

Reactions to the Network for Innovative Colleges of Education Program

By Peter Smith

As the recent Dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development (GSEHD) at the George Washington University, I can state unequivocally that our participation in the Network for Innovative Colleges of Education (NICE) has been the single most important professional and program development activity that

my faculty and I have undertaken over the last two years. In fact, my faculty will tell you that it is the most important such program that we have ever undertaken in their experience either here or at other universities.

Peter Smith is the immediate past dean of the Graduate School of Education and Human Development at The George Washington University, Washington, D.C., and the new president of California State University, Monterey Bay.

The GSEHD is engaged in a systemic reform and reinvention of our school with regard both to distance learning, master's level curriculum, and doctoral curriculum. At the same time, we are attempting to strengthen our offerings and attitudes regarding new student constituencies, multicultural and multi-disciplinary approaches, and a heightened sensitivity to the notion of becoming a learning community our-

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selves. The Network has played both an implicit and an explicit role in aiding and abetting each of these overall objectives. In terms of our own curricular development, Network members played the role of “critical friends” in our all-school retreat in December of 1993. For two-and-one-half days our faculty, led by facilitators and joined by their “friends” from other institutions, wrestled with the most basic questions of our mission, our hopes for the skills and abilities of our graduates, the needs of the surrounding community and evolving world, and so on. From that retreat came a series of working groups which have, over the ensuing 12 months, laid the base for a profound change/development in the way we do business: the New Practitioners Program and the Doctoral Reform Program. As we look toward the future, we have a new missions statement with guiding principles, a new school-wide approach to curriculum and professional development, and a new commitment to focus on portfolios and assessment as well as reflection and active learning as core values in our newly shared and developed curriculum.

As important as the explicit support has been, perhaps the implicit is even more important. Professionals, like plants, need watering and nutrients on a continuing basis. It is one of the things we do worst in higher education. Often, when professional development does happen, it is within a tightly defined intradisciplinary area where traditional skills, knowledge bases, and networks are reaffirmed at the expense of broader professional and collegial development. NICE has exposed more than one half of my faculty to the problems, opportunities, victories, and most importantly the professional lives and realities of approximately 150 other faculty members in four other settings. The sheer dynamics of the professional development and linkages which occur when people get together in loosely guided situations is irrefutable. It suggests that, in the absence of a formal structure, the structure provided by a shared commitment to reform and reinvent institutions is “enough” to guide discussions very fruitfully in subjects as diverse as better teaching and learning, multiculturalism, rewards, incentives, and enhancements for faculty, and distance learning. My faculty’s culture has been changed absolutely by the continued and (we hope) continuing involvement with an exposure to the working groups from other NICE institutions.

Any future configuration of NICE must remember the core value which has provided the organizational stimulus for these five institutions: that a finite number of institutions, working together, can establish personal and professional networking bonds which lead very quickly to profound professional development and program development given the aggressive leadership of chosen and appointed administrators. It is my very strong conviction that anything which became too formalized, too hierarchical, or too “intentional” would lead to the failure ultimately of the NICE concept. As we expand (if we do) we need to keep our groups small, interactive, and mission oriented; with the mission being defined and determined by the members who are joining the NICE consortium.

In closing, I will only reiterate what I have stated earlier. This involvement has

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been and will continue to be at the core of our institutional development. We are proceeding rapidly and successfully and very much need the continuing collegial professional development which NICE provides. I have appreciated the opportunity for George Washington University to become a member of this extraordinary working group.