

No More Silos: A New Vision for Principal Preparation

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This paper shares the evolution of an online Master of School Administration program from a traditional program of single courses (e.g. finance, law) to a program of scaffolded courses integrated with field experiences and designed to prepare leaders grounded in an ethics-driven vision of school leadership. The redesign process included reviews of the literature on ethical leadership (Fullan, 2003; Pellicer, 2007; Starratt, 2004), school leadership that works (Marzano, Waters, & McNulty, 2005), and recent thought on preparation programs (Hess & Kelly, 2005; Jackson & Kelley, 2002; Murphy, 2001; SREB, 2006; Young, Fuller, Brewer, Carpenter, & Mansfield, 2007). Program development involved university faculty, practicing teachers and administrators, and candidates in the old masters program. This paper presents an overview of strategies used in the redesign process and links strategies to specific outcomes.

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Criticism of educational leadership programs is nothing new (Leaders for America's Schools, 1987). However, the scrutiny and criticism of such programs has increased significantly in recent years (Bottoms & O'Neill, 2001; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Hess & Kelly, 2005; Levine, 2005; Murphy, 2001). Countering the criticism of traditional approaches to leadership preparation, researchers are reaching consensus on practices that hold the greatest promise for preparing effective school leaders (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Waters & Grubb, 2004; Waters, Marzano, & McNulty, 2003). Therefore, those in higher education who take on the task of redesigning programs will have little problem finding research-based practices to consider.

What they will rarely find, however, are descriptions of the internal processes of successful program redesign. In fact, the conscious or unconscious reluctance to engage in the process of change within stereotypically intransigent higher education faculty may be a greater cause of the lack of change in this field than knowledge of the changes that are needed. In tracing the process of program redesign at Western Carolina University, we intentionally weave a narrative of process and product strategies that may provide a model for others working toward a vision of a powerful leadership preparation program. Specifically, this paper addresses the questions:

1. What strategies were critical in influencing the design process or outcome?
2. How did critical strategies influence the design?
3. What lessons in this effort may be useful to other faculties?

Stages

Hackmann and Wanat (2007) documented historical examples of how external forces, including mandates, have influenced program redesign. However, as several authors point out, redesign for the sake of compliance usually results in documents designed to illustrate programmatic changes rather than in actual systemic, sustainable change (Hackmann & Wanat, 2007; Hess & Kelly, 2007). In Western's case, although there certainly were external forces, the faculty perceived the catalysts as more internal than external (Buskey and Jacobs, 2009). This section gives an overview of the history of Western Carolina University's (WCU) principal licensure programs. It also explores the catalysts that led to the redesign effort, including issues with program structures, new faculty, the move to an online program, and concerns raised by and about the program's students.

History

In the early 1990s the North Carolina State Legislature eliminated all school administration programs in the state. Universities were required to redesign their programs and apply for permission to offer the Masters in School Administration (MSA). The North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) specified numerous requirements for the degree, including a year-long internship. In addition, an "add-on" principal licensure for advanced degree holders was eliminated. WCU's principal licensure program dated to this time, and the program remained largely unchanged until the spring of 2005 when the program moved online at the request of local school superintendents. The program was and remains North Carolina's only fully online principal licensure program.

Early in 2006, the North Carolina State Board of Education responded to predictions of a principal shortage by reauthorizing the add-on license for principals and allowing universities to define their programs with few stipulations. WCU hastily designed and implemented a Principal Add-on Licensure program, which began operation in spring, 2007. In the fall of 2006 NCDPI replaced the Interschool Leadership Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) standards with a set of standards developed by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction—The 21st Century Standards for School Executives (NCDPI, 2006). In July 2007, the North Carolina legislature passed and the governor signed House Bill 536, mandating a redesign of all principal licensure programs in the state (General Assembly of North Carolina, 2007).

Dissonance

In August of 2007, prior to becoming aware of HB 536, Western's MSA

faculty decided to redesign the program. The decision was prompted by faculty changes, systems problems resulting from growing online enrollments, and experiences and feedback of students enrolled in the program. These factors are discussed briefly below but were examined more closely by Buskey and Jacobs (2009).

Faculty turnover in the WCU MSA Program was one factor that contributed to the redesign process. The years 2002–2007 were filled with faculty retirements and transfers. By fall, 2007, each of the four tenure-track MSA faculty members had been at Western for less than two years. The faculty readily questioned the course requirements and sequencing they had inherited (Figure 1). None of the new faculty members exhibited any territorial claims over curricular areas, and all had recently transitioned into their positions from school and district leadership roles. This critical mass of faculty with common backgrounds and dispositions became a critical factor in the redesign process and product.

