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## Issues of access and excellence: New faculty expectations and evaluations

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## Issues of Access and Excellence

### New Faculty Expectations and Evaluations

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People who become educational leadership professors usually come to their new occupation with a range of skills and experiences. Most doctoral preparation programs in educational leadership however do not always prepare future faculty members to address conflicts that arise when the actual roles and responsibilities of the new faculty member conflict with either their own norms and values or the institutions' norms, values, or mission. This case is an opportunity to consider how new faculty prepare for entrance into the professoriate. This case guides the reader through an exploration of faculty expectations of their students and themselves and how to plan student evaluations given students' characteristics in the context and the culture of the institution. Future faculty members can benefit from a thoughtful consideration of themselves and how their expectations for themselves and their students affect the teaching and learning process.

**Keywords:** *access and excellence; equity; grade inflation; Hispanic; preparing future faculty; research university*

### Case Narrative

#### Introduction

Last year, Maria Escobar graduated with her Ed.D. in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of the Rocky Mountains (URM). URM is a research-extensive university located in a large cosmopolitan city in a Rocky Mountain state. Maria had the opportunity during her 4-year doctoral program to work closely with a number of nationally and internationally known scholars. Maria worked very hard; she and her family made a number of sacrifices (e.g., reduced income as a result of quitting work

to be a full-time student, less time with her family) so she could finish the academically rigorous URM program.

Maria is the youngest of five children. Her two brothers and two sisters graduated from high school; however, Maria was the only sibling to attend college. Maria is 41 years old and married to Joel, age 48. She and her physical therapist husband have two children. Their daughter, Danette, is 8 years old, and their son, Gregory, is 5 years old. Maria was an elementary school teacher for 10 years and an assistant principal for 3 years before she left her job at Gila Canyon School District to work on her doctorate full-time at URM.

Her close-knit family supported her decision to return to school to earn a doctorate. For Maria, earning a doctorate was well worth the effort and sacrifice; she had considered leaving the K-12 environment to become a professor for many years. The program at URM was very rigorous. The curriculum was coherent and organized with the goal of either preparing future school and university leaders or preparing future educational leadership faculty. Students graduated with the research and leadership skills and the knowledge necessary to become either a school or university leader or a university professor. The faculty had leading scholars and practitioners in both K-12 education and higher education. Admissions and graduation standards were high. Maria was proud to have graduated from such a demanding program—Maria knew she was well prepared for the professoriate.

Maria is now a new assistant professor in the Department of Educational Leadership at Southwest Sunshine University (SSU). This is her first semester at SSU. Maria was hired to teach mostly qualitative research methodology courses. However, she was also expected to teach courses in K-12 supervision and law. Maria was expected to publish two to three peer-reviewed journal articles per year, teach two courses a semester, and serve on no more than five to seven departmental, college, or university committees. She was also expected to serve on at least five dissertation committees her first year. Dr. Tiller, the department chair, told Maria to try to spend about 45% of her time researching and writing, another 45% on teaching, and the remaining 10% of her time on service-related activities. SSU is classified as a Hispanic-serving, research-intensive university located in an urban Southwestern city of nearly 500,000 people. Maria was excited when she received a job offer from SSU.

Although she had a number of other job opportunities, Maria wanted to work at SSU for two reasons. First, she wanted to work at a university where most of the students were students of color. One of her goals was to help graduate students of color receive advanced degrees. She wanted these students to return to their schools as role models for children of color. Second, her husband received his undergraduate degree from SSU and most of his

immediate and extended family still lived in the community. Maria's parents were both deceased and she and her husband wanted to be closer to family. SSU seemed to be a perfect match. She began working at SSU last August.

