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Preparation Issues in Educational Leadership

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Educational leaders have chosen to belong to one of the most important and influential professions. Not only do educators have an important impact on others, but there is a need to have a practical understanding of instruction, curriculum, and psychology. Leaders in all disciplines often relate to previous educational relationships in discussions about important moments in their lives. These relationships matter, and they provide foundational experiences for each of us.

Professors of educational leadership must be generalists in many areas to help prepare future school administrators for overall success. The ability to understand eclectic subjects becomes apparent in the variety of topics that occur in open-themed journals. For example, this journal edition has topics as varied as mentoring, accountability, culture, leadership, and minority issues. However, there is an underlying thread that ties together these issues: student achievement.

What is the best way to develop the leaders who are responsible for student achievement? There are multiple views related to the best way to train administrative professionals, and new technology creates new questions. There are currently several options for instructional delivery of educational administration classes, including traditional face-to-face, hybrid (both traditional and internet use in a class), and totally online courses.

The courses that are 100% online are controversial among many professors. The reason is simple – how does a teacher of a mainly people-

oriented discipline address these skills without modeling. In addition, research suggests the importance of teacher-student relationships to overall student achievement. Can a course designed to impact the next generation of educational leaders be taught completely online?

Competition for educational administration students is fierce. Most regions in the state will have several universities hire adjunct professors to teach a cohort away from the brick and mortar of home. Colleges market their programs in order to address the needs of educators, and this process begins to erode the traditional bases of many programs. Few programs have created the concern of Lamar University's Online Educational Administration Program. Lamar agreed to provide the higher education legitimacy for entrepreneur Randy Best, who not only created a marketing plan for educational leadership program delivery, but also contacted districts in order to solicit their support through regular payroll deductions for the program cost. In addition, Higher Education Holding, the business that is owned by Best, provides this for \$5000, a cost significantly less than many schools. Lamar benefits through state funding increases based on enrollment (Smith, 2008).

There was a strong reaction to this program. Throughout the state over 2800 students enrolled in the program, and this enrollment adversely impacted a number of educational administration departments in the state. Many professors believed the program was an issue not only in decreased student numbers, but in instructional philosophy. The Texas Council of Professors of Educational Administration (TCPEA), in a meeting during the spring of 2008, expressed concern and developed a statement addressing online instruction. This TCPEA statement represents a concern for the instructional validity of mass production degrees that represent little value in the professor/student interaction and relationship.

There are other problems, once again related to relationships, that programs of this type create. Educational administration programs should be more than producers of degrees and certifications. The networking and contacts that are created provide foundational resources for future administrators. Our departments exist in part to serve local school districts. The decision by the Higher Education Coordinating Board to allow the Lamar program to exist has the affect of decreasing the impact of regional departments of educational administration. The students that are produced have gaps in their education that simple knowledge based correspondence-like courses cannot reproduce, and the funds that help provide continued support for education go into the pockets of a businessman. Randy Best may be a good person, but he is not likely to be available for a struggling first-year principal.

The entrepreneur mind-set is the other side of this issue. Perhaps the departments of educational administration must adjust or perish. Departments that do not adjust to the market, even if the characteristics of the market provide a lesser education, may deserve to become extinct. The entrepreneurial focus is happening more often as other universities are beginning to offer online degrees.

Future educational administration programs will likely have online degrees, although allowing businessmen to siphon off funds from the state while using a university front is questionable. Departments that do not address the needs of their students will find class sizes getting smaller. Technology has often been viewed as a paradigm changer in education, although for it to be beneficial, teaching excellence must accompany it. Relationships are important in education, and without the human touch instruction often feels empty.

School Leadership Review invites articles related to contemporary issues in online instruction for the Fall 2009 issue. Are the online programs an academically less effective option driven by the market, or can this instruction be as worthwhile as traditional methods? Can a program have 2800 students throughout the state and be legitimate? Are there really benefits to local Departments of

Educational Administration? These are important questions that need to be addressed as we prepare the next generation of educational leaders.

References

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