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# A Few Steps Forward in the Process of Looking Back: Setting Parameters for a Self-Study of Administrative and Program Development Work Over 18 Years

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*Title: A Few Steps Forward in the Process of Looking Back: Setting Parameters for a Self-Study of Administrative and Program Development Work Over 18 Years*

**Abstract:**

Most self-studies focus on an individual or several teacher educators. Although there have been self-studies undertaken by teacher education administrators, there is relatively little research available that focuses specifically on administrator's program development work in teacher education. This self-study examines one teacher education administrator's program development work over a period of 18 years and in two institutions. Data comes from entries from a professional journal/log kept during those years. A framework consisting of emergent categories and sub-categories was developed for analysis. Initial findings suggest there is a complexity of and multiple roles that are influenced by outside forces. In terms of the parameters of the study, the enormity and complexity of undertaking a long-term self-study surfaced in understanding the scope of the work, deciding on what framework to use for data analysis, allowing time and place for making personal connections and meaning, and sharing the work with others. Next steps for this study and future self-studies that cover many years of data and involve multiple roles are discussed.

**Keywords:** self-study; teacher education; administrator; research; program development

## **A Few Steps Forward in the Process of Looking Back: Setting Parameters for a Self-Study of Administrative and Program Development Work Over 18 Years**

### **Context**

I am a senior faculty member and administrator in a new Master of Education, plus initial licensure, program at a selective liberal arts mid-western college. Over the last 20 years I have led the development of three initial licensure programs in liberal arts college settings and also taught courses in them. During the last few years I have begun studying my growth as a teacher education administrator and program development leader in the context of two of these institutions and continue as I work in the third one.

The vast majority of published self-studies focus on the work of individuals or groups of teacher educators as they investigate their own teaching practices (e.g. Hamilton, 1998; Loughran & Russell, 2002). Some self-studies move beyond the individual or individuals and focus on development of programs (e.g. Kroll & LaBoskey, 1996) and a few self-studies focus on accreditation and standards and their impact on institutions and individuals (Eldridge, Hawes, & Nyary, 2006; Kosnik, 2005). These last studies, and the chapter on self-studies by administrators in the *International Handbook of Self-Study of Teaching and Teacher Education Practices* (Manke, 2004), highlight the importance of reflection on and analysis of the work of administrators. My study adds to this emerging body of literature that addresses and explores the practice of teacher education administrators and leaders of program development. Within the context of my work and study, the role of the department administrator (the chairperson) included being the leader of the development of a new teacher education program. To keep this

paper more readable I have chosen to use just the term administrator, which implies both administration and program development.

As I study the processes of leading program development, I learn more about who I am as a teacher education leader and my impact, as administrator, on the programs I lead. In developing a third program, understanding themes in my work and recognizing internal and external forces that influence me, and my work, is extremely useful. In addition to supporting my own professional development, this self-study helps bring the voice of an actual administrator in teacher education to the public arena. One value of self-study research comes from the fact it is conducted by those closest to the work, giving it an insider's perspective (Zeichner, 2007) not found in other types of educational research.

In order for this unique insider's perspective of administrative practice to be considered useful and trustworthy (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 2000) by a wider audience, the process, findings and conclusions need to be set in dialogue with other self-study research and the literature in the field of teacher education administration. "[I]n researching practice through self-study, there is a need to demonstrate scholarship by making clear that personal theories are challenged in ways that help the research (and the audience) see beyond the personal alone." (Loughran, 2007, p. 13). I prepare this work to be shared with a wider audience to check and challenge my personal theories, interpretations and frames of reference (Loughran & Northfield, 1998) and be set in dialogue with other research about teacher education leadership (Zeichner, 2007).

General literature about teacher education administrators and deans of education is sparse and focuses mostly on schools of education in large institutions with little information on administrators of programs or departments in small institutions. Most of those studies and articles were published in the 1970s and 80s and reported on demographics of administrators and

roles they play (e.g. Anderson & King, 1987), issues confronting deans and their programs (e.g. Denmark, 1983), and the health of the profession (Bush, 1987; Clifford & Guthrie, 1988; Judge, 1982). In the 1990s, writings about teacher education administrators and teacher education programs were few, with most having a reform theme (Goodlad, 1990; Valli 1992), and some focusing on the complexity of the roles played by deans (Bowen, 1995; Gardner, 1992). Recent studies look more at those complexities and the need for balancing responsibilities (Gmelch, 2002). The major work pertaining to education administrators in the last decade has been by a research team who looked at different dimensions of education leadership -- intellectual, emotional, social and moral. (Wepner, D’Onofrio, & Wilhite, 2008; Wepner, Wilhite & D’Onofrio, 2003).

