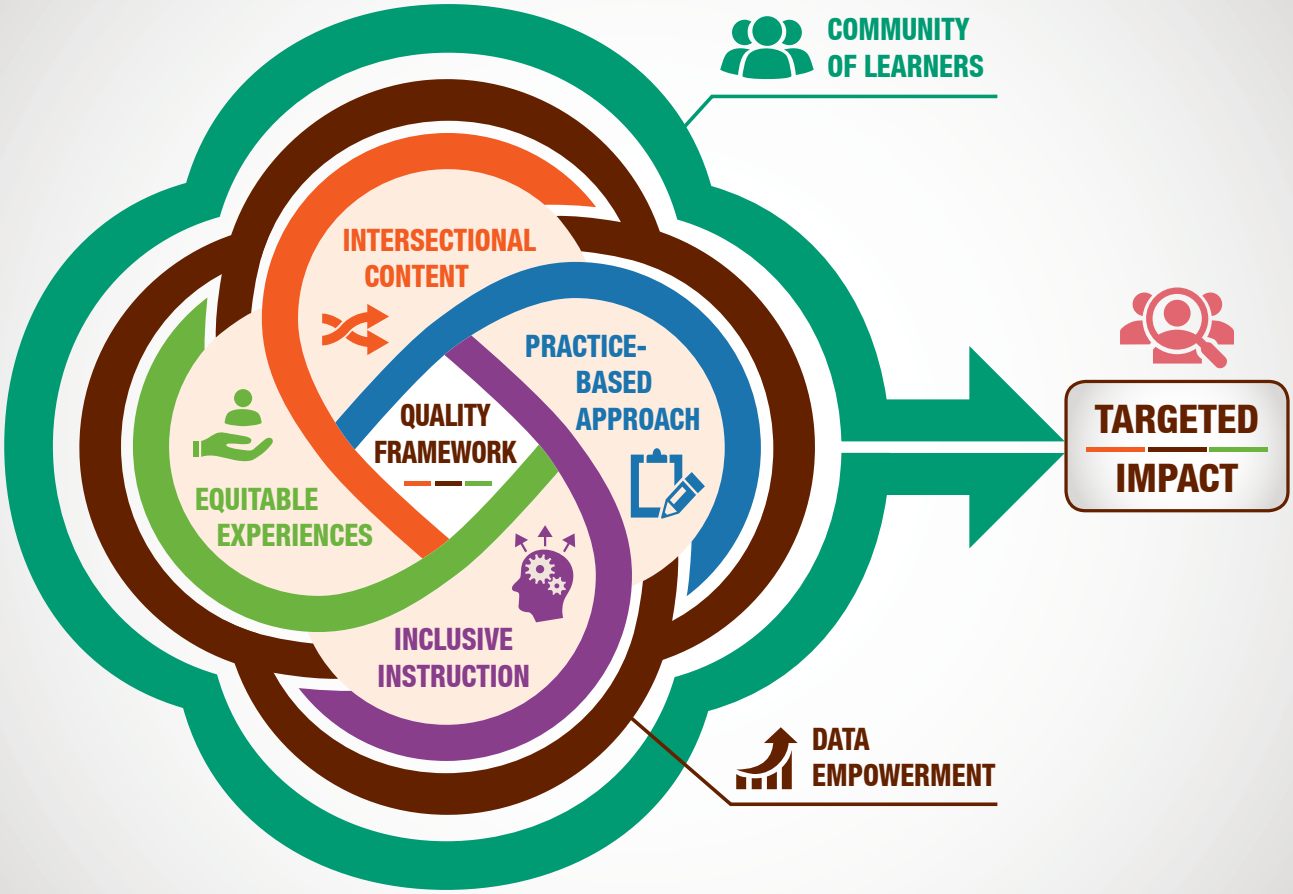
BRIEF:
Community of Learners



Branch Alliance
for Educator Diversity

Suggested Citation:

Alvarez McHatton, P., Canales, L., & Casey, E. (2022). *BranchED Framework for the Quality Preparation of Educators: A Community of Learners*. Austin, TX: Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity.

