Learning Forward

Preparing the next generation of school leaders is an invigorating and ever-changing enterprise, but the past year and a half have brought more change and more of the fear and uncertainty change inspires than anyone could have anticipated (Superville, 2021).

We, the co-directors and core faculty of educational leadership programs at Salem State University, have reinvented our leadership programs' routines and structures to accommodate the needs of pandemic leadership preparation while trying to keep our eyes on the core elements that make us who we are.

We are now able to look back and ask: What will we maintain? Our revisions have created a new path steeped in collaboration and communication, with changes in course content and structure, a program-wide emphasis on social justice, and connections to the community that will endure.

Keeping community at the heart

The educational leadership programs at Salem State prepare teacher leaders and school leaders. Designed around theories of adult development, with coursework and fieldwork sequenced to support transformational learning (Kegan, 1994; Kegan & Lahey, 2009), we designed our community- and cohort-based programs to be modular and interconnected.

Before the pandemic, most courses consisted of eight-week modules, with five sessions of in-person learning and online asynchronous work in-between. For the first year, cohorts of teacher leaders and future school leaders learn together, with a shared focus on building collective ownership of instructional change; taking a justice-oriented perspective towards teaching, learning, and leadership; and putting the learning of students and adults front and center.

Those pursuing formal licensure as school leaders then complete a second year of continued coursework and a leadership practicum. The second year focuses on formal leadership skills, such as supervision and evaluation, and key leadership perspectives, such as enacting a culturally-responsive leadership stance.

Connection and community have always been at the heart of our work. Faced with the sudden loss of in-person instruction in March 2020, we knew we had strong foundations from which to build, but never had external forces tested our abilities to connect and build community the way they would during the pandemic.

Beginning in March 2020, we redoubled our efforts to discern the needs of our candidates and instructors and built new programmatic routines and structures accordingly.

Meeting candidates' needs

Our program is designed for working educators. Virtually all candidates maintain their full-time jobs in schools while participating. All of these educators faced a year of uncertainty, challenge, and heartbreak.

Through discussions, surveys, and advising conversations during spring and summer 2020, it became clear that candidates were overwhelmed by navigating their schools' remote learning shifts, meeting students' needs, completing coursework, and balancing increased responsibilities at home.

We understood that we needed to shift course content and structure and that instructors would need support in identifying and teaching the core ideas and tasks of each course while shifting to a fully online, blended model of synchronous and asynchronous instruction.

The most visible change we made was a reduction in face time, cutting four-hour in-person classes to two-hour online synchronous classes, to mitigate intense screen fatigue and time pressure on candidates. But this meant courses would have only half as much synchronous time as in the past, so we decided to maximize collaboration during class and move away from reliance on lengthy written and submitted work products as evidence of learning.

This was a pedagogical challenge for instructors but ultimately led to deeper student learning. For instance, in a course on data-informed leadership, candidates grappled together in small online breakout groups with Safir's (2017) three levels of data and how to

analyze and act on them. Through dialogue, they came to new realizations about the power of collaborative data use without needing to produce a written reflection.

We gained some key insights from this shift. One of the biggest takeaways was that instructors learned to trust in the learning *process*, as opposed to a reliance on learning products. This required an enhanced focus on student learning during class time, as opposed to looking for records of student learning after class. Witnessing candidates' learning across the year affirmed our choice to make these revisions.

In addition, making shifts in our program structure led to more collaborative work among instructors. During the planning phase for each course, instructors gathered in teaching teams. For many, this was the first time they had gathered to discuss course content and structure. While occasional instructor collaboration existed prior to the pandemic, it was spotty and ad hoc.

Unlike their pre-K-12 counterparts, our instructors enjoy a great deal of academic freedom. But that freedom can also lead to isolation. The pandemic nudged us into a different collaborative space.

To respond to the acute needs within our candidate community, instructors had to intentionally and continuously collaborate this year, and these collaborations provided opportunities to deepen practice, calibrate content across different sections of the same course, and raise hard questions about how to meet course and program goals.

Instructors also collaborated across courses more systematically than ever, with important conversations taking place at the handoff from one course and instructor to the next. The value add from these instructor conversations will serve us well into the future.

Focusing on antiracism and justice

The COVID-19 pandemic coincided with a national reckoning with racism and magnified existing inequities in schools. Our programmatic mission is to prepare culturally responsive leaders who are able to make change and lead equitable, liberatory school experiences for all students, especially Black and Brown students.

Prepandemic, we made some progress diversifying our candidate and instructor pools and reshaping the curriculum with a stronger focus on anti-racist and justice-oriented leadership. However, the pandemic landscape of 2020-21 catalyzed deeper and quicker change in this domain.

Our partnerships with local school districts, which are the cornerstone of our programs, illuminated the challenges and provided opportunities for change. Time and again, the need to diversify the pipeline of formal and informal leaders in the region emerged in

conversations with our partners. Our district partners and candidates have also often articulated their novice knowledge of anti-racist and justice-oriented practices, along with a desire to learn more. This became even more urgent in 2020.

