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The Journey to a Program for International Teacher Leaders: Vision, Dilemmas & Success!

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Abstract

The purpose of this program review is to examine one university's attempt to reach an international market of educators through the development of a master's degree program designed for K-12 international educators. The program serves as a successful example for other organizations attempting to internationalize their education programs. This study outlines the program growth and development including (1) course design and delivery, (2) lessons learned, (3) program assessment results, and (4) overall impact of the program. Examples of challenges and student experiences highlight the descriptive piece; adding a personal lens on the program development, growing pains, and ultimately the final framework as it applies today. The findings provide several key takeaways. First, the importance of building relationships with those people embedded in the field. Second, the need to understand the lives of international teachers and what is important to them. Finally, how navigating the waters of the university bureaucracy can provide multiple challenges; however, few that cannot be overcome with perseverance and passion. New perspectives were gained as this newly created university program served as a catalyst for infusing global awareness and cultural competencies while increasing enrollment in both graduate and international students.

Keywords: international educators, international students, education programs, vision.



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Introduction

In the past decade, higher education has increasingly focused on the topic of internationalization, but these efforts are only as strong as the initiatives (Marmolejo, 2010). Internationalizing a campus must move beyond theory and into the practices, programs and lives of the people involved. This article seeks to shed light on challenges and triumphs endured as two professors worked together to create a master's degree program for teacher leaders in international schools.

Recognizing the untapped potential to reach graduate students beyond the U.S. borders, University of Northern Iowa (UNI) professors Leigh Martin and Timothy Gilson combined their areas of expertise in International Education and School Leadership to develop a Master's degree program specifically designed for teacher leaders in American International Schools. At a university historically rich with international initiatives, they leveraged their international connections in an effort to reach a new global audience. This initiative is now being delivered in over ten different countries, just over two years since it launched. But how did it come about?

Leveraging Connections

The international student teaching program at the University of Northern Iowa (UNI) is widespread; placing between 30-50 student-teachers overseas each semester. As an international student teaching coordinator, and former international teacher, Martin was commonly asked by international school administrators if UNI could provide a master's degree program for teachers living and working abroad. Martin, initially an adjunct instructor and lacking experience at the university, felt unqualified to tackle such an initiative and therefore responded with an honest answer; "No, this university does not offer such a program". Two years later, with increased experience and confidence, Martin began formulating ideas for how such a program could be created as well as markets of teachers it could reach. The College of Education Dean and Department Heads supported the concept, but had other ideas for implementation. It was soon passed into the hands of tenured professors who later visited international sites and discussed possibilities. However what became of that proposal was an online master's degree program that has flourished in the local university community, but neglected to address the unique needs and timelines of international teachers.

Years passed and the same question persisted regarding the untapped niche. In an effort to determine if these international school leaders truly would turn to UNI for professional development opportunities, Martin and Gilson, both on tenure track and eager to make their mark, proposed a workshop for International School Administrators in conjunction with the annual UNI Overseas Recruiting Fair. This recruiting fair, held annually since 1976, attracts administrators from over 120 International Schools. Although the purpose for coming to Iowa in the middle of February is to hire new teachers for the upcoming school year, they also had expressed a need for recertification credits while on a university campus. Why not work through Gilson's Department of Educational Leadership, the largest preparation program for aspiring administrators in the state, to take on such a venture? The workshop was a success and relationships were further established. After three years of offering this workshop, Martin and Gilson determined that there was sufficient evidence to suggest that there was indeed a need and interest for further

developing the concept of a UNI master's degree program for international teachers, and thus, the process began.

One of the most vital contributions to this future program came through simple dialogue with current international administrators. What was most important to them was graduate work designed around the concept of leadership; specifically, teacher-leadership. While most educators living and working in the U.S. are aware of the explosion of the teacher-leadership concept, the understanding that this explosion was being felt overseas was uncharted ground for both Martin and Gilson.

Key to the understanding around the importance of teacher-leadership is the takeaway that empowering teacher leaders can have a tremendous impact on student achievement. Put quite simply, when school administrators build leadership capacity in those around them they are more able to focus their attention on what really matters - helping teachers become better at their craft; thus improving student achievement! Lee (as cited in Terry, 2000) reminds leaders that,

Empowerment means that school authorities provide teachers with the authority to make decisions that have, in traditional systems, been made for them, a time and a place to work and plan together during the school day, and a voice in efforts to deepen their knowledge and improve their teaching. The most effective leaders are those whose teachers have ownership in the mission of the school and a vital interest in its effectiveness. (p. 5)

In these leaders' schools, a shift in leadership occurs. When that shift occurs, teachers true focus becomes their classroom and student achievement. The dialogue with international administrators reminded Martin and Gilson that whether or not teacher leaders ever desire to become school administrators is irrelevant. When they are empowered and embrace this change in their focus, students ultimately are the winners.

