

# Lessons Learned from Designing a Principal Preparation Program: Equity, Coherence, and Collaboration

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## Abstract

This study examines the work completed by a regional, comprehensive university's principal preparation program in redesigning their curriculum for greater coherence. Their process for identifying equity as a program theme and explicitly addressing learning related to program themes is described. Key steps in the process include (a) collaborating with partners, (b) identifying problems of practice, (c) surfacing core beliefs, (d) articulating a comprehensive theory of action, (e) creating a crosswalk aligning standards to courses and themes, and (f) identifying learning experiences and assessments aligned to the crosswalk. Their conclusions recognized the importance of collaboration, coherence, and context in redesigning

## Keywords

leadership curriculum, leadership preparation programs, leadership program design, leading for equity, principal preparation, university programs

The Principal Preparation Program (P3) at Western Kentucky University (WKU) launched a redesign effort in 2016 when selected as one of seven universities to participate in a philanthropic organization's \$48.5 million University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI). This project sought to create partnerships across numerous

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organizations, including universities, districts, state agencies, and exemplary mentor programs to redesign P3s. The project also funded leader tracking systems to provide universities with data needed to support continuous improvement. The launch of this initiative coincided with the publication of the report by Davis (2016) and sought to address the identified themes from the field. Among these themes were district leaders' dissatisfaction with P3s and their perceptions the program of study often did not reflect the real work of principals.

WKU collaborated with our partners to design a program preparing principal aspirants to lead schools toward equitable opportunities and outcomes in rural and urban contexts. Our mentor partner through this work was an exemplary program in Illinois (Cosner, 2019). We also worked with the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE), our regional educational cooperative, and local district partners. Applying lessons learned from our mentor program, we implemented cycles of inquiry and the principles of improvement science (Cosner et al., 2012, 2015). This article chronicles our journey through the initial steps of this work, focusing on the role of equity in the planning phases. During the first phase, WKU faculty worked with our partners to identify problems of practice, surface program beliefs, and articulate our theory of action and vision for program graduates. Next, we collaborated to create a coherent program of study that was vertically and horizontally aligned and assessed through relevant learning experiences.

Research from the last 2 decades demonstrates school leaders can make a difference in student outcomes. In a synthesis of research on principal effect, Grissom et al. (2021) found the impact of school principals to be "nearly as large as the effect of having a similarly effective teacher. Principals' effects, however, are larger in scope because they are averaged over all students in a school, rather than a classroom" (p. 14). In recognizing the importance of principal leadership, the Wallace Foundation Educational Leadership unit implemented the Principal Supervisor Initiative (PSI) and the Principal Pipeline Initiative (PPI), both focused on developing school leaders and school leader pipelines at the district level (Gates et al., 2019; Goldring et al., 2020).

Grissom and colleagues also identified behaviors with direct and indirect impacts from an equity perspective. These findings focused on how principals impacted identified groups of students, particularly low-income students and students of color (Grissom et al., 2021). They described the management of student disciplinary actions as directly impacting equity. Principals' working with teachers to implement culturally responsive teaching practices and engaging in hiring practices resulting in more teachers of color indirectly impacted equitable outcomes. Grissom and colleagues also wrote of high-leverage practices principal preparation should develop in aspiring leaders to manage and lead for equity. Equity-driven P3s should focus on preparing aspiring leaders to engage in instructionally-focused interactions with teachers, build strong relationships and collaborative cultures, strategically manage personnel, and prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable groups of students.

In an earlier list of recommendations, Ward et al. (2015) identified three behaviors for practicing and prospective principals in leading for equity: reflecting critically, fostering a shared vision of equity, and transforming dialogue. Table 1 extracts the

**Table 1.** High-Leverage Practices Aligned with the NELP and PSEL Standards.

Practices	Standards
Engage in instructionally focused interactions with teachers (Grissom et al., 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NELP 3.3 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, advocate, and cultivate equitable, inclusive, and culturally responsive instruction and behavioral support practices among teachers and staff.</li> <li>• PSEL 3e. Confront and alter institutional biases of student marginalization, deficit-based schooling, and low expectations associated with race, class, culture and language, gender and sexual orientation, and disability or special status.</li> </ul>
Build strong relationships and collaborative cultures (Grissom et al., 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NELP 7.2 Program completers understand and have the capacity to develop and engage staff in a collaborative professional culture designed to promote school improvement, teacher retention, and the success and well-being of each student and adult in the school.</li> <li>• PSEL 7c. Establish and sustain a professional culture of engagement and commitment to shared vision, goals, and objectives pertaining to the education of the whole child; high expectations for professional work; ethical and equitable practice; trust and open communication; collaboration, collective efficacy, and continuous individual and organizational learning and improvement.</li> </ul>
Strategically manage personnel (Grissom et al., 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NELP 7.4 Program completers understand and have the capacity to evaluate, develop, and implement systems of supervision, support, and evaluation designed to promote school improvement and student success.</li> <li>• PSEL 7e. Deliver actionable feedback about instruction and other professional practice through valid, research-anchored systems of supervision and evaluation to support the development of teachers' and staff members' knowledge, skills, and practice.</li> </ul>
Prioritize the needs of the most vulnerable groups of students (Grissom et al., 2021)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NELP 3.2 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to evaluate, cultivate, and advocate for equitable access to educational resources, technologies, and opportunities that support the educational success and well-being of each student.</li> <li>• PSEL 3c. Ensure that each student has equitable access to effective teachers, learning opportunities, academic and social support, and other resources necessary for success.</li> </ul>
Reflect critically (Ward et al., 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NELP 2.1 Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to reflect on, communicate about, cultivate, and model professional dispositions and norms (i.e., fairness, integrity, transparency, trust, digital citizenship, collaboration, perseverance, reflection, lifelong learning) that support the educational success and well-being of each student and adult.</li> <li>• PSEL 2b. Act according to and promote the professional norms of integrity, fairness, transparency, trust, collaboration, perseverance, learning, and continuous improvement.</li> </ul>
Foster a common vision for equity (Ward et al., 2015)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• NELP 1.1. Program completers understand and demonstrate the capacity to collaboratively evaluate, develop, and communicate a school mission and vision designed to reflect a core set of values and priorities that include data use, technology, equity, diversity, digital citizenship, and community.</li> <li>• PSEL 1a. Develop an educational mission for the school to promote the academic success and well-being of each student.</li> </ul>

