

The executive-in-residence and school–university partnerships: a case study

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper considers boundary spanning in relation to the creation of an executive-in-residence position at a midwestern comprehensive university and the resulting impact on school–university partnerships.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is a case study. The researchers chronicle several current and ongoing school–university partnerships.

Findings – The creation of an executive-in-residence position is a unique approach to creating and strengthening school–university partnerships. This paper provides information and creates awareness of the potential benefits of using this approach within the context of the reader.

Originality/value – With increasing expectations and decreasing resources, it is as important now as ever to encourage the development of school–university partnerships. This paper is focused on practitioners with enough detail for replication.

Keywords Executive-in-residence, School–university partnerships, Boundary spanning

Paper type Case study

Background of the executive-in-residence position

The role of executive-in-residence

Colleges of Business have been using retired executives to bridge the gap between theory and practice for decades. Academics provide learning experiences that keep students engaged, but risk creating course assignments that lack “real-world credibility” (Achenreiner & Hein, 2010). The role of Executive-in-Residence (EiR) is often envisioned as a connection to careers in the field and is currently found in more than half of the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (Johnston, 2014).

Meanwhile, Colleges of Education continue to receive criticism for being “out of touch” with what is currently happening in schools (Ferlazzo, 2022). Preservice teachers and in-service teacher graduate students need exposure to “real world” perspectives and a primary reason to utilize an EiR is to bring real-world experiences into the classroom. Just as importantly, based on broad experiences and vast knowledge, the EiR is expected to maximize the opportunity to build and strengthen relationships between the university, the college, and practitioners in the field (Johnston, 2014). In other words, the role of EiR is not an honorary title; it implies more meaningful engagement than simply a guest speaker. Typical EiR activities include delivering lectures and workshops, mentoring future leaders, and serving on advisory boards and as external evaluators on committees (Rangarajan, Lottman, & Earp, 2022).

Overview of the job description and expectations

Newly created during the spring 2022 semester, the position of Executive-in-Residence at Eastern Kentucky University (EKU) has helped build new and strengthened existing School–University Partnerships throughout EKU’s service region. The initial job description stated the

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EiR would spend 60% of their time creating and fostering relationships with P-12 schools in Kentucky; 20% of their time serving as an advisor to the President and the President's Cabinet; 10% of their time teaching education-related courses; and 10% of their time collaborating with staff in the Office of the President to coordinate and execute special projects and other duties as assigned.

Conceptual framework

Essential 8 – boundary spanning

In the Second Edition of the National Association for Professional Development Schools (NAPDS) Nine Essentials, Essential 8 – Boundary Spanning was revised (NAPDS, 2021). The Original Essential 8 used “work by college/university faculty and P-12 faculty in formal roles across institutional settings.” The revision states “a PDS creates space for, advocates for and supports college/university and P-12 faculty to operate in well-defined, boundary spanning roles that transcend institutional settings” (Cosenza *et al.*, 2023). Boundary spanning in school-university partnerships is the active engagement of educators to bridge gaps between institutional and local contexts to enhance educational outcomes for students. This concept emphasizes shared leadership and collaboration to create mutually beneficial relationships that support student learning and well-being (Skinner, 2024).

Effective boundary spanners facilitate communication and the exchange of resources while recognizing and addressing differing priorities and perspectives. They navigate complex organizational structures and norms, fostering trust and mutual understanding among partners. Boundary spanners build capacity in schools and universities by leveraging educational assets and aligning them with student achievement goals, resulting in innovative responses to educational challenges (Burns & Badiali, 2020). Ultimately, boundary spanners help cultivate environments where students thrive.

Research highlights that successful partnerships are characterized by shared leadership, clear communication, and a commitment to equity. School-university partnerships that engage in boundary spanning often see improved student engagement, increased access to resources, and enhanced community support. Additionally, these partnerships can lead to innovative practices and policies that address systemic challenges in education, such as inequity and under-resourced schools.

Strengthening school-university partnerships

Many of these new initiatives are designed to improve teacher and leader preparation, while also helping with recruitment and retention. The positive impacts of these School-University Partnership initiatives span service region schools and districts, as well as undergraduate and graduate programs. Some specific examples include a new Teaching and Learning Dual Credit Pathway designed to increase options for our most under-represented school and district populations, an alternative certification process designed to tailor our initial certification bachelor's degree to specifically meet the needs of currently employed paraeducators in our service region, and a principal certification cohort program that uses a hybrid instructional model featuring both online, asynchronous as well as in-person sessions delivered on site at schools in our partner districts. Additionally, through our School-University Partnerships we have created more meaningful pre-service clinical experiences and delivered more professional development to our student teachers by inviting more of our school and district partners to share their expertise. We have leveraged the business community partner relationships to create new scholarship opportunities for students in our graduate programs. Lastly, our School-University Partnerships work together to develop and advocate for similar legislative agendas to improve the educational experience for students of all ages throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky.