University Goals

The University of Northern Iowa is a comprehensive, liberal arts university that serves approximately 13,000 students. While the university is best known for their preparation of PK-12 classroom teachers, the Graduate College provides over 50 different programs and serves approximately 1800 students in any given year. While these numbers are admirable, the graduate student enrollment trend had shown no marketable growth during the last 20 years. Coupled with lower than desired international graduate students (129 in 2013), UNI had several goals designed around graduate student growth as well as international student growth. It became abundantly clear that Martin and Gilson's program plan had interest from key stakeholders, and a need from university administration.

What are International Schools?

International Schools are private schools offering U.S. or internationally-based curriculum to host country and expatriate students. These schools are established for the purpose of providing a U.S. based curriculum to American's living abroad and are often attended by a diverse population of students including the host country national students, diplomatic dependents, and children of international business personnel. International Schools are typically accredited by U.S. accrediting agencies such as the Middle States Association or the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC). They are highly competitive and often boast their student achievement scores, low student to teacher

ratios, advanced integrated technologies and graduate admission into the finest universities in the world.

The language of instruction is English and a majority of the teachers are trained in the U.S. or other English speaking countries such as Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom. This being the case, there are limited reputable online-offerings for these teachers to gain advanced degrees without repatriating to their home country. Although there are a handful of universities that some international schools support for online programs, the options are limited especially in the area of Teacher Leadership.

One issue that international schools wrestle with is teacher turnover. As many international teachers have a desire to see various locations in the world, even five to six years can be considered a long tenure at an individual school. Some administrators expressed the idea that perhaps teachers would extend their contracts in a school if they were involved in a master's degree program, and perhaps were offered opportunities to be involved in leadership efforts. Since each international school is basically a district in itself, teacher leadership skills and knowledge are important as school administration often rely on their teachers to be involved in decision making that is commonly left to the central office or school board in the U.S.

After investigating other master's degree programs offered abroad and talking with current teachers and administrators in these international school settings, it became clear that there was indeed a need and UNI had the resources and connections to make it happen. What transpired has been the development of what is now called the UNI master's degree in Teacher Leadership for International Educators.

Program Development

As is typical and necessary for any quality program, this one also needed a framework to drive the teaching and learning. This framework would provide a road map for students and also keep all coursework and assignments linked to a common goal - the development of future teacher leaders. The framework Martin and Gilson chose came from the Teacher Leader Model Standards (2011). These standards, or Domains, are based on the work of ten national organizations along with many other agencies and practitioners. From their collaborative efforts came the seven Domains that have since been widely accepted and utilized for the development of teacher leaders (Appendix A).

While providing a solid framework, the Domains, by themselves, do not make a program successful. Key to providing a program for the unique audience of international teachers is a sequence of courses that are relevant, engaging, and based around 21st century trends in education. Thus came the development of a sequence of courses best suited to match the high expectations and rigorous teaching environment of international school settings (Appendix B).

Along with the development of this course sequence, a concerted effort was made to tie all courses and assignments back to the Domains found within the Teacher Leader Model Standards. Perhaps even more important in this process has been the effort to help all professors involved understand the unique settings in which the students are teaching. This has been accomplished by diligent work with all professors involved in teaching the coursework; and has certainly not come without its challenges.

Most challenging throughout this process has been the tightrope walk necessary with program coordinators Martin and Gilson as they navigate the waters of cross-departmental work and the academic freedom of professors. With just four of the thirteen courses completely new for this program, the remaining nine had to be carefully adjusted from existing courses to contain both aspects of the Teacher Leader Model Standards as well as provide relevance for teachers in countries and continents worldwide. As both Martin and Gilson were initially non-tenured faculty members, this process was daunting to say the least. However, what was quickly discovered was the dedication of a group of faculty from several departments who were very interested in meeting the unique context of this program's students. While there have been some bumps in this journey, as well as unplanned adjustments made to courses, Martin and Gilson now feel as though the stage has been set for a sequence of courses taught by passionate and experienced faculty that better understand the international settings these teachers work in.

