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"From Two Different Perspectives" to Simultaneous Renewal: Program Components That Inform and Transform Practice through a University–District Leadership Preparation Partnership

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Abstract: University-district partnerships are promising models for leadership preparation programs, however many partnerships fall short of their potential. In this two-year qualitative, action research study, we examine how a university-district partnership led to the simultaneous renewal of the district and university as it sought to develop transformational school leaders. Analysis of semi-structured interviews with program participants, university staff, and district administrators indicated the impactful role of cohorts, co-teaching, and inquiry-based instruction in the continual improvement of all stakeholders. We show how each of these program components informed and transformed the university and district. We also identified partnership conditions that supported their effectiveness. Our findings inform universities and districts designing partnerships for leadership preparation and provide existing partnerships that incorporate cohorting, co-teaching, and inquiry-based instruction a better understanding of their potential impact.

Keywords: university-district partnership; simultaneous renewal; school leadership preparation; transformational leadership; cohorts; co-teaching; inquiry

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1. Introduction

Leadership preparation programs are under scrutiny as they typically lack the practical learning experiences required to understand the dynamics of school leadership [1,2]. Program participants' dissatisfaction [1] and high leadership turnover rates require a refocus on how universities prepare future school leaders.

University–district partnerships are widely recognized as valuable for educator preparation [2]. Collaboration between a university and district benefits learning experiences, providing "tangible connections between topics, structures, organizations, and other elements that function as joint entities" [3] (p. 32). A university–district partnership better aligns curriculum and coursework to the everyday expectations of district leaders and has the added support of district staff [4]. Nonetheless, university–district partnerships remain few in number [1]. They demand a high level of collaboration and require a mutual commitment to the program to remain innovative and relevant [1,4–7].

Rooted in the tradition of simultaneous renewal that understands partnerships as fruitful spaces for the continual growth of all stakeholders [8], we conducted an action research study of a university–district partnership to investigate the following research questions:

1. How does a university–district leadership preparation partnership impact both the university and district?

2. What program components of a university–district leadership preparation partnership inform and transform practice in the university and the district?

2. Literature Review

District leaders across the United States have expressed concern that leadership preparation programs often fail to adequately prepare future principals [1]. Both university and district administrators assert that a strong university–district partnership is essential for effective principal preparation programs and the development of quality school leadership [1]. The collaborative context needed for an effective partnership depends on the level of shared ownership, commitment, and involvement of all levels of leadership within the district and university [7,9,10]. Thus, understanding the conditions needed for a strong university–district partnership requires a focus on partnership relationships, as well as programmatic structures.

Research and reports from leading educational leadership organizations indicate various characteristics of effective university–district partnerships for leadership preparation. Our review of this literature revealed the following program components: (1) a shared vision, (2) joint ownership, (3) co-constructed learning experiences, including opportunities for university and district co-teaching and district-embedded experiences, and (4) a reflective culture for ongoing improvement.

2.1. Shared Vision

A shared vision is widely noted as a necessary component of strong university–district partnerships. The Partnership Effectiveness Continuum (PEC), a self-assessment tool created by the Education Development Center, names 'partnership vision' as one of the six core dimensions of effective partnerships [11]. A unified vision grounds the collaborative work between the university and district and helps delineate a common goal, which motivates individuals and behaviors [6]. When communicated to all stakeholders, a shared vision develops a collective understanding of leadership preparation and of what effective leadership looks like within the partner district specifically [10,12,13]. Furthermore, it supports the development of and communication about clear action plans that align to previously established goals [6].

2.2. Joint Ownership

Collaborative district–university leadership partnerships require joint ownership and accountability, which necessitate "active engagement and accountable structures from multiple perspectives" [14] (p. 35). Joint ownership supports a mutually vested commitment to the program's success [4] and is critical to sustaining a partnership for the long term [15]. Although 'joint ownership and accountability' is recognized in the PEC as one of six dimensions of effective partnerships [11], stakeholder involvement can be a challenge in the partnership development process [16]. One way that a partnership can address this challenge is by creating shared program governance [17]. Several studies noted that the inclusion of a formalized agreement, which clarifies each stakeholder's responsibilities as well as the district's and university's operational roles, helps sustain a partnership over time [16,18].

However, joint ownership is more than a contract; it requires developing relationships that value the multiple sources of knowledge from the university and district as a creative tension [6,19]. A leadership committee, or 'design team' consisting of stakeholders from the university and district, can ensure joint ownership and alignment with the program's vision [6]. Members of this committee should have a vested commitment to the program's success as well as "sufficient authority to enact change" [4] (p. 9) within the program. The leadership committee supports distributed leadership and collaborative decision making across stakeholders [6,19,20]. In this way, the committee can more equitably commingle district and university knowledge, honoring both perspectives and the commitment to a mutually beneficial partnership [4,20]. Accordingly, district superintendents rated 'inclu-

sion of district personnel on partnership committees' as one of the top collaborative efforts needed for strong district–university partnerships [1].

2.3. Co-Constructed Learning Experiences

Partnerships that co-construct learning experiences are more effective in preparing leaders for the field. University faculty and district educators can work together to design a relevant curriculum, responsive course pacing, and practical field-based experiences [3,4,12,13,15,16,18,21–23]. Coursework that is rigorous and relevant enhances participants' leadership skills and cultivates transformative school leaders [3,4,17,21]. The integration of district perspectives ensures courses are responsive to district-specific objectives, leadership positions, and problems of practice [7,10,23]. For example, Gonzales et al. (2020) noted how a district–university partnership focused their learning experiences on developing leadership teams after the district found that their principals struggled to develop and lead these collaborative structures [18].

Leadership preparation partnerships that co-construct learning can develop meaningful district-embedded experiences that provide opportunities for the application of new learning in clinical settings. The internship, a required component of leadership preparation programs, is one example of a district-embedded experience that—to a fault—varies in length and requirements from program to program and state to state [24]. Both the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the University Council for Educational Administration (UCEA) find the internship to be a 'high leverage' program component only when it is "tightly integrated with the curriculum . . . and provides mentor supervision" [1] (p. 15), which are more likely when a university and district work collaboratively to co-construct the internship experience [16].

