

**External Review Report of  
Education Master's Degree  
(M.Ed.) Program  
at Sam Houston State University  
Huntsville, Texas**

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## Table of Contents

<b>PROGRAM PROFILE .....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>CURRICULUM.....</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>FACULTY .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>STUDENTS .....</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>RESOURCES AND FINANCES.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT.....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>ASSESSMENT EFFORTS .....</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING EFFORTS .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>CONSISTENT STRENGTHS .....</b>	<b>10</b>
<b>AREAS OF CONCERN .....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>RECOMMENDATIONS .....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>CONCLUDING REMARKS .....</b>	<b>15</b>

## **PROGRAM PROFILE**

Created by legislation signed by Governor Oran M. Roberts on April 21, 1879, Sam Houston Normal Institute's dedicated goal was to train teachers for the public schools of Texas. It was the first teacher-training school in the southwestern United States. Sam Houston Normal Institute became a member of the American Association of Teachers Colleges in 1922. In 1923 the curriculum to prepare teachers for elementary schools was expanded to prepare teachers at all levels in the public schools, and Sam Houston Normal Institute became Sam Houston State Teachers College. In 1965 the word "Teachers" was dropped from the name of the institution, and in 1969 the institution became Sam Houston State University.

The College of Education is comprised of five academic units: Library Science; Teacher Certification; Language, Literacy, and Special Populations; Curriculum and Instruction; and Educational Leadership and Counseling. As reported in the Self-Study, *"Sam Houston State University Master of Education in School Leadership is designed as an advanced professional preparation program to prepare educational leaders. The program emphasizes the practical application of knowledge and skills for today's complex school leadership roles focused on school improvement."*

It is my intention to perform a general overview of findings, generate a section on the consistent strengths of the program, provide another section on the perceived weaknesses of the program, and then culminate the report with a list of recommendations for the core faculty and administration of the SHSU M.Ed. program.

## **PROGRAM ADMINISTRATION**

To begin with, the admissions process for the program at Sam Houston State University is relatively easy. A Google search of the terms "Sam Houston educational leadership" allows potential students to find the SHSU webpage quickly specifically for the program. From there, the individual is directed to other pages for admission information and curriculum requirements.

As per the department's self-study, once the applicant submits the required documents to ApplyTexas, a department-level administrative assistant reviews all documents ensuring the applicant meets all TEA requirements. Once the administrative assistant completes the review, she/he moves the records to AppReview where the program coordinator accesses and reviews the applications and, with input from other faculty, makes decisions regarding admitting candidates to the program based on the published criteria. The procedures in place appear to have been working.

Students and faculty alike spoke about the positive interactions they had with each other and the department. Students expressed a high level of satisfaction with the personalized attention and advising they received from the program.

## **CURRICULUM**

The program is commended for its efforts to keep the curriculum current and relevant. During the interviews with faculty, it was noted that the state certification changed in September 2019 from Principal Certification requiring candidates to pass one state certification exam to Principal as Instruction Leader Certification requiring candidates to pass two state certification exams. In response, the program modified the program by adding a second semester of practicum internship and adding EDAD 5332 Communication for Ed Leaders bringing the total program requirements to 36 hours.

The students interviewed during the on-campus visit were very supportive of the faculty's capabilities in laying out the course sequencing clearly and logically. Courses are offered with

sufficient frequency that students can complete the degree requirements in a reasonable time, as seen in Table 1.

Table 1. *Course Offerings*

		Sum 19	Fall 19	Spg 20	Sum 20	Fall 20
EDAD 5332	Adm & Org of Public Schools	x	x	x	x	x
EDAD 5352	Communication for Ed Leaders		x	x	x	x
EDAD 5372	Fed-State-Local Sch Law		x	x	x	x
EDAD 5386	Spc Populations & Spc Programs	x	x	x	x	x
EDAD 6370	Campus Business Management	x		x		x
EDAD 6362	Principal Practicum/Internship <sup>1</sup>		x			x
EDAD 6362	Principal Practicum/Internship <sup>2</sup>			x		
EDAD 6371	Role of Prin in School Admin	x	x	x	x	x
EDAD 6378	Building Capacity For Tch & Lrn	x	x	x		x
EDAD 6379	Prog Eval For School Imprvmnt	x	x	x	x	x
EDAD 6385	Culturly Proficnt Schl Ldrshp	x			x	x
EDAD 6394	Advancing Educ Leadership	x	x	x		x

