

## Chapter 3

# Using eCollege to Facilitate Learning, Provide for Program Coherence, Manage Accountability Innovations, and Ensure the Evolution of a Principal Licensure Program

*Connie Fulmer*

My love affair with online learning started at Northern Illinois University (NIU) when an email for professional development landed in my inbox with an opportunity for curriculum enhancement and *how to hang it on the Web*. The specific curricular enhance was *writing across the curriculum*, but it was the Web part that caught by eye. I signed up and two weeks later I had mastered some basic HTML and was able to create web pages to support my leadership classes at NIU. With these newfound skills, I set about the task of creating an online environment intended to support the learning activities in my courses. I uploaded specific course information that included: (a) the official course description, (b) information about me as the instructor, (c) course objectives and assignments, (d) reading assignments for each class meeting, (e) structural outline notes for each reading assignment, (f) a glossary of terms specific to this course for students to add definitions during the course, and (g) a clickable calendar. Lost in this work, I spent hours in these labor-of-love activities using technology to enhance my teaching repertoire.

Later when I joined the Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies (ALPS) faculty at the University of Colorado Denver, we began using Colorado Education Online (CEO), powered by the FirstClass system, to deliver our distance-learning programs. By creatively using folders and icons, we were able to create an environment where students could find assignments, upload letters of introduction, and other assignments as needed. Even though CEO was primarily an email system, it provided a commons area where we could create folders for anyone to access. We soon learned that we could create one folder for the entire program, and within that one program folder we could add a folder for each of the learning domains (which for the Principal program was four domains). This simple common folder structure provided students continuity and structure as they proceed thorough our intensive 32 credit-hour principal licensure program. Within each of the four domain folders, faculty added folders with assignments, assessments, reading lists and other course activities and strategies. We also added a folder for the clinical-practice element of our program. While CEO was not designed to host online courses, it did a great job and had some special features. For instance, you could create work in an email message and send it directly to the appropriate program folder. However, over time, faculty were encouraged to make the switch to eCollege.

At first, we were skeptical. We questioned whether or not eCollege could meet the needs of our already strong teaching and learning culture. We also questioned whether eCollege would enable us to transfer the nested folder structure for our program. Finally, we questioned whether eCollege would enable us the ability to give faculty and students access to course shells beyond the traditional single semester time frame (e.g., ALPS cohorts require a four-semester time frame for completion) as well after the end of a particular cohort. We found out that eCollege could meet all of our needs so,

eCollege became our course delivery system. We were pleased to find out that eCollege was easy to master. As the years have passed, we have become quite comfortable with eCollege. It can be heard around the sixth floor in the Lawrence Street Center, that before we'd switch to a new course delivery system, someone would have to pry our "mice" out of our cold dead fingers.

### **Providing for Program Coherence**

We begin each new principal licensure cohort with a dedicated course shell in eCollege that stays active and accessible to students throughout their entire program. We use this program course shell to provide structure and coherence for students, just as we did in CEO. I will briefly outline how we structure this course shell (see Table 1) because the structure illustrates how we use this course shell.

### **Course Home**

The first unit in the left navigation area is by default called "Course Home." Under this unit we include the following content items (a) program syllabus, (b) ALPS Handbook, (c) Wacky Weather Protocols, (d) Registration Information, (e) information for students seeking a Master of Arts MA or an Educational Specialist EdS degree, (f) graduation information, (g) licensure information, and (h) a class list.

### **Program Texts**

The second unit is called "Program Texts." This tab not only lists the names of all the required and optional reading for the entire program but also includes links to publishers, book vendors, and other resources separated by learning domains (i.e., leadership; school improvement, instructional leadership and evaluation, and equity).

### **PBAs**

The third unit is called "PBAs," which stands for performance-based assessments. Under this unit, there are four content items—one for each of the learning domains in the program. This unit (and the four content items) outlines information about each of the performance-based assessment in our program. Things such as rationale statements, descriptions for specific PBAs, guiding questions for student learning activities, specific reading assignments, web-based resources, required learning activities and work products, and grading rubrics are included to help prepare students for the PBAs.