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Published by Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity,
an imprint of M.E.B. Alliance for Educator Diversity, Inc.,
7500 Rialto Blvd, Building 1, Suite 250, Austin, TX 78735

https://www.educatordiversity.org/

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Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity (BranchED)

Branch Alliance for Educator Diversity, or BranchED, is the only non-profit organization in the country dedicated to strengthening, growing, and amplifying the impact of educator preparation at Minority Serving Institutions (MSIs), with the longer-range goals of both diversifying the teaching profession and intentionally addressing critical issues of educational equity for all students. Our vision is for all students to access diverse, highly effective educators.

This goal is accomplished through application of our *Framework for the Quality Preparation of Educators*[1] (the Framework), which outlines a roadmap to create teacher preparation programs that meet the needs of our increasingly diverse student body. The Framework seeks to build equity-oriented educator preparation programs that prepare educators to reflect, respect, and reify the value of the diversity of America's PK12 school children. It offers educator preparation providers (EPPs) a common vision of what high quality, culturally sustaining educator preparation is, and a coherent and sustained approach to implementing evidence-based practices that accomplish vitally important educational equity work.

BranchED Framework for Quality Preparation of Educators

BranchED created the first and only evidence-based framework for the quality preparation of teachers which addresses diversity as a fundamental component of quality. While we assert that each institution has a unique context, we believe that certain key elements are fundamental across all programs, such as: mutually beneficial partnerships with PK-12 and community stakeholders; a coherent, content-rich curricula; culturally and linguistically relevant and sustaining pedagogy; scaffolded and authentic opportunities for practice; genuine community engagement; and equitable opportunities for students to thrive. BranchED's framework is the lens through which we support EPPs' continuous improvement and innovation efforts. It is the bedrock of all organizational activities.

The Framework was developed through a multi-state process that began in the summer of 2016 and proceeded through the end of 2018. This included a review of the literature on existing practice in teacher preparation and an array of one-on-one interviews with over 50 faculty and leaders of EPPs, representatives of advocacy organizations, teacher groups, and state program approval and licensure department personnel. Subsequent focus groups helped to clarify and strengthen the Framework and its principles. A Charette and a Critical Friends Group, both consisting of prominent thought leaders in teacher education reform within and beyond MSIs, were leveraged to garner specific feedback on the Framework and its RoadMap documents.

BranchED's Framework is unique in that it does not focus on candidate competencies nor philosophical orientation. Rather, it focuses on six design principles that high-quality educator preparation programs implement to ensure graduates are competent and confident educators able to leverage, not fear or ignore, the differences among their students. Two of these design principles (***Community of Learners*** and ***Data Empowerment***) provide the foundation for the remaining design principles: ***Practice-Based Approach***, ***Inclusive Instruction***, ***Equitable Experiences***, and ***Intersectional Content***.

Each of the design principles was based on contemporary mixed methods research in the fields of teaching and teacher education.[2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12] Each is defined in terms of the critical shift it calls EPPs to make and is operationalized by a set of indicators that help to guide continuous improvement efforts. The Framework is asset-based, formative, and designed for the purposes of continuous improvement, rather than compliance. It is not a one-size-fits-all model; rather, its' design principles serve as critical focus areas in which providers can concentrate their improvement efforts.

Design Principles

Quality educator preparation is catalyzed by a broad-based ***Community of Learners***. The Educator Preparation Provider (EPP) establishes a community of learners through leadership, shared responsibility for candidate learning, and professional collaboration.

Quality Educator preparation is ***Data Empowered***. The EPP has an active culture of inquiry, utilizing an authentic and ongoing cycle of evidence-based improvement that begins with asking thoughtful questions, moves through organizational learning and action, and ends with an evaluation of the effectiveness of actions taken.

