Learning to Lead? Studying the Content of Principal Preparation

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The Quality of Principal Preparation

- 2005 study by Art Levine, President of Columbia Teachers College, concluded: “Majority of programs range from inadequate to appalling.”
  - Nearly 90% of principals said education schools do not prepare school leaders for realities.
- 2003 Public Agenda report found that 96% of principals thought experience and advice from colleagues more valuable than their training.

Sources: Levine (2005), Educating School Leaders. Teachers College: The Education Schools Project. Farkas et. al. (2003), “Rolling Up Their Sleeves,” Public Agenda.

The Question of Content

- Levine study is important but did not examine content of principal preparation.
- Joe Murphy (2004) reviewed preparation research and concluded, “We know almost nothing about” the content of preparation.

The Two New Studies

- Our research asks two basic questions:
  - What are principal candidates actually being taught in preparation programs?
  - What are they being asked to read in these programs?
- The two studies are descriptive.

New Demands of 21st Century Principals

- Leading school improvement under accountability
- Actively ensuring teacher quality
- Employing data and research
- Operating in a public choice environment

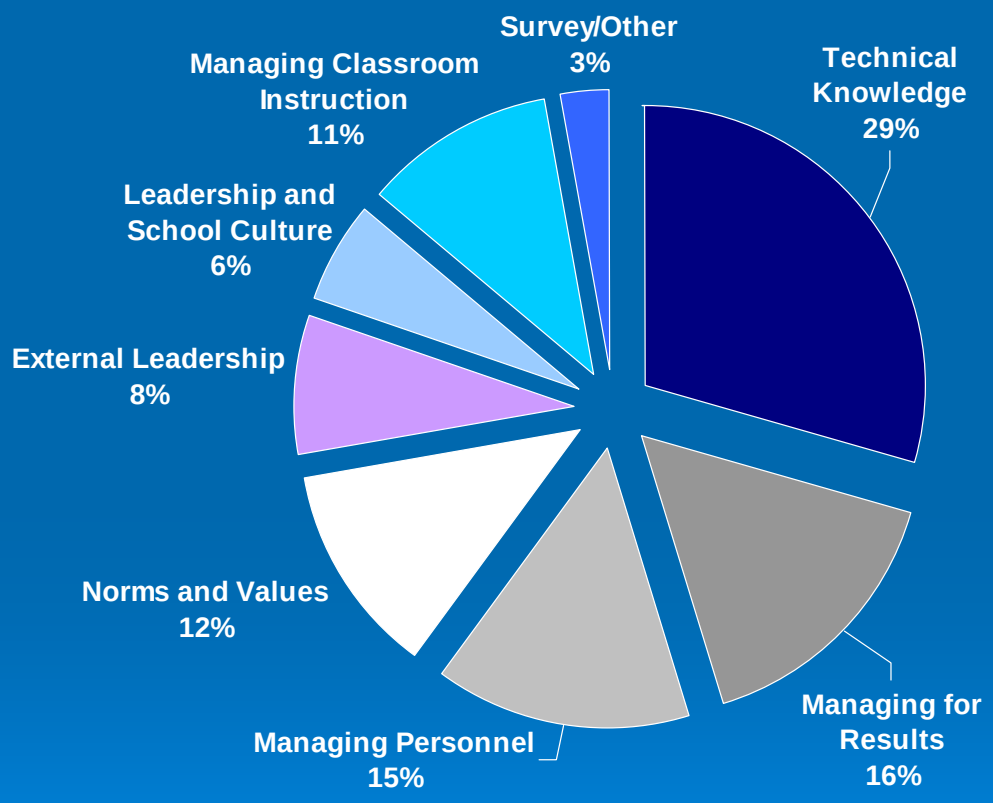
Sampling Methodology

- In early 2004, the NCES “IPEDS” database listed 496 educational administration programs.
- From this universe we drew a stratified sample of programs (56 qualifying sample programs).
  - Elite: Top 20 in 2004 *US News & World Report* ed admin rankings
  - Large: 20 granting most M.Ed.’s in ed admin
  - Typical: 20 others selected at random

