

From the Director: The Promise of University–District Partnerships

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The purpose of university–district leadership development partnerships is to provide a district with access to high-quality and contextually relevant preparation, supportive learning structures, and in-service development. Such partnerships have the potential to leverage the collective capacity of both the district and the university if they are both willing and able to work together from start to finish.

For years, UCEA has encouraged the development of partnerships among its membership. One of UCEA’s membership standards, in fact, explains that member programs should have in place long-term formal relationships with one or more school districts, and other appropriate agencies, that create partnership sites for clinical study, field residency, and applied research. Research indicates that university–district partnerships are very important. They not only provide the most effective means for preparing principals for specific district and regional contexts but also expand the resources available to both university preparation programs and school districts. Additionally, leadership development is much more likely to become an ongoing priority for both districts and universities, beginning with preparation and then followed by comprehensive efforts to build leadership capacity within the district.

A groundbreaking study by Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, and Orr (2007) found partnerships to be an essential factor in the effective leadership preparation programs. In fact, in each of the programs they examined that qualified as highly effective, partnerships appeared to contribute profoundly to the program’s success. Several UCEA institutions were featured in this research. For example, Bank Street College worked closely with Region 1 of the New York City Public Schools to create a cohort-based preparation program focused on the unique needs of that district. Similarly, the University of Louisville worked in partnership with the Jefferson County Public Schools to develop a certification program for aspiring principals that built on the district’s in-service framework and aligned with the its approach to teaching and learning. Finally, the University of Connecticut Administrator Preparation Program (UCAPP) faculty worked closely with both districts, such as Hartford, and the state principals’ association to provide in-depth field experiences for its candidates. The researchers pointed out that each of these programs, and the others included in their report, were distinguished by the commitment of key members of both parties to make the partnership work. This commitment went beyond mere words to include coconstructing new curricula, districts providing credit subsidies, universities providing tuition waivers, and finding resources for coaches for new principals and faculty for district-based preparation and professional development. For other examples, see Browne-Ferrigno (2004) and Goldring and Sims (2005).

A growing number of university–district partnerships are working to provide preparation. These partnerships represent a continuum from coordinating aspects of a program to cooperatively designing and implementing aspects of a program, to full collaboration in all phases of preparation and beyond (Ray, 2002; see also Southern Regional Education Board [SREB], 2008). The range of collaboration is represented by the Partnership Continuum rubric (see Table). In this rubric, the collaboration is ranked based on the level of collaborative “intensity” (SREB, 2008, p. 23) in three areas: (a) partnership intent, (b) program design, and (c) program delivery.

Benefits and challenges are involved in developing any of the partnerships portrayed by the continuum, but experience and research have identified ideas and strategies for developing a partnership that can facilitate the efforts of partnership developers. According to research conducted by SREB (2008), for example, certain factors can help a partnership become more effective. The SREB referred to these factors as enabling conditions, such as the following:

1. Develop a common vision for the program, candidate learning, and leadership outcomes.
2. Develop a shared commitment to the partnership the partnership, expressed through official written agreements and the allocation of resources (human and fiscal) to support the development and implementation of the program.
3. Clearly define expectations for the roles and responsibilities of both parties.
4. Develop a process for gathering, analyzing, and communicating formative and summative evaluation data to both parties.
5. Identify and ensure mutual benefits for both parties.

Table
Partnership Continuum

	No collaboration	Coordination	Cooperation	Collaboration
Partnership intent	There is no intention to formally collaborate on preparation.	University faculty members or district leaders recognize the utility of developing some form of relationship or partnership. The utility may be related to sociopolitical reasons or to a pipeline need. The partnership may be short term and typically involves activities such as developing press releases about the partnership, ensuring that information about a university partner program is distributed to district employees.	Both the district and university have a genuine interest in collaborating. Both organizations bring resources to the table to ensure program success. The partnership, however, is not formalized and depends in large measure on personal relationships.	Both the district and university have a genuine interest in collaborating and view collaboration as critical to ensuring the validity and effectiveness of the partnership. Both organizations bring resources to the table to ensure program success. Key officials are involved in drafting the program vision, identifying mutual benefits, and developing formal agreements.
Program design	No system has been put in place for representatives of districts and universities to discuss or collaboratively plan aspects of the program or the selection of candidates.	An advisory board for the district program may be developed that includes practicing leaders from one or more districts, but it meets infrequently to share information about the program and to request assistance in marketing and recruitment. Efforts are not focused on program design. Boundaries between the organizations and the roles of organizational players (e.g., practitioners vs. faculty) are reinforced.	Intentional efforts are made by the university to solicit the advice and opinion of district stakeholders in program development. Advisory groups are carefully formed to include representation of key individuals from each organization. Advisory group meetings are meaningful and result in many informal interactions.	University faculty and district personnel collaboratively design the program, including how students will be selected, what the curriculum contains, how the curriculum will be delivered, what the internship will involve, and how students will be assessed. Partnership meetings occur regularly, and processes are in place for continual reassessment.
Program delivery	There is little or no involvement of practitioners in the delivery of the program. Practitioners may serve as adjunct professors or internship supervisors.	District personnel may recommend candidates to the program. However, there is little or no involvement of practitioners in the delivery of the program. Advisory board members and other practitioners may serve as adjunct professors or internship supervisors.	Partner district practitioners are involved in the identification of students for the program. Some delivery may take place in the partner district. Practitioners may serve as co-instructors for course delivery and as internship supervisors.	Partner district practitioners and university faculty collaborate in student selection for the program. Some delivery may take place in the partner district. Practitioners are likely to serve as co-instructors for course delivery, as evaluators of student progress, and as internship supervisors. University faculty roles extend beyond the preparation program to working with sitting leaders to better understand and improve their practice.

UCEA encourages the development of strong, substantive, and sustainable partnerships. During the summer of 2009, UCEA Plenary Session members from 10 institutions and their district partners attended the SREB University–District Partnership Trainer of Trainers Workshop. The workshop provided UCEA members and partners with an intensive overview of how to develop and sustain meaningful partnerships and how to conduct a training workshop for other UCEA faculty and district partners interested in improving or developing new partnerships. UCEA will be holding its first half-day training, based on the SREB modules, during a Sunday morning workshop at UCEA Convention 2010 in New Orleans. The training is appropriate for groups that are at any stage of development. Participants will have an opportunity to learn from both research and experience about things like identifying common goals and common ground, conducting a needs assessment, avoiding or working through common problems, developing formal agreements, developing infrastructure, facilitating curriculum development and delivery, and ensuring sustainability. More information on this and other UCEA Convention workshops will be available on the UCEA website (www.ucea.org) in the spring. Additionally, UCEA has conducted a number of interviews with scholars and practitioners engaged in the development, implementation, and sustainment of university–district partnerships. These interviews can be accessed (stream or download) on the UCEA Interview Series page (www.ucea.org/interview-series) and on BlogTalkRadio (www.blogtalkradio.com:80/ucea).

Note: Previous “From the Director” articles are now archived at www.ucea.org/from-the-director

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