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Implementation of LEAD—Part II: Grants Competition and Program Operation

by Hunter Moorman

Office of Educational Research and Improvement
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Public policy and federal grants programs become real through the competition for funds and ensuing program operation. These steps continue in a more public way the policy interpretation and refinement begun with the development of regulations. As with implementation at the regulations stage, new actors and their appreciations of circumstances at these stages introduce new values, interpretations, and perceptions of limitations and opportunity. The conduct of the LEAD grants competition, including preparation of the program announcement, peer review, and early project operation are reviewed here.

Program Announcement

The Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI) was obligated by regulation and its own traditions to make grant awards through a competition that was both full, fair, and open, and of the highest substantive and technical quality possible. A start toward these ends had been made with the regulations—with the (it was hoped) appropriate criteria for review, the clear presentation of information, and the "constructive notice" they provided. The program announcement OERI developed to provide guidance for the competition, if well done, would carry this aim a step further.

Program announcements may not legally convey "sub-regulatory" guidance—that is, it may not impose more strin-

Hunter Moorman is the Program Manager for the LEAD Program. A career civil servant, he has worked during the past 20 years with the U.S. Office of Education, the National Institute of Education, and the Department of Education. He holds a BA in Government from Harvard College and MPA from George Washington University.

gent conditions upon applicants than established in regulations. But additional clarifying, supporting, or hortatory detail in permissible. The program office decided upon the content of the announcement through an assessment of the *constituent interest, the state of the field, and its own experience and capacities* related to grant competitions and operating programs.

Constituent Interest and Expectations

The ED was dealing not with a piece of legislation or Congressional sponsors alone, but with four Washington-area education associations and their national memberships as well. As Larson notes elsewhere in this issue, several professional associations helped shape and secure passage of the legislation. Their involvement resembles the process Fuhrman, Clune, and Elmore (1988) have called "strategic interaction." In a study of education reform at the state level, these researchers found not the resistance predicted by current implementation theory, but instead that "strategic interactors' seize opportunity, coordinate and expand state policy to meet their needs, and anticipate and actively shape state policy" (p. 17). To one degree or another, the American Association of School Administrators (AASA), National Association of Elementary School Principals (NAESP), National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA) had played a strategic interactor role by supporting, contributing to, molding, and generating Congressional support for the LEAD legislation.

They were active after passage of the Act in the eventual appropriation of funds, and they kept their membership informed of progress with the bill and alert to the upcoming funding opportunity as the program took shape. Some of the national and state-affiliate associations operated or were developing programs that could be considered potential beneficiaries or recipients of the grant awards. Passage of LEAD stood to be a significant demonstration of their political leverage and capacity to represent the interests of the field and of their members. These associations had urged the Department not to develop instructions that departed from the law or elaborated unnecessarily from it. They had also reminded the Department that the field was heterogeneous, with myriad alternatives deserving both the chance to compete and support for further development. The associations and their members had earned an influential place in representing their interests and expectations in the implementation of LEAD.

Field Environment

Past OERI experience and research literature suggested that the system LEAD was to help change was loosely-coupled, ambiguity-plagued, complex, unorganized, and lacking a well-developed base of knowledge or technology. *Loosely coupled* in the sense that each sub-element in the system functioned in relative independence of the effects of the others, such that perturbations at one point in the system affected other parts only modestly, if at all, and that sustained, significant intervention would be required to effect changes (Weick, 1976; 1979). Ambiguity of the kind March and Olsen (1976) observed in institutions of higher education prevailed: sources, limits, and targets of power were unclear to the putative wielder of power; organizational purposes were vague or many; lessons of experi-

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ence, meaningful feedback in response to action, were uncertain; and what constituted success was in doubt. *Complex* because many organizations and actors with impinging, overlapping, and divergent missions constituted the preparation and development "system." *Unorganized* in that no unifying principle or consensus on overarching purpose bound the diverse factions together. *Lacking knowledge* in the sense that leadership research remained somewhat conceptually and methodologically flawed and still offered rather contradictory, tautological, and irrelevant findings (Bass, 1984; Karmel, 1984; Mitchell and Scott, 1987; Pfeffer, 1984; see also for example, Bass, 1984, pp. 378, 400-402, 600, and 602; and Schriesheim, Tolliver, and Behling, 1984, pp. 130-131). And lacking *technology* in the sense that there were few materials that translated available knowledge into useful, sound training.

Program Experience and Capacities

The program office's assessment of its own capacities and interests also affected the process. This analysis led away from the direction of the "one best system." The staff's training and experience led it to distrust heavy-handed federal guidance (as did the Administration) and centralized models in favor of local diversity and initiative. Staff most closely involved at this stage also lacked sufficient expertise in school administration and leadership at that time to feel comfortable being too prescriptive.

What the program did feel comfortable doing was serving as a modest sort of exemplar in its drafting of the announcement. It decided to put into the document both the kinds of information and the degree of care it hoped applicants would invest.

And, last, the program paid heed to its division title, "Education Networks Division," and its competence in supporting and encouraging with various means the enhancement of education reform and local improvement through networking among grantees and other appropriate parties.

This composite picture created by constituent interests, field environment, and program office background suggested three large strategic approaches. First, that the competition should be used to the extent feasible to encourage forms of coordination and collaboration that would not likely arise independent of a significant outside inducement. Second, that the kind of improvement envisioned by the Act would be hard-won, and that its achievement would depend as much on provision of other kinds of support beyond the grant funds as on the quality of the competition. And third, that the grants should be viewed as developmental and needing to be encouraged to learn from experience and to recognize and take advantage of more promising opportunities as they arose.

Thus came the crafting of an announcement that communicated the requirements of law and regulations with these key features:

A minimum of intrusiveness and directiveness. There was no leadership model suggested, nor any ideal program design other than the skills and services listed in the law. A bare minimum of reporting and other obligations to the federal funding offices were included.

