

Getting a Foot in the Door: Helping Education Students “Kick It” During Interviews

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The college of education involved in this study has programs for preservice teachers and educational leadership candidates. Each spring these groups participate in a hiring simulation, when aspiring leaders interview aspiring teachers through role-play in a mock setting. This endeavor provides a simulated hiring environment designed to better prepare students for real-world job interviews. The purpose of this study was to explore the effects of the experience on degree-seeking preservice teachers and administrators. This paper reviews the preparation for the event, the process, and feedback from participant surveys; results indicate this is a profitable activity for both groups.

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By the end of their teacher preparation program, candidates report that they are prepared to teach; however, they have been nervous about the interview and job-seeking process. Students have worked on résumés and interview tactics with career specialists from campus, heard interviewing guidelines

from a guest principal in their seminar class, and been able to attend a campus job fair. The students need something more to help them prepare to interview, and a simulation can be a fertile learning environment in which to diffuse fears and build confidence.

Research broadly supports that school and district hiring practices directly affect positive or negative outcomes for organizational advancement in critical areas, including student achievement, school climate, and teacher retention (Clement, 2013; Hughes, 2014; Peterson, 2002). With high teacher turnovers and reductions of classroom teachers due to long-term funding losses, a growing number of educational leaders are showing a renewed interest in hiring practices and human capital management as key to attracting and retaining quality teachers for improving their schools (Donaldson, 2013; Hughes, 2014). As the national economy strengthens, so does the need for qualified teachers prepared to enter U.S. classrooms; there is a projected

need of over two million new teachers within the next decade (Hughes 2014; Lee, 2005). An essential hiring practice that often challenges both school administrators and teacher applicants alike is the job interview (Clement, 2013; Peterson, 2002). While an applicant's ability to create a favorable impression during an interview does not guarantee the candidate will be an effective teacher, Clement (2013) and Hughes (2014) suggest that hiring interviews are helpful in revealing important candidate attributes. However, preparing for and participating in interviews can challenge even the most well-prepared job candidates.

Hiring simulations are designed to help alleviate interview jitters experienced by many of those who are new to the job market (Newberry & Collins, 2012). Kolb (1984) suggests that role-playing in an experiential simulation can provide a conceptual bridge to transition from an academic environment to career roles. Schaff and Randles (1972) responded to their students' needs by creating a simulated interview program that offered both student interns and administrative interns an opportunity to role-play in a hiring interview.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of a hiring simulation experience on degree-seeking preservice teachers and administrators. The college of education involved in this study has programs for preservice teachers and educational leadership candidates, and each spring these groups participate in a hiring simulation, when aspiring leaders interview aspiring teachers through role-play in a mock setting. The hiring simulation of this study is unique in that *all participants* are engaged in role play with a learning goal. In essence, an experiential learning community is formed between cohorts of educational leadership candidates, who are in a performance-based

degree program and gaining experience in personnel management through the interview process, and preservice teachers, who are completing their student teaching internship and preparing to begin their search for employment. The candidates have a safe environment in which to practice their skills of interviewing to either hire top talent or acquire a position in a school where they might flourish as teachers.

Role-Playing Participants

Participants in this study ($N = 142$) included degree-seeking preservice teachers and administrators. At the time of the hiring simulation, all participants were working toward professional certification as defined by the Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GAPSC) and leading to licensed practice in Georgia classrooms. There were 73 school administrators employed at either the building level or district level and working toward earning a performance-based certificate. These school administrators held a minimum of a Master's degree and were enrolled as candidates for GAPSC Performance-Based Leadership certification, an Educational Specialist degree, or both, depending on need. At the time of their participation in the hiring simulation, the preservice teachers were completing their student teaching internships at local schools. Of the 69 preservice teachers, there were 33 working toward secondary education certification, either completing a Bachelor's degree in a content field or earning a Master of Arts in Teaching, and 36 undergraduates working toward K-12 certification in Health and Physical Education.

Preparation and Process

Participants began their hiring activities approximately six weeks in advance. Each

team of school administrators posted a job announcement and description for a teaching vacancy at the team leader's base school. In most instances the teaching vacancies were contrived; however, some administrative teams elected to post genuine job searches. School administrators developed questions and evaluation rubrics for scoring teacher candidates' responses during the interview. Preparations for the preservice teachers were done as components of their capstone seminar course. Course assignments included writing a résumé and letter of application, which were a natural fit for the simulation requirements; the students were able to write these and receive feedback prior to making their revisions in anticipation of the hiring simulation.

