

# Making a Difference in the Lives of Others: Teacher Education at the University of Vermont College of Education and Social Services

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## Introduction

Over the past decade the phrase “making a positive difference in the lives of others” emerged and stuck as a statement-part vision and part goal-for the University of Vermont (UVM) College of Education and Social Services (CESS). The phrase captured the energy and intention of the educator preparation programs and signaled the role of these programs as applied social and behavioral sciences disciplines, thus locating them among the other disciplines of the university. Once securely located in the academy, reform becomes easier. While this is particularly true for historically marginalized professional disciplines in the academy, it is even more true for professions that work with socially marginalized populations, i.e. children and a female-dominated workforce (Blackwell et al., 2000). At UVM, the college’s status achievement within the array of other colleges and professional schools was a legacy from a former dean of the college, Corrigan, who asserted

When universities demonstrate their belief that teacher education is an equal partner among the professional schools, it will confirm the profession’s faith in itself and its promise. It would also quicken the pace of research and hasten the process of professionalization (Howsam et al., 1985, p. 203).

Thus, in the early ‘90s, the CESS was well positioned as one of UVM’s professional schools and was poised for change just as the national debate about the quality of public education of educators was heating up.

We begin this article with a brief examination of that debate, arguing that program development was influenced by claims and assertions in the national discourse and by events and struggles at the local, university level. Turning next to what programmatic changes emerged from this

dialectic, we conclude by analyzing how effective the changes have been and what needs to happen next.

## The Context: Policy Influences on Educator Preparation

Arguably, the line from the appearance of *A Nation at Risk* (NCETE, 1983) to the first publication of the Holmes Group recommendations in 1986 is fairly straight and apparent. The former took aim at the quality of the nation’s public schools while the latter called for reform in how Schools, Colleges, and Departments of Education (SCDE) prepare teachers. The Holmes Group’s work fostered a vibrant debate about how to make teaching “intellectually sound,” how to differentiate between beginning and veteran teachers’ skills and needs, how to create “relevant and intellectually defensible standards” for entry into teaching, and how to connect educator preparation more closely with schools as a means of increasing quality in beginning as well as veteran educators and in schools (Holmes, 1995, pg. iii–v). While disquieting, Holmes’ call for reform articulated a powerful critique of educator preparation for the national policy discourse community, one that echoes in the contemporary discourse about educator preparation in the No Child Left Behind initiatives, and in other national and state policy initiatives. At UVM, as in other SCDEs, this discourse led to reforming policy and redesigning college programs.

The national discourse and policy shifts had their counterpart at the state level. The progressive Vermont Design for Education that had set standards like “the emphasis must be upon learning, rather than teaching” or “the development of an individual’s thought process should be primary” or “the teacher’s role must be that of a partner and guide in the learning process” (Vermont Department of Education, 1968, pgs. 1–11) was replaced as the policy community worked on standards for schools, educators, learn-

ers, and currently, grade level competencies. Vermont's reformed definitions about what learning should be was paralleled by a changed view of what teachers should be—a connection that would later be asserted by NCTAF (1996) as the teacher being the critical variable in producing student learning. Vermont's teacher certification guidelines were revised as beginning licensure<sup>1</sup> requirements that included a 3.0 GPA, "a thirty credit major in the liberal arts," and a portfolio to demonstrate pedagogical competence.

By the mid-90s, the State Department of Education began using Goals 2000 and Eisenhower funds to invest in and support professional development schools, reflecting another Holmes recommendation that SCDEs should engage with schools toward achieving reform for educator preparation and for schools. With university budget cuts escalating, these funds became a crucial resource. In 1998, the new leaders of the Vermont Department of Education, Vermont State Colleges and UVM's President Ramaley agreed to the creation of the Vermont Public Education Partnership (VPEP). A collaborative of all the public education entities, each a separate instrumentality of the state, this partnership has become a significant policy-making body with the goal of improving "the future of all public education in our state from pre-kindergarten through college and beyond" (VPEP, 2001). The VPEP has created a relatively sturdy collaboration that works to address identified problems, such as a statewide effort to increase the number of special education teachers through a jointly designed and offered Special Education endorsement program and the development of a design team to implement a bold new design for high school reform.

When the current dean, Jill Tarule, arrived in 1992, she led the faculty through a college-wide discussion about a shared agenda for change, guided by her own scholarship on relational and collaborative ways of knowing (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule, 1986). The process produced new bylaws and a new college organization based on faculty articulated core values of inclusion, collaboration, and critical reflection. Despite significant transitions in university leadership, Ramaley's commitment to the 21st century landgrant as an engaged institution (Ramaley, 2000) provided an unusual level of support for outreach, which motivated the college faculty because they believed that their field based

efforts would be valued. But even as these college changes emerged, the University faced numerous resource challenges including the aforementioned budget cuts. Overall, in the last decade, the context for change has been challenging at the national, state, and local level.

