Results of the Completer Focus Groups

for Administrator Programs

Participants in focus groups conducted with completers of our administrator advanced programs included those several years post-graduation, those immediately post-graduation, and employers of these administrators. Participants had completed our initial preliminary administrator licensure program, our licensure program for current administrators, or in some cases, both. The transcripts of these focus groups were coded to understand the strengths and weaknesses of the programs, and also to think about how well the programs meet the standards in use: the National Educational Leadership Preparation (NELP) Program Recognition Standards.

Participants, in general, noted several program-specific components that supported them in their current positions as school administrators, which included the following:

- **Small class sizes:** Participants described how the small class sizes supported them in their learning; for example one said: "Not having a lecture hall where you can't ask questions, instead having a more intimate setting and just being able to have that 1:1 time." This concept came up repeatedly, in that the small class size, in tandem with the cohort model, really helped deepen their learning.
- **Cohort model:** Participants described how the cohort model "was extremely helpful" – the cohort of those "coming from diverse backgrounds with a common thread of being on the same page in thinking 'oh my gosh can I actually do this?' was really helpful." Others described how this cohort model "bolstered my confidence" and how the "professional relationships and the networking" were the most important impacts. Further, they mentioned how "the instructors were so intentional about cultivating those relationships inside and outside the classes."
- **Course content:** Participants attributed their knowledge to the course content, and that they "really appreciated having the discussions around leadership models, particularly when they're applied in practical ways." They described growing from the observations, supervision, and assignments. The observations in particular helped one participant, who described how "having the chance to go through that process one time with a faculty member and get a sense of what that felt like, and what those conversations felt like, and where I'm putting my foot in my mouth compared to where I could have potentially pushed a little harder" were so crucial to their development as a leader. Others described how valuable the information about the basics of budgeting was (though they recommended applying it to both public schools and private schools) and how important "learning and understanding the law" was to their learning.
- **Authentic situations (i.e., panels & case studies):** Similarly, participants also described the importance of authentic situations to their learning – some spoke to the value of "case studies," or in "asking what you would do, and why, and not everything has to be cut and dry, or absolute – sometimes you make decisions that aren't perfect." They recommended continuing to use this type of instruction in the courses. Others commended panels as authentic learning that went beyond cases, and that these panels were "so helpful...when

they told us stories of where they had run into really snarly legal situations, and what had happened, and how it played out, and how they wish they had done it differently. So maybe having something more like that, it doesn't have to happen all the time, but that was memorable because it made it real in a way that was hard to see when you're just looking at the cases." Others noted that beyond panels, "site visits" were key and that no one should finish a program without experiences in diverse schools – "they should need to go shadow for a full day." Finally, "the more you can have problems of practice scenarios embedded in the content and wrestle with those multiple perspectives, wrestle with those priority lists, and really create scenarios where people are having to sit through the hard things where there's no clear solution, the better prepared we will be."

- **Support from professors:** Participants repeatedly described how much they "really appreciated the practical experience that all the professors brought." Administrators described "feedback and immediacy that we got from the professors" as being crucial to their development. Participants commended several courses and professors specifically as being especially helpful, with almost every professor and course being mentioned by one participant or another. They referenced using the information learned often in their current practice, and how the focus on equity really impacted them and "was the most impactful." Another called out the "data class as being very effective for me and it forced me to learn Excel spreadsheets, which has been a godsend lately." Another commended the focus on instructional leadership and modeling while another described the emphasis on ethics as key. Participants stressed the importance of continuing to utilize instructors that have "boots on the ground," as this was so valuable.

- **Overall self-efficacious:** Participants overall spoke directly to feelings of efficaciousness that related directly to the NELP Standards. They spoke to navigating "racial stress" and lack of representation in parent-teacher association groups, for example (i.e., Standard 3: Equity, Inclusiveness, and Cultural Responsiveness); they spoke to the importance of infrastructure and having "good systems," especially in times of extreme challenge like the pandemic pivot (i.e., Standard 6: Operations and Management); they described implementing trauma-informed practices and additional tiers of support for students of concern (Standard 4: Learning and Instruction); they unpacked ethically and professionally leading the community in their school's vision (Standard 1: Mission, Vision, and Improvement; Standard 2: Ethics and Professional Norms; Standard 5: Community and External Leadership), and so on.

