Innovative Online Doctoral Course on the Pre-Service Exploration of the Superintendency

William T. Holmes, EdD
Assistant Professor
Educational Leadership
Department of Professional Studies
University of Wyoming
Laramie, WY

Michele A. Parker, PhD
Associate Professor
Department of Educational Leadership
Watson College of Education
University of North Carolina, Wilmington
Wilmington, NC

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to illustrate an innovative online doctoral course on the pre-service exploration of the superintendency in order to advocate for effective teaching practices in response to calls from the field. To this end, a review of literature was utilized in order to frame and illustrate the course, bringing forth key concepts, ideas, and needs in the areas of superintendent preparation, pedagogy, and the superintendency. The value of this article is two-fold: 1) to illustrate innovative online teaching practices in the preparation of school leaders, and 2) highlight through a focused review of the literature, the need for academic programs to respond to national and local trends to enhance student preparation.

Key Words

superintendency, pre-service exploration, on-line teaching practices

Introduction

In this era of educational accountability and standards, superintendents are charged with one of the most extraordinarily challenging (Bierly & Shy, 2013) and important jobs in America (CGCS Urban Indicator, 2014). They are responsible for "making visible and rapid improvements in the academic achievement" of all children (CGCS Urban Indicator, 2014, p. 1).

Educational reform involves empowering good teachers and building the capacity of quality teaching and learning in schools. It also includes uniting and steering key stakeholders (e.g., parents, teachers, administrators, school boards, business and community leaders) toward a purposeful vision. Superintendents work in highly politicized environments while serving as "collaborators, visionaries, communicators, and agents of change" (CGCS Urban Indicator, 2014**,** p. 1).

As Bierly and Shy (2013) state transformational leadership is vital to school turnarounds and research demonstrates that "leadership" was second only to classroom instruction among school-related factors that affected learning (p. 5). Great leadership requires "a broad range of skills and competencies" (p. 5).

Nationally, in the 2014 Annual Survey of School Superintendents, Finnan, McCord, Stream, Petersen, and Ellerson (2015) found 13% of respondents reporting being in their first year of the position of superintendent and 52.5% of respondents reporting being between years one and five in the position of superintendent. This national trend in the superintendency mirrors North Carolina during the 2015-2016 school year where 17 out of the 115 or 14.78% of the superintendents in the state were first time superintendents and 80 out

of the 115 superintendents or 69.6% of superintendents in the State of North Carolina will have less than five years of experience according to Jack Hoke, Executive Director, North Carolina School Superintendents' Association (personal communication, June 9, 2015). There is an overarching need to increase the pipeline of qualified superintendents.

The pipeline begins with preparing potential applicants for this critical leadership role. This article focuses on a course designed specifically for doctoral students as a pathway to the superintendency in response to the need based on national and state trends.

Relevant Literature

This literature review provides a succinct overview of preparing superintendents and pedagogy in higher education. The literature review included contributions between 2004 and 2015 from educational databases (e.g., ERIC, PsycINFO, SAGE Journals Online, Sociological Abstracts).

First, we searched for relevant peer-refereed journal articles and books using specific search queries.

Second, we analyzed the results from this search activity and identified additional sources and key researchers in this area of interest, which were in turn included in the review process. Although these criteria, for inclusion strongly guided the review process, sources were included that did not fulfill these criteria, because they were perceived as good or important examples relevant to this specific contribution.

Preparing superintendents

Bierly and Shy (2013) discuss the need for extraordinary leaders and the challenges inherent in developing strong school leaders.

They acknowledge that the number of well-prepared candidates "will be severely limited without formal systems to encourage talented individuals and create meaningful pathways for their development," p. 4). Petersen, Fusarelli, and Kowalski (2008) also recognize the need to prepare good leaders for successful educational reform efforts. They focus specifically on the preparation of superintendents as a critical and essential element despite the focus on principals in most administrator preparation programs.

Although Bierly and Shy (2013) address the preparation of principals many of the same facets apply, the combination of knowledge and skills "can only be developed through on-the-job experience, high-quality training and day-to-day mentorship. It also requires the right mindset" (p. 3).

