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Becoming a Reading Specialist: Surveying the Possibilities

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The terrain of graduate programs is changing, especially in light of preparing highly qualified teachers (NCLB, 2001) and standards-based accreditation (IRA, 2004a, NCATE, 2008). This changing terrain is noticed as many institutions of higher learning undergo program reviews through self-studies required by the institution, by state departments of education, by specialized professional associations, or by national accreditation entities. This project sought to explore the nature of reading specialists master's programs by examining their websites in light of the shift towards standards-based accreditation of programs and the influence of federal legislation. Specific objectives for this descriptive study included: (a) reviewing master's programs that lead to reading specialist certification at institutions of varying purpose, size, and location; (b) examining program configurations, including but not limited to programs of study, requirements, and special features; and (c) exploring features of institutions' websites offering information about becoming a certified reading specialist.

Related Research

Recent interest in preparing highly qualified reading professionals has provided opportunities for institutions of higher learning engaged in teacher preparation to examine the nature of their programs. The International Reading Association (2004a; 2004b) advocates for teacher education to prepare high-quality teachers who can deliver high-quality teaching— teaching that makes a difference with all students, able and struggling (Roller, 2001). Research that examines the nature and quality of teacher preparation assists faculty in developing programs for reading specialists who can not only help struggling readers achieve (Bean, Swan & Knaub, 2003), but who can help colleagues develop their knowledge and skill in teaching reading and/or literacy studies (Blachowicz, Obrochta, & Fogelberg, 2005; Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005; Dole, 2004). Though the research is not conclusive, it is suggestive that well prepared teachers outperform those who are not prepared.

Some institutions that prepare educational professional have begun to structure their preparation programs on standards-based content knowledge, pedagogical skill, and professional dispositions (IRA, 2004a; NCATE 2008). The nature of the courses, the assessments of candidates, and the field and clinical experiences are moving toward the expectations and language of the national standards. Additionally, the No Child Left Behind Act (2001) calls for highly qualified teachers, defined as having a bachelor's degree, a state teaching certification or a passing score on the state teacher licensing examination, and subject matter knowledge (Liston, Borko, & Whitcomb, 2008). As a minimum base for teacher knowledge, this definition focuses on input measures—teacher preparation programs and state certification requirements. Advanced preparation, such as reading specialist/literacy coach programs, are also responding to the expectations of professional standards (IRA, 2004a; IRA, 2004b) and are seeking to prepare highly qualified advanced teachers—those having a master's degree with substantial coursework

in reading, a state endorsement or certification that connects to an initial teaching license, and a passing score on the state advanced licensing examination (Vogt & Shearer, 2007).

In addition to professional organization standards, large-scale surveys (Bean, Cassidy, Grumet, Shelton, & Wallis, 2002; Dole, 2004) and school-university partnerships also inform preparation programs. Both surveys and partnerships provide insight into the daily lives of teachers and reading specialists. When considering the work of reading specialists, recent surveys indicated that their work included providing services to students, coaching colleagues in refining and/or altering instructional practices, providing professional development to teachers within their schools and, at times, beyond their schools, locating and securing instructional materials, writing grants, and managing budgets (Bean et al., 2002). Considering these tasks and expectations required of reading specialists across the nation suggest that professional preparations programs keep pace with these expanding roles. Faculty in teacher preparation programs that partner with public schools may be aware of the changing roles because of the time that they spend in schools and because of their relationships with teachers and principals. This intimate knowledge of the lives of teachers may influence the way preparation programs are altered to not only stay current with the needs of teachers and schools, but also to lead the nature of the work performed by reading specialists (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005). Professional preparation programs that produce successful teachers include (1) collaborative relationships between university programs and local school districts, (2) coursework and school and community fieldwork in which candidates' attitudes, knowledge and beliefs about teaching diverse learners are addressed, and (3) program components that are clearly related to teacher quality and student achievement (i.e., program purpose, program vision, program goals) (Cochran-Smith & Zeichner, 2005).

