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Redesigning a Master's for Teachers Program

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Abstract

This paper describes the process that one college of education used to redesign the master's for teachers program. Post-baccalaureate programs were redesigned to incorporate requirements of No Child Left Behind, school improvement, empirical based researched practices, and student achievement. All redesigned courses reflect an increased emphasis on field experiences.

In February 2003, all private and public universities in the state of Louisiana received a mandate to redesign all master's for teachers programs. The redesign committees were to include P-12 administrators, teachers, community representatives, current teacher professionals and representatives from other colleges in the process. The redesigned post-baccalaureate education program had to: (a) be jointly developed by faculty within the College of Education, College of Arts/Sciences/Humanities, other colleges, and K-12 schools; (b) addresses teacher and educational leader needs as they relate to Louisiana's K-12 content standards, Louisiana's Components of Effective Teaching, Standards for School Principals in Louisiana, NCATE accreditation, PRAXIS assessments, and ISLLC assessments, NCLB, and IDEA; and (c) is based upon empirical research pertaining to effective practices. Only one-third of the courses in the existing program could be used in the redesigned program. This was not a small undertaking since faculty were furiously preparing for an onsite NCATE accreditation visit during Spring 2004.

Collaboration

College of Education (COE) faculty, as well as those in other campus colleges, partner schools, and community, was actively involved in the advanced program revisions during Spring, Summer, and Fall 2003 as well as preparing for the NCATE site visit. All redesign documents were shared with the university, college, and community through electronic Blackboard. [HYPERLINK "file:///A:\\woodard\\homes\\eudora\\attach\\add%20link"](file:///A:\\woodard\\homes\\eudora\\attach\\add%20link) The Curriculum, Instruction, and Leadership department met on a monthly basis to discuss areas for change within programs. The faculty developed subcommittees to redesign or review current evaluations. The subcommittees met weekly for several months. A University Advisory Team was established to gain a university perspective. The Regional Advisory Team, composed of representatives from other colleges, partner schools, community and teacher professionals, served as the steering committee. Three face-to-face Regional Advisory Team meetings were held. All changes within programs were discussed at Regional Advisory Team forums. Program changes and minutes of committees were made available electronically on Blackboard to University Redesign Teams and the Regional Advisory Team. The use of electronic documentation as well as electronic communication broadened persons' abilities to participate with the redesign effort.

In the existing master's for teachers program, program completers received a Masters of Science in Curriculum and Instruction with cognates in adult education, early childhood, educational leadership, supervision, library science, reading, technology, and content subject areas. In the redesigned program, teachers select a program from adult education, early childhood, library science, reading, technology, subject areas: English, economics, history, mathematics, biology, chemistry, and physics. All redesigned courses reflect an increased emphasis on field experiences. Each of the redesigned master's programs requires 24 hours of Professional Core courses offered by the College of Education. All program completers of the proposed masters program will receive Teacher Leader

endorsement with the exception of reading. Having the teacher leadership courses imbedded in the Curriculum and Instruction program provides opportunities for teacher professionals to develop skills to assume leadership roles (e.g., serving as curriculum developers, employing collaborative team learning approaches, and providing collaborative teamwork between teacher and administrators) in their respective schools. Content specific courses for the subject areas will be offered by the appropriate colleges that teach the content specific courses (12 hours of content). Although some courses do not include site-based performance activities, the total program provides teacher professionals with ample opportunities to apply new knowledge through site-based experiences. Non-degree graduate teacher professionals will have the opportunity to enroll in graduate level classes to earn Continuous Learning Units.

Course sequences were identified for all programs. Each concentration sub-committee researched theorists/scholars in which to identify an empirical basis for each course. The iteration of courses indicate which standards are to be developed in depth, which are to be reviewed, and which are to be introduced for each course objective. The identification of standards resulted in a revision of objectives, proposed resources for learning, and plans for assessment and field-based experiences that enabled a more rigorous alignment of the program with the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS).