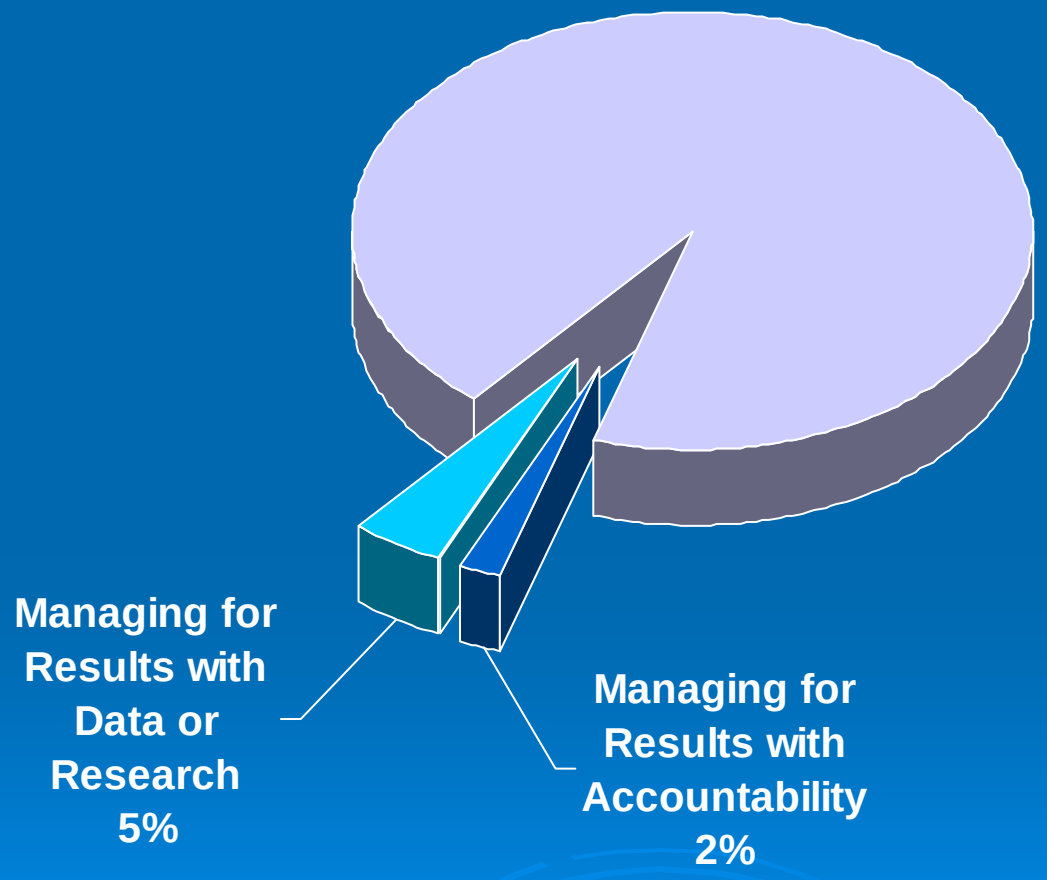
Syllabi Study: Methods

- Acquired core syllabi from programs and faculty
  - Only about 5-10% were available via internet.
- Collected at least 4 core syllabi from 31 programs
- 210 total syllabi, with 2,424 course weeks and 1,851 readings
- Conducted two studies:
  - Content of syllabi
  - Most commonly assigned texts