Not only did the new faculty question the curricular foundation for the program, but also they experienced implementation stress, as the program shifted from a face-to-face delivery system to an online system. A rapid exponential enrollment increase was the most significant unintended consequence of the transition to a completely online program in 2005. Program enrollment increased from 25 in fall, 2004, to 120 in fall, 2007, and 220 in fall, 2008. The program had always maintained rolling admissions, but the constant flood of new students overwhelmed the existing methods of tracking and advising. The increased demand that online teaching placed on faculty time, compounded by continually growing advising challenges became another factor in a gradually shifting vision of the MSA program.

The faculty might have been willing to continue the status quo, but they were moved by the stories and feedback of the program's students. While

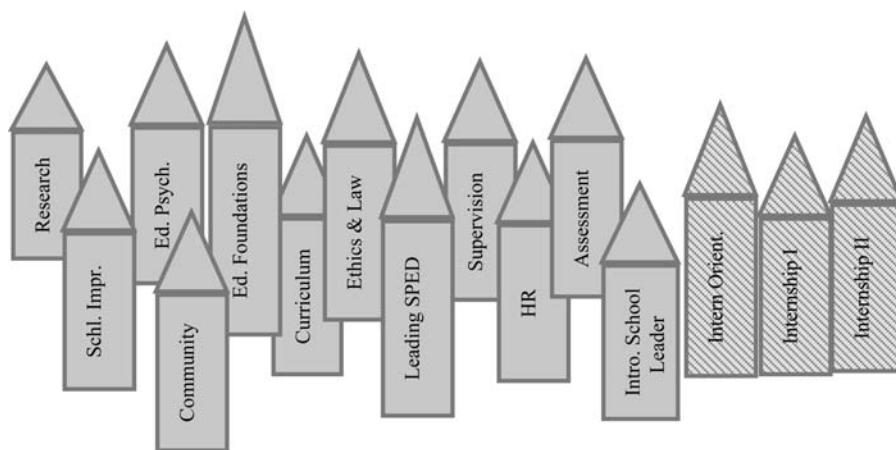


Figure 1. Old program consisting of individual course silos and three internships.

feedback was generally positive, many students relayed stories of the ineffective leadership of school administrators they knew and with whom they worked. Some students found themselves emulating poor leadership, consciously or unconsciously. The faculty saw three types of leadership problems: ethical failings in which leaders took harmful or illegal shortcuts to address needs or respond to accountability pressures; the tendency of leaders to try to “sell” personal projects rather than to work collaboratively to address school problems; leaders’ failure to see and address issues of social injustice. As such, the faculty began to discuss how to prepare a generation of leaders skilled in these areas.

Beginnings: Critical Decisions

The first official re-design meeting took place at a weekend retreat in fall 2007. In addition to the four MSA faculty members, the department head (and previous MSA coordinator), Ed. D. coordinator, and a senior member of the department faculty attended. These additional faculty members were very engaged and influential in the early and middle phases of the redesign process, during which the conceptual foundation of the program was defined and the content and structures were developed and aligned.

The work completed at the retreat laid the foundation for both the objectives and the process of the redesign. The faculty coalesced around four critical decisions, agreeing on a set of objectives, the extent of the redesign, core program beliefs, and a method for identifying key content.

Objectives

After a short discussion, the faculty identified four important objectives:

1. Design and implement a program that would dramatically improve the ability of principal licensure candidates to engage in leadership for positive change in schools
2. Incorporate current research on administration preparation programs
3. Address but not be limited by North Carolina’s 21st Century Standards for School executives
4. Comply with House Bill 536

In regard to the fourth objective, the faculty took a major departure from both the intent of the Bill and the traditional method of program redesign. House Bill 536 specifically uses the term “redesign,” although Department of Public Instruction officials would later emphasize that programs were expected to do more than “rename courses” (personal conversation, October, 2008). The first critical decision the MSA faculty faced was whether to adjust and adapt the old program or to start from scratch. It took the faculty about ten minutes of discussion to decide to jettison the old program and begin from nothing. In making this decision, faculty members were explicit about their desire to dream and to begin with the assumption that anything was possible.

Mission vs. Mantra

Once the decision was made to start from scratch, faculty started dreaming about what they wanted the new program to be. Faculty thought that a mission statement would focus the design work and began by defining what each member thought was most important in the preparation of school leaders. All persons wrote 3–5 words that they felt represented the call of a preparation program. Consensus on key ideas and words were fashioned into a mission statement, “The purpose of our program is to help others develop leadership capacity that will ensure successful learning environments for each student.” The revisioning team sat in silence, looking at a bland, generic statement that failed to capture the true spirit of the faculty’s intent.

