

# DATA DRIVEN PRACTICUMS: PUTTING THEORY INTO PRACTICE

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## Abstract

*Practicum courses and meaningful field experiences provide opportunities for professional licensure candidates to obtain supervised experience and to integrate theoretical and practical knowledge gained during their graduate program. This is one of the most important aspects of educator preparation as candidates conceptualize and put into practice real-world experiences that transform them into educators who are prepared with skills and confidence to succeed. Because of the importance of the practicum for full transformation, university professors must ensure that candidates are receiving consistent experiences tied to best practices aligned with state accreditation compliance procedures. This article describes how Angelo State University's educator preparation program revised and used program data for improvement of candidate preparation and compliance with state regulations.*

Keywords: graduate practicum, field experiences, online programs, compliance

The purpose of graduate-level practicum courses at a Angelo State University is to prepare candidates (students in the practicum) to assume school administrator, school counseling, superintendent, and higher education positions with the knowledge, skills, and confidence to be successful. For this university, it is one of the most important aspects in the Educator Preparation Program (EPP). Throughout the online programs leading up to the practicum coursework, candidates are provided course assignments showcasing theoretical knowledge and a variety of real-world, on-the-job experiences relating to state and national standards to integrate practical exposure. Depending on the program and the setting, candidates may observe, collaborate, participate, and act as leaders in various activities. These activities may include interviews with practicing educators in the field of study, needs assessments, video recordings, trainings/presentations, websites, podcasts, and more.

The overall goal of the practicum is for candidates to obtain supervised experience and integrate the theoretical and practical knowledge gained during the online graduate program through meaningful field-based experiences under the supervision of a site supervisor (mentor) and a field supervisor (evaluator). This supervisory team, including the site supervisor, field

supervisor, and university instructional unit, all collaborate to ensure candidates are obtaining appropriate field-based hours. The university's practicum follows the requirements set forth in the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) Texas Administrative Code (TAC) Chapter 228 (2018) for Texas certification programs. The minimum number of field-based hours needed to successfully complete a practicum is 160 clock hours (TAC, 2018). Each month, candidates submit a record of hours, reflections, and evaluations that help them become reflective practitioners. These records are scored by university instructors according to program guidelines and TEA requirements. These records also serve as documentation and evidence for compliance.

While the current model of practicum experiences has shown improvement in order to move towards all state requirements, that has not always been the case. Although standards and requirements tend to change frequently at the state or national level, it sometimes takes university programs longer to catch up with those changes. However, because of the importance of practicums as set forth in TAC, all university EPPs must continually transform. This college's efforts to transform and improve may help other EPPs improve and gain compliance.

## Theoretical Framework

While transforming and improving the practicum and internship experiences, the educator preparation program's coursework and assignments were grounded in Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which helps conceptualize how candidates in the practicum are able to fully immerse in a transformative learning experience. To review, Kolb's learning cycle involves four stages of experience: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation (Kolb, 1984). In the EPP, candidates learn theoretical content and pedagogy in their coursework (concrete); then, they conduct field observations and use reflective journals and discussions to help conceptualize what they learn (reflective observation and abstract conceptualization); and finally, candidates participate in the practicum to put into practice what they have learned (active experimentation). This model utilizes multiple program faculty in order to establish learning outcomes and experiences that are appropriate for each candidate, whether they are in the practicum for school counseling or school administrator, or the internship in higher education or superintendent program. This model supports candidates and allows them to have a full transformative learning experience.

## Statement of the Problem

Because of the importance of the practicum experience for this full transformation, as well as the specific requirements of TAC Chapter 228 (2018), university EPP faculty and staff must ensure that candidates are receiving a quality experience while collecting evidence of compliance. Although Texas has specific guidelines on what teachers (TAC 228.30 and TAC 228.35, 2018), counselors (TAC 239.15, 2017), principals (TAC 241.15, 2018), and superintendents (TAC 242.15, 2009) should know and do, it can be difficult to document that candidates are gaining experiences in the field aligned with the required elements outlined in code. Collaboration and communication among faculty within the department, and also with those who are supporting candidates in the field, are key to creating consistent experiences with the required documentation for evidence.

## Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to review Angelo State University's transformation to a field-based practicum program that relies on communication, feedback, data collection, and collaboration for candidate success. This

article reviews program data in areas of program improvement, compliance, documentation, communication, and feedback. The information provided may help other EPPs in their efforts to improve.

## Background

To provide background on this topic of transformation, in December of 2016 and 2018, TAC Chapter 228 was updated. Chapter 228 emphasizes collaboration among those working with candidates: the field supervisor, the site supervisor, the campus administrator, as well as university professors (TAC, 2018). Defining the roles of field supervisor and site supervisor helps to understand how stakeholders interact in their collaborative efforts.

TAC (2018) defines the field supervisor as a certified educator with at least three years of experience; hired by the EPP; and with advanced credentials to observe, monitor, and provide constructive feedback to improve candidate effectiveness as educators. A site supervisor is defined by TAC (2018) as a certified, accomplished, trained educator with at least three years of experience in the certification class in which the practicum candidate is seeking certification who guides, assists, and supports the candidate and provides feedback to the field supervisor regarding the candidate's performance.

The TAC (2018) also holds EPPs accountable for developing candidates that are prepared in the standards specific to their field and for providing candidates more opportunities to practice theory before obtaining certification. For example, within this specific university program, candidates in the school counselor preparation program are required to complete a demographic and needs assessment. This allows candidates the opportunity to dig into the data on their campus and to collaborate with professionals to see where needs could be addressed through intervention in a positive way from the perspective of a school counselor. Not only does this fulfill TAC Chapter 228.35, which dictates that EPPs "shall provide evidence of ongoing and relevant field-based experiences throughout the EPP in a variety of educational settings with diverse student populations, including observation, modeling, and demonstration of effective practices to improve student learning" (2018, para. 12), but it also ties into several specific standards in TAC 239.15, such as:

- (b) Standard I. Learner-Centered Knowledge: The certified school counselor has a broad knowledge base. The certified school counselor must know and understand:

- (6) changing societal trends, including demographic, economic, and technological tendencies, and their relevance to school counseling;
- (11) techniques and behavioral interventions to assist teachers with classroom management;
- (13) the roles and responsibilities of a comprehensive school counseling program that is responsive to all students;
- (14) counseling-related research techniques and practices. (2017, para. 4)

Another primary example would include candidates in Angelo State University's principal certification program engaging in action-based research assignments throughout their coursework. Upon entry into the principal certification program, candidates are guided through an intense data dig using actual data specific to their campus and district, and as a result, they are to identify a specific area of need to focus their coursework towards. The concept behind the action-based research model involves engaging candidates in actual administrative actions guided by a mentor and field supervisor, generating meaningful artifacts that are relevant in leading student success initiatives, and contributing via research to actual areas of need on campuses throughout the state. The principal standards are a vital component to crafting a successful curriculum for an optimum practicum experience, as they assist in building a foundation of knowledge, skills, and mindsets of aspiring principals, as outlined in TAC 241.30 (2018).

Additionally, Chapter 228 (2018) includes regulations for field supervisors, indicating that a field supervisor must have the same certifications as the candidates he/she is observing, are seeking. Additionally, field supervisors must participate in the TEA-approved field supervisor coaching training. These requirements create consistency in the supervision of candidates, as well as criteria used by schools and districts, to develop and support candidates. Because of the updated requirements, stakeholders within this university's EPP met weekly to incorporate compliance standards into the practicum for improvements.

### Improvements

To improve course and program documents, the faculty aligned course requirements with Chapter 228 (2018). The Practicum Handbook, already in place, was updated to reflect the new requirements. Application packets were updated to include the specific wording from TAC for documentation purposes. For example, the

application cover page was updated to include fields for candidates to initial that they have read TAC, that they have followed their district procedures for securing a practicum, and that they have verified that their campus is TEA-accredited. The revised application also included a requirement for a letter of support and approval from each candidate's district superintendent, proof of liability insurance, a screen shot of current State Board for Educator certification, acknowledgement the site supervisor's successful impact on student learning, and a district cooperating agreement.

