

## **When Districts Drive Leadership Preparation Partnerships: Lessons from Six Urban District Initiatives**

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### **Abstract**

This article is a cross-case analysis drawing on case study research conducted in 2009-2010 on six leadership preparation programs and their district-university affiliation, using research on consumer action and inter-organizational relationships to understand their relationships in developing leadership preparation programs. The six urban districts were encouraged, through foundation support, to become active consumers and directly influence the quality and nature of preparation that met their leadership needs. How districts became more active consumers, the different ways in which they engaged local universities, and structures needed to support their shared programs and relationships is described. Their strategies and challenges can be instructive in guiding districts and universities on how to best support and sustain such programs.

### **Keywords**

partnership, leadership preparation, district, university

## Introduction, Methods and Conceptual Background<sup>i</sup>

In recent years, urban districts have invested in leadership preparation as an important lever for improving schools and student learning. Often, federal and foundation funding support made such work possible.

One national foundation initiative (The Wallace Foundation) encouraged six districts to become active consumers and directly influence the quality and nature of preparation that met their leadership needs.

All six engaged universities in program design and delivery. How districts became more active consumers, the different ways in which they engaged local universities, and the structures need to support their shared programs and relationships are the focus of this article.

Their experiences can be instructive in encouraging other districts to be more proactive in shaping local leadership preparation and in guiding districts and universities on how to best support and sustain such programs.

This article is a cross-case analysis (Stake, 2006) drawing on case study research conducted in 2009-10 on these six programs and their district-university affiliations (Orr, King, & La Pointe, 2010).

Researchers collected data using a mixed methods approach to construct a case

study on each district's program and its university affiliation(s), based on in-depth interviews of school district and university officials, program directors and faculty, and candidates and program and district documentation.<sup>ii</sup>

Researchers conducted a cross-case analysis to identify themes and patterns in how districts enacted more consumer action and the nature of the organizational relationships that enable and sustain districts' affiliation with local universities for leadership preparation.

The analysis used institutional theory to understand organizational consumer action (Burch, 2007; Lubienski, 2003) and coupling theory (Weick, 1976) and research on effective collaboration (Langman & McLaughlin, 1993; Ring & Van De Ven, 1994) for explication of district-university relationships.

Key points from such research that are applicable to district involvement in leadership preparation with local universities are:

- The most important attributes of consumer action, particularly when entering or trying to influence a new field (Burch, 2007; Lubienski, 2003), were how districts create cultural and market forces—as consumers—to influence universities—as suppliers—or take action by becoming producers themselves in being innovative in preparing aspiring leaders.

<sup>i</sup>This article is based on a paper presented at the 2011 annual convention of the University Council for Educational Administration, Pittsburgh, PA, November 2011. For a copy of the full report, see Orr and others (2010), *Districts developing leaders* available at <http://www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge-center/school-leadership/key-research/Pages/Districts-Developing-Leaders.aspx>.

<sup>ii</sup>For more information the study's methodology, see the full report (Orr et al., 2010).

- Intra- and inter-organizational coupling attributes influence organizational outcomes (Burch, 2007; Langman & McLaughlin, 1993; Ring & Van De Ven, 1994; Weick, 1976). This research directed attention to the tightness or looseness of relationships around purpose and process between organizational units and between institutions, and clarity and agreement around goals, structures, roles and processes for effective relationships.

For purposes of this article, the relationships between districts and universities around leadership preparation are termed as an *affiliation* with the district and involve some form of formal arrangement for a university in a district-based program or a district in a university-based program. The results show that district-university affiliations require relationships within each institution and between the two institutions. They offer insight

into the potential for and challenges of greater district influence around leadership preparation and provide lessons for local universities in how to be more responsive to district needs and priorities.

### **About the Districts**

The cross-case analysis focused on six districts and their university affiliates, as listed in Table 1.

Five were small cities with populations of 23-56,000 and one was a countywide metropolitan area of 92,000. Their schools ranged in number from 34 to 157. Five districts had not made Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) and the sixth district had several schools that had not made AYP, according to federal student progress requirements.

Five districts affiliated with one local university and one district eventually affiliated with four local universities as part of their grant supported leadership preparation. The nature of these affiliations is the focus of this article.

