

NC State's Principal Leadership Academies: Context, Challenges, and Promising Practices

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Abstract

Developing effective educational leaders is fundamentally and irrevocably an interpersonal, relational process—one that requires face-to-face contact, deep thought, deliberation, reflection, engagement, and interaction. It requires cultivation of the habits of heart, mind, and soul. For nearly a decade, the faculty at North Carolina State University (NCSU) have focused on dramatically improving principal preparation. This article explores the initial design of the program, its key features and how they have evolved, processes established for continuous improvement, major challenges faced and approaches to addressing these challenges, and recent program initiatives.

Keywords

principal preparation, leadership knowledge and skills, leadership development, leadership curriculum, leadership program design, leadership program resources

In 2014, the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) identified North Carolina State University (NCSU) as an Exemplary Educational Leadership Preparation (EELP) program. NCSU is one of only five programs in the United States to have ever received that distinction. For nearly a decade, the faculty at NCSU have focused on dramatically improving principal preparation—driven by a mission reflected in our program motto: Excellent Leaders, Effective Schools, Enriched Communities.¹

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Developing effective educational leaders is fundamentally and irrevocably an interpersonal, relational process—one that requires face-to-face contact, deep thought, deliberation, reflection, engagement, and interaction (Fusarelli, 2004). Effective, transformative leadership is a relational process between leaders and followers. If the preparation of school leaders is to be a transformative experience, it must be grounded in a set of contemplative, rigorous, interactive experiences that enhance personal growth and development.

Effective educational leadership practice requires cultivation of the habits of heart, mind, and soul. Effective preparation programs produce leaders who have been so deeply engaged in the work that they have developed a type of muscle memory—having practiced and role-played enough theory-to-practice scenarios that even when confronted with a new challenge, the well-prepared leader can immediately apply their learning and experience to new situations. Well-prepared principals are intuitive, adaptive, and divergent in their thinking to generate breakthrough solutions.

NCSU's framework is a result of years of study and experience, built on research-based best practices, incorporates elements of deep reflection and applied practice, and is contextualized for high-need schools. What results is a fluid praxis where assignments are purposeful and relevant, linked to our theory of action and national and state standards for school executives, and focused on solving real school issues. This article provides a description of (a) the initial design of the program, (b) the program's key features and how they have evolved, (c) processes established for data collection and continuous improvement, (d) major challenges faced and approaches to addressing these challenges, and (e) recent program initiatives.

NCSU's Northeast Leadership Academy (NELA): History and Key Features

Leandro and the Origin of the NELA

In March 2009, NC Superior Court Justice Howard Manning, the judge overseeing NC's school finance lawsuit, *Leandro v. State*, ruled that Halifax County Public Schools were committing "academic genocide" and threatened a state takeover the district. As a result, William Harrison,² the Chair of the NC State Board of Education, initiated a two-pronged approach to rapidly improve Halifax's schools. First, state assistance teams were immediately placed in each school and second, to have a great principal in every school, NCSU's NELA was created.

Under threat of state takeover, Halifax County Public Schools agreed to participate in NCSU's new NELA program; however, to have the scale needed to deliver the program, Harrison facilitated a meeting with local superintendents, all of whom work for districts that are distal from major academic institutions. Due to NCSU faculty being willing to travel to deliver NELA locally in a face-to-face format, the superintendents entered into a regional leadership pipeline consortium agreement in partnership with NCSU.

Partnerships between institutions of higher education (IHEs) and local education agencies (LEAs) are not created in a vacuum. Local politics, inter- and intra-organizational conflict, and threats to the status quo all impact the micropolitical environment. Legislative mandates for school–university partnerships for educator preparation often fail to consider the complexity of such interorganizational endeavors.

IHE–PreK–12 partnerships often unveil differences in views on how principals should best be prepared and encounter issues with information sharing, confidentiality, and even turf conflicts. Furthermore, when IHE professionals work in marginalized communities to “solve a problem,” past exploitative practices can unearth deep-seated mistrust for community outsiders. In close-knit rural communities, where the school system is the largest local employer, nepotism can be normative. These dynamics compelled NCSU to probe deeply into fundamental questions and conceptualizations about organizational structure, interorganizational dynamics, and organizational networks in education. Our successful coordination efforts had a foundation in a strong formal agreement, yet over time, these partnerships have undergone a partnership life cycle of initial participation, trust development, task definition, problem-solving, and group integration toward a sense of coordinative identity. As Alvold and Black (2014) note in their case study of the NELA program, “Challenging obstacles existed in navigating all of the necessary agreements to serve the selected communities, but those barriers have been largely overcome with the success of the program” (p. 2).

Initial Program Design, Funding, Standards Alignment, and Anchoring Beliefs
Scholars who study leadership preparation programs note their weakness: a lack of alignment to strong, established standards; a lack of robust authentic experiential learning; and a lack of meaningful internship and field experiences (Hess & Kelley, 2007; Levine, 2005; The Wallace Foundation, 2016; Young & Crow, 2016).