Delivery and Course Design

Students desiring a graduate degree in teacher leadership are, quite simply, aspiring school leaders. Whether they choose to take this degree and apply it towards a principalship certification can be determined at a later date. What is hoped is that they all gain the characteristics, attributes, and framework for leading in various capacities. To help make this happen, this program's structure and course make-up mirrors that of UNI's Iowa-based graduate students seeking principalship certification. However, as was briefly mentioned previously, several courses with little application for our international students have been replaced by those that are. Although many international schools are held to U.S. standards due to U.S. accreditation requirements, in reality courses specific to state laws and codes have little application in these international schools. Additionally, private international schools have limited, if any, students with severe special needs. This being the case, new courses have been created and infused into the program with greater significance to international teacher leaders such as: Teaching in Multilingual Contexts; Culturally Relevant Teaching and Leading; and Teacher Leadership in International Schools.

Like many distance education programs, both synchronous and asynchronous delivery are incorporated. What has likely been one of the biggest surprises with the development of this program has been the fact that while asynchronous courses allow a much greater level of flexibility for students, synchronous course sessions have been the predominate "favorite" based on student feedback. One would assume that when the "home" university sits anywhere from 4,000 to 6,000 miles away, a sense of isolation would be the norm. Synchronous course sessions serve as one mechanism towards helping to reduce this feeling of isolation. Another advantage with this type of delivery stems from the interactions that students can have with each other. When a student in Brazil has the opportunity to talk with one in India, their own knowledge and experiences are challenged and expanded. A smiling face on the computer screen is far more interactive than a message or post in an inbox! Their own professional network expands through every course and that network can have a tremendous impact when searching for future positions.

While both types of delivery meet various learning styles and have advantages and disadvantages, Martin and Gilson believe strongly that the preparation of leaders necessitates active, timely and immediate feedback, as well as practice in oral communication. All of this is much easier and more authentic in a synchronous platform model. As Hrastinski's (2008) study showed, ".....synchronous communication was more like

talking compared with asynchronous communication. It seemed more acceptable to exchange social support and discuss less complex issues” (p. 54). Effective oral communication is a basic prerequisite for leadership. Courses delivered in a synchronous manner require the practice and development of this necessary skill.

Lessons Learned

Working closely with individuals not only across campus but also across the globe proved to be challenging, educational, and at times, comical. Of perhaps greatest importance, however, have been the rewards gained by so many people involved in the process!

Time zones

Although it sounds quite impressive to boast the vast array of nationalities in students and the number of countries and continents where they are living, this also means working some rather unusual hours! Martin and Gilson learned quickly that students appreciated having a synchronous aspect to most courses where they could all be online together, talking through the Adobe Connect video conference tool that UNI utilizes. These synchronous sessions allow students to feel more connected to one another and with the professor. However, when students and professors are cast as far and wide as the U.S. to Dubai to Seoul and the hours of 8:00 am to 3:00 pm are usually off limits for teachers, that leaves very few waking hours left in the day. Add to that the fact that in some countries the work week is Sunday through Thursday and for others it is Monday through Friday, plus managing a variety of holidays and breaks that are not prevalent on most U.S. calendars; coordinating time zones and work schedules has been a far more elaborate detail than was ever anticipated.

Travel

When students enroll in a master’s degree program in the U.S., it can be inferred, or even expressed, that this is not a time in a student’s life when one should engage in extensive travel plans as most professors will be less than forgiving if a planned vacation is the reason for missing class or an assignment. However, travel is sacred for international teachers. Many international teachers are living daily in an environment that is trying, chaotic, and while exhilarating on many levels, it is also unmistakably not their homeland and can leave them exhausted and anxious for a “get-away”. Therefore, when a three day weekend arises, or a week long break, it is not uncommon for international teachers to jet-set on international trips that most U.S. students may take once in a lifetime. While it may be hard to explain to professors that they need to account for this in their syllabus, we have learned that limiting the opportunity for international teachers to travel is often a non-negotiable and travel will win out if they have to choose. That being said, the quality of work these students produce has been astounding, in spite of what could mistakenly appear to be misaligned priorities.

