

## **The Bridge from Student to Teacher: What Principals, Teacher Education Faculty, and Students Value in a Teaching Applicant**

**By Tammy V. Abernathy, Al Forsyth, & Judith Mitchell**

Growing student populations and an aging teacher population suggest that securing a teaching position should be assured. Yet, applicants for those positions who are completing teacher preparation programs may find themselves unaware of what school districts actually desire in a teaching applicant. National, state, and university accreditation standards directly influencing teacher education programs may not impact on local school districts. Specifically, the goals and expectations of teacher education programs may not necessarily be congruent with those of local schools (Forsyth & Abernathy, 1998; Monson, Lignugaris/Kraft, Byrnes, & Johnson, 1995). As a result of their focus on accreditation standards, teacher educators may notice discrepancies between the expectations of those who hire new teachers and the skills and experiences of those who seek teaching jobs. Forsyth & Abernathy (1998) found that applicants lacked knowledge about what district personnel directors considered important when they hire. This lack of knowledge highlights the differences between the

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*Tammy V. Abernathy is a professor in the Department of Curriculum and Instruction at the University of Nevada, Reno, and Al Forsyth and Judith Mitchell are professors in the Department of Teacher Education at Weber State University, Ogden, Utah.*

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expectations of teacher education programs and the expectations of local districts. In the competition for new teaching positions, preservice teachers and their professors may benefit from knowing what personnel directors and school principals consider important when evaluating applicants.

Research on issues related to hiring new teachers revealed few investigations of specific hiring criteria. Willems, Brown, and Green (1987) explored the importance of school administrators in the selection of new teachers, but stopped short of examining specific factors administrators consider important in selecting new teachers. Ralph, Desten, Lang, and Smith (1998) and Monson et al. (1995) examined district level administrators' preferences of what to consider when hiring new teachers. Results from the Ralph et al. (1998) study indicated that district administrators' value strong interpersonal communication skills followed by good classroom management and discipline skills. The Monson et. al (1995) investigation revealed that district administrators consider previous experience and evaluations from cooperating teachers and supervisors as critical. Principals' perceptions and an investigation of the congruence between school hiring personnel, teacher educators, and future applicants are yet to be fully investigated.

Forsyth and Abernathy (1998) extended the study conducted by Monson et al. (1995) that examined what district personnel directors considered important in an applicant, as well as an applicant's portfolio, compared to prospective applicants' perceptions of the same qualities. Ninety-three teacher education students completed surveys asking them to rate the importance of 18 factors that might be considered by school hiring personnel in evaluating applicants for teaching positions. They were also asked to rate the importance of 22 items commonly included in student portfolios.

The 1998 study found that, in general, there was high positive correlation ( $p < .01$ ) between the two groups' rankings of factors that a school district looks for in a teaching applicant and of items that districts look for in an applicant's portfolio. However, certain factors valued highly by the personnel directors were ranked low by the students—among them were writing ability, the ability to use technology, and the number of certifications held. Conversely, other items, such as grade-point average were ranked high by the students, but low by personnel directors. Similarly, certain portfolio items ranked high (e.g., examples of a variety of teaching strategies; evidence of writing ability) or low (e.g., statement of philosophy) by the hiring personnel were ranked the opposite by students. Such disparity between the two populations suggests the need to improve communication between the university and the school districts and focus on synchronizing teacher education program goals and district expectations for students moving into their first teaching positions.

Scrutiny of the Forsyth & Abernathy (1998) project raised two new questions. First, are the perceptions of teacher education students reflective of the perceptions of their mentors and the programs they are enrolled in, and second, what are the perceptions of principals, who are more empowered to finalize hiring decisions in

their school than other district personnel? Teacher educators may have a larger role in the hiring of teachers than previously realized. Specifically, the values teacher education programs promote are the ones students are likely to take into the field. If these same values are not shared by local school districts, applicants may not foreground the qualities that position them as superior candidates. Mismatches between administrator needs and the teacher education students' expectations in the Forsyth and Abernathy (1998) study may have been a function of incongruent expectations between teacher education programs and local school districts hiring the candidates. Specifically, students in the Forsyth and Abernathy (1998) study had recently participated in the NCATE accreditation process and were indoctrinated in the mission and "conceptual framework" of the teacher education program and were prepared to describe their preservice experiences. These experiences may have been less important to district personnel than to accreditation reviewers.