Co-constructed learning experiences may include district administrators co-teaching with university faculty [4,14,23,25–27]. Co-teaching allows a partnership to "move from co-construction to implementation" and "provide[s] a structure for the integration of district and theoretical perspectives" [14] (p. 35). Thus, it intentionally and formally brings different perspectives to the classroom, bridging theory to practice in a dynamic way [4]. Research has shown that co-teaching is valuable to university faculty who often operate in isolation from the field [13], and that program participants appreciate co-teaching and recognize the interplay between theoretical and practical expertise as a positive aspect of their leadership preparation program [26,27].

2.4. Cohort Structure

Cohorts are widely recognized by researchers as a characteristic of effective leadership preparation programs [2,17]. They foster community and support the use of high-leverage practices such as inquiry [28]. Likewise, cohorts are often identified by program participants as the most influential program component [9,27]. District-specific cohorts can be even more powerful as they support intentional programming, relevant discussion, networking with district leaders, and strong relationships within the district [3,9,15,21,26,27]. In a case study exploring cohorts, Lightfoot and Thompson also found that a district-specific cohort offered the opportunity to design learning experiences that engaged students in constructing responses to district problems of practice [15].

2.5. Reflective Culture for Ongoing Improvement

Finally, an effective university–district partnership should continuously monitor the cross-institutional relationship and the leadership preparation program. Gooden et al. noted that a partnership must be "flexible and make reasonable changes" [12] (p.10) as it works to develop both programming and a mutually beneficial relationship. Partnerships benefit from a built-in system for self-assessment, reflection, and continuous improvement of programming components to better meet participant needs [21]. This process is central to the development and maintenance of a transformational partnership [17,20]. Counter to a transactional partnership, a transformational partnership challenges expectations as a way

to innovate a program and mutually enrich each organization [7,17,20,29]. Often cultivated at the partnership's inception, a culture of continuous renewal places value on program success rather than each institution's benefit. This investment to continuously improve the program relies on collaboration and mutual trust [4,6].

2.6. Need for Participatory Action Research

The majority of the studies included in this literature review are qualitative case studies where the researcher is an outside observer, unrelated to the partnership and with little influence over practice and outcomes [30]. Few studies were authored by a researcher embedded within an ongoing partnership program [6,12,26]. Research from within an active partnership reveals a coherent understanding of a partnership's strengths and weaknesses, uncovers the application of research into practice [20], and supports continuous program renewal in a systematic way. Additionally, action research concurrently informs the field of leadership preparation, offering insights that are rooted in a deep knowledge of the history, frameworks, and lived experience of developing and sustaining a university–district partnership. Finally, participatory action research reveals the nuances in implementing innovative program components while demonstrating how the research itself impacts all program stakeholders.

3. Conceptual Framework

Our research is shaped by the concepts of simultaneous renewal [30] and transformational partnership [17,20,29]. Goodlad's work on simultaneous renewal supports the notion that the preparation of educators should be accomplished through the joint efforts of universities and schools [8,31,32]. Universities acting in isolation prepare educators without moral obligation to the districts in which their graduates will soon serve. Goodlad believes that the "simultaneous renewal of schooling and the education of educators" [8] (p. 25) can be accomplished through highly collaborative university and school district partnerships. This collaborative model is interdependent and reciprocal [8]. It challenges traditional educational behaviors in an effort to develop a mutually beneficial relationship that simultaneously renews both institutions. Often driven by a center of pedagogy [8], simultaneous renewal addresses uneven power dynamics, the disconnect between theory and practice, and top-down directives, which can impede a partnership. As such, simultaneous renewal is committed to a collective mindset—the ability to develop mutual and authentic relationships between public schools and universities [32]. For partnerships to be successful, administrative support from both partners and a commitment to the partnership's vision needs to be visible [8,33,34]. The concept of simultaneous renewal guided our inquiry and analysis of how a university–district partnership informed and transformed all stakeholders, drawing our attention to program components that strengthened the program, the university, and the district.

Transformational partnerships are relationship-oriented partnerships committed to a shared vision that challenges traditional leadership norms as a way to innovate a program and mutually renew each organization [7,17,20,29]. Transformational partnerships are built upon the research of transformational leadership—leaders who engage in inquiry, challenge expectations, and recruit others into their innovative work [29]. Leadership preparation programs that are transformational partnerships model shared leadership and work collaboratively for the betterment of the organization. They cross institutional boundaries and include course content that offers situated learning experiences [17,29]. Further, their "problem-based curriculum drawn from actual school and district challenges" [17] (p. 495) becomes the primary focus of teaching and learning. Innovative practices, particularly surrounding instructional leadership and social justice leadership, can be fostered in response to district needs. The partnership under study in this paper strives to be a transformational partnership, a long-term, research-oriented partnership that employs innovative practices, such as inquiry and action research, to develop leaders for educational and social change. Moreover, the concept of transformational partnership focused our

investigation and analysis on program components that challenged and diverted from status quo practices within the university and district.

4. Background

This study examines a university–district partnership program called the Urban Leadership Collaborative (ULC; pseudonym) in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States. The ULC is informed by the Wallace Foundation's research on district–university partnerships for leadership development [35]. The goal of the partnership is to cultivate school leaders who have demonstrated a long-term commitment to the district and excellence as educators. The ULC is a five-semester program in which participants obtain their master's in educational leadership, as well as their principal's and supervisor's certifications. Participants become part of a cohort of approximately 15 educators who aspire to be subject area, school, or district leaders in the partner school district. ULC students progress through the program in their cohort, share the same advisor, and attend cohort events such as a summer orientation and fall kick-off celebration.

Although the ULC is the first formal partnership between the university and district for leadership preparation, the two have worked together within the area of teacher preparation and teacher professional development over several decades. This long-term relationship provided a foundation of trust for the development of the ULC. Like many urban areas in the United States, the district experiences extensive teacher and leader turnover and shortages. Shortages were further exacerbated soon after the launch of the ULC with the COVID-19 pandemic, which led many educators to retire or to find opportunities to transfer to their preferred district. With the ULC, the district sought to strengthen its leadership pipeline and to mitigate turnover by identifying and supporting the preparation of educators who reflect and are committed for the long term to the district's student body, approximately 90% of which identify as either Black or Latinx, 15% of which have been labeled English learner students, and 80% of which qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.