Excuses

“The dog ate my homework” mantra takes on a whole new meaning when listening to the reasons why international students may miss synchronous sessions or turn in a late assignment. Although professor’s skepticism has often led to required confirmation regarding the validity of these ‘excuses’, the realities of international teachers is far different than life in middle America, and therefore, their ‘excuses’ have been found to be valid and

need to be honored. A few examples include: “I need to make a border run to renew my visa and the van only goes once a month (during our class time)”; or “massive demonstrations against the President are set to begin at the same time as class, I am not sure I will be able to safely get to my computer”. Other reasons include street violence, extended power outages, government imposed curfews, a battery of violent attacks, illness and more. As each rationale is shared, program professors gain greater insights into the life of many of these international teachers and better understand not only the students that they teach but the circumstances in which they are living and working. The most commonly heard praise of this program as the first two cohorts were graduating was with respect to the on-going flexibility and compassion for their circumstances. Martin and Gilson have learned that there is very little room for hard and fast, unbending rules with international teachers. Many who choose this lifestyle are quite free spirited in nature and demand a more flexible program to match.

Cross Campus Involvement and Challenges

Working as program coordinators for the first time in their tenure as university faculty, Martin and Gilson were surprised at the complexity of higher education. Simply staying ahead of class expectations, research, and service is in itself a full time expectation. The planning and program coordination of something as uncharted as this international teacher leader program was, to put it mildly, daunting!

Never before had there been a need to work almost daily with the Office of Admissions, the Graduate College, the Registrar’s Office, and handle such complexities as the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) waivers, transcript equivalencies and apostilled documents. The job of program coordination requires the oversight of many responsibilities. Likely none are as important as making sure that all students are progressing successfully through the myriad of systems and offices that are setup to monitor that progress.

As three cohorts of students have now graduated from this program, the importance of these necessary, but still daunting, responsibilities have clearly been identified. With the fourth cohort now in their final year of the program, and a fifth site-based cohort beginning at Singapore American School in January of 2016, these challenging expectations have become far more manageable.

Program Assessment

Assessment of this program has taken shape both formally and informally. A mid-program survey was sent to all students in the first two cohorts with questions addressing the convenience for international educators, and the academic rigor and relevance of the content. Of those who responded to the survey (n=18) there was one hundred percent agreement that the program either met or exceeded expectations with regard to convenience. Furthermore, eighty nine percent felt the program was academically rigorous and seventy eight percent found the content to meet or exceed their expectations regarding internationally relevant content. The opened ended comments at the end of the survey gave insights with detailed descriptions of great appreciation for professor flexibility and well as a desire for professors to better understand the context of international schools. These results were taken into consideration during the formation of subsequent cohorts and steps were taken in hopes of making content more relevant.

Although Martin had spent significant time at international schools, it was determined that both Martin and Gilson should visit an international school campus in an effort to build rapport with students and understand the context of their work day. Thus, together they visited one campus where many students worked. Since this program has commenced, Martin has moved her office to an international location and works remotely from the university, while Gilson meets with all professors on campus prior to teaching their first international course in an effort to create a clearer picture of the cohort and their unique settings. A document was created with biographical information on all cohort members, including a description of where they are from and the countries where they have taught. This document is circulated to all professors for better understanding of the global nature of the cohort. Additionally, professors are encouraged to consider the US-centric aspect of any textbooks that they choose to use and be conscientious of the audience. Martin and Gilson hope to create opportunities for more professors to visit international school sites in the near future to further enhance the relevance of their teachings.

Students were also asked to provide feedback at the completion of the program. The responses at the end placed far greater emphasis on satisfaction with content, pacing, rigor and relationships developed not only among the cohort but with professors as well. It was suggested that the timing of the courses should not overlap, thus allowing students to focus on one course at a time. Feedback also encouraged the addition of a leadership practicum or internship to the program. Both of the recommendations have been fully considered and changes have been represented in the upcoming cohort.

As is true in any good leadership program, relationships are key to success. Martin and Gilson continue to develop relationships with highly regarded international administrators who help to promote this teacher leader program on their campuses and in their own networks. Through these relationships come mutual trust and sharing of crucial insights as to what international teacher leaders need to focus on. It has been noted that international teachers are highly transient, and therefore word travels quickly with every move. Enrollment has already grown significantly in areas where past participants have moved from country to country sharing their learning, growth and experience with their new colleagues. The greatest challenge that Martin and Gilson currently face is determining how many cohorts the program can support at one time; hardly a bad problem to have.

Impact

While university administrators are certainly happy to see the positive impact that this program has had on increasing the number of graduate and international students on campus, Martin and Gilson are most proud of the personal impact that the program has had on the professors teaching within the program and the new energy around it. With dwindling budgets and decreased travel allowances, there are not always opportunities for professors to travel the world and gain that perspective. However, in a sense this program has brought the world to the UNI campus. Professors have been routinely impressed with the similarities that exist between international schools and Iowa schools, while still recognizing the unique distinctions that set them apart.

