Designing a Quality Principal Preparation Program: Key Features of an Online Program

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Abstract
This qualitative study examines the key characteristics of an online principal preparation program at a higher education institution. The analysis uncovered three significant features 1) Faculty and Curriculum approaches that respect various theoretical frameworks and methodologies; 2) Administrative and Structural elements that enhance accessibility and engagement; and 3) Additional Support Services that strengthen connection and community among participants.

Keywords: principal preparation programs, principal preparation program features, principal program improvement, online principal preparation programs

1. Introduction

An institutional mosaic exists across the nation when we ask questions about the quality of principal preparation programs. The gravity of this question should be of great concern to researchers and practitioners who have the responsibility of preparing and mentoring principal candidates. Particularly since principal preparation programs prepare principal leaders with deep knowledge, skills and mindsets to lead in diverse and challenging school environments. Darling-Hammond's et al. (2022) recent report titled "Developing Effective Principals: What Kind of Learning Matters?" profoundly declares that research indicates "strong school leadership is critical for shaping engaging learning environments, supporting high-quality teachers and teaching, and influencing student outcomes" (p.74).

Quality principal preparation programs serve as the main pathway for equipping new principals with the essential skills needed to lead their schools effectively. However, variability of principal preparation programs and the features of focus in each program can potentially impact the quality of learning student candidates receive. A lack of evidence on program effectiveness hinders improvement efforts (Ni et al., 2017).

According to Young et al. (2009), in terms of program features, most programs at the time of this study indicated that quality preparation had multiple features. In fact, assessment features varied across the nation in implementation but included factors such as recruitment and selection of candidates, curriculum focus, instructional strategies, program delivery methods, internship practices, and program and/or candidate assessment and evaluation (Young et al., 2009).

1.1. Purpose of the study

This study aims to investigate the critical features that define a successful online principal preparation program within the context of higher education. By systematically analyzing both the program's strengths and areas for development, the research seeks to identify evidence-based practices that contribute to program effectiveness and whether the features align with the latest research findings by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022).

1.2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study aligns with the latest findings motivated by research at the nexus of the features proposed by UCEA principal effectiveness practices. Our analysis begins by revisiting the factors that shaped the design and nature of our current principal preparation program that was aligned to the UCEA framework which included: 1) a rigorous recruitment and selection of students, 2) a strong curriculum focus on instruction and school improvement, 3) a coherent curriculum that is tightly integrated with fieldwork, 4) active-learning strategies, 5) quality internships, and 6) a knowledgeable faculty (Baker, et al., 2007; Darling-Hammond et al., 2007). These inputs informed our practice, however, with the latest report by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) and new standards mandated by the Texas Education Agency, it became necessary to reevaluate the effectiveness of our program. Considering the report and the investigation that preparation programs have a direct influence on principals' work in practice, we adjusted the theoretical framework to align to the recent and emerging changes in program features by UCEA which include the following:

- **Greater Emphasis on Clinical Practice:** There is near-universal agreement among preparation programs and school district leaders that robust, field-based clinical experiences are critical. However, challenges remain, such as securing funding for high-quality internships and compensating mentors.
- **Focus on Instructional Leadership:** Superintendents and program leaders increasingly demand that curricula be based on contemporary practice, with a strong emphasis on instructional leadership and the ability to lead school improvement efforts.
- **Use of Full-Time Faculty and Practitioners:** UCEA member programs typically rely on full-time faculty for most instruction, but also integrate practitioners (e.g., current or former school leaders) as instructors, supervisors, and guest speakers to bridge theory and practice.
- **Transformational and Reflective Learning:** Exemplary programs recognized by UCEA foster transformational leadership through powerful learning experiences, critical reflection, and a focus on changing mindsets, not just imparting technical skills.
- **Competency-Based Licensure:** Some states and programs are moving toward competency-based licensure and renewal, requiring evidence of effectiveness in improving student learning and school outcomes, rather than just completion of coursework. (UCEA)

1.3. Research Questions

Research Question 1: How do students perceive the influence of faculty expertise and curriculum design on their satisfaction in online Educational Leadership programs?

Research Question 2: What are students' experiences with Programmatic Structures of online Educational Leadership programs?

Research Question 3: What support services do students in online Educational Leadership programs identify as essential for their academic and professional success?