Developed collaboratively between the university and district, the ULC is tailored to district priorities, assets, needs, and protocols, as well as its community context. For example, the ULC trains students to use the district teacher observation rubric, district administrators are invited to serve as mentors through one-time events and a year-long internship, and all students are placed in assistant principal positions for summer school during their third semester in the program. In addition, two courses are co-taught by district administrators with university faculty and two courses are independently taught by district administrators. All courses require students to engage in authentic leadership experiences in their schools and, in their second year, students conduct an action research project that informs a substantive school improvement initiative carried out under their leadership. Reflecting the program's commitment to equity-oriented and anti-racist leadership that promotes social justice, students' inquiry projects have included broadening and deepening opportunities for family partnership, facilitating student transitions from middle to high school, and supporting teachers in acquiring and using materials that increase English learner students' access to the curriculum. Conceived in the 2019–2020 academic year, the ULC has now accepted its third cohort and is recruiting the fourth. The first cohort graduated in Spring 2022, and nearly half immediately assumed district leadership roles, such as assistant principal and department chair positions.

5. Methods

In this qualitative, participatory action research study [36], we use the lenses of simultaneous renewal [8] and transformative partnerships [17,29] to understand how the ULC concurrently informed and transformed the district and the university. According to Merriam and Tisdell, participatory action research is usually conducted by practitioners and community members to "challenge power relations and initiate change in their communities" [37] (p. 57). With a commitment to continual improvement [8], a faculty member who coordinates and instructs in the ULC has led a team of doctoral students to study

the implementation and impact of the program since its launch. The faculty member has engaged in this participatory action research as a reflective process and, in response to the study's findings, has exercised their institutional power to implement changes in consultation with other program leaders, who include a university and a district administrator. The ongoing iterative process of collecting data, analyzing data, and discussing findings with the district has shaped the program coordinator's practices and informed changes to the program design in a short period of time, providing an ever-more-responsive leadership preparation program for individual participants and the district.

5.1. Data Collection

Simultaneous renewal demands that data collection and analysis concurrently consider the perspectives of all stakeholders and track change over time [8]. We conducted a two-year longitudinal study that included semi-structured interviews with ULC students, university faculty and administrators engaged with the program, and district administrators who coordinate and/or teach in the program (see Table A1 for an overview of the study participants). After obtaining approval from the university institutional review board and the district research office, all ULC students from the first, second, and third cohorts were recruited to the study over email at the start of their first semester and were asked to complete three interviews—at the beginning, middle, and end of their course of study. Four university doctoral assistants recruited participants and collected data to avoid an unethical power imbalance between the lead faculty member and participants in the study. ULC students were assured that their participation would be confidential and have no impact on their employment in the district or on course grades. ULC students who consented to be a part of the study did not always complete all three rounds of interviews. In the second year of the study, all university and district personnel affiliated with the program were recruited over email to complete one interview. In total, we interviewed 19 individuals, including 13 ULC students, 4 university staff members, and 2 district staff members. Each interview lasted approximately one hour, and all interviews, due to the COVID-19 pandemic and busy schedules of the participants, were conducted virtually with the video telephony software Zoom.

The semi-structured interviews were guided by protocols that sought participants' perspectives and experiences related to how ULC students were being prepared for leadership positions in the district, specific program components (e.g., orientation; co-teaching), and the university–district partnership. For ULC students, we developed three protocols to be used at the beginning, middle, and end of their studies with questions about how they were developing as leaders, how that development was manifesting within their current positions, how the partnership was serving the community, and how the partnership was shaping the curriculum and instruction in the program. To illustrate how the ULC students' interview protocols varied over time, the first-round protocol included questions about participants' hopes and anxieties related to the program, the second interview included questions about how the program could better serve them moving forward, and the third interview protocol included questions on their year-long internship, recently completed under the mentorship of a current district administrator. We also designed specific protocols for district personnel and for university personnel, who, given their roles, were ideally positioned to speak about the development of the university–district partnership, instructional approaches, and program responsiveness to the district context. Some questions remained consistent across all protocols in order to examine ideas across study participant groups and over time, while other questions varied depending on the positionality of the study participant. For example, all study participants were asked about their perceptions of effective school leadership, anti-racist leadership, culturally responsive leadership, how prepared ULC students were to take on leadership roles in the district, and ways the program could be improved. While the doctoral assistants recruited and interviewed participants, once the data were de-identified the research team, which included the lead faculty member, analyzed data and developed findings.

5.2. Data Analysis

All interviews were transcribed, and participants were assigned pseudonyms by the doctoral assistants for confidentiality and to ensure their identities remained hidden from the lead faculty member who coordinated and taught in the program. The transcripts were then uploaded into the qualitative analysis program, Dedoose, and assigned descriptors indicating participant group (ULC student, university staff member, district staff member) and interview round (first, second, or third) for the ULC students, which allowed us to eventually compare themes across stakeholders and over time.

Subsequently, we coded the 28 interviews with codes derived both deductively and inductively [37]. Our codebook was informed by a synthesis of the literature on university–district partnerships for educator preparation (see Literature Review) and by ideas that emerged from open-coding a subset of the interviews and from research team meeting discussions about significant observations during data collection. All codes in the codebook were clearly defined, and an example for each was provided to facilitate consistent coding across the research team. To further ensure inter-rater reliability, we began the coding process by individually coding the same transcript and discussing our decision making and any discrepancies. This process helped ensure that all team members had a similar understanding of the codes and how they should be applied to the data. In addition, coding occurred in two rounds so that each transcript was coded twice by two different members of the research team. Any questions or discrepancies in coding decisions between the two coders were marked with a "revisit" code and discussed in our weekly research team meeting.

Through this process, we identified a small set of codes that emerged as significant in terms of their frequency, pointing to program components and characteristics that fostered simultaneous renewal in the district and university. Table A2 provides three of these codes with their definitions and examples. Each team member drafted a memo about one of these codes by closely examining their associated excerpts. The research team reviewed and discussed all the memos and developed a unifying framework that connected them, which was subsequently used to draft our findings.

6. Findings

From the interviews with ULC students, district administrators, and university faculty members, we identified various program components that informed and transformed all stakeholders. Specifically, three key components—cohorting, co-teaching, and inquiry-based pedagogy—were particularly impactful to the renewal of practices, institutional structures, and relationships within the university, district, and partnership program.

6.1. Cohorts

ULC students are part of a district-specific cohort, a group of aspiring leaders—from the same district—moving through courses and learning experiences together [2]. Our research findings indicate that the district-specific cohort model was a rich source of renewal for the university and district. More specifically, we found that the cohort model strengthened peer networks, augmented support, and deepened program responsiveness.

