

Educational Administration Candidates in Multiple-Roles As Evaluators, Learners and Consumers Within A Principal Preparation Program

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ABSTRACT

This study highlights the value of leveraging department resources in principal preparation program resources to achieve multiple teaching and program review goals. In this study masters degree candidates participated in all aspects of the evaluation of the Department of Educational Administration and Counseling. As consumers they already had a sense of what issues would be the most relevant to examine. As learners they participated in every aspect of program review. The openness of the Department modeled the kind of openness future administrators will have to exhibit in their work. The Department was able to take the findings of the study to develop a master plan for program improvement.

The ability to identify essential information and organize it in a meaningful way is fast becoming one of the most important skills for leaders. Maruska (2004) argues that in order to improve an organization, the leader must seek better information that can inform a hopeful future. Kotter (1996) warned that without an appropriate [informed] vision, a transformation effort can easily dissolve into a list of confusing, incompatible, and time-consuming projects that go nowhere” (p. 7). Peters (2003) underscored the urgency for leaders to understand as much about their own organizations as their customers do: “...*We Live in the Age of the Never Satisfied Customer*...[Information Technology] enables total transparency. People with access to

relevant information are beginning to challenge any kind of authority. The stupid, loyal and humble customer, employee, and citizen is dead” (p. 67).

For any organization to formulate its mission, understand its purpose and be credible with its various audiences, one of the most essential functions for a leader is that of creatively scanning the environment for signs of opportunities and dangers. This concept is not new. Worthen & Sanders (1987) argued that educational systems have a key deficit when they do not systematically evaluate their processes. “Without careful, systematic inquiry into the effectiveness of either current school practice or new programs, many changes occurring in education become little more than random adoption of faddish innovations” (pp. 3-4).

Accordingly, one the most important competencies of the 21st century school administrator is the ability to identify barriers to learning and take action to build a better learning environment. What makes systematic data gathering and analysis more urgent is the fact that information is now in the hands of schools various constituencies – parents, students and teachers. This in turn is leading to unprecedented demands for accountability and improved quality of service. Ultimately, school leaders who do not take program evaluation seriously will fall victim to an increasingly informed and sophisticated clientele who will select and use data in their own interest.

How to ensure the development of information gathering and analysis skills of current and future principals is the challenge of principal preparation programs across the nation. Principals who do not learn these skills risk losing credibility. Their ability to control schools will go to others who are better at analyzing and interpreting data. We know that administrators do not learn these skills from a classroom lecture, a textbook, or even a weekend retreat with a dynamic speaker and lots of good food. Therefore, it is emphatic that principal preparation programs ensure that their candidates have the commitment and skill to acquire detailed knowledge about previously unexplored arenas within their own campuses. Principal preparation programs can leverage their efforts in this quest by providing hands-on experiences to candidates that teach authentic, team-based research skills. These learning experiences will be far more effective if they occur in a setting that is both familiar and important to the learner.

A Training Model

A combination of needs came together to create a training model that enabled educational leadership candidates to evaluate the principal preparation program within the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling at Prairie View A&M University. The department had not undergone an extensive internal program review until its involvement in the Texas Principals’ Lighthouse Initiative, a consortium of approximately 15 universities in Texas committed to the continuous improvement in the delivery of principal preparation in the state. Therefore there was an urgent need for data to be collected and analyzed in a short time frame.

An educational administration research class needed a client for a program evaluation project that would involve contracting with a department within the university or a school district. The purpose would be to enable these future and current administrators to design and conduct an evaluation study from beginning to end—a turnkey operation—within an authentic environment. Ultimately these candidates would present their findings and recommendations to their client. Ironically, the academic department in which they would be earning a master’s degree also became their client.

During the first week of the 15-week inquiry candidates conducted a review of related literature on principal preparation program evaluation, adult learning methods and

standards promulgated by NCATE, the National Policy Board and the State Board of Educator Certification (Texas). Candidates interviewed other candidates and faculty members to determine what variables and questions would be most useful. Faculty opinions were sought on the questionnaire before field-testing was conducted. Sixty (N=60) candidates sat for the 54-item survey. Questions were added or deleted or wordings were adjusted to better reflect intent of the study.