Quality educator preparation is grounded in ***Intersectional Content***. Before program completion, candidates demonstrate mastery of content related to learners, learning, subject matter, content knowledge for teaching, pedagogical knowledge, assessment, and engagement with families and communities. Such knowledge is dynamic, constructed, and overlapping.

Quality educator preparation is experiential and incorporates a ***Practice-Based Approach***. The EPP purposefully engages candidates in direct experience of teaching (practice) and focused reflection, in order to increase knowledge, develop skills, clarify values, and develop the capacity to contribute to diverse communities.

Quality educator preparation fosters ***Inclusive Instruction***. Inclusive pedagogy minimizes or removes barriers to learning or assessment and supports the success of all learners, while ensuring that academic standards are not diminished. Such pedagogy includes the integration of culturally and linguistically sustaining practices, social and emotional learning, cognitive science, and trauma informed care.

Quality educator preparation ensures ***Equitable Experiences*** for all candidates. The EPP provides a multi-layered, holistic system of candidate-specific research-based supports, just-in-time interventions, and enrichment experiences that are informed by data and identification of candidate-specific needs. These academic and social supports are regularly provided and actively monitored to determine whether activities are effective in meeting candidates' needs and enabling their achievement.

Quality educator preparation achieves ***Targeted Impact***. The EPP demonstrates the overall impact and value of its preparation program on its candidates and graduates such that they are competent and confident in their ability to bring about positive academic gains for PK-12 students, especially students of color and low-income students.

Introduction to the Brief

Overview of the Brief

This brief is one in a series in which we revisit each of the design principles to ensure continued relevance to quality educator preparation and provide additional information on each based on a review of the literature. In this brief we highlight the design principle titled: ***Community of Learners***, as defined by BranchED. We believe quality educator preparation is catalyzed by a broad-based Community of Learners comprised of teacher educators within and beyond colleges and schools of education and the institution, PK-12 and other community members, and workforce development personnel. We begin by providing an overview of what encompasses a community of learners based on the literature. Next, is an examination of each of the indicators that are integral to this design principle followed by a description of how one EPP embeds the constructs of Community of Learners into its practices.

Intended Users

This brief is intended for EPP leaders and teacher educators, whom we define as individuals who play a role in the preparation of teacher candidates by providing instruction or guidance. Teacher educators may hold roles such as: Teacher Education faculty and Arts and Sciences faculty employed by a university, site coordinators, coaches/clinical instructors, PK-12 school-based teachers (e.g., mentor, coordinating teacher), and PK-12 administrators. PK-12 educators may find this brief applicable to their own practice.

Community of Learners

Ron Blonder[13] defines a community of learners as "a group of people who share values and beliefs and who actively engage in learning from one another—learners from teachers, teachers from learners, and learners from learners (para. 1)." It is predicated by the notion that learning environments in which there is active and intentional construction of knowledge by teachers and students foster a sense of belonging and a willingness to take risks and learn from mistakes. A community of learners is made possible when the curriculum and associated applied experiences are designed to maximize coherence through vertical and horizonal alignment and ensure purposeful intellectual engagement among faculty and peers. Research suggests a community of learners can serve to enhance academic performance and student progression and may lead to higher student engagement, greater respect for diversity, higher intrinsic motivation, and increased learning.[14, 15]

Pedagogically, a community of learners is contrary to Paulo Freire's banking concept of education in which learners are empty vessels waiting to be filled by the teacher,[16] nor is it about achieving parity between balance and control. Rather, in a community of learners, students learn as they collaborate with others in activities with "purposes connected explicitly with the history and current practices of the community (p. 211)."[17] In a community of learners, learning is inquiry based with a goal of deepening understanding, and instruction attends to the individual strengths and needs of community members.

