

The Chronicles of the Renaissance Group

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Abstract

The Renaissance was a cultural movement initiated in Florence, Italy, during the late Middle Ages and later spread to the rest of Europe, focusing on the improvement of various disciplines through a revival of ideas from antiquity. The influence of the Renaissance movement affected art, literature, philosophy, politics, science, religion, and other aspects of intellectual inquiry. What does the Renaissance movement of fourteenth century Italy have to do with The Renaissance Group (TRG) of 21st America? The times and places may be very different, but as we review TRG's contributions to teacher education from the 1980s to the present (a time during which The Renaissance Group laid a strong foundation to shape this national consortium of colleges, universities and professional organizations) we may discover more similarities between the two than imagined.

The Chronicles of the Renaissance Group

Background

The Renaissance Group: Who are its members? Visionaries, dreamers, educational leaders?

The Renaissance (French for “rebirth”; Italian, *Rinascimento*, from re - “again” and *nascere* - “to be born”) was a cultural movement initiated in Florence, Italy, in the late Middle Ages and later spread to the rest of Europe, encompassing periods from the fourteenth to the seventeenth century. This time was focused on the improvement of various disciplines through a revival of ideas from antiquity, by employing creative approaches to thinking and doing. The influence of the Renaissance movement affected art, literature, philosophy, politics, science, religion, and other aspects of intellectual inquiry.

What does the Renaissance movement of fourteenth century Italy have to do with The Renaissance Group (TRG) of 21st America? The times and places may be very different, but as we review TRG’s contributions to teacher education from the 1980s to the present (a time during which The Renaissance Group laid a strong foundation to shape this national consortium of colleges, universities and professional organizations) we may discover more similarities between the two than imagined.

I have been a member of The Renaissance Group since July 1, 2008, as the organization’s Executive Director. Because my tenure with this incredible group of educational leaders has been relatively short, I must resort to presenting TRG’s life through the eyes and experiences of a fairly new observer, as I interpret information availed to me by colleagues, through reviews of organizational files, as well as from my direct observations and experiences during the past four years. However, in order to relate a fairly complete story, I must first take us back in time, approximately 25 to 30 years, and briefly revisit the state of public education during those initial years up to the present.

By examining the educational challenges and reform movements of the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, one can easily extract from local, state, and national news media unfavorable, highly critical messages about America’s P-20 public school systems. For a number of years, active criticism of our schools has been on the front burner of public debate, allowing schools to be seen as one cause for what is considered to be “wrong” with modern-day America. During those challenging years, *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative For Educational Reform* was published in 1983, as part of President Ronald Reagan’s National Commission on Excellence in Education’s efforts to improve the academic performance levels of American high school students. Approximately two decades later, in 2001, the *No Child Left Behind* legislation targeted the improvement of student achievement levels by raising academic standards for all P-12 students. *Race to the Top* in 2009 challenged all educators to implement and enforce rigorous standards and assessments for all students. Recently, the *Common Core State Standards* have taken center stage for the educational rebirth of America’s P-20 institutions, serving as a forceful reminder that achievement standards need to be seriously addressed in all corners of the country if the U. S. hopes to regain a prominent place in world leadership.

The public schools of our nation have always exhibited one unique characteristic: all students who enter their schoolhouse doors will be accepted and served, regardless of needs and abilities. Perhaps it is this concept of absolute inclusion that that has lead the citizenry of

America to conclude that the ailments expressed within our neighborhoods must be caused by or somehow associated with our public schools, their teachers, their staff, or their administrators. Who else could be held responsible? After all, these individuals do influence our youth each and every day they attend classes. Although I present this discourse with a strong dose of cynicism, it is precisely this form of expression that has motivated our elected leaders to fuel the numerous educational reform movements of the past and the present.

The Early Years

The Renaissance Group consortium was conceived during the spring of 1989, a time of increased expectations for schools and for teacher education programs in colleges and universities. The world encountered issues not much different from those we experience today, and not all that different from 14th century Europe, if we consider and reflect upon the increased expectations for the leaders, educators, artists and scholars of that era. Criticism of teacher preparation programs has been the focal point of national debate since I can remember. The university presidents, provosts and deans who first gathered at the University of Northern Iowa in the spring of 1989 (see Figure 1), and those who joined them in a series of meetings that



Figure 1. The Renaissance Group leadership planning session.

followed, were motivated to embark on a rebirth movement in order to try to bring new life to educator preparation programs. The educational leaders of the late 1980s, representing the top

leadership of some of the finest higher education institutions in the country, were visionary in their belief and firm in their conviction that the education of teachers must become an all-campus responsibility. They were clearly the Leonardos and the Michelangelos of the 20th century (see Figure 2)!