2. Literature Review
2.1. Quality Principal Preparation Program Features
The leadership of the principal is essential to the success of a school. According to a seminal 2004 study by Leithwood, Seashore Louis, and Wahlstrom, the principals have the second largest impact on student achievement after teachers. To add to this, the Wallace Foundation commissioned a thorough analysis of more than 200 studies, which suggested that a principal's influence may be considerably more profound and extensive than previously believed. According to this study, principals have a significant impact on student attendance, teacher retention, and satisfaction, and the decrease of exclusionary punishment methods (Grissom, Egalite, & Lindsay, 2021). Strengthening principal preparation is, therefore, becoming increasingly important. Consequently, the importance of genuine partnerships between universities and districts has emerged as a recurring subject in recent studies and is currently being defined and promoted by initiatives like the Wallace Foundation's University Principal Preparation Initiative and others of a similar nature. Strong teamwork facilitates meaningful clinical experiences and helps match curriculum with district requirements (Wallace Foundation, 2016; Fusarelli, & Fusarelli, 2023; Darling-Hammon et al 2022).

Aligning preparation with real-world leadership is frequently not adequately reflected in traditional programs. Even now, course content frequently does not correspond with real-world administrative tasks, and instructors occasionally lack experience in school leadership. Cohort models, coaching, and job-embedded learning were highlighted in redesigned initiative programs (like RAND's University Principal Preparation Initiative), which demonstrated high uptake in states and districts (Wang et al 2018).

There is mounting evidence in favor of coaching, mentoring, and internships when principal preparation programs are involved in rigorous clinical placements, coaching, and cohort assistance, according to the Wallace redesign program, which demonstrated impressive outcomes (2016). Moreover, there is a movement in which states are using policy levers to reshape principal preparation. Some states are strengthening licensure requirements, although the Wallace Foundation (2016) notes most still do not require principals to be rated "effective" as teachers prior to certification while several states are tightening their licensing criteria.

The survey responses from principals who graduated from the five programs studied by the American Institutes for Research (George W. Bush Institute & American Institutes for Research, 2016) are common. They listed the following program features as important to principals' preparation: 1) internship or residency, 2) mentoring or coaching, 3) focus on instructional leadership, 4) reflections on the realities of the job of principal, 5) cohort model and networking, and 6) role-playing and simulation exercises.

A systematic change toward integrated, partnership-led, equity-focused, and practice-rich preparation is seen in recent literature. States and districts are becoming more involved, and preliminary studies have connected these models to better educational outcomes. However, access is still unequal, with underfunded programs and smaller districts falling behind. The key takeaway is

that teamwork, practical experience, equity, and ongoing support beyond certification are essential to high-quality principal preparation.

2.2. Online Learning in Higher Education

The narrative for fully online courses in the U.S. has demonstrated significant and increasing integration into higher education, especially during the pandemic and now post-pandemic. This trend is supported by higher education institutions, with 63.3% of chief academic officers including this in their long-term strategic planning (Allen & Seaman, 2018; Chen, Lambart, & Guidry, 2010). Moreover, online programs are generally viewed as a valuable and increasingly acceptable mode of learning, particularly in graduate education and for those with existing commitments like work or family. Furthermore, Allen and Seaman state that approximately 6.3 million university students are enrolled in online courses in both undergraduate and postbaccalaureate (2018). To serve these students enrolled in online courses it has become accepted that "institutions must ensure that online students receive high-quality instruction, support services, and other fringe benefits enjoyed by traditional face-to-face students" (Chen et al. 2010, p. 1229).

Though there was an impetuous start during the pandemic to get fully online programs implemented, the data are surfacing that universities are beginning to see a slight decline in students taking online courses, as noted by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2025). Today, online courses and degrees are commonplace in universities across the nation despite declining enrollment (NCES, 2025; Garrett & Legon, 2017). There exists an appeal to online courses and programs.

2.3. Support Systems for Online Programs

Universities are attempting to meet this need through an array of professional development opportunities for their instructors that focus on various aspects of teaching and learning in a distance learning environment. Researchers tend to list barriers or lessons learned that are disconnected from existing adoption or implementation theories. In contrast, some existing research focuses on the design and implementation of a given professional development program without considering how these design decisions influence adoption decisions by faculty members. Seldom does the existing research use theory to support the investigation of these practices. Hence, there is a dearth of literature at the nexus of theory, experiences of instructors, and professional development for online teaching and learning in higher education. The existing literature base contains several studies of adopting online teaching among higher education instructors in specific fields where the focus is expanding upon the nuances of that field such as with agriculture (Drape, 2013) or with nursing (Cash & Tate, 2012). The literature, however, rarely focuses on researching the adoption of distance education.