Community, defined

Community in a community of learners refers to the social context of faculty and students and their learning environments and may exist in brick-and-mortar structures as well as virtual environments. As noted by Bickford and Wright, "A community has the power to motivate its members to exceptional performance (para. 5)."[18] They go on to state that while many forms of community can be found, a real community "exists only when its members interact in a meaningful way that deepens their understanding of each other and leads to learning (para. 5)."

Membership in a community of learners

Across all settings, a community of learners is a collaborative learning group in which expertise is shared, participants' roles and functions have "dynamic and penetrable boundaries (p. 62),"[19] and learning occurs in a social context. Indeed, existing research posits that we learn best in community.[20, 21] The composition of the members in a community of learners varies depending on the goal. For example, within an EPP, you can have a community of learners comprised of teacher candidates and teacher educators focused on developing a deep understanding of content, pedagogy, child development, positive learning environments, inclusive instruction, and family engagement. Similarly, within and beyond the college and institution, teacher educators, administrators, state and national accreditors, professional organizations, and other stakeholders may comprise a community of learners focused on improving educator preparation on a larger scale to positively impact PK-12 outcomes. Ultimately, the success of a community of learners is based on nurturing the community aspect, ensuring fidelity in implementation of an effective community of learners, and humility in recognition that we all can learn from each other.

Indicators of a Community of Learners

Preparation of a high-quality educator preparation program requires a Community of Learners comprised of key stakeholders within and beyond the EPP. The figure below details the indicators associated with an effective Community of Learners.

Leadership	EPP leaders have the authority and autonomy to make decisions about key elements of the EPP's operations.
Shared Responsibility	The EPP builds long-term, trust-based relationships with arts and sciences faculty members, PK-12 partners, community-based organizations, local businesses, and other groups for the purposes of building a collective vision and fostering a sense of joint ownership and shared responsibility for candidate learning.
Professional Collaboration	The EPP establishes clear agreements with internal and external stakeholders on expectations, roles, and responsibilities and creates frequent opportunities to engage in high-quality dialogue focused on identifying common challenges, analyzing relevant data, and testing out solutions to strengthen the quality and effectiveness of the preparation program.
Organizational Learning	Educators seek out, generate, and apply high-quality research and/or best practices to teaching practice, course revision, and program and curriculum development on a regular basis.
Collegiality and Collectivism	The EPP's professional learning structure and expectations promote collaboration and collegiality to improve candidate performance and program effectiveness.
Growth Mindset	Educators embrace a growth mindset, believing that one's most basic abilities can be developed through dedication and hard work; intelligence and talent are just the starting point.
Collective Efficacy	EPPs along with internal and external stakeholders believe in their ability to collectively positively impact PK-12 learning through the preparation of high quality equity minded educators.

Leadership

Decision-making is a centerpiece of leadership in any context. Therefore, its importance in EPPs cannot be overemphasized. Often, however, the degree of effectiveness of leadership in such programs is affected by systemic issues. These issues include the decision-making limitations placed upon leaders within EPPs because of hierarchical and other bureaucratic processes that make decision-making delayed, if not difficult.

Against this background, we posit that to enhance EPPs that reflect and sustain the design principle of a community of learners, leadership must possess and utilize autonomy and authority in key decision-making processes related to their programs' development and successes. This requires EPP leaders to be cognizant of their institution's strategic vision and priorities and be able to align EPP needs and priorities to that vision and communicate that effectively within and beyond their college. Further, EPP leaders must leverage internal and external stakeholders as essential contributors to program quality and continuous improvement efforts.