### **Addressing the new challenges in policy, programs and practice**

Unquestionably, the Holmes recommendations crept into college policy and reform efforts, which were further prompted by the state's revision of the licensure process. At first, both the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators and the CESS were leaning toward the Holmes Group call for graduate teacher preparation programs only. But the proposal foundered on arguments about rurality and economics: that Vermont's rural schools could not afford more expensive professionals and students teachers could not afford a fifth year of preparation. A compromise was struck and a thirty-credit major in the liberal arts, not a liberal arts major, left the education baccalaureate intact. Another economic reality, being situated in the most expensive public university meant that the CESS, unlike other research landgrants, did not adopt the Holmes recommendation. However, a post-baccalaureate program was begun, which supported the development of professional development schools (PDS).

Arguably, the PDSs are the most significant innovation in our teacher preparation program reform. Like a Trojan horse, the first PDS, created and nurtured by a visionary Secondary Education professor, (Clarke et al., 1998, 2000) would be a catalyst for profound changes and fertile ground for nurturing program reform, such as year long internships for preparing educators. At first, students enrolled as post-baccalaureate students, but it quickly became clear that, academically, the program was equivalent to a master's degree. Moreover, the masters program gave students access to student loans and higher starting salaries.

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<sup>1</sup> The change from "certification" to "licensure" was in discourse terms if not in policy a significant marker of the shift in thinking about educators as skilled technicians certified to do their work (like plumbers) to professionals who are licensed (like doctors), a distinction that is once again under debate (see Cochran-Smith & Fries, 2001).

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Mentioned above, the state's commitment of resources for PDSs supported on-site coordinators, usually non-tenure track faculty members, who provided invaluable on-site instruction to pre-service teachers and collaborated to engage veteran teachers in professional development and in school reform efforts. PDSs flourished with faculty commitment and funds both increasing, so that soon undergraduate students were integrated into the PDSs for internships and practicums.

What the PDSs did was place all faculty members—tenured and non-tenured—into a much closer relationship with the schools which led, in turn, to changes in program design. Simultaneously, the college was engaged in self-study for an NCATE ten-year visit and a state approval visit that included the first articulation of the various majors in the liberal arts and of guidelines for portfolios. A new triad was established in preparation programs: liberal arts, professional preparation, and public school programs. At first, students were the only connector between the three, but as a University Committee on Teacher Education was created, university and public school faculty became engaged. By 2002, the new sound bite was “it takes a university and its partners to prepare an educator.”

These forces, once in motion, powered other programmatic changes, such as ensuring that students were in the field “early and often,” moving some subject-based methods courses from being taught by faculty on the college campus to being taught in schools by public school faculty. With the PDS and partnership relationships, schools were much more accessible so that first-year students could be required to have an in-school volunteer experience such as America Reads/America Counts. Another change was curricular. Teacher preparation programs instituted significant academic changes such as offering blocks of courses that integrated the diverse disciplinary knowledge in elementary education to expanded requirements at all levels for the teaching of reading, addressing the needs of diverse learners, and integrating technology into teaching.

Another Trojan horse for reform, the state's newly required student portfolios, led to faculty-developed scoring rubrics, which led to formative program evaluation. As faculty member teams sat through final portfolio presentations,

they had a new “cross-case” method for assessing program effectiveness. Thus, when the recent ten-year NCATE and state approval visits preparation began in 1999, new standards for formative and summative program assessments were interpreted by the faculty as an opportunity to expand on the narrative and qualitative assessment strategies that the portfolios had brought into view along with the more conventional quantitative measures for assessment. The result is, we believe, a unique program assessment design that promises to provide nuanced and complex data for program review and renewal.

Perhaps as a result of the portfolio experience, the recent revision of the conceptual framework was undertaken enthusiastically as what came to be called a “back-mapping strategy.” Faculty members asserted that the decade of conversation and debate about portfolios and programs had produced in each program a strong set of beliefs, values, and commitments. The task was to “back map” to those inchoate claims and to articulate them, thus uncovering the shared, program-wide “paradigm” for professional preparation. Ten years ago the conceptual framework was captured as “the three E's”—equity, empowerment, and excellence—catchwords that everyone could remember. The result of the back mapping strategy was that the new conceptual framework was a shared and socially constructed conception that is coherent, consistent across programs, satisfyingly complex and widely adopted. And people don't have trouble remembering it because it is authentically connected to their philosophy, beliefs, and practice, which ultimately hold promise for future program development and sustainability.