### **The University and Its Community**

At the beginning of the semester, Maria attended a mandatory new faculty orientation. Dr. Sichi, the university provost, was the keynote speaker. During his presentation, Dr. Sichi made the following points:

- More than 70% of SSU's students were Hispanic. Many SSU students, faculty, and staff speak and write in Spanish and English. The community is poor: The 1999 median per capita annual income for Sunshine County—the county where SSU is located—was only \$14,421. The community is also undereducated; the 2000 census showed that only 66.8% of the local population obtained a high school diploma and only 13.6% obtained a bachelor's degree. These figures were similar to national statistics that showed that, "Among adult whites, 89 percent finish high school and nearly 30 percent obtain a college degree. Among Hispanics, only 57 percent finish high school and about 10 percent earn a college degree" (Pew Hispanic Center, 2002, p. 1).
- SSU plays an important role in the community. Most people in the community realized that education, particularly higher education, was the most likely means for individuals to pull themselves out of poverty and for the community to increase the opportunity and equity of its citizens. The university is the educational, intellectual, and cultural center of the community.
- More than 45% of incoming SSU freshmen are required to take remedial noncredit coursework to improve their literacy and numeracy skills and knowledge. Despite this fact, the cumulative grade point average (GPA) of graduating seniors and graduate students is extremely high. "Our students," said Dr. Sichi, "do amazingly well. By the time they graduate, their academic skills, reflected by their high GPA, are excellent. We demand, expect, and usually receive a high level of academic rigor from our students."
- "However, the dropout rates of our undergraduates," said Dr. Sichi, "is 32.5% in the first year, 45.8% in the second year, 52.2% in the third year, and 57.8% in the fourth year. We must do everything we can as an institution to dramatically increase our retention rates."
- "Another troubling issue," said Dr. Sichi, "is the fact that those who graduate with an undergraduate degree from our institution within a 6-year period are 12 times more likely to be in significantly higher socioeconomic status categories and have parents or siblings who earned college degrees than those students who fail to earn their bachelor's degree. And to make matters seem even worse, 90% of our students, regardless of whether they are undergraduate or graduate students, are first-generation college students."

- Throughout the nation, Hispanic participation in K-16 education is troubling. In K-12 education, the Hispanic high school drop-out rate has been “quite grave and . . . has serious long-term implications for the education system, Latino communities and the nation as a whole” (Fry, 2003, p. iii). In higher education, a recent Pew Hispanic Center (2004) report found that Hispanic participation was less intense and at lower academic levels than other ethnic groups. The report said,

Nearly 1.7 million Hispanic students were enrolled in our nation’s 4,100 degree-granting colleges and universities in fall 2002. A big share of these students, 87%, are undergraduates (rather than graduate or first-professional students). In comparison, undergraduates make up 81% of all white college students. (p. 2)

- National Hispanic enrollment in graduate school is very small. According to Fry (2002), “Among 25- to 34-year-old high school graduates, nearly 3.8 percent of whites are enrolled in graduate school. Only 1.9 percent of similarly aged Latino high school graduates are pursuing post-baccalaureate studies” (p. 4).

After Dr. Sichi’s presentation, faculty were encouraged to ask questions. Armando Ortega, a new physics professor, asked Dr. Sichi if the high SSU graduating student GPA was the result of grade inflation. Dr. Sichi answered that although grade inflation was a possibility, high achievement was a more likely explanation.

Maria thought to herself, “How is this possible when more than 45% of new students take remedial classes at a university that has justifiably prided itself on a very open admission policy?” It did not make sense. In addition, the attrition rate was so high that it must be one of the reasons graduating students had high GPAs—the students who were struggling academically dropped out while the academically successful students stayed and completed their degrees. She knew grade inflation was an ongoing research issue and a source of debate for decades. She decided to ask a follow-up question.

“Dr. Sichi,” said Maria, “maybe grade inflation is not really the issue here. I wonder,” she continued, “are we really talking about compromising academic excellence in order to have relatively open university admissions policies? In other words, in achieving our institutional goal to allow more people of color and those from low socioeconomic backgrounds to receive post-secondary education, have we, in effect, lowered the bar on what we ask from our students academically? I guess,” said Maria, “that I am uncertain about how we, as a university and as individual faculty members, institutionalize high expectations of academic rigor from students whom I would argue have rarely had any educator in their lifetime expect great things of them.”