6.1.1. Strengthening Peer Networks

The district-specific cohort model strengthened peer networks by nurturing trusting relationships among colleagues. One district administrator who served as an instructor in the program saw the benefits of connecting aspiring leaders to share resources, ideas, and access to critical information: "[The ULC students] were really able to share resources with one another, like when they are brainstorming about how to [meet the internship requirements], they really were able to help one another and they were differentially positioned within the district . . . we had . . . one person working [in a] district office who was able to provide some really critical information to the rest of the cohort." Such networks strengthen the climate and culture of collegiality, which improves teacher professionalism,

job satisfaction, teacher commitment, and student outcomes [38,39], all important effects in a district experiencing leadership turnover and acute teacher shortage.

The fact that cohort members worked within the same district but at different schools fostered district-wide relationships, inter-school communication, and a deeper understanding about the community that may have otherwise not developed. Cohort members often connected over how they experienced district initiatives and policies in their respective schools. For example, a ULC student noted, "I feel like we make a team like becoming a unit and work[ing] together. It's not a competition about who is better than who, it [is] about working together to become better as a unit." The sentiment was echoed by a university faculty member who emphasized the importance of strong relationships between school building leaders, "You've got to build the trust and rapport, first of all, between principals so that they're not competing [but rather] they're in collaboration with each other because they each have their challenges and their own buildings. And then, you know, enough trust to share". Upon graduation and their eventual movement into leadership roles, ULC students will carry over these networks into the district, supporting district leaders and potentially increasing leadership retention. Thus, the district-only cohort model in the ULC created a scaffold for collaboration, trust, and communication among future district leaders.

6.1.2. Augmenting Support

The cohort model augmented support by connecting colleagues who experienced similar struggles (e.g., adding graduate coursework to lives already packed with a full-time job and family commitments). One ULC student discussed how the cohort provided her with academic, social, and mental support though the challenge of completing the program: "My cohort has been my support in this whole ordeal. We call each other, we meet up with each other. We study together. I think that the cohort model is by far the best model. I feel like the struggles that I'm going through are, you know, that we experienced that together. And so . . . you don't feel like you're doing it alone." Another ULC student echoed this sentiment stating, "It has been a great experience. So, I am in a group of like 12. And we all go through the same classes, I've made some lifelong friends." ULC students organized social gatherings to decompress and process the shared, intense experience of managing work, graduate school, and family life: "when we get together, sometimes we can use it as a release . . . it just helps you release . . . a lot of stress and things." Progressing through the program with the same group of students over two years fostered relationships that supported program completion, individual leadership development, and, in turn, the district's leadership pipeline.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on ULC students' jobs and graduate school experiences could have compromised program completion; yet it instead nudged ULC students to find innovative systems of support. ULC students reported feeling renewed and connected despite this unprecedented time of social distancing and isolation. For example, one ULC student shared how their cohort used social media to augment support and connectedness, "We text each other, we're on a WhatsApp, group text, and email system, and we're keeping each other sharp. You know, mental sharpness. And when we see that someone may be in need of help or guidance, we're right there to help them along." The cohort model allowed participants to persevere in the program at a time when teachers—especially teachers in the partner district—were leaving the profession at a high rate, as indicated during a faculty member interview, "I actually marvel about it a little bit, and it gives me hope that our students have been able to develop those same types of connections. It's just in a different way that I think none of us ever thought would be here at this point." The cohort model provided a structure for participants to forge creative strategies for support that were not directly managed or overseen by program personnel.

The district-specific cohort model also helped ULC students find the confidence and structure to advocate for themselves in solidarity. Cohort members would discuss aspects of the program that were not working for them and then informally nominate a representative to explain the issue and suggest an alternative practice to a faculty member

or program leader over email or in person. In this way, for example, the cohorts were able to ensure that assignment deadlines were adjusted to better complement their job and family commitments. This advocacy was typically met with openness, flexibility, and encouragement by faculty and program leaders, as noted by one ULC student, "I really feel that our professors were open to the feedback". A faculty member emphasized how the cohorts stood in solidarity to advocate for their needs: "they weren't shy about feedback, like they told me midway, 'we want more time to talk to each other in small breakout groups and to actually do some of the assignments that you're giving us together during classes'." The cohort model empowered participants to seek program alterations that were more supportive of their success.

Just as individual ULC students benefited from their cohort's support, so did the district. Program completion contributed to the district's leadership pipeline and supported the development of a connected group of leaders across the district. Research shows that increased collegiality and connection among a district's educators helps with teacher retention [40]. When leaders feel connected to their colleagues and have support systems, they are more likely to feel satisfied and to stay in their positions [41,42]. Moreover, systems developed by the cohort, especially those forged independently through non-university and non-district means (e.g., WhatsApp), transcend the program and can be carried into the leadership roles participants eventually take on, increasing support among district leadership through collaboration, communication, and joint problem solving and planning. Therefore, systems of support developed within the ULC provided a protective factor for teacher and leadership turnover, both high in the partner district.

6.1.3. Deepening Program Responsiveness

District-specific cohorting fostered the development of course pacing, course curriculum, and instructional activities that were responsive to the district's assets, needs, priorities, protocols, policies, community, student body, and vision of school leadership. Every other week, university and district leaders who coordinate the ULC (the ULC leadership team) met to reflect and plan together, which provided a structure to ensure program responsiveness and adaptation to changing district contexts and needs. A university faculty member shared the following as a rationale for the program: "The ultimate goal is that the partnership is a true service to the district and is supporting the district in developing and identifying and placing strong leaders in its schools who will improve the schools and make more schools that are more equitable and just". In addition, program instructors noted that district-specific cohorting fostered reflection and discussion within courses about how school structures, practices, and the implementation of district initiatives varied geographically, by grade band, and by school leadership.

The ULC included two elective courses, which were designed entirely from scratch in response to district priorities discussed by the ULC leadership team. A faculty member shared their process for developing one elective with input from district leaders: "They said, [the district priority for leaders is] instructional supervision. [They] want leaders to know instruction, [so we] make one of the elective classes an opportunity to go deeper into instructional supervision ... So our class was around [fostering] collaborative learning among teachers. So, things like PLCs, instructional leadership teams." Such district-specific elective courses were unique to the ULC and provided an opportunity for faculty to learn about district challenges and to hold themselves accountable for keeping a close connection between theory, research, and practice in the classroom.