3. Methodology
3.1. Data Collection

Data was collected through a qualitative survey administered to students at various stages of an educational leadership program. According to Braun and Clarke (2013), qualitative surveys typically consist of a series of open-ended questions that participants complete independently, either by typing or handwriting their responses. These instruments are self-administered and differ from interviews in that they do not involve direct interaction with a researcher. The survey was developed and distributed using the institution's licensed survey platform, Qualtrics. A total of 19 responses were received from a potential pool of 40 participants. The survey included a series of open-ended

questions designed to elicit detailed, reflective responses regarding students' experiences and perceptions of the program. The interview questions consisted of the following:

1. What do you find most valuable about the program?
2. In what areas could the program improve?
3. What additional resources or support would enhance your experience with the program?

3.2. Data Analysis

According to Li and Zhang (2022), conducting a qualitative study involves identifying patterns and relationships, offering a more integrative approach to linking data collection, analysis, and theory than traditional quantitative methods. Unlike the standardized procedures of quantitative analysis, qualitative methods provide researchers with a flexible and adaptive toolkit for exploring and interpreting complex social phenomena. Glesne and Peshkin (1992) describe data analysis as "the process of organizing and sorting data in light of increasingly sophisticated judgments and interpretations" (p. 130). The primary goal of this process is to uncover meaningful patterns, features, and insights from the data collected.

To guide the analysis, Miles and Huberman (1994) emphasize that the researcher's central task is to "explicate the ways people in particular settings come to understand, account for, take action, and otherwise manage their day-to-day situations" (p. 7). A thematic analysis approach was employed to identify recurring features and patterns within the qualitative responses. Swanson and Holton (2005) outline qualitative data analysis as a process involving "(1) sensing features, (2) constant comparison, (3) recursiveness, (4) inductive and deductive thinking, and (5) interpretation to generate meaning" (p. 236). The data were initially reviewed to establish familiarity, followed by the generation of initial codes. Through an iterative process, features were refined and finalized. The analysis revealed three overarching features: Faculty and Curriculum, Administrative and Structural Components, and Additional Support Services.

3.3. Findings

The following features were identified by qualitative data analysis: Faculty and Curriculum, Administrative and Structural components, and Support Services. In response to Research Question One, "How do students perceive the influence of faculty expertise and curriculum design on their satisfaction in online Educational Leadership programs?" the following comments were provided by graduate students:

3.4. Faculty Expertise and Support

The Educational Leadership Master's Program has received substantial praise from students, particularly for its faculty and curriculum. The data reveals a strong appreciation for the program's ability to blend theoretical knowledge with practical applications, preparing students effectively for their future roles in educational leadership. The data reveals that students highly value knowledgeable faculty who share real-world experiences and find value in curriculum focused on practical topics like special population laws and teacher evaluation systems. Students specifically mentioned growing "tremendously in the program" due to faculty who are "warm, helpful, and inspiring," indicating that faculty expertise and supportive attitudes significantly contribute to student satisfaction. Students consistently highlighted the value of knowledgeable and supportive faculty members. One student remarked, "My time in this program has been wonderful, and I have grown tremendously in the program." This sentiment is echoed by another student who stated, "My time has been amazing, and I have expanded my knowledge vastly in the program thanks to all of

the faculty." These testimonials underscore the significant impact that dedicated and approachable professors have on student growth and satisfaction.

3.5 Curriculum Relevance

The program curriculum, particularly its focus on practical, real-world applications, received high praise from students. One student specifically mentioned the value of "Course over Special Populations and Instructional Supervision, where we learned the ins and outs of TTESS [Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System]. I learned more in these two courses than any other course. This feedback highlights the importance of courses that directly relate to the challenges and responsibilities students will face in their future careers. Students also appreciated the program's emphasis on field experience and guidance from professors. One student noted, "The knowledge I've gained through field experience and guidance from my professors" as the most valuable aspect of the program. This hands-on approach, combined with expert guidance, appears to be a key factor in students feeling well-prepared for their future roles. The supportive nature of the faculty was consistently mentioned as a valuable aspect of the program. One student expressed, "I value the amount of support I received from each of the professors. They were always available for any question that I had even before the classes started. This level of accessibility and support seems to create a positive learning environment that enhances student engagement and success.