EKU offers a corporate partnership agreement with school districts that reduces tuition fees for their employees taking courses. The agreement requires approval of the local

school board. When the EiR began at ECU, the university's focus was on partners outside of education and of the more than 40 total partners, only two were school districts. Leveraging personal relationships with current superintendents and knowledge of what makes school board members happy, the EiR helped the university add more than 50 new partners. Recently, the university reached a goal of 100 partners, with more than half being school district partners.

Another early opportunity was with the education program's dual credit teaching pathway, which had four partner school districts and fewer than 30 students enrolled. The EiR suggested the department offer the courses online, asynchronously to eliminate the need for teachers at each participating high school. Based on my superintendent experience, the EiR knew staffing such courses was often a barrier. The department chair took a chance by enrolling these dual credit students into the new, fully online elementary education program. This offering permitted schools with only one or two interested students to participate by combining students from multiple schools into a single, online section. These changes added more than 100 new students.

The growth in corporate partnerships and dual credit teaching pathway students were a direct result of the EiR's ability to leverage experience and professional relationships to strengthen school-university partnerships.

Methodology

Case study methodology is qualitative research that facilitates an in-depth exploration of complex phenomena within their real-life contexts. Case study methodology allows researchers to investigate intricate interactions and processes often overlooked by quantitative methods. This method is particularly valuable in fields such as social sciences, education, and business (Yin, 2021). By utilizing multiple sources of evidence such as interviews, observations, and document analysis, case studies provide a rich, holistic understanding of the subject matter (Stake, 2020).

The primary benefit of case studies is their ability to focus on the specifics of a particular situation. In this case study, the researchers examine the role of the EiR at Eastern Kentucky University and several examples of school-university partnerships. Another key advantage of case study methodology is its flexibility, enabling researchers to adapt their focus to new and emerging insights. However, challenges include concerns over generalizability and potential researcher bias (Bryman, 2021). In the end, case studies contribute significantly to practical applications by illuminating specific instances that can inform deeper understanding and influence practice.

Findings and analysis

MAEd principal certification cohort program

Like many universities today, ECU offers an online, asynchronous Master's of Arts in Education principal certification program. The program consists of 10 courses, each three credit hours. The courses include Introduction to Education Administration and Leadership Research; School Leadership and Instructional Supervisions; Finance and Support Services in Schools; School Law and Ethics in School Leadership; Community Relations and Educational Advocacy; Leadership for Safe Schools; Assessment for Learning; Human Resources Leadership; Learning for At-Risk Students; and Principal Internship. For most students, the degree program is completed in five semesters. Enrollment trends for the program were in decline, with less than 20 new students enrolling each semester. Due to these declines and based on superintendent and other school-university partner feedback delivered specifically to the EiR, a hybrid cohort version of the Master's of Arts in Education principal certification program was created. Reasons for this request included the need to form an internal "grow your own" leadership initiative in multiple districts through their university partnership, increasing

leadership candidates' professional networks to include professors and colleagues with successful careers, and collaboration with leadership candidates from other school districts. The new hybrid cohort program consisted of the same 10 courses, and like the online, asynchronous version, was designed to be completed in five semesters. The only aspect of the hybrid cohort program that made it different was the addition of three in-person meetings scheduled each semester. The meetings lasted three hours and were scheduled after school hours from 4:30–7:30 p.m. Meeting topics were strategically planned to engage candidates in collaborative learning activities and target leadership trends identified by the EiR and school district partner administrators, and through conversations at educational cooperative meetings, district visits, and current research. There was initial conversation around six-hour sessions held during the school day, but with the current shortage of substitute teachers in many Kentucky school districts, this format was quickly abandoned.

In addition to the traditional benefits of a cohort program, which include building lasting relationships with peer students, these students are offered the opportunity to dive deeper into their curriculum, complete a broader range of field and clinical experiences, and develop their leadership skills through a series of experiential learning assignments. The hybrid cohort program embraces research-proven experiential learning activities and program faculty create new experiential learning activities to incorporate into their classrooms, resulting in their students being more prepared to effectively lead in the role of school principal (Darling-Hammond, Wechsler, Levin, & Tozer, 2022).

