

## The Transformation of a College

By **Richard Wisniewski**

Demands that teacher education in the United States be reformed have a perennial quality. In the past decade, the teacher education establishment began to respond on an encouraging scale, at least to those advocating reforms. The Goodlad Network, the Holmes Group, the small Network for Innovative Colleges of Education, and many individual campus efforts exemplify positive responses. This essay describes one such effort at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK).

That the UTK College of Education needed to be restructured was not a decision precipitated by forces such as a fiscal downsizing or other calamitous events. The decision was the logical next step in a progression of changes in the College over a ten year period.

The faculty developed an agenda of teacher education reforms in the early 1980s, partially in response to questions raised by the campus administration. That agenda was expanded over the years until it encompassed all of the College's programs and missions. The dynamics of how events developed, key decision points, progress, and retreats cannot be described here. Suffice to say that as one examines changes already made and others yet to come, my colleagues and I have learned much about what can be achieved (and what is impossible) in a university. None of the changes could have been made if they were not supported by a number of key faculty. In respect to

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my role, I am an advocate of serious reforms, but no dean can change a college unless a significant number of colleagues share common goals.

As is true of all higher education, the University of Tennessee is not an institution where large scale changes take place often. There was little in the University's history to encourage a restructuring of the College of Education. Nonetheless, University level support was provided once the goals of the proposed changes became better understood. Changes in teacher education were widely applauded by the University community from the very beginning. The restructuring process, in contrast, is too new and different to elicit the same level of enthusiasm.

### **Changes in Teacher Education**

Encouraged by the University's administration, the appointment of a new dean in 1983 was orchestrated into an opportunity for the faculty to initiate major changes in teacher education. Based on faculty task force reports, the change process was initiated in early 1984. Several colleagues and I argued that teacher education should be a five year process, predicated on teacher education students earning a Baccalaureate in the Arts and Sciences. The fifth year would consist of a full-time internship in the schools, jointly supervised by teachers, principals, and professors. Admission standards were increased. Admissions boards were to be created to insure that persons seeking admission to teacher education were assessed by a process that went beyond a superficial review of academic work. The proliferation of methods courses was reduced. Required courses became better articulated. Working relationships with schools, a strong tradition in the College, were expanded. The goal was to create partnerships linking the College's programs with practicing professionals. Much of this agenda has been achieved. By 1988, these changes were in place and operational. In significant ways, the College was among the first in the nation to implement the Holmes Group agenda for the reform of teacher education.

While these changes were taking place, less attention was given to other programs and missions in a large and comprehensive college. Modest curricular changes took place regularly, especially at the Ph.D. level. There was no attempt, however, to address college missions and to reform graduate programs on a scale similar to what was done in teacher education. Indeed, some graduate faculty were concerned that too much attention was being paid to the teacher education enterprise. The majority of the graduate faculty, however, appeared content not to have their work disturbed. This matter is convoluted since most teacher education faculty also have graduate responsibilities. It is difficult to draw a line between graduate and undergraduate activities in large state colleges such as that at UTK.

By the late 1980s, it was clear that the College could not respond to demands being placed on it by changing conditions or to its critics without engaging in a self-assessment likely to lead to a major reorganization. Despite the changes in teacher

education, not enough had been done to alter college teaching and assessment practices, the heart of our work with students. These issues were difficult to address given the fragmented nature of the College. All of the College's faculty, programs, and students were housed in seven autonomous departments. Each department had its strengths and weaknesses. The one thing they had in common was operating as if they were colleges unto themselves. The departmental structure was rigid and it was virtually impossible to achieve consensus on issues or possibilities. It was difficult to go beyond superficial committee recommendations that seldom challenged the status quo. Several of the department heads did their best to move beyond this condition, but the culture of the College was not conducive to reform. The College as a whole was suffering from a collective case of hardening of the arteries.

In the early 1990s, the College's Faculty Council began to discuss the need for strategic planning. Not surprisingly, some Council members were more responsive to this need than others. These discussions led to conversations with the University administration, outlining the need for strategic planning that would likely lead to a reorganization of the entire College. Based on these explorations, it was possible to explore funding for a planning process with several foundations. With the help of a then vice president of the University, a proposal for a major planning grant was made to the Philip Morris Companies. This company provided \$500,000 to create a "new" College of Education.