Softened emphasis on centralized and extensive services. The eight disparate services listed in law and regulation were all included, but they were organized into four categories based on their primary function: information collection and analysis, training, technical assistance and consultation, and dissemination and information utilization.

Attention to key features of program design and operation. Applicants were encouraged to use resources in ways

that provided greatest leverage in the state and that would best organize and improve upon offerings already in place. They were encouraged to form relationships and develop capacity beyond a single organization or narrow base in the state.

Emphasized importance of a sound knowledge base.

The announcement drew attention to the importance of operating on a sound assessment of local needs and problems and thorough understanding of lessons of current research and practice.

Called for participation in a "network" and systematic exchange of information. Projects were encouraged to think in terms of membership in a larger network of projects, to budget funds for participation in a national LEAD meeting annually, and to engage in regular exchanges of information to strengthen their own and other leadership activities.

Encouraged applicants to approach the development of applications with a large investment of care, thought, and competence. The program office modeled as much care, thought, and competence in preparation of the announcement as possible. Care was taken to anticipate stumbling blocks or other problems applicants might encounter or overlook and to prepare applicants for them. Applicants' attention was directed to kinds of information that would help them respond to the review criteria and help expert reviewers best discriminate among competitors.

The Grants Competition

The grants announcement was published in October 1986, and mailed to approximately 3,500 colleges and universities, LEAs, SEAs, education associations, private firms, and individuals. A notice entered in the *Federal Register* on October 6, 1986 (OERI, 1986) advised the public officially of the competition, applicable regulations, source of additional information, and closing date for submission of applications.

A general public information conference held in Washington, D.C. afforded an opportunity for interested or prospective competitors to ask questions and to comment. Several associations also invited program staff to brief their memberships on the competition at national meetings.

One of the program's concerns at this stage was to ensure prospective competitors that the competition was not, in the terminology used to indicate an ostensibly open but fraudulent competition, "wired." Apparently because of the aggressive "strategic interaction" the administrator and board associations had conducted, some other prospective applicants began to assume that the funds were "intended" for these associations' members. This was not so, and it was important that we disabuse the field of this notion. Program staff took every occasion to portray the competition as completely open and fair and to encourage any interested applicant to apply.

Seventy-six applications were submitted for the 51 center "slots." In the case of 35 states, there was only one applicant. There were between two and five for the other 16 states. We have only anecdotal evidence to explain the submission of a single application in these states. In some instances, it appears that a single competitor seemed so overwhelmingly favored to win that others were discouraged from applying. The advantage seemed to lie not with any preferred position in the competition but with the edge of experience and capacity. There are some states where there was but one realistic competitor. And it is probable that the image of a favored competitor group was not wholly dispelled in every state. But the more voiced explanation is that prospective competitors decided to join and split the pot rather than run the all-or-nothing risk of competition.

While it cannot be proven that this was always for the best, it does seem as though it most often worked out in the state's best interest. It provided in effect a competition before the competition, one in which bargaining substituted for choice in the determination of the eventual program. Agencies and organizations that had resisted working together had now come together and developed joint programs. Though these were sometimes merely confederations to preserve individual interests, it appears that true collaborations and consortia are evolving in many cases.

Because the statute provided for funding one center to serve each state, the competition was run essentially as 51 sub-competitions, each seeking to identify a suitable awardee for one state. Applicants from the single- as well as from the multiple-applicant competitions were put through a rigorous peer review. A plan for the review was developed and approved by the OERI Assistant Secretary in accordance with the OERI procedures for peer review (OERI, undated).

Over 100 peer reviewers read and provided extensive comments on applications. Each application was evaluated by 5 readers, among whom were school administrators, policy makers, scholars from disciplines pertinent to leadership and school administration, teachers, and businesspersons. Decisions were made by the Assistant Secretary/OERI on the basis of the field reviews, staff advice, and his own readings. In two cases of the 16, awards were made to the second ranked competitor when scores were extremely close and the readers' commentary justified the choice.

There were in effect two additional competitions to round out the full complement of awards. A follow-up competition was held to fund a center for Indiana, after the one application from that state was withdrawn during the first competition (see 52 FR 16301, dated May 4, 1987). Much later, a second cycle of competition was held to make awards to American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Mariana Islands, Palau, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands—the entities that had been ineligible for the initial competition. Technical Amendments to the Higher Education Amendments of 1986, into which the LEAD program had been reauthorized since the first competition, had made these entities eligible (U.S. Congress, 1987; OERI, 1988). These followed essentially similar procedures, and resulted in one award for each of the jurisdictions.

Program Monitoring and Networking

The last in the many recursive stages of program implementation is the projects' operating phase. Projects encounter a variety of obstacles and opportunities in the course of daily events that could never have been anticipated and provided for in the grant application or project design. Since the funding instrument is a grant, assistance for the grantee's needs and purposes, program adjustments within the overall scope of the original approved grant are acceptable and even encouraged. We are after, after all, the best programs in an ambiguous, changeable world.

The program office is deeply committed to providing a high level of support and encouragement to these projects. We know they will encounter new circumstances. We know they are sometimes operating blind and alone, relying—to

paraphrase William James—only on their faith in an uncertified outcome to ensure the results they seek. We know there is great comfort as well as inspiration and rich new ideas to be gained from working among a community of like-minded, dedicated colleagues. And we know that the additional commitment, effort, and activity that even a small increment of new funding can provide can make a potentially big difference in the project's success. We have tried to create a situation where the 57 LEAD grants have the support, encouragement, community, and extra dollars they need and deserve in order to make their best contributions to the field. Elizabeth Hale describes this undertaking—the National LEADership Network—in a separate article in this issue.

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