A shining example partnership: Jessamine County Public Schools and ECU

Jessamine County school and district leaders noted a distinct difference among candidates completing the hybrid cohort program versus those who only completed asynchronous coursework. These candidates showed strengths in problem-solving, collaboration, communication, and presentation skills. Former cohort member and current assistant principal Jessica Blair remarked:

As a current administrator in this cohort model, I could connect my assignments directly to my daily job tasks. The information in the classes clearly supported my role, and the in-person model allowed more in-depth discussions and a time to ask questions and practice my knowledge in a risk-free scenario. The connections made helped me become more involved in my district and collaborate with various people in multiple roles. The knowledge I gained made me a stronger administrator and helped me become a greater advocate for my school, teachers, and students.

Additionally, Ms. Blair's supervisor, Mr. Andrew Pickerill, noted the cohort program's value by recognizing her professional growth through relevant course assignments:

The hybrid principal program at ECU helped our Curriculum Resource Administrator, Jess Blair grow in her capacity as a school administrator. When I compare my experience in a principal preparation program, I see that the assignments and tasks required of Ms. Blair were always aligned with what is expected of a school administrator. Often a class assignment matched up perfectly with what we as a school were planning to carry out in our school. I do not doubt that her involvement in ECU's principal program helped accelerate her progress toward becoming an excellent school administrator.

In Jessamine County, seven of the ECU Hybrid Leadership Cohort members have been hired as successful administrators over the last three years, representing 67% of administrative positions hired overall.

Many describe the school principal as one of the most demanding positions in a school district. With increasing expectations and diminishing resources, it is as important now as ever before that future school leaders receive the necessary knowledge, skills, and experiences as part of their professional preparation. Specifically, through the Jessamine County Partnership with the EiR, local and state leadership needs have been incorporated into the key assessments of each course.

Previous criticisms of principal preparation programs include the lack of depth in field and clinical experience opportunities, the lack of connections between course assignments and real-world situations, and a curriculum that fails to provide analysis of the leadership skills required to address the complex situations found in today's schools. The result is a pool of "certified" principal applicants, with only a few being "qualified" to effectively lead a school (Davis, Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, & Meyerson, 2005). District and school administrators in Jessamine County have been active partners in the clinical experiences of these candidates. One of the innovative initiatives designed to mutually benefit EKU and the Jessamine County partnership is tailoring clinical experiences to drive the strategic planning needs for the district. A specific result from a recent Jessamine County Cohort has been the intentional redesign of the Special Education Tier I instructional program.

Option six – expedited route to certification

In Kentucky, the Education Professional Standards Board (EPSB) is the government agency responsible for promulgating regulations and providing oversight for the teaching profession. As such, they have created several alternative routes for teacher and administrator certification. One of those is Option Six which allows a teacher enrolled in a specific principal certification program to be eligible for hire once they have been officially admitted to the program and enrolled in classes. Offering Option Six is one thing that helps to differentiate our principal certification program from others offered in the state. For our school and district partners, this option expands the applicant pool. In our first principal certification cohort, nine of the 27 students were Option Six participants, serving in the role of principal or assistant principal, before having the first course in the program. Compared to the online, asynchronous certification program, the cohort program provides additional layers of support, which are so critical during the first few months in a school leadership role. Having personal access to experienced school and district leaders serving as faculty in the program and developing relationships with peer members in the cohort helped to support the development of each of these new school leaders. Here are a few remarks from those students who were serving in the role of principal or assistant principal while taking classes in the EKU Principal Certification Cohort. Student A:

I have personally benefited from the exposure to networking that being enrolled in the EKU Cohort has provided me. I have had the opportunity to network with local and district personnel in regard to topics related to human resources, principalship, administration, and superintendency. This experience has also expanded my networking with classmates from local and surrounding districts. I have built relationships with others and know that I can reach out to collaborate with anyone of them. I am thankful for the opportunity that EKU has provided me!

Student B:

As a current administrator in this cohort model, I was able to connect my assignments directly to my daily job tasks. The information in the classes clearly supported my role, and the in-person model allowed more in-depth discussions and a time to ask questions and practice my knowledge in a risk-free scenario. The connections made helped me become more involved in my district and collaborate with various people in multiple roles. The knowledge I gained made me a stronger administrator and helped me become a greater advocate for my school, teachers, and students.

Student C:

I have learned many valuable lessons throughout this journey. I have learned principles and attributes of leadership styles. I have practiced applying my knowledge into human resources, assessment, Kentucky law, school safety and so on. I have been able to take what I am learning to lead the charge of reinventing my school.