The job of teacher education administrators becomes more challenging as more groups hold the teacher education profession accountable. Robbins and Schmitt (1994) reported the average tenure of an education dean is four and a half years and most deans surveyed cited “burnout” as the reason for leaving the job. More research is needed to understand issues and problems teacher education administrators face: how they prioritize what they do and why they find it difficult to stay in that position. This study begins to explore responsibilities and issues central to an administrator of a small teacher education program.

### ***Descriptions of the Colleges and the Administrator’s Roles***

The two institutions in my study, Southeast College and Midwest College, are similar in many ways. They are small (between 1,200 and 2,000 students with 20 and 50 students who finish the teacher education programs each year), undergraduate, co-educational, residential liberal arts colleges that were founded in the mid-1800s. They both had religious affiliations when they began although Southeast College has more present-day connections with its religious

roots than Midwest College. The institutions have been involved with teacher education since their inceptions but had come to a point where they wanted to drop a current teacher education program and develop a new one. The programs have between three and five full-time education faculty members and their institutions draw academically strong students.

With respect to administrative and program development demands, the teacher education programs are comparable. They have some relationship with undergraduate arts and science faculty; are strongly impacted by their respective state legislatures, boards of education, and departments of education; and went through state and/or national program approval/accreditation during the development process. Both institutions have relationships with local public K-12 schools.

The schools are also distinctive. One third of Southeast's teacher education population consists of continuing education students and it has a four-and a half-year elementary program and a four-year secondary education program with only a few specialty areas. Midwest College has all undergraduates in an advertised program of four years, offering elementary and a wide range of secondary and K-12 licensure programs.

Within these institutions the roles of administrator were similar. The administrator was the department chairperson who hired and supervised faculty and staff; represented the department within the college; managed the budget; headed up in-college recruitment for the department; oversaw and spearheaded the majority of work necessary for state and/or national accreditation; attended state teacher education meetings; worked with local and state teacher education initiatives; and developed relationships with local superintendents and principals. In addition, department chairpersons in small colleges are also full faculty members and so the college expectations of committee work, scholarship, and teaching were present. During my 15

years at Southeast College, I was chairperson for 12 years. I usually taught a full load (three courses a semester) or had one course off for administrative work. For the six years I worked at Midwest, I was chairperson and taught one course a semester (three also being a full load). In both institutions, the job of program developer resided within the administrative position, with an institutional expectation that I would lead the development and then operation of a radically different teacher education program. That work included bringing the best practice in teacher education and program development research to the process; leading the process in ways that allowed ownership by all involved; developing a strong working faculty team; creating an integrated and cohesive program; guiding the process through college, state and national approval; and leading development of policies, procedures and materials to make the program understandable and doable by all.

### **Data Sources and Design of Study**

To begin this self-study, I reread my professional journals about the development of the Education Studies Program at Southeast College (1989 through 1999) and the new teacher education program at Midwest College (2000-2006). The journals consisted of hand-written pieces ranging in length from several short paragraphs to a few pages. Because multiple ideas were contained in every dated piece, each idea was considered an entry. I wrote in the journal when I had time or when I needed to express thoughts and feelings about a situation. I often went weeks or months between entries.

My initial entry was made 3/08/89 and explained why I was beginning the journal.

The impetus for starting this log/journal came as we were driving ...last week. I couldn't sleep at any point in the drive because so many thoughts, feelings and concerns kept bubbling to the surface of my consciousness. The whole process of hiring for the education department this spring has been so time consuming and frantic that I have had



no time for reflection and analysis. This book is needed for that. I need to “force” myself to take the time to pause and think about what is going on inside me and around me. A second need further convinced me to start writing. I need to keep track of what actually happens for the next few months, to help me remember sequences, what others say and what decisions were made. I do need to type up the transition team minutes, but it is hard to do that about the search process and the politics/personalities involved in that process. A final reason I can think of now for this book is to keep track of the whole process – the creation of this new program – ongoing reflective evaluation. The evaluation will help with our development, my own growth and will provide materials for written documents [NCATE, articles] later.