The program consists of 36 semester hours, which is representative of most principal preparation programs in the state and nation. An examination of the course offerings reveals the curriculum is similar to other programs around the state and nation. For example, some of the universities that require 36 hours to obtain the M.Ed. degree include Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Prairie View A&M, Arkansas Tech, and Georgia State. Other universities only require 30 hours for the degree such as UT Tyler, Stephen F Austin, U of North Texas, TAMU-Commerce, Lamar, and Arkansas State.

Following the national trend, the program has transitioned to an online program to remain competitive for students with the 66 other EPPs in the state. Courses are offered in the traditional 16-week format but, according to interviews with faculty and administrators, there have been discussions about adopting an accelerated model in which courses are offered in 8-week terms in hopes of attracting more students to the SHSU program.

Consistency in enrollment numbers allows administrators to plan more thoroughly as well as farther in advance than when dealing with erratic enrollment numbers. The consistency in having a

principal degree program producing wave upon wave of candidates is an advantage that should not be taken for granted. This same sense of consistency plays a large part in the continuing success of the program. Several students who were interviewed for the program review offered their opinion on the topic. Unfortunately, student enrollment has been declining since 2014 as noted in Table 2. It is conjectured that this is due to competing universities offering their principal preparation programs totally online and at a lower cost than SHSU.

Table 2. *Program statistics*

	Students	Degrees Conferred	Core Faculty	Student/Faculty Ratio
2013-2014	311	44	6	51.8
2014-2015	245	55	6	40.8
2015-2016	275	38	5	55.0
2016-2017	324	52	6	54.0
2017-2018	227	63	6	37.8
2018-2019	150	33	4	37.5

An examination reveals that obtaining the M.Ed. degree at SHSU costs the student significantly more than at several other Texas universities (Table 3).

Table 3. *Costs to Obtain the M.Ed. Degree*

Institution	Program Hours	Current Enrollment	Cost per semester hour	Program Cost
Lamar	30	NA	\$235	\$7,050
Stephen F. Austin	30	196	\$245	\$7,360
UT Tyler	30	185	\$250	\$7,525
University of North Texas	30	238	\$300	\$9,200
Texas A&M Commerce	30	170	\$367	\$11,000
Sam Houston State University	36	48	\$513	\$18,468

Regarding relevance and assistance in passing the state principal exams, students generally rated courses very high, from 4.5 to 5.0 on a 5-point scale. During the on-campus visit, students indicated they liked the pace of the courses, that it gave them time to reflect on the materials. They

expressed concern that an 8-week course would be too rushed as it was during the summer session. Two students who had taken the state exam were highly complimentary of the program and the preparation they had received for passing the exam.

When asked what changes they would suggest for the program courses, several stated it would be nice to have the information contained in the course Advancing Educational Leadership earlier in the course sequence. Others suggested concentrating more on Texas law and finance instead of an overview of both subjects. One student stated they would eliminate much of the material about PLCs from courses since schools are already implementing PLCs, and the content is redundant. Even though the students offered suggestions for change, they were quick to point out that they were extremely satisfied with the courses they had taken.

## **FACULTY**

The constitution of the faculty is highly impressive. The program is supported by three core faculty and five adjunct/supporting faculty. Two of the core faculty and four of the adjunct faculty received their doctorate from SHSU. This might explain the level of commitment observed during the faculty interviews to making the SHSU program one of the best in the state.

Student respect for the faculty is quite evident based on the student interviews. Reviewing student evaluations of teachers revealed that students rated faculty from 4.4 to 5.0 on a 5-point scale in practically all courses during the past five years. The only noted exception was a rating of 3.8 but students explained that was due to an adjunct who did not follow the syllabus. Students and administrators were highly complimentary of faculty during the interviews.

