

Crossing the street: Developing successful collaboration between education and arts and sciences faculty to improve middle grades teacher preparation

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Throughout the years, various agencies have recommended that faculty from Colleges of Arts and Sciences and Colleges of Education work together to create seamless and integrated teacher education programs (American Council on Education, 1999; United States Department of Education, 1999), yet truly collaborative relationships between Colleges of Education and Colleges of Arts and Sciences are rare. There is an array of reasons for this seeming separation between the two stemming from historical distrust and status differentials (Labaree, 2004) to deep-seated epistemological distinctions across disciplines (Kennedy, 1999). Some even posit a pattern of personality and gender differences of those faculties who choose to enter the professoriate through the academic units versus the professional schools (Sleeter, 1999) and of course, embedded economic and entrenched communication issues have long fed the cultural divide. For instance, at our university we have been told by our College of Arts and Sciences (CoAS) colleagues we in the College of Education (CoE) speak “educababble.”

However, it would seem if any program in an education school should be able to collaborate with arts and sciences colleagues it would be those in the Middle Grades Teacher Preparation Program. With interdisciplinary teaching teams, integrative curriculum, connective thinking, and advocacy for young adolescents, an often

misunderstood group, at the heart of its educational mission no program seems in a better position to collaborate across the academy than one which prepares middle grades educators. This chapter tells of the development at Georgia College & State University (GCSU) of a collaborative partnership between faculty members in the two colleges over the past several years. This is the story of how we have literally “crossed the street” to bring unity to teaching and learning.

Impetus for collaboration

Since the University System of Georgia’s Board of Regents delineated the *Regents’ Principles for the Preparation of Educators for the Public Schools* in 1998 teacher preparation programs have become the shared responsibility of education and arts and sciences faculty. The necessity for this joint responsibility included ending the high degree of “out-of-field” teaching which was a concern throughout the state. Educators were defined as teaching “out-of-field” if they did not have the equivalent of a minor in the academic areas in which they taught. This condition was most prevalent among teachers who taught at the middle level in rural areas and as such were expected to be generalists but were often organized for instruction by subject areas and teams. In order for them to be considered qualified for “in-field” teaching, the courses they completed for the minor in an academic field needed to be taught by Arts and Sciences (A&S) faculty, not by education faculty.

This external mandate would cause us eventually to reflect upon what it means to have an effective collaboration with shared responsibility for teacher preparation, but at the time responding to the implementation of these principles became the original

impetus for our partnership. We began as a task force by holding a meeting with the chairpersons of the departments of those faculties who taught middle grades teacher candidates. Our goal was to complete the work quickly, ensuring we had enough upper level A&S courses to offer candidates in the middle grades program so graduates could have the equivalent of a minor in math, science, social studies, or English. We expected to align and make slight modifications to the then current schedule in a minimum of time which would enable us to adhere to the principles with little accommodation for the other's way of doing business. We did not intend to have long-term effects on each others' practices.

From the initial meeting we have evolved into a persisting group with broad participation of faculty and department chairs from seven departments and programs which come together regularly four to five times per year to work on issues we identify as important to the success of the middle grades teacher candidates, and to operate in ways which contribute to our own professional development. Our collaborative model has been developing for well over a decade and by all accounts is a successful one others may choose to emulate.

Knowledge to teach

From the beginning we found real differences in the conceptions of knowledge existing between us and our A&S colleagues which stymied collaboration. This played out as an argument between colleges over the need for teacher candidates to be prepared with content knowledge versus pedagogical content knowledge and was voiced only in our own units. Faculty from the CoAS often argued education faculty

placed too much emphasis on the development of pedagogical knowledge and skills with content simply as the vehicle for learning, while faculty from the CoE contended their A&S counterparts failed to help candidates learn how to teach the specific discipline. A&S faculty believed their courses to be ends-in-themselves in which they could focus on the beauty and rigor which is their subject. Education faculty, deeply enmeshed in the world of performance standards teacher candidates had to meet, and more troubling had to produce public school student achievement, were dissatisfied with traditional conceptions of knowledge in the arts and sciences which resulted in A&S faculty overreliance on transmission methods of instruction. Without collaboration it was often the middle grades program faculty who were expected to adapt its programs to the ideals of the “experts” from the various fields in the CoAS.

However, after a few years into the relationship we began to see this argument as one which was not going to go away and we more formally began to address the issue. The middle grades programs coordinator instituted a system of regular meetings, two per year, which brought together the faculty and not merely the chairpersons, to begin discussions of teacher candidate success. Prompted by the National Middle School Association (NMSA) standards for initial certification teacher candidates were expected to meet, these instructors of middle grades education, mathematics, biology, chemistry, physics, English, literacy, geography, and history began to have discussions about the tools of inquiry in their respective disciplines. While we were guided by the question of determining what the candidates actually needed from the courses to be effective middle level educators, our goal shifted over time to a desire to perceive

teacher preparation from the others' point of view.

Our meetings became more frequent, with more broad participation, dealing with more substantive issues, and signaled preliminary success which motivated us to seek true collaboration. Several key people, structures, and incidents emerged to play important roles in sustaining the team. The need to demonstrate proficiency on standards caused us to look at student work completed in the CoE as well as in A&S courses as a group to determine whether we could show student achievement. From there we worked more closely to co-design and at times co-teach content courses which technically met Board of Regents requirements but also helped our teacher candidates learn to integrate content and pedagogy. It was several years before we recognized candidates were not as aware of our collaboration and its intent as we expected so we wrote a shared statement for our syllabi which indicates why we engage in this work. Recently a group of CoE and CoAS faculty studied our practice and presented at the American Association of Colleges of Teacher Education (AACTE) conference detailing the unique attributes of this partnership. As more evidence of a strong collaboration, this year we came to see instructors could use more direct feedback from their students and so we brought articulate teacher candidates to the final meeting of the 2010 academic year to share their thoughts as to the success of the curriculum and the instruction within the courses. As our relationship has evolved, our collaboration has become genuine and effective, no longer driven by an external mandate. What are the elements which have led to this successful collaboration?