### Is it working?

**NEW WAYS OF WORKING COLLABORATIVELY.** As a result of the “back-mapping” of the conceptual framework, the faculty created a structure to sustain and nurture the ongoing work comprised of the University Committee on Teacher Education (UCTE) with three standing committees, semester Plenary Sessions, and annual retreats with representatives of the 17 programs.

Also, a UCTE Leadership Committee, chaired by the Dean of the CESS, the university-designated Coordinator of Educator Preparation, meets three times a semester to ad-

dress policy issues. Membership on the Committee consists of the CESS and CAS deans; four department chairs from the CAS, two from the CESS, and one from the College of Engineering and Mathematics; the Vermont state Deputy Commissioner for Teacher Quality; and the chairs of three standing committees addressing ongoing issues in teacher preparation: the Unit Assessment Committee, the Unit Diversity Committee, and the Unit Technology Committee. Both students and school-based professionals are also included. The structure encourages cross-college as well as institutional-field conversation, and nurtures collaborative efforts.

The UCTE Leadership Committee hosts one plenary session each semester, gatherings for field, content, and professional education faculty to work on issues that matter to the partners. For example, the first sessions addressed cultural competency and literacy. This venue supports field and university partners to identify concerns and collaborate in addressing them through instruction and research.

In preparation for the NCATE and the state ROPA-R<sup>2</sup> visits, the faculty developed institutional outcomes and standards for candidate knowledge, skills and dispositions and conceptualized an assessment process. In these sessions, faculty learned about each other's programs and began to find new ways to work together. Having these clear processes for inclusive collaborations and clearer articulation of learner outcomes and program revisions are, we believe, evidence that the college has institutionalized a system that can respond to the changing requirements for tomorrow's education professionals.

**DEEP COLLABORATION IN AND WITH THE FIELD.** Faculty in the programs, located in three different UVM colleges, committed to working in the field, are now more deeply engaged there, many in scholarly endeavors on topics such as school reform (Clarke et al., 1998, 2002), reading success (Mosenthal et al., 2001; Lipson et al., 2002), portfolios (Mosenthal et al, 1996), and interdisciplinary research into the quality of life of children and adolescents (Hasazi et al., 2002).

The CESS, with support from the Woodrow Wilson National Fellowship Foundation, collaborated with the College of Arts and Sciences, the UVM Center for Teaching and Learning, and field partners to offer Teachers as Scholars at

UVM. The program brings veteran teachers to campus with district support for content-rich seminars. Content area faculty engage teachers in reading and dialogue around their current research. The seminars are evaluated by teachers as some of the most stimulating intellectually and renewing professional development experiences they have had in recent years. In addition, they often provoke further collaborations, such as a recent case where a PDS English faculty was asked for help to plan two similar seminars to support development of a culturally competent, culturally sensitive English curriculum.

Another partnership grew when the Elementary and Literacy faculty partnered with one of Vermont's diverse elementary schools with support from the Reading Excellence Act. Their work to improve reading success of students led to the school being recognized by the National Chief State School Officers as one of seven schools in the nation that achieved demonstrable change in learner outcomes through a planned approach to school reform.

**REDEFINITION OF SCHOLARSHIP.** In 1977, CESS faculty revisited the college's Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure guidelines. It was important to ensure that the faculty evaluation, promotion, and tenure guidelines recognized the new scholarship that emerges from greater engagement with the field, and greater emphasis on innovative teaching. Encouraged by the President, who invited faculty across the university to consider Boyer's (1990) ideas on scholarship, the CESS Faculty Affairs Committee led a college-wide discussion on the development, and ultimately, the approval of new guidelines that embrace a broader definition of scholarship (Aiken, Mosenthal et al., *Higher Education Perspectives*, in press).

**ASSESSING P-12 LEARNING.** The faculty is committed to continuously assessing students and especially to evaluating the ability to "make a positive difference in the lives of all learners." All programs rely on the portfolio as evidence of candidate quality and they enable faculty to assess candidates' knowledge, skill, and dispositional

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<sup>2</sup> The Results Oriented Program Approval Process, Revised has been adopted by the Vermont Standards Board for Professional Educators and by the Vermont State Board of Education. It constitutes the Vermont Program Accountability System that is performance based and consistent with Vermont's Educator Standards and Principles, and framed first in 1991 and revised in 2001.

development. Some have taken this to quite sophisticated levels through electronic formats, rubric assessment, and triangulated evaluation, and are providing leadership across the programs. The portfolio is at the center of the assessment system.

Over the past two years, faculty have engaged collaboratively to develop that common unit-wide assessment system. They agreed that such a system should be derived from a set of common beliefs and values, encompass program themes, be structured around common outcomes, and build on current program assessments. A faculty member whose scholarship is in program assessment and evaluation has taken the leadership role in the Unit Assessment Committee (Gajda, 2003). Unit faculty and field partners have defined common standards and are poised to develop common assessments (<http://www.uvm.edu/~cess/ncate/standards/standardII.html>). Among the positive outcomes from this work is the achievement of the 2003 reaccreditation and state approval.

