

10 Online Principal Preparation Interventions and the Impact on the State Licensure Exam: A Lamar University Model

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Abstract

Technology can be a means to merely upgrade current pedagogical practices or an opportunity to redesign entire preparation programs. One problem faced when the latter is chosen is how to explain the relationship between variables when numerous interventions were implemented in a major redesign of a preparation program. In reviewing state principal exam scores, it was readily apparent that students completing the Educational Leadership and Technology Leadership degree program through the Lamar University online program were scoring significantly higher than many of their counterparts in other programs. The obvious question was which of the ten new strategies or interventions (independent variables) related to the higher passing rates and overall scores (dependent variable). A causal comparative design yielded no definite answers due to the inability to isolate independent variables. Yet, the overall success of the Lamar students, comparison to the state wide students clearly implied many or all of these strategies have an impact on learning.

Despite the inability to report a definite cause and effect relationship between any one or group of interventions implemented and the significant higher results on state text scores, the authors of this paper deemed it worthy to share the ten strategies in the new redesign of the program to inform the field and possibly guide further research and practice. Key Words: state principal exams, educational leadership and technology, education on-line program.

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1. Introduction

In 2007, Lamar University and the Educational Leadership Department contracted with a private business partner specializing in online learning with its own learning management system, technology support, and marketing. The relatively small program of 50-60 students grew to over 3,000 students in an 18-month period. The department faculty was given total control over the curriculum and program design. This opportunity allowed for not only a redesign of the overall program but the redesign of each of the courses in the degree program.

Aside from minor improvements to many courses, there were ten major strategies employed in the overall degree and certification program.

2. Intervention Strategies

There were ten major strategies employed in the overall degree and certification program. These strategies were based on best practice and the latest technology.

2.1. Strategy1

The call for an extended internship experience goes beyond the ELCC standards and most educational researchers support a full year practicum in a school setting (Orr and Pounder, 2010; Black & Murtadha, 2007; Wallace Foundation 2012; and Martin, et al. 2012). Current research cites the benefits of extending this experience even further to 18 months (Perez, et al. 2011). Although the ideal would be a full-time administrative internship, states and school districts can seldom afford the extra expense. Thus, university preparation programs face the dilemma of how best to provide a meaningful internship while students are working full-time as teachers. In a recent study in Minnesota, principals expressed concern over the gap between the time they took a licensure program and the opportunity to do administrative work. "I wish I could have taken my university courses after I was in the position" was a common theme (Danzig, et al, 2012). The Lamar faculty considered the benefits of an extended internship to include the development of an approved internship plan in the first introductory leadership course. This strategy allowed students to take all coursework while serving as an intern. This also made it possible for students to have opening and closing of school experience, as well as summer experiences.

During this first required course, students completed various self-assessments on state competencies, national standards, technology standards, ethics, task versus people orientation, dispositions, temperament, and general school administrative knowledge and skill. After completion of the self-assessments and case studies on leadership, students collaboratively designed an internship plan with their school mentor and submitted to their professor for review and approval. The faculty found that students were able to begin immediately and they were able to log more hours during the program. One reason cited by numerous students is that they did not have to wait on a school mentor to assign intern activities but were free to fully implement their activities due to having an approved plan at the beginning. Additionally, students reported a less stressful experience due to the extended time period to acquire the needed number of internship hours.

2.2. Strategy2

Given the long duration of an 18-month internship, the faculty chose a second strategy of requiring the first internship course as the seventh course (the halfway point in their degree program). This strategy allowed for assessing progress, sharing experiences with other interns, problem-solving, and updating plans for the second half of the internship. This seventh course is predominately a reflective seminar on their previous nine months of interning and their degree of progress toward mastery of the standards. Students report that this practice allows them to hear varying perspectives, degrees of progress, and advice from fellow interns. Additionally, this course introduces final reports, forms, and other documentation needed for their second internship course taken at the end of the degree program.

2.3. Strategy3

This unique strategy requires students to take a final internship course AFTER the internship is completed. This design allows for a final reflective seminar format.