Dr. Sichi stared at Maria. After a few moments of silence, Dr. Sichi said, “That’s a great question. We are not, nor do we intend to be, a highly selective or even a selective research university. Instead, we are a university that works very hard to provide an outstanding education for our students who happen to be mostly low socioeconomic status students of color. I am not sure how it happens but it *does* seem to happen—we do expect a great deal of our students and they do seem to perform at high academic levels. We do not have a thumb on really understanding the process. Anecdotally, I can tell you that individual faculty, departments, and colleges across campus demand a great deal of our students.”

Maria remembered that some researchers had argued that academic rigor and excellence increases as student selectivity increases. Braxton and Nordvall (1985) for example found evidence to suggest that institutional selectivity is “an indicator of institutional quality” (p. 550). Furthermore, Braxton (1993) said, “Undergraduate admission selectivity is a common defining characteristic of the academic quality or excellence of a given college or university” (p. 657).

The new faculty orientation ended with Maria still wondering about the expectations of student rigor by faculty, administrators, and students. Did students, faculty, and administrators have similar or different beliefs about student academic expectations in general and rigor in particular? Did having an open enrollment policy mean that quality was low?

### **Speaking to Colleagues**

When Maria had some free time, she decided to ask other faculty members in the department what they thought about the university’s policy of maintaining open access while having high academic expectations of its students. Before she began talking to her colleagues, she wondered if she was the only one who had questions about how the university’s access and excellence policies affected students and faculty. Maria found four colleagues that day willing to spend some time talking about her concerns.

Her first conversation was with Dr. David Miller. Dr. Miller was a tenured full professor and had been at SSU for 17 years. He taught mostly leadership courses. Maria asked Dr. Miller what he thought about the university’s access and excellence policy.

Dr. Miller said, “Maria, as you know, our graduate students are mostly principals, superintendents, or midlevel university administrators. While I lament the fact that a number of our students are here only to obtain a credential for advancement or prestige, I have come to realize over the years that we cannot expect too much from them. After all, they all work full-time and

come to our program on a part-time basis. To complicate matters, most are married and have children. They have so much on their plate. I think we need to be lenient in our approach and not ask too much of them. Let's be honest, most of our graduate students are just going to return to the same jobs at their schools and district offices and do what they have always done—but they will do it as a doctor.”

Next, Maria spoke to Dr. Lori Jones. Dr. Jones was a tenured associate professor. She had been at SSU for 9 years. Dr. Jones was the quantitative research methodologist in the department. After speaking to Dr. Miller, Maria asked Dr. Jones what she thought was the right amount of rigor for students. “How do you know,” asked Maria, “just how much to ask of our students?”

Dr. Jones said, “I know how hard our students work. I realize they have busy lives and I am very familiar with the university's desire to have an open enrollment system, even for graduate students. Because of this knowledge, I always ask myself if I am appropriately tempering my enthusiasm for rigor and my proclivity to ratchet up my course requirements with their need to obtain success in the form of an advanced degree, to ‘have a life,’ and to be able to sleep now and again. I must admit that this whole process of finding the right fit between allowing students into the program who really should not be here and creating a rigorous academic program is very frustrating. Unfortunately,” continued Dr. Jones, “this is a conversation (maybe it's really a debate) that will never end—we all believe different things about access and excellence.”

Maria asked Dr. Jones a follow-up question. “Lori,” asked Maria, “can you give me an example from your classroom where the issues of access and excellence come up? I want to know if balance is ever possible.”