Student D:

My work in this master's program also allowed me to view much of the work I do through a different lens. It's also forced me to speak and work with different people in a variety of positions from

bookkeepers, Family Resource Center (FRC) directors, and finance personnel. While I had been acquainted with many people before, being able to learn more about what they do daily is eye opening and valuable as I continue principal positions. These relationships and overall knowledge of different things that happen behind the scenes in a school will certainly be carried with me as I continue in my position currently and in the future.

Student E:

I am thankful for the relationships built and the networking that was made possible by the cohort. I talk regularly with several members from the cohort that are out of my own district about many different things. The in-person meetings allowed us to pick things up from other districts that could be beneficial within our own and for those relationships to be built. I am very thankful to have gone through this program and would recommend it to anyone!

Student F:

One of the benefits of this cohort model was that the assignments aligned perfectly with my role as an assistant principal. Personally, what I really loved about this model were the in-person sessions. They gave me a chance to connect with other principals and leaders, building relationships that have been very valuable. The in-person sessions also provided me with the amazing opportunity to learn from and chat with experts in the field of educational leadership.

Student G:

Throughout the time working in this leadership cohort, I have engaged in a number of experiences and assignments that have developed my capacity to take on leadership roles. The assignments included in this portfolio have each built my understanding and ability to meet the standards expected of educational leaders. For the duration of this program, tasks have been thoughtfully assigned, completed, discussed, and reflected upon and each of these steps have prepared me to become a more effective leader. The variety of assignments included in this portfolio showcase concrete experiences such as interviews with educational stakeholders, in-depth research and analysis from presentation of assessment data to researching how to best support at-risk populations of students, as well as hypothetical reflection scenarios like threat assessments and case studies.

Student H:

The hybrid cohort model has provided me with an effective blend of practical knowledge, leadership theory, and authentic advice that I have been able to immediately put into practice in my new administrative role. My advisor and my other instructors have offered support both online and face-to-face during our in-person sessions, and I have developed relationships with current and future administrators across the state as we have completed the courses together. These relationships with mentors and peers represent the key advantage this cohort model offers over other programs. It has been an invaluable experience that I could not recommend more highly.

Additional examples of school-university partnerships

“Experience excellence” superintendent of the year awards. The Executive-in-Residence fills the Board of Directors position for two educational cooperatives in Kentucky: the Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative (CKEC) and the Southeast-South Central Educational Cooperative (SESC). The remaining directors are superintendents from member districts. CKEC is based in Lexington, Kentucky and has 32-member school districts. SESC is based in London, Kentucky and has 26-member school districts. Continuing its commitment to education throughout the Commonwealth of Kentucky and building on its rich, foundational history of preparing teachers and educational leaders, the Dean of the College of Education and Applied Human Sciences (CEAHS) at Eastern Kentucky University created the “Experience Excellence” Superintendents of the Year. The awards are given in conjunction with the CKEC and SESC. These partnerships demonstrate ECU’s ongoing relationship with the state’s educational cooperatives, further defining their shared mission to transform the Commonwealth through educational practice, investment, and leadership. The ECU

“Experience Excellence” Superintendent of the Year award employed a competitive process to identify Kentucky public school district superintendents with particularly notable talent and vision in the areas of instructional leadership, communication, professionalism, and community involvement. Award recipients demonstrate through their practices and daily leadership that knowledge advances student success; they incorporate innovative thinking and bold action into their vision; and their transformational leadership style embraces guiding values of inclusion and trust. The award winners are announced at regularly scheduled CKEC and SESC board meetings. Additionally, the winning superintendents were again recognized during their local board of education meeting. And finally, each winning superintendent was given the opportunity to provide a \$1000 scholarship for one of their graduating seniors.

“Leadership matters” and “tomorrow’s leaders” scholarships. Through a collaborative effort with several Kentucky business partners, the “Leadership Matters” and “Tomorrow’s Leaders” scholarships were created. The Department of Teaching, Learning, and Educational Leadership in the CEAHHS at ECU awards 10 scholarships annually. Through a generous gift to encourage promising educators to prepare for a career in district-level leadership, leading corporate partners and service providers in Kentucky with a passion to serve their education-based clients, have established one-time scholarships with a value of \$500 per award. The scholarships are created to reduce tuition costs for required coursework in the ECU Superintendent of Schools certification program.