The original study by Monson et al. (1995), the extension by Forsyth & Abernathy (1998), and the study by Ralph et al. (1998) all examined the views of district personnel directors who conduct preliminary interviews, and then send promising candidates to local principals who need new teachers. Yet, those who are most likely to make the final decision whether to hire a specific teacher for a particular school are the site principals and not district administrators (Brandt, 1991). Perceptions of principals who regularly make hiring decisions have not yet been fully considered.

The purpose of this current project was to extend the earlier work of Forsyth and Abernathy (1998) to include the opinions of principals, who are typically responsible for selecting the candidate best suited for their school. The intent of this project was to examine three specific relationships in terms of what is important when hiring a teacher applicant and in assessing an applicant's portfolio. These relationships were: (1) the correlation between principals' perceptions and teacher education students' beliefs; (2) the correlation between teacher education students' perceptions and teacher education faculty beliefs; and (3) the correlation between principals' perceptions and teacher education faculty beliefs.

## **Method**

### ***Sample***

This study included three groups of respondents from a midsize commuter university in the Rocky Mountain region. Undergraduate education students (n=57) nearing the completion of their programs, teacher education faculty (n=10) responsible for the training of those students, and school principals (n=75) who worked in the four districts primarily served by the teacher education program were surveyed.

The student sample included 25 prospective secondary applicants and 32 students intending to seek elementary school positions. Of the principals who responded to the survey, 51 were elementary principals, 16 were middle school

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principals, five were high school principals, and three failed to indicate level.

The teacher education program had a strong field-based component. Students progressed through the program by completing clusters of three to four courses subsumed in a “level.” Within each level students participated in a field experience ranging from three hours per week in Level 1 to 12 hours per week in Level 4. In Level 5 students completed a 10 week full-time student teaching experience.

### *Procedure*

The original two-part survey, constructed by Monson et al. (1995) was used in this extension study. Faculty members in Elementary and Special Education initially constructed survey items. Local school district administrators were invited to evaluate the content validity of the survey. Part 1 of the survey asked respondents to rate the importance of 18 specific factors in the hiring decision on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 representing “none” and 5 representing “a great deal” (See Table 1 for list of factors). Part 2 asked respondents to rate the importance of 22 specific components of an applicant’s portfolio on a scale of 1 to 4, with 1 representing “low” and 4 representing “critical” (See Table 2 for list of factors). The title and instructions on the instrument were modified for each group of respondents to improve clarity. Also, demographic items related to each group surveyed were added to the instruments. No revisions were made to survey items.

Respondents in the student sample were nearing completion of student

**Table 1**  
**Mean, Standard Deviation and Rank Scores of Factors Considered Important in Evaluating Applicants for Teaching Positions**

Survey Items	Principals			Teacher Ed. Students			Teacher Ed. Faculty		
	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank
Previous successful teaching position	4.49	0.79	1.0	4.07	1.08	4.0	4.80	.42	2.0
Cooperating teacher evaluation	4.32	0.68	2.0	4.30	0.79	1.0	4.90	0.31	1.0
Samples of teaching/management skill	4.27	0.70	3.0	4.00	0.90	5.0	4.30	0.67	5.0
Person is already known in your district	4.23	0.89	4.0	3.67	1.37	7.0	3.90	1.37	8.0
Recommendation from school personnel	4.20	0.88	5.0	4.16	0.88	3.0	3.40	0.97	11.0
Experience w/specific programs in district	4.19	0.77	6.0	3.23	1.09	15.0	4.00	0.67	6.5
University supervisor evaluation	3.97	0.88	7.0	4.27	0.80	2.0	4.60	0.52	3.0
Number of certifications held	3.85	0.97	8.0	3.26	1.18	13.0	4.50	0.71	4.0
Stated philosophy compatible with district	3.59	0.95	9.0	3.54	0.95	9.0	3.30	0.82	13.0
Record of volunteer work w/children, teaching	3.56	0.87	10.5	3.46	1.06	11.0	3.70	0.95	9.0
Recommendation from university faculty	3.56	0.86	10.5	3.93	0.87	6.0	3.10	0.74	16.0
Graduation w/honors or other awards	3.47	0.76	12.5	3.13	1.04	16.0	4.00	0.94	6.5
Grade point average	3.47	0.74	12.5	3.50	0.95	10.0	3.10	1.10	16.0
Program of study (actual courses taken)	3.44	0.92	14.0	3.66	1.06	8.0	3.40	1.08	11.0
Familiarity w/ specific type of community	3.43	0.86	15.0	2.95	1.04	18.0	3.40	0.70	11.0
Completion of graduate degree	3.33	0.74	16.0	3.42	1.34	12.0	3.20	1.14	14.0
Involvement in professional organizations	2.89	0.83	17.0	3.07	1.00	17.0	2.90	0.88	18.0
Institution where student was certified	2.24	1.18	18.0	3.25	1.13	14.0	3.10	1.20	16.0