Although students are required to submit intern logs with reflections on the activities (minimum of 300 hours), a supervisor evaluation, passing of a comprehensive exam (practice state exam), a 3-year professional development plan, and the action research project report, the emphasis of the seminar is reflecting on the degree of mastery attained toward each of the national standards. Students report significant learning with this format and it especially assisted in passing the state exam.

2.4. Strategy 4

The consensus of the research on principal preparation notes that the focus of the role of principal is to create and support environments that facilitate instruction and learning (Roach, et al, 2011; Grossman, 2011; Davis, et al., 2005; Wallace Foundation, 2012). This strategy requires students to take as their second required course, action research.

Students are introduced to the concept and process of conducting a long-term action research project to increase student learning. Students choose a problem in their school, conduct interviews / surveys and online research to clearly define the problem and then choose an intervention to address the concern. Students meet with their school mentors for approval of the research project. Following approval, the action research plan is submitted to the university professor for review. The action research plan is then added to the overall internship plan. Hours collected in leading the research project are counted as intern hours. At the present time, the Educational Leadership and Technology department at Lamar University is working with colleagues at Rice University in designing a web portal in Connexions for publishing the action research reports. It is hoped that this service to other teachers and administrators will benefit students with similar problems in other schools. It is also hoped that the knowledge and skill gained in leading this research project and writing of a professional report will lead graduates to train their future faculty members in the schools in conducting action research.

2.5. Strategy5

In general, there is greater criticism of programs and coursework when the application of theory to practice is not explicit (Danzig, 2012, p. 38). To address this concern, the Lamar online program requires approximately 15 hours of field experiences in each course. The field experience activities are logged as internship hours and must be the application of course content in a real school setting. This strategy requires the application of the learning under the strict requirements of the professor. This gives faculty the opportunity to ensure that all interns carry out specific activities that are needed in a rigorous internship and support the overall curriculum.

2.6. Strategy6

Lamar's Educational Leadership and Technology department offers two masters degrees. The first degree is in school administration and the second is in educational technology leadership. Both degrees are online and can be completed in an 18-month period. When the first graduates of educational technology leadership completed their degrees, 85% of the students enrolled in our 18-hour principal certification program. This was due to graduates discovering that their districts required an administrative certificate for building and district-level technology leadership positions. This fact led the faculty to redesign the masters in educational technology leadership to include principal certification.

The new design for the technology degree placed the technology students in eight courses with the school administration students, including the first two required courses, Fundamentals of Leadership and Action Research, both internship courses and four core administration courses. The technology degree students have an additional four courses focused on technology. All students create blogs and wikis, attend web conferences, conduct online research and readings, participate in online discussion boards, and utilize virtual office hours. Two unforeseen benefits arose from this design. First, the economy of fewer classes needed to be offered with two degrees and secondly, and more importantly, the infusion of more technology into the program for school administration students.

Presently, school administration and technology students conduct self-assessments and reflections on the ISTE standards for administrators and the ISTE Tech Facilitator standards. Although the tech students amass more internship hours than school administration students in technology leadership activities, both plan for intern experiences to lead schools in the new technological world. Although this may appear to have benefitted the school administration students more, technology graduates reported highly positive program evaluations for the learning and experience in leadership.

2.7. Strategy 7

Limited research has compared the effects of conventional and exemplary preparation, but the results suggest that principals either report or demonstrate better leadership practices when they have had longer, more full-time internships. Many of the internship elements and descriptors in Standard 7 parallel the research findings from Danforth Foundation-funded innovations in leadership preparation in the early 1990s. Comparative case study analyses yielded strong conclusions about the nature of high-quality internships. They concluded that the critical components of field experience that have the greatest value and potential influence are:

- Sufficient time on task (frequency and regularity of work across school year and day; exposure to and engagement in relevant and realistic range of site responsibilities; support of effective mentor practitioners).
- Relationship with mentors who have demonstrated skills and have been trained as mentors; focus on appropriate modeling and reflection.
- Multiple and alternative internship experiences to support diverse clinical training (e.g., medical rotation model).
- Reflective seminars to support interns' analysis and integration of learning.
- Field supervision—typically not given much consideration or focus within the larger internship process.
- Program coordination by educators who can link district and university programs and model professional development and learning (NPBEA, 2011).