Many professors have commented on the personal relationships between teachers enrolled in the program, regardless of the countries in which they are living. Similar to the connectedness that exists between Iowa teachers and administrators across the state, so

too are the students in this program, but on a global scale. As a transient group of educators who value international travel, it is common that many have crossed paths with one another in the past and will continue to do so in the future. One professor noted, "I never would have expected that many of the international schools have turnover similar to small, rural schools. Teachers bouncing to another job after a couple of years present some real challenges for leaders intent on developing and maintaining a positive, productive culture. Knowing that common thread from Egypt to rural Iowa has been eye opening for me and for my students" (N. Pace, personal communication, February 8, 2015). This new understanding not only allowed Pace to better relate to the needs of international teachers, but also informed his work with aspiring Iowa school leaders.

Universities are under pressure to internationalize their curriculum and this program has helped to put a global lens on this local need. From a leadership perspective, Pace discussed his desire to broaden aspiring principals' horizons by somehow connecting them to students in international programs like this one. He shared, "As the world becomes flatter and more globally connected, we have to help people in Iowa understand that they not only have a stake in the education students receive in Chicago, Newark and LA, but also that they're connected to students, systems and ideas in Bangalore and Manila as well. Teaching in this program has been an excellent opportunity to begin building those connections and bridging the gaps." (N. Pace, personal communication, February 8, 2015)

Routinely, professors have commented on the level of rigor and dedication that the international teachers bring to the course content as well as insights of the demanding environments in which they teach. One such professor admitted to initially being a bit nervous to teach students in such culturally diverse settings and hoped that his content would be relevant to them. That was short lived as he found they had many of the same needs and concerns as his students in Iowa. Although he reworked scenarios to make them more relevant, and found he needed to be unusually flexible with assignment due dates as a result of some political unrest, he ultimately shared that, "Teaching in the international program has been one of the highlights in my career" (D. Jones, personal communication, February 9, 2015).

Although not completely dissimilar from schools in the U.S., another professor and co-coordinator of this program noted that "the progressivism and creativity that is mandated in these schools is anything but status quo" (Gilson, 2013). The use of technology found in international schools is unheard of by many U.S. public schools' standards and therefore mandates that the professors be more creative as well. Martin and Gilson found that when professors were encouraged to leave class projects open ended and students were allowed to meet the objective through their own creative means, the products routinely surpassed any expectations that the professors may have had. In a program where the professional development opportunities for teachers spans the world over, it is no surprise that the creative ideas meld into a wealth of global and differentiated perspectives on teaching and learning.

Conclusion

As universities across the U.S. strive toward a broader scope and scale of internationalization, this initiative at the University of Northern Iowa has proven to move beyond the concept stage and into action. Although challenges certainly exist in bringing such a program to life, Martin and Gilson agree that the best rewards come from the greatest challenges and this program is no exception. With increased interactions between a diversity of students and professors alike, this program serves as a catalyst for infusing global awareness and cultural competencies both on campus and across the globe.

Notes

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Appendix

Appendix A

Teacher Leader Model Standards

Domain I

Fostering a collaborative culture to support educator development and student learning

Domain II

Accessing and using research to improve practice and student learning

Domain III

Promoting professional learning for continuous improvement

Domain IV

Facilitating improvements in instruction and student learning

Domain V

Promoting the use of assessments and data for school and district improvement

Domain VI

Improving outreach and collaboration with families and community

Domain VII

Advocating for student learning and the profession

Appendix B

Course Sequence

Orientation to Teacher Leader Model Standards (TLMS) & Educational Leadership

Leading Learning, Teaching, & Curriculum

Culturally Relevant Teaching & Leading

Teacher Leadership in International Schools

Teaching in Multilingual Contexts

Power, Politics & Ethics in School District Leadership

Internship

Leading School Growth & Improvement

Educational Research

Leading Instruction in Schools

Technology for School Leaders

Evaluator Approval for Improved Student Learning

Capstone TLMS

Appendix C

Program Feedback

Questions	Exceeded my Expectations	Met most of my Expectations	Partially met my expectations	Did not meet my expectations
With regard to convenience , how well has the UNI MAE for international educators met your expectations in the following area?	11 (61%)	7 (39%)	0	0
With regards to rigor , how well has the UNI MAE for international educators met your expectations?	7 (39%)	9 (50%)	2 (11%)	0
With regards to relevance , how well has the UNI MAE for international educators met your expectations?	10 (56%)	4 (22%)	4 (22%)	0