Breakdown of Syllabi Content

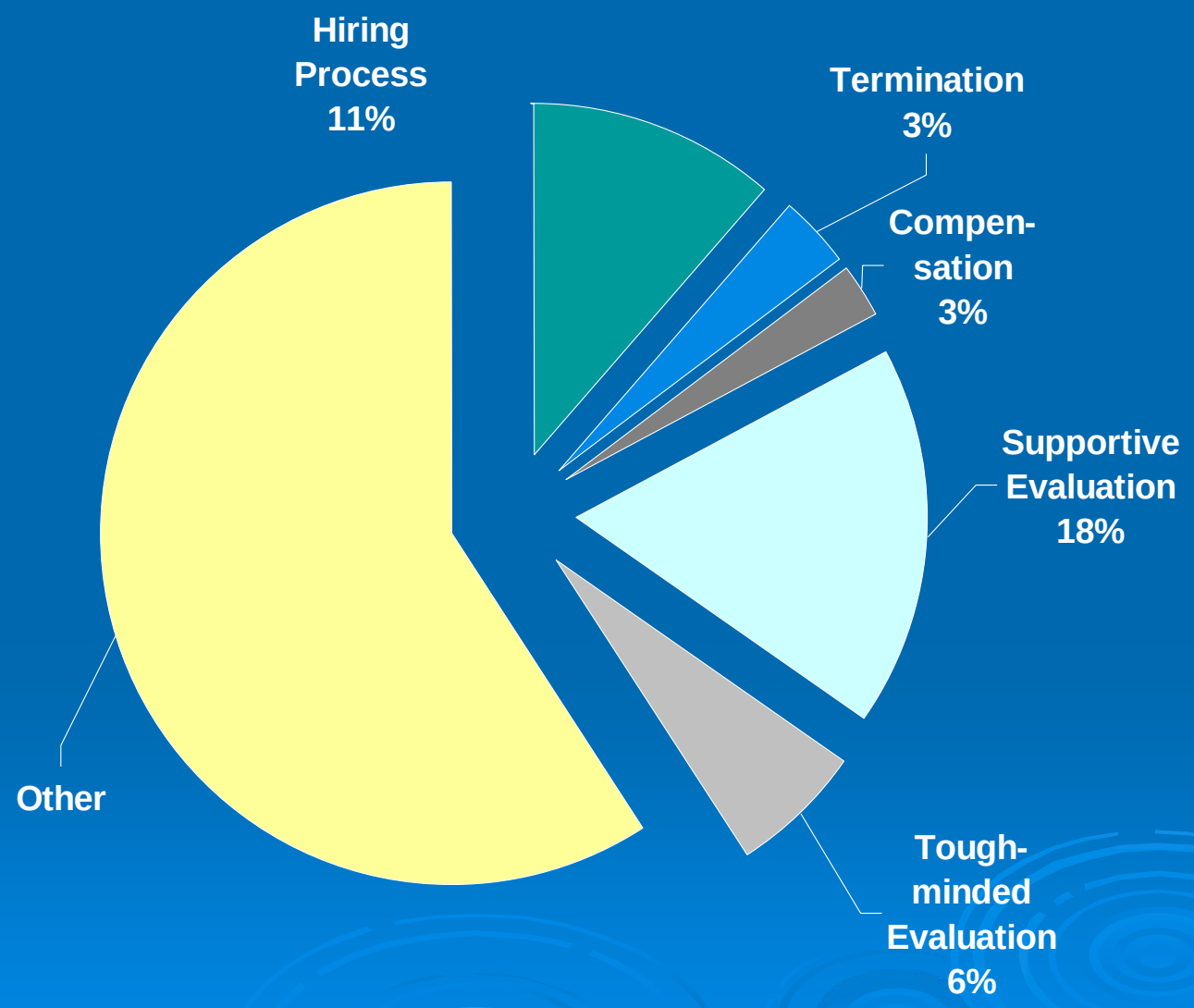


Managing for Results



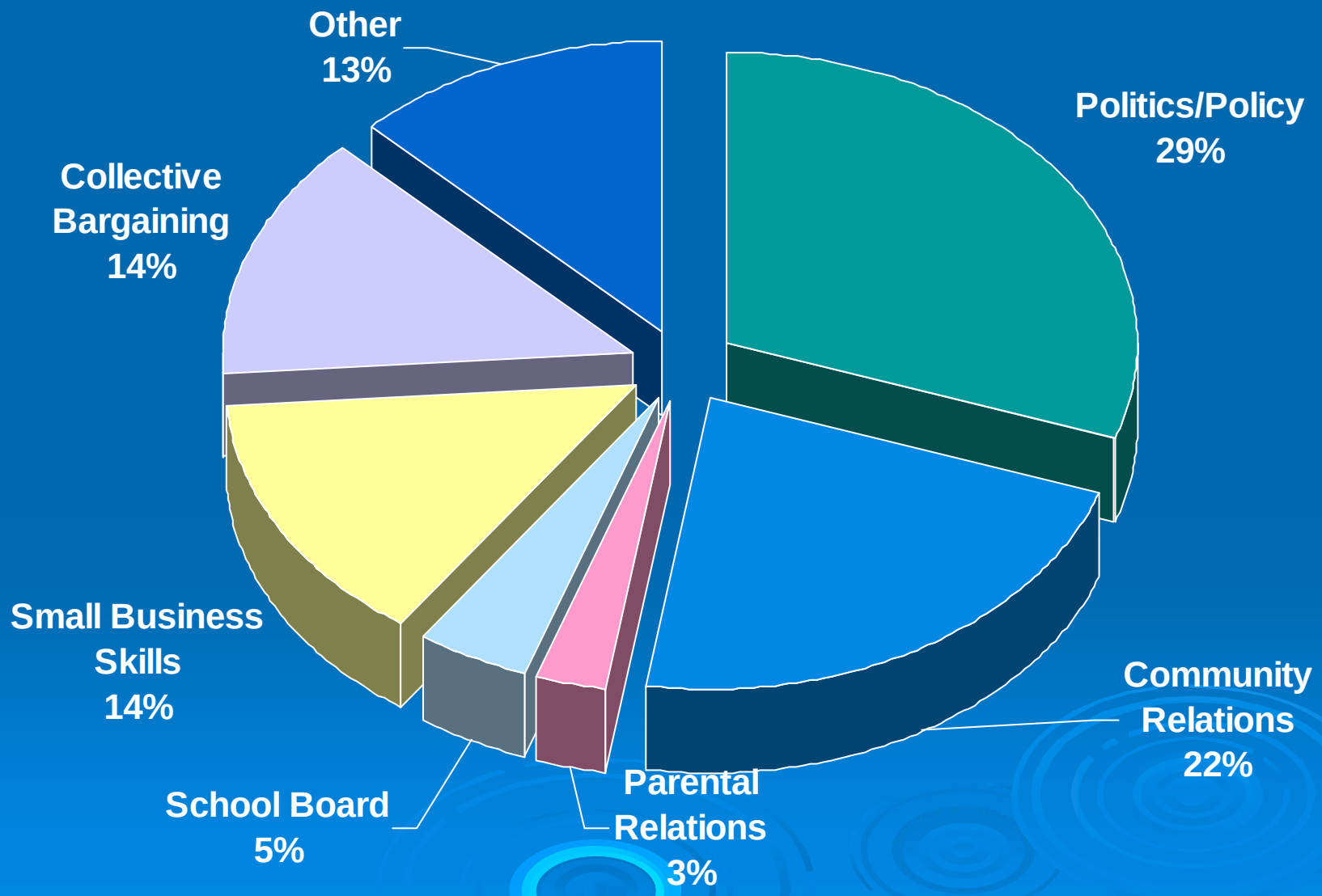
N = 2,424 course weeks

Managing Personnel



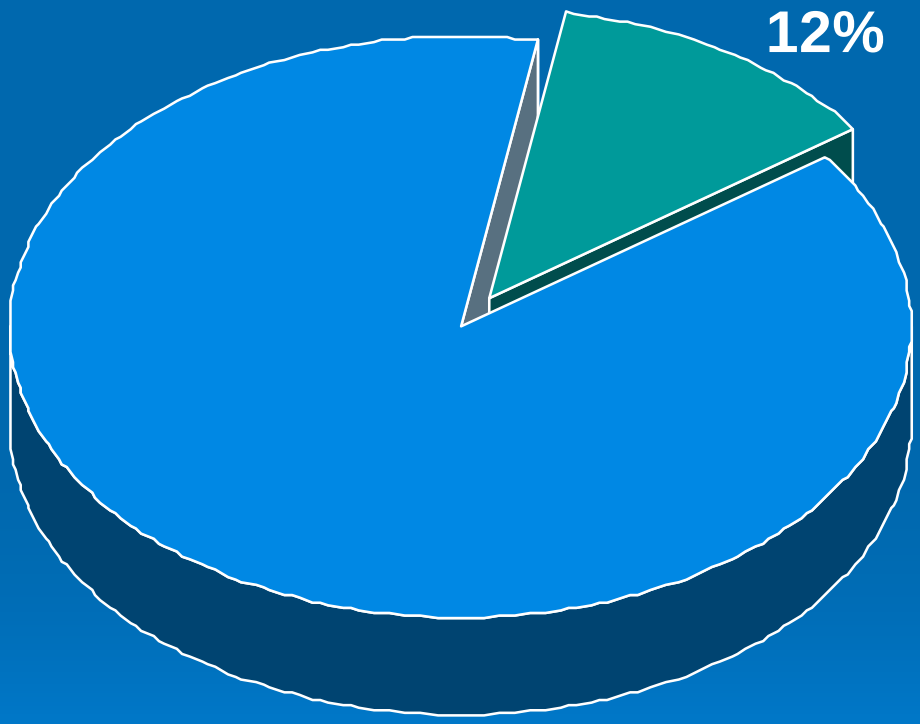
N = 360 course weeks

External Leadership



N = 194 course weeks

Limited Attention to Norms and Values



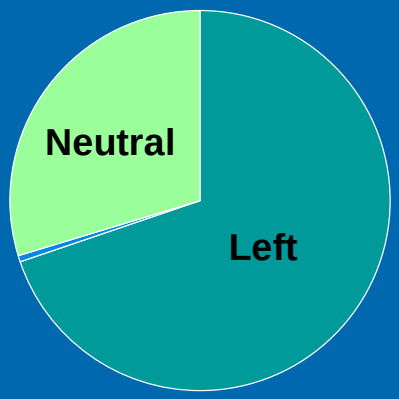
Norms and Values

N = 2,424 total course weeks

Norms and Values Coding

- **Left-leaning:**
  - Advocated concepts like social justice and multiculturalism.
  - Focused on race-based discrimination.
  - Emphasized notions of child-centered instruction.
  - Critical of testing and/or choice-based reform.
- **Right-leaning:**
  - Critiqued social justice or multiculturalism.
  - Questioned emphasis on inequality or discrimination.
  - Advocated back-to-basics instruction.
  - Supported testing and/or choice-based reform.

