

Public Hearing for the New NY Education Reform Commission



## **Teacher Education Reforms at SUNY Plattsburgh**

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## **Introduction**

In 1889 the New York State Legislature established Plattsburgh as school for the education of teachers, the New York State Normal and Training School. As recently as seven years ago, the teacher education programs at SUNY Plattsburgh were operating in the deep ruts of tradition. There were common group characteristics that included comfort with the status quo, fear of risk taking, intolerance for ambiguity, identity defined by discipline, inability to imagine the system being different, and avoidance of conflict rather than managing it. Our program looked like most others, starting with a course in human development, moving to methods courses, receiving the first classroom field experience in the junior year, and then culminating in student teaching the senior year. Professors did not speak to each other about their classes, which led to redundancy (e.g., Piaget was taught in several classes) with little depth of content. There were separate departments with chairpersons, tried and seemingly true curricular models that had been updated with content, but with little appreciation for the wealth of collective knowledge that existed across each education program and within area schools – the silos were tall and the ivory tower was fortified. A less-than-positive accreditation visit in spring 2004 served as the impetus for deep reflection and change.

## **Organizational Culture Change**

A newly hired Dean in fall 2004, Dr. David Hill, began the daunting task of implementing changes in a way that respected external forces (accreditation standards, changes in state standards for certification) and internal forces (faculty who believed nothing was wrong with the current model, new leadership, faculty turnover), changes that would be internalized by faculty and would be long lasting and ongoing. The sometimes-competing external and internal forces were not enough to motivate meaningful change; consequently, a focus was placed on faculty leadership, on strategies to engage faculty in doing things in a different way, on a common knowledge base, on faculty engagement and reflection, on an efficient decision-making system, and on building trust (Hill, 2011, 2012).

The process resulted in a complete restructuring of teacher education at SUNY Plattsburgh. Teacher Education faculty members met every Friday afternoon, along with faculty from the Division of Arts and Science, as changes were designed and implemented. A new sense of civility was fostered together with an orientation toward inquiry into the effectiveness of the teacher education program. “Whine and Geeze” gatherings were held after meetings to build community. Retreats (one focused on improving communication within the faculty that was run by a mental health counselor) were held along with professional development workshops focusing on schools of the future.

### **The Curriculum**

The curricula for all degree programs were rewritten, starting with childhood education. This was during the time when the current dean, Dr. Michael Morgan, was the Associate Dean of Education, Health, and Human Services and Interim Chairperson of Childhood Education. In the old program, teacher candidates did not go out into the school until their junior year. Members of the Teacher Education Unit saw this as a major design flaw based on their new knowledge base from common readings (e.g., Darling-Hammond) about the importance of learning in context - wording we used before the most recent expression of “Clinically Rich.” The new curricular model developed by the faculty required an education course every semester beginning with the first semester in the first year of the undergraduate program. Early field placements were included in the freshman year where curriculum and field experiences were integrated. Each subsequent course in the program requires increased number of hours of field experience, exceeding The State Education Department minimum. For Adolescence Education, a 5-year model incorporating an academic major with a master’s in education was designed and implemented. Special Education was moved to a master’s level program. Both of these programs provided coursework during undergraduate study.

Unlike the old curriculum, the new curriculum requires professors to go with teacher candidates into field placements; some professors had not been in the schools for more than ten years – a serious disconnect. Parallel changes in the Master of Science in Teaching programs included

revised courses integrated with required field placement each semester. Field placements are also supervised by faculty.

Throughout the process of curricular change, principals and school personnel were brought in to talk to students and faculty. Faculty also began meeting regularly with principals. The disconnection between the college's classrooms and the area schools faded and was replaced with a new appreciation and with valued relationships.

There was concern about transfer students with our new eight-semester model. Consequently, a strong articulation agreement was developed with the local community college to register (through cross-registration) their freshmen who wanted to be teachers into education classes at SUNY Plattsburgh. This has resulted in a seamless transition from the local two-year college to SUNY Plattsburgh. Transfer students from other institutions must commit to three years so that they can fulfill the requirements of our non-traditional, clinically rich program.

### **Changing Teacher Education's Structure**

As a result of faculty decisions, the traditional department-by-discipline organization was replaced with a Teacher Education Unit. Three coordinators took the place of five department chairs to oversee the undergraduate program, the Master's of Science in Teaching program, and the Master's of Science in Education programs. Four program leaders were named to assist the coordinators in administrative duties. The model provided opportunity for more leadership roles within the faculty.