“Sure,” said Dr. Jones. “In my advanced doctoral quantitative class for example I talk about the important link and the balance between research and practice. I want my students to realize that theory informs practice and practice informs theory. Frequently however, students tell me they are not that interested in theory and research; they say they don't need it. They seem to be only interested in concrete examples of practice. In fact, some of these students have told me in class that reading peer-reviewed research is a waste of time. When I ask these students to explain themselves, they say their many years of work experiences are far more helpful in solving an educational leadership problem than is any understanding and application of theory. There is one student—I think he's a coach—who recently told me, ‘I always go with my gut instincts. I'm usually right.’ It's difficult to change that kind of thinking. Students like my coach see the doctorate as a credential—they will continue to depend on their experience to lead schools while they earn a

degree that helps them get a better, higher paying job. But to be fair, there are many other students who clearly see the importance of theory and practice.”

Next, Maria talked with Dr. Antonio Garcia. Dr. Garcia was a 4th-year assistant professor. He taught multicultural, evaluation, and policy courses. Dr. Garcia responded to Maria’s question about access and excellence saying, “As a faculty member, I understand and appreciate that for some students, a graduate degree is merely a lane change, a way to make more money. I find nothing wrong with furthering one’s career objectives. This is a ‘bootstrap’ community we live and work in. Students everywhere have a practical motivation for going to college. We have,” continued Dr. Garcia, “an obligation to have both a fairly open admissions policy—so that disadvantaged students have an opportunity to achieve their educational goals—but we also have an obligation to push hard for excellence.” Maria asked Dr. Garcia, “Tony, define what you mean by pushing hard for excellence.” Dr. Garcia replied, “Most of our students, including our graduate students, have not had the same educational opportunities as others in other parts of the country have had. We are, for the most part, poor and brown. Therefore, we have students who have the intellectual ability to achieve but who, frankly, have never been asked to work hard academically. It’s incumbent upon us to ask them to achieve at the same levels as anyone else. We cannot forget that they will be competing with others who have had the benefit of privilege, be it economic or racial privilege. Consequently, we must push our students hard so that they can be competitive with everyone. We do not serve our students well if we ask too little of them or reward mediocre effort with grade inflation. We must create competitive, challenging, and rigorous academic programs here so that our students will be highly skilled, thoughtful, capable, and caring school leaders. We do our students and ourselves a disservice to do otherwise.”

Finally, Maria spoke to the chair of the Educational Leadership Department, Dr. Norman Tiller. Dr. Tiller had only been the chair for 3 years. He had come to the university from a public research-intensive institution in the Northeast. Maria asked Dr. Tiller what he thought about the issues of access and excellence in their graduate program.

Dr. Tiller said he was very much aware of the issues. Dr. Tiller said, “I just went to a meeting in which the provost of the university asked all of the deans and the department chairs to do what they could to increase university enrollment. We need to boost our graduate student admissions, plain and simple. As funding from the state legislature continues to decline, the university must come up with additional funding sources; graduate students are worth many full-time equivalent bonus points, Maria. We need to be more flexible on who we admit.”



“But Norman,” asked Maria, “there are only so many good candidates out there. If we open up the admission gates even wider, aren’t we significantly reducing quality?”

“Maria,” answered Dr. Tiller, “it’s much more complex than you might think. Our department is a cash cow. In fact, we bring in so much money that the university diverts much of our revenue to other programs on campus that are in a financial bind. We are, in effect, the cash cow of the entire university. I’m getting a great deal of pressure to keep our enrollments high; we have an obligation to the university. And besides, Maria,” said Dr. Tiller, “we will not have many students if we increase our admissions standards.”

Maria left Dr. Tiller’s office. Maria remembered that a professor in her undergraduate education program had talked about an unspoken and sometimes even a spoken agreement high school teachers and students sometimes made with each other to ensure that neither the teacher nor the students pushed the other too hard in class (Powell, Farrar, & Cohen, 1985). She also reminded herself that universities and university students were very different than they were several years ago. Students had become, said one of the professors in her doctoral program, more like consumers (Delucci & Korgen, 2002) who expected high grades, were keenly aware of the grading reward structure (Kuh & Hu, 1999), and felt entitled to their university degrees.