Shared Responsibility

Related to leadership autonomy and authority, community engaged EPPs are marked by shared responsibility among stakeholders. Faculty from beyond the college of education provide instruction on content, assessment, and child development. PK-12 partners support the bridging of theory to practice through clinical experiences. Community settings provide opportunities for candidates to see and engage with children, youth, and families in authentic settings. Therefore, EPPs that exemplify and operationalize the design principle of community of learners must, by necessity, include shared responsibility by all constituents of the program community and its partners beyond the institution. This requires intentionally creating avenues for everyone to engage in collaborative decisions regarding the direction, culture, and outcomes of the programs.[22, 23]

Professional Collaboration

A culture of professional collaboration is enhanced by the two preceding indicators. Importantly, a culture with shared responsibility is facilitated by, and facilitates, professional collaboration that enhances the organizational culture and program identity of EPPs. Professional collaboration, then, is central to the principle of a community of learners and necessary modus operandi of a community-engaged EPP.

Whether it is the value of inquiry communities or critical friends groups,[24, 25] professional collaboration is critical to the identification of dilemmas of practice, the facilitation of thought partnerships, and the fostering of professional insights and actions that will enable teacher educators' professional development. The outcomes of effective collaboration are often greater than what could have been produced working alone.[26]

Organizational Learning

Peter Senge describes learning organizations as:

> *"organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together (p. 3).*[27]

EPPs are uniquely situated as part of the higher education infrastructure. This positioning enables a constant focus on teaching and learning and ongoing innovations to enhance both. Unsurprisingly, therefore, learning is endemic to EPPs. However, too often learning is relegated to candidates in the role of students. The design principle of community of learners emphasizes that learning is a community-wide experience, not just reserved for a sub-group.

Consequently, we encourage the creation and sustenance of a culture of learning as an organizational imperative and value. This means that administrators, faculty, and community stakeholders spend time in continuous learning about teaching and learning, particularly as relevant to people who are minoritized and the ways EPPs may better meet the related needs.

Collegiality & Collectivism

The community engaged EPP, by its very nature, is predicated on both a rich culture of collegiality and a fierce commitment to collectivism. Education is not an individual domain of life. Notably, EPPs benefit most from a strong culture of both collegiality and collectivism at every stage of the educator preparation process.

Collegiality extends beyond being cordial. It encompasses collaborative interaction and taking responsibility as a collective for the work at hand. EPP design must include intentional built-in opportunities for candidates to work collaboratively. For those supporting candidate learning and development, engagement in relationships that focus on individual success as well as collective success of candidates and the effectiveness of the program is essential. Collectivism -- an important value in many cultures that have been minoritized -- enhances the well-being for both individual candidates and the culture of EPPs.[28]

Growth Mindset

Community-engaged EPPs will admit many qualified and capable candidates, but they also must ensure that they engender a community of learners who take an inquiry stance[29] and who are constantly focused on growth. This growth mindset among educators and students will ensure that hard work and dedication facilitate learning and growth.[30] A growth mindset will also enable a shift from the interconnected and related toxic cultures of grades-obsession and grade inflation[31] to cultures that value and celebrate growth over time. In the case of the latter, the goal is a twin culture of learning and growth -- not merely grades and individuals' supposed ranks among other candidates.

Therefore, a growth mindset[32] that is program-wide will aptly complement other indicators of the design principle of a community of learners. It will facilitate an important shift among individual candidates, but it will also shift the often competitive and alienating culture of some educational contexts (like EPPs) towards being more humanizing and growth-centered, not merely grade-centered. The former is stifling and limiting. The latter enables various ways of being, teaching, and learning that focus on educator candidates as human beings, developing practitioners, and critical agents in the future of good quality education.

Collective efficacy

Albert Bandura defined collective efficacy as *"a group's shared belief in its conjoint capability to organize and execute the courses of action required to produce given levels of attainment (p.477)."* [33] Collective efficacy is a major contributor to organizational culture and has been found to strongly and positively impact student achievement.[34] We propose that in addition to impacting student achievement both at the PK-12 level and in higher education, collective efficacy may foster an asset-based, appreciative inquiry approach to program development and improvement as well as strengthening partnerships.