## **Year One**

The process began in September 1991. A representative of the Philip Morris Companies attended a faculty meeting to announce the grant. The faculty received the details of a planning process open to every person on the faculty in keeping with goals supported by the Faculty Council. Responses to this opportunity were, in the main, guarded. Some persons voiced enthusiasm for what they saw as an opportunity to build a strong future for the College and for themselves as individuals. Other persons appeared threatened by the prospect, likely fearing that their control over programs might not survive the planning process. The majority of the faculty appeared to take a "wait and see" attitude. None of these reactions is unique in academic settings.

A faculty member was appointed to serve as a co-director of planning, with the dean serving as the "principal investigator." A planning committee was appointed in consultation with the Faculty Council. The persons appointed had indicated in one way or another their concerns about the College's future. An effort was made to make the planning group representative of the faculty. To this day, debates continue as to whether this was achieved. This reaction is part of the traditional lack of closure so common in academic decision making. Decisions, large and small, tend to be questioned in perpetuity. Some view this as one of the strengths of a University. Others see it as one reason why important changes seldom are achieved.

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Whatever the reasons, efforts to improve things are usually under attack. Persons have only to ask “questions” to slow or undermine the process. Few persons will publicly oppose change. Indeed, virtually everyone says change is needed. Many of these same persons will, nonetheless, ask question after question. Asking questions is not the problem. **Not** providing answers or alternatives or options is the problem. Innovation requires ideas—proposals and counterproposals—an ongoing commitment to challenging established practices, even if those practices appear to be working. Yin and Yang are at the heart of a dynamic institution, at least in any institution where full participation in decision making is valued.

Using grant monies, it was possible to send groups of faculty to exemplary programs across the country. Consultants were invited to provide advice on the process and possible outcomes. A national advisory board was created, linking the College with strong voices calling for reform in education at the national level. Breakfast and luncheon meetings gave each faculty member an opportunity to discuss ideas and their reactions to the process. A major planning retreat was held for all faculty members. A New College Planning Office was created. A graduate assistant and secretary were appointed to handle communications, to arrange meetings, and to distribute materials. Books and other materials on change were purchased and made available to interested faculty. Efforts were made to engage students in the process. This was not achieved on the scale requisite to a New College of Education, sharp evidence of the limited opportunities for student voice in the “old” College. The phrase “New College of Education” began to emerge in discussions and documents.

Much give and take occurred during this process. Ideas came from many sources. Several faculty members wrote position papers circulated to the total faculty. A host of meetings was held for a variety of purposes. Several large task forces were created, each seeking to define the College’s missions and other issues. Some persons argued that the Dean already had a plan for restructuring the College and that the process was a charade. Others said that it was the most open process they had ever experienced during their academic careers. I hold the latter view. In every possible setting, faculty members had an opportunity to determine the College’s future and their role in that future. This opportunity became clear during the second year when faculty members had to determine the new College Unit that they would create and join.

Given these and other activities and the many ideas “floating” in the College, the planning committee was paid their full summer salaries to produce a planning document. These individuals worked throughout the summer of 1992 on the document. It was an exceptionally heady period. Ideas offered from many sources during the prior year had to be debated. The group sought consensus. No one had the satisfaction of having all of their ideas incorporated in the planning document, and this applies equally to the co-directors of the effort. Slowly, a consensus on key principles emerged.

A major decision made by the faculty was that the College should remain a comprehensive rather than a single focus institution. That is, programs not directly related to education should remain in the College. While a few argued that non-education programs should leave the College, the majority believed that the restructuring process was an opportunity for programs such as Exercise Science, Counseling Psychology, Public Health, Human Services, and other non-teacher education programs to plan their futures. The possibilities of diverse programs working together began to emerge. Five goals were also established: commitments to social justice, to scholarship, to innovation in teaching, to collaborative partnerships among faculty, students, and practitioners, and to a leadership role in education. These concepts provided the framework for a host of ideas in the document. By the end of summer 1992, the College had a planning document—a blueprint for its future.

## **Year Two**

In September 1992, a national symposium on the restructuring of schools of education was hosted. Members of the College's National Advisory Board, state school officials, teachers and superintendents in the local area, deans of education from across the country and the state, representatives from the Philip Morris Companies, and other foundations' representatives joined the faculty for a two day examination of the need to restructure colleges of education. What was happening at Tennessee was not the prime focus of this conference. UTK's plan was but one case study amidst a number of ideas coming from many institutions and authorities. This conference was also a heady affair. It demonstrated that what the College was doing was part of expectations being raised across the country. Namely, if colleges of education were to have a positive future, they needed to make serious changes in their practices.