A Left-Leaning Bias?

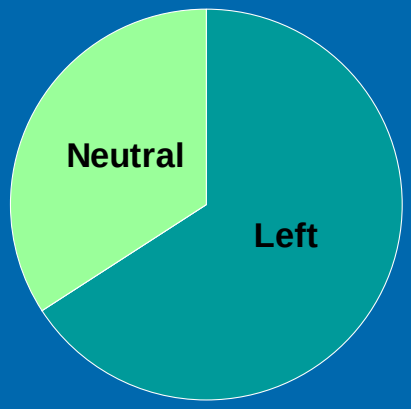


Elite

70% Left-leaning

<1% Right-leaning

30% Neutral

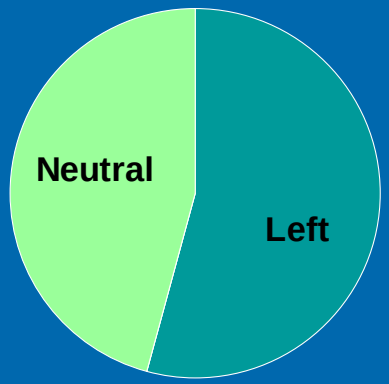


Large

66% Left-leaning

0% Right-leaning

34% Neutral



Typical

54% Left-leaning

0% Right-leaning

46% Neutral

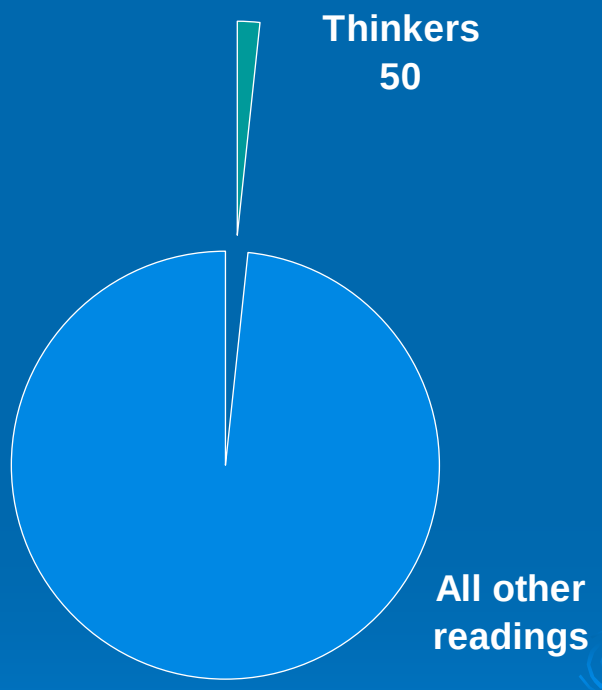
Sample Left-Leaning Course Weeks

- “What role(s) do race and social class play in school reform? Is social Darwinism a useful reform concept?”
- “Transforming urban education with a social justice agenda: The role of the Brown Decision in the fight for social justice in urban communities”
- “Fomenting social change”
- “Tools for change: Social reconstructionist schooling”
- “Race and ethnicity: White privilege, critical race theory”

Leading Management Thinkers

- 2003 survey of management professionals, professors, and students ranked the 50 most influential living management thinkers. List included Jim Collins, Clay Christensen, Warren Bennis, and Peter Drucker.

- Of the 50, just 9 were assigned a total of 29 times (1.6% of 1,851 readings).



Survey: Bloomsbury Publishing & SunTop Media (2003) *Thinkers 50*.