Figure 2. Renaissance-style celebration and meeting.

The University of Northern Iowa was the first home of the executive offices of the Renaissance Group, with Dr. William Callahan as Executive Director. Emporia State University was the second home. These were most critical times for the young, yet experienced and energetic, leadership team of TRG; times during which a solid organizational foundation was being shaped and new members identified and invited to strengthen the educational settings where teachers were being prepared. According to Dr. Tes Mehring, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs at Emporia State University, one of the early leaders of TRG, this was also a period of connectivity with major education organizations, such as the American Association for State Colleges and Universities, the American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards, and the National School Board Association, to mention only some of the best known. Additionally, it was during this time that The Renaissance Group and the U.S. Department of Education initiated meaningful discussions in support of teacher preparation programs. Nationally recognized speakers often delivered the keynote addresses at conferences held in the Washington, DC area during their fall annual meetings. Throughout these very important foundational years, the initial joint meetings with TRG and the Teacher Education Council of State Colleges and Universities (TECSCU) also

took place. The Renaissance Group has always been committed to quality programs for the preparation of teachers, counselors, and administrative leaders for our nation's schools. The initial meeting held in Iowa by a handful of university presidents and education deans was followed by a quick succession of meetings at the University of Northern Colorado, Western Kentucky University, California State University, San Bernardino, and at Emporia State University. As TRG added more member institutions, provosts and arts and science deans were included as key members of TRG (see Figure 3). This core group of university presidents,



Figure 3. Meeting at California State University, Fresno.

provosts, arts and science deans, and education deans from member institutions continues to be represented on The Renaissance Group Board of Governors today (<http://www.csufresno.edu/renaissancgroup/>). The founders and leaders of TRG have spent their time and resources for the past 23 years focused on the organization's belief that with the right kind of campus infrastructure, and with continuing support of key campus administrators, teacher education will remain a university priority at TRG member institutions (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. TRG founders/leaders at the annual fall conference, Arlington, VA.

Oral History Research Initiative and The Twentieth Anniversary Celebration/Conference

During my review of archived documents, I uncovered some additional insights about the early development of TRG. These findings were confirmed in 2009, through extensive conversations with founding leaders of the organization including Dr. Thomas Switzer (see Figure 5), Dean Emeritus of the Judith Herb College of Education at the University of Toledo, member of TRG's Board of Governors for a number of years, and one of the principal founders and developers of The Renaissance Group. Dr. Switzer was instrumental in organizing the oral history research initiative that prominently kicked off the 20th anniversary celebration and conference held in October 2009 in Arlington, VA. This event was designed to be a time of reflection, celebration and rebirth, and it truly was! His ingenious idea generated a respectable collection of anecdotes and insights about the beginnings and initiatives of The Renaissance Group, as presented by a number of the organizations' founders and leaders. The oral history research initiative, the 20th anniversary conference agenda, and pictures of participants may be experienced by visiting TRG's website at <http://www.csufresno.edu/renaissancgroup/>.



Figure 5. Dr. Switzer – recipient of the first TRG Annual Leadership Award.

I was most fortunate to be able to conduct many of those interviews. One story of particular interest and importance relates to the origin of the organization's name, The Renaissance Group, which others and I initially believed to be named after the European Renaissance movement. After all, TRG's primary principle that the preparation of educators be an all-campus responsibility was a type of educational rebirth. However, as exciting and romantic as that notion might be, the truth of the matter is that during one of their early meetings, in July of 1989, TRG's leaders were enjoying the peace and beauty of Estes Park, Colorado, the host site for one of their early planning sessions. This very prominent event happened to take place in the Renaissance Room of a local lodge, hence the name The Renaissance Group (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. One of the early planning meetings – Estes Park, CO, the Renaissance Room.

