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Shirley Vaughn Greves
University of North Dakota

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Collaboration Between Departments of Education and the Disciplines: Making it Work

Shirley Vaughn Greves
University of North Dakota

Abstract

In an educational and political climate where subject matter is valued even more highly than teacher education in the preparation of “highly qualified teachers,” it is imperative that teacher educators and faculty in the content area disciplines work collaboratively in this preparation. Within the culture of higher education, such a positive relationship at many institutions is not always the case. This article explores the factors that have contributed to the forging of an effective partnership between the Secondary Education Program and the disciplines at one university, with the intent of helping others to foster a similar partnership at their institutions.

Introduction

For several years, a colleague and I have been presenting our three-phase portfolio assessment process for our teacher candidates in the Secondary Education Program at the University of X at regional, national, and international annual conferences. When we describe the Phase II Portfolio Review as a collaborative effort between the teacher candidate’s discipline (content area) and secondary teacher education advisors, we are often asked how we are able to enlist the assistance and support of the faculty from disciplines across campus. We were surprised that this kind of collaboration was not the norm and came to realize that our teacher education program perhaps shares a unique relationship with the disciplines at our institution. These impressions were reinforced when we conducted an Interactive Dialogue on this topic at the 2005 Annual Conference of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE). We were once again surprised at the interest in this topic, and the participants actively engaged in discussion, noting situations such as one discipline at one institution refusing to follow the state guidelines for licensure in that major’s curriculum. One participant even thanked us for the session, stating that it had been “cathartic.” At the recent 2006 AACTE conference, we were again surprised when a perusal of the conference program revealed a number of sessions on the program on topics similar to the one we had presented the previous year. It appears that this collaborative relationship continues to be a concern for those involved in the preparation of teachers.

In the current climate of accountability precipitated by the “No Child Left Behind” (NCLB) legislation, the emphasis on content knowledge becomes particularly critical for teacher preparation of secondary preservice teachers within their majors. Former Secretary of Education Paige emphasized the value of subject matter knowledge over teacher preparation. In such a climate, it is critical that departments of education and departments within the disciplines collaborate to prepare future teachers effectively for their roles within this context. It is, therefore, valuable to examine our own collaborative efforts with the disciplines in the hope of

sharing some insights with other schools of education while continuing to strengthen our own relationships. A brief review of the usual structure of secondary teacher preparation and the literature on the relationships between schools of education and the disciplines will assist in setting this exploration of collaboration within a context.

The Context

Units that prepare secondary teachers come in several models. Some are totally field based, while others are self-contained within the school of education or housed within the college of each discipline. Some programs are integrated within a four-year program, while others are post degree programs. Many follow the model wherein the subject matter content and the methods of teaching it are the responsibility of each discipline's department housed within colleges separate from the teacher education department, while the general pedagogical courses are taught within the latter department, which also provides the field experiences. Our secondary teacher education program follows this model, integrated within a four-year degree. Historically, discipline departments have had neither an interest in nor a feeling of responsibility toward teacher preparation, and, in fact, the low status of teacher education within most institutions causes faculty to distance themselves from assignments in teacher education (Goodman, 1988), perhaps because it is not rewarded in the institution for the requirements of professorship (Fulwiler, 1996).

The culture of the university quite possibly contributes to the lack of collegiality between departments of teacher education and the disciplines noted by our colleagues at other institutions. Fulwiler (1996) notes that teacher education's "declining prestige within the academic community is well documented" (p. 24). Goodman (1988) explains earlier that "universities still view teacher education as a relatively simple endeavor compared to other programs . . . Most individuals recognize that schools of education within universities often suffer from low status" (p. 47). Goodlad (1990) adds, "Teacher education not only ranks low among university priorities, it is marginal in the school or college of education," noting that professors attaining grants or teaching graduate classes are able to avoid teacher preparation courses which require "a great deal of time and energy" (p. 25). This situation, explains Goodlad, has been created by the university's culture of "publish or perish" expectations, wherein value is placed on research rather than preparation of effective teachers. More recently, Goodlad (2004) notes that there is a myth that teacher candidates take the bulk of their courses in the schools of education rather than in the disciplines. While this myth is refuted by studies, its existence still tends to lend itself to the call for closing schools of education in favor of more content. He also comments that there is a growing interest in schools of education by university presidents; however, this interest has been more in the quality, and especially the quantity of teachers produced, rather than any contribution to educational research, about which says Goodlad, "most policy makers could not care less" (p. 22), evidenced by the questionable sources of research on which the NCLB legislation was based. It is little wonder that professors in the disciplines might distance themselves from teacher education.