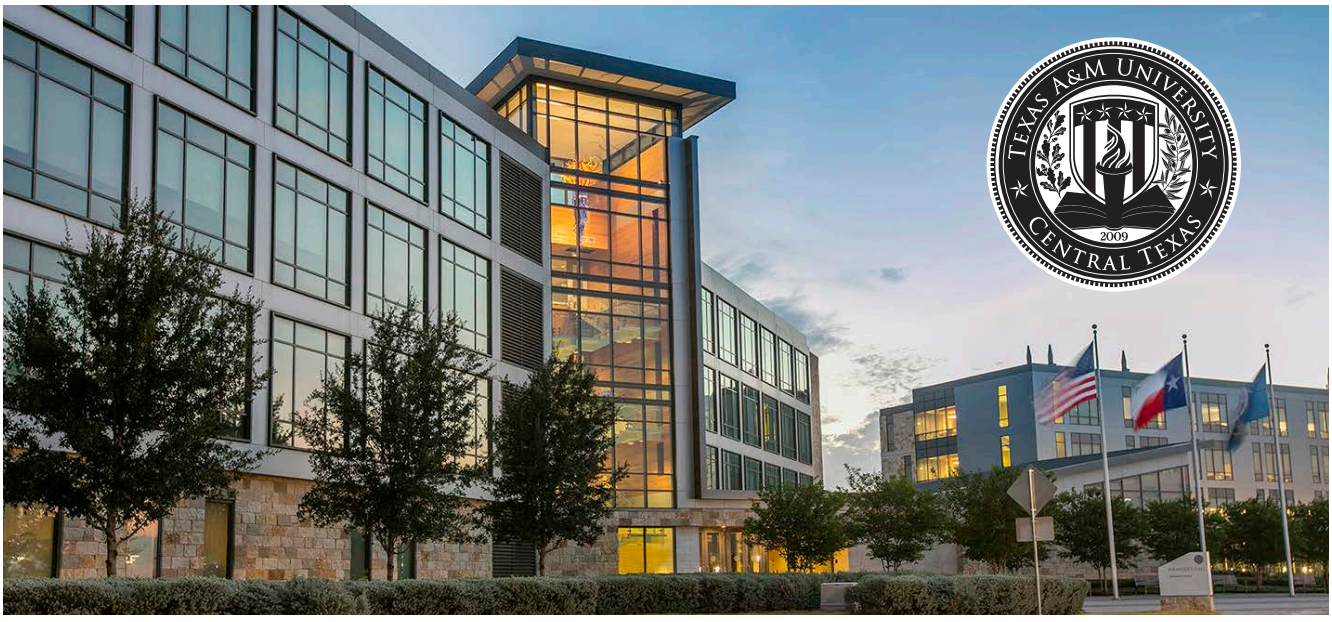
A community of learners facilitates development of collective efficacy through an inquiry stance. Characteristics of an inquiry stance consists of shared analysis of teacher candidate performance, faculty teaching competency, shared goal setting, opportunities for continuous improvement through descriptive feedback, individual and organizational learning, and a collegial environment.[35] Evidence of collective impact reinforces collective efficacy and influences the learning and working environments we create.

What it Looks Like in Practice: Texas A&M University - Central Texas

A Case Study in the First Person

Texas A&M University Central Texas (TAMUCT), a Hispanic Serving Institution, was established as a part of The Texas A&M University System in 2009 as a "public, upper-level university offering baccalaureate and graduate degrees".[36] Our College of Education and Human Development (CEHD) academic programs include the Bachelor of Science, Bachelor of Applied Arts and Sciences, Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT), Master of Education (MEd), Master of Science (MS), and Specialist in School Psychology (SSP) degrees.

Our college recently joined BranchED's National Transformation Center in which select EPPs and their respective partners progress through an intensive three-year transformation journey aimed at producing highly



effective, diverse, equity focused teachers that can maximize the learning, well-being, and achievement of PK-12 students. Rooted in the BranchED Quality Framework, this transformation journey promotes a critical shift in the way EPPs engage with key stakeholders within and beyond the EPP. In other words, rather than isolated efforts, EPPs that participate in the Transformation Center establish a community of learners that is centered on shared responsibility, professional collaboration, and collective efficacy in preparation of teacher candidates for their future roles as teachers.