### **Clinical Practice**

The fourth unit is called "Clinical Practice." Because of the complex nature of clinical practice, there are six different content items under this unit. Specifically, there is one for (a) a clinical practice contract between the intern and the school site supervisor, (b) a form and directions for writing clinical practice goals, (c) a form and directions for writing clinical practice logs, (d) the clinical practice evaluation form and instructions for its administration and collection, (e) a data sheet for collecting information regarding the site of the clinical practice experience and the school site supervisor, (e) information on how to register your school supervisor to receive university credit for supervising the principal candidate, and (f) the clinical practice handbook. Each of the items are included to help ensure students have a successful clinical practice.

### **Portfolio**

The fourth unit is called "Portfolio." This section of the course shell describes the requirements for the end of program portfolio that students complete. More specifically, here students learn how to construct the required elements of their program

portfolios (i.e., portfolio cover page, table of contents, leadership resume, CDE standards evidence matrix, performance-based assessments, clinical-practice documentation, professional growth plan, graduate degree requirements and faculty approval of final portfolio).

**Table 1. Overall Structure of Program Course Shell in eCollege**

<b>Course Home</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Program Syllabus</li> <li>• ALPS Handbook</li> <li>• Wacky Weather Protocols</li> <li>• Registration Information</li> <li>• MA &amp; EdS</li> <li>• Graduation Information</li> <li>• Licensure Information</li> <li>• Class List</li> </ul>
<b>Program Texts</b>
<b>PBAs</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• PBA1</li> <li>• PBA2</li> <li>• PBA3</li> <li>• PBA4</li> </ul>
<b>Clinical Practice</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• CP Contract</li> <li>• CP Goals</li> <li>• CP Log</li> <li>• CP Reflections</li> <li>• CP Evaluation</li> <li>• Data Sheet</li> <li>• SS Reg Form</li> <li>• CP Handbook</li> </ul>
<b>Portfolio</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Initial Review</li> <li>• 2<sup>nd</sup> Review</li> <li>• 3<sup>rd</sup> Review</li> <li>• Final Review</li> <li>• Portfolio Guidelines</li> </ul>
<b>Standards</b>
<b>Self-Assessment</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Surveys 1-4</li> <li>• Professional Growth Charts</li> <li>• Professional Growth Plan</li> </ul>
<b>Denver Dates</b>

**Standards**

The sixth unit is called “Standards.” Our principal program was designed to meet three sets of standards: (a) Colorado performance standards for principals, (b) Colorado performance standards for administrators (CDE), and (c) the national standards called the ELCC-NCATE standards (National Policy Board for Educational

Administration, 2002). During their program, students must demonstrate their knowledge of these standards and are evaluated on this knowledge.

### **Self-Assessment**

The seventh unit is called “Self-Assessment.” Self-assessment is an important component of the principal program and under this unit students can find 11 online surveys that they must complete at four times throughout their program to demonstrate their levels of understanding. A Professional Growth Chart is also located under this unit. The Professional Growth Chart is an excel file that students use to enter their self-assessment scores (from the 11 online self-assessment surveys) throughout their program. The excel file creates a visual representation in the form of a graph of students’ progress during their program. This graph is then used by students to help them to create a professional growth plan for once they graduate.

### **Denver Dates**

The last unit is called “Denver Dates.” This unit includes information about all face-to-face meetings (e.g., dates, times, location, agenda) organized by semester.

This overall structure is common to each ALPS principal licensure cohort. Using these eCollege tools to support the teaching and learning culture we developed in our days of using CEO has served us well to provide an organized learning environment and therefore, program coherence between faculty teaching in the program and between cohorts starting in different semesters and in partnership with different school districts.