Fulwiler (1996) contends that the reason perhaps for the low status of teacher education stems from the public's conflicting views of schooling: "[M]uch of the literature yokes the ambivalence toward teacher education with society's ambivalence toward schooling" (p. 24). So

too, Secretary of Education Paige's view of the significance of subject matter knowledge over pedagogy reflects the public perception of teaching from its own experience of schooling referred to as "received wisdom" by Kennedy (1999, p. 54) or the "apprenticeship of observation" from Lortie's (1975) well-known study. According to Kennedy (1999), the public views teaching as learning subject matter content, then learning the "how to" through classroom experience (p. 54). Clabaugh and Rozycki (1996) note that the promotion of subject matter over pedagogy is not new. The weighing of which is more important, pedagogy or content knowledge, notes Sosniak (1999), has "see-sawed" throughout time (p. 187).

Contrary to the current contention that subject matter knowledge is the key to effective teaching, education researchers and reformers, such as Lee Shulman (1988), assert that it is the combination of pedagogy and subject content (pedagogical content knowledge) that sets the effective teacher apart from someone with understanding of pedagogy only or a person possessing a degree only in the content area: "Pedagogical content knowledge transcends mere knowledge of subject matter as well as generic understanding of pedagogy alone" (p. 38). "More than two hundred studies," state Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin (1999) "have found that teachers who have more background in their content areas and have greater knowledge of teaching and learning are more highly rated and more successful with students in fields ranging from early childhood and elementary to mathematics, science and vocational education" (pp. 377-378). Indeed, in the context within which we are preparing teachers, it is essential that teacher education and the disciplines collaborate for the benefit of our prospective teachers.

Significant to the stance of this work is the fact that collegiality and collaboration between the disciplines and schools of education model such attitudes and behaviors for preservice teachers' future work with colleagues across disciplines. Several authors advocate building collegiality through collaborative problem-solving and shared responsibility for intentions, standards for practices, common concerns, and student outcomes (Ball & Cohen, 1999; Hawley & Valli, 1999; Little, 1999). Little (1999) further supports fostering in our preservice teachers such collegiality and a feeling of shared responsibility for standards of student work and assessment through problem solving. What better way to achieve this than by modeling such problem solving and shared responsibility by the departments in teacher education and the disciplines.

Exploring our Practices

Our Secondary Education Program in the Department of Teaching and Learning (T & L) has a long history of working with the disciplines (approximately fourteen departments) in the preparation of secondary preservice teachers. Particularly over the last ten years, we have experienced an increased collegiality with the disciplines and success in establishing a collaborative working relationship with them. Because of this success, some of the concrete strategies from our own achievements for establishing these positive, collaborative relationships might be beneficial to others. Rather than a formal research study, these strategies have surfaced through a more informal self-study.

To supplement our Secondary Education Program faculties' impressions, I have surveyed faculty from the disciplines with whom we work closely. Their responses to open ended

questions will be integrated throughout the following discussion. It should be noted that not everyone responded to the survey; however, those who did not have always been ready and willing to assist with projects to ensure the quality of our teacher candidates. Let us then explore the factors in establishing collaboration and collegiality with the disciplines.

From our own reflections and observations along with the responses from faculty, the factors that emerged seem to fall into three main categories: Extended faculty meetings, portfolio reviews, and No Child Left Behind. Permeating throughout, not surprisingly, is the value of communication and having a common goal. One Secondary Education Faculty member noted about this relationship, “[I]t is a partnership. Each member contributes something very important to the students’ education.”

The Secondary Education Program has had a longstanding relationship with the disciplines through what we term **Extended Faculty**, an extension of our in house secondary teacher education faculty. Representatives, usually subject area advisors, from each of the disciplines across campus as well as teacher representatives from the school district are a part of the Extended Faculty. This group meets four times throughout the school year, convened by the Secondary Education Program Coordinator, to discuss issues relevant to all those involved in the preparation of teachers. The meaning of the Extended Faculty is perhaps described best by one of our colleagues in the disciplines:

It means being part of a group of disciplinary specialists from the College of Arts and Sciences [and other colleges] who are working with a highly-motivated team of secondary education specialists in this institution’s efforts to promote the well-grounded constructivist preparation of teacher candidates and do so in the context of INTASC [Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium] Principles and the various national standards for the respective disciplines.