Several students also highlighted specific professors who made significant impacts on their learning experience. For instance, one student mentioned there were incredible professors. They align the content to practical contexts. This alignment of course content with real-world scenarios appears to be highly valued by students, as it enhances the relevance and applicability of their learning. Another student was quoted as saying, "Our professor transformed complex leadership theories into strategies we could implement immediately in our schools. Her ability to connect academic concepts with the daily challenges we face as educators made the material not just understandable but immediately useful in my role". Additionally, that student explained that "By examining real challenges happening in schools right now, I gained confidence in applying what I learned to address similar situations in my district. This practical approach to learning has been invaluable for my professional growth".

In response to Research Question Two, "What are students' experiences with Programmatic Structures in online Educational Leadership programs?" the following comments were provided by graduate students:

3.5. Programmatic Structures in Educational Leadership Programs

The survey data from the Educational Leadership Master's Program reveals significant administrative and structural challenges that impact students' educational experiences. Research Question Two asked, "What are students' experiences with administrative and structural challenges in online Educational Leadership programs? Analysis of student responses identified two primary features: Clear Communication and Consistent Grading Practices and Policies.

3.6. Clear Communication and Organization

Students consistently identified communication as a significant administrative challenge within the program. A recurring feature was the lack of timely and clear information from department leadership, which created barriers throughout their academic experience. One student specifically noted the need for improvement in "communication from department heads on providing information in a timely and clear manner." Another student echoed this concern, stating that

"communication was the worst of all" among the program's shortcomings. Students expressed a strong desire for more structured communication and clearer expectations from the outset of the program. "The Educational Leadership program could improve by enhancing communication, organization, and student support." Establishing a clear timeline of events and expectations from the start of the program would greatly benefit students. This should include practice test dates, deadlines for test requests, costs of study programs, graduation, and comprehensive exam submission dates. A structured orientation covering these topics would provide clarity and reduce confusion. The need for improved organization extended into the digital learning environment. Students described inconsistencies across courses that made navigation and access to materials unnecessarily difficult:

> There should be commonalities across classes in that department. Blackboard, assignments, due dates, and expectations are all over the place. There should be a way to streamline the Blackboard course shell that allows all students to access the same tabs. For instance, all Zoom meetings should be in the same place on all Blackboard shells. Currently, they are tucked in wherever the instructor wants them and causes students to play hide and seek. It should not feel like you are hunting to find the same information in two different courses.

Orientation support was another area where students felt improvements were needed. Several participants emphasized the importance of a dedicated session to clarify academic expectations by "Adding a day of orientation to communicate all academic expectations for the program." Frustration also emerged around the lack of guidance regarding graduation requirements. One student shared that,

> I would improve the amount of support we get to understand the graduation requirements as we approach program completion. I was not advised about the degree plans; I figured it out on my own. Although my professors did tell me what to register for, I didn't get guidance as far as a complete degree plan.

Another student elaborated on the confusion experienced near the end of the program:
> Lastly, we, as a cohort, were not prepared for the end of the program. We have had to ask for all information regarding graduation requirements, certification testing, graduate interviews, and the next steps. It seems as if this was the first group to have ever finished. This is the thing I'm most disappointed in: the need to figure out our next steps, commencement, and certifications.

3.7. Inconsistent Grading Practices and Administrative Barriers

The second major feature revealed significant concerns regarding inconsistent grading practices and policies across the program. Students reported encountering arbitrary standards and shifting expectations, which undermined their confidence in the fairness and reliability of the evaluation process.

One student explicitly called for "Grading policies that are the same for everybody," underscoring the perceived lack of uniformity in how student work was assessed across different courses and instructors. Several students described specific instances of problematic grading practices. One student shared:

> I am actively delaying my graduation to avoid taking courses with a professor since their rubrics do not reflect the grades given—the amount of time we spend searching the library database for their required resources. I followed the order they had in the assignment instructions, and they told me my tables were wrong, but I followed a format from a student who received no points off for theirs.

Another student elaborated on similar concerns:

> A professor has repeatedly failed to follow their own rubric, changed grading criteria after assignments were submitted, and penalized students for not attending Zoom meetings in an asynchronous course. Furthermore, her grading appears biased, influenced by comments made in Zoom meetings. Students deserve fair, consistent, and transparent grading, free from subjective biases or shifting expectations.