She thought back to her own graduate school days. Maria remembered a session from a class she took near the end of her doctoral program. The class was designed to help students prepare for a career in the professoriate. The faculty preparation class was similar to the Preparing Future Faculty programs (Council of Graduate School, 2004; also see Adams, 2002; Gaff, Pruitt-Logan, Sims, & Denecke, 2003) popular at other universities around the country. During one class session, the doctoral students discussed and debated how they expected to grade their future students. At first blush, grading seemed so straightforward to the students: A course professor determined the grading system before the class, communicated the course grading system in the course syllabus, and made sure that students were completely aware of course expectations. The professor of this class, Dr. Bell, soon had the class wondering about what grading really meant. Dr. Bell asked students to read several articles and to debate the findings and conclusions of the articles in class.

The class first discussed and debated Birnbaum’s (1977) study about how university grade inflation may have been a reflection of the increase in student achievement over several decades. Then, the class discussed and debated a study by Ellis, Burke, Lomire, and McCormack (2003) about the positive correlation between students’ evaluation of faculty and the grades received from the faculty. Finally, the class discussed and debated Lawler’s

(2001) essay about how many of today's professors graded students not on merit but rather on how high grades were more likely to help professors keep their jobs.

Maria had copied a quote from Lawler's (2001) essay; she had scribbled it on a notepad and had kept it in her briefcase to remind herself about the ethics of grading students. According to Lawler, "Professors will not risk their self-preservation by endangering or even insulting students with low grades, and students, more than ever, seek the safest route through college and to career" (p. 136).

After speaking with her colleagues at SSU, Maria thought back to the debates in Dr. Bell's class, specifically to the idea that grading had so many subtleties and that it was difficult not to be subjective and biased in assessing what grades students would earn. Maria knew that it was possible that the knowledge of, an appreciation for, and even a (positive or negative) bias about her students—aside from their meritocracy of their respective performance in a class—could influence the grades students earned from her.

Maria wondered whether she had become socialized in graduate school to expect lower standards and higher grades despite what she learned in Dr. Bell's class. Did she and her colleagues, after receiving their doctorates and becoming newly minted professors, pass on expectations of less work and higher grades? She promised herself to only give grades to students based solely on the merit of their work in a course.

Maria was aware that students, faculty, and administrators at other research universities often struggled with issues surrounding the promotion and institutionalization of access and excellence (Roper, 2004) as well as with grading philosophies and practices. She was also aware of the recent Levine (2005) report that said some new doctoral programs in educational administration (SSU's doctoral program was only 7 years old) "have turned out to be little more than graduate credit dispensers. They award the equivalent of green stamps, which can be traded in for raises and promotions" (p. 24). Furthermore, Levine said, "A growing number of education schools are lowering admission standards, watering down programs, and offering quickie degrees. This can only be described as a 'race to the bottom'" (p. 24).

Maria wondered if her department was racing to the bottom too. She wondered if her department, individually or collectively, in light of their own issues of access and excellence, was contributing to the poor "overall quality of educational administration programs in the United States" (Levine, 2005, p. 23). For the first time, she had doubts about her choice to become a professor.

Maria thought back to her conversations with the provost and her colleagues. Now, Maria told herself, it was time to think even more carefully

about her roles and responsibilities as a new professor. At that moment, she realized how her epistemology about education and her commitment to teaching and learning had changed so much in such a short time.

### **Teaching Notes**

People who become educational leadership professors usually come to their new occupation with a range of research and teaching skills, experience as educators, and experience as administrators. Most doctoral preparation programs in educational leadership (and arguably in most other disciplines) however do not always prepare future faculty members to address conflicts that can arise when the expectations faculty members have for students conflict with either the faculty member's norms or values or the institutions' norms, values, or mission. This case provides graduate students in educational leadership an opportunity to consider how they will prepare for entrance into the professoriate. This case guides the reader through an exploration of what future faculty members may expect from their future students and how to plan evaluations of those students in consideration of the student's race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and ability as well as the context and the culture of the institution. Making the transition from a graduate student to a new professor is never easy. Future faculty members can benefit from a thoughtful consideration of who they are as individuals, the expectations they bring to the professoriate, and what their roles may be as new members of an academic community.