## **STUDENTS**

Student makeup is diverse (Table 4). Of particular interest is the fact that female enrollment in the program has ranged from 65% to 79%, with an average of 71%. White enrollment is around 58%, while Hispanic enrollment has been about 23%, and Black enrollment has been around 17%. First-

Generation enrollment has averaged 28%.

Table 4. *Fall 2013 to Spring 2019 Student counts by gender, ethnicity, and generation status*

	Females	Males	White	Black	Hispanic	Other	First- Generation
2013-2014	214	97	184	53	57	17	68
2014-2015	170	75	142	45	19	8	71
2015-2016	178	97	156	37	68	14	107
2016-2017	228	96	199	34	77	14	118
2017-2018	171	56	129	36	53	9	62
2018-2019	118	32	86	28	33	3	26

Of particular concern is the number of students who are applying to the program. Table 5 shows the number who applied to the program over the past six years and the percentage of the accepted ones who enrolled. The number who applied to the program has dropped alarmingly over the past two years. The question to be asked is whether this is due to the state's change in testing or some other factor.

Table 5. *Applicants to the Program*

	Applied	Accepted	Enrolled	% Enrolled
2013-2014	84	73	66	90%
2014-2015	89	65	54	83%
2015-2016	120	91	78	86%
2016-2017	82	65	59	91%
2017-2018	39	33	28	85%
2018-2019	51	34	28	82%

On a positive note, more than 75% of students enrolled in the program graduated within three years. Looking further at the statistics, the average number of terms to graduation ranged from 4.6 to 8.3 terms.

## RESOURCES AND FINANCES

Financial support for the program is quite commendable. While there is no designated program budget, faculty are allocated \$3000 in travel funds and \$500 for conference registration by the



department. Additionally, faculty can request funds through the college and graduate studies office to support travel and recruitment. Also, to be commended is the effort to support graduate students who are presenting at conferences.

One recurring theme that arose during the interviews and was reported in the self-study was a concern about losing an administrative assistant who provided support for scheduling, admissions, academic forms, and other administrative tasks for the program. Even with declining enrollment in the program, the amount of time required to support 150 students is considerable. Program administration is time-consuming. The program coordinator's responsibilities require an estimated 20-40 hours per week additional time. This is almost a full-time job in itself.

## **FACILITIES AND EQUIPMENT**

The program is offered 100% online except for a 3-day onsite training required by the TEA. Onsite training is conducted at The Woodlands Center. Facilities were well-maintained and adequate for the program needs. Faculty and students expressed satisfaction with the site.

Faculty and students expressed satisfaction with the support provided by the SHSU library and praised the SHSU Online staff for their assistance in research and technology needs. Students commented that the library was more than adequate for their research projects.

## **ASSESSMENT EFFORTS**

The program utilizes several assessment measures to gauge the strength of the program. Some of these include the state certification exam, a program comprehensive exam, a site supervisor evaluation, and an alumni survey.

One criterion goal was that at least 85% of students would earn a passing score on the comprehensive examination during the first administration. It was noted that in 2017-2018 that 90% of students (n=71) scored exemplary or acceptable on the comprehensive exam; however, in 2018-2019

only 61% of the students (n=33) scored exemplary or acceptable. While this might appear troubling at first, it is noted that the comprehensive exam consists of released state certification exam questions. With the change in state certification exams during that time period, it is to be expected that a decline in pass rates would occur.

## **RECRUITMENT AND MARKETING EFFORTS**

Even though the program is 100% online, except for the 3-day onsite training required by TEA, most students in the program are from southeast Texas (nearly 84%). Interviews with administrators revealed there are limited marketing efforts specifically for the program. Nationally, and perhaps locally, building level administrators are retiring more frequently than before, hence the need to actively recruit for those positions. The university should consider a marketing firm to promote the program throughout the state

## **CONSISTENT STRENGTHS**

The strengths of the M.Ed. Program are almost multitudinous. The faculty currently consists of three full-time, experienced core instructors, all of whom possess terminal degrees, and several adjunct/supporting faculty who are currently serving or have served in the role of a building administrator. This provides current, relevant insight into the program. Using program-developed syllabi affords a level of consistency necessary to develop a high level of program expectations and continuity.