Note: This table aligns high-leverage practices (Grissom et al., 2021; Ward et al., 2015) for preparing principals to lead for equity to the PSEL (NBPEA, 2015) and NELP (2018) standards.

high-leverage practices described by Grissom et al. (2021) and the practices identified by Ward et al. (2015) from the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards (NBPEA, 2018) and Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (NBPEA, 2015). Transforming dialogue is not included in Table 1, but it is considered an overarching practice and further defined here. Transforming dialogue references the earlier work by Woods (2011), *Transforming Education Policy: Shaping a Democratic Future*. It is one component of the holistic democracy framework. Woods and Woods (2012) define transforming dialogue as,

A climate where exchange and exploration of views and open debate are possible, enabling deliberative democracy to take place through which individuals cooperatively seek to reach beyond individual narrow perspectives and interests, enhance mutual understanding, and work toward the greater good for themselves and the community. (p. 707)

In designing a program addressing these practices and behaviors while partnering with other UPPI recipients and exemplary programs, we realized no universal model was applicable across every context. As programs, we were operating in different policy environments and serving varied communities. An emphasis on an individualized approach to equity issues in P3s underscored the importance of adopting a one-size-does-not-fit-all approach when revising programs to consider equity and social justice issues (Hernandez and Marshall, 2010). For program outcomes to reflect this change, it must first come from within the university, often beginning with faculty members charged with curriculum revision.

Diem and Carpenter (2012) considered the absence of information and resources to aid P3 professors who want to engage meaningfully and successfully in social justice and equity-oriented conversations with students, particularly focused on race issues, but who may lack the skills to do so. Diem and Carpenter asserted the need for deep and rigorous faculty professional learning on equity and social justice before meaningful programmatic changes occur.

## **Western Kentucky University's Context and the 2011 P3**

The WKU main campus is in Bowling Green (pop. 60,000), a city in south-central Kentucky located between Louisville (north) and Nashville, Tennessee (south). This regional university serves 17,500 students. The P3 with three core faculty and one department chairperson admits two cohorts per year of 10 to 20 school principal aspirants. These aspiring principals are often teachers, instructional coaches, or guidance counselors in one of the many smaller, mostly rural regional school districts; however, candidates employed in larger urban districts regularly enroll.

In Fall 2011, WKU implemented a revised P3 aligned to the statewide collaborative work *Kentucky Cohesive Leadership System: Continuum for Principal Preparation and Development* (Kentucky Cohesive Leadership System, 2008). A partnership among Kentucky's 11 higher education institutions offering principal preparation, school district representatives, and others with expertise in the field developed this document.

The final product included dimensions and dispositions for school leaders, learning activities, formative assessments, and summative assessments. The *Kentucky Cohesive Leadership System* (2008) mentioned diversity and equity in two key places: one related to considering student diversity when developing curriculum and instruction (Function 1.1.e) and a more generic statement about demonstrating a commitment to diversity and equity (Function 4.3.b). The dimensions specifically mentioned equity only once, “4.3.b. Understands the importance of a commitment to equity and diversity” as part of Dimension 4, Building Culture and Community. Within the continuum document, recommended activities explicitly addressed equity only once. This reference was within the context of pre-assessing candidate commitment to equity and diversity. Two additional standards used the term diversity, “1.1.e Understands the importance of diversity in developing and implementing curriculum” and “3.1.c Understands the importance of aligning the staff recruitment and selection process with the diverse needs of the school, school mission, vision, and school improvement plan.”

Kentucky’s work from 2011 was also committed to developing leaders who modeled eight dispositions reflecting practices and beliefs such as life-long learning, student learning as the fundamental purpose of education, and the protection of student rights. Although the dispositions did not explicitly address equity and diversity, some language implied the need for equitable leaders. For example, dispositions included phrases such as “the educability of and life-long learning for everyone,” “bringing ethical principles to the decision making process for the common good of the community,” “education as key to opportunity and social mobility,” and “being an advocate for the protection of student rights” (Kentucky Cohesive Leadership System, 2008).

From 2011 to 2018, WKU’s P3 addressed equity issues most explicitly in Building Culture and Community. Principal aspirants considered equity issues through various reading assignments, including *Cultural Proficiency* (Lindsey et al., 2009) which strongly addressed equity issues, and the *Professional Code of Ethics for Kentucky Certified School Personnel* (EPSB, 2017), which modestly considered equity. The cultural assessment completed in this course intentionally addressed equity through a combination of survey instruments (Richardson, 2010; Wagner, 2006) and collaborative field-based activities (Peterson & Deal, 2009).