teaching at the time of project and were surveyed during an on-campus class session. Participation in the project was voluntary; however, all students in attendance during administration of the instrument completed it.

Surveys were distributed to teacher education faculty via department mailboxes. Cover letters describing the project were attached. Faculty members were asked to respond within one week. Excusing the three investigators involved in this project, there were 20 eligible faculty and 50 percent elected to participate. Anonymity was guaranteed.

All principals within the three school districts most likely to hire applicants from the student sample were surveyed by mail (n= 148). Cover letters and return addressed, stamped envelopes were included with the survey. Principal return rate was 50.7 percent. In all instances, participants were assured of confidentiality.

Descriptive statistics and composite rankings of the items for both parts of the survey were computed. The procedure outlined by Monson et al. (1995) and used by Forsyth and Abernathy (1998) was replicated. Specifically, the mean and standard deviation were calculated for each survey item for each of the three groups (principals, teacher education faculty and students). Items were ranked based on the item's mean. A ranking of 1.0 indicated the highest mean score in the item pool for

**Table 2**  
**Mean, Standard Deviation and Rank Scores of Factors Considered Important in the Portfolios of Applicants for Teaching Positions**

Survey Items	Principals			TeacherEd. Students			TeacherEd. Faculty		
	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank	M	SD	Rank
Evidence of ability to manage whole class	3.86	0.35	1.0	3.36	0.64	1.0	3.70	0.48	2.0
Evidence of good character	3.82	0.39	2.0	3.14	0.69	8.5	3.30	0.67	7.0
Evidence of ability to work w/ diverse learners	3.81	0.39	3.0	3.27	0.68	3.5	3.40	0.52	6.0
Evidence of interpersonal skills	3.81	0.43	4.0	3.23	0.62	5.0	3.80	0.42	1.0
Examples of variety of teaching strategies	3.57	0.55	5.0	3.09	0.65	10.0	3.60	0.52	4.0
Evidence of thought processes	3.40	0.59	6.0	3.27	0.70	6.0	3.60	0.70	4.0
Evidence of writing ability	3.37	0.68	7.0	3.32	0.68	3.5	3.60	0.70	4.0
Evidence of creativity	3.33	0.50	8.0	3.32	0.70	7.0	3.20	0.63	8.5
Examples of use of technology	3.27	0.61	9.0	2.43	0.80	19.0	2.70	0.48	18.0
Examples of parent/community involvement	3.21	0.69	10.0	2.83	0.83	12.0	2.90	0.57	14.5
Examples of assessment practices	3.18	0.62	11.0	2.91	0.70	15.0	3.00	0.67	12.0
Evidence of teaching experience beyond levels	3.14	0.70	12.0	2.91	0.72	16.0	2.80	0.42	16.5
Statement of professional goals	3.03	0.68	13.0	3.14	0.78	11.0	3.10	0.74	10.0
Statement of philosophy	2.96	0.84	14.0	3.50	0.71	2.0	3.00	0.67	12.0
Statement of beliefs/aspirations	2.83	0.73	15.0	2.86	0.81	17.0	2.90	0.88	14.5
Examples of lesson plans w/objectives	2.81	0.77	16.5	3.32	0.76	8.5	3.20	1.03	8.5
Examples of unique projects	2.81	0.73	16.5	2.90	0.72	14.0	2.60	0.52	19.0
Examples of curriculum development	2.77	0.72	18.0	2.32	0.82	20.0	2.50	0.71	20.0
Examples of sample units	2.70	0.73	19.0	2.90	0.76	18.0	2.80	1.03	16.5
Statement of personal mission	2.58	0.67	20.0	3.05	0.79	13.0	3.00	0.47	12.0
Examples of teaching (video)	2.57	0.83	21.0	2.14	0.88	22.0	2.40	0.84	21.5
Statement of outside interests/hobbies	2.45	0.79	22.0	2.05	0.81	21.0	2.40	0.97	21.5

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each respective group. Spearman Rank Order Correlation Coefficients were calculated to establish the relationship between groups of respondents.

