the graduate school, 2) department review of

admission documents and the assignment of a permanent advisor, 3) course matriculation where candidates complete key assessments that are unique to the School Administration program, including school improvement planning, public relations strategy planning, school simulation and intervention plans, curriculum and instructional design, scheduling and budgeting, and teacher evaluation and performance, 4) a comprehensive exam is administered as a capstone experience, and 5) the final transition point for School Administration occurs after program completion and is assessed using a follow-up survey aligned with the ELCC, ISLLC and MoStep Standards.

### **Data Collection and Use of Data to Inform Practice**

Data collection for three years was required for the process of accreditation and recognition. With the planning and revising phase completed, immediately upon the succeeding semester, data collection began. During this first semester of data collection, the faculty implemented the revised syllabi that included updated course objectives and assessments. Scoring rubrics were completed for each ELCC assessment. One faculty member collected the master's level data with another collecting specialist level data.

The Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling reviewed the assessment data each semester, during "data day," to ensure systematic use of the assessment results to improve candidate and program performance. The College of Education also utilized an Assessment Committee, charged with completing performance data aligned with program objectives, as a means of University evaluation. This report is submitted on an annual basis to the University Assessment Committee, the Chair of the department, the Dean of the College of Education, and the University Provost.

Resulting from the semester discussions of the data, several changes were made to improve candidate and program performance. Interpreting the data from the content area assessments, the faculty developed an additional activity to be added to the portfolio compiled during the Internship experience. This activity focused more on Standard 4, responding to diverse community interests and needs, and mobilizing community resources. In addition, to address Standard I relating to school vision, the required graduate paper would be developed focusing on a vision of learning. This graduate paper discussion and findings would then be presented during the comprehensive examination.

Interpreting data from the professional and pedagogical knowledge, skills, and disposition assessments, faculty updated activities that included experiences where candidates incorporate grade level expectations objectives aligned with the Missouri Assessment Program (MAP). Additional updates were incorporated into the school improvement planning process that aligns with the Missouri accreditation requirements. Candidates also are expected to review testing data available to them via the Missouri Department of Elementary and Secondary Education in order to utilize the data in planning for school improvement. To address the Internship connection, a request was made to allow release time for visitation to the individual schools where Interns are working. A new form for supervisor evaluations was also developed.

In the area of candidate learning assessments, the faculty determined a need to include more required activities that assisted candidates in their growth with collaboration with the community as noted previously. Semester analysis of the data continued with the goal of revising syllabi and rubrics in response to the information collected from the candidates. A required

activity that continued to be expected was for every candidate to join a professional organization. Finally, the Assessment 5 Employer Survey was planned to be administered on a yearly basis.

### **Generation and Submission of the SPA**

Using the template for completion, the coordinators for both the building level and district level programs began the process of compiling the SPA report. Once a draft report was completed, the Dean of the College of Education suggested the use of an outside reader to provide feedback regarding the content. Following her recommendation, the faculty submitted the report. Subsequent feedback resulted in revisions to several assessment rubrics. Rubrics were revised to provide more detailed and specific activities relating to the authentic experiences of the candidates. Draft reports were also submitted to the department chair, the Dean of the College of Education, and the College Assessment Committee in order to gain additional feedback before final submissions. Given that report responses were limited in character count, a focus of these groups was a review not only for accuracy in reporting, but also relative to the length of the responses.

Final submissions were scheduled by the College coordinator for Assessment. A location within the University Center for Scholarship in Teaching and Learning was determined so that SPA reporters would have access to a computer lab on campus. Both the coordinators for the building level and the district level programs were given a timeframe for entering the final SPA submission. Reports and attached data rubrics were entered electronically with little difficulties encountered during the process.

### **The Report of National Recognition**

Both the School Building Level and the District Level programs received national recognition. All standards were met at both levels. The majority of assessments were deemed “more than adequate” in providing information.