Encouraged by one of the newest members of the faculty, the group watched a video on creating a mantra (Kawasaki, n.d.) and then quickly developed a five-word phrase that captured their collective ideals: “Live your courageous leadership journey”. This was later amended to: “Live your leadership journey courageously”. Each of these words carried specific and shared meanings that guided future development of the program. The mantra had a profound impact on the redesign process, because it served as an anchor for future periods of debate, drift, and stagnation.

Interpreted Experience

The final critical decision addressed how content and structures would be identified for the program. Faculty agreed to a loosely structured three-stage process. The initial stage involved outlining the content and structure based on individually interpreted experiences. Each faculty member brought to the table unique experiences, and personal and professional knowledge. Among the shared values was a commitment to include student voices in the form of written feedback. After building an outline of the program, the faculty decided to compare program features with recommendations in the literature, conduct a standards audit, and consult with practicing school administrators.

Content and Structure

The faculty balanced considerations of program structure and program content. Elements of structure and content informed each other and received alternating focus. Initially, faculty developed a draft structure, separating courses that served as the foundation of a degree in an educational field from specific principal preparation courses. The faculty planned to include these courses in the redesign process at some point, but the demands of the core leadership program redesign overwhelmed the initial intentions, and the degree courses were omitted from future conversations.

Familiarity with the best practices literature (e.g., Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, & Orr, 2007), led the faculty to agree on a cohort model and continuous internships linking course work and field experience as preferred components of the delivery system. They also explored struc-

1st Semester	2nd Semester	3rd Semester	4th Semester	5th Semester	6th Semester	7th Semester
Integrated and sustained research			Leadership Intro.	The Visible	The Hidden	The Possible
				Self 1	Self 2	Self 3
				People 1	People 2	People 3
				Duties of the Season		
Field Experience			Internship			

Figure 2. Redesign based on discrete themes.

turing the program around discrete courses focused on understanding culture, self, people and seasonal duties (Figure 2). A program structure that began with what is visible in schools and progressed through the hidden to the possible emerged as a sequence within which themes could be developed in depth.

After exploring these tentative structures, faculty generated a comprehensive list of 77 things that assistant principals needed to know and be able to do. The faculty specifically addressed assistant principal needs because of the common practice in North Carolina of moving teacher leaders and newly-licensed leaders into assistant principal positions before promoting them to a principalship.

As the faculty worked to bring big ideas into the form of a defined program, they also wrestled with how to infuse the mantra values into that program. A program rubric emerged based on previous attempts to differentiate applicant essays and to detailing six leadership imperatives with a five-point scale (see appendix A). The rubric foci, students, change, leadership, ethics, action, and personal growth supported the ideas central to the mantra.

The “77 things” were grouped into themes and semesters, and the faculty decided to create a series of four core leadership courses. To address the research-based imperative for selective admissions, the faculty integrated an “admission to candidacy” screening process in the first core course. Students lacking in areas of the program rubric would be denied admission to candidacy and redirected into a targeted support program. The faculty divided pieces of each area among four semesters based on relationships among the pieces to arrive at four semester themes of *Taking Stock (visible)*, *Setting Goals (hidden)*, *Piloting Change*, and *Courageous Improvement (possible)*. These would eventually become the four core-course sequence shown in Figure 3.

Structure

In a marathon meeting in late January, each core faculty member brought one theme (Relationships, Instruction, Management, or Culture) roughed out into a linear learning progression. The four themes were rearranged into six with the addition of Change, and Process/Communication skills. Throughout February and March the ideas were flushed out and condensed into an executive summary. The summary was shared with a selected group of current and former students, principals, and a larger group of department faculty members. Minor adjustments were made to the plan based on the feedback.

Deadlines

In April the executive summary was shared with the Executive Director of the State Board of Education. The faculty sought permission to implement the program as a pilot in the fall of 2008, and permission was granted. The faculty developed draft syllabi and began the process of shepherding the new program through the university approval process. In June and July the faculty met twice to finalize the content, readings, and design of the introductory core course. In August of 2007, 13 students met face-to-face in Hickory, North Carolina for a Friday and Saturday orientation. On the following Monday they met again online and the first cohort began traveling on a unique journey.

Lessons and Implications

The successful redesign has come from the collective willingness to: (1) *dump* a traditional long-standing program in order to escape the constraints on conceptualizing something truly new; (2) *dream* about the possibilities that could come from creating a program that would address what faculty have learned from the research, their students and school partners, and their own observations; and (3) *define* a meaningful program through long hours of debate, consensus building and design. These critical strategies had far-reaching effects on both the process and the product of the redesign effort.