## **Results**

Results of this project revealed significant relationships between the perceptions of principals and teacher education students (*hiring factors*:  $r_s=.72$ ;  $p<.01$ ; *portfolio factors*:  $r_s=.72$ ;  $p<.01$ ) and principals and teacher education faculty (*hiring factors*:  $r_s=.77$ ;  $p<.01$ ; *portfolio factors*:  $r_s=.81$ ;  $p<.01$ ) on both parts of the instrument. There was not a strong relationship between the perceptions of teacher education faculty and students on Part 1 (*hiring factors*:  $r_s=.44$ ;  $p<.06$ ); however, students and teacher education faculty responded similarly on Part 2 (*portfolio factors*:  $r_s=.88$ ;  $p<.01$ ).

### **Part 1—Hiring Factors**

Examination of mean scores on Part 1 of the survey (hiring factors) revealed that teacher education faculty members rated more items as important compared to students and principals. Faculty responses ranged on a six-point scale (range 0-5) from a high of  $M=4.90$  ( $SD=.42$ ) to a low of  $M=2.90$  ( $SD=1.20$ ). Principals' scores ranged from a high of  $M=4.49$  ( $SD=.79$ ) to a low of  $M=2.24$  ( $SD=1.18$ ). Student mean scores ranged from a high of  $4.07$  ( $SD=1.08$ ) to a low  $2.95$  ( $SD=1.08$ ) (See Table 1).

All of the respondents in this study ranked cooperating teacher evaluation as a critical factor in hiring decisions. Further, previous successful teaching experience was equally important. The three groups also indicated that involvement in professional organizations and the institution where the student was certified were the least important factors in the hiring process. However, despite the overall high positive relationships found among groups, there were several notable disparities.

Principals considered previous successful teaching to be the most important factor in making hiring decisions. The remaining top five factors were: cooperating teacher evaluation, samples of teaching/management skill, reputation in the district and a recommendation from school personnel. These items reflect the value principals place on the performance of the applicant in the schools and school personnel evaluations of the applicant. The five highest ranked factors for teacher education faculty matched only two of the principals' highest ranked factors (previous successful teaching and cooperating teacher evaluation). Faculty valued reputation in the district and the recommendations of school personnel less than principals; however, compared to principals they placed more importance on the evaluations of university personnel. The five highest ranked items in the student sample matched the principal sample more closely than the teacher education faculty sample, but reflected both of the cultures students were trying to negotiate. Students valued recommendations from school personnel, but also respected the importance of a recommendation from their university supervisor.

There was disparity among the three groups on the importance of additional certifications, the importance of honors and awards, the program of study and the importance of grade point average. Students perceived grade point average and their program of study as more important in the hiring decision than did principals or teacher education faculty. Also, students did not view additional certifications as important as the other two groups.

### **Part 2—Portfolio Factors**

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of a portfolio prior to ranking the importance of factors included in a hiring portfolio. Overall, respondents believe portfolios to be “somewhat important.” Twenty-four percent of the principals indicated that portfolios were “very important,” 49 percent marked “somewhat important,” 5 percent “not important,” 2.6 percent “never look at it” and 19 percent did not respond. In the faculty sample, 10 percent believe portfolios are “very important” while 90 percent perceived them as “somewhat important”. Students also favored the “somewhat important category,” with a 64 percent marking, followed by 19 percent indicating “very important,” 15 percent “not important and 1.7 percent not responding.

Part 2 of the survey asked respondents to rank the importance of 22 specific items included in a hiring portfolio. Results indicated overall positive relationships among the three groups. Item mean scores were generally higher for principals than for teacher education faculty and students. On the four point scale, principals’ mean scores ranged from a high of  $M= 3.86$  ( $SD=.35$ ) to a low of  $M=2.45$  ( $SD=.79$ ). Descriptive results for Teacher Education faculty ranged from  $M=3.70$  ( $SD=.48$ ) to  $M=2.40$  ( $SD=.97$ ). Again, as in Part 1 of the survey (hiring factors), students mean scores were lower than the other two groups ( $M=3.36$ ;  $SD=.64$  to  $M=2.05$ ;  $SD=.81$ ) (See Table 2).