The impact of these inconsistencies extended beyond grades, affecting students' overall educational experience and perceptions of faculty professionalism. One student reflected:

> When the faculty expects us to be perfect, they should meet at that bar, as well. [They] consistently expected perfection but had grammatical and spelling errors on Blackboard and in comments for every course I took with her. Moreover, faculty members seemed to be thrown into classes at the last minute and made comments about not having time to change or update the Blackboard class. Again, if we are expected to burn the midnight oil to meet expectations and turn in complete, professional papers, the faculty should be expected to have their courses and rubrics set up before class opens.

Students also noted that inconsistent grading and unclear administrative processes hindered their ability to plan and progress through the program. One student emphasized:

> Students who have completed the program must be cleared up to take the tests in timely manner. Delaying students who have a 4.0 and have completed the program from taking the 268 and 368 for no reason is not right and costs students valuable time, money, and jobs.

Another student requested more flexibility in assessment scheduling such as "Allow students to complete PASL if they are requested to, instead of forcing them to wait until they pass the 268."

These accounts collectively illustrate how inconsistencies in grading and administrative procedures negatively affect students' academic trajectories and overall satisfaction. The data clearly demonstrate that the program's administrative structure and organization significantly influence students' educational experiences. Students consistently recommended improvements in communication, organization of program information, consistency in grading practices, and transparency in expectations from the beginning of the program through graduation.

In response to Research Question Three "What support services do students in online Educational Leadership programs identify as essential for their academic and professional success?" The data reveals that students in online Educational Leadership programs identify a range of support services as critical to their success. These services span academic, professional, and personal domains, highlighting the multifaceted needs of adult learners balancing complex responsibilities.

3.8. Orientation and Program Navigation

Students suggested that the orientation process for online Educational Leadership programs should be more comprehensive and strategically designed to support long-term academic success. Rather than a brief introduction to faculty and learning platforms, they recommended an expanded orientation that includes detailed, practical guidance on navigating the program. Students proposed that orientation should include a clearly outlined course sequence that shows which classes to take and when, helping them plan their academic journey more effectively. They also recommended step-by-step explanations of key milestones, such as certification exam requirements, practicum expectations, and graduation procedures, to reduce confusion and ensure timely progress. In addition, they suggested incorporating interactive resources (live webinars) to explain administrative processes and address frequently asked questions. Finally, students emphasized the value of early opportunities to connect with peers and faculty, noting that such interactions could foster a stronger sense of community and support from the outset. One student remarked, "I wish there had been a roadmap from day one—it would've saved me a lot of confusion." This sentiment was echoed by others who felt that a more structured and informative orientation could reduce early uncertainty and improve confidence. Additionally, students recommended that orientation not be a one-time event. Instead, they suggested ongoing orientation checkpoints—brief refresher modules or live sessions offered at key stages of the program, such as before practicum placements or certification testing. These would help ensure that students remain informed and supported throughout their academic journey.

3.9.Advising and Mentorship

Participants consistently emphasized a strong need for accessible academic advisors and structured mentorship opportunities. Many described feeling uncertain about how to navigate academic requirements and career planning without clear, personalized guidance. Students expressed that personalized support from faculty or experienced professionals was vital for overcoming academic challenges and planning for future leadership roles. The data revealed that students value advisors and mentors who take the time to understand their individual goals and challenges. One participant shared: "Having a mentor who understands my career goals made all the difference. I didn't feel like I was just another number—they helped me map out a plan and encouraged me when things got tough." In addition to accessibility, students voiced a desire for more proactive and consistent support. Suggestions included regular check-ins and mentor matching based on shared interests or career aspirations. The lack of structured mentorship opportunities was a recurring concern. As one student explained, "I wish we had more structured mentorship programs. Sometimes you don't even know what questions to ask until someone with experience starts guiding you." Overall, the findings suggest that students perceive advising and mentorship as essential components of their academic success and personal development. They are seeking more intentional, relationship-based support systems that extend beyond course selection and administrative guidance.