Program faculty do an admirable job of mentoring adjuncts and learning from them. Education is continually changing, so having that relationship with individuals working in the trenches is vital. Adjuncts can provide valuable insight into needed changes in the courses. The faculty is to be commended for seeking input from the practitioners.

The high level of respect for faculty held by the students who were interviewed is inspiring.

The level of commitment demonstrated by program faculty was repeatedly echoed by the program candidates and new students alike. The human element and relationships developed in the program are one of the essential takeaways from the degree efforts. This sense of community cannot be overstated and is intentionally developed by the faculty.

Students are performing well on the state exams. Between July 2016 and June 2019, 103 students scored Exemplary on the TExES Certification Exam, and 46 scored Acceptable. This speaks highly of the concerted efforts of the faculty in preparing students for the exam. Also, most students complete the degree requirements within three years.

As noted previously, support for the program is good. Faculty receive financial assistance to attend and present at conferences. They feel they have adequate resources from the library and have positive comments about SHSU Online staff and support. Students are supported in their efforts to attend conferences to make presentations, and student workers are assigned to the program to assist with applications and other functions in the department. Some departmental scholarships are available to students.

## **AREAS OF CONCERN**

The foremost and fundamental concern noted is the decline in the number of students in the program. In 2016-2017 there were 324 students in the program. Two years later, the number was down to 150 students. During that same time period, 82 students applied to the program in 2016-17, but only 51 applied two years later, and of that number, only 34 were accepted into the program. Two factors may contribute to the decline: (1) since more programs are online, the competition for students is intense, and (2) the cost to complete a degree at SHSU is high compared to competing universities and other preparation entities in the state.

Another concern is the "efficiency" effort the university appears to be implementing that has eliminated a program administrative assistant and has moved those responsibilities to the department

administrative assistant. With over 150 students in the master's program in educational leadership alone, there is a concern that personal relationships with those students may be compromised. It was noted that the program coordinator was responsible for advising all students. With the loss of the program administrative assistant, more of the burden of student contact will likely fall on the program coordinator. In fact, it is estimated that the program coordinator's administrative responsibility consists of 20-40 hours per week.

Implementing change is often very difficult at higher education institutions. To make a minor curriculum adjustment usually requires jumping through several hoops, completing forms, obtaining numerous committee approvals, writing assessment plans, and obtaining the registrar's office approval. This process may take months if specific deadlines are not met, and if they are met, changes may not be implemented until the following year. This is the nature of higher education. Conversely, P-12 education as a function of the state is often subject to politics and can change quickly and must be swiftly implemented. Educational leadership programs often need to adapt rapidly to comply with state requirements. Unfortunately, university procedures typically do not allow quick changes in higher education programs. This needs to be addressed at the university level so program changes can be addressed more quickly.

Another concern is the prescriptive nature the state imposes concerning principal certification requirements. According to the TEA website, Senate Bill 1383 (82nd Regular Legislative Session) directed TEA to accomplish the following initiatives:

- establish and administer a comprehensive appraisal and professional development system for public school principals;
- establish a consortium of nationally recognized experts on educational leadership and policy to help develop the system and make recommendations about the training, appraisal, professional development, and compensation of principals; and
- establish school leadership standards and a set of indicators of successful school leadership to align with such training, appraisal, and professional development.

Apparently, in response to the Senate bill, TEA developed a set of requirements for principal

preparation programs that even dictated content and textbooks to be used in courses and created alternative routes to principal certification that do not involve university programs. While this is more of a state political issue than a university issue, Texas universities should engage in lobbying efforts to ensure universities have more input into principal preparation programs.