A series of three one-hour sessions was scheduled. Time allotted during the one-hour interview sessions included a 30-minute interview, a 10-minute panel debriefing, 10 minutes of post-interview feedback, and 10 minutes for room transitions. Teacher candidates entered each one-hour session in assigned groups of three, with one teacher candidate scheduled to be interviewed while the remaining two teacher candidates recorded observations. At the end of the interview session, peer observers provided written feedback to the interviewing candidate. Strategic scheduling ensured that teacher candidates serving as observers were not assigned to provide feedback for their own interview team. This precaution served to ensure the integrity of the hiring simulation interview experience for all participants.

Feedback from the Interviewers and Interviewees

Following the hiring simulation, all participants were offered paper surveys as a means to provide feedback about their experiences; the surveys were specific to the

roles of school administrator or teacher candidate. The instrument for each group was similarly constructed using multiple choice questions, each assigned Likert-rated response options that ranged from Strongly Disagree (1) to Strongly Agree (5). Additionally, two open-ended perception prompts addressed participants' level of confidence about future real-world interview opportunities and how to strengthen the effectiveness of future hiring simulation exercises. Participants were told survey completion was voluntary; 73 school administrators and 69 teacher candidates elected to participate in the feedback process. Data were collected from 2013 through 2015, during three spring semesters of implementation. Survey data were aggregated and analyzed for patterns in responses.

Table 1
Administrator Participant Survey Results: Statement Rankings

Survey Statements	n	Min. Rank	Max. Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
Were you prepared with respect to the candidate's content area of certification during the interview?	73	2	5	4.27	0.768
Were you knowledgeable with respect to the candidate's experiences, education, etc. during the interview?	73	2	5	4.49	0.626
The interview process set me at ease and made it easier for me to improve on my questioning technique.	73	3	5	4.68	0.524
I was able to give important feedback to the teacher candidate that they may not have gotten without this experience.	73	4	5	4.89	0.315
I was able to receive important feedback from the teacher candidate that I may not have gotten without this experience.	73	1	5	3.45	1.202
Overall, I believe I have become a better interviewer after participating in the hiring simulation.	73	2	5	4.53	0.689

The Likert ratings for 73 administrator participants are summarized in Table 1. The mean rankings by the administrator candidates ranged from 3.45 to 4.89. The administrator candidates indicated they were prepared and knowledgeable going into the simulation and they were comfortable with the process. They also thought they had improved in their role as an interviewer as a result of the hiring simulation, shown by the 4.53 Likert rank mean. The administrators'

surveys indicated the highest mean score, 4.89, in their ability to give valuable feedback to their interviewees. The only survey question that resulted in a mean rating below the “agree” mark was because some administrators believed they were not able to receive important feedback from the teacher candidates; nevertheless, the resulting mean still ranked higher than a “neutral” score at 3.45.

The administrators were positive in their responses to the open-ended question, “As you prepare for “real” interviews, what will you take with you from this experience?” Many plan to emulate the structured process; over 17% plan to use the rubrics that relate to teacher standards, and one noted the importance of revising the rubric as necessary. Ten percent of the respondents learned the importance of helping candidates be at ease to get a true picture of who they are as teachers and individuals. The most commonly noted take-away, expressed in over 46% of the responses, was a clearer sense of the importance of being prepared.

Table 2
Teacher Participant Survey Results: Statement Rankings

Survey Statements	n	Min. Rank	Max. Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
The interview panel seemed prepared to interview me.	69	3	5	4.84	0.474
The interview panel asked relevant questions pertaining to my content area.	69	3	5	4.70	0.602
The interview panel seemed familiar with my résumé and asked about my experiences.	69	1	5	4.20	0.979
Participating in the hiring fair simulation sets me at ease for future interviews.	69	1	5	4.58	0.736
I was able to give important feedback to the interview panel that they may not have gotten without this experience.	69	1	5	4.03	1.014
I was able to receive important feedback from the interview panel that I may not have gotten without this experience.	69	1	5	4.83	0.568
Overall, I believe I have become a better interviewer after participating in the hiring simulation.	69	1	5	4.77	0.598

The Likert ratings for 69 teacher participants are summarized in Table 2. Their surveys indicated one of the highest mean scores, 4.83, in the opportunity for preservice

teachers to receive valuable feedback from their interviewers and the lowest mean score, 4.03, in their ability to give important feedback in return. These candidates believed their interview panel was prepared and knowledgeable and asked relevant questions. They also believed they had improved in their role as interviewees as a result of the hiring simulation, represented by the 4.77 Likert rank mean.