The Lamar program appeared to meet the components in the above 2011 ELCC Standards but found field supervision (bullet #5) to be quite an obstacle given that the online program included students from every corner of a very large state. In order to overcome this obstacle, the department hired 20 current or recently retired Texas superintendents to serve as field supervisors. Approximately 75 interns are assigned to each field supervisor following completion of the first course and approved intern plan. The field supervisors communicate with their interns through web conferences, email, and phone. These knowledgeable and experienced administrators monitor the interns' progress and are available for advice, problem-solving, and other assistance. Students report that the field supervisors gave an invaluable perspective to current practice and challenges.

2.8. Strategy8

Reflection is not something that is done in isolation, but occurs in a community of learners. Reflecting on experience, on what happened, requires that other people are involved in the learning. There is need to verbalize and unpack the given circumstances of an event, what happened and what may need to be done differently in the future. Otherwise, one risks repeating the same mistakes over and over and missing the meaning of one's experiences, instead of learning from experience (Martin, et al., 2012, p. 107).

One of the key strategies in the new degree program was to teach interns the skill or art of reflective practice. Thus, reflection activities are seen throughout the coursework and internship. Students begin reflection at the beginning of the program with reflecting on their analysis of the self-assessments, following each intern activity, and in course discussion boards. Major assignments on reflection of the learning occur in both internship courses, one at the halfway point and a final reflection at the end of the program. Students report that the reflection on their degree of mastery of the state competencies (similar to ELCC standards) helped greatly to prepare for the state exam and to complete their 3-year professional development plan.

2.9. Strategy9

Although the authors are not supportive of the practice of high stakes multiple-choice testing for state certification, it is a reality in Texas as well as most other states. These tests, by nature, are designed to word possible alternative answers in a fashion where students that know the content are confused. In analyzing the test required in Texas, it appears that the scenario of the questions detail which state competency the questions if referring to.

Possible answers are typically actions that successful leaders take but the student much choose which action is closest to the competency area. Thus, to be successful on the state exam, the student must not only know sound leadership practices but be expert on what each competency entails. In some respects, it is a testing game. Despite the weaknesses of multiple-choice testing and the millions of tax dollars spent (and out of pocket costs to the students), preparation programs must ensure that their graduates are prepared to take and pass the exam for certification. The strategy employed in the Lamar degree programs is to infuse state competencies or national standards in course and internship activities.

For example, the required internship plan must have activities in each competency or standard area and reflective activities, noted in the above strategy, follow each activity and overall reflection paper in the final internship report. Additionally, Lamar offers online practice exams in the 1st, 7th, and 12th courses. Online reviews are available for students detailing the rationale for each correct answer. Students report that the practice exams and especially the reviews were most helpful for passing the state certification exam.