### Embedded Program Standards

The preparation standards for each program were embedded into its particular practicum course. For example, TAC Chapter 239.15 (2018) lists the school counselor standards that must be used by an EPP in coursework. To help candidates conceptualize the standards, they were grouped into domains; thereby allowing the candidates to log their experiences with a more intensive focus. For example, TAC Chapter 241.15 (2016) encompasses the updated principal standards required for the EC-12 Principal as Instructional Leader certificate, is six pages long, and includes six standards and 66 descriptors. Candidates are assigned two standards and about 20 descriptors as a focus per month. For the principal standards, the divisions in the course became: Domain I School Culture and Leading Learning; Domain II Human Capital and Executive Leadership; and Domain III Strategic Operations and Ethics, Equity, and Diversity.

### Evaluation

New evaluation forms were created to include documentation fields for TEA, including start and end date of the practicum, date of observation, time in and time out, proficiency in each standard, evidence of educational activity observed, strengths, areas to address, and signatures from the candidate, site supervisor, and field supervisor. Three reflections were added into the course which allowed candidates one more layer of conceptualizing theory into practice, as per the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization phase of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. A self-evaluation over all of the standards was implemented to allow the candidates to reflect on their mastery of the standards in their field at the end of their term.

Not only do these evaluation areas help with continuous program improvement, many of the program standards also require an understanding of evaluation. For example, the counseling standards mandate that the certified school counselor must "use reflection, self-assessment, and interactions with colleagues to promote

personal professional development” (para. 6, TAC 239.15, 2018). The principal standards similarly include that the principal “reflects on his or her practice, seeks and acts on feedback, and strives to continually improve, learn, and grow” (para. 5, TAC 241.15, 2018).

### Support Systems

Candidate support was also greatly increased when clinical experts were added to the team. These clinical experts were the educators that hold positions in the field in the same certification field as the candidates. With current experience, these experts provided a relevant, realistic support system to help candidates understand their future roles. Additionally, the university instructors, site supervisors, and field supervisors offered support in the field and through feedback and encouragement. Field supervisors were enrolled as guests in Blackboard courses (the program’s online course management system) so they received the same communication regarding deadlines, announcements, and discussion questions that candidates received. Furthermore, site supervisors provided input regarding candidate performance in the areas of willingness to learn, professional appearance, professional interaction, punctuality, completion of assignments, initiative, communication skills, individual growth, and overall quality of work. This information was given to the field supervisors for inclusion in the evaluation. The collaboration of all stakeholders helped to build a cohesive team that provided a comprehensive picture of the candidate throughout the term.

### Training

Within the department, one faculty member became a TEA Field Supervisor Coaching Trainer, in order to supervise and train all field supervisors. In addition to this TEA training, the site and field supervisors received training through a university-specific Field and Site Supervisor Training Guide. This was very similar to the practicum handbook given to candidates, but it was catered to site and field supervisors and provided step-by-step directions on supervision, forms to complete, and how their efforts followed Chapter 228 (2018) requirements and directly impacted the EPP’s compliance efforts.

### Data Collected

All of the forms and documentation previously mentioned were placed in a digital folder, including: TAC Chapter 228 (2018), the Practicum Handbook, all of the standards required for curricula and coursework, the applications, training guides, site supervisor qualifications,

field supervisor training certificates, State Board for Educator Certifications, and curriculum vitae for every clinical expert. Additionally, documentation is contained in a separate folder for each candidate, including the logs, reflections, field supervisor evaluations, site supervisor evaluations, and self-evaluations. These folders were labeled by candidate name and program for ease in providing documentation to TEA in the event of an audit.

To showcase the variety of geographic diversity, a map was created of all practicum locations to share with the dean and department chair, as well as other stakeholders, for a final data report. At the end of the semester, tallies for all of the communication methods utilized with the candidates were calculated so that a record of all of the ways that candidates were supported were documented. Finally, copies of actual communication documents were saved and archived. For example, a PDF document of the course announcements was exported and saved, and a PDF of all of the discussion board communication was exported and saved. Also, as TAC Chapter 228 (2018) requires ongoing communication and support by field supervisors, one of the department’s field supervisors created a document to share with the other field supervisors to document the times they visited with their candidates throughout the semester. Candidate evaluation details were inputted into a Google Form, to include the date, the time-in and time-out of the observation, and field supervisor comments. This helped validate that the department was following the TEA requirements for all evaluations.