The program addressed issues of equity with less intentionality elsewhere. Principal aspirants surveyed historical achievement trends in the introductory course with attention to the deficit-oriented language, “achievement gaps.” The legal issues course touched on issues of equity surfacing via discussions of specific topics such as *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and student discipline for students with disabilities. The final semester of core courses addressed issues of equity and diversity explicitly through Kentucky school improvement goal requirements with principal aspirants analyzing data and developing comprehensive school improvement plan goals in five key areas: achievement gaps, student achievement, student growth, transitions, and graduation rates where applicable. They also considered issues of equity and diversity in this course when auditing their schools’ Multi-Tiered Systems of Support (MTSS). In both instances, the program addressed equity and diversity issues, but they were

addressed fortuitously and, in some cases, such as considering achievement gaps, through a deficit lens.

The dimensions and dispositions were loosely coupled with ideas of equity, leading to a program curriculum loosely coupled with ideas of equity. Believing we were integrating equity throughout the program led to few learning experiences explicitly and deeply addressing equity issues. The faculty sought to develop a horizontally and vertically aligned program intentionally and expressly addressing equity throughout the program.

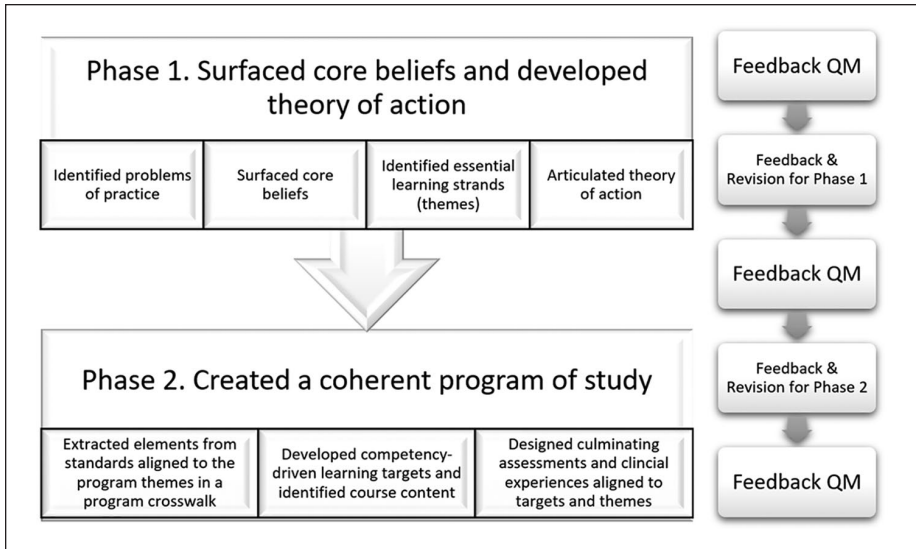
## **Western Kentucky University's Program Redesign Process**

WKU's P3's context encompasses a combination of rural, suburban, and urban school settings, with a heavy emphasis on serving rural schools primarily because of our geographic location and our proximity to these smaller school districts. Because of the multiple settings with differing equity impacts, we had to consider what equitable leadership looked like in each context. The P3 core faculty engaged in the process of surfacing our thinking about equity individually and collectively. The following steps describe efforts to ensure we intentionally spiraled equity concepts in our proposed curriculum and assessment tasks. They summarize our process for initially addressing program revision concerns (generally) and providing an intentional focus on preparing more equity-focused school leaders (specifically). Before discussing the separate phases of the work, we describe the overarching series of feedback loops playing a critical role throughout the process. Figure 1 provides an overview of the process.

### *Revised Through a Series of Feedback Loops*

A critical step in planning the workflow was identifying opportune times for continuous feedback from stakeholders. The feedback loops occurred at crucial decision-making moments in the initial phase of the work, including identifying problems of practice, articulating essential learning strands, and designing meaningful assessments and learning experiences. WKU's stakeholders included a collaborative organization representing over 40 school districts served by our program, superintendents and principal supervisors from UPPI partner districts, and state representatives from the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and the separate licensing agency, Kentucky's Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB). As part of the problem identification stage, the mentor program conducted interviews and focus groups of stakeholders, including superintendents and principals' supervisors, full-time and adjunct program faculty, current program participants, and previous program participants who were current school administrators. The data collected were used in the identification of problems of practice.

The self-assessments conducted by program faculty in partnership with state and district partners using the Quality Measures (QM) Program Assessment Tool (Education Development Corporation, 2016) provided valuable feedback. The work started with



**Figure 1.** Western Kentucky University Curricular Design Process Pre-Implementation.

Note: This figure provides a brief overview of WKU’s redesign process before implementing the new program. The two phases occurred parallel to a series of feedback loops that included Quality Measures self-assessments with district and state partners. Multiple events locally and with other grant partners provided further feedback.

the QM Baseline Program Assessment in Fall 2016, followed by mid-point review in Spring 2019, and again in Spring 2021 once the first cohort in the new program had completed the coursework and the leader tracking system was in use. The initial QM assessment tool, aligned to the Interstate School Leaders Licensure Consortium (ISLLC, 2008) standards, provided a baseline review of program outcomes. The current iteration of QM is aligned with the PSEL standards.

For each round of QM, program faculty started by rating our work in the following areas: candidate admissions, course content, pedagogy and andragogy, clinical experiences, performance assessments, and graduate outcomes. We then met with partners informing them of the self-ratings and evidence of the ratings. Sharing the self-ratings led to discussions with our stakeholders around the program’s strengths and opportunities for growth. This work forged relationships and allowed us to see our program from the stakeholders’ perspectives (Wang et al., 2018). One of the problems of practice identified from this work was the need to be more intentional in focusing on leading for equity and diversity.