2.10. Strategy10

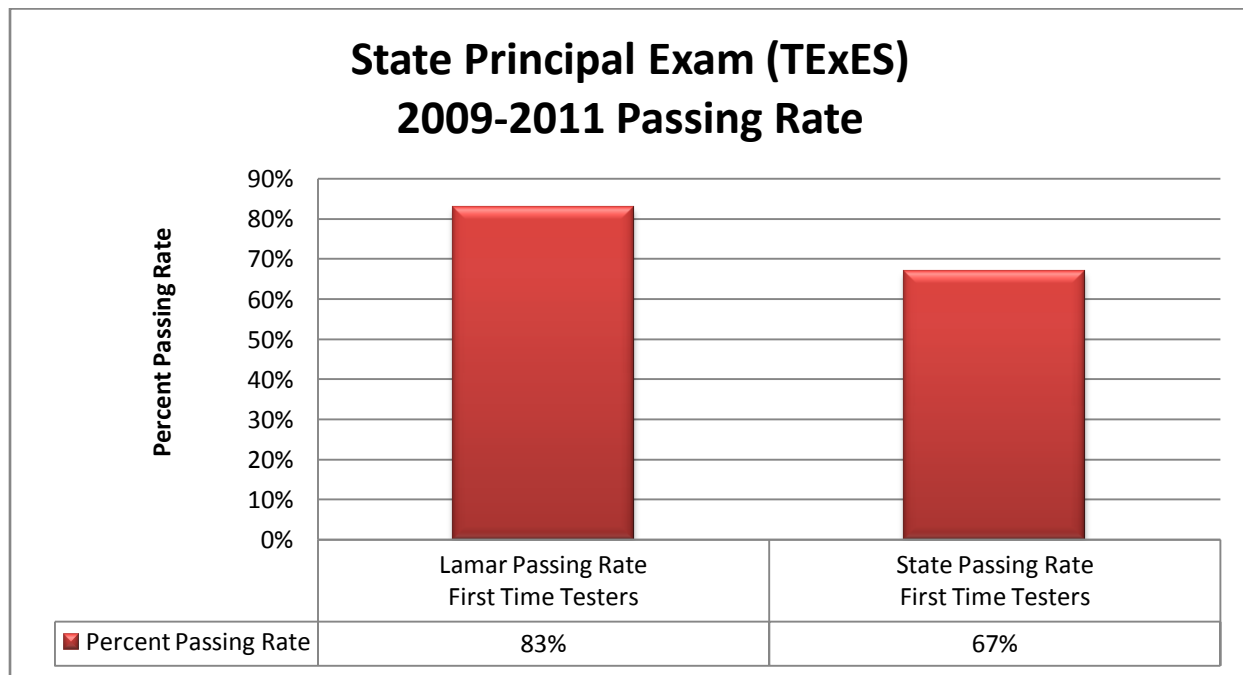
Discussions with prospective students revealed that the majority were looking for accessibility, quality, and affordability – and in that order. Accessibility to these students meant that courses would be offered when they wanted to take them and there would be no long delays in finishing their degree programs. The strategy employed to meet this student need was a combination of eight entry times per year and a two-cycle rotation of courses. Thus, courses in the Lamar online program are at 6-week intervals or eight courses per year. Students may begin the program at any new 6-week period.

The two-cycle rotation of courses has the first two required courses and both internship classes offered each six weeks. The four courses in the leadership core are offered in order the first half of the year and the last half of the year. Likewise, the courses in the leadership concentration block are scheduled in the same manner. This strategy allows students who have to miss a class due to extenuating circumstance, a very short delay. If students must miss either of the first two courses or either internship class, there is no delay as the next needed course is offered the following session. Likewise, if students must miss their first course in either the core or concentration blocks, there is no delay. Students that miss their 2nd course in either block have a six week delay, the 3rd course, a twelve week delay, and the 4th course, an 18 week delay or one semester. The average delay time for a missed course is six weeks. It should be obvious that this type of course scheduling would be impossible in the brick and mortar environment.