Tripses, Hunt, and Watkins (2013) conducted a study of superintendents in Illinois seeking input on the content of superintendent preparation programs. Results from 369 respondents about the knowledge and skills that should be included in such programs are explicit instruction on finance, communication, politics, curriculum and instruction, superintendent self-care and self-awareness, applied learning of theory not applied learning vs. theory, the realities of the position, an emphasis on internship programs, faculty credibility, and the use of sitting superintendents to augment classroom content.

In particular, Kowalski and Brunner (2011) highlight the disjunction between superintendent preparation and practice in the area of communication. Specifically, (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011, p. 150), stated, "… communication skills are listed in standards for practice and routinely cited as required qualifications for superintendent vacancies yet most administrators never complete a graduate-level course in communications."

This does not speak to the need for the even more specific need for superintendents (and all administrators) for course work and training in leadership communications (Anonymous, 2012). Petersen, Fusarelli, and Kowalski (2008) surveyed novice public school superintendents from California, Missouri, North Carolina, and Ohio. Overall they felt adequately prepared yet a few novice superintendents wanted better preparation in regards to school finance, school law, and school board relations.

In light of Petersen, Fusarelli, and Kowalski (2008)'s admission that most doctoral programs in educational administration contain minimal coursework tailored for the superintendency, we need to "actively promote, monitor and support the talent pipeline" (Bierly & Shy, 2013, p. 17).

We need a "purposeful pathway" to the superintendency "for those that are interested" (Bierly & Shy, 2013, p. 8). "… promoting the opportunity to the right candidates is an essential first step in developing a more robust supply of strong leaders" (Bierly & Shy, 2013, p. 7).

A formal process for "developing and putting in place more transformational school leaders is among the clearest and most effective ways to create a higher number of exceptional schools" (Bierly & Shy, 2013, p. 4).

Courses used to prepare such leaders should incorporate experiential education such as internships and guest speakers to increase knowledge and skill acquisition and ultimately employment outcomes. "Nothing is more

important to leadership development than a rich set of real-world leadership experiences" (Bierly & Shy, 2013, p. 13).

Pedagogy

Instructional strategies for fostering motivation include teaching content worth learning, integrating goals, activities, and assessments, as well as using praise and criticism effectively (Barkley, 2010). Meanwhile, strategies for promoting active learning include promoting active transfer, and articulating learning goals.

In engaging learners, it is equally important that students are appropriately challenged (e.g., assessing starting points, self-assessment) (Barkley, 2010). According to Fink (2013) significant learning experiences should involve different kinds of learning, have a high energy level, and add content to student's "life file" (p. 7).

The tenets of significant learning (i.e., foundational knowledge, application, integration human dimension, caring, and learning to learn) in conjunction with the eight principles of good practice for experiential learning activities (e.g., intention, preparedness and planning, and reflection) can be used as the basis of course development. The importance of assessing learning outcomes is addressed by many scholars such as Bain (2004), Barkley (2010), and Fink (2013).

In particular, Fink (2013) focuses on educative assessment, which consists of forward-looking assessment, self-assessment, criteria and standards, as well as fidelity feedback (Fink, 2013). Forward-looking assessment "incorporates exercises, questions, and/or problems that create a real-life context for a given issue, problem, or decision to be addressed" (Fink, 2003, p. 13).

As Bain (2004) states, "The best teachers carefully constructed learning tasks and objectives to build confidence and to encourage, yet to give students strong challenges and a sense of accomplishment" (Bain, 2004, p. 41). This sense of accomplishment is provided via fidelity feedback. It is frequent, immediate, discriminating, and delivered with care (Fink, 2013).

In addition to being timely, relevant, learner-centered, and helping students connect to their professional practices, Lehman and Conceicao (2014) detail the use of technologies to increase presence in the online environment. They also recommend the use of teaching methods that encourage interaction, foster community, and motivate students to participate in flexible and convenient environments that allow them to control their learning process.

Best practice reveals that critical reflection coupled with applied learning, is a means of generating, deepening, and documenting student learning and course outcomes (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Purpose and Context

Given the importance and increasing need for Superintendents in North Carolina and the disconnect between professional preparation and practice particularly in Educational Administration programs Dr. Anonymous decided to build a solution.

In the summer of 2015, an elective course entitled "Pre-service Exploration of the superintendency" was offered to students. This significant learning experience has had a lasting impact (Fink, 2013). The purpose of this article is to describe the pathway to the superintendency course and to discuss the implications for effective teaching.