Research also suggests that 11 practices in preparation should produce higher quality school leaders, including (a) research-based content focused on instruction, change management, and organizational practice; (b) coherent curriculum that links all aspects of the preparation experience around a set of shared values, beliefs, and knowledge about effective organizational practice; (c) rigorous selection process that gives priority to underserved groups, particularly racial/ethnic minorities; (d) cohort structures that foster collaborative learning and support; (e) school–university collaborations that create a seamless and coherent program for students; (f) field-based internships that allow individuals to apply their new knowledge and skills while under the guidance of expert leaders; (g) supportive organizational structures that support student retention, engagement, and placement; (h) a systematic process for evaluating and improving programs and coursework; (i) low student–faculty ratio (i.e., 15:1) and active, student-centered instruction; (j) faculty who identify, develop, and promote relevant knowledge focused on the essential problems of schooling, leadership, and administrative practice; and (k) ongoing professional growth opportunities (Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007; Levine, 2005).

In the following sections, we illustrate how NCSU's program exemplifies research-based best practices in leadership development (Cheney, Davis, Garrett, & Holleran, 2010; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007; Newman, Prociw, Hull, Collins, & Supovitz, 2017; Orr & Cohen, 2007; Orr, King, & LaPointe, 2010; Orr & Orphanos, 2011; The Wallace Foundation, 2016; Young & Crow, 2016; Young, Crow, Murphy, & Ogawa, 2009).

Designed for district and school context. NELA was designed to develop leaders specifically for high-need school contexts. The 14 districts that comprise the northeast quadrant of NC suffer from issues related to abject, intergenerational poverty and racial segregation. NC's lowest performing schools are disproportionately clustered in this region. Alvold and Black (2014) explain,

... selection and recruitment of teachers and principals is challenging in remote rural districts ... and complicated by local politics and traditional norms ... the obstacles to reform in small rural communities with limited staffing, resources, and strong community political influence can seem insurmountable. (p. 1)

NELA responds to these characteristics and enables school turnaround with a purposeful focus on community leadership, relationship building/interpersonal relations, and micropolitics.

NELA's initial design was based on state and national standards, local context, and State Board Chair Harrison's ideas about leadership pipelines. The program incorporated the director of NELA's own experiences with highly effective leadership development programs in rural areas. Bonnie Fusarelli was a co-principal investigator (Co-PI) along with Tricia Brown-Ferrigno [PI] and Keith Gurley [Co-PI] on the Principals Excellence Program [PEP] that addressed the unique challenges of school leadership in poor, rural, Appalachian schools. USDOE research examined 60 models of preparation and identified PEP as one of only six models that offered "promising practices for others who aim to develop innovative solutions to our schools' urgent demand for greater numbers of effective school leaders" (USDOE Office of Innovation and Improvement, 2004, p. 6). NELA's design was informed by the work of PEP and the empirical research on best practices in rural school leadership development (Browne-Ferrigno, 2003, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Johnson Fusarelli, 2005; Browne-Ferrigno & Muth, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Maynard, 2005; Fusarelli, Browne-Ferrigno, & Ricciardi, 2005; Howley & Pendarvis, 2002; USDOE, 2004).

NELA funding. All of NCSU's Leadership Academy cohorts have been grant funded.³ To varying degrees of success, we have sought out funders who are aligned with our values. Such alignment lessens the impact of funder mandates. One nonnegotiable for NCSU is our commitment to working with high-need schools and districts. Our partner districts all have schools with heart-wrenching disparities in school performance, with the lowest performing schools failing to provide even a minimally adequate

education. Improving the life chances of children by providing access to excellent schools is what gives our work purpose and ultimately is a source of strength when the challenges of such work require perseverance and unyielding dedication.

Funding by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation supported initial program design and a grant from the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) helped launch the program. USDOE's Race to the Top grant supported Cohorts 1, 2, and 3. Funding for Cohorts 4, 5, and 6 came from the USDOE's School Leadership Program and from the Turnaround Leader Program. Funding for Cohorts 7-11 came from the state of NC, through funding from the Improving Principal Preparation Program established by NC House Bill 902. Since 2010, NCSU's program has been supported by over \$27 million in grant awards. While grant funding certainly has many benefits, it also requires adapting to meet the guidelines of the particular funder and grant competition. As the old adage goes, the one who holds the purse strings makes the rules.

One unanticipated benefit of the grant funding was that NELA was designated as having alternative pathway status, which meant that NELA operates outside of the fairly rigid oversight of NCDPI. This alternative status, along with grant funding, enables NCSU to have unprecedented freedom from state bureaucratic oversight⁴ to allow us to work with our district partners to design and deliver a program that, as scholars and practitioners of educational leadership, we believe will best prepare principals for what is likely one of the hardest jobs in America.

Both grant-funding and alternative status afford NCSU a great deal of freedom that other preparation programs both within and outside NC might not currently experience. Therefore, since 2016, as a The Wallace Foundation's University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI) grantee, NCSU has been working to create a refined program model that will enable us to deliver district-customized programs without external grant funding. An additional component of UPPI is working with state officials to try to establish a dialogue about improving principal preparation policies, specifically giving programs charter-like flexibility to encourage innovation and reform. Importantly, we believe we have identified key components of effective programming that other preparation programs may be able to utilize regardless of grant funding or alternative status. For instance, it is critical that faculty take personal responsibility for the quality of the *program* and not just their individual courses. We have also found it to be extremely important to work closely with district partners to contextualize learning.