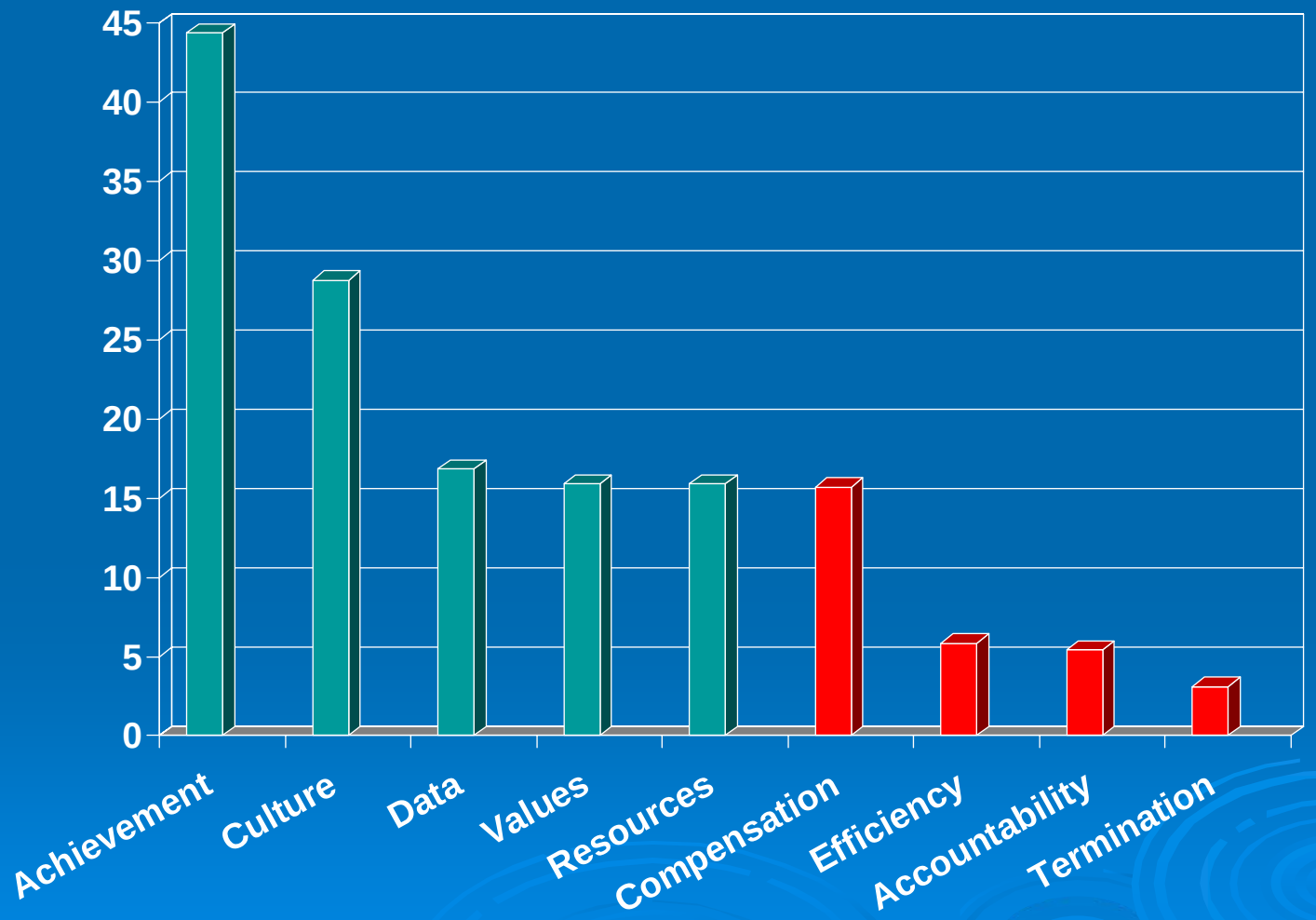
Text Study: Methods

- Second study analyzed 11 of the most frequently assigned texts.
- Most common text assigned 8 times across 210 courses.
- 17 texts were assigned more than 4 times.
  - We discarded 3 law textbooks and *Savage Inequalities*.
  - We studied the 7 assigned 5 or more times and 4 others.
- Texts divided into 3 categories: general, specialized, and foundational.
- Coding did not rely upon indexes; entailed reading each page in each text.