WKU hosted multiple events to gather feedback from our partners beyond the QM meetings. We brought in stakeholders regularly, and program faculty used clearly defined protocols to gather input. These processes allowed stakeholders to provide critical feedback, ensuring the representation of voices of equity from each of our served contexts in the design of meaningful assessments and learning experiences.



We sought input from our partners in identifying problems of practice, designing our theory of action, developing a coherent sequence of courses, and aligning assessments and field experiences.

### *Phase I: Surfaced Our Beliefs and Developed a Theory of Action*

Bryk et al. (2015) described the practice in education of implementing solutions before identifying and understanding the problem. They labeled this “propensity to jump on a solution before fully understanding the exact problem to be solved” (p. 24) as solutionitis. Although WKU faculty were eager to dive into this work and believed we understood where program improvements were needed, our mentor program quickly slowed our work. They led us to collect further data to understand our current system better and identify problems of practice before articulating our theory of action.

*Identified problems of practice.* Our team started the process of visioning by focusing on identifying problems of practice within the current context. Concurrently and organically, we examined the standards and existing literature on principal leadership within an equity focus. The latter informed and shaped the former. WKU faculty worked with our mentor program and district- and state-level stakeholders to identify critical problems of practice within our program. Because faculty members had previously valued equity and the underlying dispositions of the 2011 program connected to equity, there was, perhaps, a belief the program already adequately addressed equity. After reviewing syllabi, assessments, and student work products, we realized that we explicitly addressed equity weakly and often unintentionally. Faculty could share how equity guided their thinking on presenting course content and even feedback to aspiring principals, but they could identify only a limited number of learning experiences explicitly designed to develop student understanding of equity in leadership. Comparing the current and emergent standards for school leader development further supported the need to focus more intentionally on equitable leadership and diversity within the program.

Program faculty identified a problem of practice related to the entire program: the lack of vertical alignment and planned learning progression. This lack of alignment and learning progression also characterized learning around specific topics or themes such as equity. Although we taught the program curriculum in a mandated sequence, there was nothing to suggest the courses needed to be in a specific order beyond the introductory course. The content was not intentionally scaffolded or designed to build a deeper understanding as the program progressed. Specifically, our candidates might discuss equity issues in the first and second courses, but they did not receive a foundational equity study offering prerequisite learning for the subsequent courses in their programs. A review of course documents in the current program also revealed a lack of intentional progressions of learning and rigor (including those surrounding equity issues) across the program. We needed to articulate our program theory of action to foster the coherent curriculum into which we wanted to immerse our candidates.



Faculty must...	The program must...	Principal aspirants must...
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• educate themselves about issues of equity before educating others</li> <li>• have the courage to lead conversations related to issues of equity</li> <li>• engage others in critical reflection around issues of equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• eschew a one-size-fits-all approach and embrace individualization</li> <li>• hold principal aspirants accountable for addressing issues of equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• articulate the issues of equity impacting underrepresented student populations</li> <li>• be motivated to action by the belief that a healthy culture of learning and achievement must address issues of equity</li> <li>• have the knowledge and skills to substantiate meaningful change</li> </ul>

**Figure 2.** Western Kentucky University Program Beliefs Regarding Equity.

*Surfaced core beliefs.* Before transforming our program, we, as P3 faculty, first looked within our own beliefs and practices for opportunities to improve. Diem and Carpenter (2012) considered the absence of information and resources to aid P3 professors who wanted to engage in social justice and equity-oriented conversations meaningfully and successfully with principal aspirants (particularly focused on race issues) but lacked the skills to do so. Participating in the UPPI grant allowed us opportunities and connections to resources we might have been unable to access had we redesigned the program in isolation. We reflected on our own beliefs and practices as we mined data to identify problems of practice, but our participation in the external collaborative opportunities afforded by the UPPI process allowed us to think more deeply and critically about the work. We compared our andragogical approaches, field experiences, and content to other UPPI participants, exemplary program partners who participated in the grant, and the extant literature. As we embarked on this process and reflected on our own beliefs and practices, we identified beliefs around ourselves as faculty, our program, and our students. The beliefs are identified in Figure 2.

*Identified essential learning strands.* We embarked on this journey as the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) disseminated the PSEL standards (NBPEA, 2015), and the NELP Program Recognition Standards (NBPEA, 2018) were being reviewed. Both sets of standards include one standard explicitly addressing equity, Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness, but ideas of equity are spiraled throughout the other standards, too. The NELP standards include components related to equity and the use of data, access to resources and opportunities, and instruction and behavior support practices among teachers and staff (NBPEA, 2018). The PSEL Standards include indicators related to adult interactions with students, provision of equitable access and resources, policies, and systems for addressing student behavior, broader ideas of marginalization and deficit-based thinking, and leadership characteristics such as cultural competence and responsiveness (NBPEA, 2015).