Technology and the World Wide Web have provided access to information in unprecedented ways. Individuals are able to use the Internet to search for possibilities before making decisions. This is certainly true as more and more individuals seek information about colleges and universities that may offer programs that meet their professional goals. No longer are consumers limited to the local college or university when seeking advanced preparation programs. They are able to explore options beyond their local setting through the use of blended courses, web-based courses, and professional development modules (Williams, 2008). This enlarged sphere of options creates challenges for institutions of higher education to make their professional programs and learning opportunities available as an option for technology savvy students.

Creating a web presence requires careful consideration, planning, and time. Some institutions provide personnel to create and maintain program websites, while other institutions expect faculty and staff within programs to create and maintain their own websites. Regardless of the genesis of a professional preparation program's website, the content and the navigation are the critical aspects of the site. Pearson (2001) suggested that much could be gained by developing a database that documents reading teacher education. This project attempts to examine the nature of reading specialists master's programs based on information gleaned from websites of institutions categorized by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2005).

Methodology

Sample

        This descriptive research project involved a content analysis of the websites of master's programs that prepare reading specialists at selected institutions of higher education. Four types of institutions were identified based on Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, higher education classifications (2005)—Research Universities, very high activity, Doctoral/Research Universities, Master's Colleges and Universities, larger programs, and Master's Colleges and Universities, smaller programs. Ten institutions in each of the four types of institutions were selected to serve as the sample for this project. Care was taken to select institutions that represented a mix of census regions of the United States and funding status. Appendix A presents the institutional profile for the 40 institutions that comprised the sample, including the Carnegie Foundation classification, the state in which the institution is located, the United State region in which it is located, the setting, and the funding status.

        To summarize the institutions (see Table 1), the 40 institutions were located in 26 states; 16 of the states were home to one institution, six states had two institutions, and four states had three institutions within this sample. Forty-two percent (n=17) of the institutions were located in the South, 22.5% (n=9) in the Midwest, 17.5% (n=7) in the West, 15% (n=6) in the Northeast, and 2.5% (n=1) in the Pacific. The institutions were more frequently situated in urban centers (n=29; 72.5%) than in rural areas (n=11; 27.5%). The sample reflected many public institutions (n=29; 72.5%) and few private institutions (n=11; 27.5%).

Table 1. Summary of the Institutional Profiles

	States Represented	Regions Represented	Settings Represented	Status Represented
MS*	10 states	South = 3 (30%)	Urban = 5 (50%)	Private = 2 (20%)
	Number of institutions per state:	Midwest = 3 (30%)	Rural = 5 (50%)	Public = 8 (80%)
	1 institution per state (100%)	West = 1 (10%)		
		Northeast = 2 (20%)		
		Pacific = 1 (10%)		
ML*	10 states	South = 4 (40%)	Urban = 7 (70%)	Private = 6 (60%)
	Number of institutions per state:	Midwest = 2 (20%)	Rural = 3 (30%)	Public = 4 (40%)
	1 institution per state (100%)	West = 2 (20%)		
		Northeast = 2 (20%)		
		Pacific = 0		
DRU*	10 states	South = 4 (40%)	Urban = 9 (90%)	Private = 2 (20%)
	Number of institutions per state:	Midwest = 3 (30%)	Rural = 1 (10%)	Public = 8 (80%)
	1 institution per state (100%)	West = 2 (20%)		
		Northeast = 1 (10%)		
		Pacific = 0		
RUVH*	10 states	South = 6 (60%)	Urban = 8 (80%)	Private = 1 (10%)
	Number of institutions per state:	Midwest = 1 (10%)	Rural = 2 (20%)	Public = 9 (90%)
	1 institution per state (100%)	West = 1 (10%)		
		Northeast = 1 (10%)		
		Pacific = 0		
Summary	26 states	South = 17 (42.5%)	Urban = 29 (72.5%)	Private = 11 (27.5%)
	Number of institutions per state:	Midwest = 9 (22.5%)	Rural = 11 (27.5%)	Public = 29 (72.5%)
	1 institution = 16 states (62%)	West = 7 (17.5%)		
	2 institutions = 6 states (23%)	Northeast = 6 (15.0%)		
	3 institutions = 4 states (15%)	Pacific = 1 (2.5%)		