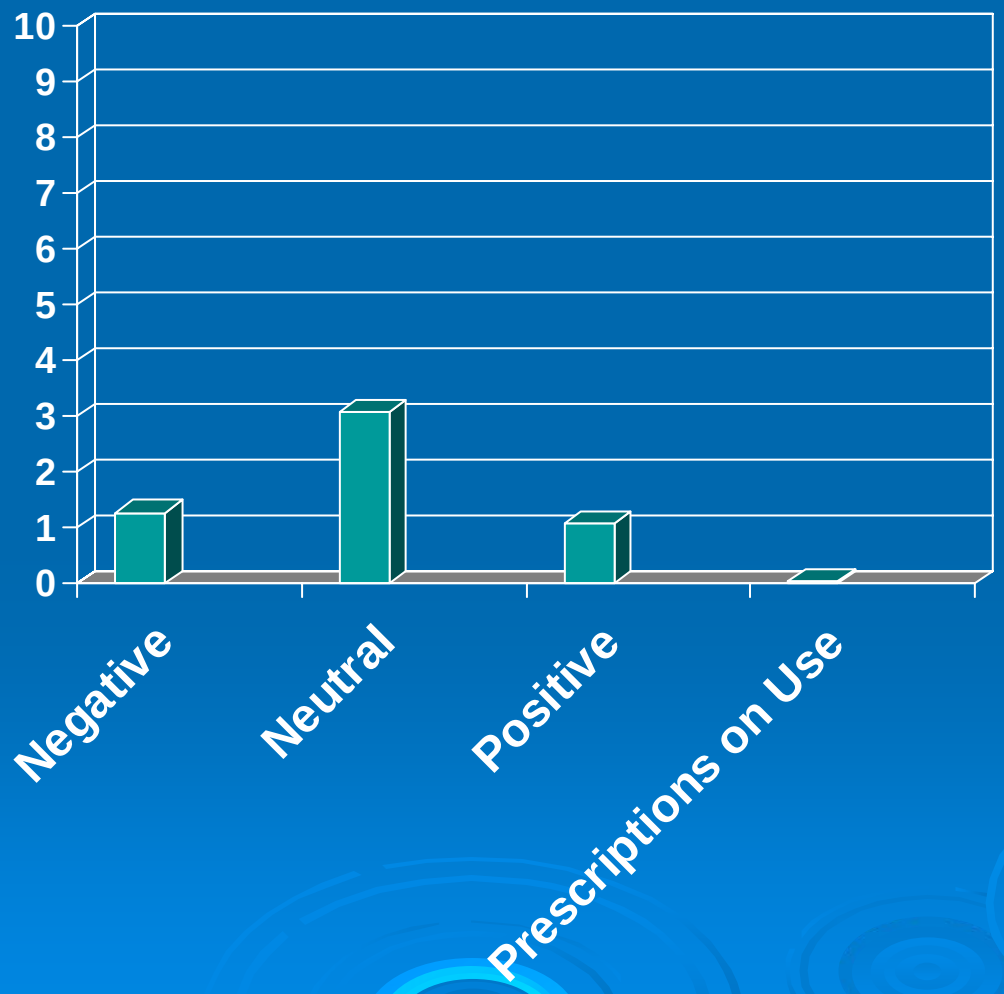
Coding of Texts

- Two rounds of coding:
  - **Initial:** Word count gauging frequency with which texts mentioned concepts like: achievement, culture, data, values, resources, compensation, efficiency, accountability, termination.
  - **Second:** examined whether concepts were discussed critically, positively, neutrally, and/or were accompanied by guidance.