The district-specific cohort model provided a pipeline of leaders who were prepared to lead in the partner district's schools. The ULC's responsiveness to the district increased the likelihood that ULC students would be offered a leadership position in the district, would stay in the district, and would be effective as district leaders. With the opportunity to train leaders specifically for their context, the district invested personnel, money, and time into the program. As such, the district is also renewed through a strong leadership

pipeline and the placement of promising leaders in positions that best match their strengths and interests.

6.2. Co-Teaching

Co-teaching, where a district administrator is paired with a university faculty member to instruct a course, is a distinctive component of the ULC and differentiates it from all other leadership preparation programs at the university. We found that the co-teaching model, which was employed for a core, introductory class and for one elective in the program, renewed the university and district by narrowing the gap between theory and practice, developing instructors' pedagogical practices, and expanding ULC students' professional networks.

6.2.1. Narrowing the Gap between Theory and Practice

In the co-teaching partnerships, university faculty members relied on research and theory to teach about leadership, while district administrators prioritized the practice of school leadership and the challenges of implementing theory. As one ULC student explained, "they are coming from two different perspectives". Although university faculty were not completely disconnected from practice nor district administrators fully disconnected from research, each learned from the other. University faculty gained a greater appreciation for how the daily demands of being a school leader (mis)aligned with the scholarly literature, and district administrators gained conceptual tools and became more aware of empirical trends from research that helped them reflect on and enhance their practice in schools. The manner in which co-teaching bridged theory and practice simultaneously benefited ULC students' leadership preparation and deepened instructors' understandings of school leadership and the district context. A district administrator who served as a co-teacher explained how instructional collaboration bridged theory and practice:

> I'm able to show my co-teacher what happens in the district, and [my co-teacher] gets to show me what happens at the university. Both of us are guiding the students. We can tag-team off of each other when we're actually in class. There are certain things that speak to what the university wants to get through. But then there's also things that are specific to our context, here in the city, that I can speak to. And it helps the students understand [that] there's the legacy that comes from the district. And then there's also the learning that comes from the university that you have to mesh together. So it's been a great experience to have the opportunity to co-teach. And I think the students benefit from it as well, because again, as you're learning, you know, the content, you're also getting the context . . . the district context, so that you don't have to learn the district context when you get into the district and get into a leadership role . . . So the co-teaching aspect has been really, really good.

The district administrators' expertise about practice and the district context were valued equally to the university faculty members' scholarly knowledge, dismantling knowledge power structures typical of educational preparation programs. The collaboratively developed syllabi for the co-taught classes dedicated significant time to guest lectures, site visits, and district protocols and structures (e.g., school leadership teams and PLCs). This illustrates how district expertise was valued as critical to leadership preparation.

Moreover, the district co-teachers, both of whom held high-level positions in the district central office, offered special insight into district leadership when co-planning instruction with university faculty, during classroom discussion, and through class visits to schools where ULC students observed school leaders at work. One university faculty member noted the insider perspective that their co-teacher offered: "[my co-teacher] was able to let us see behind . . . the scenes, perhaps in a way that if I were teaching in class by myself, I wouldn't be able to have insight into. So, for example, she was able to get a principal to give us a recording of her leadership team meeting and we watched [it]...as a class and stopped at certain points and kind of had the students analyze what they saw and

talk about what they noticed". This insight and transparency offered by district co-teachers provided unparalleled access to leadership in action and enriched learning experiences that might have otherwise been limited to more decontextualized methods of learning within the university.

ULC students noted how co-teaching fostered authentic and engaging learning opportunities. They valued the leadership experiences that top district leaders brought to class as they provided them with advice and real-life scenarios that are applicable to tackling the difficulties of being a school building leader. ULC students appreciated these "stories of administrative life" [27] (p. 219) and acknowledged how co-teaching between university faculty and district administrators modeled shared leadership and collaborative practice required in schools. One ULC student said that her favorite class was a class co-taught by a university faculty member and a district administrator:

> That class really allowed us to experience what it is to be a leader and make difficult decisions and make changes...[the district administrator] provided a lot of insights, since she has been in these situations...It was balanced . . . like, it wasn't just writing papers, you know, it was, alright, some discussions or write some papers, we'll do some conversations, we'll record interviews . . . the way they approached education is the way that I would want to approach education in my classroom, which is tailoring to the learning of all students. And I think that part is missing [in] universities . . . I think the balance is what made that class so strong.

This ULC student felt that co-teaching improved the traditional university learning experience by balancing both institutions' expertise.

However, not all ULC students agreed that the university and district co-teachers successfully integrated their two perspectives. One ULC student said:

> I had two professors, one was the [university] professor and one was an administrator, and I think sometimes they were indecisive of how to present certain material, because the professor wanted it one way, but the administrator wanted to kind of make it into more of a scenario and how would we react to this experience as opposed to the professor, you know, giving us information and basing our answer on evidence from the reading. So it was like two different perspectives when they were both teaching the same class and sometimes they weren't on the same page and on the materials and also grading [...] you know, the administrator would grade it one way, but the professor was grading [a different way] and they wouldn't, you know, agree, so I think that was one of the drawbacks.

Although the majority of ULC students expressed their appreciation for the dynamic learning experiences that co-teaching offered them, it is important to recognize the struggles that occurred with co-teaching. As noted across the co-teaching and partnership literature, collaborating takes time, mentorship, and "in most cases, [co-instructors] need to further develop the unique skills involved with co-teaching a graduate-level class in a higher education setting," [4] (p. 9).

6.2.2. Developing Instructors' Pedagogical Practices

The co-teaching model encouraged faculty members to develop and expand their teaching practices by stepping outside their comfort zone and working collaboratively with an experienced district leader. According to a university faculty member, co-teaching at the university level is not a common practice. Calling the co-teaching experience "gratifying," she said: "I've learned a ton, [having a co-teacher] is really like a gift. Because you just don't get somebody else in your classroom. I've never had that. And I think that 10 years ago, that would have terrified me. And so the fact that this happened now, like I'm just much more comfortable with my teaching, and so that made it less scary and more exciting." Post-secondary instruction is typically a solitary practice, and the introduction of this co-teaching model offered university faculty thought partners and co-planners (who were

trained and practicing educators) to diversify their instructional strategies and to reflect anew on their regular classroom practices. The same university instructor continued to explain that she frequently discussed ways to improve their teaching to give their students a better experience: "We talk a lot, and we talk about how class went . . . How would we do this differently?...What worked?" Co-teaching fostered more reflective pedagogy and developed university faculty members' practices in ways that also benefited students in their coursework outside of the ULC program.