### TaskStream Surveys

TaskStream, a web-based portfolio program, was integrated with Blackboard so that the candidates’ scores for each standard in their field was entered from their field supervisor’s evaluations for a snapshot of how well candidates were progressing towards proficiency. Also, four surveys were released at the end of the term to collect additional data. The first survey was for the site and field supervisors to garner feedback on candidate performance and to ensure recommendation for certification, as per TAC Chapter 228, (8) (D) which states: “A practicum is successful when the field supervisor and the site supervisor recommend to the EPP that the candidate should be recommended for a standard certificate” (2018). The next survey was for the candidates to rate their site and field supervisor. This assisted with the site and field supervisor evaluations and hiring.

In addition, candidates completed a two-part course evaluation survey to rate the course effectiveness including content, assignments, knowledge and skills, technology, collaboration, critical thinking, instructors, and reflection.

There was a section for open-ended responses regarding support, strengths of the course, and areas that could be improved. Candidate feedback on open-ended responses showed what was working and what was not. For example, one candidate wrote, “I would suggest trying to find a way to turn in all paperwork without the need to purchase a [TaskStream] account if possible.” Additionally, another candidate responded:

The structure of [the course] has been set up in a way to help me be successful. The three checkpoints along the way are perfect to help keep me on track. The experiences I have gleaned are crucial to helping me understand the role of a school administrator. Please do not change anything about the structure of this course. The assignments, resources, and accessibility to professors has been perfect. Thank you for working alongside me to help me be successful.

All information collected from the various evaluative data was then analyzed quantitatively and qualitatively and condensed into easy-to-understand reports for program improvement, as well as a one-page report in the form of a final executive summary. These measures strengthened the practicum in regard to compliance and provided evidence of quality experiences and opportunities for continuous improvement.

### Conclusion

Angelo State University’s educator preparation program followed the requirements set forth in the TAC Chapter 228 (2018) for all practicum and internships for compliance and quality by incorporating the following elements for improvement:

- Revised the handbooks, applications, and courses with wording from TAC Chapter 228 (2018)
- Embedded the preparation standards for each field
- Grouped standards by domain for focused activities
- Integrated TaskStream with Blackboard for candidate portfolios
- Incorporated instructors as clinical experts
- Added field supervisors as guests in Blackboard for consistent communication
- Created new evaluation forms for field supervisors
- Added field supervisor requirement to email evaluations to faculty

- Created new evaluation forms for site supervisors
- Created Site & Field Supervisor Training Guide
- Added candidate reflections for each domain
- Added a candidate self-evaluation over preparation standards

Because of the importance of the practicum experience for the full transformation of candidate preparation for a role in advanced certification, as well as the specific requirements by TAC Chapter 228 (2018), university EPP faculty and staff must ensure that candidates are receiving the most quality experiences while collecting evidence of compliance. Although Texas has specific guidelines on what teachers, counselors, principals, and superintendents should know and do, it can be difficult to document that candidates are obtaining quality experiences in the field. Ongoing data collection and research is a constant practice, as this institution strives to ensure that an optimum practicum experience is provided to all candidates. Furthermore, preparing individuals to obtain an advanced certification is one layer of performance for the faculty at this institution, but analyzing the vast impact on student success by arming candidates with the essential knowledge, skills, and mindsets to step into advanced certification roles in the educational arena is another significant layer. Data collected as evidence of compliance and program improvement includes the following:

- Site and Field Supervisor Training
- Site supervisor qualifications
- Field supervisor training certificates, certifications, qualifications
- Field supervisor evidence of ongoing communication
- Candidate records of observations: Dates, time, field supervisor comments
- Folders with artifacts: Logs, evaluations, reflections, final self-evaluation
- TaskStream reports by standard
- Blackboard communication
- Survey results (candidate, course, instructor, & field supervisor evaluations)

Collaboration and communication among faculty within the department are key to showcasing quality programs, and this university’s EPP was able to transform the practicums with data and evidence for compliance and continuous program improvement.

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