*MS=master's small; ML=master's large; DRU=doctoral research university; RUVH=doctoral research university, very high activity

Data Collection and Analysis

Using a feature checklist that emerged from a pilot review of two institutions from each of the four types of institutions, websites of master's programs that led to a specialization in reading/literacy studies were examined. The first level of analysis focused on website features. The feature checklist included accreditation information, program contacts, faculty descriptions, course descriptions, course syllabi, and reading student handbooks. A complexity rating for finding information on each website was determined—1=information directly found or found by using a simple search of the website; 0=no information was found or finding the information required multiple steps. The second level of analysis, a deeper document analysis, was completed by printing selected materials available on the website, including the degrees offered, coursework requirements, certification requirements, field/clinical requirements, admission requirements, and costs per credit hour. A cross-institution analysis was completed for each of the four types of institutions examined. Description statistics were used to represent the data.

Results

The analysis of the 40 institutions demonstrated variation in reading specialists master's degree program websites. Programs reviewed included those that provided a master's degree in reading and/or literacy and those that provided a master's degree in education with an emphasis in reading and/or literacy studies. The features of the websites and the information available to potential and current students ranged from basic program descriptions to complex websites with multiple levels of multiple links.

The first level of review focused on features of the website. Thirty-seven (92.5%) of the websites reviewed earned a complexity rating of one, meaning that information was found through direct links or by using a simple search within the website. Three websites seemed more complex, requiring multiple steps in locating targeted information or the information was never found. Table 2 presents the overview of website feature analysis. Of the 40 institutions reviewed, 36 institutions (90%) reported that their education programs were fully accredited by a national accrediting agency and/or by the state department of education, while accreditation information for four institutions was unavailable. Of the four institutions with unavailable accreditation information, all were public institutions, three were urban, and one was rural.

Table 2. Website Feature Analysis

School by Carnegie Foundation Classification*	Accreditation	Program Contacts	Faculty Descriptions	Courses Descriptions	Course Syllabi	Reading Student Handbook	Complexity Rating Totals**
MS	9	5	6	10	2	4	9
ML	9	9	6	10	1	0	10
DRU	9	10	9	9	2	0	9
RUVH	9	9	9	10	3	0	9
Totals	36 (90%)	33 (82.5%)	30 (75.5%)	39 (97.5%)	8 (20%)	4 (10%)	37 (92.5%)

Websites that provide program coordinator contact information and faculty information support individuals when seeking ways to directly contact personnel by telephone, by email, or in person. Thirty-three institutions (82.5%) provided explicit program contact information. Interestingly, only five of the master's small (MS) program institutions provided contact information on the portion of their website that featured information about becoming a reading specialist or about attaining a master's degree. Faculty information was provided more frequently by the doctoral institutions (n=18; 90%) than by the master's institutions (n=12; 60%). Faculty information included names, contact information, degrees, specializations, research interest, and/or curriculum vitas.

When interested individuals or matriculating candidates seek information about courses or about the policies and procedures for a particular program, they often consult program websites. Of the 40 program websites reviewed, 97.5% (n=39) provided course descriptions, but few provided posted course syllabi (n=8; 20%). The syllabi that were provided were representative of the nature of the required courses rather than current syllabi for a particular semester. Student handbooks often include policies and procedures for particular programs, and candidates often find handbooks useful during matriculation. Few reading student handbooks (n=4; 10%) were found as links on program websites. In fact, of the four electronic handbooks found, each was offered by public MS institutions.

The second level of analysis required a deeper, more comprehensive examination of materials printed from each of the websites. Table 3 provides data related to the website document analysis. Graduate programs making candidates eligible to apply for a reading specialist certification reflected two pathways—a master's degree in education with an emphasis or track for reading/literacy studies or a master's degree in reading. Twenty-two (55%) of the institutions offered master's degrees in education with an emphasis or track for reading/literacy studies; 18 (45%) offered master's degrees in reading/literacy studies. Of interest is that the size of the institution seemed to make a difference in the type of degree that was offered in master's institutions. Programs in MS institutions were more likely to offer the master's of education (n=9; 90%), while programs in the master's large (ML) institutions were more likely to offer the master's of reading/literacy studies (n=8; 80%). Doctoral institutions were more similar in the ways in which they offered programs that lead to eligibility for certification as a reading specialist. Four (40%) of the doctoral research universities (DRU) and five (50%) of the research university, very high activity, (RUVH) offered master's in reading/literacy studies degrees.