### **Managing Accountability Innovations**

eCollege has provided our team with the virtual space to create, manage, and administer several online accountability tools (i.e., self assessments for Colorado Department of Education principal performance standards, performance-based assessments, a reflective justification paragraphs and grading rubrics, a scurry matrix, and a professional growth plan). Keeping in mind the literature on effective assessment (Chappius, Stiggins, Arter, & Chappius, 2003; Wiggins & McTighe, 1998, 2007) and effective online delivery (Baker, 2003; Hutchins, 2003; Pennsylvania State University, 2002), we developed these accountability tools to address both the assessment *‘of’* learning and *‘for’* learning. Each of these accountability tools is described in more detail in the following paragraphs.

### **Self-Assessments**

We ask students to self assess their perceived levels of competency for each of the principal standards. We initially had students rate themselves using the following scale: (a) no to little evidence, (b) some evidence, (c) conceptual evidence, or (d) performance evidence (Fulmer, 2005). However, we have since adopted Wiggins’ and McTighe’s (1998) six facets of understanding to structure our self-assessments using a three levels of proficiency scale (i.e., emergent, proficient, and exemplary) which is explained in Table 2.

The rationale behind this is that if a leader can explain, interpret, and apply knowledge, dispositions, and skills, then they can pretty much get the work of a leader accomplished. But if they can do those three skills and add characteristics of perspective, empathy, and self-reflection, they are providing evidence of a polished professional leader. These self-assessments are administered online in eCollege.

**Table 2. Three Levels of Proficiency Scale**

<i>Emergent Understanding</i>	If students select <i>Emergent Understanding</i> , it means they can provide an <u>explanation</u> of (a) the knowledge, dispositions, and skills, related to the standard, (b) the appropriate and related literature and the general contents of those works to the standard, (c) how the context of their school environment might influence their choices for action as a leader, and (d) what strategies they might employ as a future leader.
<i>Proficient Understanding</i>	If students select <i>Proficient Understanding</i> , it means they can not only can <u>explain</u> , but also <u>interpret</u> and <u>apply</u> (a) the knowledge, dispositions, and skills, related to the standard, (b) the appropriate and related literature and the general contents of those works to the standard, (c) how the context of their specific school environment might influence their choices for action as a leader, and (d) what strategies they might employ in the future.
<i>Exemplary Understanding</i>	If students select <i>Exemplary Understanding</i> , it means they are able to <i>not only</i> <u>explain</u> , <u>interpret</u> , and <u>apply</u> (a) the knowledge, dispositions, and skills, related to the standard, (b) the appropriate and related literature and the general contents of those works to the standard, (c) how the context of their specific school environment might influence their choices of action as a leader, and (d) what strategies they might use in the future, <i>but also</i> do so with <u>perspective</u> , <u>empathy</u> , and <u>self-reflection</u> .

**Performance-Based Assessments**

The basic idea of a PBA in our program is that there are certain activities that principals need to be able to do to run a school. PBAs provide students with structured opportunities to demonstrate that they know and are able to complete these specific activities. Thus, students carry out these activities in their own school environment with other teachers and administrators. Each of our four learning domains (i.e., leadership, school improvement, instructional leadership and evaluation, and equity) has specific PBAs and each PBA is structured around specific activities and aligned with certain standards.

Students can read about each PBA in the eCollege program course shell. Each PBA has an outline that explains the rationale for the assessment as well as descriptions, guiding questions, reading requirements and web-based resources. Once the student has completed the PBA, he or she prepares what we call a learning narrative (which follows a specific format with standard headings). Throughout the learning narrative, students determine where best to add specific reflective-justification paragraphs demonstrating what they have done and learned. The PBAs are then evaluated with rubrics specifically created for these projects (using the same levels of proficiency as listed in Table 2). Students’ work is viewed as developmental and students are expected to improve their work based on the feedback they receive throughout their program.

**Reflective-Justification Paragraphs and Rubrics**

In addition to Self-Assessments and PBAs, students in our program also write reflective justification paragraphs for each CDE standard cited in their learning narratives. When writing these, students strive (a) to use the standard correctly, (b) to cite relevant literature to support the use of the standard, (c) to use the standard and the

literature citation in the context of their specific school environment, and (d) to (based on the information provided in the prior three sections) outline the steps, stages, strategies, or their preferred response repertoire for how they would behave as a leader.