This course is taught at a Master's Comprehensive Public University of 13,000 students in Southeastern North Carolina. The mission of the university centers on teaching excellence, and the Quality Enhancement Plan aims to improve the quality of learning for students through applied learning.

This approach "places students in experiences requiring them to integrate theories, ideas, and skills they have learned in new contexts, thereby extending their learning" (About ETEAL, n.d., para 4). The University has an Educational Leadership doctoral program, which began in 2007, designed to prepare aspiring leaders to be informed, proactive, and reflective change agents. Doctoral students enrolled in the program take leadership, research, and business courses and are required to complete several internships as part of their core requirements (EdD, n.d.).

The Course: Pre-service Exploration of the Superintendency

A fully online elective course exploring the superintendent position from a pre-service perspective was developed and implemented utilizing standards-based content delivered with support from sitting superintendents and culminating in an applied learning application in which students engaged in a technology-driven simulation. This involved students applying for a superintendent position inclusive of online interviews and peer evaluation resulting in deep levels of impact for all those involved in the course.

Course preparation began with the utilization of the proposed ISLLC Standards (2014) and North Carolina Standards for Superintendents (2007). The integration of research and content on aspiring superintendents with the instructor's personal experience gained from superintendent academy training, the instructor's personal

experience in going through two superintendent searches, and the instructor's network of contacts in the superintendent field provided the foundation for the course.

Finally, the instructor aligned the standards and content to the university's Experiencing Transformative Education through Applied Learning (ETEAL) Student Learning Outcomes (SLOs). Through the ETEAL plan, students participate in experiences requiring Intention, Application of Knowledge, and Reflection/Evaluation of Impact.

The instructor's dual goals for the course were to:

1) provide students with the scholarly content and information necessary to understand the roles and expectations of a Superintendent, and

2) to provide students a real world understanding of the superintendent Search process from both a state and national perspective.

In order to accomplish this in the area of course content, the instructor laid out the North Carolina Standards for Superintendents and aligned course readings, guest speakers, and interactive assignments where the instructor provided both written and video feedback to each student individually.

In terms of real world application, the instructor provided opportunities for students to reflect upon their intentions as potential superintendents, to engage with state and national superintendent search firms live via WebEx, evaluate superintendent candidates from an actual superintendent search in a video case study format, engage in a superintendent search simulation and provide peer feedback to

a class peer (resume, community introduction video, Board of Education video interview, and initial District entry plan), critically reflect upon their learning and next steps in their superintendent journey, and receive an individualized Superintendent Coaching Plan for future course of action from the instructor.

Course content

Within the area of course content, the instructor utilized an 'aspiring to the superintendency' textbook titled, *Achieving Success for New and Aspiring Superintendents: A Practical Guide* by Callan and Levinson (2011) along with scholarly readings in the areas of the superintendent and student achievement, school facilities and student outcomes, the rural superintendency, superintendent tenure, and superintendent ethics. Students, additionally, reviewed the ISLLC 2008 and proposed 2014 leadership standards.

Dr. Robert McCord, Professor Emeritus, UNLV and Professor in Residence at AASA spoke to the students about the State of the superintendency at the National level and Mr. Jack Hoke, Executive Director, North Carolina School Superintendents' Association spoke to the students about the State of the superintendency at the state of North Carolina level.

Sitting superintendents from the Watson College PDS Collaborative spoke to the students about Board-Superintendent Relations and Facilities Management, and Superintendents from across the country spoke to the students about Instructional Leadership (northeast US) and Human Capital Management (western US).

Jack Hoke, executive director, North Carolina School Superintendents' Association informed students that many school districts in North Carolina were hiring earlier career

candidates and offering lower salaries in the superintendent position due to the many factors congruent with other districts nationally (educational reform movements, the graying of the superintendency) and those unique to North Carolina (state economic concerns, state educational reforms, and public pressures regarding superintendent salaries) J. Hoke (personal communication, June 9, 2015).

Over half of the class was female and half of the class was African-American. The disproportionality of males to females in the position of superintendent nationally and in North Carolina as well as the low numbers of African-American females in the position was discussed in the course.

During the interview with the superintendent from the western U.S., an African-American female superintendent, spoke directly to the concerns of these students providing both valuable insight and motivation in response to student interactivity in the course. Students reviewed case studies about ethics in the superintendent position inclusive of actual real world superintendent ethical dilemmas.