Louisiana Schools, District Accountability System (LSDAS) and Grade Level Expectations (GLE) are addressed in appropriate courses. COE faculty has been trained as Louisiana Teachers' Assistance and Assessment Program (LATAAP) evaluators. In addition, six COE faculty were trained in Southern Regional Education Board's (SREB) Educational Leadership modules.

The redesigned plan was to address the following areas (a) recruitment, (b) screening and selection for the program, (c) support for program completers, (d) redesigned plan of studies, (e) course descriptions of content specific courses, (f) description of field sites and performance activities for each course, (g) identification of field sites, (h) screening process for mentors, (i) mentor preparation for teacher professionals' evaluation and support, and (j) assessment system and program evaluation.

Recruitment

The Director of Graduate Studies and Research will be responsible for the recruitment of teacher professionals to the redesigned master's program. A website will be updated regularly to inform potential applicants about the advanced programs offered by the College of Education. Mail-outs to school districts and personal contact will be made with P-12 superintendents and personnel directors to identify outstanding individuals for the program. This recruitment plan differs from previous recruiting efforts by the personal contact with superintendents and personnel directors to identify outstanding individuals for the program rather than self-selection. Self-selection will still be permitted as this was a request of the Regional Advisory Team.

Screening and Selection for the Program

The office of Graduate Studies and Research will collect data on program applicants. A Screening and Selection Committee composed of PK-12 educators, community representatives, and university faculty will screen and analyze applicant qualifications in order to select applicants for the redesigned master's program. Each applicant must submit two letters of recommendation (superintendent, principal/another educator), a self-rated disposition evaluation, and a writing sample. Applicants for the program must meet the following college admission requirements: hold standard teaching certificate, have a minimum undergraduate GPA of 2.5 and a GRE score. Teacher professionals must maintain a 3.0 average or higher in all graduate coursework pursued.

This screening procedure differs from previous efforts by the creation of a Screening and Selection

Committee to assist in the selection of applicants for master's programs and the requirement of two letters of recommendation, the disposition evaluation, and the writing sample. Teacher professionals who do not meet all criteria can be admitted based on identified compensating strengths.

Support of Program Completers

A website will be created for program completers to visit to receive assistance on new mandates, current trends in education, as well as clarification on any areas of concern. Upon graduation, program completers will leave with at least the names and contact information of at least two mentors. Faculty expertise and their emails addresses so that program completers can seek assistance as needed. Special topics courses will be developed on an as needed basis. Professional development workshops and institutes will be provided on request of school districts or schools.

Description and Identification of Field Sites

The field and clinical experiences are designed to allow teacher professionals sequenced field activities and participation in diverse settings. The field activities provide multiple and diverse opportunities for teacher professionals to apply theory to practice and to reflect upon resulting outcomes. Through the use of an online tool, PASS-PORT, the Assessment Coordinator, Faculty Advisors, and Clinical Field Experience Director will assess teacher professionals' field-based activities and work sites. The Director of Field and Clinical Experiences serves as a liaison for the placement of teacher professionals and schedules all field experiences in partner schools in a ten district area. Sites for field-based activities and internship include public schools that are within the ten school districts that participate in a Partnership Agreement with the College of Education.

Mentors

The Director of Field and Clinical Experiences will contact superintendents/designees from local school systems to identify qualified educators to serve as mentors for masters program teacher professionals. Mentor teacher professionals will be asked to submit a vita and a letter of recommendation from the educational community. A university committee will screen and select educators to serve as mentors. Mentors will be required to meet state standards for their area of certification.

Educators identified to serve as mentors will be required to take EDCI 524 Supervision of Student Teachers (or course equivalent) in order to gain proficiency in supervising and mentoring teacher professionals. Teacher professionals will post reflections of field-based activities as part of their electronic portfolio in PASS-PORT (a web-based system that provides college of education teacher professionals, university faculty and administrative staff a tool to gather, demonstrate and evaluate the performance). A meeting with mentors and university faculty will be held at the beginning and end of each quarter to identify strengths and areas that need improvement in the mentoring process.