Table 1

*Districts, Their AYP Status, Primary University Affiliates for Leader Preparation and Number of Candidates Prepared*

<b>School District</b>	<b>Number of Students</b>	<b>Number of Schools</b>	<b>DISTRICT MEETING FEDERAL ANNUAL YEARLY PROGRESS</b>	<b>Primary University Affiliate</b>	<b>NUMBER OF CANDIDATES PREPARED</b>
Boston, Massachusetts	56,168	143	No	University of Massachusetts Boston	49
Jefferson County, Kentucky	92,000	157	No	University of Louisville initially, and later added Bellarmine and Spaulding Universities and Indiana University, Southeast	111 <sup>iii</sup>
Providence, Rhode Island	23,344	52	No	University of Rhode Island	59
St. Louis, Missouri	30,000	84	No	University of Missouri–Columbia	41
Springfield, Illinois	28,000	34	No (for some schools only)	Illinois State University	35
Springfield, Massachusetts	25,233	55	No	University of Massachusetts Amherst	80

\* AYP status of all schools and districts is for 2007-08.

<sup>iii</sup> Some of these candidates were prepared through other affiliated institutions in recent years.

## Findings

### Type of consumer action

There were three ways that the six districts leaders asserted consumer behavior to encourage more innovative, district-aligned preparation approaches for better prepared school leaders:

- **Becoming a discerning customer**  
This approach is defined by how much district leaders asserted clear expectations for school leader standards and competencies and used them to recruit and prepare aspiring principal candidates. Jefferson County used this approach when it met with local university officials over two years to create its own school leadership standards and then expected program personnel to use them to frame program content and delivery. Over time, most of the other five districts' leaders adopted some form of this approach for their own use and for their affiliated programs.
- **Becoming a competitor**  
In this approach, district leaders created their own leadership preparation program aligned to their standards and reform priorities and in competition with other local programs. Boston, Providence and Springfield, MA used this approach. Offering their own leadership preparation programs gave districts the greatest control over outcomes but proved to be the most costly and time-consuming leadership preparation improvement strategy.

- **Becoming a collaborator**  
In this approach, district leaders used contracts and other inducements (e.g., scholarships and designation of "preferred provider" or collaborator status) to induce local university programs' personnel to change selection criteria and customize content, instructional methods, internships, and assessment practices to meet their needs. Jefferson County, Springfield, IL, and St. Louis used this approach. Programs created by focusing changes in the universities proved to be more sustainable over time than were district-based programs.

Combining consumer approaches that clarified the district leadership preparation expectations and induced local university personnel to change to meet district needs appeared to have the greatest potential for broad-reaching, sustainable change in preparation quality and graduate readiness for school leadership, in these six districts. The university-based programs were still in operation after grant funding ended, but only one of the district-based programs was sustained.

### Nature and types of relationships

An understanding of inter-organizational theory provided insight into the factors that enabled and sustained district-university relationships during the grant period, and for some, beyond.

A review of research showed that four factors influence the success of shared purpose among units within an organization or two or

more organizational affiliates (Langman & McLaughlin, 1993; Ring & Van De Ven, 1994).

These are:

- A shared commitment and complementary goals;
- Appropriate roles and clear responsibilities for their shared purposes;
- Processes to support decision making and problem solving;
- Shared resources.

Further, available research showed that the tightness and looseness in agreement and relationships between units and among organizations, as well as other local conditions, influence innovation, direction and sustainability of their shared endeavors (Weick, 1976).

Applying this research to district-university affiliations for leadership preparation