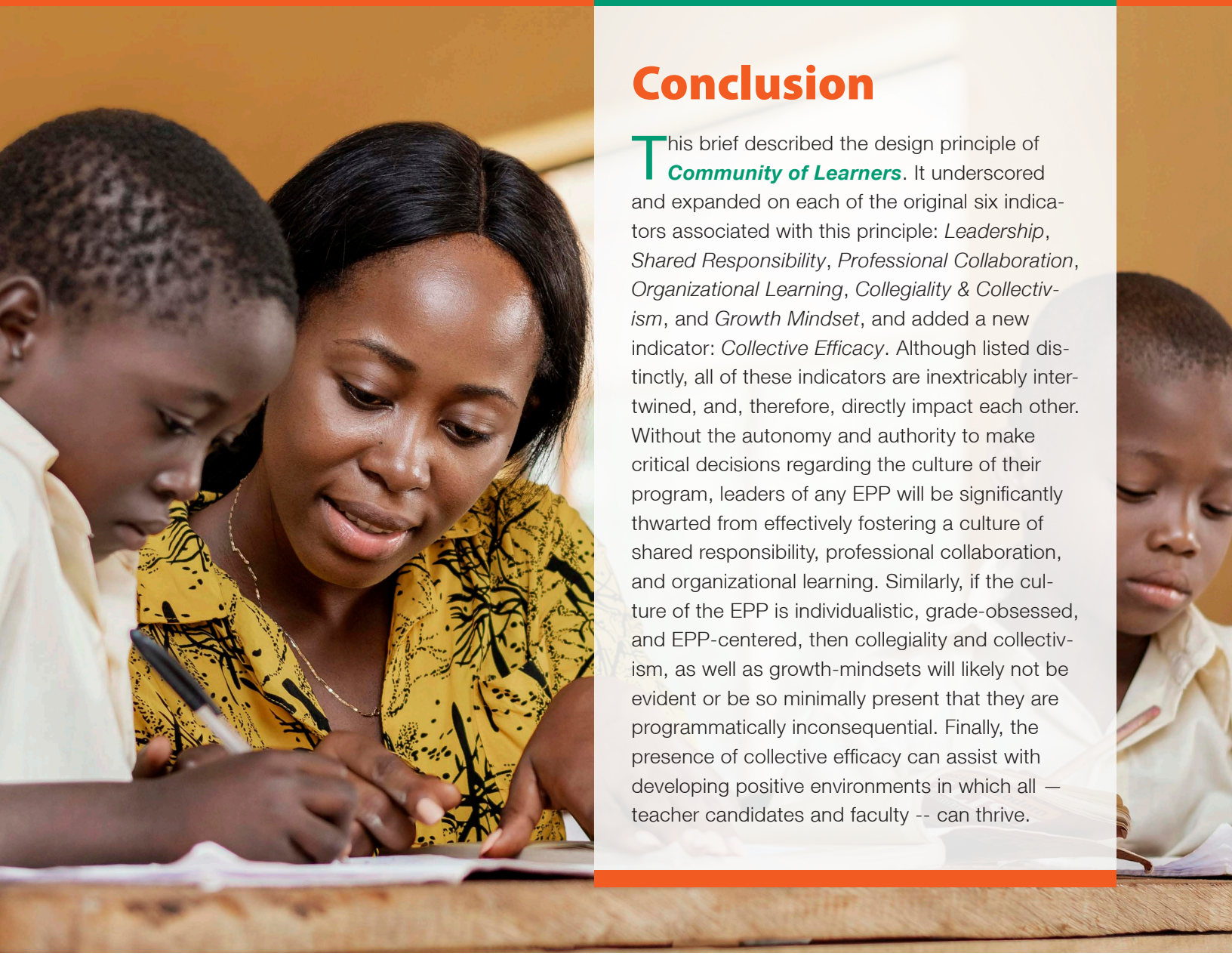
Our EPP has made great strides in building a strong community of engaged learners. Three years ago, there was limited engagement between faculty in Curriculum and Instruction and faculty in Arts and Sciences. Furthermore, our district partnerships lacked stability. COVID-19 complicated the situation as everyone remained isolated and focused on their own agendas. Understanding that engaging with district partners is essential in supporting teacher candidates, we began making changes within the EPP.