Initially, some candidates were quite visceral about a few of the issues. They were instructed in the ethical considerations of evaluation research as well as the practical side of conducting a study does not threaten nor harm the client. Rather the point was to help a willing client see its own deficits and plan to improve its processes and performance. Significant professional growth and maturation occurred among the class when they came to understand that the evaluation was to guide program improvement and not was not merely an outlet for pent-up negative feelings. Role objectivity prevailed and the candidates conducted the study with great expectation of changes in the program.

After the templates had been revised and distributed, the candidates worked in pairs to learn how to set up a Statistical Program for the Social Sciences (SPSS) template that would be used to record and analyze data. They worked in the same area of a computer lab so that consistency and refinement of instructions could be maintained. Each pair of candidates was responsible for creating a portion of the template. One of the pairs with more specialized experience in data analysis managed the development of the entire template. This team maintained version control and documentation as the other teams added a portion of the template. A single version of the fifty-four-question survey template was distributed by email to each of the pairs of candidates. This master version of the SPSS template was used to record data. Any revisions to the instrument and template were noted prior to distribution to the teams.

Training in the use of SPSS continued with each team inputting data from a portion of the 60 available field-tested instruments. Each pair determined which individual would read out the response and which would perform the data entry. This ensured greater reliability and reduced data entry error and fatigue. When all data had been entered, the results of the survey were analyzed to yield frequency distributions, summary statistics, correlations and various comparisons of means.

Written comments of respondents were recorded as text in Microsoft word. The data input by the various pairs of candidates were combined into a master list. Implications of the field-test data were discussed and the implications for practice and policy were addressed. It was understood by all participants that the data gathering, organizing, inputting and analysis were just for practice. The real study lay ahead when the class participants would attempt to survey the entire population of candidates for master's degrees in educational leadership on three campuses of Prairie View A&M University.

Over a two-week period candidates distributed the revised surveys in most classes of educational leadership. Only one section of a class was not included in the study. By the end of the two-week period, because some students attended multiple classes in the Department, some classes had only a handful of students who had not completed the survey. The population of the final study totaled hundred fifty-four (N=254) candidates in educational leadership. Over the next two weeks, the pairs of candidates met during class to input the new data applying the same procedures that had been used for the preliminary training data. Written comments were coded and a table was constructed to show greater detail for some of the concerns indicated in the surveys.

The following two weeks of the study were spent discussing the findings and determining what recommendations they would make to the faculty of the Department. Data were distributed to faculty and to candidates who had been most instrumental in conducting the study. The candidates felt certain that the study was representative of their own thoughts and feelings of those of their peers. They made recommendations with great clarity and

conviction. They communicated to the faculty the urgency of making changes so that their own experiences and those of other candidates could be improved.

This study produced a number of surprising findings and some that were expected. The surveys confirmed some things that had been known for a long time. For several years there had been no systematic approach to gathering and reporting the kinds of data collected in this study, the issues were never addressed. Almost immediately after the data from this study were reported the Department, the Chair and faculty began moving on some of the most pressing issues. One example was in the area of student confusion over registration procedures, conflicting information over degree plan options and the need for numerous signatures on a variety of papers. The role of advisor had become one of signing registration forms, providing access codes for registration and signing waivers for course requirements. Papers were frequently lost, professors and students missed connections, and students were being sent to a variety of offices before they could find someone to answer their questions.

When department secretaries were interviewed to find out what had been the most frequently asked questions during each work day, they indicated that most of their days were spent answering the same questions related registration and degree plans. This corroborated the findings in Table I below:

Table I

Findings of the Candidate Survey that resulted in immediate corrective action: Stressors experienced by candidates (N=256)

	Not Stressful	Moderately Stressful	Highly Stressful
1. Departmental procedures and paper work	114 (44.5%)	100 (39.1%)	42 (16.4 %)
2. Lack of signs posted during registration	129 (50.4%)	72 (28.1%)	55 (21.5%)
3. Lack of available classes at need times and locations	108 (42.2%)	92 (35.9%)	56 (21.9%)

After inspecting the numbers included in Table I and the fifty-one remaining variables, the candidates conducting the study came away with an appreciation of the power of their data and the implications that data had for recommending reform. They also grew to appreciate the importance of moving away from the traditional use of numbers by schools and toward an approach that was more customer-oriented.