On the left is my journal, on the right, the log.

The book (journal) was organized with personal, feeling entries on the left-hand side of the journal and the logistics, facts and plans of action on the right-hand side.

As I reread the journals, I noted beside each entry its subject matter (e.g., personnel issue, my writing/research, accreditation related). As I analyzed entries, groupings arose out of the data. I recorded and studied the frequency of entries for each grouping. I identified five categories into which the groupings fit and each grouping then became a sub-category. I began with general analysis of the data, describing parameters of the categories and sub-categories to understand more about what the job of teacher education administrator entails. I also began comparing numbers of entries in categories and sub-categories to learn more about what areas of my work life demanded most time and energy (or at least the most time devoted to journaling).

For the sake of brevity, I am including only a description and beginning analysis of the categories and their sub-categories.

### ***Categories and Their Sub-Categories***

Initially thirty-one groupings were named and then clustered, as sub-categories, under five categories. The criteria used in choosing which category a sub-category would reside in usually depended on the main thrust of entries within the sub-category. There is nothing definitive about where sub-categories were placed, and many could be logically placed in any of several categories. Some entries focused on describing tasks, interactions, meetings or events while others concentrated on what I was thinking or feeling about those tasks, interactions, meetings or events. There are close to a 1,000 entries, with some entries falling into multiple sub-categories. The categories are described below and then presented, with their sub-categories, in chart form (Table 1).

#### *Category I, Outside Forces*

This category has entries focused on interactions with the world outside the institution and has four sub-categories of State/Federal, Public Relations, Public Schools, and Accreditation and Approval. The category has 7.8% of the total entries with the majority residing in the sub-category of Accreditation/Approval.

#### *Category II, Institution*

The focus of this category which has 13.6% of the total entries is on interactions, issues, and questions pertaining to my work in relation to the entire college. Entries in the two largest sub-categories, Politics and Financial/Grants, look respectively, at the balancing of interests, needs, and demands involved with all other categories and money issues.

#### *Category III, Department*

This category contains entries centering on relationships among and workings of the group of people specifically responsible for the teacher education program. Its sub-categories focus on Personnel, Hiring, Tenure, and Transition. The entries of this category, 25% of the total,

highlight the excitement involved with the hiring process, disappointment when department members leave the institution, agony of asking people to leave the institution, and “ups and downs” that come with working as a team developing a new program.

#### *Category IV, Program*

The Program Category contains 14.1% of the total entries and centers on development and implementation of the new teacher education programs. The sub-category, Program Development, includes entries about conceptual ideas, policies and procedures, and philosophy; entries stem from exploration and articulation of my, and the programs’ developing philosophies. Other Program sub-categories cover a wide-range of topics - Vision, Assessment, Community Building/Collaboration, Courses, Race, and Students - all of which connect more with the program than with me personally.

#### *Category V, Me*

With the most entries (40% of the total) of any category, Category V focuses on what I was doing, thinking, and feeling about my professional life relative to me rather than in interaction with others. Sub-categories include my learning and growth as leader, teacher, and researcher and wanting and/or finding support and inspiration for that learning and growth. Sub-categories of Workload and Research/Writing have the most entries.

Workload is a many faceted sub-category, with entries focused on figuring out how to organize or prioritize the work to be done, registering times of feeling overwhelmed, and making resolutions, usually at the beginning of a semester, to bring balance between my professional and personal lives. The Research/Writing sub-category contains entries about research/writing ideas and logistics of getting something written and published.