The Reflective-Justification rubric has been created for both students and faculty. Students use the rubric to create their reflective-justification paragraphs. Faculty use the rubric to determine if the reflective-justification paragraphs meet the program requirements.

### **The Scurry Matrix**

The scurry matrix tool, is a simple standards matrix. It is named after the character *Scurry* from Johnson and Blanchard's (1998) book *Who Moved My Cheese*. The standards are listed down the left side of the document and the four learning domains of the program are listed across the top. Students use this matrix to demonstrate their mastery of standards by learning domain. While student work is only required to be at the proficient level, we encourage students to reach the exemplary level. Students use the Scurry Matrix and their Self Assessment results to complete their Professional Growth plan.

### **The Professional Growth Plan**

The Professional Growth Plan is the last accountability innovation that we use. The plan is a structured interview protocol that student's complete in preparation for their final portfolio evaluation. Students are asked to think about their self-assessment results and any standards they might still need to provide evidence of mastery on. Students are also asked whether or not there are any areas of knowledge or skills they feel they still need to acquire and if so, how they plan to acquire them. Similarly, students are asked how they plan to stay current in their field (e.g., what journals will they read or what professional organizations will they join). Students are also asked how they plan to improve their leadership skills. And finally students are asked to identify some leadership goals they hope to attain once they graduate. This Professional Growth Plan is meant to serve as a link between the end of our program and the beginning of their practice as school leaders.

### **Reflecting on the Student Experience**

The learning curve for our program is quite predictable. During the first semester students and faculty alike are quite pleased with the program. However, the second semester is perhaps the toughest semester –which our FCQs reflect. We surmise that this has something to do with the tuition bill being due for a second semester in a row while at the same time, the pile of books (and therefore reading) seems to be increasing almost exponentially. No one believes they can read all of the required information in a lifetime let alone in the four short semesters of the program.

The goal of the program is take teachers who want to be principals into the program and to push out future leaders at the end of the program who are capable of running a school *on day one*. But in the middle of the program, many students question their sanity and try to figure out how to balance their work, their program, and their families day-to-day. Some think of quitting. Some actually do. But for those who stay, the magic happens in the third semester.

By the third semester, students have figured out how our innovative accountability and assessment system works. They become more familiar with the literature and their required readings and begin to “name drop” key authors and concepts they found in the readings. They stand taller and take on a new more confident identity of an educator

ready for a new position of leadership in the future. They find themselves more comfortable with the workload of the program while at the same time realizing that the work of a principal is more difficult than previously thought.

During the fourth and last semester, most are pushing hard to graduate on time. However, many are already looking for an open principal position. Faculty, on the other hand, are already thinking about how to modify learning assignments and elements in the eCollege shell to better support student learning.

### **Ensuring the Continual Evolution of the Principal Licensure Program**

eCollege has provided the virtual space in which to offer a fully online principal licensure program. This space became our training ground to develop new performance-based assessments and accountability systems to help us prepare educational leaders. As we perfected our program and performance-based assessments in the online cohort, we took them to our face-to-face cohorts. However, our program is continually evolving and improving. We are always happy to start each new cohort, because we get a chance to make any needed changes to our program. As a result, this next group of students is always getting the best possible version of our program.

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**Bio**

Connie Fulmer earned her Ph.D. in Educational Administration at The Pennsylvania State University and started her academic career at Northern Illinois University, where she held the following leadership positions: Faculty Chair of Educational Administration and School Business Management; Associate Department Chair of Leadership and Educational Policy Studies; and Interim Chair of the Teacher Education Department. In July of 2000, Connie joined the Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies faculty here at UCD and became first Program Chair of the ALPS Principal Licensure Program, then Division Coordinator of Administrative Leadership and Policy Studies, and most recently Director of the Teacher Education Division.