6.2.3. Expanding Participants' Professional Networks

Having district administrators as co-instructors expanded ULC students' professional networks, which offered mentorship and relationships for future employment opportunities. One ULC student mentioned that although he was initially anxious about having administrators as instructors, having regular interactions with district administrators in small class settings ultimately gave him greater confidence in his own identity as a leader: "I thought it would be intimidating, you know, I thought that they would see what we need help with or had a challenge in and maybe use it against us . . . But it turned out to be very encouraging . . . they were not out to get us, they actually wanted us to succeed and you felt that." As ULC students saw that the district leaders were invested in their professional growth, trust was strengthened between teachers and administrators in the district.

Not only were the district administrators who served as co-teachers valuable connections themselves, but they also utilized their positions to invite a range of school-level and district-level administrators to class to speak about topics relevant to the curriculum or to arrange site visits. As one district co-teacher explained, "what we do is we bring in guest speakers, we bring in acting principals and vice principals and assistant superintendents to talk to them, to help [ULC students] understand what they're going to face when they become a leader." As ULC students gained a better understanding of the connections between theory and practice, they also developed collegial, increasingly horizontal relationships with district leaders with whom they may have otherwise had no interactions. These expanded networks also benefited the district by strengthening relationships and helping it identify and mentor future leaders who are specifically trained for the district. In this regard, a ULC student noted:

> This program is a link, a connection, a partnership between [the district and university] to make sure that we're successful and impactful in our school district. So, thanks to [a district leader who co-taught a course], who has challenged me to say 'I' instead of 'a leader,' I'm putting myself in those shoes and walking through that door. So everything that I say is as a [district specific] leader not just any leader.

Networking benefits all stakeholders and can shift districts from a culture of isolation and individualism to one that recognizes diverse perspectives and encourages collaboration and learning [43].

6.3. Inquiry-Based Instruction

University faculty and district administrators in the ULC shared a common vision for leadership preparation that prioritized inquiry-based instruction and a commitment to consistently embedding inquiry throughout the curriculum and fieldwork. Several courses, including those on family engagement and curriculum, required ULC students to identify a problem, gather data to investigate its root cause(s), and then design a responsive action plan. In addition, all ULC students carried out a year-long inquiry project in their second year of the program, spending the Fall semester identifying a research question and gathering data and the Spring semester designing and carrying out an action plan. A university faculty member explained how inquiry is worked into their course as an approach to understand and actively address a school's problems of practice: "in continually pushing on the need for inquiry as a lever of change and...using action research . . . [participants] engage with different [problems of practice] to understand what is going on

in their schools in authentic ways and then determine . . . what can we do next?" Similarly, a district administrator explained that inquiry-based learning is essential to enacting change in schools, such as with interrogating a school's vision, how it (mis)aligns with the needs of the community, and whose perspectives and interests it represents:

> [In the class I co-taught, ULC students] had to develop, or refine the vision for [their] school, and we did [that through] a lot of talking about how does the vision for the school connect with who the school serves? And . . . who is in the community that it serves?...And how do you make sure that the voices of the community are even involved in the process of vision development itself? So [inquiry] is kind of woven in . . . everything that we do.

Both excerpts reveal that there was a common understanding in the ULC of how inquiry should be central to participants' leadership preparation. We found that this commitment to inquiry-based experiences supported a shift in participants' mindsets from teaching to leading while also transforming the district.

6.3.1. Developing a Leadership Identity: From Teaching to Leading

Through inquiry-based assignments, ULC students learned to become transformational leaders and developed a leadership identity that required a shift in mindset. One participant described how inquiry-based work helped him see beyond his teacher perspective and expanded his understanding of leaders' decision-making processes:

> So, I think [inquiry] has really opened up my eyes to what happens in the background because I've only seen it from the teacher's side. So now that I am in this program, I am like, oh, so that's what they are doing . . . I've always had questions like . . . why are they doing that and why they are not doing this. So being in this program . . . has really helped me, shaped me, and really [it is] creating change in what I am seeing.

The inquiry process helped deconstruct and uncover the foundation for administrative initiatives while concurrently promoting a vision of leadership that values evidence-based decision making.

ULC students also gained confidence in their leadership identities through this inquiry work in which they developed a deep understanding around a specific topic and then spearheaded an initiative for improvement. As such, ULC students experienced a transformation in how they saw themselves and their ability to enact change. One faculty member explained how she witnessed a gradual change in the way ULC students wrote and talked about themselves as leaders: "I saw that transformation. [At the end of the program], they had to do this elevator pitch [for current district leaders] where they were like I am a transformative leader and I've investigated this problem in my school and identified these changes. So I have to say that I've really seen a shift in terms of their own confidence and ability to kind of see themselves as leaders." The 'elevator pitches' served as the culmination of the year-long action research project and positioned ULC students as peers of current district leaders with valuable insights to offer them. The commitment to inquiry shaped ULC students' conceptions of leadership and empowered these pre-service leaders to already see themselves as changemakers in their schools and the district. Both the development of transformative leaders and the immediate empowerment of educators who take initiative for improvement strengthen the district's capacity to serve its students.

6.3.2. Transforming District Practice

Inquiry, as a pedagogical tool, empowered ULC students to develop their leadership identity as they looked critically at their district and designed and enacted plans that mitigated problems of practice and promoted social justice. Each ULC student is expected, through the action research project, to uncover and act upon educational inequities and to generate reform. Thus, the program's goal to develop leaders as agents of change renews the district by normalizing the practice of continually interrogating current practices in

order to more equitably serve the district's students and community. Participants gained confidence in their abilities to become knowledgeable about a problem of practice and to lead transformation. One ULC student explained the value of her inquiry project and how it created a space to explore an issue in her school, identify a potential solution, and develop a plan to enact change:

> I [focused] my inquiry on discipline referrals, and so it was very interesting to see the students who had the referrals, and it was mainly males, and like [in] a specific grade level. [This inquiry project]... help[ed] me think of, like, 'What kind of plan needs to be put in place to support the individual students as well as the school to help decrease the referrals?'...The data that was collected and the questions . . . help[ed] kind of drive what needs to be changed to fix our system inside the school and support all of our students.