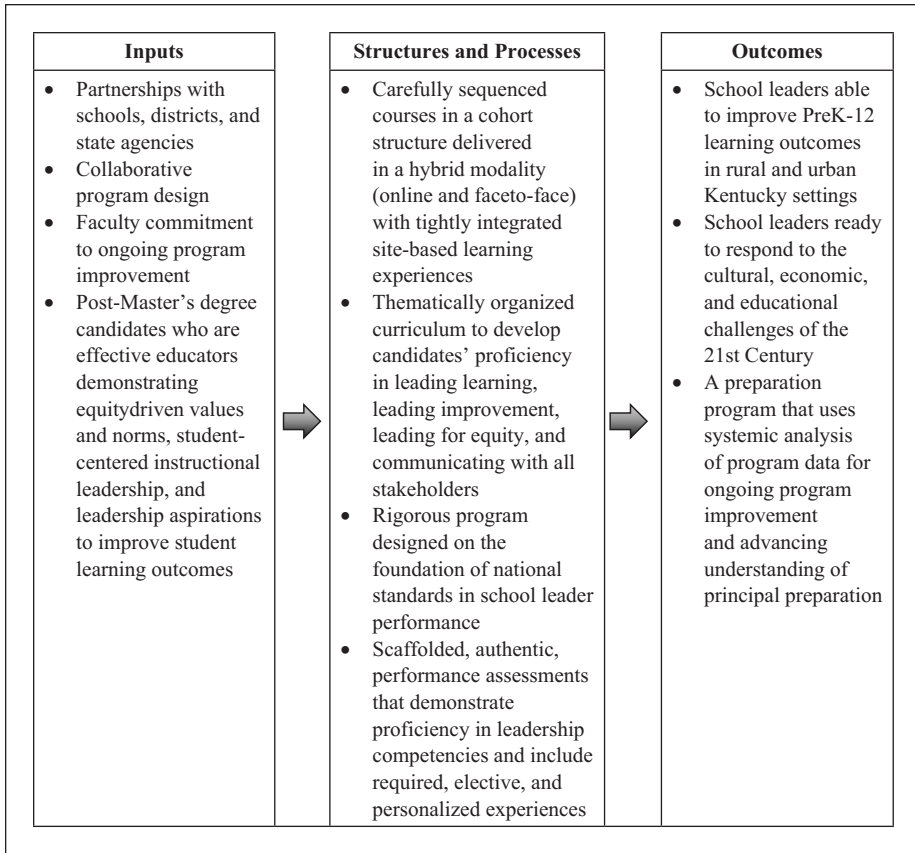
We explored and analyzed the NELP and PSEL standards as a faculty workgroup. From our discussions, three essential learning strands emerged related to instructional leadership, equity, and continuous improvement. In reviewing the standards and learning strands with our partners, they identified the need for a fourth strand related to communication and relationship building. These essential learning strands originated to empower candidates with the knowledge and skill to ask and answer the following questions:

- What will learning look like?
- How will we make sure all students are successful?
- How will we communicate with all stakeholders?
- How will we use data to lead continuous improvement?

As we designed courses, dove deeper in literature, learned from other programs participating in the work, and designed learning experiences and assessments, these ideas would develop, becoming richer and more nuanced.

*Articulated a theory of action.* While faculty members made general decisions regarding our revised program's framework and logistical structure, we also independently started the visioning process for the program format. Based on the data analysis, national standards, and personal priorities, each faculty member developed a vision of principal preparation. According to the facilitator, "Although the five proposals showed some variation, they also demonstrated considerable congruence. For example, the first semester focused heavily on PSEL Standards 1–5 while the final semester focused primarily on the latter standards" (S. Tozer, personal communication, April 15, 2017). The initial program vision of each faculty member started with a foundation in leadership and culminated with a course focused on the science of continuous improvement, with classes focusing on building a culture of equity and improvement and developing organizational capacity in between.

We knew from the literature that exemplary programs move beyond developing a vision and should seek to articulate an explicit theory of action connecting content, andragogy, and contextual learning experiences (Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). Our theory of action in Figure 3 emphasized the importance of partnerships, collaborative design, and ongoing improvement and recognized the influence of state policy on the program. Our initial work aligned to Kentucky's requirement that admitted candidates must already hold a master's degree. As we worked on our program redesign, Kentucky's EPSB worked with the 11 principal preparation providers to update Kentucky regulations. Kentucky, and subsequently WKU, removed the master's degree requirement. Our desired outcomes included the development of individuals ready to lead schools and improve student outcomes; they also included developing a data system to guide our ongoing cycles of improvement. The processes remained similar with the addition of a thematically organized curriculum to promote program coherence.



**Figure 3.** Western Kentucky University Principal Preparation Program Theory of Action.

Note: This theory of action guided our redesign work funded by a grant from a philanthropic foundation. Kentucky, and subsequently WKU, eliminated the post-master's degree requirement.

### Phase 2: Created a Coherent Program of Study

After articulating our theory of action, we began designing a coherent, tightly integrated curriculum. The crosswalk of the program served as the critical tool in this work. The curricular crosswalk was a matrix using proposed courses and program themes to align program learning and assessments. In completing the crosswalk, we extracted elements from the NELP and PSEL standards, deconstructed the elements into competency-driven learning targets, and designed culminating assessments and clinical experiences for the program.

*Extracted equity standards and elements from NELP.* A shift in standards occurred in educational leadership during the last few years. The Interstate School Leaders

Licensure Consortium (ISLLC) Standards, last revised in 2008, were replaced with the Professional Standards for Educational Leaders (PSEL) and adopted by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration (NPBEA) in 2015. According to the Center on Great Teachers & Leaders at American Institutes for Research (2016), the new standards focused intentionally on equity, talent development, leadership capacity, and academic systems. The Center on Great Teachers & Leaders described the shifts for each standard and highlighted these themes. They identified the greater focus on equitable and culturally responsive leadership in PSEL 3 as “Encouraging perceptions of student diversity as an asset for teaching and learning, confronting and altering institutional biases rather than simply recognizing them, and serving as a true advocate for equity and cultural responsiveness in all aspects of leadership” (p. 7).