3.10. Work-Life Balance, Flexibility, and Mental Health

Many students, particularly working professionals and parents—reported significant challenges in balancing coursework with personal and professional responsibilities. They emphasized the need for flexible deadlines, asynchronous learning options, and enhanced mental health resources to support their well-being and academic success. One student reflected on the inefficiency of certain assignments:

> There were many assignments that were not beneficial and could have been
> eliminated. When a person is told to do an excessive amount of reading and then type

a paper over said reading, they are no longer reading to retain that information. They are now skimming to find the information needed to type the paper and then get the assignment submitted. Students also voiced concerns about rigid course structures that failed to accommodate their demanding schedules.

One student noted: "This is an online platform, and students should NOT be required to make the Zoom meetings or suffer. If you are unable to make the Zoom meetings, you absolutely do miss out on what is going on in the course."

Mental health and stress management emerged as critical issues. While students acknowledged the academic rigor of the program, many felt it lacked sufficient support for managing stress and maintaining a healthy balance. As one student stated that, "The work/life/school balance is not realistic. I'm an educator and a mother, and the expectations sometimes felt overwhelming."

These insights underscore the importance of designing academic programs that are not only rigorous but also flexible, inclusive, and supportive of students' holistic needs. Enhancing asynchronous learning opportunities, streamlining workloads, and expanding access to mental health resources could significantly improve both student satisfaction and retention.

3.11.Test Preparation Support

A recurring feature in the student feedback was the need for more structured and transparent support in preparing for certification exams, particularly the TExES 268 and 368. Students expressed concern over the lack of clarity regarding testing timelines, expectations, and available resources. One student noted, "We, as a cohort, were not prepared for the end of the program. We have had to ask for all information regarding graduation requirements, certification testing, graduate interviews, and next steps." This sentiment was echoed by others who described the process as disorganized and unnecessarily stressful. Several students emphasized the importance of having access to review sessions and practice materials. One graduate stated, "Access to free or low-cost 268 and 368 study materials and structured review sessions would better prepare us for exams." Another added, "There should be a clear timeline of events and expectations from the start of the program, including practice test dates, deadlines for test requests, and costs of study programs."

These comments highlight a perceived gap between the program's academic content and the logistical support needed to navigate certification requirements effectively. The absence of a centralized resource or orientation was also identified as a barrier. Students recommended the creation of a detailed handbook or structured orientation session to outline testing procedures, portfolio expectations, and graduation requirements. One participant suggested, "A structured orientation covering these topics would provide clarity and reduce confusion." In addition to institutional support, students expressed a desire for peer collaboration and mentorship. The value of community was underscored by one respondent who shared, "The most valuable part of the program has been the camaraderie amongst faculty members and classmates. I cannot wait to meet everyone in person at graduation!" This sense of community could be leveraged to form peer study groups and mentorship networks to support exam preparation.

Finally, concerns were raised about delays in test clearance, even for students with exemplary academic records. One graduate expressed frustration, stating, "Delaying students who have a 4.0 and have completed the program from taking the 268 and 368 for no reason is not right and costs students valuable time, money, and jobs." This points to a need for more efficient administrative

processes and clearer communication between faculty, advisors, and students. Overall, the findings suggest that while the academic content of the program is largely valued, the infrastructure supporting certification readiness requires significant improvement. Students are calling for a more proactive, transparent, and supportive approach to test preparation that aligns with the rigor and expectations of the program.

3.12. Networking and Professional Development

Students in the Educational Leadership Master's Program expressed a clear and consistent desire for more robust networking opportunities with alumni, faculty, and professionals in the field. While some respondents acknowledged the value of peer discussions during synchronous sessions, many felt that the program lacked structured avenues for professional connection and career development. One student remarked, "The discussions during Zooms are valuable and provide great insight from other perspectives," highlighting the potential of virtual platforms to foster meaningful dialogue. However, this informal interaction was not seen as sufficient. Another student emphasized the need for broader engagement, stating, "More networking opportunities with school leaders and alumni would strengthen career prospects."

The data suggests that students are seeking intentional, program-supported initiatives such as virtual networking events, guest speaker series, and access to professional organizations. These initiatives are viewed as essential for enhancing career readiness and bridging the gap between academic preparation and real-world leadership roles. One participant proposed, "Regular cohort check-ins to build community and provide a platform for students to voice concerns," indicating that networking is also seen as a means of peer support and collective growth. Moreover, students expressed a desire for mentorship opportunities that extend beyond the classroom. As one respondent noted, "A structured mentorship program connecting students with experienced school administrators for real-world insights" would provide invaluable guidance and professional modeling. This sentiment reflects a broader call for the program to facilitate relationships that extend into students' future careers.