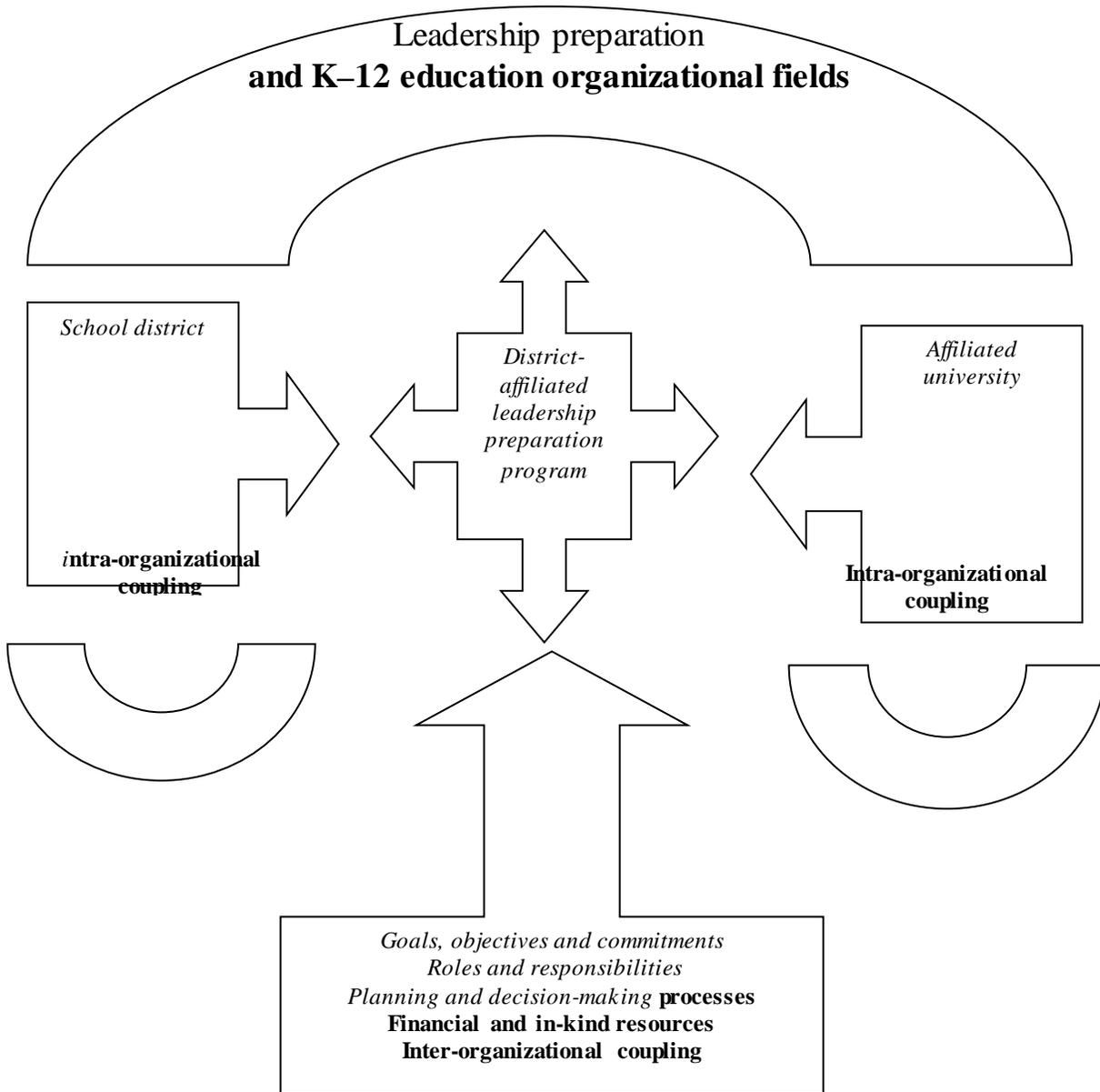
entailed examining three types of relationships:

- Inter-organizationally: between districts and universities.
- Intra-organizationally: between the program and other units of the district.
- Intra-organizationally: between the program and other programs and units of the university.

As shown in Figure 1, these three relationships, as discussed below, varied in goals, structures and processes, their degree of coupling, and how they were affected by their organizational fields.

The tightness or looseness of the relationships within and between each institution and the external context (such as state and federal accountability and fiscal climates) directly influenced program design and its alignment with other district units and university programs.

Figure 1. District-university affiliation for leadership preparation: Structures, processes, domains of coupling, and field influences.



## Inter-organizational Relationship Between District and University

Whether the program was a district-initiated program with university input, a university-led program based on district standards and support, or cooperatively-developed and – delivered programs, each grappled with the four elements core to inter-institutional relationships.

### Goals, objectives, and commitment

In all six school districts, leaders were committed to creating a district-focused preparation program as a component of their broader district reform initiatives. Similarly, by becoming affiliated with the local districts, the universities committed to supporting leader preparation tailored to local needs. How districts and their affiliated universities developed shared goals and objectives and made institutional commitments occurred in one of three ways:

- *Contractually developed partnership.* In Jefferson County and St. Louis, district leaders established priorities for program missions and objectives, which their affiliated universities agreed in their proposals to or contracts with the district.
- *Emergent collaboration.* In two districts, Boston and Springfield, MA, officials developed their programs' mission and objectives through a lengthy process during which they met with several local university faculties over time. Out of this process grew their programs' design and commitment to one university each. Providence selected one university as a partner but was active in program design and adopted the Institute for Learning

(IFL) principles and Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) modules for its program.