The NELP standards, aligned to and derived from the PSEL standards, guided our leadership preparation programs in focusing on the needs of novice leaders. In addressing our curriculum work, WKU faculty focused on directly aligning to the NELP standards. We identified six elements as most relevant to our equity work: 2.3 Values, 3.1 Equitable Protocols; 3.2 Equitable Access; 3.3 Responsive Practice; 3.4 Supportive School Community; and 3.5 Learning Supports. There are standards identified in Table 1 as equity-centered that are not present in this list as program faculty aligned them to other themes. Although leading for equity was a program theme, we could not separate equity-thinking from the other themes: leading instruction, leading improvement, and communicating/building relationships. The alignment of the NELP standards across the four themes is shown in Table 2. Due to updates in Kentucky regulations, we have since realigned our work to the PSEL standards. There is duplication of elements within the crosswalk due to the treatment of the element within specific courses. For example, NELP 1.1 focuses on mission and vision, but includes “collaboratively [designing] a mission and vision,” which relates to the fourth theme, Communicating and Building Relationships. Depending on the context, the “values and priorities” reflected in the mission and vision might connect to Leading Instruction, Leading for Equity, or Leading Improvement.

Initial work to better address vertical alignment of the program across the four strands, including equity, involved individual faculty members extracting standards from NELP as related to the assigned strand and considering PSEL standards for additional competencies.

Next, we logically progressed to unpacking, or deconstructing, the identified standards and drafting what would become learning progressions and learning targets derived from the NELP standards.

*Deconstructed standards and developed competency-driven learning targets.* We advanced through this phase logistically and philosophically. Logistically, we entered a collaborative process of deconstructing NELP standards rewritten as program learning targets. We collaboratively decided where equity and social justice objectives and tasks

**Table 2.** Crosswalk of NELP Standards to Program Themes and Courses.

Course	Leading instruction	Leading for equity	Leading improvement	Communicating and relationships
Introduction to Leadership	1.1 Mission, vision 2.1 Values	1.1 Mission, vision 2.3 Model, cultivate ethical behavior	1.1 Mission, vision 2.1 Values	1.1 Mission, vision 2.3 Model, cultivate ethical behavior
School Law and Policy		2.2 Ethical, legal decisions 2.3 Model, cultivate ethical behavior		6.3 Laws, rights, policies, regulations
Culture of Achievement	1.1 Mission, vision	3.3 Culturally responsive (CR) practices	4.3 CR, accessible assessments	5.1 Engage diverse families 7.2 Collaborative professional culture
Community of Learners	7.2 Collaborative professional culture	3.1 Supportive, inclusive culture 3.3 CR practices	6.2 Managing resources	5.1 Engage diverse families 5.2 Relationships with diverse community members 5.3 Advocate for school/community
Leading Learning Systems	4.1 Curricula programs, supports 4.2 Equitable practices	3.2 Equitable access 3.3 CR practices	6.2 Managing resources	4.1 Curricula program, supports 4.3 CR, accessible assessments
Developing Teacher Capacity	7.2 Collaborative professional culture	4.4 Curriculum, instruction, assessment, technology systems	6.2 Managing resources 7.4 Systems of supervision, support, evaluation	4.2 Equitable practices 7.1 Developing teacher capacity 7.3 Professional learning
Managing for Equitable Outcomes	6.1 Managing operations	3.1 Supportive, inclusive culture	1.2 Improvement processes 6.2 Managing resources	6.3 Laws, rights, policies, regulations 7.1 Developing teacher capacity 7.3 Professional learning
Leading School Improvement	1.1 Mission, vision, values	3.1 Supportive, inclusive culture	1.2 Improvement processes 2.1 Values	6.3 Laws, rights, policies, regulations

Note: This table includes select keywords from the elements. See the NBPEA (2015) document for the complete language of the elements.

should appear and then individually and collectively connected these objectives and targets to draft anchor assessments. Philosophically, we began this task thinking our primary goal was to define equity in our program's context. We challenged ourselves first to determine whether defining equity *differently* for our program mattered, and then, depending on the previous answer, crafting—and embodying—that definition. We thought of the schools immediately surrounding our university whose teacher leaders regularly enter our P3, and their aims were often to lead the smaller rural schools where they currently teach. We also recognized we served students from the two larger urban districts in our state whose teachers were immersed in different contexts. This latter group of prospective principals regularly tackled equity issues primarily of race, ethnicity, and poverty, while the former group encountered equity issues primarily of poverty. We also realized the need to design experiences to fill the gaps resulting from context through the literature, case studies, and other learning.

*Informed our culminating assessments and clinical component designs.* Our principal candidates completed a culminating task known as the *anchor assessment* in each core class of the previous program. The program required them to demonstrate proficiency to advance to the subsequent courses. Faculty and partners saw value in this model and desired to keep some form of the culminating tasks in the redesigned program. We knew we needed to consider how to assess best our candidates on equity and social justice issues (especially if they were to gain prominence in our new curriculum). At the onset of the program revision, we had an anchor assessment draft we could most obviously use to assess candidates' cultural proficiency. As we continued to spiral the NELP standards and our learning targets throughout the course sequence, other opportunities to evaluate these prospective leaders' equity readiness in areas such as finance, law, curriculum, instruction, assessment, and evaluation began to emerge.