A concern that was mentioned during the interviews was the discussion of a possible change in the program format from a traditional 16-week course during the semester to an 8-week course format. Even though only a small number of current and former students were interviewed, the fact that this topic is being mentioned warrants further analysis. While the adoption of an 8-week course format may appear promising, program effectiveness is likely to decline if the program adopts an asynchronistic model of instruction with limited instruction and reduced student-to-student interaction. Recurring themes raise questions about the instructional quality of the discussion board and other electronic posts as valid and reliable learning devices to instill and nurture students with the essential dispositions to become school leaders. One salient question that can be raised is whether or not the faculty will be able to adequately assess students acquiring and maturing in prerequisite dispositions that define effective school leadership in a shortened class format. Another major concern is whether or not the 8-week model of instruction will transition the current 16-week class to an impersonal class of learning, preventing students from becoming constructive and creative thinkers, which are vital prerequisite skills for research and writing. Aspects of collegial student-to-student and faculty-to-student interaction must be preserved in the program.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

To address declining enrollment, it is essential to market the program effectively. While the university has a marketing team, it appears it does not have a dedicated unit to emphasize the educational leadership programs. When students were asked why they chose the SHSU program over other programs in the state, many said it was recommended by their principal and not because of any

marketing effort. The university should capitalize on this input and develop connections with building principals to get a presence in the schools throughout the state. Building principals who are familiar with the SHSU program, even if they are not graduates of the program, are more likely to recommend it. It also helps to enhance name recognition for the university in the schools. A physical presence on a school campus adds a personal touch to the recruitment effort. A recurring theme in the student interviews was the personal relationship they felt with the faculty. This personal relationship should be emphasized in any marketing plan. In conjunction with the personal relations students feel with their professors, it should be stressed that the program prepares students to pass the state exams. Ideally, the university should have a marketing team dedicated to promoting educational leadership programs. The K-12 sector will always have teachers who retire and are replaced with younger teachers who will eventually want to obtain a master's degree.

A probable major obstacle to recruitment of new students to the program is the cost of attending SHSU. As noted in Table 3, the cost to obtain a degree at SHSU is significantly more than the price at other public universities. While the reviewer is cognizant of financial constraints on public universities and that SHSU is third from the bottom in state funding, it is imperative to investigate ways to attract students to the university. Students are becoming more financially savvy due to the high cost of obtaining a college degree. Today's students compare programs to determine the most cost-effective method of attaining their goal.

Since the program is 100% online, it might be possible to waive specific fees from which the student derives little or no direct benefit. For example, some of the fees such as Student Center (\$100), Recreational Sports (\$100), Medical (\$75), Intercollegiate Athletic Fee (\$20/SCH), Student Service Fee (\$16/SCH) might be waived. Waiving these fees, while helpful, still does not make the program financially competitive with other programs in the state. Other options might include differential tuition, additional funds for scholarships, tuition waiver for the first two classes taken, etc.

If the university seriously entertains the idea of modifying the program to 8-week terms, it needs to carefully consider the concerns mentioned previously and consider the impact on other university functions such as admissions, financial aid, registrar, etc. Most importantly, program quality is essential and must be preserved. It has been argued that classes are taught in a shortened time period, usually eight weeks, during the summer session, so why not offer the content in 8-week terms year-round? Input from program faculty is critical. Any adoption of an 8-week term must be periodically assessed to make sure that program quality is maintained.

Adjunct and mentoring training is a continual process. It is recommended that the university develop a training program for new adjuncts to complete before teaching a class. This program could be housed on the Blackboard LMS and could cover topics pertinent to the program and administrative functions, such as how to use Blackboard effectively, how to submit grades, etc. It is further suggested that training modules be developed for each course an adjunct might teach. This could ensure consistency among sections of the course. These modules should cover the expectations of the course, required activities, use of rubrics for evaluation, etc. As faculty retire or move to other positions, course consistency must be maintained.

The department and university should assess the impact of eliminating the program's administrative assistant position. With over 150 students in the program, it appears that many of the clerical tasks are falling upon the program director and consuming her time.

## **CONCLUDING REMARKS**

The SHSU program is to be commended for its relevance and strength in preparing candidates to be school leaders. Current and former students are very complimentary of the preparation they have received in the program, and they pass the state-required exams at a high level. This indicates high-quality instruction.

Faculty obviously care about students and develop personalized relationships with them. The faculty enjoy a high level of moral support, especially from the chair and dean, and financial support from more senior administration. The program has the flexibility to utilize highly qualified adjuncts as needed.

Overall, the program is strong and has adapted well to the requirements imposed upon it by the TEA. While the program is experiencing a decline in enrollment, it is possible for the faculty and administration to develop solutions collaboratively to address issues affecting the decline.