Aligned to state and national standards. NCSU's principal preparation program is designed to meet state and national principal standards.⁵ NC school leader evaluation rubrics are aligned to state standards and were created by McREL to rate a principal's performance as either Developing, Proficient, Accomplished, Distinguished, or Not Demonstrated. NCSU's program utilizes this school leader evaluation rubric in assessing student performance. Through our work with the Wallace Foundation, our faculty and district partners also developed a new set of program standards that we believe will better represent the skill sets needed by principals in our partner districts. These standards have been crosswalked with the PSEL (Professional Leadership Standards

for Educational Leaders) standards and NC's Standards for School Executives. See Supplemental Appendix A for an overview of the program/district-derived standards.

Anchoring beliefs. NCSU grounds its work in research-based principles derived from a comprehensive review of leadership training literature.⁶ We utilized a broad definition of leadership preparation and drew on research from business, military, and nontraditional modes of principal preparation and utilized research from the Wallace Foundation, Rainwater Foundation, and the Bush Institute. In 2018, NCSU faculty and leaders from our partner districts revised the anchoring beliefs to more accurately reflect the contemporary role of a principal as the chief caretaker and advocate who leads with vision and sets culture, leads quality teaching and learning, leads innovative systems, and leads by empowering others.

NCSU's intensive, highly selective cohort model combines coursework, specialized trainings, a community internship, and a yearlong supervised principal residency experience to rigorously prepare principals for high-need schools (see Supplemental Appendices A and B). These components will be described in the following sections.

The NCSU Program

NCSU's pedagogical approach and learning experiences include experiential learning, project-based learning, a PreK-12 student focus, community focus, and an inquiry-action based approach that is equal parts questioning, actions, and reflection. Fellows learn by leading in authentic settings—such as developing and delivering professional development sessions and then receiving feedback on their performance, including their ability to use research to change practice.

We developed protocols and observation rubrics that often utilize a scale that helps infuse divergent thinking. Dr. Pat Ashley, a clinical faculty member who spent her career overseeing school and district turnaround, helped design a Likert-type scale ranging from Bad Practice, Basic Practice, Best Practice (evidence/research-based), and Breakthrough Practice. Adding this last measure of Breakthrough Practice reframed our post-observation discussions. When juxtaposed against Best Practice, it supports divergent thinking and problem reframing for innovative problem-solving.

NCSU's program has three major components: (a) course requirements, (b) program requirements, and (c) district requirements (see Figure 1 below). Each semester Fellows enroll in specified courses while also completing program requirements. These requirements often take the form of specialized trainings that enhance and align with their coursework. Examples include retreats, school visits, conference travel, a developmental project focused on developmentally appropriate teaching and learning across school levels, and specific trainings like Crucial Conversations,⁷ Understanding by Design, and Restorative Discipline, among others. Our district partners also outline district requirements that may include specific professional development, attending leadership meetings, or other experiences.

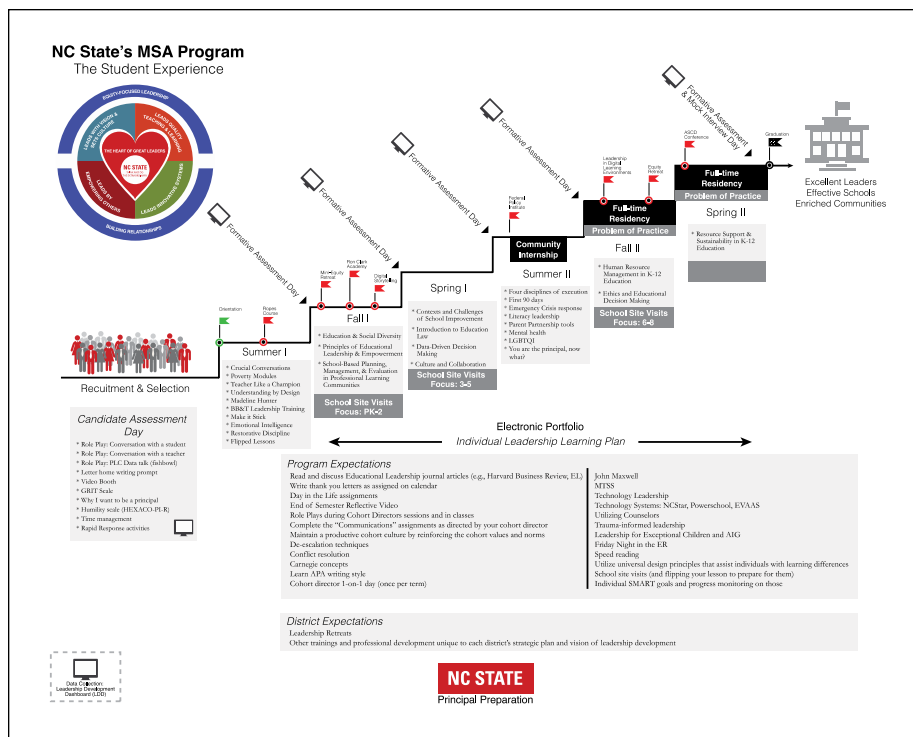


Figure 1. Overview of NCSU's 2-year program.