Faculty decided that a Unit organization that eliminated traditional departments was better for implementing and evaluating the revised programs. In the revised programs, faculty had to collaborate, plan, and teach together. Traditional department structures inhibited that collaboration. Process ownership by faculty allowed them to decide an organizational structure to meet their program and identity needs.

## **Cohorts**

Instead of teaching the same classes every year, professors in the undergraduate program were put into teams that included at least one expert in the areas of literacy, special education, and childhood education (one member of the team is usually a former teacher or administrator who brings recent school experience to the cohort). The teams of professors move through the curriculum with their cohort of students from the freshmen classes through the senior year. This model requires significant professional development for faculty, but it is dynamic and produces the necessary disequilibrium to require constant learning by faculty and deep, reflective communication. The faculty had to (have to) learn to navigate through ambiguity and become familiar with the entire program. In addition, they learn how to complement each other's knowledge bases.

The first cohort of instructors developed guiding principles that focused on building community. They shared the following:

- We agree to keep the needs of students first, as our guiding focus.
- We agree that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts and that we would keep departmental agendas outside of the room.
- We agree to engage in respectful interactions with each other by being open-minded and listening actively.
- We agree to continue to build trust with each other by agreeing to keep specifics of our work's progress among team members until final products are ready to be shared.
- We embrace the concept that it is through respectful expression of differences that our own learning is enhanced in this process. In short, we speak with the expectation of being heard and listen with the expectation of being changed.  
(Hunt, Bobys, Mockry, & Simard, 2013, p. 19)

They stated, "These principles became our statement of how we were choosing to be together. These principles often served as a life line – preventing us from moving back into our own silos and helping us to keep our focus" (p. 19). Students in cohorts have become like families. There is deep trust within the cohorts that inspires deep learning. Teacher Candidates in cohorts reported that community building had a positive impact on their learning environment. They

spoke of deeper friendships outside of class and an increase in risk-taking/participation in class. The early field placements helped teacher candidates with early career decisions (Simard, Hunt, Bobys, Mockry, 2008). Area teachers who supervised teacher candidates in student teaching from the revised program reported on the candidates' ability to engage students in meaningful learning when they began compared to candidates from the old program who needed more mentoring. The early field placements made a significant, positive difference. Supervisors for our New York City student teaching placements (through the SUNY Urban Teacher Education Center) echoed the same perceptions.

### **Clinically Rich Teacher Training and Partnerships**

We began the effort of increasing clinically rich experiences with the requirement that our early field placement students must contribute to the class in which they were placed. They were no longer to sit and observe; rather, they were there to contribute to the education of the students in the class. Professors accompanied their students to the early field placements.

Placing faculty with teacher candidates in early field placements resulted in new relationships. A new culture of respect and trust was formed between area school teachers and teacher education faculty – each gained new perspectives and appreciated our new-found symbiotic, mutually beneficial relationship. This was the catalyst for building meaningful partnerships; it is not possible to have a clinically rich program without deep relationships and strong partnerships. The integration of curriculum with field placement resulted in engaged learning by teacher candidates and engaged teaching by professors. Clinical richness not only comes from integrating curriculum and field experiences, but must embrace multiple formats that lend themselves to achieving this goal (e.g., case presentations, evaluating recordings of model teaching and teaching that is not effective, being involved in the life of the public schools when they have community events).

Our most recent initiative to provide our students with a clinically rich curriculum has been to establish a contract with the Plattsburgh City School District (PSCD) to run its afterschool program in three elementary schools and one middle school. The five-year initiative is entitled

Project CONNECT. Mr. Jake Short, superintendent of the school district was quoted in the local newspaper, “The partnership between the district and the college is a win-win situation for everyone involved because it provides positive learning experiences for students of both institutions” (Livingston, A, 2012). Project CONNECT will provide clinically rich experiences and further strengthen partnerships. Undergraduate and graduate students from Teacher Education and other programs at SUNY Plattsburgh (Social Work, Human Development and Family Relations, Speech-Language Pathology, and Psychology) are joining with Teacher Education to collaborate and learn in the rich school laboratory settings. This project includes four certified teachers who are site directors, four liaisons hired within the schools to provide communication between elementary/middle school teachers and those who conduct the program, and a full-time employee (an Outreach Coordinator) at the college. The outreach coordinator’s responsibilities include overseeing Project CONNECT, deepening relationships with our partnership schools, and designing professional development opportunities for area teachers who work with our students. Professors will accompany teacher candidates at each of the four schools, each school day, and will focus on an integrated curriculum that is clinically rich.

### **Institutional Support**

There has been strong institutional support for education reforms at SUNY Plattsburgh. During the redesign process, support was given to increasing academic progress standards; thus, reducing enrollment in undergraduate teacher education program by 10 percent.