Table 3. Website Document Analysis

Code	Degree	Hours	Certification Requirements	Clinical Exp	Admission

	Emphasis in Reading	Reading	Total (h=hours)	Reading (h=hours)	Praxis II	State Test	No Test	Teaching Experience	Field or Clinical Exp.	Teaching Certificate	Teaching Experience
MS	9	1	3 <36 h 7 36 h	4-18 h 3-21 h 3-24 h	5	1	4	1	10	10	3
ML	2	8	4 <36 h 3 36 h 3 >36 h	1-18 h 4-21 h 4-24 h 1-33 h	5	4	1	4	10	9	1
DRU	6	4	3 <36 h 5 36 h 2 >36 h	1-12 h 3-18 h 2-21 h 1-27 h 2-30 h 1-32 h	3	6	1	0	10	7	1
RUVH	5	5	4 <36 h 5 36 h 1 >36 h	1-12 h 1-15 h 4-18 h 2-24 h 1-33 h 1-36 h	4	5	1	6	10	7	2
Summary	22 (55%)	18 (45%)	14 <36 h 20 36 h 6 >36 h	2-12 h 1-15 h 12-18 h 9-21 h 9-24 h 1-27 h 2-30 h 1-32 2-33 h 1-36 h	17 (42.5%)	16 (40%)	7 (17.5%)	11 (27.5%)	40 (100%)	33 (82.5%)	7 (17.5%)

*MS=master's small; ML=master's large; DRU=doctoral research university; RUVH=research university, very high activity

The analysis of the printed documents allowed for a more careful examination of the total credit hours and the types of hours required for the master's degree at each of the institutions. The total credit hours to complete a degree at the 40 institutions were sorted into three categories—those that required fewer than 36 hours, those that required 36 hours, and those that required more than 36 hours. Overall, 14 institutions (35%) required fewer than 36 credit hours, 20 institutions (50%) required 36 credit hours, and six institutions (15%) required more than 36 credit hours. When examining the number of credit hours that could be explicitly categorized as reading/literacy studies content, the credit hours ranged from as few as 12 to as many as 36. The majority of the institutions (n=30; 75%) required 18-24 credit hours of reading/literacy studies content. Institutions rated MS had the tightest range of content credits (18-24 hours), while RUVH had the broadest range of content credits (12-36 hours).

Becoming a certified/licensed reading specialist is a state department of education function. Universities recommended as eligible for certification graduates who successfully completed an approved program. When analyzing the requirements for certification, state departments of education required completing an approved preparation program. They often also required passing a content test and teaching experience. Thirty-three (82.5%) institutions

required completing an approved program and passing a designated test to be eligible for a recommendation to the state department of education for a reading specialist certificate, while seven (17.5%) institutions required only completing an approved program to be eligible for the recommendation to the state department of education. Of the 40 institutions reviewed for this project, 17 (42.3%) required the Education Testing Service Praxis II, 16 (40%) required a state test, and seven (17.5%) required no test. A minority of institutions had programs that required teaching experience (n=11; 27.5%). Of note was that four ML institutions (40%) and six RUVH institutions (60%) required teaching experience prior to certification as a reading specialist.

Each of the 40 institutions reviewed in this project required a clinical experience. The clinical experiences included university-based reading clinics where teachers and/or parents referred children with reading difficulties to work one-on-one with candidates seeking certification/licensing as a reading specialist or were school-based structured tutoring experiences. Some institutions also referred to practicum or field experiences that focused on providing professional development to teacher and/or coaching teachers in classrooms.