Note. NCSU = North Carolina State University.

Key Program Features and Components

Cohorts, Adult Learning Theory, and Divergent Thinking

NCSU utilizes closed cohorts to build trusting relationships, expand collegial networks, and develop high-performing school leadership teams. We scaffold learning experiences, build readiness, and provide a gracious space to make mistakes, thus fostering deep reflection and transformative learning. Our instruction is based on adult learning theory, authentic learning experiences, and personal sensemaking and reflection.

Personalized learning. We personalize the program by using a comprehensive 360 ongoing, real-time assessment of each Fellow's knowledge, skills, and practices and through the use of Individual Leadership Learning Plans (ILLPs). We use multiple diagnostic tools to identify areas where the Fellows can improve and together we co-create comprehensive action plans for targeted improvement and measurable growth. Fellows' ILLPs are the basis for their principal residency learning needs assessment. They create SMART goals, accompanied by specific activities or experiences at the

residency school that will help the Fellow develop and practice the identified leadership skills. The document is co-created by the Fellow, their executive coach, and their mentor principal.

Fellows actively document their progress toward their identified goals in their ILLP throughout the program using a variety of technology-based resources (web, video, multimedia). Fellows also provide a corresponding narrative with each activity and experience. These then become part of the Fellow's e-portfolio submitted for licensure. Progress is monitored by the coach, mentor principal, and NCSU faculty. The ILLP also outlines any Principal Residency Rotation(s) the Fellow should experience based on the individual Fellow's learning needs and may cross school levels when appropriate (i.e., rotation at Elementary, Middle, High School, or Central Office).

Instructional Leadership Skills and Building a Teacher Coaching Toolkit

Through a series of interactive seminars and field-based applications, Fellows learn and apply context-specific, research-based teaching strategies and processes associated with effectively improving the academic achievement of students in high-poverty, high-minority schools. Participants apply and practice these skills in their own classrooms during the first year of the 2-year program and share them with other teachers during their principal residency year.

Principals as literacy leaders. Through a partnership with the Hill Center, Fellows learn to lead literacy data gathering and analysis and to design, implement, and monitor literacy interventions. Trainings focus on universal approaches that support students with dyslexia and struggling readers, as well as benefit proficient readers.

Equity-focused leadership. NCSU graduates build positive school cultures focused on high academic achievement for all students. The vestiges of racial segregation remain distinctive in many of the communities in which we work; therefore, we place an intentional focus on racial equity. In addition to an equity course, Fellows attend a 3-day equity retreat at a former slave plantation, which was known as a place to break unruly slaves. Later, the American Missionary Association transformed a building on the site into one of the first schools for African Americans in NC. The site later became a retreat center called the Franklinton Center at Bricks. At the equity retreat, students identify sources of their own bias, begin to examine school problems through an equity lens, and develop a personal definition of social justice upon which they anchor their leadership practice.

On-site, daytime courses: Learning experiences and learning exchanges. Fellows are released from their teaching responsibilities to attend full-day school site visits to experience and apply their leadership learning during the daily flow of a school in session. Fellows are exposed to high-performing traditional public schools, charter schools, and private/parochial schools. Prior to site visits, Fellows are trained on flipping classroom instruction and are required to prepare flipped lessons for their

students. Fellows participate in other types of learning exchanges based on individually identified areas of needed growth.

Authentic, reflective learning experiences. Fellows experience facilitative, experiential teaching—delving into case studies and participating in role plays of authentic scenarios with video cameras recording the session for reflective practice. All course assignments are relevant, linked to our theory of action, and focused on solving real school issues. To monitor Fellows at the programmatic level, program-wide role-play scenarios frame daylong experiential skills assessments conducted at the end of each semester. As part of the Wallace UPPI work, NCSU faculty and RTI International (RTI) are co-creating customizable electronic role-play scenarios—to be launched in summer 2019.

Leadership in digital learning environments. Fellows learn multiple technologies to prepare them to be instructional leaders in digital learning environments. We partner with the Friday Institute for Educational Innovation to teach our future leaders to create and implement a vision for personalized and digital learning. The students also gain an understanding of and plan for key elements of personalized and digital learning: human capacity, curriculum and instruction, data and assessment, and technology and infrastructure. We also teach digital storytelling as a pedagogy. Fellows use digital stories to craft artifacts about self, community, and their development as a leader.

Full-time, yearlong clinical practice in authentic settings. NCSU Fellows engage in a full-time, full academic year (10-month) close-in Principal Residency (internship) experience with an expert principal mentor. Expectations are beyond those for a typical internship. Fellows are granted a provisional NC assistant principal license, enabling them to receive the salary of a beginning assistant principal during their residency.⁸ The provisional license also means they can be the administrator on record and actually be assigned real leadership responsibilities, instead of only shadowing their principal mentors. Fellows develop strong interpersonal relationships, diagnose student learning and effective teaching (including conducting teacher evaluations), model reflective practice, and master leadership skills and dispositions.