The findings underscore that while the academic content of the program is generally well-regarded, the infrastructure for professional networking remains underdeveloped. Students are calling for a more intentional and inclusive approach to networking—one that not only supports their immediate academic needs but also prepares them for long-term success in educational leadership.

4. Discussion

4.1. Faculty Expertise and Curriculum Relevance

This study examined key elements of a high-quality online principal preparation program through the lens of student perceptions, focusing on faculty expertise, curriculum design, administrative structures, and support services. Findings align with UCEA's evolving framework and broader research on effective leadership preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022; Young & Eddy-Spicer, 2019). Students valued faculty who combined academic and practical leadership experience, reinforcing UCEA's emphasis on bridging theory and practice.

The curriculum's focus on instructional leadership, special populations, and field-based learning reflects UCEA-aligned principles of job-embedded, equity-centered preparation (Wallace Foundation, 2016). Student feedback supports the importance of curriculum coherence and relevance in preparing effective school leaders (Darling-Hammond et al., 2010, 2022)

4.2.Administrative and Structural Challenges

Despite the program's curricular strengths, students identified significant administrative and structural barriers. Chief among these were inconsistent grading practices, unclear communication, and disorganized digital learning environments. These findings echo concerns raised in the literature regarding the variability of program quality and the need for coherent administrative structures (Ni et al., 2017; Golde, 2005). The lack of standardized course shells, inconsistent application of rubrics, and insufficient guidance on graduation and certification processes undermined students' confidence in the program's organizational integrity. Such inconsistencies are particularly problematic in online learning environments, where clarity, transparency, and timely communication are essential for student success (Allen & Seaman, 2018; Chen et al., 2010). These findings suggest that even well-designed curricula can be compromised by administrative inefficiencies, highlighting the need for systemic improvements in program delivery and oversight (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

4.3.Support Services and Equity

Students articulated a strong need for comprehensive support services, including structured orientation, academic advising, mentorship, and mental health resources. These findings align with Wlodkowski's (2003) framework for adult learning, which emphasizes the importance of flexibility, relevance, and holistic support in graduate education. The call for ongoing orientation checkpoints and proactive advising reflects best practices in student retention and engagement (Lovitts, 2001). Moreover, the emphasis on work-life balance and mental health underscores the importance of designing programs that are responsive to the complex reality of adult learners, particularly those balancing professional and familial responsibilities. The literature supports this perspective, noting that equitable access to support services is a critical component of inclusive and effective leadership preparation (Grissom et al., 2019; Wallace Foundation, 2016). The call for structured mentorship and peer networking also reflects best practices in leadership development, where coaching and collaborative learning are essential for building leadership capacity (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

4.4. Implications for Practice and Policy

To enhance program quality, institutions should invest in faculty development, ensure consistent administrative practices, and embed equity-focused content throughout the curriculum. Policymakers and program designers should consider adopting high-leverage strategies such as performance-based assessments, structured internships, and district-university partnerships, as recommended by Darling-Hammond et al. (2022).

4.5 Limitations and Future Research

While this study provides valuable insights, its findings are limited by sample size and institutional context. Furthermore, this study surveyed graduate students in a fully accelerated online program versus traditional programs. Future research should explore longitudinal outcomes of online leadership graduates and examine how program design influences leadership effectiveness across diverse educational settings.

5. Conclusion

This study adds to the literature on online principal preparation by examining student experiences in a UCEA-aligned Educational Leadership program. It highlights both strengths—such as faculty expertise and curriculum relevance—and areas for improvement, including administrative consistency and student support. These findings support calls for equity-centered, practice-rich leadership preparation (Darling-Hammond et al., 2022).

Students emphasized the need for clearer communication, structured advising, and better orientation, echoing broader concerns about supporting adult learners (Golde, 2005; Lovitts, 2001; Wlodkowski, 2003). Addressing these issues requires transparent systems, robust mentorship, and accessible mental health and certification resources.

Ultimately, aligning program design with national standards that emphasize equity, clinical practice, and transformational leadership is essential. As institutions expand online offerings, this study raises questions about the viability of accelerated online models, especially given student feedback favoring traditional, face-to-face formats. Institutions must weigh quality against quantity, particularly in states with strict accountability standards.

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