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## **Spotlight on Research by The Wallace Foundation Moving Beyond “Good” in Leadership Preparation**

In October 2016, The Wallace Foundation initiated the \$47-million University Principal Preparation Initiative (UPPI). The Foundation selected seven universities along with their state and district partners to develop models over the next four years for improving university principal preparation programs and to examine state policy to see if it could be strengthened to encourage higher-quality training statewide. The goal is to generate lessons other university principal preparation programs and their partners can adopt or adapt as they undertake similar redesign efforts.

This spotlight piece analyzes interview data collected from the seven UPPI institutional representatives conducted at the initiative’s Faculty Professional Learning Community in November 2019. It also utilizes finding from a 2018 study by RAND Corporation documenting the initiative’s first year implementation, *Launching a Redesign of University Principal Preparation Programs: Partners Collaborate for Change.*

One of the emerging themes coming from the UPP analyses is the need to go beyond good in leadership preparation. The seven university programs engaging in redesign through UPPI did not do so because of broad dissatisfaction with their programs. In fact, each program could point to a variety of strengths prior to starting the initiative. The motivation behind the redesign process was to enhance the quality of their programs and not be content with past achievements. A spirit of continuous improvement infused the programs.

According to *Launching a Redesign*, University programs had already begun implementing some evidenced-based features. These included selective recruitment and coherent curricula to prepare candidates for the demands of the job. However, most were not able to align such features with extensive clinical experiences. University programs, with the help of their mentor programs, thus began redesigning them. This included the extent to which a full-time model could be implemented.

The belief faculty had in their programs prior to the initiative can be seen through interviews conducted at the Faculty Professional Learning Community.

A representative from Western Kentucky University expressed pride both in where the program started and the hard work invested to make it better:

*“I thought we had a pretty good program before we started this. When I look at our old program compared to the new program, it’s amazing the changes that have taken place. My faculty inspire me because they’re so small and yet they’ve been able to take on the work on 10, 12, 14 people and do it very well and on time and on task.”*

This perspective was shared by a representative from NC State who pointed out that one of their programs had even been honored with UCEA's Exemplary Educational Leadership Preparation Program Award:

*"We had a program that we felt like was doing great things. It had received the UCEA Exemplary Award, the NELA program. And then we had a very traditional on campus program that was following state requirements for licensure. And our idea was how do we bring those together and how do we bring in new district partners to be a part of that work."*

A representative from Virginia State University elaborated on this thinking by championing the need to constantly be better and to be mindful that equity work requires consistent effort and attention:

*"In order to build the kind of synergy, you need to make movement and change - to be better than what you already have. Virginia State is already known for having great teachers and great educators. The national teacher of the year came from Virginia State University. So we've always been in this kind of work. What the redesign and what this focus gave us was some partners that were in this work and helping us diversify our readings, diversify some of the practices that were out there. Because in equity work, the one thing that you know is that you're never done."*

Other UPPI program representatives discussed the responsibility they felt to be leaders and models for their states. It was not enough to confine their efforts to their own program. If they wanted to achieve wide spread impact, they needed to share lessons learned with other programs in their state and help shape public policy.

A representative from San Diego State University discussed how they wanted to share the commitment they had to their work with other preparation programs in California.

*"So we're a diverse community. There is 100% but in for the equity work. Because of this work we have branched out, through another grant, and are not working with principal preparation programs in the state of California on their redesign and working with partners."*

UPPI programs also understood that support from The Wallace Foundation would not last forever and that positive changes would not persist if not codified in state policy. A representative from Florida Atlantic University discussed his efforts to share lessons learned through the design process with state leaders in Tallahassee so other programs in the state could benefit:

*"I went from, let's just rebuild the curriculum and now I'm getting involved in all of these different things. Not to mention the work that I'm doing with the state. I've meetings in Tallahassee all the time as we work to improve policy to enable these specific parts of the program to actually happen in other universities. Wallace funding is going to end. We want to make sure that state policy is directed so that all universities will be able to do this kind of stuff that we're doing in this initiative. So there are, there are communities of institutions of higher ed and potential partners to those institutions across the country that are watching this work a bit."*

Finally, UPPI programs expressed a desire for candidates to not just be technically proficient, but to enable and empower them to be change agents. A representative from the University of Connecticut described the need in school communities and the responsibilities assumed by school leader candidates.

*“By design, we espouse to be a very different program. Our primary aim and mission has been and remains to prepare the best possible candidates for every school community in the state of Connecticut. I think we’re better today than we ever have been at achieving that in every school community. Our reputation has been, rightfully so, that we have been preparing the best candidates in our state. I think we still do, I think that we send them out endorsed for certification, more capable in knowledge and skills and with judgment on when and how to apply it and what works for them. I think we’re a little bit better today and we’re gonna continue to get better in those areas, but I think we are beginning to open their minds to what we believe is the area of responsibility that they have that’s beyond the technical, which is truly seeing themselves as agents of change to level the playing field for those whom the system has not worked and doesn’t work well.”*

The challenges facing schools and communities are deep and vast. It is not enough to simply provide prospective candidates with a threshold minimum of skills and knowledge. To tackle systematic inequities and really impact school and communities, leadership preparation needs to move beyond good. Moving beyond good means not being afraid to constructively review already thriving programs and embracing a continuous improvement mindset.

By Marcy Reedy

#### **References:**

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