These meetings provide us with the opportunity to update discipline faculty on our program changes, to solicit their input and support for improvements or curriculum changes, to update changes in requirements for state licensure due to No Child Left Behind, and to work jointly on accreditation requirements for the state and NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education. Out of these meetings, other committees have emerged such as the Teacher Education Committee with representation from the disciplines and all the program areas in the Department of Teaching and Learning, and the K-12 Committee, which encompasses representation from those disciplines that prepare teacher candidates for K-12 licensure, such as physical education and music. The K-12 programs have been under the umbrella of our Secondary Education Program because it is less self-contained than elementary, and therefore, can accommodate their programs better, and the focus on a major in secondary coincides with the specialist status of the K-12 programs. Because of their growing needs and other subject areas now becoming K-12 programs, the need for a separate committee arose. They continue to be involved with our Extended Faculty meetings and endeavors. The fact that the Extended Faculty group itself is not a part of the governance structure, but rather holds an informal advisory position, may contribute to the collegiality that we experience.

All of the respondents to the survey noted the significance of the Extended Faculty meetings in keeping informed on the requirements for the teacher education students whom they advise. They also noted that, unfortunately, since all faculty do not attend all the time, other forms of communication are necessary and appreciated. These include e-mail communications, announcements, reminders, and minutes from the meetings. The chair of our department, as a recipient of our frequent e-mail messages, noted how well we kept our Extended Faculty informed.

While in the past we enjoyed in depth discussions on pedagogical issues, regrettably, much of the focus in recent years has been on keeping abreast of the current and ever changing requirements of the **No Child Left Behind legislation**. The discipline faculty expressed appreciation for our keeping them informed of these licensing requirements, suggesting that a Web site for reference once items are established would be a valuable tool. Unfortunately, with the constant flux of requirements, the site would be quickly out-of-date, and therefore, a detriment to advising rather than an aid. All of the respondents, however, found all of the education faculty most willing and helpful in responding to queries: “As a new advisor . . . I have found the T & L faculty to have infinite patience in answering my many queries”; “I can contact the T & L faculty for assistance with any questions I have”; “Whenever I need advice or an answer to a question, there is someone in Secondary Education who will assist me.” One even suggested that No Child Left Behind may have contributed to the collegiality of the Extended Faculty: “[T]he need to respond to external demands has had positive effects, in my opinion, on the camaraderie and collaborative nature of the group.” Perhaps an “us against them” perspective helps to forge positive relationships.

One colleague from the disciplines noted the fact that teacher candidates’ having an advisor from both their discipline and the secondary faculty probably contributes to our positive working relationship. This situation has not always been the case in the secondary program. Because our teacher candidates were essentially getting their degrees from other departments and colleges, secondary faculty were not always assigned advisees. This void sometimes resulted in candidates slipping through the cracks without all of the requirements. With having two advisors who are in contact with one another, the successful progress of the teacher candidates is more assured, although not foolproof. Students appreciate the fact that we know one another and consult one another. This advantage is especially beneficial if there is a student of particular concern. Advisors regularly consult one another on problems or potential concerns in order to provide the best guidance and outcome for the student.

This joint collaboration between advisors is especially evident in the **Phase II Portfolio Reviews**. When we restructured our portfolio process, the assessment tool in our program, we adopted a three-phase process: Phase I—in the introductory class; Phase II—in the semester prior to student teaching; Phase III—at the completion of student teaching. The Phase II review was to take place with the teacher candidate, the discipline advisor, and the Teaching and Learning Secondary advisor. Prior to this restructuring, the discipline advisors had had no responsibility with portfolios at all. We introduced the new process to the Extended Faculty for their approval, which they gave. Thus ensued a close relationship in reviewing, and particularly, interviewing our teacher candidates to ensure their readiness for student teaching. This collaboration has precipitated the involvement of many of the Extended Faculty in Phase III Portfolio Reviews,

witnessing the culmination of their advisees' programs, and even in the Phase I Portfolio Reviews when called upon. They find it interesting and rewarding to see, as we have, the growth of our teacher candidates from the beginning to the completion of their teacher preparation.

As noted earlier, permeating these three categories is **communication**. Along with obvious concerted efforts to communicate through meetings, e-mail, reminders, announcements, and minutes, there may be some intangible factors at work here such as attitude and respect for one another. The fact that the discipline faculty feels quite comfortable in consulting us is one indication of treating one another as professionals. They also noted in their responses that they did feel they had a voice in the decisions that were made for preparing secondary teachers, stating that the meetings “provide an opportunity for open discussion” and that “[a]ll the T & L faculty with whom I have had contact take my ideas and input seriously.” It is also rewarding to note their comments with regard to our relationship with them: “I see it as friendly, professional, and mutually respectful”; “They work hard to include faculty from the disciplines in the decision making process”; “Collegial in that the secondary education group have been inclusive and extremely supportive of a wide-range of disciplinary colleagues in the promotion of cross-disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives in teacher education plus these educators simply are a fine group of colleagues.” As we tell our teacher candidates that to attain respect from their students, they must show them respect, so must we model that respect with our own interdisciplinary colleagues.

