

## **The Urban School Leaders Collaborative** **University of Texas at San Antonio & South Bexar County I. S. Ds.**

The Urban School Leaders Collaborative (USLC) is a nationally recognized educational leadership preparation program, honored with the first University Council of Educational Administration (UCEA) Annual Exemplary Educational Leadership Program Award in 2013. A partnership between the University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) and South Bexar school districts, the USLC is a cohort-based principal preparation program dedicated to developing leadership capacity within the school districts. The purpose of this collaborative is to support and retain emerging leaders in the school district, preparing them with both a master's degree and principal certification with a focus on social justice advocacy.

The USLC prepares educators as transformational leaders who are committed to working effectively in diverse, ambiguous, and challenging contexts. An innovative model, it is distinct in several ways. First, the program is driven by a philosophy of social justice advocacy, focused initially on the development of asset-based attitudes and mindsets, and then on the cultivation of collaboration, analytical and leadership skills. Second, as an authentically collaborative partnership, both the school district and university are actively involved in the selection, planning, teaching, and evaluation of the program. This is essential to the department's capacity building and results in a praxis-oriented curriculum that benefits the student and faculty. Third, the USLC is a closed cohort model that serves the employees of the partnering school district. Leadership preparation is customized to meet the needs of the children of the school districts while promoting buy-in and a level of ownership from central administration. Fourth, because all classes are taught by department faculty at the school district, university faculty engage with issues and problems in the field, across the district and at multiple levels of the district organization. And finally, student support continues via a mentoring component in which faculty continue to mentor graduates as they assume leadership positions. As one graduate noted, "We may graduate, but we never finish."

Teaching and learning in this program are driven by a constructivist theoretical approach. In a constructivist classroom, students, together and collectively, engage in critical reflection. Coupled with constructivist learning theory, the *Pedagogy of Collective Critical Consciousness* (Garza, 2016) engages students intensely in collective learning activities, including shared critical reflection, the writing of autoethnographies, and ultimately, the implementation of praxis (Freire, 1993). Students learn together and from each other. As co-constructors of knowledge, they are both teachers and learners. The central premise of the *Pedagogy of Collective Critical Consciousness* framework is to engage students in a continuous cycle of collective learning experiences. The intensive critical reflection and autoethnography are extremely demanding and require students to develop a deep understanding of who they are, personally and professionally. It is critical that these activities be carried out in a context of trust and respect, which deepens over the course of the program. Incorporating instructors from both the district and university who have particular understandings of the experiences of participants in the USLC has been critical to the success of these activities.