Assessment System and Program Evaluation

The COE Assessment System has changed over time in response to a number of internal and external factors. NCATE 2000 Unit Standards challenged the College to refine its assessment system to meet national and state teacher preparation standards. Committees were formed to address COE programs and their relation to state redesign guidelines as well as to national accreditation expectations. In 2002-2003, an assessment coordinator was named to

facilitate coordination of the overall assessment process and to manage the PASS-PORT electronic data system.

New NCATE standards and Specialized Professional Association (SPA) standards provided additional direction in the review of programs, courses, and experiences, and in design of additional performance based assessments. The COE’s conceptual framework, graphically represented as the S.T.A.R. Professional revised expected Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions (KSDs), and its new Strategic Plan were all utilized in the prior redesign initiatives. As with the teacher preparation redesign, COE faculty, as well as those in other campus colleges, partner schools, and community, were actively involved in the initial program revisions, which included focus on performance assessment plans. The masters redesign committee worked with the assessment coordinator to identify the masters for teachers’ program assessment component. All redesign documents were shared with the university, college, and community through a Redesign Blackboard site. The use of electronic documentation as well as electronic communication increased participation in the redesign effort.

Although somewhat painful, the program redesign process provided the COE with the opportunity to further examine the quality of its master’s for teachers programs. Improved data collection tools for candidate performance were created and feedback was solicited and obtained from a random sample of program completers and their employers. The COE Assessment System is designed as a comprehensive structure to measure student performance on expected KSDs, program quality, instructional quality, faculty and administrative effectiveness and efficiency, and effectiveness of other COE operations. The System consists of two major components: one focused on individual and aggregate student performance and one focusing on evaluation of other COE operations.

The Candidate Assessment component features key monitoring points (called portals) for initial programs and advanced programs both at the masters and the doctoral levels. Key portals have been identified which require the candidate to complete specified criteria prior to being admitted to the next phase of the program. These portal requirements have been aligned to the Louisiana PASS-PORT electronic portfolio system benchmarks, which are currently in their initial stages of implementation in the College, are identified in Table 1.

The Initial Program Assessment element, in addition to its baccalaureate programs, includes a non-master’s/ certification only program and a master’s/certification program. Teacher professionals in the non-master’s/certification-only programs possess a baccalaureate degree from a regionally accredited university and complete a minimum of 18 academic hours or 27 hours versus a minimum of 124 hours. A third program, the master’s plus certification differs from the Initial Teacher Preparation Baccalaureate Program. A teacher professional in the master’s plus certification program must possess a baccalaureate degree from a regionally accredited university, demonstrate competency on the Graduate Record Exam, and complete a minimum of 39 hours versus a minimum of 124 hours. Although, there are major differences among the baccalaureate, non-master’s, and master’s for teachers programs, teacher professionals are required to meet the same professional education standards and accountability measures.

Table 1 Assessment System Portals for Initial and Advanced Programs

INITIAL PROGRAM (Baccalaureate and Alternative Programs, i.e., Non-Master’s and Master of Education [M.Ed.]	MASTER’S PROGRAM	DOCTORAL PROGRAM
Portal 1 Admission to the College of Education	Portal 5 Admission to Graduate School	Portal 9 Admission to Graduate School

Portal 2 Admission to a Teaching Program	Portal 6 Admission to Masters Program	Portal 10 Admission to Doctoral Program
Portal 3 Admission to Field Experiences and Clinical Practices	Portal 7 Admission to Internship and/or Practica (if applicable)	Portal 11 Admission to Candidacy
Portal 4 Program Completion	Portal 8 Masters Program Completion	Portal 12 Doctoral Program Completion
Transition A Competence of Initial Level Graduates	Transition B Competence of Master's Level Graduates	Transition C Competence of Doctoral Level Graduates

Transition A provides quality indication of COE operations. It features the College's assurance of the competence of its program graduates is articulated in the Louisiana Quality Assurance Compact. The COE promises to assist in the mentoring and remediation of any program completer during his or her first three years of teaching. Upon the request of school or school system officials, the College will provide additional coursework, make site visits, mentor electronically, and, as necessary, provide other assistance to new teachers to further ensure their success. Teacher candidates must maintain contact with College of Education faculty and staff and must submit follow-up surveys in order to facilitate the Compact. Additionally, teacher candidates must successfully complete the Louisiana Teachers Assistance and Assessment Program. Advanced Program Assessment elements feature eight portals and two transitions very similar to those for initial programs and include programs leading to the Master of Arts (M.A.) degree in Counseling and Guidance, the Master of Science (M.S.) degree in Curriculum and Instruction, and the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) degree in Curriculum and Instruction or Educational Leadership.