Table 1. Groups of categories, sub-categories and numbers of journal entries (entries written between 1989 and 2006)

<u>Large category</u>	<u>Sub-category</u>	<u># of entries</u>
Outside forces	Accreditation	75 (7.8% of total entries)
	Outside forces (including state)	
	Public relations	
	Public schools	
Institution	Administrative	131 (13.6% of total entries)
	Financial/grants	
	Other departments/rest of college	
	Politics	
	Culture of the institution	
Department	Personnel	236 (24.5% of total entries)
	Hiring	
	Tenure	
	Transition	
Program	Program development	136 (14.1% of total entries)
	Philosophy	
	Vision	
	Assessment	
	Community building/collaboration	
	Courses	
	Race	
	Students	
Me	Mentor	385 (40% of total entries)
	My growth/reflection	
	My leadership	
	Support (needing)	
	Teaching	
	Trust	
	Workload	
	Outside college work	
	Research/writing	
	Self-study	
	Total number of entries	963

## **Discussion of Findings**

Many forces have an impact on the development of a teacher education program and its leader. Contending with each of these forces requires much time and energy. The categories of Outside Forces, Institution, Department, Program, and Me captured the types and range of demands, illuminating the constant pressures from groups outside and within the institution during the development process. These five categories, with their 31 sub-categories, provided a productive initial framework for analysis.

### ***What the Categories Revealed***

Organizing journal entries into categories helped describe types of work I did and with whom I interacted. Other ways of creating categories would lead to other revelations and understanding. I could focus on the types of roles I played (leader, communicator, problem-solver, mediator, curriculum developer, scholar, professor, etc.) or use the framework of intellectual, emotional, social, and moral dimensions of problem solving developed by Wepner et al. (2008) to better understand myself as an educational leader. In the future I want to return to the entries with other ways of categorizing in mind for further analysis.

Certain groups of roles and tasks claimed the most time, energy and reflection. The seven sub-categories with the most entries, Personnel, Workload, Research/Writing, Hiring, Accreditation and Approval, Program Development and Politics, had more than 60% of all entries. Each category contained at least one of these sub-categories, lending credence to the idea that primary demands of a teacher education administrator come not from one, or several groups, but from a wide variety of sources.

At both institutions, I was asked to lead the development and implementation of new, high quality programs. Although I voiced this as my highest priority, the data seem to indicate I

did not devote as much time and energy to program development as I believed. The Program category, with its eight sub-categories, only contains approximately 14% of the total entries. I wonder if a tension I reported in many Workload entries resulted from other forces, which show up in the Financial/Grants, Politics, and Accreditation and Approval sub-categories, and impeded and distracted me from what I considered my true work. Perhaps I need to incorporate these other demands and tasks into the center of my conception of program development.

This self-study work provides systematic, grounded analysis that helps me improve my practice. As I read individual entries I reflected on what I was learning, plus, as I analyzed the tallying and clumping of entries, I noted reminders, confirmations, warnings, strategies, and language to use as I lead the development of a third program.

For example, in 2003 the education program proposal was being held up in a Midwest College committee and I was feeling frustrated by the delay of having to incorporate their concerns into the document. On October 2, 2003 I wrote,

This is a critical time – we need to get that whole committee behind the proposal. I have to remember that when I took the Southeast proposal to the college’s curriculum committee, (the head of the Curriculum Committee) and I needed to do a lot of rewriting.

As I wrote that entry I realized time spent on buy-in from the rest of the college was well worth the momentary irritation. Documenting that idea and reading it again during this study reminded me to seek ways to educate and engage my present college community with the program development work I am doing now.

Another example of what I have learned comes from tallying entries. The sub-category with the most entries is Personnel. I was surprised at how much of my time was spent thinking about and acting on personnel issues. One of the lessons I learned/relearned is that no matter how rushed I feel, I need to be serious, deliberate, and thoughtful in heading the search process for

any position. Those hiring decisions, whether about a tenure track position or administrative assistant, are all critical for the smooth and successful development of a program and functioning of a team.

### ***Giving Myself Time to Revisit the Experiences***

This study helps me begin to understand and describe many different components that constitute the practice of a teacher education administrator. The realization of the enormity and complexity of undertaking a self-study covering 18 years surfaced in all parts of the work – in understanding the scope of the work, deciding on what framework to use for data analysis, allowing time and place for making personal connections and meaning, and sharing the work with others. I now realize I have to honor the story even before I start analyzing data, and in some ways, even before I set parameters. As I stated earlier, for many years I kept two sections in my journal, what I called the “journal” and the “log.” The journal, on one facing page, included the personal, emotion-filled responses to events at hand. The log included descriptions of actions taken, reminders, and logistics. As I reread and tried to categorize all of these entries, I found I needed to pause and remember people and events and I kept connecting comments, conclusions, and reactions to the work and feelings I have now. Probably because of the scope of the study (over 18 years and within two institutions), the time needed to just explore the data and let categories and patterns arise from the data was more than I had anticipated. It has taken considerable time to begin to understand the story.