Fellows receive wrap-around type support from an executive coach, principal mentor at their school site, and NCSU faculty. Principal mentors help guide the principal residency action research projects and model district expectations. Executive coaches serve as an external source of expert support that complements and expands the Fellow's work with the NCSU faculty and their principal mentor. Individualized learning objectives are set and monitored in a 360-degree manner. The principal mentor and executive coach regularly meet to reexamine learning targets, and Fellows continue to participate in programmatic Formative Assessment Days and have individual feedback meetings each semester. NCSU's online *Principal Residency Handbook* provides further details.

Problem of practice. An integral part of the principal residency is the Residency Problem of Practice that requires students to work through an entire cycle of Collaborative Inquiry and Action (Militello, Rallis, & Goldring, 2009), including developing a logic model. Fellows demonstrate the root causes of their problem of practice through data (including new data collection) and engagement with multiple stakeholders. Then they gain acceptance of the problem, develop a theory of action vis-a-vis a logic model, and engage in action (an intervention). A robust evaluation (consisting of outputs, outcomes, and impact) plan is utilized to reflect upon the strategies employed. Before graduation, Fellows present their results in a mini-conference poster session using an Ignite format.

Community internship. Co-constructed with NCSU's 4H Extension office, NCSU's Summer Community Internship is a focused experience in the local community where Fellows provide service to a community agency and write grant proposals for funding to connect the community agency to their residency school. Students intern in a variety of community agencies such as Boys & Girls Clubs, Chambers of Commerce, Migrant Education Programs, Peacemaker's Family Center's Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools, Cooperative Extension Offices, Digital Oral Histories projects, and community centers such as Franklinton Center at Bricks. Through this experience, we create school leaders who are community leaders skilled at tapping into community supports for schools.

Multiple opportunities for candidates to be observed and coached. The transfer of learning from training programs into leadership practice dramatically increases with individualized coaching; specifically, from 5-10% when presented or modeled in training to 80-90% when coaching is provided (Joyce & Showers, 2002). Therefore, NCSU utilizes carefully vetted and trained executive coaches to observe, provide formative feedback, coach, and monitor Fellows and their ILLP as they progress through the program (and if funding is available, during their first year as a school leader). Drawing from research by Bloom, Castagna, Moir, and Warren (2005), we created a new model of coaching built around the particular needs of school leaders and meant to move from single to double-loop learning—moving from the what to the why (i.e., the reasoning behind the behavior; Argyris, 1977, 1990). Our model resolves some of the long-standing problems with mentor programs. In traditional mentoring programs, mentors are senior organizational insiders, often in job-alike positions. The supervisory nature of the relationship makes it difficult for mentees to share confidences—especially when they are struggling. Furthermore, mentors have their own demanding jobs so they are usually not fully available to their protégés. The role of executive coaches is explained further on our program website.

Principal mentors. In addition to an executive coach, Fellows are also paired with a residency principal mentor who is carefully vetted and trained. Mentors provide advisement in the daily functions of the residency and help Fellows live their learning

during their field experiences/residency.

Evaluation of fellows. Each course/training has an accompanying artifact that is linked to state and national standards. Fellows create and post artifacts on a web-page (shared publicly) to demonstrate and articulate their competencies. Fellows also participate in a daylong formative assessment experience each semester. As Fellows progress, the Formative Assessment Day becomes increasingly more personalized, with assessment activities targeted at building skills in areas identified as areas of needed growth for each specific Fellow. Instructors, coaches, and mentor principals provide feedback to the Cohort Director who then combines those data with data from Formative Assessment Day to form a progressive profile of candidate performance. The coach then meets with their Fellow(s) to provide targeted feedback to inform a revision of the Fellow's ILLP and co-construct a comprehensive action plan for targeted improvement and measurable growth. Fellows who fail to meet growth targets receive additional support. If, after intervention, the Fellow has not made sufficient growth, the superintendent is consulted and the Fellow is dismissed from the program. (To date, only three Fellows have been dismissed for failing to make adequate progress.)

Other sources of feedback data include rubrics mentor principals and coaches complete twice per semester. Summative evaluation includes a complete 360 assessment based on a performance-based activity, data from mentors, coaches, instructors, and program directors, as well as a comprehensive review of the candidate's electronic portfolio based on the NC Standards for School Executives Evaluation Rubric.

Induction. New principals and assistant principals need support during novice practice years (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Browne-Ferrigno & Johnson Fusarelli, 2005; Daresh, 2002). When grant funding is available, executive coaches continue to work with Fellows as they are hired into leadership positions. New principals/assistant principals participate in monthly sessions focused on self-selected problems of practice with facilitation by an executive coach. One of our executive coaches calls this "NCSU's Good Housekeeping Warranty!" We do whatever we can to continue to support our graduates across their careers. Types of supports include delivering requested professional development for their faculty/staff, assisting with master scheduling through an equity lens, facilitating establishing shared values with school faculty/staff/stakeholders, and myriad other types of support.

Overcoming Challenges: A Spotlight on Candidate Selection

The most important element of NCSU's program is that we admit individuals who we (faculty and district partners) believe have excellent leadership potential. We measure

leadership potential in a variety of ways and continually use data on graduate performance to refine our recruitment and selection processes.