- *Co-constructed collaboration.* One district, Springfield, IL, and its affiliated university, ISU, constructed a shared program mission and objectives and collaborated on program design and delivery.

The cross-case analysis showed that the more collaborative the affiliation, the more likely the district and university shared goals, objectives and commitments for leadership preparation.

### Roles and responsibilities

Regardless of approach, the district-affiliated programs had the following roles to support program design and delivery: bridge leaders, program leaders, frontline workers, and other contributors.

This finding was consistent with other partnership research (Goldring & Sims, 2005; Grogan & Robertson, 2002). In all six districts, at least one district staff member was responsible for the program and bridged between the district and university on program matters. In each affiliated university, there also was a designated person who had primary program responsibility and served as a bridge to the district.

In all six districts, program leaders were responsible for program oversight and coordination, candidate selection and assessment, and, at times, development and support of the coursework and internship experiences. They handled problem solving and tracking and reporting on candidates' progress. Who served as program director or coordinator depended on the type of affiliation. District-initiated programs had district staff members as

the program leaders. In districts that established standards but not programs, the universities' department chairs or program coordinators led the district-affiliated programs.

In more collaboratively developed programs, such as in St. Louis and Springfield, IL, program management was split between the districts and universities. In Providence, the bridge person, who was an adjunct at the affiliated university and worked in the district, served as the program coordinator.

The designated faculty member managed the program in cooperation with the affiliated district and facilitated partnership relations. Often this person was a former district leader or had other district experience (such as the program coordinators in the four district-affiliated universities in Jefferson County).

The faculty member may have had some autonomy to make program decisions, balancing district and university needs and priorities. Typically, these faculty members continued teaching and had other administration responsibilities within their departments as well.

To manage the processes for program delivery, the district and university staff formally shared the core work in one or more areas: candidate recruitment and selection, content and course development, course instruction, internship support, and assessment.

In most district-affiliated programs, district officials and staff took a more active role than university staff in candidate

recruitment and selection, internship assignment and supervision, and candidate assessment.

In the more collaborative relationship, these responsibilities were shared. Across most programs, much of the course instruction was provided by university-based faculty, with some district staff participation in some classes (as speakers or resources). In some programs, district officials and staff taught some courses independently (Springfield, IL) or co-taught courses with university faculty (Jefferson County).

### **Planning, decision making, and governance processes**

The six district-university affiliations had limited formal, shared decision-making and governance processes. Four districts had formally defined and written agreements that stipulated inter-institutional arrangements, through contracts, Memorandum of Understanding, or a competitive grant process.

None of the district-university programs incorporated an advisory committee or established a formal meeting structure for shared governance, oversight, and problem-solving.<sup>iv</sup> The more collaborative the affiliation, the more planning and decision-making processes were shared, although these were not highly structured and all six districts lacked formal shared governance.

In several sites, district and university representatives, when interviewed, talked about the "relationship" aspect of their shared work—how well they knew each other, and how they talked frequently and informally about program-related issues.

<sup>iv</sup> Springfield, IL, did begin its program development with an advisory committee, but the committee disbanded after one year at the request of its members, who asserted that their assistance was no longer needed.

### Financial and in-kind resources

In addition to foundation grant support (which typically paid for program director time and some program costs), districts and universities contributed other resources. District officials most commonly contributed human resources (specifically, bridge and program leaders for program design and operation), information and expertise on operations and procedures, space for course instruction, internship placements, and internship supervisors.

University officials commonly contributed faculty expertise in course development and instruction and internship support, credit and degree management, candidate support, and higher education resources such as libraries and career placement centers.

Sometimes university officials contributed further by forgoing potential income—by offering reduced tuition or waiving tuition altogether, or by granting course credit for district-delivered instructional experiences or credits earned at other institutions as part of the program.

In some cases, resource contributions (particularly universities') were spelled out in a contract or partnership agreement; in other cases, these contributions (particularly from districts) were added over time. Generally, the more collaborative the affiliation, the more district and university officials contributed financial and in-kind resources.

District contributions were primarily in-kind and thus more sustainable. The costs of universities' financial contributions (particularly forgone tuition) had to be weighed against the benefits as university officials evaluated sustained participation.

### Intra-organizational Relationship: Program Fit within the Districts

How the district-affiliated leadership preparation programs fit with other district functions was similarly examined in terms of goals, responsibility, decision-making processes and shared resources.