Due to these rich instructional components and capacity-building experiences, in the final question asking if participants would recommend the program, all (100%) participants recommended the administrator programs and several described how they had actually recommended the program to colleagues who had then participated.

Participants also noted current challenges they were facing in their roles as administrators, which may be aspects that the program should continue to address in the future, including the following:

- **Add additional panels of various perspectives:** Participants described hitting snafus, and that "it would just be so neat to have a panel of either first year administrators, or people who just have hit pitfalls." Panels were clearly deemed as capacity-building and doing more of this could be beneficial.

- **Add more information on balancing management work with visionary work:** Participants described struggling with balancing the "management work that makes up a lot of the daily work as an admin, and is necessary but not very life-giving, with the visionary work that many of us get into the job wanting to do, finding the way to balance the time...if you don't give yourself enough time for the vision, you can get bogged down and it started to feel like you're only in the grind."

- **Add more information regarding legal issues and ensure it stays current:** Participants described how they "didn't get enough about the legal things, and how that impacts staffing and HR kind of stuff." One employer noted this as well, saying: "The legal aspect has become more important and increases with online learning – keeping the content current with the times will help prepare the candidates." Another participant agreed, saying "There's not a day that goes by that there's not some aspect of law in education in the decisions that we make that we have to take into account… I mean, we just use that every day."

- **Add more information about navigating a new culture at the same time:** Several participants described challenges with navigating a new culture at the same time as navigating becoming a leader, and that any support in that avenue would be helpful. For example, one participant opened a new school, while others came into positions as outsiders, and these situations were particularly challenging since they had not worked as a leader before. They noted that "this is probably the stickiest piece of being a new administrator, and it would be nice to have more attention that, maybe with some scenarios, maybe some simulations." Similarly, one employer spoke to the need to "be flexible and a systems thinker…. Admin needs to be able to move and change at the drop of a hat. Provide situations for candidates to work through that shows them they must move with what's around them."

- **Add additional information about challenges concerning working with adults:** Participants described how "the challenging work is sometimes the adults… I mean it's not sometimes, it is always the adults." They described wanting to know more about the psychology of adult learners and employees and the challenges of dealing with putting teachers on action plans and the challenges that come with those conversations. They further described how their faculty "range in ages from 25 to 65 and you don't approach [those ages] all the same way," so more information on adult development and human development during various stages of life could be very meaningful. An employer agreed, stating that "some practice at having difficult conversations with the teachers they are supervising" is key – they need to "really understand good teaching from the standpoint of supporting and growing teachers, and relationships still matter."

- **Add additional information about challenges when working with families:** Similarly, participants also described navigating challenges regarding families, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

- **Add information about using technology as a leader:** Some participants called out how technology integration in the program was so helpful for them, however, others noted that, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, they wished there was even more emphasis on technology. They hoped to learn more about "using technology effectively as a leader... how much email is too much email? How can we consolidate and use the tech tools we have available better?" They also talked about learning how to make a video, using video conferencing tools, making good presentations, and making agendas and newsletters with the best formatting. "How can technology help us be effective and efficient and model it for our faculty?"
- **Add information about dealing with challenges**: Again, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic specifically, participants described needing more information about "what to do in a challenging scenario," which might include the pandemic, a school shooting, a snowstorm, a death in the community, the school's furnace going out, etc. "In times of challenge, how do we support our school members and build trust and balance workload?"

Employer Interviews Specifically

While information from the employers has been integrated with information from the candidates above, several components were important to summarize here in terms of capacity building. The employer interviews specifically spoke to how the graduates of the administrator programs had positively impacted student learning as instructional leaders. They spoke to how the candidates "evaluated teachers effectively," "were very well prepared," "had been well prepared around constructing meaning and culturally relevant practices," "knew good instruction," and have strong codes of conduct, thus allowing "teachers to teach and students to learn," and were "terrific with technology and data," using them to analyze data for student learning (all of these components align to the NELP standards). Further, they noted these completers demonstrated themselves as lifelong learners, constantly "trying to improve their skillset and working with staff to help them better meet the needs of our students."

In conclusion, one employer spoke to how well the University of Portland prepares its administrators, stating that they have been the mentor for many administrator candidates from various institutions, and "I can say hands down, the University of Portland has the most thorough program and prepares the administrators the best. The right things are emphasized and adhered to. I highly recommend the program."