For NELA's first cohort in 2010, Fellows were selected by their district superintendent. Unfortunately, even after providing additional coaching support, three of the Cohort 1 Fellows were not capable of meeting the high bar for continuing in the program and were dismissed. Of those three students, two were the only two participants from their school district. Knowing that this would be difficult to communicate to the superintendent, an academy director and a faculty member who was a former superintendent with ties to the region met with the superintendent to explain the decision. Instead of being upset about the Fellows he sponsored being dismissed, the superintendent said he was not surprised! He explained that he did not think either candidate would actually make a good principal. When asked why he wrote both individuals glowing letters of recommendation, he explained that the candidates would still be in his community no matter what he said in his recommendation letter and, "Why make your teachers unhappy?" We further learned that one of the Fellows was closely related to a school board member and the other was a relative of the superintendent's church pastor. We began to realize just how risky it could be perceived to be (both personally and professionally) for a rural superintendent to be completely candid about employees with strong, local social networks.

This experience taught us that we needed to change how we selected our Fellows. As we explained when presenting the new process to our partner superintendents, we needed to make NCSU the "bad guy" by taking the onus off the superintendent and having NCSU utilize Candidate Assessment Day (CAD) for admission decisions. We created an assessment process that includes an opportunity for the district/superintendent to give verbal input before we offer admission to a candidate. Supplemental Appendix C includes a visual overview of the steps in our recruitment and selection process.

NCSU's Candidate Recruitment Process

NCSU is now proactive and intentional in our aggressive recruitment of individuals who are committed to becoming exceptional school leaders. We target our recruitment efforts through a combination of district-based recruitment nights (widely advertised information sessions) and through district and school administrator recommendations. We ask principals, superintendents, program alumni, and coaches to identify and encourage application from excellent teachers who have strong leadership potential with a particular focus on strategically recruiting educators who have successfully worked with students from historically underserved populations (i.e., teachers of exceptional children/special education and/or teachers of English Language Learners, Reading Support Specialists, etc.). Knowing the importance of having leaders who reflect the population/community they lead, our intentionality in recruitment and selection has resulted in NCSU's MSA being the second most racially diverse program at NCSU—second only to an international engineering program.

NCSU's selection process begins at our information sessions. The informational presentation is framed around the program's core values and challenges potential students to ask themselves whether they believe that they belong with us after a series of value-based statements about the program. Program graduates participate by talking about the rigor and time commitment required to complete NCSU's MSA. This high-intensity interaction usually results in many individuals self-selecting out of applying to such an intensive, mission-driven program.

We have found that individuals in whom others see great potential, but who are a little reluctant to enter school leadership (and thus require multiple contacts via email and phone), are often some of our highest performers. These individuals often have a more complete understanding of the demands of the contemporary principalship and thus are hesitant to leave their success/comfort zone as a teacher for a future that will be filled with long work hours and working with adults more than directly with students.

NCSU's Candidate Selection: Rigorous Selection Based on Competencies That Are Predictive of Success as a School Leader

NCSU uses a multistep selection process that includes experiential events in which candidates must demonstrate their leadership skills, knowledge, and dispositions. Through carefully sequenced interactions, we select individuals who demonstrate characteristics of principals that research has identified as linked to higher levels of student performance and deep school change. NCSU selects students who (a) have high expectations and share the belief that all children can achieve at high academic levels, (b) have a sense of urgency and personal accountability for achieving results for all students, (c) have a deep commitment to equity and community engagement, (d) possess a deep knowledge of curriculum and instruction and monitor teacher effectiveness, and (e) have strong resilience skills to persevere when confronted with setbacks.⁹

The process of selection. In the first stage, applicants complete an enhanced NCSU Graduate School application that includes a background screening, reference check, and letters of recommendation from the candidate's immediate supervisor(s). Finalists are selected to participate in CAD where they engage in authentic scenario-based activities and assessed by evaluation teams composed of teachers, principals, high school students, turnaround coaches, superintendents, and university faculty. Each team follows six candidates throughout the day and utilizes scoring rubrics to assess their performance.

During CAD, candidates

1. Participate in role-play scenarios with a high school student;
2. Participate in role-play scenarios with a K-12 teacher, after which they receive immediate feedback and must then redo the role-play;

3. Complete the GRIT Perseverance Survey;
4. Participate in a role-play of data talk within a grade-level team;
5. Complete a timed, authentic writing activity;
6. Complete written responses to prompts, such as explaining how they use data to inform their decisions and so on;
7. Complete quick oral responses to prompts in a video booth; and
8. Participate in a 30-min individual interview.

In addition to these experiences, we include serendipitous encounters or intentional interactions during which the candidate does not know their behavior is being assessed as a teaching tool to demonstrate what the potential students will experience in the program. For example, a volunteer posed in a janitor's uniform at CAD. Throughout the day, he cleaned the halls in proximity to candidates. The "janitor's" impressions (i.e., if and how the candidates interacted with him) were documented on a Serendipitous Encounters rubric. At the end of the day, before candidate dismissal, the janitor's true identity was revealed. We explain that the program looks for candidates who show compassion, kindness, and professionalism to everyone they meet and not just the evaluators. The purpose was to show potential students that in the program, as in leadership, everything counts.