### **Recommendations for the Instructor**

Take 15 to 20 minutes to generally discuss the case. Then, break the class into two or three groups. Ask each group to spend 20 minutes considering the major issues Maria faced as a new faculty member. Then, ask each group to discuss or debate their conclusions. The following questions are provided as a guide for the discussion.

1. Why do you think different faculty members, including Maria and the provost, had different opinions about access, admissions, academic excellence, grading, expectations of and by students, and rigor?
2. How might a faculty member's race, gender, sexual orientation, or the type of courses one teaches influence how one thinks about these issues?
3. How do our individual identities (e.g., straight Hispanic woman teaching methodology courses; White lesbian teaching philosophy of education courses; straight African American man teaching supervision courses) and

our academic strengths, weaknesses, and abilities influence how we teach and think about these issues?

4. How might a faculty member's knowledge and beliefs about a student's race, gender, sexual orientation, academic ability, or academic interest, for instance, influence what the faculty member expects from a student? How might that knowledge influence the way a faculty member evaluates a student?
5. How might the similarities and dissimilarities between a faculty member and their students influence the way faculty members perceive and evaluate themselves, their students, and the norms and values of their institutions? How important is it for faculty and their students to be aware of the effect that racial, cultural, gender, sexual orientation, and ability differences may have when these differences (or similarities) "intersect" in the classroom?
6. How would you approach these same issues?
7. According to Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004), approximately 68 percent of all students who enter 9th grade will graduate "on time" with regular diplomas in 12th grade. While the graduation rate for white students is 75 percent, only approximately half of Black, Hispanic, and Native American students earn regular diplomas alongside their classmates.

"While a great deal of attention has focused on the high school dropout rate for Hispanics and others, the college dropout rate may be just as significant" (Fry, 2002, pp. 6-7). Given the low attendance and low completion rates of Hispanics (and other students of color) in undergraduate and graduate programs in the nation, what obligations, if any, do colleges and universities have to admit and to graduate students of color and other disadvantaged students (e.g., from low socioeconomic backgrounds)?

8. Are the norms and the goals of access and excellence compatible or at odds with one another?
9. Is there a relationship between nonselectivity in a college or university and its practically motivated students? In other words, is there a positive relationship between universities whose objective admission criteria (e.g., GPA, GRE scores) are comparatively low and their respective students' (low) expectations of rigor and (high) expectation of easy courses and credentialing?
10. Are you aware of colleges or universities like SSU who have a large number of incoming students who need remedial work (even in graduate school) and who still graduate students with very high GPAs? Can you explain this relationship?
11. Assuming grades of undergraduate and graduate students have become inflated over the past several decades, do you tend to favor Birnbaum's (1977) argument that higher student GPAs are a reflection of increased student achievement or Ellis et al.'s (2003) findings that there is a positive relationship between students' evaluation of faculty and the grades received from the faculty, thus suggesting that faculty and students may have some unspoken mutu-

ally beneficial agreement about evaluating each other? Alternatively, do you have another explanation for grade inflation?

12. Should one's grade in a course be based solely on one's ability and achievement in that course? If not, what other factors do you think you should consider when you grade a graduate student?
13. Do you tend to agree more with Dr. Miller, Dr. Jones, Dr. Garcia, or Dr. Tiller?
14. As illustrated in this case, the issues of access and excellence are complex and often confusing. In general, there are many different opinions about university access and excellence. Universities (and educational leadership programs) grapple with issues such as affirmative action, social justice, quality, and selectivity. In the specific context of educational leadership programs, new doubts about the quality and the usefulness (e.g., Levine, 2005) of these programs may force many of us in the academy to reconsider our standards and our policies. What can and should you do to ensure that educational leadership programs provide both access and excellence?

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