

A Look Back at the First Five Years in a New College of Education

By Steve Lilly

On August 1, 1990, I arrived for my first day of work as the Dean of the new College of Education at California State University, San Marcos. My first day was to serve as an apt metaphor for the role I had assumed. I was shown to my new office, in which the sole piece of furniture was a telephone sitting in the middle of the floor. I was assured that my furniture would be delivered that day, and asked what type of computer system I would prefer. Three weeks after my appearance, the first 50 credential candidates were to arrive to start their programs of study. During one of the first “deans’ meetings” I attended, a major topic of discussion focused on ensuring that chalkboards, chalk, and overhead projectors would be in place for the first day of instruction. Daily, we simultaneously delighted and panicked in the realization that “this was not a drill,” and the wonderful opportunity we were facing would actually be implemented, sooner rather than later.

California State University, San Marcos, was established in 1989, the 20th campus of the California State University system and the first new public university to be chartered in the United States in 25 years. The planning year, 1989-90, was staffed by a President, an Executive Vice President, a core staff and 11 “founding faculty” members who designed the first academic programs

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and recruited the first students. Thus, when the deans were hired, the “blank slate” was no longer blank; it had been written on by the founding faculty in their planning of programs and their recruitment of a second wave of new faculty who arrived two weeks after this new dean. To say that the planning year had been hectic would be a massive understatement; many basic values of the University were established during marathon meetings of the founding faculty in that planning year. However, the arrival of deans and subsequent additions of new faculty annually have assured that assumptions and decisions made during that initial planning year have been subject to continuous analysis and revision.

I arrived at California State University, San Marcos confident that the College of Education had an opportunity unparalleled in the United States. In an era of increasing pressure for fundamental change in professional education and for increased relevance and responsiveness to societal needs by the higher education community, we were building a College of Education from the ground up. This offered a chance to construct not only a state-of-the-art curriculum, but more importantly a paradigm for professional education and for faculty research and service which is consistent with the many calls for reform of higher education in general, and teacher education in particular.

The first and most important task for the new College was to determine our mission and core beliefs. In fall 1990, we adopted a mission statement that has guided faculty selection, program development, school-college collaboration, budget development, and all other areas of strategic decision making in the College. We are a mission driven College of Education.

The mission of the College is threefold: (1) to foster continuous advancement of student learning in elementary, middle, and secondary schools in our immediate service region; (2) to contribute to improvement of instruction in the University; and (3) to advance teaching and teacher education at the state and national levels. The primary means of pursuing this mission are: (1) preparation of newly credentialed professional educators who are reflective practitioners with the commitment and ability to assure that all students learn to use their minds well; (2) provision of advanced learning experiences for in-service professional educators; (3) conduct of educational research and scholarship planned in collaboration with K-12 educators; (4) provision of service to the education community which is closely integrated with our teaching and research programs; and (5) participation in University programs aimed at instructional improvement and research on teaching. The College faculty are committed to modeling excellent instruction and engaging in scholarly activities which have applications to contemporary problems of schooling.

Our mission is based on two core beliefs:

1. All students can learn, not only rote facts but to reason and use their minds well, and teachers are the primary agents for this learning; and
2. In order to meet the considerable challenge of assuring that all students will

learn, teachers must be lifelong learners themselves, professionally empowered and skilled at problem solving and collaboration with their peers for the purpose of designing creative, effective approaches to ensuring student success.

These two fundamental beliefs guide our teaching, research, and service activities in the College of Education. They are rooted in the commitment that in order to be places of effective learning for all students, schools must be active learning communities for the adult professionals who work there. And if we hope to prepare educators to be continuous learners in their professional and personal lives, we must model effective learning community in all we do in the College of Education.

The College is dedicated to building instructional programs which require people to think and to engage themselves in powerful learning communities. Course formats and teaching methods reinforce collaboration and problem solving, and model a wide variety of effective teaching strategies. In classes, everyone is expected to be both a teacher and a learner, and assessment techniques are designed to measure reasoning and complex performance, not mere regurgitation of discrete bits of knowledge. Finally, field experiences in community classrooms are planned in accordance with the nature of the course or program and the needs of class participants, to ensure that classroom learning is guided by the realities and challenges of current school reform efforts.

We have also created staffing models and governance structures in the College which reflect our beliefs in community and collaboration. We have as a part of the College faculty four Distinguished Teachers in Residence, area classroom teachers selected for their special expertise to serve two-year terms as full-time College faculty on loan from their school districts. Distinguished Teachers carry normal teaching and student teaching supervision loads and engage in scholarly and service activities along with tenure-line faculty. The program which brings Distinguished Teachers to the College also provides assigned time for tenure-line faculty to work in area schools on programs and activities aimed at improvement of teaching and learning for all students.

Our College governance structure also reflects the commitment to collaboration, collegiality, and a learning community which is the hallmark of College philosophy and practice. Rather than a faculty governance structure, we have formed a College of Education Governance Community which consists of and provides full voting rights for tenure-line faculty, Distinguished Teachers in Residence, and representatives of College part-time faculty, staff, and students. The Governance Community makes programmatic and curriculum decisions and serves as the major decision-making body in the College. Last year, the Governance Community made a conscious decision to move from a “parliamentary” structure to a consensus based, problem solving approach to doing business, another step toward being the kind of learning community we are trying to help create in schools.

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The programs offered by the College also reflect the fact that we are “mission driven.” Our programs are designed to prepare teachers to serve effectively all the students who come to California’s schools. We prepare elementary, middle level, and special education teachers, and plan to begin a high school teacher preparation this fall and a program in school administration in 1996. All of our programs are based on a “cohort model,” in which we admit students in learning groups of 25, ask each group to pursue the program together, and commit to teaching cohort groups in ways that model active learning and collaborative problem solving.

In addition, all of our programs include systematic attention to preparation of teachers who can combine subject matter instruction with English language development for English learning students in their classrooms. All of our graduates qualify for not only their basic California teaching credential, but also a specialist credential in Cross-Cultural Language and Academic Development (CLAD). Finally, in all of our programs we offer the option for students who are fluent in a second language and culture to prepare to be bilingual teachers, capable of teaching English learning students in their primary language. Preparation for multicultural and multilingual teaching, combined with our focus on building and maintaining learning community with peers, results in program graduates who are sought after by area schools.

This is a brief description of our efforts at structuring a responsive and professionally relevant College of Education. While we have made great progress, we know that our job is far from done. If we are true to our values, we must realize that what we are doing today will be insufficient to meet the ever-changing demands of tomorrow. We must invest our energies in serving well our current students, as well as the area schools whom we consider to be our primary “customers.” At the same time, we must constantly question what we do as well as our basic beliefs and assumptions about children, schools, teaching and learning. Combining a commitment to enduring values with a focus on continuous quality improvement is essential if we are to “practice what we preach.” For example, when we hire new Faculty we always include the College mission statement in the recruitment advertisement and ask applicants to address the mission in their presentation of qualifications. This helps to ensure that while we have considerable diversity in ways of knowing and doing among faculty, we share a common commitment to improvement of teaching and learning as our reason for being.

The Network for Innovative Colleges of Education has been an invaluable resource for us to connect with others who are struggling to ensure their relevance to the real world issues of schooling in the 1990s. Through the Network, we have been reinforced that we are on the right track and have made connections with others who are sharing our journey. We are better because the Network has existed, and so are our students and our K-12 partners. We are striving to achieve a national reputation for our College of Education through local impact, and the Network has provided new ideas and approaches to our task by extending our collaboration

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agenda to work with curious and committed higher education colleagues across the country.