When I began I did not realize that before I could make my work and analysis public, I needed to react to the process and explore the data personally. Bringing some of the data and questions to a paper session at the annual meeting of the *American Educational Research Association* in 2007 and to the *Seventh International Conference on the Self-Study of Teacher*

*Education Practices* (i.e., Castle Conference) in 2008 raised many feelings and questions. I needed to understand emotionally, in addition to cognitively, that this study encompasses the bulk of my teacher educator and administrator career, lived within two institutions and involving multiple roles. I needed to understand and acknowledge the emotions and lived experiences behind the story as I began to focus in on the interplay between self and history.

### **Significance and Next Steps**

Findings from this study impact my individual work as an administrator and researcher and may add to others' understanding of the complexities of the roles of the teacher education administrator. The results also contribute to self-study research of administrative practice and longitudinal self-studies in general.

### ***This Particular Self-Study***

Wepner et al. (2003) determined in their studies that "Education deans need to be aware of how they think so that they lead proactively rather than reactively" (p. 21). They suggest deans need time and support for leadership development that includes reflection and analysis. They also note that reflective journaling is a way to engage in such development. This self-study centers on analysis of a reflective journal. Reviewing and analyzing my own words has helped me better understand the types of work demanded of me as an administrator and why the job has been difficult much of the time. This has enabled me to prepare more consciously for and respond to the challenges in my current job.

The study also contributes to the research about the role of administrators in teacher education. Several initial themes emerged from the analysis. The process of developing programs situated within specific institutional settings in the midst of highly complex and variable educational mandates and expectations is complicated, time-intense, and demands attention to



personnel, standards, and requirements. In addition, the role of program developer is affected daily by pressures of other roles. In this analysis, actual development of goals, themes, expectations, and courses for the teacher education programs was a small part of the work involved, while other forces, from within and outside the institutions, dictated the majority of the work accomplished. This affected my responsibility and feelings towards those roles and the work itself.

This study also sets the stage for more analysis and raises many questions about how to proceed. The extent and complexity of data from the journals merits continued analysis before I begin examining additional types of data such as program development documents from each institution.

#### *Value of Critical Friends*

Having others looking critically at the data, interpretations, and process of the work is a central feature of self-study (Loughran & Northfield, 1998). At the Castle Conference in 2008, a set of critical friends listened to the personal story of the process of setting parameters, and reviewed the data, asked questions, and introduced other ways of organizing and analyzing data. They offered several possible ways to proceed with the study. For them, some of the sub-categories held more interest and power than others and suggestions about using “trust” and “support” as lenses with which to approach the study surfaced along with ideas about looking first for positives themes and trends, breaking the study down into three six-year blocks, and looking for questions that catch dilemmas in this work. These insights and questions push me to consider other possible parameters for this study. This work of critical friends also helps move any analysis from the particular of my situation toward frameworks of analysis and conclusions that might reflect more administrators’ experiences.

Another insight I gained from listening to these critical friends is that, although I worked with a team of faculty members when developing the new programs, there were many parts of my jobs I did not feel I could share with others in my department because of the confidentiality involved. Until I began this self-study and shared the process and pieces with those at the Castle Conference, national conferences and peer reviews, I lived in a reaction mode, doing the work and reflecting on it in the moment. The process of self-study is helping to sort out patterns and raise questions that can be useful to me, and others. I wonder about factors that contribute to “burnout” and what “burnout” looks and feels like. How can I tell if I am spending too much time on less important parts of my job, rather than parts I believe are most important to me and teacher education? As with teachers (Valli, & Buese, 2007), are there too many demands of teacher education at this point for any administrator to be able to do her/his job well? Perhaps, in addition to the reflection and analysis gained from journal writing, administrators need to find someone, probably outside the institution, to help with this sorting and questioning process.