In addition to culminating anchor assessments, we considered how to assess formatively these concepts throughout a semester-long course. Our practice and the literature provided tools and andragogical approaches to aid prospective school leaders in evaluating their communities' current state of equity. We designed each course to focus on embedded field experiences that were required, elected (a choice among narrowly defined options), or personalized (a menu of options and the opportunity to personalize based on professional growth plans). Research has described the value of field experiences that “allow just-in-time, in-class preparation. . . followed by in-class debriefing” (Gordon et al., 2016, p. 67), connect theory to practice (Cunningham & Sherman, 2008; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007), make coursework relevant, develop students as reflective practitioners (Darling-Hammond et al.), allow students to learn in an authentic setting, and build students' confidence as leaders (Cunningham & Sherman).

WKU faculty agreed assessments should be site-based and experiential (or as authentic as possible). We also decided we should consider individualizing experiences according to a candidate's experiences and current school context. Our primary task then became helping each other articulate experiences to determine readiness.

Our partners provided input from diverse voices and helped us connect theory to practice as we designed our assessments. Addressing issues of equity still referred to prioritizing the needs of underserved and underrepresented populations. Still, we knew we should consider the impact that context might have on leading for equity.

## The Proposed Revision

In the previous program revision (adopted Fall 2011), equity and social justice appeared most obviously in the second course (Building Culture and Community) taught in the cohort format. Even in this course, equity issues arose informally, unintentionally, and sometimes accidentally. Keeping equity in the forefront as we individually and then collectively rebuilt and revised our program was necessary to ensure greater intentionality. This intended explicitness is now evident through the identified topics and standard elements in revised courses, as displayed in Table 3.

Program faculty created assessments focusing on evaluating systems and programs. In Table 3, these assessments are referred to as audits. Three of these audits include an intentional focus on equity. Bustamante et al. (2009) recognized the value in using audits as an entry point to equity work in uncovering assumptions. Principal aspirants conduct the audits in their work context. Each audit involves a set of indicators to use in collecting data and evaluating their school's performance. They then identify strengths and challenges. They also take on the principal's perspective and develop an action plan for leveraging strengths and addressing challenges.

A second andragogical approach used recurrently is case studies. Faculty selected or designed case studies allowing aspiring principals to interact with issues of equity they might not encounter otherwise. Case studies addressed four challenges of only using field experience to address equity. First, some aspirants are in schools with limited racial or ethnic diversity and might not encounter issues related to racial equity through their field experiences. Second, candidates might not be privy to certain situations arising in their schools due to confidentiality issues. Third, student learning in their field experiences is often dependent on the semester they take the course. Finally, student learning in their field experiences relies, at least in part, on the mentor's available time to devote to the student learning and the mentor's understanding of the standards (Clayton et al., 2017).

Program faculty developed a rubric for assessing student reflections on learning experiences. This rubric considers critical roles in the program framework: learning leader, equity engineer, relationship builder, effective communicator, and reflective practitioner. For equity engineer, the overarching prompt for aspiring principals is, "How were equity issues addressed, considered, or overlooked in this experience?" The rubric uses a four-point scale that ranges from "recognizes basic and obvious equity issues but fails to grasp complexity or interrelationships of issues" to "accurately and deeply evaluates multiple perspectives, questions of equity considered or overlooked, and describes the full implications of the application."



**Table 3.** Equity in the Revised Program.

Course	Selected course topics	Selected learning experiences and assessments
Introduction to School Leadership	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Ethical values associated with school leadership</li> <li>Historical gaps in opportunity and outcomes for students from various groups</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Identify the cognitive, interpersonal, and intrapersonal knowledge and skills needed to lead for equity; identify personal strengths and opportunities for growth</li> </ul>
School Law and Policy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Federal and state legal dimensions of school leadership including equity concerns. Emphasis given to Kentucky law</li> <li>Special education and the role of the Admissions &amp; Release Committee (ARC)</li> <li>Student and staff expression, particularly as related to equity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Attend and observe an ARC meeting using a template provided</li> <li>Special education audit</li> <li>Case studies reflecting a wide range of equity concerns</li> </ul>
Leading a Culture of Achievement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Culturally Responsive (CR) curriculum</li> <li>Positive Behavior Interventions and Supports (PBIS)</li> <li>Promoting and fostering equitable cultures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Equity audit</li> </ul>
Leading a Community of Learners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Cultural proficiency</li> <li>Leading structurally diverse families</li> <li>Barriers to family engagement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Family and community engagement audit</li> <li>Create a video responding to the question, "How welcoming is your school?"</li> <li>Case studies reflecting a wide range of equity concerns</li> </ul>
Leading Teaching and Learning	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>A guaranteed and viable curriculum</li> <li>Balanced, equitable assessment systems</li> <li>Multi-tiered Support Systems (MTSS)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Evaluate a unit plan for CR pedagogy</li> <li>MTSS audit</li> </ul>
Building Teacher Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>CR practice and teacher evaluation</li> <li>CR practice and professional learning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Align CR practices to teacher evaluation framework; identify evidence of CR teaching in teaching videos</li> <li>Case study involving a veteran teacher with a history of demonstrating deficit thinking toward students</li> </ul>
Managing Schools for Equitable Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>School safety, discipline, restorative justice</li> <li>Hiring and staffing</li> <li>Critical conversations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Simulation related to equity and budgeting</li> </ul>
Leading School Improvement	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Building organizational capacity for equity and student success</li> <li>MTSS and improved instructional practice</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Write improvement plans to address issues of equity within school's data</li> </ul>

## Challenges and Conclusions

In redesigning our program, we recognized the importance of coherence, context, and collaboration. We sought the tightly integrated and coherent curriculum described in the literature from the outset of the work. Lessons learned from the literature coupled with lessons learned from our mentor program guided our path to a more coherent program. Levine (2005) defined coherence as “. . .organized to teach the skills and knowledge needed by leaders at specific types of schools and at various stages of their careers” (p.13). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007) and Orr (2011) also recognized the importance of a tightly integrated and coherent curriculum. Orr substantiated the case that program coherence mattered and concluded coherence around instructional leadership coupled with rigorous field experiences led to positive outcomes for principal aspirants. Articulating the importance of coherence and achieving coherence were not a singular process. From earlier iterations of our P3, we knew our program lacked horizontal and vertical alignment and intentional learning progressions. Modeling after the work completed by our mentor program, we identified program themes and created a crosswalk that would serve as the essential linchpin for designing a coherent curriculum.