Elements of collaboration

As time has passed we have recognized we have an unusually strong joint venture and have analyzed how it came to be and why it continues. One of the things we did correctly from the beginning was to establish meeting times throughout the year at times most convenient for A&S faculty and began meeting at these regularly scheduled times. As an enticement and to set an inviting tone for the meetings, CoE faculty provided a potluck luncheon twice per year. We have also created a climate of respect for all involved parties. According the math educator, Janet Shiver, "While the CoE took the lead in organizing the first meetings at GCSU, it soon became clear that this was not 'their' meeting but 'our' meeting." The meetings quickly became a comfortable place for all to discuss important ideas and to work together to improve middle grades education. As we came together frequently many of our misconceptions were challenged. When you begin to work with "the other" it is more difficult to maintain distrust and prejudices. Those from A&S soon learned faculty from the middle grades program were equally concerned about the content knowledge of the future teachers while faculty from the CoE learned their counterparts "across the street" shared their desired to produce effective teachers and were willing to make changes to curriculum and instruction to realize this goal.

A third important element to our collaborative effort required involvement outside of our regularly scheduled meetings. When this began to happen, we realized the commitment of those involved was real and internally motivated. The meetings had become a great jumping off point for inspirational ideas, but it was clear these meetings would not be enough to affect long-term improvement. A concerted effort was made to

actively involve group members throughout the year in a variety of endeavors. For example, faculty from A&S were included in search committees for new middle grades education faculty while members of the middle grades program were invited across the street to help to develop innovative programs within the departments of mathematics and biology. It became second nature to value the expertise of the other and to see how we could work together. These joint ventures, which often started as one-to-one efforts, resulted in the faculty member becoming an active liaison to an entire department, consequently changing the culture in the external academic units as well. The best example of a shift in culture occurred within the Department of Mathematics. Janet Shiver wrote the following recollection of the change she witnessed within her department.

The case of collaboration with the Department of Mathematics

Changing a mathematician's view of teacher education is difficult. Mathematics faculty often questions the value of pedagogical study believing teacher preparation should focus solely on subject matter knowledge. The belief more mathematics means better mathematics teachers is often at the forefront of their arguments against teacher preparation programs. There are several factors which play into this lack of understanding and respect for education: a) their own training as researchers and not as mathematics teachers, b) the practice of high-quality teaching weighing lightly in tenure and promotion decisions within schools of Arts & Sciences, and c) the view professors of education are dispensers of suspect educational theory and weak in the subject area of mathematics. So how does one begin to challenge these perceptions and build a

collaborative unit with the College of Education? Housing mathematics educators within the Department of Mathematics made “translation” between the languages spoken in each of the colleges possible and collaboration occurred almost effortlessly.

Mathematics educators have a natural interest in both mathematics and the teaching of mathematics making them an accepted part of both the mathematics faculty and the education faculty. At GCSU the math educators easily slid into the role of advocates for the middle grades program because they shared the goal of mathematics learning. Additionally, as accepted members of the Mathematics Department, it was the math educators’ responsibility to build support for the Department’s role in the preparation of future teachers. With young and progressive faculty members as math educators this seemed to happen easily and with some unexpected bonuses.

While we had expected this developing relationship between the CoE and the mathematics department to result in better course design for teacher candidates, a more seamless curriculum in the middle grades teacher preparation program, and a greater understanding of the work occurring in the CoE, we did not anticipate the ripple which occurred throughout the Department of Mathematics.

As more mathematics faculty were exposed to and began to appreciate the pedagogical side of teaching mathematics the more they wanted to know. To explore these new ideas, they turned to the mathematics educators for guidance and information on ways to improve their own pedagogical practices. Several of the faculty began experimenting with redesigning their courses. Some introduced the use of manipulatives or hands-on activities to their mathematics courses. Others simply

questioned the value of certain topics, courses, or ideas which are currently a part of the accepted curriculum and revamped elements of the sequence. This effect in the Mathematics Department, though unexpected, has improved teaching and learning for our academic majors and created a stronger commitment to the collaboration with middle grades faculty.

At GCSU today the divide between “real” mathematicians and those who prepare future middle grades teachers has narrowed as each has come to see the perspective of the other more clearly and with more esteem as this has contributed to better prepared educators. This step of housing educators in the academic department has been a crucial one for us. While it is by no means the only organizational structure which contributed to the collaboration with the middle grades program and the CoE, it has allowed us to “cross the street” with regularity and good intentions leading to better educational outcomes for all of our students, preservice teachers, and academic majors alike.

Sustaining collaboration

GCSU, the John H. Lounsbury College of Education, and the middle grades teacher preparation program have all improved as a result of this collaboration. We have been intentional about creating it and we give thought and attention to sustaining it. It seems like happy circumstance now that we were first compelled to work together but the results have convinced us we must be deliberate about its maintenance and growth. This chapter is one component of the self-study we have undergone in order to sustain this effort and demonstrates how the concepts of middle level philosophy with a

focus on integration, teaming, and advocacy can be applied in a collaboration of higher education faculty with positive results. We feel this authentic practice of ‘crossing the street’ allows us to model for middle grades teacher candidates our expectation of them as in-service professional educators.

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