#### *Other Ways to Focus the Study*

In most teacher education self-studies, researchers focus on a particular assignment, course, or pedagogical belief and action rather than the entire set of responsibilities. Thinking in a parallel fashion, would a next step for this researcher, and administrators in general, be to study particular components of their jobs (e.g. to examine how administrators use meetings to inform and obtain buy-in from constituents about reform ideas or to focus on how the hiring process impacts program development) before exploring multiple facets of their work? There are existing examples of administrative self-studies that reflect these narrower parameters, allowing researchers to look more deeply at specific practice and concepts (Manke, 2004).

The authors of the leadership studies suggest deans need six to seven years in the same institution to allow them “to have sufficient experience in their positions to be able to exercise their leadership with confidence and in a way that is compatible with the institutional context” (Wepner et al., 2003, p.16). Another possible next step in this study is to examine individual sub-categories to learn how my thinking/action in those areas stayed the same or changed over time and between institutions and how my growth as an administrator affected the emphases of demands.

I am now at a juncture in this self-study and need, in light of what I have learned so far, to rethink both long-term and intermediary goals for this study and reset its parameters. The focus could be on certain times during the 18 years (e.g. six-year blocks), specific activities (e.g. the hiring process; accreditation visits), certain roles (e.g. problem-solver, communicator), and/or could center on one of the specific sub-categories such as “trust” or “support” and explore changes over time. This study so far has illuminated a myriad of possible future directions to take. I now need to consider my next steps forward in this rewarding research.

### ***For Self-Study Work about Administrative Work in General***

Although the studies in this issue of *Studying Teacher Education* are exploring how to go “beyond the story,” perhaps in the case of teacher education administrators our place in the wider educational research context is hindered because there is not a critical mass of stories being told. If, as reported by Robbins and Schmitt in 1994, the tenure for an education dean is still four and a half years and “burnout” is the major contributor for leaving the job, perhaps even just initial writing and beginning reflection and analysis of their stories seems too much to juggle along with other demands. And if administrators do not see their position as a long-term one, then they

may steer away from administrative work as the focus of their research in favor of more long lasting, and seemingly more personally rewarding, topics.

Starting with just the story does meet some critical needs for the practitioner/researcher. Telling the story allows the writer to acknowledge the work accomplished, helps others learn about the work done, and supports oneself in a world that often seems not to value the work. Telling the story also begins the process of finding problematic areas in what the practitioner does; seeing patterns and thinking about what to keep and what to change in one's practice. Writing down one's story may support the critical reflection and analysis recommended by Wepner et al. (2003) as support for leadership development for teacher education deans.

Self-study research has taken a developmental growth path that began with most authors focusing on telling their stories as a way to explain how practice was done, to share ideas, and search for meaning within the practice. As researchers in their own studies, and the field as a whole, have become more experienced and analytical about searching for meaning, issues, and patterns, the focus has switched from how to be a teacher educator to why does this approach to practice matter (Loughran, this issue). Self-studies of administrator practice, as a whole, may also need to travel a developmental pathway, by first focusing on understanding what the story is and why the story is important to self and change in practice, and then changing the analysis to how to study the story in ways that connect it to a larger context and help generalize the learning.

These stages may not always happen in sequence and could, in some instances, go on simultaneously. Perhaps as administrators are made aware of the need for their stories to be told for their own support and improvement of practice, they also will see examples about how to move beyond telling the story and be encouraged by those within action research communities to

develop their research in ways that help bring issues within their work out into the light, situated within the larger research context, so others can examine them, too.

As I think about “going beyond story,” I am struck with the understanding that to move a self-study to reach a wider audience and contribute to the teacher education literature, the researcher needs to write the story and move beyond it plus understand and acknowledge the personal journey the research uncovers and/or highlights. A self-study focused on a semester course may involve uncovering personal blemishes or issues along with professional understanding, and time and place for that personal learning may need to be placed outside of the actual public writing/presentation. In a long-term self-study looking at growth in multiple areas over many years, the personal exploration, understanding and reconciliation of data and memories may, at first, overwhelm even the story. Time in the research cycle needs to be built in for the personal impact of understanding the story. Perhaps there is a “goes before story” that needs to be acknowledged and honored in self-study research so the important story can be told and then moved beyond.

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