Real world application

Within the area of real world application, the instructor stressed to students inside North Carolina and outside North Carolina an understanding of the superintendent position in three distinct parts: an initial development of the superintendent position, an analysis of a superintendent search, and the application for the position of superintendent.

Initial essential understandings and development

Students began comprehensively examining the superintendency by comparing regional licensing requirements of states across the country and comparing them to North Carolina

superintendent licensing in an online licensing Wiki followed by a review of current superintendent searches in progress by search firms across the country identifying the most common themes and most essential themes necessary in a superintendent. Students engaged in two online WebEx interviews with superintendent search firms.

The first interview was with the North Carolina School Board Association who explained the process in detail within North Carolina to the students and then offered the students individualized follow-up mentoring meetings at their discretion in order to support their growth and development.

The second interview was with a regional search firm in the Pacific Northwest *Window2Leadership* and Mr. Greg McKenzie.

The students were led systematically through the application process and informed of how boards of education review applications. Program participants had access to samples for discussion and illustration.

Students reviewed actual superintendent contracts including all 115 from the State of North Carolina.

Students were taught the power of the Superintendent Entry Plan using both material from the text and examples from the field and then asked to complete an entry plan for their current district building due to their familiarity with it.

The characteristics of the guest speakers in the course are illustrated in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1

Characteristics of Superintendent Guest Speakers and Districts Represented

Superintendent Guest Speaker	Gender	Race	District Enrollment	Years in Position	Type of District
North Carolina # 1	Male	White	2054	4	Rural City
National # 1	Male	Black	6000	4	Suburban
North Carolina # 2	Male	White	9383	7	Rural County
National # 2	Female	Black	63000	1	Urban

Table 2

Characteristics of Expert Guest Speakers in the Course

Expert Guest Speaker	Gender	Race	Years in Position / Pertinent Experience
National Policy	Male	White	40
State Policy	Male	White	35
National Head Hunter	Male	White	35
State Head Hunter	Female	White	25

Video Case Study

Students were led through an actual superintendent Search gathered as part of the public record from a district in the western United States that is a part of the Council of Great City Schools making it one of the largest 100 school districts in the country in which the students reviewed applicant resumes, applicant introductory videos to the community, applicant interviews with the board of education, and board of education transcripts.

Each of students evaluated two of the five candidates and shared their similarities and differences as part of a discussion board on Blackboard.

The students then shared their findings and thoughts during the final class WebEx online session. The students used the ideas, information, and strategies gained from the case study in their final class project.

Online culminating simulation

Finally, students were given a simulation in which they applied for a position of superintendent.

Specifically, the instructor took the application process in which the class was led in during its WebEx session with Mr. Greg McKenzie and modified it for a small NC school district, asked the students to create a resume, community introductory video, and a three question interview video with one of the questions based upon available district data.

The other two questions based on content unique to the NC school district and submit on a special Discussion Board created by the College of Education Technology Support Unit.

Students utilized a rubric to help frame their work and provided blind peer review

feedback facilitated through the instructor to help support each other's learning and deepen their own processing.

The instructor provided both a community introductory video and interview video for students to provide feedback on and to utilize as a support in their own learning after the process was complete as part of his constructivist approach to the course.

The final real world application piece of the course was for the instructor to provide an individualized coaching plan to each student for possible next steps on their aspiring superintendent journey.

The technology

This online course was delivered via the Blackboard Learning Management System. The course contained both synchronous and asynchronous components.

Students interacted with the course content in the following ways: video presentations, guest speaker interviews, discussion boards, interactive reflective journals with the instructor providing both written and video feedback to students in a one-on-one manner, live WebEx sessions with guest speakers and the instructor, video discussion boards created by the College of Education Technology Support Unit so that students could post extended time video interviews for peer review and evaluation (inclusive of written and video tutorials on video creation), and instructor created models for support.

The students in class created YouTube videos of an extended length (approximately 30-35 minutes long) and were provided extensive tutorials on how to create the videos, how to create the YouTube accounts to post the

videos, and how to post/stream the videos for the most efficient distribution by the class.

The use of technology was widespread throughout all aspects of the course by both the instructor and students as illustrated in Table 3.