Twenty-three years have naturally seen many changes in the membership and leadership of TRG. The original leaders have reached or are approaching the end of their professional careers. Sadly, some of them have already passed away. Thanks to the oral history research initiative of 2009, accounts of some of the work and reflections of these innovators exist today and some of the knowledge gained from their individual and collective efforts to develop quality programs for the preparation of teachers is not lost to future generations. The oral history research initiative attempted to capture the rich knowledge and wisdom of those educational leaders and mentors whose exemplary work is reflected today in TRG institutions throughout the country. The oral histories were completed with the assistance of modern information technology from various universities, particularly from Western Kentucky University, capturing both voice and video of some of The Renaissance Group founders and leaders. Approximately 30 past and present leaders of TRG were initially identified as potential participants. The University of Toledo, under the leadership of Dr. Thomas Switzer, Dean of the Judith Herb College of Education, was the home base for the oral history research initiative. Western Kentucky University, under the leadership of Dr. Barbara Burch, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Mr. David Brinkley, Senior Producer, Director and Writer of Educational Television Services, continued the work initiated by Dr. Switzer and supported it to its completion. The video presenting the first 20 years of TRG's life may be viewed on the organization's website at www.csufresno.edu/renaissancegroup.

The Middle Years

Members of the Board of Governors and all member institutions of The Renaissance Group continuously renew their commitment to improving teacher preparation programs by reflecting on past practices, celebrating accomplishments, embracing present and future educational challenges, and by sharing strategies and promising practices designed to improve local, regional, and national learning environments. The membership has grown over the past 20 years, attracting 35-40 member institutions during its development. For several years, the executive office of The Renaissance Group was located at Emporia State University, Emporia, Kansas. There, thanks to the outstanding leadership of Dr. Kay Schallenkamp, President, Dr. Tes Mehring, Provost and Vice President for Academic Affairs, and Dr. Leo Pauls, Executive Director, TRG grew and significantly strengthened its original foundation (see Figure 7).



Figure 7. Emporia State University, Spring Conference.

Today, more than ever, all TRG members proudly support the tradition of strong commitment for the preparation of educators as a campus-wide effort and are pleased to announce that a significant number of teachers successfully prepare for the profession at TRG institutions. In keeping with past practice, tradition, and the belief that supporting educator

preparation programs and initiatives is the best investment our nation can make, The Renaissance Group continues to provide each year, as it has done annually since its inception, unique opportunities for educators to celebrate their successes and recommit their individual and collective research, talents, and resources for the preparation of outstanding educators for America's schools. Those who believe that excellent teaching translates into more successful students have supported and continue to support the efforts of this unique organization. By doing so, the educational leadership of our country contributes to the much-needed rebirth of our nation's schools, positively influencing national policy and practices relative to the design and implementation of outstanding teacher preparation programs. The organization's vision, principles and strategic plan, reflected on the following tables, have always guided the work of The Renaissance Group.

The Renaissance Group Vision

Leadership in the exemplary preparation of educators through full campus commitment, in collaboration with P-12 School Districts, for the transformation of education to meet societal needs.

The Renaissance Group Principles (September 2009)

The Renaissance Group: Universities working to improve the quality of educator preparation.

- The education of teachers is an all-campus responsibility undertaken in collaboration with P-12 school personnel.
- The university values and models teaching excellence.
- Teacher preparation is integrated across the curricula of general education, in-depth subject matter content, and professional studies in both general content and specific teaching methodologies.
- The education of teachers incorporates extensive and sequenced field and clinical experiences in various settings with effective supervision.
- The university meets and exceeds national and state standards for the preparation of school personnel.
- The university assesses learner outcomes in order to monitor its program effectiveness and assure teacher quality.
- Pre-service teachers and faculty members reflect our pluralistic society and are committed to the education of all students in diverse schools.
- The continuing professional development of teachers is the shared responsibility of the individual, the university faculty, and other professional educators.
- The university provides learning experiences and mentoring that develop teachers who are creative and innovative leaders.
- The university integrates technology throughout its teacher preparation program.

Strategic Plan Update (December 2010)

The Renaissance Group, building from two decades of leadership in teacher education, seeks to provide relevant and meaningful service to our members and partners. As we embrace the changes of the 21st century, TRG will endeavor to achieve its mission and vision through a strategic focus on three goals.

I. TRG will provide enhanced benefits for member institutions.

Measures of Performance

- Develop a timely and relevant “signature project”.
- Facilitate a process whereby member institutions collaborate in the collection and sharing of relevant legislation, data, grant ideas, best practices, etc.
- Represent the membership in a strengthened alliance with Department of Education.
- Provide pre-NCATE reviews for member institutions.
- Facilitate communication between member institutions and P-12 programs to ensure congruence with current educational demands.
- Re-evaluate the conference structure and content to provide greater incentive for involvement by university presidents, legislators, school superintendents, and other stakeholders.