ULC students had to identify and implement feasible interventions within the control of their school for critical and complex problems, which was especially challenging work to lead as they did not yet officially hold leadership positions. They had to earn trust and investment in their action plan through their commitment to the community and the research they had conducted, as they were not afforded the traditional authority formal leaders may use to insist on compliance. The skill of inspiring collective action is critical for transformative school leadership. Faculty supported ULC students in this process by helping them increase the responsiveness of their action plan. One program faculty member explained how they supported ULC students' projects to enact transformation in the district:

> [One ULC student] wanted to study school discipline and wanted to look at the data . . . there were disproportionate numbers of students of color being suspended...It's a school with some issues [and the project] immediately raised the hackles of the leaders. [So, we began] working with their team to create both an institutional climate and instruction that honors the biographies and histories of their students.

This is an example of how the ULC partnership catalyzed district transformation alongside leadership preparation, as it served to name and address inequities.

7. Discussion

In this paper, we contribute a close examination of three program components—cohorting, co-teaching, and inquiry-based pedagogy—and their role in informing and transforming stakeholders in a district–university partnership for leadership preparation. District-based cohorts strengthened peer networks, augmented support, and deepened program responsiveness. Co-teaching narrowed the gap between theory and practice, developed instructors' pedagogical practices, and expanded ULC students' professional networks. Inquiry-based instruction shifted ULC students' mindsets from teacher to leader and transformed practices in the district. In sum, these three program components are mechanisms that integrate two different perspectives—those of the university and district—to promote simultaneous renewal in ways that have increased capacity beyond the boundaries of the ULC partnership.

Our findings inform universities and districts designing partnerships for leadership preparation and provide partnerships that already incorporate cohorting, co-teaching, and inquiry-based instruction for a better understanding of their potential and impact. As noted in the literature review, other university–district partnerships incorporate these three program components, yet they may not find the same degree of impact. Genuine collaboration is commonly noted as essential to enhancing the components of an effective partnership [21]. To unpack the qualities of genuine collaboration that supported simultaneous renewal, we looked across our findings to reveal a core framework [9] that supported each program component. We noted that a shared vision, a mutual relationship, and a commitment to reflection for improvement stimulated each program component, allowing

for a renewal of practices and structures. By identifying these key conditions, we deconstruct genuine collaboration and operationalize effective university–district partnerships while discussing how each program component can be constrained or enhanced by these foundational characteristics of the partnership.

7.1. Shared Vision

The partnership's shared vision to develop transformational leaders who are prepared for and committed to the district is a foundational condition noted across the findings. As Goldring and Sims concluded, it can be difficult for a partnership to navigate the two different institutions' perspectives on knowledge, culture, and structure. It requires trust to share knowledge and time to create new knowledge collaboratively [6]. Before the ULC partnership, the district and university had previous partnerships relating to teacher preparation and professional development. These preexisting relationships fostered trust and respect and supported genuine collaboration between the university and district to forge the ULC's shared vision.

The ULC's shared vision underpinned the district-specific cohort model that developed peer networks and program responsiveness. This shared understanding of effective district leadership allowed the ULC to align course programming with district priorities, assets, and needs. An ethic of care in developing leaders for change shined through, providing the cohorts a space to network and express needs and wants in solidarity. Distinct from interpersonal comradery [29], ULC cohort solidarity and a shared vision of renewal compelled university faculty to adjust course content and program design based on the ULC students' feedback.

The ULC's shared vision also underpinned the co-teaching model. District administrators and university faculty balanced their two different perspectives of leadership in the classroom. They collaboratively created course content and assignments that reflected the district priorities and broader problems of practice. They shared the responsibility of enacting innovative instructional practices that model the qualities of supportive instructional and social justice leaders [17]. Guided by a shared vision that integrated the university's and district's expertise on leadership, the co-instructors deliberately exposed the ULC students to the life of a district leader and provided research-based leadership preparation content [27].

Aligned with the shared vision of cultivating district-ready transformational leaders, inquiry-based experiences offered authentic learning experiences that "emphasize instructional leadership and school improvement" [44] (p. 723), informing and transforming the district and their aspiring leaders. As aspiring leaders felt comfortable analyzing problems of practice within the district, they were able to develop solutions that not only helped them enact their newly acquired leadership skills but also gain the feedback needed to become transformational leaders who positively impact their district and community. As such, without intention, transformation serves as "change for the sake of change" [34] (p. 5). Thus, a shared vision provided the purpose for the partnership and supported implementation of these innovative program components.

7.2. Mutual Relationships

Mutual relationships amongst various stakeholders were also noted as an essential condition for cohorting, co-teaching, and inquiry-based instruction to renew the district and university. Mutualism is an important concept that ensures the two different perspectives (university and district) engage in sustained interaction that benefits both institutions [45]. The mutual relationships in this partnership required stakeholders to collaboratively learn and create an entirely new partnership culture and shared knowledge [6]. These ideas and our work show that partnerships must engage in a mutually beneficial relationship in order to simultaneously renew the two different institutions [8].

The district-specific cohort model transformed and informed stakeholders because of the mutual relationships between cohort participants. In this partnership, the cohort

participants were aspiring leaders from the same district. Although they worked in different buildings, they were experiencing similar work environments. These similarities and networking abilities helped transform the program into its own professional learning community (PLC), one that is grounded in collaboration and collective inquiry for the betterment of the community it serves [46]. As a PLC, the participants leaned into each other for academic and work support. These relationships were able to develop because of the district-specific cohort model and the ULC's commitment to the district. It enabled collaboration, networking, and relationship development across the district. These relationships fostered within the various cohorts supported the individual and collective development of the district's future leadership.

In this partnership, co-teaching between district and university staff created a space for cross-institutional, mutual relationships. University faculty and district leaders worked together to curate course materials and develop learning experiences that aligned with their shared vision of a transformational leader for the district. The openness and willingness to value the positional expertise and knowledge of both institutions helped to create a trusting relationship that renewed all stakeholders [14]. This exemplifies how a distributed approach to developing educational leaders fosters simultaneous renewal [8] and is foundational to a transformational partnership [7,17,20,29].