At the end of CAD, the assessment team debriefs with faculty about each candidate. NCSU faculty later complete another comprehensive review of all the materials, consult the superintendent via phone calls, and make final admission decisions. Based on data from our CAD, there have been times when we did not follow a superintendent's recommendation—most commonly when the superintendent's rationale was that the individual was too young or in cases of Teach for America alumni, "not from here." These situations required careful navigation so that the superintendents understand that while their recommendations as program partners carry weight, we don't rely on any single metric (such as district recommendation) in admissions decisions.

Our process for selecting candidates is refined with each iteration of NCSU's program and highlights how initial barriers can be overcome. NCSU's process is comprehensive, exhausting, and requires a significant time commitment. An external evaluation found that the level of scrutiny that NCSU applicants undergo is highly unusual in principal preparation programs (both university-based and non-traditional; Brown, 2014).

Recent Initiatives and Ongoing Development

Since 2016, funds from the Wallace Foundation's UPPI initiative have supported NCSU's faculty and district partners in redesigning our program to be more district-customized and have supported creating broader faculty ownership of program outcomes, and designing a program that could be successful independent of grant funding. Utilizing a design-studio process with a facilitator from NCSU's College of Design, NCSU faculty, district leaders, principals and assistant principals, and other educational stakeholders convened to design a program from the ground up, using the

following prompt (visualized as a stick person) to guide our work: In your experience, what do highly effective principals know (the head)? What do they feel (heart)? What do they do (hands)? Where are they (feet)?

After using this prompt to identify topics, skill sets, and dispositions highly effective leaders possess (see Supplemental Appendix A), we organized related items into semesters with a resulting spiraling 2-year (24-month) curriculum.¹⁰ These recent changes also highlight how we use a holistic plan for continuous program improvement. We continually collect and monitor data on our effectiveness and make just-in-time adjustments to the program. NCSU's strategies include a Plus/Delta and exit survey for *each session* to provide immediate feedback to instructors/trainers, to identify any areas that need further clarification, and to make just-in-time adjustments to content and delivery to improve future sessions.

We conduct comprehensive annual program reviews based annual feedback surveys of program graduates, feedback/listening meetings with partner superintendents, and quarterly meetings with executive coaches and instructors. In addition, we continue to vet the components of our program to national and state leadership educators, including individuals from corporate leadership development. We also receive input from grant-funded external evaluations that have highlighted our exceptionally high first-year postgraduation leadership placement rate of approximately 90% of Fellows immediately employed into assistant principalships and some directly into a principalship.

Finally, NCSU is working with SAS, a leader in analytic software development, to design and deploy a customized Leadership Development Dashboard with our partner districts. These electronic repositories of longitudinal information about aspiring, novice, and veteran principals will complement existing systems to house in one place electronic records of key information about the district's leadership bench strength. The system tracks the education, career progress, and performance of school district employees to provide timely and actionable data back to NCSU for data-informed continuous improvement. We hope other universities will opt to also utilize this tool which would ultimately result in a robust dataset for leadership research.

Closing Comments

Although nationally recognized for excellence, NCSU's leadership academies undergone near constant review, revision, and continuous improvement. The key components are continually vetted by panels of principals, university professors, superintendents, innovative leadership educators, and professional development organizations. The current design reflects the core tenets of the original program, but as NCSU has grown to serve almost one quarter of all school districts in NC, NCSU continually customizes the design and content to meet the needs of district partners.

Much is made of the need for strong university–district partnerships, but those partnerships take time to develop, to maintain, and require a commitment by *both* partners.

Persistence is key. NCSU utilizes the Education Commission's Quality Measures Partnership Effectiveness Continuum Tool to develop a common understanding of the indicators of effective partnerships as described in the research literature. It guides team reflections and prompts discussions on and pathways to strengthen existing partnerships and form productive new ones.

Innovative programs face challenges, professional jealousy, internal restrictions, personnel issues, and a near continual battle against institutional intransigence in the state bureaucracy (top-down standards, licensure, and the bureaucratic tendency for every program to look alike), in IHEs (three credit courses rather than sets of specialized trainings), and in districts (that's how things are done around here). The work is complicated by a lack of public understanding about how IHEs function, the need for sustained (not grant dependent) financial support, and more empowering (more flexible) and more stable state policies for leader development, which are essential for scaling up and replicating successful programs.

The ultimate test of success is the performance of program graduates. As noted above, NCSU graduates have exceptionally high first-year postgraduation leadership placement rates (approximately 90%) and every graduate has worked in a high-need school post-graduation. It takes time for a graduate to become a principal, and then a year or more to be able to measure the impact that principal had on student achievement. Tracking principal impact data is time intensive. We hope the in-progress Leadership Development Dashboard will contribute actionable data on graduate performance.

Meanwhile, a research study of the first five Fellows who became principals (2013-2014) showed that each had significant gains in student performance—increases of 33.5%, 18.2%, 16.4%, 15.8%, and 8.4% on the composite scores for the school (Edmonds, 2017). The principals continued to make gains during their second year. As of our last comprehensive review of performance data of our graduates, 83% of NELA *first-year* principals met or exceeded growth in high-need, *Title I* schools versus only 75% of experienced principals across all schools in the state reaching the same level of performance.