Table 3

Course Technology Usage

Instructor Technology Usage	Student Technology Usage
Instructor Made Content Videos	Interactive Blackboard Discussion Boards
Instructor Made Content Power Points	Blackboard Wikis
Online Journals and Readings	Online Course Content
Blackboard Discussion Boards and Wikis	WebEx Sessions Live and Recorded
Guest Speaker Video Interviews	Video Case Study
Guest Speaker Live WebEx Sessions	Online Video Creation – Superintendent
Video Case Study	Simulation Application
Instructor Video Feedback/Interactive Grading	Online Office Hours
Instructor Video Coaching/Mentoring	Email Exchange
Instructor Made Video Demonstration	Telephone and Voicemail
Online Office Hours	
Email Exchange and Announcements	
Telephone and Voicemail Interaction	

Impact of course

The impact of the course was significant to the students and the instructor. Students were highly engaged in the course and felt that the course met the needs of their learning, and the impact on students were reflected in their critical reflections *(What have you learned, what can you use, and what might you inquire about next?)* written at the end of the course as illustrated in the following comments:

- The superintendency simulation was a priceless activity. The inside view you provided the class with regarding the superintendent search was enlightening and eye-opening. I am eternally grateful for the opportunity to see the superintendent interview process from the inside. As an outgrowth [of the class] of preparing myself for the next level, I have identified a few mentors. I have begun to network with a retired Assistant Superintendent and a current Assistant Superintendent as mentors.

- This course has been so valuable to my schema of the superintendency. We discussed and engaged in meaningful, relevant, real-world learning experiences that have impacted how I view the superintendency. The learning activities in the course promoted practical, critical and creative thinking. This course has assisted me with developing personal growth goals for my leadership as superintendent. This course has afforded me the opportunity to better assess my competencies as it relates to the superintendency and has moved my learning forward.

- This course has made me realize I have some work to do ahead of me if I want to pursue a superintendentship on my terms. The most pressing task is that I must gain more experience and knowledge in curriculum and instruction. Specifically, I need more elementary experience.

- For me the most impactful part of the course is what I will take with me moving forward, which is an extensive and comprehensive look at the process

and preparation of becoming a superintendent.

- The instructor gave very meaningful feedback through the quick video clips that felt as if I was truly getting individualized attention that is not present in many classes. This has made me think about my own style of providing feedback when coaching teachers if I cannot have immediate face-to-face time with them. What I can take with me from this point forward is a tremendous amount of resources to place in my "Superintendent's Tool Box". I have been able to reflect on the holes of my own resume and look for ways to identify opportunities to increase my skills in facilities management, online learning, and principal relationships. The careful consideration of the Superintendent's entry plan made me also reflect on the current strategic planning sessions I have for this upcoming year and I have made adjustments. Thank you again for the encouraging feedback throughout this course.

- This course has provided me with the information about the steps required to become and begin my role as superintendent. I have learned how to apply for the position, transition into the new role, get organized to lead, prepare an entry plan, and work with the various stakeholders.

The impact on the instructor was within the area of applied learning and its power to both move students forward in their learning and in the instructor to see immediate benefits to instruction.

As a result of the course, one out of eight students immediately transitioned to a superintendent-focused dissertation and three out of the eight students realigned their planned educational internships to focus on alignment with the aspiring superintendent coaching plan. Fifty percent of the students in the class indicated that they plan to apply for a superintendent position upon completion of the doctorate and subsequent qualification for licensure within the State of North Carolina. In terms of instruction, the simulation as culminating activity combined with critical reflection allowed the instructor to immediately observe the learning, processing, and application of student learning from the scholarly work, interaction with sitting superintendents, interaction with practitioners in the field of superintendent development, engagement with fellow classmates, and independent reflection and internal dialogue regarding the role and work of the superintendent.

Discussion

This superintendency course described has the potential to enhance doctoral students' individual lives, their social interactions with others and their reflexivity and citizenship (Fink, 2013, p. 7). Most notably it helps students prepare for the world of work. It focuses on developing the knowledge, skills, and attitudes necessary (Fink, 2013, p. 9) for being an effective superintendent. The course incorporates 6 of the 8 principles for good practice of experiential education espoused by the National Society for Experiential Education (NSEE).