Mutual relationships also underpinned the program's inquiry-based experiences as they nudged participants to engage in their inquiry projects with others in the district. Participants were able to collaborate with various district staff, including teacher colleagues, district-level leaders, and current building-based leaders. The participants also leaned into the university staff as a system of support when developing solutions to problems of practice. These mutual relationships (some cross-institutional) were foundational components of the various inquiry-based experiences and stimulated the renewal of all stakeholders.

7.3. Commitment to Reflection for Improvement

Finally, in accordance with Sanchez et al. [4], a commitment to ongoing reflection for improvement was a necessary condition for all three program components to foster simultaneous renewal. The district-specific cohort model supported the willingness for ULC students to reflect on program experiences as they moved through the courses together. Their openness to reflection and renewal transformed this district-specific cohort into a cross-district PLC, providing a space for ULC students to experience learning with and from peers. Further, feedback from ULC students also renewed the program. In the ULC partnership, the opportunity for reflection and the faculty's introspective response to feedback demonstrated a commitment to continuous improvement and a willingness to reform the program and partnership from the bottom up. Similar to Barnett et al.'s findings, adjustments to course pacing and programming were possible since cohort feedback was made in solidarity as participants advocated for collective needs [28]. Further, the ULC's concurrent research within the partnership supported the leadership team's ability to enact program changes, demonstrating the partnership's responsiveness to cohort feedback and commitment to reflection for improvement.

Co-teaching in the ULC also demonstrated a commitment to reflection for improvement, allowing university faculty and district staff to grow as educators from their collaborative work. As previously described, university faculty shared a sense of renewal and transformation from teaching with district staff. Faculty reported increased reflection on their own instructional practices. District staff also shared their transformation as they reflected on their experience working and learning alongside university faculty. Co-teachers dismantled the traditional hierarchies of knowledge between university and district, honoring both as experts in the field, and were able to reflect on their practice when collaboratively creating relevant leadership learning experiences.

Inquiry-based learning experiences required ULC students to critically reflect on their district's structures, identify problems of practice, and engage in a solution-oriented approach to transform their schools and themselves as future leaders. Inquiry was situated

and problem-based, offering ULC students the opportunity to "try out multiple [leadership] perspectives" [17] (p. 495) and helped expand these aspiring leaders' "problem-framing and problem-solving capabilities" [17] (p. 496). To support the learning that came from situated inquiry work and the ability to put this learning into action as transformational district leaders [17,29], the ULC deliberately incorporated opportunities for collaborative reflection with university faculty and district mentors. Mentor and faculty supervision was an integral part of the ULC's commitment to reflection for improvement [1].

7.4. Future Research

While the scope of this paper is limited to better understanding how cohorting, co-teaching, and inquiry-based instruction renews the university and district, an exploration of dilemmas that arise with each program component is also needed. For example, cohorting exacerbated the challenge of financing the program for many participants because they were unable to slow down their course of study to adjust tuition expenses each semester, as participants in more flexible programs could do. In addition, district-specific cohorting meant that participants were less exposed to a wide range of leadership practices in various district contexts. A district-responsive curriculum as well as district instructors may increase the likelihood that the program reproduces current leadership practices rather than encouraging transformational leadership.

Partnership designers must also consider the benefits of co-teaching [23,26,27] with the vulnerability that may come from having acting administrators as university instructors. Similar to Padilla et al.'s findings, most ULC students favored district leaders as course instructors; however, some felt stressed about the potential ramifications of speaking openly with their superiors in the district present [23]. Learning should occur in a space where students are comfortable to practice, experiment, make mistakes, and reflect on challenging work experiences. As such, hesitations and anxieties might "inhibit honest classroom discussions" [23] (p. 252) and may create a high-stakes environment, one that does not allow pre-service leaders the space and time to develop.

Inquiry-based instruction asked the ULC students, teachers without traditional roles of authority, to enact change and challenge the status quo in their school contexts. Pre-service leaders who worked in schools resistant to change and to non-traditional power structures (teachers as leaders of transformative work) found that the inquiry-based assignments made them (or made them feel) vulnerable in their workplace, a dynamic that has yet to be addressed in the literature. These learning experiences uncovered implicit power dynamics that were often possible to avoid as classroom teachers. Recognizing this, it is important for course instructors to consider the school's culture and existing leadership structure to support pre-service leaders in navigating district-embedded learning experiences that require them to employ transformational leadership practices.

Future research that examines the dilemmas raised by cohorts, co-teaching, and inquiry-based instruction would provide critical insights to universities and districts designing or looking to strengthen an existing partnership. For example, further research is needed to explore power dynamics during district-embedded inquiry-based learning experiences, as well as whether internship placements outside of pre-service leaders' current school settings mitigate the challenge of affecting change. As demonstrated in our work, participatory action research would be well-suited to uncover dilemmas of program implementation and foundational conditions that allow program components to simultaneously renew districts and universities as they engage in long-term partnerships for leadership preparation.

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Appendix A

Table A1. Participants and interviews.

Participant Type	Number of Participants	Interview Round	Number of Interviews
Cohort 1 Students	5	1	5
		2	5
		3	2
Cohort 2 Students	5	1	5
		2	2
Cohort 3 Students	3	1	3
University Staff	4	1	4
District Staff	2	1	2
Total	19		28

Table A2. Codebook sample.

Program Component and Structure	Definition	Example
Co-teaching	University and district staff teach a course together to facilitate the learning of future district leaders	"So I've learned a ton, [having a co-teacher] is really like a gift. Because you just don't get somebody else in your classroom. I've never had that. And I think that 10 years ago, that would have terrified me. And so the fact that this happened now, like I'm just much more comfortable with my teaching, and so that made it less scary and more exciting."
Cohort model	A group of students that enter a program together and remain together throughout its duration	"It has been a great experience. So I am in a group of, like, 12. And we all go through the same classes, I've made some lifelong friends."
Inquiry-based instruction	Reference to or evidence of inquiry mindset or practices which focus on the usage of questioning and investigating, research/data-informed decision making, data-informed action plans.	"... [In the class I co-taught, ULC students] had to, you know, develop, or refine the vision for the school [in our district], and we did [that through] a lot of talking about how does the vision for the school connect with who the school serves? And . . . who is in the community that it serves? And how do you think about making those connections? And how do you make sure that the voices of the community are even involved in the process of vision development itself? So [inquiry] is kind of woven in . . . everything that we do."

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