Following the conference, the planning document was heavily debated. The fall of 1992 was devoted to the serious political dimensions of academic change. The Faculty Council and several faculty members took leadership roles, calling for a series of forums to debate the planning document. These activities consumed the Fall Semester and beyond. In many ways, this was the most frustrating part of the process. Some opined that the debate was like "going back to square one," a repetition of the first year of planning. Nonetheless, everyone realized that the planning effort was serious. It was not something that was going to be put "on the shelf." The document called for fundamental changes in how the College was organized, how faculty worked with one another, and how the College was to relate to the professions it serves. Those ready to implement the document were frustrated by the continuing debates, a process nonetheless vital to consensus building.

Opposition to the document, though it proved to be from a minority of the faculty, became highly vocal. At least three department heads viewed themselves

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and their departments as seriously threatened by what was being proposed. The other four department heads made clear early in the process that they were in favor of fundamental changes even if it meant significant changes for their departments and for them as individuals. Hence, political and power issues were joined during the fall and winter of 1992-93.

The outcome was determined by the faculty in February 1993. A vote was conducted with faculty members privately casting their ballots. Seventy-four percent of the faculty voted for the planning document and the ideas therein. The remaining quarter of the faculty opposed the document. All concerned learned that the vocal minority was indeed a minority, and the majority was heartened by the decision to move forward. Following the vote, the most intriguing and exciting portion of the transformation began.

In the spring and summer of 1993, faculty members explored the types of Units they would like to create. "Unit" became the code word for a new configuration of faculty and programs. While there were a number of open meetings where persons proposing Units outlined their plans, most of the negotiations appeared to take place privately. Again, this is a natural phenomenon. Persons were not eager to declare themselves until they were sure that what they were thinking was consistent with that of their significant others.

During the summer of 1993, an implementation committee was appointed. This group consisted of a different faculty group from the original planning committee, thus giving still another faculty group an opportunity to be godparents of the New College. The faculty as a whole began to write proposals for new Units. During the summer and fall of 1993, a total of 11 Unit plans was reviewed by the implementation committee. In each instance, the initial plan was returned to the faculty, asking for clarifications. Concerns were raised if ideas in the College planning document were not readily visible in the rationale for a Unit. One of the strong components of the Unit plans was the "Principles of Association" section. In this section, faculty members addressed how they would work with one another, with their students, and in ways consistent with the New College plan. Each Unit plan was reviewed twice by the implementation committee. In all instances, the Units were approved after the second review.

During this period, two groups of faculty expressed concerns about the directions in which the College was moving. They independently initiated explorations with the College of Human Ecology. These deliberations led to rumor mongering and distrust among segments of the faculty. One department initiated explorations with the College of Engineering before determining that its future would be best served by joining Human Ecology. Once these negotiations were well underway, the deans of the two colleges met with the vice chancellor for academic affairs to determine not only his views on the matter, but to work out the many details incumbent in the transfer of departments from one college to another. Reactions to these transfers ran the gamut in both colleges. Some faculty believed

that no department should have the option of leaving a college. Others believed that this option was precisely what an open planning process enabled. Personality, turf, governance, power, and fiscal issues were all factors during these negotiations.

At the end of the negotiations, all but one member of an entire department and three-quarters of another department were formally transferred to the College of Human Ecology. These changes became official in July 1994. It is significant that several faculty members in these departments elected to stay in the College. This fact underscores the promise to faculty members that each individual had an opportunity to determine his or her personal future. The transfer of the two departments is perhaps the most negative aspect of the change process. It is not negative because the departments left the College. Rather, the overtones of what was said and done during the year of negotiations was not in keeping with positive collegial relationships. The tensions revealed were not new, however. They had a long history in the College.

### **Year Three**

In 1993-94, the faculty had achieved consensus on defining the 11 new Units. It was widely expected that new faculty leadership would emerge within these Units. It was necessary first to receive University approval of the proposed changes. Support for the change process had been forthcoming at the University level throughout, but official actions had to be taken. At a critical meeting in December 1993, the chancellor, vice chancellor, and others in central administration met with about 25 members of the faculty. I provided an overview of the new structure and then withdrew so that the chancellor's staff could confer directly with the faculty. The faculty members communicated that what was being proposed belonged to them. It was not just something the dean wanted. It was stated that, should I leave the deanship, the plan belonged to the faculty. When I was told this after the meeting, it was a singular high point among the many highs and lows experienced during a long change process.