A certified/licensed reading specialist is qualified to provide specialized instruction to children who struggle with reading. Most state departments of education require reading specialist certification as an endorsement to an existing teaching certification. Consequently, many programs include admission requirements related to holding teaching certification and/or teaching experience. Thirty-three institutions ((82.5%) required a teaching certification for admission. Interestingly, the MS and ML institutions were more likely to require a teaching certificate (n=10; n=9, respectively), than the DRU and the RUVH (n=7; n=7, respectively). Having teaching experience is a step beyond requiring a valid teaching certificate. Seven (17.5%) of the 40 institutions required teaching experience for admission to their programs. These seven institutions were spread across the four categories of institutions in this project (MS=3; ML=1; DRU=1; RUVH=2).

Not surprisingly, the cost of becoming a reading specialist varied by the funding status of the institution (see Table 4). Generally, the cost per credit hour increased with the classification of the institution. The mean cost for in-state students at public institutions was $281 per credit hour and for out-of-state students at public institutions is $651 per credit hour. The mean cost for students enrolled in private institutions in this sample was $713 per credit hour. Note that the mean for private MS institutions was less expensive than tuition for out-of-state students at public institutions.

Table 4. Mean Costs per Credit Hour

Carnegie Foundation Rating*	In-State		Out-of-State	
	Public	Private	Public	Private
MS	$246 (n= 8)	$ 473 (n= 2)	$577 (n= 8)	$ 473 (n= 2)
ML	$252 (n= 4)	$ 579 (n= 6)	$545 (n= 4)	$ 579 (n= 6)
DRU	$300 (n= 8)	$ 778 (n= 2)	$662 (n= 8)	$ 778 (n= 2)
RUVH	$324 (n= 9)	$1020 (n= 1)	$821 (n= 9)	$1020 (n= 1)
Summary	$281 (n=29)	$ 713 (n=11)	$651 (n=29)	$ 713 (n=11)

*MS=master's small; ML=master's large; DRU=doctoral research university; RUVH=research university, very high activity

Discussion and Conclusion

This study sought to explore the nature of graduate professional preparation programs through examining the websites of institutions of higher education that represented four of the six Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (2005) classifications. In general, websites of the 40 institutions in this project provided information concerning the graduate professional preparation program that led to teachers becoming reading specialists/literacy coaches. Nearly all of the websites presented content that was easy to navigate. As technology savvy students seek information, they want website navigation structures to be reasonably predictable. Though websites are somewhat unique, the ways in which one navigates and finds information should be somewhat intuitive. Ease in navigation allows focus to be devoted to content—what are the answers to my questions and what additional information can be found, rather than where is the information that is being sought.

Consumers interested in information about graduate professional preparation program for reading specialist/literacy coaches can find that information on the websites of the 40 institutions. Basic information such as accreditation, program requirements, and course descriptions were nearly universally available within our sample. Specific program contacts and faculty descriptions were more available in the two levels of doctoral institutions (DRU and RUVH) than in the two levels of master's institutions (MS and ML). This could be due to the doctoral-granting institutions having a faculty with more full-time personnel. Smaller institutions, whose faculty was often more focused on teaching rather than generating research, may have used more part-time personnel. Consequently, keeping websites current with faculty contact information and professional descriptions may be more challenging at the master's institutions than at the doctoral institutions. Additionally, though students often request specific information about particular courses before enrolling, course syllabi were rarely available on program websites, regardless of the classification, location, or funding status of the institutions. The content of courses evolve over time; thus, keeping syllabi accurate would mean developing a schedule to upload current syllabi each semester. This may be considered a challenging task for preparation program personnel. Finally, few professional preparation programs had student handbooks specific to their programs posted on their websites. General, campus-wide student handbooks were often available as links from the institutions' homepage, however. In summary, some of the more stable information, such as accreditation information and course descriptions, were more likely available on the website, regardless of the institution's profile.

Pathways to completing a graduate program that would allow a teacher to apply for a certification/license as a reading specialist vary. Across the sample, more institutions offered a master's in education with a specialization/track in reading/literacy studies than a master's in reading/literacy studies. Based on our sample, the classification of the institutions did not seem related to the type of degree offered, the number of hours required for the degree, or to the number of hours of reading/literacy studies required. Thirty-three institutions required a content test prior to certification. The master's small institutions were more likely than the other institutions to require no test. This may have been due more to state department of education requirements for licensing reading specialists rather than institutional decisions. Many professional preparation program requirements in this sample seemed influenced by accreditation agencies (IRA, 2004a; NCATE, 2008) and state departments of education. Neither of the national accreditation agencies mandated the types of degrees, specific courses, learning

experiences, or assessment instruments; however, standards for accreditation are clearly articulated. The national standards are written to reflect the research on high quality teachers and high quality teaching (Williams, 2008). Additionally, education continues to be a local responsibility; thus, it was not surprising to find some variation in the nature of the programs of study for professional preparation programs that have met accreditation standards.