Current support includes a plan to move the Psychology Department, the Counselor Education Department, the Communication Disorders and Sciences Department and the Teacher Education Unit into one building. This will allow for new approaches to pedagogy across disciplines (e.g., mock IEP meetings, training across disciplines to add value to the work students from these programs will do with each other when they get jobs).

## **Performance Assessment, Common Core, and Data Driving Instruction**

Teacher Education faculty at SUNY Plattsburgh have been receiving training on reform initiatives. The North Country Teacher Resource Center (NCTRC) is located in the same building as the teacher education faculty. A close relationship has been built with the NCTRC. Mrs. Kathy Fessette, Director of the center, has been training faculty, students, area teachers, principals, and superintendents around these initiatives (e.g., 60 area principals received calibration training in the NCTRC for the Annual Professional Performance Review [APPR] on August 14<sup>th</sup>). She also was on the design team for area school's APPR process. An example of the collaboration between SUNY Plattsburgh's Teacher Education Unit and the NCTRC resulted in bringing in experts to train faculty and students about the common core. The faculty also received an intensive two-day workshop from Duffy Miller (President of Miller Educational Consulting Services, Inc.) about APPR. We are committed to preparing as many faculty and supervisors as possible to engage in the APPR process through calibration and recalibration.

The NCTRC is the hub that strengthens partnerships with area schools. It also is the conduit that connects the two worlds of P-12 and higher education in the North Country. The interconnection (like "systemness") of SUNY Plattsburgh's partnerships with area schools and the NCTRC serves as a model for implementation of reform initiatives.

Teacher education faculty adopted use of similar APPR evaluation rubrics being used by local schools (NYSUT/TEDs); this garnered great respect from our partnership schools. Teacher candidates will be evaluated in early field placements with the evaluation rubrics as they develop knowledge and skills. The same evaluative rubrics will be used during supervision of student teaching. This developmental process will provide teacher candidates with new opportunities for reflection and growth and will prepare them for the evaluative process once they obtain a job in schools.

While knowledge and skills are crucial for great teachers, the importance of dispositions cannot be overlooked. In 2010, we began using a disposition rating form with our teacher candidates.

We continue to evaluate the rating form and the development of appropriate professional behavior in our students.

Training for reform initiatives now is expanding to Arts and Science faculty. Webinars sponsored by SUNY and funded by the New York State Education Department (NYSED) will allow new bridges to be built between education faculty members and arts and science faculty members. We look forward to this work through the SUNY Teacher and Leader Education Network in the coming year.

### **Education Leadership Training**

Dr. Steve Danna was hired as the new Dean of SUNY Plattsburgh's Branch Campus in July. He is an expert in Race to the Top and the Regents' Reform Initiatives and has trained many of the teachers and principals in the Capital District. Given his expertise, we decided to redesign SUNY Plattsburgh's Education Leadership Program to best reflect current research and New York State Board of Regents' initiatives. Dr. Danna, along with other experts in New York State, have come together to redesign the program to align with all of the new reform initiatives. The redesign is going well.

Training of new leaders in schools is an ongoing challenge. To this end, Dr. Danna is going to conduct a pilot New Principals Academy in partnership with the Queensbury Union Free School District for Queensbury and other interested school district administrators. Following revisions based on pilot evaluation data, SUNY Plattsburgh will host an ongoing New Principals Academy for the region at the Branch Campus. The draft agenda is attached (attachment A).

Dr. Danna also has written a concept paper for SUNY and SED that proposes a Certificate of Advanced Studies in Teacher Leadership Program. Completion of this program would not certify participants to be a building leader, but would prepare them to support their districts in implementing the Regents Reform Agenda (attachment B).

## Lessons from Our Experience

Turning a large ship around takes 3-to-5 years. Internal and external forces alone will not achieve significant change without the development of community and trust within the faculty and between the faculty and area school teachers and administrators. We have to give to the schools in order to get placements and experiences for our students. Early field placements that contribute to the learning of children are essential. Members of the ivory tower have to be careful not to be perceived as arrogant – “knowing it all” about teaching. We must be willing to assist teachers and schools in their efforts. We have to change what we do in teacher education – constantly update our knowledge base through readings and experiences in schools. A common knowledge base is critical for partnerships and can be achieved through Teacher Resource Centers that are co-located with teacher education programs. We need to act locally to improve education, whether it’s public school education or teacher education. Support for improvement at the state and national level needs to come in the form of incentives to innovate, experiment, and research our efforts.

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