

Guest Editor's Introduction: The Network for Innovative Colleges of Education

By Richard Wisniewski

The Network for Innovative Colleges of Education (NICE) was created by an informal process. The five deans in the Network were known to one another, but they had not worked together as a team. Our common bond was in the fact that each of us was struggling to restructure the colleges for which we are responsible.

Peter Smith represented a major private university. He had also come to the deanship on a different path from the other four deans. As a result, he provided perspectives exceptionally helpful to the group. Peter recently left George Washington University to become President of California State University, Monterey Bay.

The other Californian in the group is Steve Lilly, Dean at California State University, San Marcos. Steve's participation added still another dimension. CSU, San Marcos, is a relatively new institution and in process of development. Steve's goal is not to restructure a college; it is to develop a college that avoids some of the practices entrenched in established colleges.

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dean of the College of
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The other three deans in the Network are responsible for long-established, large state colleges of

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education that are seriously engaged in restructuring processes. Peggy Blackwell at the University of New Mexico is leading a faculty to fundamental changes in the structure of a large college of education.

Richard Wisniewski at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, is engaged with the faculty in creating what is called a New College of Education. As in New Mexico, departments were “sunsetting” and new organizational units were created to facilitate the work of a college committed to new goals and practices.

Jan Kettlewell, Dean at Miami University (Ohio) has led her faculty in a reform process linked to the John Goodlad Network. The faculty at Miami has approved a plan for creating a Center of Pedagogy, in keeping with Goodlad’s principles. Jan recently left Miami to take a position with the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. It is anticipated that both Miami and George Washington Universities will continue to be active in the Network should it be continued.

The original proposal to the Rockefeller Foundation was to enable the five deans to meet periodically in order to compare notes and to support one another. The five individuals needed to get away from the politics and hurly-burly of university life to reflect on what was happening on the five campuses. They initially planned to invite persons with visions for collegiate reform to meetings to enhance what each individual dean was attempting.

The group thought of itself as being “out on a limb.” Each dean had learned that anyone who presses for serious change is vulnerable to attack and to heavy resistance to change. Institutions do not exist to reform themselves; they exist to perpetuate themselves. This is as true at universities as it is at any other institution. Those within institutions who take the lead in advocating reforms are always suspect, however positive the veneer placed on activities. This is also true for key faculty and other administrators working with deans to make changes. Even when successes are achieved, the process is fragile, political, and frustrating.

At the first meeting of the group, the deans quickly concluded that they were not the only ones who felt “alone” at their colleges. Key faculty at each institution, persons who shared the goals being advocated, felt the same pressures as the deans from colleagues less willing, ready, or able to contribute to reform. The nay-sayers are ever-present and often appear to outnumber the persons who see the positive aspects of reform. The group determined to make two changes in Network activities.

First, the Network would meet at each of the five campuses during the 1993-94 academic year. Second, teams of three or four faculty would join the deans at the five campus meetings. The colleagues invited would be persons making strong contributions to restructuring each college. The Network was never intended to convince anyone that change was necessary. Rather, it exists to bring together persons who are helping to make things happen on five campuses—to give these persons opportunities to learn from one another and to reinforce all concerned in their commitments.

These goals were met at each of the campus meetings. Beginning in New Mexico, and moving every few months to the other campuses, the host institution would bring together all the persons most active in restructuring activities. The visiting teams learned about the good things happening—as well as the problems being encountered—and how people were dealing with the frustrations of change and politics at each institution. The participants learned that we are all moving in similar directions, with only minor variations on the themes.

From everything heard from colleagues, these meetings were exceptionally worthwhile. They gave everyone a sense of being part of something bigger than what is normally visible in the day-to-day work of a college. Friendships and communication networks will last long after the Network ends. As these activities were taking place, questions were received from several deans across the country asking what the Network was all about and if there was a possibility they might join.

The goal was never to create a large network. One reason for the success of the Network is that it is small and there is no infrastructure. We simply do what needs to be done to organize a meeting and to communicate with one another as appropriate. The grant monies have been used to support the meetings of the Network institutions. Fortunately, sufficient funds existed for one additional Network meeting that took place in May of 1995 at the University of Tennessee.

The Network has provided reinforcing activities for individuals, campuses, and groups with a commitment to reform their institutions—and this includes the five deans. Persons on the fringes of the reform movement have other venues at which to learn about what restructuring is all about. This Network exists for the five campuses where **what is possible is actually being created**. If the Network is continued, there are three or four other deans ready to join. They are well down the road toward restructuring and they need the support of like-minded colleagues.

What follows are descriptions of the transitions taking place at the five institutions. A summary chapter outlines the main things learned over this past year.

We are deeply grateful to the Rockefeller Foundation for supporting the Network's work.