Student teacher “professional development days”. One area where the EiR has made the most impact is with the Office of Professional Education Services (PES). During the last semester of their initial certification program, pre-service teachers complete student teaching. These placements last for 16 weeks and include Professional Development (PD) days at the beginning and the end. Before hiring the EiR, these days were often used for academic advising, lesson planning, and program completion paperwork. More recently, these days have been used for professional development in the areas of resume preparation, interviewing skills, mock interviews, and school-university partnership job fairs. Instead of relying on ECU staff from the Office of Advising and Career Services, the PES worked with the EiR to bring current school and district leaders to campus to participate in panel sessions. The panel sessions provided a mutually beneficial opportunity for both the student teachers and the school and district leaders. The student teachers benefitted from an authentic question and answer period, and the school and district leaders were able to begin relationships with potential applicants for current and future teacher vacancies. When it came time for PES to recruit mock interview participants, the school-university partnerships nurtured and maintained by the EiR resulted in having more interested mock interview participants that slots needed. In addition to great numbers, the newest school-university partnerships ensured broad geographic, gender, and ethnic representation, as well as representation from urban and rural partners, large and small partners, and partners serving preschool, elementary, middle, and high school students. There are several examples of student teachers being offered job contracts on-the-spot during the mock interviews.

Implications for practice

Benefits to professionals in the field, faculty members, and students

It is common to use current school superintendents as guest speakers in principal certification programs. Hearing the expectations that current superintendents have for principals is one effective way to be prepared as a principal. The EiR used personal and professional relationships to secure guest speakers. After serving as a guest speaker, one school superintendent said, “it’s important for those of us who have had the opportunity to lead other educators to spend time with our future leaders to ensure that they are as prepared as possible to lead the next generation of educators.” Another said, “the enthusiasm displayed by the future school leaders rejuvenated me professionally. It is encouraging to know that I might have an impact on future generations.”

Equally important is having other district leaders serve as guest speakers. The EiR chose speakers with high credibility, expertise in the area, and passion for investing in future leaders. A local district Communications Director remarked, “sharing the importance of communications and messaging gave me the opportunity to create a connection between the work I do and the leaders I will hopefully work with in the future.” After presenting to the same group of students, an assistant superintendent said, “preparing for the presentation helped me to reflect on where we are in our school system in relation to the topic.” Candidates overwhelmingly appreciate the positive impact of these guest speakers through the in-person sessions. Students value this access to candid perspectives on the profession, including “the relevant and realistic opportunities preparing me for situations I may encounter as a leader.” Another student appreciates “the opportunity to talk with my peers and listen to guest speakers during our in-person sessions.”

Frustrations in the role

For many business and industry leaders moving into the role of EiR, the frustrations they face in their new position are common among faculty and include grading student assignments, poor student attendance, and addressing the issue when students arrive in class poorly prepared for the daily lesson (Wendel, 1981). Additional frustrations are the often-discussed tensions between academics and practitioners including differences in pedagogical techniques, developing an effective lesson, answering student questions, knowledge sharing, and collaboration (Ancira, Rangarajan, & Shields, 2022; Sher-Hadar & Bar Giora, 2019).

With experience as adjunct faculty, the EiR was rarely frustrated by these issues. Instead, the EiR defines the greatest challenge as meeting the expectations of public-school partners. School district leaders’ expectations of the EiR are based on prior performances as a school and district leader, yet in the role as EiR, there is minimal opportunity to enact change in current practices and rarely an opportunity to lead and influence the implementation of new programs and initiatives, often resulting in dissatisfaction and disappointment from our partners. For example, school and district leaders often comment on the disconnect between our preservice teacher curriculum and what happens daily in their classrooms. They fail to realize the accreditation and certification requirements we are required to meet, mandating us to teach John Dewey and Madeline Hunter instead of the latest instructional strategy.

Conclusion

There are numerous studies supporting the use of an EiR for the mutual benefit of students and institutions in colleges of business (Lewis & McKinzie, 2022; Maginnis & Weidman, 2017), yet no specific research has explored whether long-term advantages of appointing retired school superintendents to this position in a College of Education exist. With tenures of school superintendents getting shorter and shorter, involving them as EiR in colleges of education can be a way to capture their knowledge, skills, and experience for the benefit of our next generation of teachers and students. Creating an Executive-in-Residence (EiR) role offers an opportunity for significant advancement in bridging the gap between academic theory and practical application in P-16 education. Through the creation and maintenance of strong school-university partnerships, the EiR will address the need for real-world perspectives in educator training, thus enhancing the relevance of teacher and school leader preparation programs. Effective EiR will be transformative change agents, facilitating access to resources, leveraging innovative pathways for student engagement and achievement, and ensuring that institutions of higher education and public school districts remain responsive to the evolving needs of students and schools within school-university partnerships.

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