Seeing things Differently: Fixing Broke Stuff

A traditional approach to looking at survey data would be to squeeze as much good news out of them as possible. In a traditional system, it would be pointed out that the greatest number of people in each area of Table I experienced no stress about these issues. The conclusion in a traditional approach would be drawn that those who reported either “moderate stress” or high “stress” were whiners. In a blame-the-victim maneuver they would be chastised for not doing a better job of reading the instructions in the university bulletin or

some other more obscure document set out in some other not well-known corner of the department. . The result of this approach would be little or no change and complete dismissal of the concerns of the relatively smaller numbers of individuals having problems. It is axiomatic among those who are familiar with higher education literature, Alexander Astin's admonition that when students voices' cannot be heard within the system, they will vote with their feet and go elsewhere.

A more customer-oriented approach that relies on data such as this would take a much more critical view of the findings. This approach to management and leadership are based on the Six-Sigma principle that candidates on this project became immersed in as a theoretical paradigm. Pande, Neumna & Cavanaugh (2000) wrote: "In Six-Sigma, customer focus becomes the top priority. For example, the measures of Six Sigma performance begin with the customer. Six Sigma improvements are defined by their impact on a customer satisfaction and value" (p. 18). They further argue that developing a measurement 'infrastructure' is critical for the organization to monitor and respond to opportunities and challenges.

Applying this notion, candidates conducting the study noted that they or their peers do not come to a university, or to any school for that matter, just to get stressed out. They have higher purposes in mind and they expect the university to respect this. As future administrators they found this more critical approach to data analysis refreshing. They came to see this approach to data interpretation as fundamental to their own success as principals.

For example in Table I, rather than note the comparatively larger percent of people who reported no stress, they noted that 55.5 per cent of the candidates surveyed find departmental procedures and paperwork either moderately or highly stressful, 49.6 per cent found lack of signs in buildings indicating the next step during registration to be moderately or highly stressful, and 57.8 per cent of candidates found the lack of available courses at times and locations desired to be moderately or highly stressful. Written comments corroborated these numbers and provided greater explanation of concerns such as trying to find specific advisors to sign forms, forms being lost, having to refile forms multiple times, being sent to several offices before someone would begin to address their concerns, being unable to register at all due to the fact that so many courses had prerequisites and being offended due to rudeness of staff.

Administration candidates conducting this study learned that a customer-oriented approach uses every percentage point in the negative column as an opportunity to improve services. It represents an opportunity also to improve results.

When these and other data were presented to the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Counseling there was little surprise. What did change was the level of urgency attached to the problem. Within two weeks of presentation of these data, the Department went to unrestricted on-line registration for candidates, elimination of prerequisites that served little purpose and that created bottlenecks and delays in candidate program completion. Data from Multiple forms were simplified and signature requirements were eliminated. Contradictions were eliminated.

All staff members were placed on notice that no candidate was to be sent or transferred to another office. Every piece of paper was to be handled by one administrative assistant. All registration matters that remained after implementation of on-line registration were to be handled by a second administrative assistant. Advisement for professors and students was redefined to entail counseling candidates on matters of academic content and their career development. Five on-line courses were created and approved for immediately launching where none had previously existed. All of this occurred within two weeks of receipt of the students' report.

Candidate Response

After the candidates who conducted this study had efficiently collected and analyzed the data they were amazed at what had occurred. The completed SPSS tables represented the first time many had ever seen the results of a school survey that they had completed either as an employee or student. The conclusions and recommendations they generated were extensive and will take time for the department to process. However, their amazement will continue when they sit down to register for the coming semester. Yes sit down. They will find that their efforts have already yielded significant results. They will never again have to drive to the university or go through the endless registration paper chase that had become a dreaded but inevitable event. Now they will be able to register for the courses from the comfort of their homes.

Every project participant went away as an experienced evaluator. Each also had come to feel the power of having their voices not only heard but also amplified through a simple data gathering and analysis process. More importantly they learned that when data are systematically gathered for a school that has innovative leadership that invites and acts on good data, meaningful things could happen. Additional stories about these data and future changes will be the subject of future articles.

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