We hope future Leadership Development Dashboard and accompanying research efforts will further define the essential elements of effective principal preparation that leads to excellent leadership in practice. Thus, moving closer to our program's goal: Excellent Leaders, Effective Schools, Enriched Communities.

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Notes

1. Copyright © 2018 North Carolina State University.
2. In 1994, Bill Harrison was superintendent of Hoke County Schools, a low-wealth district, which played a key role in the initiation of the *Leandro v. State of NC* lawsuit. North Carolina's (NC) formula for funding public education depends, in part, on the revenues that school districts receive from local real estate taxes, putting low-wealth districts at a financial disadvantage. *Leandro*, named after then Hoke County high school student Robb Leandro, has spanned more than two decades of trials, amendments, and appeals. Eventually, the NC Supreme Court ruled that neither school districts nor counties have any constitutional right to equal funding. However, the court also ruled the state was responsible for providing a "sound basic education" to all schoolchildren, including at-risk students.
3. The name the Northeast Leadership Academy refers to the original program that still operates in that region of NC. More recent iterations of the program have been named after the district partner(s) followed by the term "Principal Leadership Academy." For example, the cohort with Durham Public Schools is the Durham Principal Leadership Academy (DPLA).
4. In NC, principal preparation programs must have a series of "artifacts" of the preparation program that are based on the NC Standards for School Executives and approved by the NC Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI). Changes in these projects/artifacts must also go through a cumbersome process of NCDPI review. Each institution must house the artifacts on a secure electronic platform. Therefore, the "Blueprints" submitted to NCDPI in 2009 still guide the delivery of traditional Masters of School Administration programs in NC.
5. North Carolina created the NC Standards for School Executives after researching "the practices of leadership that impact student achievement." The Interstate School Leader Licensure Consortium and work by the Wallace Foundation, the Mid-Continental Regional Education Laboratory, the Southern Regional Education Board, the National Staff Development Council, National Association of Secondary School Principals (NAASP), and National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP) influenced the creation of the NC standards. The NC standards include the following: Strategic Leadership, Instructional Leadership, Cultural Leadership, Human Resource Leadership, Managerial Leadership, External Development Leadership, and Micropolitical Leadership. An eighth element, Inclusion of Student Growth, was later added. NC also has 21 Competencies (knowledge, experience, and skills) for School Executives.
6. When NC State began our work with Halifax County Public Schools, the NELA director's oldest son was entering first grade. In designing the program, she continually held in her mind's eye an image of her son, and pictured this child as an 8-year-old third grader, walking into an aging school building. This imagined school resembled many of the actual schools in Halifax County—all of the students are eligible for free or reduced lunch and 81% (four out of five) of their third-grade classmates are below grade level (not proficient) in reading. These statistics describe one of our partner district schools, and there are many, many more students experiencing schools like these across our partner districts and across NC. These students deserve better. They deserve schools capable of helping them reach their full potential. She would ask herself: What type of leader would you want for your child in this school? How would you want them prepared? and What dispositions, skill sets, and orientations would you want the leader to have? Ultimately, addressing these questions to prepare the right kind of leader for this context became the work of NC State's leadership

preparation model. We have utilized this visualization (picture in your mind's eye a child you love . . .) with both our partner districts and in training our Fellows. Turning around low performing schools is challenging work. Making the work feel more personal ("What would I want for my child?") helps to keep the focus on excellence, not expedience. Our original anchoring beliefs included the following: effective principals: (a) lead by modeling exemplar values and behavior; (b) help make possible what they require others to do; (c) establish agreement on the school's purpose and goals, and then create processes that help employees learn what they need to meet these goals; (d) select, reward, and retain teachers/staff who are willing to work to achieve school goals; (e) establish a sense of urgency and are leaders of learning in the school, possessing a laser-like focus on academic achievement, ensuring that all decisions and resources are aligned to the goal of improving student outcomes; (f) develop staff and cultivate a culture of continuous, reflective professional learning among individuals and groups/ Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) that is transparent and a collective good; (g) cultivate shared leadership so that authority and accountability are linked; (h) are systems-thinkers and are able to frame problems and potential problems by being reflective practitioners; (i) utilize a systems-level understanding of the interconnectedness of barriers to student achievement and identify leverage points within the system to push change efforts that improve school outcomes; (j) understand, read, predict, and prevent challenges to a positive school climate; (k) use multiple forms of data to inform all decisions; and (l) understand that a central aim of their work is creation of a socially just school organization and student learning process so that all students can be academically successful.

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8. In NC, all full-time Master of School Administration students, who have been full-time from the beginning of their program, are eligible for a paid internship year. Health insurance is not covered, so either the student or the school district (as our partner districts do) must agree to pay the employer's portion of the health insurance at a current cost of about \$6,000 per year.
9. A detailed description along with video links describing NC State's selection process are available at our program website.
10. The importance of spiraling the curriculum cannot be understated. It takes time for aspiring leaders to shift their mind-set from teacher to leader. Early in the program, participants filter their learning through a teacher lens. As they progress through the program, their leadership lens is sharpened and that is when it is important to revisit concepts from the early semesters and have participants apply their learning.

Supplemental Material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

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