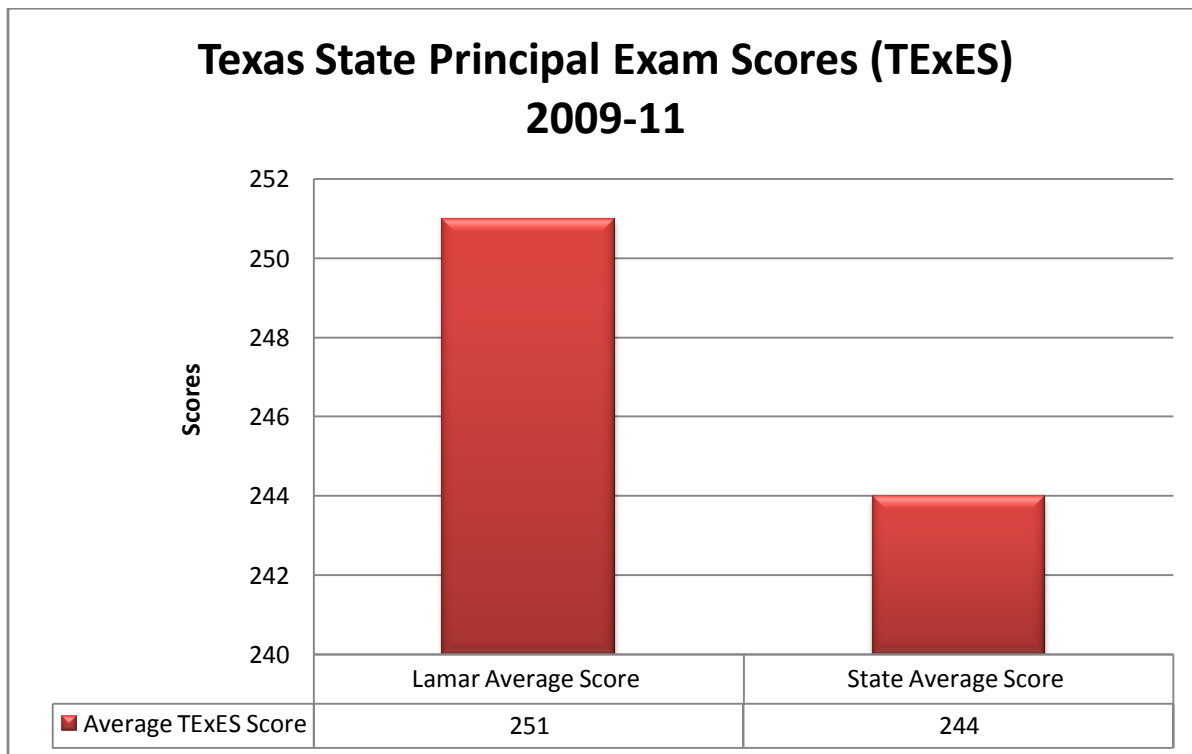
3. Findings

The Texas Education Agency compiles and posts results for all candidates taking the State exam (TEXES) for principal certification. The first graduates from the new online master's program began taking the exam in 2009. To date, over 3,000 Lamar students have taken the exam. The results show that Lamar candidates had a first-time passing rate of 83 percent. The passing rate for other Texas public university programs, including private and for-profit programs was 67 percent.

The results show that candidates first time testing scores from the Lamar University preparation program scored higher than students from other Texas public university programs. Average scores for years 2009, 2010, and 2011 were 251 out of a possible 300. Average scores for other university programs, excluding the Lamar students was 244. These scores represent averages for first time exam takers. The two following charts display these figures graphically.



State Board for Educator Certification: Texas Education Agency



State Board for Educator Certification: Texas Education Agency

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

In the quest to find a contributing relationship between various intervention strategies employed in an online preparation program and success on state exams, the researchers are left with more questions than when we began. One might assume that any one variable could explain a slight increase in state exam passing rates and overall average scores, but more than a 30% increase over other university programs is definitely a significant difference. Questions that remain include:

- Could the difference in exam scores and passing rates be explained by an assumption that:
- Students that intern while taking courses attain greater learning?
- A longer internship leads to greater learning?
- Stopping to assess internship progress at a halfway point leads to greater learning?
- Reflective seminars conducted after the internship lead to greater learning?
- Conducting an action research project causes greater learning?
- Application of course concepts in real world settings leads to greater learning?
- The inclusion of technology leadership in an administrative leadership program leads to greater learning?
- The use of current practitioners to serve as field supervisors leads to greater learning?
- Reflective practice leads to greater learning?
- Learning test-taking skills leads to higher exam scores?
- Students that take rigorous short-term courses, one at a time, attain greater learning?

Or, each of the above contributes in a greater or lesser degree than others in explaining the significant difference in passing rates and average scores. Further research is recommended to find the exact explanation.

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