To accelerate racial justice learning in our courses, we recognized that we as instructors needed to build our own knowledge, skill, and comfort with discussing topics that too often remain hidden from view. In spring 2020, with the pandemic just beginning, we purchased the book *Unconscious Bias in Schools: A Developmental Approach to Exploring Race and Racism* (Benson & Fiarman, 2019) for all instructors in the program and committed to using the anti-bias framework from the book across our program. We recognized that implementing a new framework was not a simple process, so we created a plan to engage and support our community.

The first step was to invite instructors to read the book and integrate chapters and concepts from the text into their courses. This was done organically to allow instructors to explore aspects of the text that resonated most with the content and tasks of each course.

Relying on the newly solidified teaching teams for each course, we were able to achieve a substantive integration of the text across the majority of our courses, including as the core text for a new 2021 capstone course on culturally responsive leadership practice.

At the same time, we know a single text cannot carry the responsibility for supporting instructors' or candidates' development of antiracist, anti-bias, and justice-oriented leadership dispositions and skills. We encouraged instructors to use the book as a catalyst for exploring other readings and resources to center these lenses.

For example, instructors of the first-year course on data-informed leadership designed class activities in which students used data from the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights to identify inequitable outcomes in schools they knew well and discuss potential leadership responses.

A second-year course on family engagement included new discussions about how schools can nurture trust with Black families, supplemented by newspaper articles about the impact of Black families' trust on school and district reopening plans (Green, 2021; Shapiro et al., 2021).

As we did this work to improve course content, we also aimed to undo some of the ways in which our program itself perpetuated white supremacy culture. Many of our assignments moved from graded to complete/incomplete, relying more on formative feedback than summative grades. We began to engage in more overt conversations about the ways in which schooling and leadership practices perpetuate inequities, and we asked our community how we can focus on interrupting such practices.

As we urged our candidates to listen carefully to students about how best to support and honor them as learners during the pandemic, we did the same, asking our community how we might shift and adjust to better support them as learners. We pushed these conversations to the center of the table as often as possible, and as instructors and coordinators, we sought to listen more than we spoke and encourage our students to do the same in their schools and communities.

A good deal of our programmatic attention and work is now focused on anti-racist and justice-oriented leadership. That is as it should be. We are humbled that it took a pandemic to push us there.

Stepping up support

Our leadership programs have always used a cohort model because we believe in the power of collective learning. During the pandemic, it became clearer than ever that community and connection are the backbone of leadership learning in our programs.

Cohorts provided consistency and grounding for candidates when so much was in chaos. When candidates inevitably missed classes this year, cohort mates supported them. Even cohorts that never met in person formed deep connections through their shared learning.

Nevertheless, candidates needed more than the connections from their individual cohorts. They let us, as program coordinators, know that they needed more opportunities to communicate with us – to calm their worries, answer individual questions, and help them think through leadership challenges at their school sites that had arisen from the pandemic.

In response, for the first time, we offered regular synchronous drop-in office hours via Zoom. These provided an opportunity for candidates to have flexibly scheduled, just-in-time conversations with program leaders and peers about anything on their minds. These sessions allowed for both personalized problem-solving and much-needed connection.

As students took advantage of our increased accessibility and personalized support, we quickly understood that a more distributed model of leadership would serve the program well. Through frequent short online surveys, we gathered feedback on various program elements.

For instance, in early spring 2021, we surveyed first-year candidates about their preferred learning modality for the subsequent year. We assumed that most candidates would be eager to return to an in-person hybrid model, but to our surprise, over 92% of candidates preferred to remain in a fully online learning model.

Informed by these data, we decided to keep all second-year courses fully online during the 2021-22 academic year. To model data-informed leadership, we also shared the data with candidates to explain the tensions in our decision-making process and demonstrate the ways that we centered their needs.

Additionally, we increased our overall communication at the program level. In a year of overwhelm from email and all electronic communications, we worried about overloading our candidates' inboxes. Yet it became clear that more information was best.

Candidates' worries and concerns diminished the more they knew about elements of the program both large and small. They thanked us for our transparency and shared the ways in which our messaging eased their minds, creating clarity as opposed to stress. We will retain this increased focus on communication even as we shift away from the pandemic context, to model transparency and connection, which are key elements of effective leadership.

Creating lasting change

Effective school leaders continually look for change and growth opportunities, and the COVID-19 pandemic has provided numerous opportunities. Though responding to the crisis often felt like a challenge, we have ultimately found it to be an opening for positive change.

Our responses were designed to be just-in-time and specific to the pandemic context, but many of the shifts have found their way into the DNA of the programs and stand to benefit our candidates well into the future. We also embraced an opportunity to model leadership during hard times. By centering our community of candidates and instructors, discerning their needs, and then adjusting to respond to those needs, we showed how leaders can act nimbly in the face of hardship.

We flexed, revised, shifted on a dime, communicated frequently and transparently, and tried at all times to keep our eyes on the core elements that make us who we are. We believe those lessons will help our candidates as they confront the challenges of change and benefit their schools as they reap the benefits of strong leadership for years to come.

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