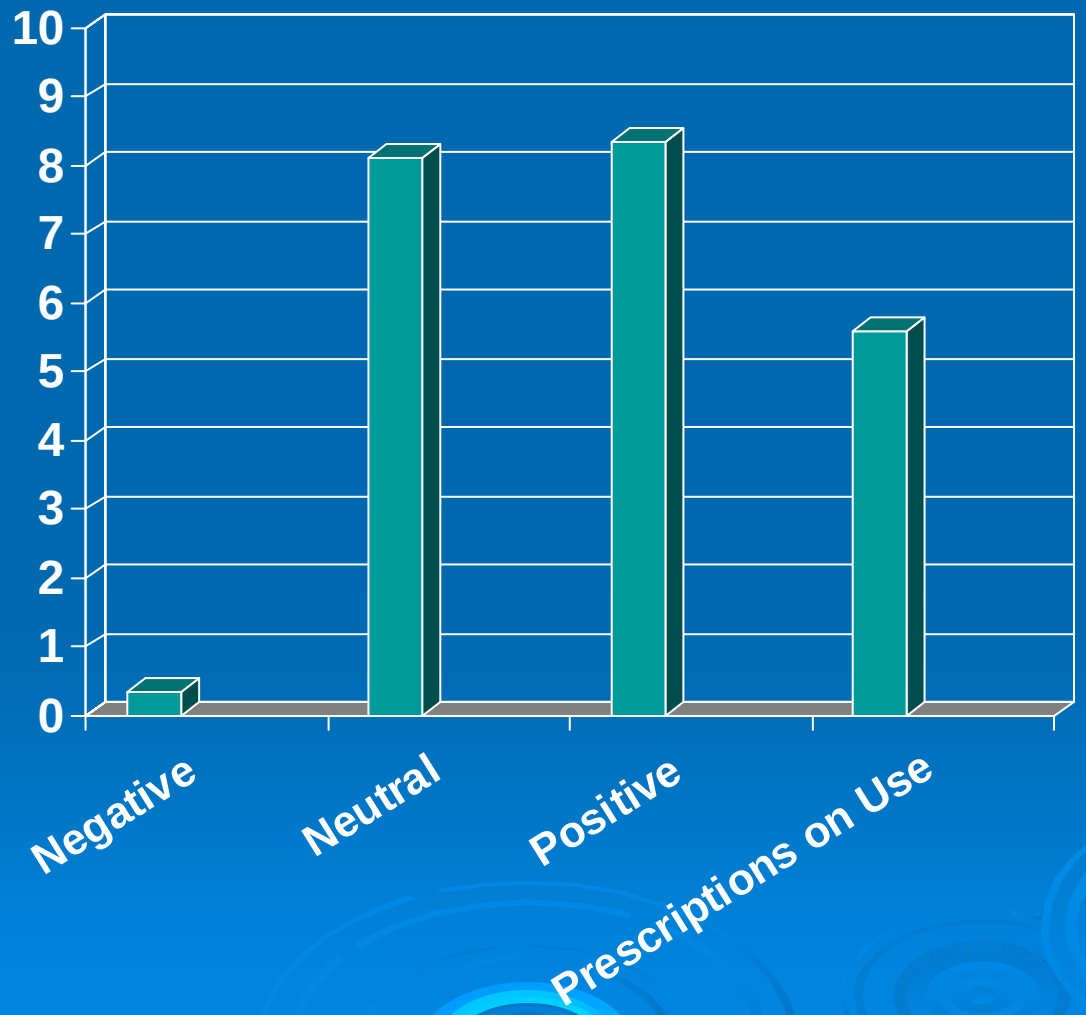
Key Concepts: Mentions per 100 Pages



Accountability: Mentions per 100 Pages



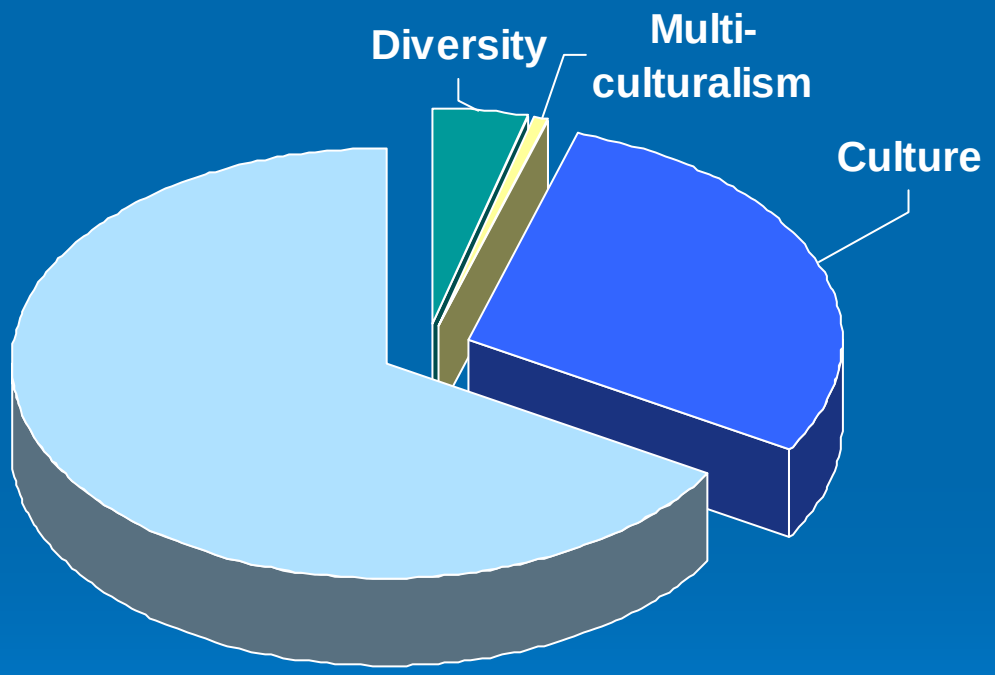
Data: Mentions per 100 Pages



Inattention to Tough-Minded Personnel Management

- Teacher termination and dismissal were mentioned just 3 times per 100 pages.
  - Nearly all mentions are due to inclusion of a single HR text.
- Not one text termed termination of weak personnel a potential positive for schools.

No Evidence of Ideological Agenda



N = 100 pages of text

Conclusions

- Principals are not being equipped to use accountability or take responsibility for teacher quality.
- There is little evidence of ideological bias– the larger concern is limited scope of preparation.
- Structural changes make sense, but we must also consider what principals need to know and what they are being taught.

Further Research

- What skills and content do principals most need?
- Will new reforms alter the content of preparation?
- How does the content in alternative programs compare?