A major component of the course featured involved forward-looking assessment, in this case becoming a superintendent. The course also contained self-assessment, criteria and standards, as well as fidelity feedback (Fink, 2013). The course instructor tried to help

each student achieve as much as possible. He outlined what it meant for students to develop, to make them feel good about themselves and their abilities (Bain, 2004, p. 79). The course was designed to stimulate construction of knowledge rather than transmittal (Bain, 2004). For instance, how do you end your existing job, transition, and start your new position as superintendent. Most of the students enrolled in the course indicated that they had not been exposed to this concept of Entry Plans for the first 100 days in North Carolina.

Similar to Copeland's (2013) suggestion for administrative preparation programs in colleges and universities to focus on the superintendency in rural settings in this case we advocate establishing a superintendent pathway course, particularly one that is rich with applied learning opportunities that allow students to construct knowledge and receive quality mentoring that helps gauge their own skills/strengths relative to a clear set of criteria so they have a better sense of where they need to improve (Bierly & Shy, 2013).

As an extension a more focused graduate level preparation program offered specifically for superintendents may better prepare school leaders for this extraordinary leadership challenge and even create a niche that would encourage prospective administrators to pursue the superintendency, this includes minorities and women who are often underrepresented (Brown, 2014; Johnson, 2010) in order to promote critical consciousness and social justice (Capper, Theoharis, & Sebastian, 2006).

In general, this approach "drives a deeper understanding of critical gaps in the existing talent pool and helps build a necessary consensus around the importance of taking bold actions to address those shortfalls" (Bierly & Shy 2013, p. 13).

Summary

As an initial effort to respond to national and state needs regarding superintendent preparation, this course was designed as an elective within the educational leadership doctoral program.

This effort was highly innovative and impactful according to the students who completed the course. Now the students have the knowledge and interest necessary to weather the tenuous process of career development and position navigation so that they can find the "right" fit in order to engage in a fruitful and successful superintendent search process and initial placement as a transformational superintendent. The educational leadership program is pursuing additional opportunities for superintendent education and development as well as expansion of applied learning initiatives based upon the successes of this course.

Implications for Practice

- Communication, in particular oral communication, is an integral if not the most integral and essential component all of the roles and elements of a superintendent's position yet the vast majority of superintendent preparation programs do not require a course in communications (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011). Therefore, all school leaders and Superintendents in particular should be required to take as part of their program of study a leadership communications course with significant emphasis on oral communications.

- Superintendents can utilized entry plans to assist with the first 100 days of the position. This was shared as best practice from superintendents across the country.

- The implementation of a pre-service aspiring superintendent course designed for the unique needs of the rural superintendency (Copeland, 2013).

- Targeted recruiting efforts by university preparation programs focused on women and people of color in order to address and advocate for social justice issues/concerns regarding the disproportionality of woman and minorities in the position of Superintendent (Kowalski & Brunner, 2011) followed by quality programmatic sustainability practices in order to ensure successful matriculation from the program (advising, concentrated course work, mentoring, applied learning, focused internships, and targeted dissertations) so that the dearth of women and minorities in the role of superintendent can be systematically addressed.

- Implementation of program and curriculum development activities for specific pathways to the superintendency.

- Being more intentional/strategic in regards to educational activities such as internships, mentoring, coaching, and development of dissertation topics in order to provide for maximum engagement and cohesion towards the superintendency.

- Within the course of study provide opportunities for a structured study of self-leadership (Neck & Manz, 2013), spiritual leadership (Houston, Blankstein, & Cole, 2008; Houston &

- Sokolow, 2006), and critical-reflection (Brown, 2004) in order to ensure that aspiring superintendents are able to withstand the rigors of the crucible of the 24/7 demands of the 21st Century Superintendent position.

Author Biographies

William Holmes is an assistant professor of educational leadership in the professional studies department at the University of Wyoming. He is a former principal of a five star elementary school in the Clark County School District and vice-chairman of the Nevada Advisory Council on Parental Involvement and Family Engagement. He is a Native American scholar and practitioner primarily focused on research, teaching, and service in the areas of leadership communication; motivating language theory; preservice and initial service experiences of superintendents, principals, and assistant principals; and culturally sustaining instructional leadership. He also provides executive search, support, and consulting services to school districts and educational enterprises across the country.

Michele Parker is an associate professor at UNC Wilmington. Her doctorate is in educational research, statistics, and evaluation from the University of Virginia. In addition to her research interests, she is actively engaged in the field of educational development. E-mail: parkerma@uncw.edu

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