### What's next?

The context for predicting and planning what is next in educator preparation is, once again, undergoing seismic shifts at the national and local level. We begin this discussion with a brief reprise of the contextual change and refer throughout this section to the national and local issues that are impacting program design, institutional practices, and public education generally. Certain national initiatives have been supportive: the Title II report card demonstrates the excellence of our graduates, about 95% pass Vermont's high cut scores for Praxis, but some have not.<sup>3</sup> National support for research on professional preparation has dwindled. There is a vibrant scholarly agenda in the college, but now faculty must seek alternative funding sources.

Just as we all agreed on the values, beliefs, knowledge, skills, and dispositions that defined a fine teacher and on what it takes to produce that teacher—the teacher is the most significant variable in student learning, and that student learning is what all this is about—the national debate has turned ugly again with assertions from the US Secretary of Education, Rod Paige, that all a good teacher needs is “verbal ability and content knowledge.” Another claim asserts

that teacher education programs are intellectually bereft and should be replaced with a national teacher test (Brassell, 2003). All SCDEs face challenges that emerge from this new discourse ranging from university administration again questioning teacher education programs (should they be graduate level or cease to exist?) to new federal funding streams that by-pass universities and state departments and land in resource-starved schools, sorely testing K-16 partnerships when those resources need to fund pressing public school challenges. The question for the day is how to respond to this cacophony of critique and budgetary challenges.

The UVM response has been to begin discussion about these challenges and their impact while taking a firm “stay the course” stance. Convinced that we provide a quality education for our students, that they are well prepared for professional practice, and that we owe the nation's public schools the best professionals we can produce, the intention is to be responsive to new challenges while maintaining stability and a commitment to our articulated values and beliefs about teaching, learning, and the role of professionals in schools.

But the new context does present challenges daily. For example, the aforementioned shift in funding streams and in notions about what it takes to produce a teacher, including alternative routes, may make the PDS a casualty. We already see signs. In one PDS, the teachers union wants all the honoraria money to go to teachers, while past practice has been for the university to pay honoraria as a lump sum to a school-based Professional Development Committee of university and school faculty who allocated resources to support school reform. Paying individual honoraria harks back to the old “cooperating teacher” model, a new Trojan horse destined to dismantle the partnerships that make the PDS such a unique setting for in-service and pre-service professional development and school reform. Without federal or

<sup>3</sup> Vermont adopted no statewide policy on when the Praxis tests would be taken. Thus, some colleges made passing Praxis I and II a requirement for completers of their program, while others, including UVM, did not. Obviously, the former achieve 100% pass rates and the latter do not. Nonetheless, it has been surprising how quickly this distinction has been understood, and moreover, how little attention has been paid to the report card so far. It is unclear if these two facts, the different definition of completer and the inattention, are related.

state support, can PDSs be sustained? Issues like these must be addressed if the model is to survive.

And at least at UVM, these are being addressed not by the creators of the PDSs but by new faculty members. The severe budget cuts over the past decades produced two quite attractive “buy-out” programs. Our programs are now staffed by a vibrant group of junior faculty who bring terrific energy to their work. The College prides itself on the fact that all faculty are engaged with schools, but these new faculty also need support to balance that engagement with the demands of achieving tenure. Revising the Promotion and Tenure Guidelines to honor fieldwork has helped somewhat, but we must be vigilant in our efforts both to support new faculty and preserve quality field-intensive programs.

Further, the university’s years of budgetary and leadership instability produced a faculty union for the first time at UVM. Just into the first contract, it is clear that it will impact programs. It is not clear how. Also, new leadership in the upper administration has prompted a new round of strategic planning that will require revisiting the role of the college and its disciplinary base in the university research, teaching, and scholarship missions.

Even though each of these factors influences day-to-day work, staying the course does not mean becoming stagnant. With a widely-shared coherent vision and conviction that we prepare fine educators, new initiatives are emerging: the development of assessment across all programs, the creation of an inter-professional strand in professional education that draws on the strengths of the multiple professions represented in the college, the creation of new programs that respond to particular needs in the public schools such as special education in the early education years, work on an inter-disciplinary program for middle level professionals, addressing diversity in public schools, and the integration of technology into our existing programs.

In the end, stability comes from our belief in our mission statement that there is nothing more important than engaging in scholarship and preparing professionals, knowing that “The ultimate purpose of these activities is to create a more humane and just society, free from oppression, that fosters respect for ethnic and cultural diversity, and maximizes human potential and the quality of life for all individuals, families and communities” (from the CESS Mission Statement).

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