Officials in the six districts created an overarching goal and commitment to leadership preparation as integral to their district reform work, but were not always explicit generally or in connecting preparation to all core units. Specifically, superintendents' attention to leadership preparation as part of their reform agendas varied from general to explicit and focused. These commitments changed over time, particularly with superintendent turnover.

How district responsibility for leadership preparation was managed in relation to other related district functions varied, as shown in each program's location on the district's organizational structure and articulation with district leadership-related systems.

Typically, programs were placed under one of three departments: human resources (HR), curriculum and instruction, or in a stand-alone office for leadership preparation.

Programs housed in HR departments appeared to be better positioned to connect with other leadership strategies, including school leader recruitment, selection, placement, support, and evaluation than where these responsibilities were divided across multiple district departments. This location influenced, in turn, how decisions were made about the program, how graduates were supported in their post-program careers, and the resources used to enhance program experiences and sustain the program as funding ended.

### **Intra-organizational Relationships: Program Fit within the Universities**

How the district-affiliated leadership preparation programs fit with other university programs was similarly examined in terms of goals, responsibility, decision-making processes and shared resources.

As with districts, each university's program commitment varied in part by the strength of its broader commitment to local leadership preparation, from none (one university had no formal program) to extensive (with other local district partnerships).

Each university's commitment and goals were also derived from its mission. Most of the districts partnered with one public higher education institution (see Table 1). The exception was Jefferson County which branched out to partner with all four higher education institutions in its region—two public and two private.

Public education institutions made good partners for these school districts because of their comparatively lower tuition, public missions, and production of teachers and other education personnel for the region.

Most institutions also had community service in their missions, which by definition made them open to inter-institutional relationships.

For example, part of ISU's mission was for faculty to engage in "public service and outreach activities [that] complement the University's teaching and research functions." (Illinois State University, 2010) Its faculty actively sought diverse outreach opportunities, evidenced by prior collaborations with other Illinois school districts.

An extension of this community service orientation was an institutional willingness to affiliate, even when the institutions were not in close proximity. Personnel in four districts developed programs with universities that were located some distance away (25 miles for Springfield, MA, 30 miles for Providence, 75 miles for Springfield, IL, and 126 miles for St. Louis).

University officials overcame the distance primarily by rethinking ways of assigning and supporting faculty by locating the program at the district itself, rather than requiring candidates to travel to the university.

The other three districts worked with universities located in their cities—but even in these cases, some or all of the courses were offered on site in the district or their schools to improve candidates' access and connections to district work.

Within the universities, the development of a shared program mission and objectives was undertaken by the department of leadership preparation which in turn helped to integrate the program's fit with other departmental offerings.

Responsibility for the affiliated program differed in how centrally it was connected to other leadership preparation programs. Most US leadership preparation programs are within departments or programs of educational leadership in university-based graduate schools or colleges of education (Baker, Orr, & Young, 2007).

In contrast, only three of the district affiliated programs were master's degree or certification programs that were situated within departments of educational leadership at a university's school or college of education.

This arrangement enabled the departments to share program faculty with the program, (sometimes) mix candidates from multiple programs in common classes, and include the district-affiliated program in broader departmental planning, program improvement, and assessments, such as for national accreditation. Where the programs were housed in the universities determined, in part, who was responsible for decision-making, problem-solving and resource sharing.

Typically both the departments and the deans of the college of education shared in making decisions pertaining to faculty allocation, tuition, course and credit approvals, and degree requirements, because these depended upon institutional and state higher education policies. The exception was URI, which did not have a department or program for leadership preparation; resource contributions and decisions pertaining to the program were made by the school of education.

In three districts, programs were organizationally housed or connected with their universities' continuing education divisions (for credit management purposes), although they "borrowed" university faculty as instructors and program coordinators.

The continuing education divisions offered more flexibility for awarding credits and offering off-site program delivery. But, locating the program in the continuing education divisions appeared to limit the educational leadership department's broader involvement and potential benefits for its faculty, programs, and ongoing improvement work. It also complicated cost-benefit analyses of the university's resource investments because of the misalignment of faculty and credit management in different divisions.

## Challenges

The primary challenges for districts and universities to sustaining the partnerships (and thus the programs) were leadership turnover and sustaining funding.

### Turnover

During the six years since they were first funded, all six districts experienced superintendent turnover, including two districts that had four or more superintendents each during those years. In half the districts, the primary district official or staff member also changed positions, left the district, or retired during this period.