II. TRG will develop a common set of standards that define a TRG teacher education program graduate and guide TRG institutions in decision-making.

Measures of Performance

- Identify quantity, quality, and nature of the expectations for graduation such as academic field preparation, clinical/classroom based experiences, practicum/student teaching experiences, internship, and graduation requirements across institutions.

III. TRG will create a broader marketing plan to increase visibility across multiple educational communities.

Measures of Performance

- Clarify and strengthen the mission and vision statement to reflect the evolving purpose of the organization.
- Create appropriate media that will be versatile and highly visible such as publications, DVDs, social networking, brochures, etc.
- Partner with affiliate members to have a common voice in educational policy development.

Signature Projects

Over the years and as presented in the 2010 Strategic Plan update, signature projects initiated by TRG members have provided guidance, direction and courageous leadership at local, state and national levels to inspire change, to guide policy and to improve all aspects of educator preparation programs on college and university campuses in America.

1999 - Teacher Work Samples

Perhaps one of the best examples of innovation and accountability relative to the preparation of educators is the development of the teacher work samples, authored in 1999 by Dr. Roger Pankratz, Professor and Assistant to the Dean of Education and Behavioral Sciences, Western Kentucky University, in collaboration with eleven TRG member institutions.

The Renaissance Partnership for Improving Teacher Quality program (1999-2005) is the result of a Title II federally funded project with Offices at Western Kentucky University, and with its Director, Dr. Roger Pankratz. The eleven Renaissance partnership project sites included California State University Fresno; Eastern Michigan University; Emporia State University; Idaho State University; Kentucky State University; Longwood University; Middle Tennessee State University; Millersville University; Southeast Missouri State University; University of Northern Iowa, and Western Kentucky University.

Thanks to the Renaissance teacher work samples, today many colleges and universities across the country have developed effective, reliable measures to evaluate the preparation levels of the teachers they graduate. Additionally, results from the teacher work samples assessments are utilized to inform faculty and administrators relative to needs and improvements for their teacher preparation programs.

2011 - Co-Teaching Model

A second, equally important partnership was formed in 2011 with Saint Cloud State University, member of TRG since 2000, when they offered their co-teaching model for teacher candidate preparation as a TRG signature project. Dr. Nancy Bacharach and Dr. Teresa Heck, faculty at St. Cloud State, developed the co-teaching model with funding from a federal grant.

There is a growing demand for teacher preparation institutions to develop highly effective teachers. The goal of this project is to reform teacher preparation through the implementation of a research-based model of co-teaching in student teaching at teacher preparation institutions across the country. Because very little data exist connecting success in a student teaching experience with student learning outcomes, more studies would be extremely beneficial to P-20 education. Co-teaching is not a new phenomenon; however, its application in the student teaching experience is a new area of study. This student teacher preparation model is designed to assist both the cooperating teacher and teacher candidate in collaboratively planning, organizing, delivering, assessing, and sharing the physical space of the classroom. Co-teaching allows the classroom teacher to partner with the teacher candidate rather than give away responsibility. Four years of research conducted on a co-teaching model of student teaching has demonstrated a statistically significant increase in academic performance for elementary learners in co-taught classrooms. The quantitative and qualitative data support co-teaching as an exemplary practice that has the potential to reform teacher preparation and student teaching, as we know it today.

The Renaissance Group applied for a federally funded multi-million dollar grant in 2011. The grant proposed to expand the co-teaching model initially developed at St. Cloud State

University and included specific plans to provide the training and support necessary for other teacher preparation institutions across the nation to successfully implement this model. The 13 institutions identified to participate in the proposal collectively produce over 4100 teachers each year and work with over 800 school partners. One hundred percent of these institutions work with high needs schools and all of them place students in classrooms where Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) has not been met. In fact, almost 85% of the placements made are in identified high needs schools. A comprehensive plan for assessing the impact of this model was also included in the application, and the results of this work would be disseminated to state, regional, and national audiences. This train-the-trainer model is not only sustainable, but can also produce a cadre of individuals capable of national implementation. In spite of this commendable effort, the grant was not funded. However, TRG will not stop trying to contribute to the improvement of teaching and learning, and will undoubtedly explore future funding opportunities for the expansion of this and other promising practices.