A summary of strengths at the building level included, 1) comprehensive internship with a substantial number of hours and experiences, 2) results are clearly being used to make improvements in the program and identify successful practices, and 3) the comprehensive exam rubric is particularly impressive and clearly demonstrates whether or not candidates are developing content and skills and are impacting student learning. According to the Part G- Decisions section of the building level report, the following was reported to the University, college of education, and the unit department:

Program is nationally recognized. The program is recognized through the semester and year of the institution’s next NCATE accreditation decision in 5-7 years. To retain recognition, another program report must be submitted before that review. The program will be listed as nationally recognized through the semester of the next NCATE accreditation decision on the websites and/or other publications of the SPA and NCATE. The institution may designate its program as nationally recognized by NCATE in its published materials. (Educational Leadership Constituent Council, 2009a, p. 8)

A summary of strengths at the district level included, 1) passing rate on the state test dramatically increased in the last two years of reporting, 2) comprehensive exam is truly 'comprehensive' and suggests a rigorous and complex program of study, 3) assessment 6 (Portfolio) provides an outstanding and complex set of opportunities to develop skills needed by today's leaders, and 4) the Internship is sustained throughout the year and covers a wide ranging set of skills. According to the Part G-Decisions section of the district report, the following was reported to the University, college of education, and the unit department:

Program is nationally recognized. The program is recognized through the semester and year of the institution's next NCATE accreditation decision in 5-7 years. To retain recognition, another program report must be submitted before that review. The program will be listed as nationally recognized through the semester of the next NCATE accreditation decision on the websites and/or other publications of the SPA and NCATE. The institution may designate its program as nationally recognized by NCATE in its published materials. (Educational Leadership Constituent Council, 2009b, p. 8)

### **The Next Steps to Address Program Improvements**

Included in the feedback from the accreditation reviewers was a suggestion to revise the employer survey, Assessment 5. Although this assessment met the standards for reporting, it was suggested that the survey needs to provide more specifically at the item level. Instead of restating the standard, the statements should be extended to include, "as evidenced by" enabling the field supervisor to be more specific when responding to and evaluating the candidate.

With the recent revisions in the ELCC standards, the faculty will need to address the updated program report that are now required as of spring of 2013. This process will begin again in the same collaborative manner as was done with the current report. A decision to address Option A or Option B reporting will be discussed.

The faculty is also researching the use of an electronic portfolio and data collection system. In the College of Education, this model is being used with Chalk and Wire at the undergraduate level and has recently been adopted by the Counseling wing of the department. At present, data is collected manually by both coordinators; having an electronic means to do so would enhance the collection process.

The Internship experience is another area the faculty is currently researching in order to revise. At present, the candidate enrolls in an internship, both building and district level, with the expectation that the leadership preparation work will be done within one calendar year. Thoughts are to divide the experience into two courses, with projects completed within each semester. Internship I would have specific requirements, with Internship II having additional projects for completion. This would enable candidates to have continuous enrollment in the program and be able to have continued services from the University (email, library privileges).

Finally, program improvement will be addressed on a semester basis, with revisions in objectives, activities, and assessments done in response to a continued improvement model. Syllabi will be updated to reflect the changes with the approval process completed within the department, college, graduate council, and university levels. Strategies to reflect any state and federal mandates will be included in the revisions.

## Lessons Learned and Implications for Practice

Several lessons were learned over the course of the accreditation process. First, the use of the outside reader is imperative. Without the use of this resource, the assessment rubrics would not have met evidence of meeting the standards. Feedback from the reviewer assisted the faculty in developing specific, detailed rubrics that provided evidence of candidate growth and performance.

Second, collaboration is a key to program improvement efforts. The faculty worked toward the development of the major assessments in a collaborative manner. In addition, by collecting data on a semester basis and meeting with the purpose of analyzing the data, the faculty has been able to adjust and revise projects and activities that are more authentic in nature as future leaders are prepared for the challenges of school or district level administration.

Lastly, the faculty finds it imperative to stay current in the field of leadership standards and accreditation. The ELCC standards have been recently revised. In turn, SPA reports have been updated to reflect these revisions. Department members have recently discussed the new reporting procedures and how to prepare for the next accreditation process. Updates in data collection procedures will also be addressed.

## Summary

The focus on program improvement efforts through the accreditation process by faculty at Southeast Missouri State University continues to be a multi-year journey. By implementing a self-analysis model to inform practices at both the master's and specialist degree levels, candidate performance is enhanced. Work continues within the department to not only provide a successful, authentic experience for candidates, but to also address candidate growth in the impact on PK-12 education.

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