First, to provide a sense of community and support, we decided to place preservice teachers into cohorts early in their coursework. Additionally, we enhanced our focus on pre-practicum experiences for students approaching their clinical teaching with every pre-practicum student being observed twice by program faculty. These observations revealed inconsistencies in student experiences with some students observing a classroom for 60 hours without any meaningful engagement and others engaging in teaching and collaboration with their cooperating teacher. Our learnings from these observations led to critical conversations with district partners. In these meetings, centered around professional collaboration and collegiality, we, along with our partners, discussed expectations, roles, and responsibilities of all stakeholders during clinical partnership. As part of this collaborative action, a year-long residency was developed with opportunities for candidates to substitute for the district on Mondays and Fridays. Our first pilot cohort is underway, and data are being gathered to identify areas that may need to be modified to ensure clinical teachers and their cooperating teachers are supported throughout the process.

Our Traveling Roadshow, in which we held three events across three areas of central Texas where approximately 60 superintendents met with key stakeholders and engaged in critical conversations to identify common challenges, was another significant innovation that advanced shared responsibility between our EPP and district partners. With the goal to determine district needs and enhance partnerships, we held three events across three areas of central Texas Through these conversations, we acknowledged and accepted our partners' needs and responded by setting up an Alternative Certification Program to address the short-term needs of the district. Likewise, curricular changes are underway to develop a Bachelor of Science in Education 7-12 to provide more support to candidates seeking certification. Although our Strategic Partners Education Advisory Council (SPEAC) met a couple of times each year, there were no opportunities to share common challenges. The Traveling Roadshow provided the opportunity for our district partners to experience shared governance with vulnerability and transparency that allowed for all stakeholders to better understand the challenges each faced.

Finally, to encourage a community of learners within our teacher candidates and their mentor teachers, a Mentoring Academy was developed. All cooperating teachers attended a four-hour professional development session hosted on campus to build a collective vision, foster a sense of joint ownership, and promote a better understanding of shared responsibility for candidate learning. All mentors are now prepared in a direct coaching model to enhance candidates' experiences and learning opportunities in their placements.

The biggest impact of this work thus far is the development of a cohort model to block candidates into courses with peers. The collaboration made possible through this community of learners has supported candidates through every phase of the program. The traveling roadshow is another bright spot that will continue as a component of ongoing collaborative efforts with district partners.



Conclusion

This brief described the design principle of ***Community of Learners***. It underscored and expanded on each of the original six indicators associated with this principle: *Leadership*, *Shared Responsibility*, *Professional Collaboration*, *Organizational Learning*, *Collegiality & Collectivism*, and *Growth Mindset*, and added a new indicator: *Collective Efficacy*. Although listed distinctly, all of these indicators are inextricably intertwined, and, therefore, directly impact each other. Without the autonomy and authority to make critical decisions regarding the culture of their program, leaders of any EPP will be significantly thwarted from effectively fostering a culture of shared responsibility, professional collaboration, and organizational learning. Similarly, if the culture of the EPP is individualistic, grade-obsessed, and EPP-centered, then collegiality and collectivism, as well as growth-mindsets will likely not be evident or be so minimally present that they are programmatically inconsequential. Finally, the presence of collective efficacy can assist with developing positive environments in which all — teacher candidates and faculty -- can thrive.

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