Seeking a master's degree that makes one eligible for certification/licensing as a reading specialist required a teaching certificate at admission for 33 of the institutions in the sample, though teaching experience was required by only 7 of the institutions. Interestingly, more master's large and research universities, very high activity, required teaching experience for certification/licensing (ML=4; RUVH=6) than required teaching experience for admission (ML=1; RUVH=2). The specific admission requirement of teaching experiences as a requirement may have been omitted since certification/licensing requirements were explicit. Though institutions varied in requiring teaching experience, each institution required field or clinical experiences as a part of their professional preparation program. The descriptions of the clinical experiences varied, yet direct work with children was required and some programs also required work with teachers either through professional development or through coaching, tasks that represent much of the work in which practicing reading specialists indicate that they perform (Bean et al., 2002; Bean et al., 2003; Dole, 2004).

This project was a scan of selected professional preparation programs leading to certification/licensing as a reading specialist/literacy coach. The purpose of this project was to examine the websites features of the program and a deeper website document analysis looking for similarities and differences in the ways in which aspects of reading specialists programs are presented electronically. The results of this descriptive study contribute to the understanding of the preparation of reading specialists across the nation called for by researchers (Pearson, 2001; Quatroche & Wepner, 2008; Roller, 2001). Scholars and educational leaders may find this information useful as they consider program changes and policy related to the preparation of reading specialists/literacy coaches, advanced certification in reading/literacy studies, and master's degree programs in reading and/or literacy studies.

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Appendix A. Institutional Profiles

Carnegie Foundation Rating*	State of Institution	US Region	Setting Urban=>50,000 Rural=<50,000	Funding Status
MS	Alabama	South	Urban	Public
MS	Alaska	Pacific	Rural	Public
MS	Minnesota	Midwest	Rural	Public
MS	Mississippi	South	Urban	Public
MS	New Mexico	West	Rural	Public
MS	New York	Northeast	Rural	Public
MS	North Carolina	South	Urban	Public
MS	Ohio	Midwest	Urban	Private
MS	Pennsylvania	Northeast	Rural	Public
MS	Wisconsin	Midwest	Urban	Private
ML	California	West	Urban	Private
ML	Florida	South	Urban	Public
ML	Maryland	South	Rural	Public
ML	Missouri	Midwest	Urban	Private
ML	New York	Northeast	Urban	Private
ML	North Carolina	South	Rural	Public
ML	Ohio	Midwest	Urban	Private
ML	Pennsylvania	Northeast	Rural	Public
ML	Texas	South	Urban	Private
ML	Washington	West	Urban	Private
DRU	Florida	South	Urban	Private
DRU	Georgia	South	Urban	Public
DRU	Idaho	West	Urban	Public
DRU	Illinois	Midwest	Urban	Public
DRU	Indiana	Midwest	Urban	Public
DRU	Louisiana	South	Rural	Public
DRU	Michigan	Midwest	Urban	Public
DRU	New York	Northeast	Urban	Private
DRU	North Carolina	South	Urban	Public
DRU	Oregon	West	Urban	Public
RUVH	California	West	Urban	Public
RUVH	Florida	South	Urban	Public
RUVH	Georgia	South	Urban	Public
RUVH	Kansas	Midwest	Urban	Public
RUVH	Maryland	South	Urban	Public
RUVH	Pennsylvania	Northeast	Urban	Public
RUVH	Tennessee	South	Urban	Private
RUVH	Texas	South	Urban	Public
RUVH	Virginia	South	Rural	Public
RUVH	Washington	West	Rural	Public

*MS=master's small; ML=master's large; DRU=doctoral research university; RUVH=research university, very high activity