Respect from within the discipline is another intangible factor that may be at work here, that is absent in other institutions, thus contradicting the literature. When asked if there was any lack of respect within their own departments for their involvement with teacher education, they were able to respond in the negative. Some were appreciated for their work, especially if a large number of the majors in the discipline were preparing to become teachers. Others were sought out to assist in training teaching assistants or for concerns about teaching in general and were supported by their chairs. Those who felt a “disengagement” or “uneasiness” from their colleagues thought it originated mainly from a lack of understanding about what it is that they do. In the rare instance where faculty failed to respond to this query, the absence of commentary itself was telling as to the respect issue within the discipline.

Perhaps underlying the positive relationship and collegial collaboration among secondary and discipline faculty is the fact that we have **common goals**. Two of the respondents noted that we are all committed to a constructivist approach to teaching. Uppermost seems to be the goal of preparing effective teachers. One summarizes it beautifully:

Despite the different disciplinary orientations each of us may have, it is clear to me that all extended faculty members share a common goal—producing the best teachers that we can. We all also seem to be on the same page pedagogically, in our support of a constructivist paradigm. Both of these commonalities are key, in my opinion, to the healthy working relationship that we have.

Interactive Dialogue: Summary of Feedback

The feedback received from the participants at the Interactive Dialogue at AACTE (2005) confirms the factors that we conclude contribute to a positive collaboration between the disciplines and teacher education. Participants who provided feedback, through a form with open-ended questions, came from ten different states and a variety in size and type of institution. All had a four-year degree program, integrating the content major with teacher education course work as the main path to licensure.

It seemed a common experience that indeed the demands of NCLB have brought the two groups into closer working relationships. Those that enjoyed a positive working relationship had strong support from their administration: Deans and Department Chairs. They also had some form of formalized meetings or committees similar to our Extended Faculty, such as a Teacher Education Committee or Teacher Education Coordinating Council, to discuss issues. Several acknowledged the advantage of our use of two advisors: one from teacher education and one from the discipline. Like our colleagues, they had the common goal of having the “students’ best interests in mind” and to “produce the best new teachers possible.”

Where the working relationship seemed less satisfactory, the disciplines saw teacher education as “telling us what to teach” with “no academic freedom.” On the other hand, teacher educators noted the disciplines’ “limited knowledge of what is involved in teacher preparation” and a “lack of understanding of education skills.” Some respondents also noted the lack of desire from certain disciplines to comply with content area requirements set out by state licensing boards. These comments reinforce the need for mutual respect, which could be fostered through communication. Almost all of the participants noted that communication was a key to a collaborative working relationship, but also attested to the fact that it required “time,” often at a premium for faculty in both areas.

Discussion and Conclusions

Through this exploration of our own practices and relationship with the disciplines at our institution, the following recommendations may be useful to other teacher education programs in establishing positive collegial relationships with their colleagues in the disciplines:

- The establishment of an informal group consisting of invited members from both teacher education and the disciplines such as our Extended Faculty to consider all issues related to teacher preparation and to serve in an advisory capacity.
- The establishment of common goals between both groups, for example, the desire to prepare effective teachers and the commitment to a similar philosophical stance in this preparation (in our case a constructivist approach).
- The establishment of a joint student advisory system, whereby a teacher candidate has an advisor within both the discipline and teacher education. These advisors work together to solve problems over students of concern; to review jointly a student’s progress in becoming a teacher, for example through a portfolio review process; and to serve as models of collegiality for future teachers.

- The facilitation of stressing the importance of preparing teacher candidates in accordance with licensing requirements, often simply through keeping discipline faculty informed of these requirements and responding to inquiries.
- The establishment of mutual respect between the faculties through asking for and incorporating ideas from the discipline faculty.
- The establishment of open lines of communication through a group such as Extended faculty, e-mail, memos, telephone calls, meeting minutes, and fact sheets.

From the examination of our own practices and the exchange of ideas from the participants from other institutions at our conference session, we hope to continue to improve our own practice and policies in working with the disciplines, for such collaboration will only benefit our teacher candidates. It is also hoped that others will benefit from our experience in working toward their own positive collaborative relationships. As one of our colleagues in the disciplines commented, “I see the Extended Faculty as a group of professionals who are dedicated to teacher education and who have formed a partnership with the Secondary Education program. The word ‘partnership’ is key here.”

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