Dump

The initial decision to dump the old program and start from scratch was



Figure 3. New program sequence showing foundations block and articulated core leadership courses with integrated internships.

probably the most consequential single decision made in the entire process. Dumping the old program had both concrete and symbolic importance. In concrete terms, we were not tied to previous structures, content, or methods. This allowed for discussions to be guided by faculty and student knowledge, values, and experiences as opposed to program history.

Symbolically, the decision to jettison the old program was a decision to move into uncharted waters and not to be limited by what we knew about traditional preparation programs in general, not just the old program at Western. The pressures of commitment, time, and risk countered the freedom granted by the decision to dump. Though these factors were not openly discussed, they were felt throughout the redesign process.

The decision to dump the old program was made easier by the newness of the faculty, and their lack of investment in the old program's content and design. Politically and culturally, few programs may have this option. Nevertheless, the option should be discussed. The simple exercise of exploring the pros and cons of dumping versus redesigning may help build common understanding and help identify common (and disparate) values. For Western's faculty, committed to meeting the needs of local populations, the decision to start from scratch was liberating and foundational to the outcomes.

Dream

The decision to dream was also critical to developing Western's unique program. Articulating and sharing a common set of values that became embodied in a powerful program mantra bonded the faculty and created a sense of commitment. Dreaming helped faculty focus on developing an ideal program as opposed to a compliant one. The deep understanding and shared purpose allowed future discussions to focus on the "how" because the "what" was known. One faculty member later captured the importance of the intersection of collaboration and values when she exclaimed, "The euphoria and sense of total agreement when we 'uncovered' our mantra . . . I loved my colleagues and was proud to be part of the group." The faculty values became a defacto set of program standards that served to set a high bar for the design. These program standards focused on ideals as opposed to minimal standards, and, consequently, the redesign process focused on building an ideal program, not one that would meet only minimal criteria.

Educational leadership faculty who are committed to improving schools for young people, and who have expertise and rich experiences will find themselves limited in designing a program to achieve minimal compliance standards. By contrast, designing a program focused on shared values and aspirational levels is both intellectually stimulating and personally fulfilling.

Define

Defining from scratch both the content and structure of the program proved to be enriching as well as frustrating. Faculty had different learning and thinking styles, and some faculty had difficulty with the wide-openness of

the task. For example, one faculty member noted that, “I always need a conceptual model, so it was a challenge to build the content if I didn’t have some idea of how it was going to be structured.” This faculty member also expressed one of the hardest challenges when she shared that she had, “some difficulty developing a program out of our collective experience” because of a lack of specific data on which to base decisions. Another member explained that, “the form was always in my mind as we discussed content.” Faculties opting to develop everything from scratch should be prepared for a lengthy process and times of monotony. Norms of collegial support, including conflict resolution, humor, and compromise are essential.

On the positive side, defining resulted in a unique program in which faculty members were invested in every course, not only the one(s) they might teach. Defined content can be specifically organized for the delivery method of the program (a hybrid model for Western) and for the unique needs of the local schools. Finally, faculty members can give voice and contribute to the design relying on their own ethical orientations, experiences, and knowledge.

Summary

Even in an era of mandates and directives, efforts to redesign educational programs do not have to be exercises in compliance. Whether the decisions are made consciously with discussion and debate, or subconsciously through simple acquiescence, educational leadership faculty have choices in how to approach the redesign process. Dumping, dreaming, and defining allow faculty to take back the process and infuse program design with both professional and personal meaning. In the end, every program will determine the most appropriate course of action to meet their unique contexts. Whatever course of action you choose, we at Western Carolina University urge you to live your leadership journey courageously (see Figure 4).

Live Your Leadership Journey Courageously				
	Demonstrates Interest	Emerging Knowledge	Emerging Application	Artistic
Students	-Students ignored	-Students addressed	-Students concerns addressed	-Students at the heart of thinking
Change	-Change is Stagnant	-Change is addressed	-Change as a process	-Change as a complicated deep process
Leadership	-Leads from Isolated reaction	-Leads from Isolated reflection	-Leads a group	-Leads collaboration
Ethics	-Ethics as a lingo	-Ethics as an opinion	-Ethics as informed judgment	-Ethics as informed judgment in light of local situation
Action	-Action as compliance	-Action motivated by reaction	-Action to solve a problem	-Creative action to fashion something positive
Personal Growth	-Growth is actively closed	-Growth is passively open	-Growth is actively questioning	-Growth is actively searching

Figure 4.

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