Several discrepancies in the top five rankings were noted. Principals valued evidence of ability to manage the whole class, good character, the ability to work with diverse learners, interpersonal skills and a variety of teaching strategies as important. Teacher education faculty rankings matched on three of those five factors. Out of the 22 items, faculty ranked good character 7.0 and the ability to work with diverse learners 6.0. Students also matched principals on three of the five top factors. However, students ranked good character 8.5 and examples of a variety of teaching strategies 10. Students placed writing ability and a statement of philosophy in their top five factors. Other interesting discrepancies were found on the following items: examples of the use of technology, examples of lesson plans with objectives, and a statement of personal mission. Principals value technology more than the other two groups, while students and teacher educators placed more value on lesson plans and an explicit personal mission than principals did. Also notable was the ranking for examples of assessment practices. Students ranked this item lower than principals or faculty, yet none of the groups ranked assessment in the top ten.

## Discussion

Overall, teacher educators and their students can take comfort in the fact, that in general, the factors they believe are important in the hiring process are similar to those held by principals who make final hiring decisions. Examination of the Spearman Rank Order Coefficients would suggest that students understand what is important in the context they intend to work in and that their teacher education program is preparing them well to compete for their first teaching positions.

Overall results of this study mask subtle differences that warrant further discussion. These data highlight the differences between university and local school culture. Principals viewed items critical to hiring as those in their environment, the public schools. They valued colleagues' opinions about an applicant's ability, skill and reputation. Teacher education faculty, on the other hand, perceived factors in *their* environment, the university, as more critical to the hiring process (university supervisor evaluation, honors and awards, number of certificates held). Students discovered the differences and have modified their perceptions to more closely match the perceptions of those who will hire them. The less than significant relationship between the views of teacher education faculty and their students found on Part I (hiring factors) would suggest that students understand differences in their preparation for teaching and the expectations of a new teacher and that they are successfully bridging the two environments. While the faculty may not perceive certain factors as important in the hiring process (e.g., recommendation of school personnel), students may be gleaning this type of information during their field experiences.

Field experiences appear to be a way for students to make the type of impact in a district that principals view as critical in the hiring process (Ornstein, 1990; Ralph et al. 1998). Opportunities to meet and teach with colleagues who can endorse their teaching skills and character can only be done in the field. Further, through field experiences students also appear to learn how to manage the expectations of both university and school environments. Field experiences may be the means teacher education faculty have to assure that students are fully prepared for the hiring process and their first teaching job.

It may be unreasonable to assume that all faculty members will perceive the hiring process similarly to principals and students. Specifically, teacher educators have dual professional responsibilities. In addition to teacher preparation, they are also responsible for conferring baccalaureate degrees. It may be unrealistic to expect faculty to downplay the importance of the factors on the survey that are related to their environment, because emphasis on those factors helps students earn their degree.

Another perspective may be that the hiring process is at the end of a developmental continuum in which students begin teacher education fully dependent on faculty and adopt faculty perceptions about what will be critical as they learn to



become teachers. Students then progress through their teacher preparation with considerable field experience and opportunities to reflect on those experiences. Through reflective practice students progress and begin incorporating their practical experience into their theoretical knowledge. As they near completion of their student teaching, they disengage from university faculty. They begin to see themselves as teachers and not students, therefore no longer needing to rely on their teachers. Perhaps these results suggest that teacher educators have done their jobs well because students have learned to rely less on them and more on themselves and the professionals in the culture they are moving into. This should, however, not preclude principals and teacher educators from working together to prepare teachers who are well equipped to meet the needs of the students in local schools.

Across the three groups, portfolios were viewed as somewhat important in the hiring process; however, students were less convinced of this than principals and faculty. Perhaps this is because they are the ones doing the work and making decisions about what should and should not be included. The fact that 100 percent of the faculty surveyed believed portfolios were “very important” or “somewhat important” may reflect a socially appropriate response given that there is a portfolio requirement in their teacher education program. It is impossible to judge the reliability of this item given the content of Part 2 (portfolio factors) of the survey. The instrument asks principals to rate the importance of specific items in a hiring portfolio. Given this directive, principals may have been prompted to respond favorably to the importance of portfolios whether or not they honestly felt so.