It was also necessary to gain the approval of the University of Tennessee system. This action required a review at the presidential level as well as final approval by the University's Trustees. The Trustees took action in February and June 1994. The February meeting was of particular interest. A faculty member who had not engaged in any part of the process took a public stand condemning all aspects of the restructuring. A host of negative allegations were voiced in the press and at the Trustees' meeting. The professor saw the process and the plan as an abomination. The Trustees gave the professor a fair hearing; questions were asked and answered. They then unanimously passed the proposal to restructure the College of Education. The Trustees reaffirmed their commitment at the June meeting when they officially approved the transfer of two departments from Education to Human Ecology.

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After the Trustees' action, it was finally possible to ask the faculty in each of the 11 Units to elect a Unit Leader. These persons were not appointed; they were elected, a major change in faculty governance. It was emphasized that the persons selected were not department heads. As Unit Leaders, they were faculty members who serve as conveners of and spokespersons for the Units. While they each receive a stipend for handling some routine administrative matters, they were not to be part of the "top down" philosophy of governance, a fundamental assumption of the former departmental structure.

A Business Office was created, centralizing much of the "administrivia" and business functions of the College. The goal was and is to streamline the business of the College so that the faculty, Unit Leaders, and the Dean's Office can devote far more attention to academic matters, to working with students and with colleagues in the field. Economies could be achieved by eliminating the replication of business transactions that characterized the "old College." In the old structure, each department had its own bookkeeping functions. Departments purchased equipment and supplies, paid for graduate students, telephone usage, arranged classroom assignments, and so on. The College replicated these activities when they were reviewed by the Dean's Office. These matters have been combined in ways to insure that the College's budget will be used to enhance the teaching/learning/assessment process, rather than being overly expended on duplicated procedures. This is far easier to say than to accomplish.

Given that 11 faculty members are new to their roles, it is not surprising that questions about these roles remain. A few Unit Leaders are being pushed by colleagues or by personal ambitions to behave like department heads. In the main, Unit Leaders realize that this is not their role. The Unit Leader concept is also difficult for most University offices and other Colleges to understand. Since the University remains structured departmentally, the College of Education's organization is an anomaly. It is applauded and envied by some on campus. It is distrusted because it is different by others. Attention cannot be given here to the 1001 details related to changes in telephones, offices, catalogues, approval procedures, new committee functions—all of the things that need to be changed when a college restructures itself.

### **Year Four**

At this writing in mid-1995, the "New" College of Education is fully operational. This does not mean that professorial, staff, and student behaviors have dramatically changed, but positive indicators are widely present. A growing number of persons are **trying** to change what they do, or they are open to reflecting on the need to alter practices. What the reorganization has made possible is an increase in opportunities—potential—possibilities—for major curricular reforms and fundamental changes in the teaching/learning/assessment process. Each day is



a test of the planning document and its potential. Each committee meeting is a step forward or backward. Each new proposal advances the transition, or it does not. The inclusion or exclusion of students and colleagues from the practicing professions in our deliberations is evidence of moving forward or of preserving the status quo. In short, everything we do is an opportunity to advance the New College or to fall back into old practices.

The old practices have a tenacity difficult to overcome. This is not surprising. The 90-plus faculty creating the New College is the same faculty that was conditioned by “old” College practices for 20 to 25 years. All of us in the College are trapped by our training, experiences, and the university culture to do certain things in certain ways. The remarkable thing about the change at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, then, is not that we are **doing** everything in our planning document. The remarkable thing is that a faculty socialized to highly traditional practices has publicly committed itself to a new future. Many members of the faculty are finding opportunities not open to them in the past. As a faculty, we **are** making progress.

Given that many on the faculty will be retiring in the next five years, a major opportunity exists for the College to transform itself in keeping with the goals to which the faculty has committed itself. The seven new faculty members recruited in 1994 came to Tennessee because they were convinced that something different was happening here. Whatever happens next, retreat is not a viable option. Too many things have been dislodged to enable the nay-sayers to revert to times past. A new generation of faculty, guided by excellent colleagues struggling day by day to make the New College a reality, are the hope for a full transformation.