For Portal 5 entry, the teacher professionals must meet the required GPA and GRE criteria to be accepted to the University Graduate School. To exit Portal 6, the candidate's GPA is reviewed again to ensure that they meet or exceed the required 3.0 GPA. Other requirements include letters of recommendation and successful completion of program coursework. Additionally, teacher professionals will be introduced to PASS-PORT where they will create their electronic portfolio, a requirement to be added in the redesigned advanced programs. Movement through Portal 7 requires teacher professionals to demonstrate a 3.0 GPA or higher on all required coursework, successful completion of clinical practice or internship, and continued refinement of a professional portfolio. In the previous masters program, program completion included having a 3.0 GPA or higher on required coursework, successful scores on comprehensive exam, and graduation, permitting movement through Portal 8. The computer-based comprehensive examination required teacher professionals to respond to performance-based questions from various program topics. Specified faculty assessed the comprehensive exams. The capstone activity of the redesigned program is an exit presentation by the program completer before a faculty committee in lieu of a comprehensive examination. Graduation from a masters program is followed by Transition B, Competence of Master's Level Graduates.

Within each of the portals, multiple assessments are completed by several faculty before program completion. Performance data are collected at each portal with self-assessments embedded. For those who do not meet the requirements at each portal, individual remediation is recommended for success. Remediation plans are developed involving the candidate, the advisor, and the Associate Deans. Moreover, when PASS-PORT is fully implemented, the remediation plans will be evident with electronic documentation of artifacts and required feedback.

Present Plan versus Redesigned Plan

The screening procedure for program admission differs from previous efforts by the creation of a Screening and Selection Committee to assist in the selection of applicants for master's programs and the requirement of two letters of recommendation, the disposition evaluation, and the writing sample. Teacher professionals who do not meet all criteria may be admitted based on identified compensating strengths. Redesigned plans of study have field

experiences embedded in every course whereas the present plans of study/courses have only limited field experiences. Another difference in the redesigned plan is that courses are tightly aligned to professional standards as compared to being loosely aligned to professional standards.

The redesigned master's programs are designed to permit certified teachers to become highly qualified as defined by the Board of Elementary and Secondary Education and to obtain a Master's Degree in Education. In addition, 12 hours in a content area could assist teacher professionals in passing the PRAXIS in order to obtain an additional area of certification. All graduate courses have been redesigned with attention to empirical-based research practices. It is anticipated that successfully completing these redesigned courses will deepen teacher professionals' knowledge on areas of certification.

The redesigned master's programs provide teacher professionals with knowledge and skills in essential areas of planning, management, instruction, curriculum, technology, professional development, and school improvement. These programs provide teacher professionals with knowledge and skills regarding the utilization of the Louisiana School and District Accountability System and Louisiana Educational Assessment Program. The program curriculum was redesigned so that the outcome would be teacher professionals' demonstration of extensive understanding of content, pedagogical and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions.

Conclusion

Numerous hours of meeting, debating, researching, writing, and editing were necessary in order to effectively redesign all masters for teachers programs. Sub-committees met for each cognate to identify content courses that would enhance the learning of teacher professionals. Electronic Blackboard was used so that all participants in the redesign process could view and critique the progress of all committees. Blackboard also allowed participants to view the final product and make revisions prior to submission.

Out-of-state expert reviewers examined the written redesigned masters for teachers program and questioned committee members using compressed video. The reviewers made suggestions for improvement. Committee members responded to the suggestions. It was a great relief in September 2004, when the College of Education received word that the redesigned master's for teachers program had gained state approval. The new program will begin implementation in June 2005. The redesigned master's degree program will enable teacher professionals to increase their content knowledge in the subjects they are expected to teach.

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