An additional significant effort of The Renaissance Group is the development of the following educational journal. Started in 2011, *Educational Renaissance* is a publication sponsored by The Renaissance Group. *Educational Renaissance* is to be published twice a year to facilitate communication among professional educators and those whose research focuses on teacher preparation as well as those committed to the improvement and reform of education locally, regionally and nationally. Manuscripts submitted to *Educational Renaissance* should conform to the language, style, and a modified format of the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association* (6th ed., 2009). All manuscripts should be submitted electronically to the editor through the Open Access journal system at: <http://educationalrenaissance.org/>. Once received by the editor, manuscripts will be anonymously peer-reviewed by at least two reviewers. Potential authors are encouraged to contact the editor to discuss ideas for contributions, or determine if their manuscript is suitable for publication in *Educational Renaissance*. Dr. Paul Beare, Dr. Jim Marshall and Dr. Patrick Newell, at California State University, Fresno, the lead TRG member institution for *Educational Renaissance*, as well as a number of reviewers from TRG member institutions, lead this project.

TRG Today

The Renaissance Group moved its Executive Office in 2005 from Emporia State to California State University, Fresno, (Fresno State) in the heart of California. In its new home, Dr. John Welty, President; Dr. Paul Beare, Dean of the Kremen School of Education and Human Development; Mr. Rich Firpo, Executive Director (2005-2008); and, in keeping with TRG's tradition of excellence, the entire university faculty and staff welcomed and embraced this national educational consortium dedicated to the enhancement of teaching and learning. The outstanding support and commitment by Fresno State, not unlike the contributions made by the University of Northern Iowa, Emporia State University, and all of TRG's leadership, has made it possible for The Renaissance Group to continue its original journey and to stay the course for the improvement of educator preparation programs (see Figure 8).



Figure 8. 20th Anniversary Conference, Arlington, VA.

The past seven years have experienced a small decline in membership, nothing serious enough to dampen the spirit of The Renaissance Group. Thanks to the outstanding leadership and dedication of Dr. John Counts, President Emeritus of Western New Mexico University and President of TRG's Board of Governors for the past seven years, and to all past and present members of TRG's Board, annual conferences designed to showcase the very best educator preparation programs have been offered in the Washington, DC area. Additional meetings have also been held at member institutions to address the present needs and interests of members and guests. Finally, with strong support from Mr. Otto Benavides, Associate Professor and Director of the Instructional Technology and Resource Center at the Kremen School of Education and Human Development at California State University, Fresno, the utilization of video teleconferencing has offered a significant level of assistance to help conduct all other TRG business and planning sessions.

In 2011, The Renaissance Group also renewed its partnership, initially formed when TRG was housed at Emporia State University, with a national organization of similar purpose, dedication and interests, the Teacher Education Council of State Colleges and Universities (TECSCU). Together, these educator preparation program architects and developers, representing higher education institutions preparing approximately 78% of America's teachers, have designed and delivered one successful Joint Conference in the Fall of 2011 and are currently planning a second meeting to be offered during the Fall of 2012. Dr. Mary Gendernalik-Cooper, Education Dean at the University of Mary Washington, and Dr. Michael Giovannetti, Executive Director of The Renaissance Group serve as co-chairs of this joint conference.

The Fall 2012 event, with the theme of *The Proof of Effective Partnerships: Educators Meeting the Challenges and Opportunities of the 21st Century* is scheduled for September 29 to

October 2 in Arlington, Virginia. The 2012 joint meeting of TECSCU and TRG will examine the evidence of resilient partnerships in teacher and education leadership preparation, by examining and discussing richly diverse models of collaboration.

Conclusion

I realize the story I have shared only begins to scratch the surface of the treasure chest of significant contributions made by a number of outstanding educational leaders to one unique national organization and to P-20 education in America. Clearly all who deserve to be included in these chronicles were not, and for all omissions, the author extends his most sincere apology. Hopefully these accounts will serve as a reminder that when The Renaissance Group was formed 23 years ago by a group of educational leaders dedicated to the improvement of teacher preparation programs, their mission was clear: this national consortium of colleges, universities and the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards has always known that in order to prepare the finest educators to effectively serve all of America's students, they must do so as an all-campus responsibility, in conjunction with its P-12 school district partners. I am confident the invaluable contributions made by TRG will continue to benefit P-20 education into the future, thanks to the leadership, dedication, and commitment of all past and present members. Criticism about our profession will more than likely continue, but I firmly believe that when persons of good will work together and persevere, amazing things will continue to happen.

The preparation of *The Chronicles of The Renaissance Group* was made possible thanks to the documentation (paper, electronic and video), collected since 1989 by the founders and leaders of The Renaissance Group, stored in the organization's archives.