Although there are some differences in top-ranked items, the items ranked in the middle warrant discussion; specifically, examples of the use of technology and assessment practices.

Surprisingly, out of 22 items, principals ranked the use of technology 9.0, yet student applicants and teacher education faculty ranked technology only 19.0 and 18.0, respectively. Teacher education faculty have made it a priority in the training program to infuse the use of technology throughout the program, in addition to requiring a class on technology applications, and yet their rankings reflect a different emphasis. Explanation for these differences may reflect what students in teacher education see as they work in the public schools, i.e., although there are conversations promoting the value of technology in enhancing education in the classrooms, most classrooms have little hardware to work with. Many schools have computer labs, but the reality is that teachers and their students have limited convenient access to the equipment.

Another area of disparity is that of “examples of assessment practices.” Students rank this item significantly lower than principals and teacher educators do. In an attempt to address national recommendations (Darling-Hammond, 1997) and results of recent research (Tindal & Nolet, 1996; Fuchs & Fuchs, 1993), the teacher preparation program in this study focused considerable effort on teaching students to connect assessment with instruction in a formative as well as summative fashion.

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Again, the surprising rankings may be a reflection of what students see as they take part in field experiences, including student teaching. On the other hand, teacher education faculty may not be sending a clear message about the importance of linking instruction and assessment.

All three groups perceived “evidence of ability to manage a whole class” as critical. Surprisingly, principals ranked *low* other items related to teaching, such as assessment (11.0), lesson planning with objectives (16.5), examples of curriculum development (18.0), and sample units (19.0). These data may suggest that principals value management over academic instruction. Principals may perceive classroom management and instruction as separate skills rather than intertwined strategies.

Finally, “examples of teaching (video)” was ranked last or next to last in all groups. Principals valued “evidence of ability to manage whole class,” “evidence of ability to work w/ diverse learners,” and “examples of variety of teaching strategies” among the top five factors, yet did not want to watch an applicant’s teaching sample via video. A video could serve as “evidence” for the top ranked items. With performance assessment gaining momentum in districts, schools, and classrooms, it is peculiar that in the hiring process, principals do not value the opportunity to watch the applicant’s teaching sample prior to making a job offer.

### **Summary**

At the onset of this project it was anticipated that research of hiring practices would have a variety of implications that could result in greater understanding of students’ perceptions, modification of teacher education program goals, and increased communication between teacher education programs and school district hiring personnel. Results of the project revealed that students have an understanding of what principals are looking for in the hiring process. They have successfully negotiated the expectations of the university environment and the school culture. Results from the student sample also suggested that students become more independent and do not necessarily model instructors’ beliefs. Field experience may play a critical role in helping students bridge the gap between their role as student and their goal of becoming a teacher.

Overall, faculty and principals were similar in their rankings; however, each group valued hiring factors that originated in their own environment. Clearly, “turf” emerged as a defining characteristic of each group’s responses. Teacher education faculty and principals also have similar, yet different goals. University faculty prepare teachers, but they also grant degrees and may see their roles as extending beyond teacher preparation. Principals, on the other hand, are interested in practical skills that can be immediately used in the classroom. These results should encourage future dialogue between those interested in preparing teachers who can meet the instructional needs of students.

Results from Part 2 (portfolio factors) of the survey are less clear. Each group

indicated that portfolios were “somewhat important.” Students considered portfolios less important than principals did, and teacher education faculty responded most favorably. Perhaps “an impressive portfolio” should have been an item on Part 1 (hiring factors) of the survey. This would have indicated the level the importance of the portfolio in relationship to the other hiring factors.

The results of this project may not be generalizable to other programs; therefore, replication of this work in other regions and programs is encouraged. Results of this study may vary depending on the length of the teacher education program, quantity of field experience, the principal’s proximity to a teacher education program, and whether a university degree is at stake. Values and expectations of principals may also vary depending on state and local education agendas. Further study of the changes teacher education students undergo from the beginning of their training to student teaching should be more closely examined.

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