Ritchie Program Impact and Development
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In 2003, the University of Denver partnered with Denver Public Schools to customize the preparation of principals. This partnership was launched as a strategy to turn around poor performing schools and improve student achievement by training a new breed of principals for Denver Public Schools (Mitgang, 2012). Leadership from the district, the university, and a local foundation formed a design team charged with developing a prototype of a principal preparation program that aligned with the needs and goals of the district and challenged existing norms (Korach, 2011). The program adopted a competency-based rather than a course-based design and developed inquiry projects that immersed program participants in authentic leadership work throughout the life cycle of an academic year. Through the program, program participants are able to challenge the status quo by engaging in adaptive work and implementing second order change in their schools (Korach, 2011).

Program Features

In an effort to promote learning communities and connect theory to practice, all participants in the Ritchie program are provided the following student-centered opportunities through the program:

- real-world experience through a year-long internship supported by a mentor principal and integrated with the work of the program;
- customization of the inquiry projects to their individual leadership development needs (based on an analysis of their skills relative to the district principal performance standards) and the needs of the host school program participants’ work should add value to the school;
- development of a leadership body of knowledge and skill (research, content, theory, tools, learning experiences, etc.) through weekly classes with a consistent team of university faculty and district leaders;
- development of a learning community grounded in reflective practice through the cohort structure that extends beyond each annual cohort to a network of alumni;
- opportunities to practice their leadership and receive feedback through leadership labs that help them develop the “dispositions and habits of mind integral to ethical and responsible leadership in urban settings” (Korach, 2005, p. 4; Korach & Agans, 2011).

Expansion of the Prototype

As a result of program evaluation findings (Korach & Agans, 2011), the faculty at the University of Denver began to redesign their course-based principal preparation after the model of the Ritchie program prototype. They launched a blended online model, Executive Leadership for Successful Schools (ELSS) in 2007. ELSS maintained the spiral learning process of connecting work to school and school to work and foundation on inquiry projects; however, some features looked different in the technology enhanced program. The online learning environment replaced the weekly class sessions and became the primary point of connection for program participants while the participants’ real-world experience came from their schools, which were scattered among multiple school districts instead of just one (Korach & Agans, 2011). Additionally, ELSS relied on threaded online discussions, use of digital portfolios, and the establishment of online supportive networks and communities as the primary mode of instruction (Korach & Agans, 2011). It offers the same structure and content as the Ritchie program, except it has a different internship and delivery format. Early findings of this program suggested that it is equally as effective as the classroom-based program (Korach & Agans, 2011).

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Program Evaluation

University faculty have consistently engaged in program evaluation research from the prototype launch of the Ritchie Program through the development of ELSS. This evaluation has included case study research (Korach, 2008), annual administration of surveys (INSPIRE), and engagement with research initiatives such as the School Leadership Program (2008) and the Wallace Foundation Principal Pipeline Initiative (2011). Evaluation and assessment of principal preparation programs is both timely and necessary as university leadership preparation programs and their effectiveness have come under fire (Crow, Arnold, Reed, Shoher, 2012; Orr, 2010). This growing accountability trend has propelled faculty at the University of Denver to put internal evaluation measures in place that track the performance of their graduates. One of the latest initiatives is the development of a graduate tracking system.

Graduate Tracking System

In 2015, the Ritchie program launched its graduate tracking database as a prototype to be used for all Ritchie and ELSS graduates. The primary purpose of the database is to track the career paths and job performance of program graduates so that faculty and district leaders can measure how well the program is preparing its leaders and determine what areas need improvement. Currently, the database contains career placement data for all of its program participants who graduated.

Placement data was collected and tracked before, during, and after graduates completed the program. It is important to note that placement data was tracked each year following the graduates exit from the program. Placement data begins with the 2003 cohort and is ongoing to the most current cohort of 2015. Some variables in the database include participant demographics, prior-placement, program indicators, and career placement data by year, school, and level (Please see Figure 1 for screenshot of the database).

![Figure 1: Screen Shot of Ritchie Graduate Tracker](image-url)

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Reports that can be run from this database include program graduates’ persistence rates in the district and testing for significant relationships and/or predictors leading to principal placement. To date (from 2003-2015), there have been 212 Ritchie graduates. Of the 198 participants that had completed placement data, 180 are employed by Denver Public Schools, 44 serve as principals, 58 serve as principal assistants, and 59 serve as a school or district leader (Please see Graph 1).

Ritchie Program DPS Graduates: Current Job Title in DPS Only 2015/2016

N = 180

Graph 1: Ritchie Program DPS Graduates: Current Job Title in DPS 2015/2016.

Graduate Tracking System Development

The development process of this tracking database began with the formulation of a design team. The design team included the department chair, a university graduate research assistant, and district collaborators. The graduate research assistant and department chair worked closely together to design the database and collect data on graduates. Prior to the development of the database, placement data was collected and updated by the department chair on spreadsheets and cohort lists. The team developed a skeleton model of the database with desired variables and a corresponding codebook. Program demographic data was collected from the university’s campus wide student information system. Program indicators and placement data were collected from various sources as existing data on program participants were scattered. The design team cross-referenced internal departmental placement lists with placement lists obtained from both the Colorado Department of Education and the district’s website. As many of these lists only contained current placement data, the design team relied on the collection of publicly available data via LinkedIn, Facebook, school websites, and personal websites. For any remaining missing data, the department chair and GRA worked with the district to obtain placement reports from the districts internal information system. The process of data collection and data sharing was an ongoing circular process that further refined the design of the database after each cycle. Once a prototype of the database was nearly complete, the design team assigned numerical values to variables and reformatted the database to be compatible with SPSS.
Further development of the database includes data collection of principal performance ratings and student achievement scores. The purpose of this tracking database will be to identify variables that link “leadership preparation to leader practices and ultimately to student learning” (Korach, Ballenger, Alford, 2011, p. 4). Department faculty are working to incorporate pre and posttest assessments and include these scores in the database to track the development of leadership competencies within the program. Additionally, the department is compiling data on accepted students and will include desired participant information such as prior placement position in the database.

Conclusion
What began as a special project between a university and a district has become a sustainable system of leadership development that has been successfully transferred to other settings and program delivery models. The following core elements have contributed to the effectiveness and sustainability of both the Ritchie and ELSS programs: inquiry projects, internships integrated with the program and needs of host schools; a support system and learning community composed of faculty, mentor principals, district leaders, cohort and program graduates; reflective practice and constructivistic pedagogy that incorporates individual student needs, district practices and program evaluation; and partnerships with schools and districts. The sustainability and adaptability of this program stems from a deep commitment to continually interrogate and evaluate the practices and program components through the lens of the work of its graduates.

References


