

# Implications From UCEA

## Using Internships in the Preparation of School Leaders



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Internships, practica, and field experiences have been touted as essential to prepare effective school leaders. Borrowed from the field of medicine, educational leadership internships are intended to help practitioners gain experience near the completion of their formal preparation (Milstein, Bobroff, & Restine, 1991). Over the years, a variety of internship formats have evolved, but research has not kept pace. This research gap suggests an urgent need to address whether and how field experiences provide the time, rigor, or relevance needed to influence aspirant leaders' actions and attitudes.

### TYPES OF INTERNSHIPS

Carr, Chenoweth, and Ruhl (2003) identified four types of internship experiences: independent, interdependent, embedded, and apprenticeship. To determine current internship requirements operating in educational leadership preparation programs across the country, 48 educational leadership programs were contacted (43 were UCEA institutions). Based on the returns from 40 of these institutions, we found wide variability in the quality and quantity of internship requirements and activities (Barnett, Copland, & Shoho, 2008). Three dominant internship designs emerged from our investigation:

- **FULL-TIME JOB-EMBEDDED INTERNSHIPS** immerse aspiring principals in "on the job" learning. Although this design is rare, its appeal is growing, especially if preparation programs want to establish strong linkages with school districts.

- During **DETACHED INTERNSHIPS**, interns document the completion of required activities using portfolios and reflective journals. In contrast to Fry, Bottoms, and O'Neill's (2005) findings, our review suggests many interns engage in instructionally-related activities (e.g., analyzing data, designing professional development programs).
- **COURSE-EMBEDDED FIELD EXPERIENCES** disaggregate the activities contained in detached internships, distributing them across courses throughout an entire preparation program. This model is not widely used due to state certification and licensure mandates requiring an internship.

### CRITICISMS OF INTERNSHIPS

Despite the prevalence of internships, they have been criticized by academics and practitioners. Although many aspirants believe the internship is an important aspect of preparation, often the experience does not provide adequate grounding in the work of being a school. Other critics have voiced concerns about: (a) inadequate field support and connection with practice, (b) lack of meaningful and relevant tasks, and (c) inadequate university support.

### EVIDENCE OF INTERNSHIP EFFECTS

Empirical research of internships tends to be no better now than when Daresh (1988) made this claim over two

decades ago. Some studies reveal aspirant leaders' knowledge, skills, and dispositions are affected. For instance, internship experiences can change interns' role conceptions about the principalship and can affect career decision making (Daresh, 1988); however, field experiences can perpetuate the status quo in power relationships between teachers and administrators. In addition, internships can assist aspirants to acquire knowledge and skills about building operations, problem-solving strategies, interpersonal skills, time-management techniques, and reflective thinking. Finally, the quality of the mentoring relationship can reduce aspirants' feelings of isolation and increase their confidence. The mentoring relationship has reciprocal benefits; mentors learn and grow just as their mentees do.

### IMPLICATIONS

Our analysis of internship research suggests a more comprehensive research and policy agenda is needed to address: (1) program effects on interns' attitudes and skills, (2) long-term effects once school administrators are on the job, (3) how internship tasks, program activities, and designs vary across educational leadership preparation programs, (4) mentor selection, preparation, and influence on interns' development, and (5) developing financial support for full-time internship.

Because most of the research of internships has been conducted by individual faculty members, findings are piece-meal and fragmented, making it impossible to assess large-scale trends and make comparisons. Employing longitudinal studies in multiple research sites will require a well-supported, coordinated research initiative. Several professional organizations and foundations, such as UCEA, the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, the Southern Regional Education Board, and the national network of Regional Educational Laboratories, have the visibility and prestige to launch this comprehensive research agenda. If the educational leadership profession provides the necessary direction and resources, we envision preparation programs understanding how best to incorporate internships into the task of developing more effective school leaders.

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