The crosswalk became a tool that we used as a blueprint for building our program. It served as a dynamic document of proposed courses aligned to national standards across the initially identified themes: leading instruction, leading for equity, leading improvement, and communication/building relationships. We revisited this document frequently—renaming courses, reorganizing courses, and evaluating progressions of learning. Those themes later developed into roles that formed the leadership framework for the program: learning leader, equity engineer, innovative problem solver, effective communicator, relationship builder, and reflective practitioner. Through all versions of our work, program faculty and district partners agreed on the importance of equity-centered leadership. The crosswalk further strengthened program coherence as we used this tool to unpack standards, spiral learning progressions, and align the program horizontally and vertically.

While equity-centered leadership is a universal construct that all P3s must address, program curricular coherence around equity must also be contextual for the populations served. Implicit in Levine’s definition of coherence is the need to consider contextual matters. Leaders must understand how school context impacts teaching and learning processes (Lalas & Morgan, 2006). WKU faculty planned and tightly integrated field experiences across each course in the program, allowing candidates to draw in their context throughout their learning. Depending on student context and prior learning experiences, our principal aspirants brought a continuum of leadership readiness to the program in all domains, including equity. Providing them with required, elected, and personalized learning experiences allowed us to individualize the program and best meet the learning needs of each student. At times, contextual learning at school sites did not allow aspirants to confront issues of equity deemed by faculty and partners to be critical to leading public schools in Kentucky.

Supporting field experience with case studies and simulations allowed us to address these gaps. Engaging district partners in the work provided us with a greater depth of understanding of our districts and allowed us to develop assignments that better reflected the role of the principal.

Although we have addressed curricular coherence throughout this article, a larger sense of coherence is necessary for meaningful change to occur. Collaboration allowed us to bring greater coherence to the program of study and the project itself. Fullan and Quinn (2015) defined the role of collaboration in coherence making,

What we need is consistency of purpose, policy, and practice. . . The solution requires the individual and collective ability to build shared meaning, capacity, and commitment to action. When large numbers of people have a deeply understood sense of what needs to be done—and see their part in achieving that purpose—coherence emerges and powerful things happen” (p. 1).

Working collaboratively and in partnership with local districts and state agencies provided the program a deeper understanding of the context and provided the districts with knowledge of program standards, accreditation requirements, and the global landscape vis-à-vis equity and social justice in education. At times, each organization’s unique mission, purpose, and constituencies created challenges, but the work yielded partnerships and program learning that promoted equity-centered leadership.

Programs considering redesign must not assume that following standards such as NELP or PSEL sufficiently yields an equity-driven framework. Instead, the standards should serve as a resource for intentionally and coherently addressing equity throughout the redesign process: the articulation of their core beliefs and theories of action, the explication of equity within their scope and sequence, and the identification of program assessments and field experiences. We should also be willing to learn from each other, particularly exemplary programs. Instead of discounting programs because of different contexts and structures, unpack programs for applicable lessons. We were able to adapt ideas from larger and more urban programs to our context. Finally, sharing beliefs and receiving feedback regarding issues of equity requires a level of vulnerability and humility on the part of faculty that must be acknowledged. Feedback from partners was essential to program improvement, but protocols that allowed the feedback to be collected safely were important.

This work attempts to fill the gap in the literature by providing our program’s story about how we have acted through the curriculum redesign process to improve coherence around issues of equity-centered leadership. In redesigning our program and participating with other programs engaged in similar processes, we came to recognize the importance of understanding equity through the lens of the school and district context. For us, we realized that context, whether rural or urban, required consideration when solving complex problems related to equity. Our work revealed the need for a deeper understanding of navigating context when leading for equity. Another area for further research is developing a data-rich understanding of how program participation and experiences impact leadership effectiveness. For example, longitudinal studies

examining participant data before, during, and after the program would be a natural next step in our improvement cycles. We can further assess our program's overall effectiveness using data available from the state and data collected from district partners. Research that collects and examines data related to novice assistant principals and principals based on their preparation would drive program improvement. Finally, another opportunity is to engage in longitudinal research on the dynamics of university preparation program-district partnerships. Research in any or all of these areas would contribute to refining the practice of principal preparation.

Each candidate in our program is situated in a context impacted by issues of poverty, but the school contexts of our candidates represent a continuum of diversity. Creating a tightly integrated program that allowed flexibility in addressing the needs of our students and their districts was a challenge that we sought to address in our redesign work through our crosswalk and our required, elected, and personalized field experiences. We may not have yet achieved Brown's (2006) call for P3s addressing head-on the issues that comprise equity and social justice globally as well as contextually within their communities, but we have made strides. Our redesign work validated our initial assumption of the importance of context for addressing equity throughout the program. We have learned much about equity, leadership, our districts, and ourselves through this process. We know we have not completed our work in addressing equity, but we will continue learning and making coherent changes in our program in collaboration with our partners and students as we engage in an ongoing cycle of improvement.

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