The teachers’ sense of improvement showed in their responses to the open-ended survey question; participants noted many specific ways to better their interview performance that ranged from learning what to say and not say to body language and eye contact. Over 17% of the respondents mentioned having learned the benefit of presenting their résumé and cover letter in a way that sells themselves as educators in order to be granted an interview opportunity.

Table 3
Combined Participant Survey Results: Statement Rankings

Survey Statements	N	Min. Rank	Max. Rank	Mean	Standard Deviation
Participants’ perception of valuable feedback for the teacher candidates that they may not have gotten without this experience.	142	1	5	4.86	0.455
Participants’ perception of valuable feedback for the interview panel that they may not have gotten without this experience.	142	1	5	3.73	1.150
Overall, I believe I have become a better interviewee/interviewer after participating in the hiring fair simulation.	142	1	5	4.65	0.654

The combined Likert ratings for three questions common to all 142 participants are summarized in Table 3. In this table, the first statement concerning the value of feedback for the teacher candidates was derived from combining the results of the teachers’ perceptions of receiving feedback and the administrators’ perceptions of giving feedback. Likewise, the second statement concerning the value of feedback for the administrators was derived from combining the results of the administrators’ perceptions of receiving feedback and the teachers’

perceptions of giving feedback. The mean rankings clearly delineate the difference in the perceived value of the feedback. While the combined groups of participants tended to “strongly agree” that the feedback the teacher candidates received from the simulated experience was valuable, as evidenced by the 4.86 Likert rank mean, their thoughts about the feedback administrators received were more neutral, with a Likert rank mean of only 3.73. Nevertheless, the third statement, with a Likert rank mean of 4.65, shows participation in the hiring simulation was helpful for all candidates involved.

Including the application process as a component of the hiring simulation exercise served parallel purposes mutually beneficial for administrator and teacher participants. Teacher candidates gained knowledge regarding procedures for initial contact protocols and submitting completed applications with supporting documentation; school administrators benefitted from analyzing the qualifications, preparation of candidates, and self-described skill sets found in applications to the ideal candidate’s qualities as advertised in the job description. Participants were positive in their evaluation responses, which supports the hiring simulation as a good practice. Students in both programs benefitted from their respective roles in the simulation and believed they were better prepared for the real event of interviewing.

Moving Forward with the Hiring Simulation

The second open-ended survey question asked both administrator and teacher candidates, “If you were to be involved with this process again, what could be done differently to make it more meaningful?” Based on the results, it is clear that a method needs to be established by which the

preservice teachers can provide feedback to their administrative counterparts during the hiring simulation. This is reflected in both the 3.73 Likert rating mean in Table 3 and the open-ended request for suggestions, although one administrator did comment that he received great feedback on strengths and weaknesses as an interviewer. Of the 73 administrators, 15, nearly 21%, reported that they would like to get feedback regarding their interviewing techniques, and suggestions were made to provide the teacher candidates with a rubric for their evaluation of the interview panel. Even the preservice teachers realized that this opportunity was missing; two of them commented that they were not encouraged to give interviewer feedback. Moving forward to future hiring simulations, this must be done. During an actual interview it is equally important for the hiring committee to establish whether a candidate is right for a position and for the candidate to determine whether s/he deems the position a good personal fit. Being able to regard the interviewers with a more critical eye will aid the preservice teachers in this aspect of the interview process. Additionally, receiving better feedback of their interviewing skills will enable the administrators to realize more value from their own roles in the hiring simulation.

Implications for future research include following the teacher candidates as they seek and gain employment in regional schools. Surveying them to learn how the questions asked during their interviews for employment compared to the questions asked during the hiring simulation would inform future leadership candidates as they prepare for their upcoming hiring simulations, thus benefiting all participants and enabling the simulation to more closely align with protocols that are experienced in the school districts.

Best Practices for Educator Preparation Programs

Colleges of education have an obligation to prepare students for employment as teachers and school administrators. This obligation should be extended to include helping candidates succeed in their quest for a position. The hiring simulation model presented in this study enables teacher candidates to be more confident as they seek employment in regional public schools, and it gives leadership candidates experience with the hiring protocols they will encounter as part of their administrative duties. By providing a hiring simulation that is meaningful for both groups of participants, colleges of education help their graduates not only get a foot in the door of a prospective employer but “kick it” during their interviews.

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