The districts with less superintendent and bridge-person turnover appeared to have had more sustained program development and implementation, with fewer changes in design and delivery and less disruption in service. The two districts with extensive superintendent turnover suspended their programs for at least a year during that period.

Universities also experienced turnover in leadership and key staff during these six years—in deans, department chairs, and faculty who were liaisons to or taught in the program.

However, the effect of these changes seemed less critical, as the pattern of working with the district had already been established. In some cases, faculty and university leadership turnover created new opportunities to reexamine courses and learning experiences.

The exception was St. Louis, where both the district and the university experienced significant leadership turnover, with the accumulated effect that the university lacked the faculty resources to offer the program under the contracted conditions.

Turnover in department chairs and deans of education limited the potential for institutions to learn from their affiliated program experiences and apply new ideas to their existing programs.

In addition, the year-to-year funding arrangements between some districts and their affiliated universities seemed to limit how much program work could inform universities' efforts to reform their other preparation programs. According to interviewed university faculty, uncertainty about funding made it difficult for them to plan in advance or to use this program development work to benefit their other programs.

### **Sustaining funding**

The foundation support was significant to these district-affiliated programs, both programmatically and organizationally, but, was short lived. Without additional funding, many district-affiliated programs struggled with continuation, with some sources of support replaceable and some organizational arrangements more sustainable than others.

Some districts or affiliated universities were able to garner additional grant funds to support program operations and the internships. Sometimes district tuition support was shifted to the candidates and the universities reviewed how much they could sustain their reduced tuition support.

University-based programs were more easily sustained because some or all of the programs could be absorbed into existing programs and departments, while district-based programs lacked such infrastructure for continuation.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

These cases offer critical lessons for districts as they undertake similar partnerships. First is that

districts should take an active role in defining their leadership preparation needs to potential university partners.

Second is that districts should develop partnership agreements, either formal or informal, that define both expectations for the program content and delivery and the roles, responsibilities and resource contributions of both partners.

Third, districts should integrate leadership preparation with other leadership expectations, programs and priorities, including recruitment and retention strategies, leadership development and supervision. Through alignment and coherence, districts can maximize the potential benefits of developing leaders that fit their local conditions and school improvement needs.

The experiences of these six districts show that district leaders have the capacity to articulate and assert their leadership needs and priorities with local universities. Becoming more active consumers, by articulating these priorities and working with local universities to change program designs, appears to be most influential and potentially sustainable.

The benefits, for districts, in articulating these priorities, however, depends upon the extent to which district leaders use these priorities internally to connect new programs to other related district units, particularly those pertaining to school leader selection, support and evaluation.

Many of the six district-affiliated programs examined here were similar to the district-university partnerships documented in previous research (Browne-Ferrigno, 2004; Goldring & Sims, 2005; Grogan & Robertson, 2002). Like these other cases, the more collaborative the relationship between district

and university, the more likely shared goals, objectives and commitments, designed roles and responsibilities, shared work, planning and decision making processes and resource contributions existed, all characteristic of effective inter-organizational relationships (Langman & McLaughlin, 1993). In these six districts, however, only some of these organizational structures were formalized.

The coupling lens (Weick, 1976) provided insight into how these programs were successful without more formalized inter- and intra-institutional structures.

The cross-case analysis showed that looser, informal district-university relationships appeared to be better suited for addressing ongoing program issues, decision making, and adapting to changing expectations and priorities with leadership turnover.

However, such informality appeared to hinder systemic input or formal program review, monitoring, and feedback. Tighter coupling arrangements appeared to be critical to facilitate communication, particularly when program leaders were not co-located, and to monitor program accomplishments and make

decisions pertaining to sustainability. Generally, the more transparent the collaboration, the more sustainable they are when faced with leadership changes and other challenges.

How the programs fit within the affiliated universities had both structural challenges and mission-related opportunities. Since most affiliated universities were public institutions with missions were consistent with program outreach, they appeared to be willing and able to be flexible as district partners for leadership preparation.

However, this “flexibility” often meant finding ways to *work around* the existing institutional structure—such as offering the program through the continuing education division—rather than *adapting* the structure.

The extent to which the universities used their program affiliation experience to rethink their approach to school leadership preparation generally seemed to be restricted by the resource contribution demands to sustain the affiliation, and the disruption caused by leadership turnover and changes in institutional direction.

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