Panthers Exploring Fields of Opportunity: Providing Faculty Time and Resources to Reach out to Iowa Schools and other Educational Institutions

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Exploring Fields of Opportunity: Providing Ed Prep Faculty with Time and Resources to Visit PK-12 Partners

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UNIVERSITY OF NORTHERN IOWA
University of Northern Iowa
Cedar Falls, IA: Population 39000

- 11000 students
- 1 in 4 education majors
- 43 teaching majors, minors and endorsements
- 450+ new teachers yearly graduated
- Top 2% size-wise in the nation for graduating teachers
- 350+ school district partnerships
- Network of over 1000 mentor and cooperating teachers
- 11 in-state field experience centers, 7 US centers, 15 international centers
- 1200 field experience placements a year
Building relationships with PK-12 partners

- A blessing and curse: an excellent core of specialized field experience coordinators leaves many other faculty in the program insulated from the PK-12 connection.
- Rural nature of the state, and relatively small local population requires travel to accommodate field placements for a large teacher education program.
- Despite having graduates teaching in 332/333 (!) Iowa school districts, UNI teacher education program is especially present in only the most local school districts.
2015 Continual improvement efforts

- A number of advisory councils were held with superintendents, principals, graduates, school board members and community members
  - Common theme: UNI needs to be more connected to current initiatives in the PK-12 schools
  - Concern whether our “ivory tower” faculty really know enough about the “real world” of PK-12 schools to effectively connect theory to practice.
- Simultaneous discussions were held with university faculty about how they connect with their graduates for feedback to foster continual improvement
  - From a Teacher Ed specific perspective: If we are to build quality models and approaches for the program, we need to know what our PK-12 stakeholders are doing and what they want from us.
An influential report

- **A Million New Teachers Are Coming: Will They Be Ready To Teach (American Institutes for Research, 2015),**
  - Asks if Teacher Education faculty really know what in-service teachers need to know and are able to do.
  - This report influenced UNI faculty discussions surrounding whether our teacher education program adequately defines common knowledge and competencies for new teachers accurately.
  - Addressing this concern could come through spending more first-hand time in classrooms and schools across the state to regarding what is expected of teachers and their challenges.
Internal and external discussions prompted action to provide faculty with time and support to visit schools that are not typically visited by the teacher education program.

Faculty were encouraged to “team up and venture out” across the state to explore the innovative, diverse and exceptional projects and programs that PK-12 schools use to impact the profession.

The program was titled, Panthers (our University's mascot) Exploring Fields of Opportunity and became a reality during American Education Week in November, 2015.
Three goals: Panthers Exploring Fields

1. Learn from PK-12 professionals across the state to understand our state’s diverse contexts, including sound and innovative instructional practices or current challenges in order to improve our Educator Preparation Program.

2. Reconnect with professionals within our respective fields across the state.

3. Seek partnerships and opportunities for collaboration.
Why is this important?

- Provide more opportunities for faculty to go see the many contexts for which they are preparing teacher candidates.
- A more intimate approach to letting PK-12 schools share what they are doing that is exciting.
- Allows more PK-12 stakeholders to see faculty in schools who may not feel that the University is "in touch" with current practices in education.
- Bottom-up mechanism for policy and practice changes to our program informed by PK-12 partners.
- A means to strengthen trust and understanding with those partners.
Simple concept with the devil in the details

- The concept for this initiative was simple: go out and visit with our PK-12 partners.
  - To date, nearly 75 faculty across the University have visited 50+ schools and districts not typically visited.
- Planning and organization still required an attention to detail:
  - Support from multiple deans
  - Securing funding for travel
  - Coordinating with groups like the University public relations and alumni office
  - Ensuring fidelity of purpose across the visits.
  - Creating quality follow up meetings to disseminate what was learned
A Successful Initiative

- The initiative received broad support from our University Provost and President and was also shared with our State Board of Regents as a highlight of success.

- In debriefing sessions there was general agreement that the visits were mutually beneficial for faculty and the various hosts across the state.
  - PK-12 partners were able to share with our faculty innovative instructional practices and diverse educational contexts.
  - The initiative was so successful that it was run Fall in 2016 with similar participation.
  - Current plans are in place to run Panthers Exploring Fields of Opportunity a third time.
Planning
Initiated through COE Senate
  - Run by Senate Chair and committee
    - Notes from initial meeting (handout)
    - Follow-up meetings with committee members and reach out to participants throughout the process
    - Taking previous materials and updating them into the next year with new leadership/participants

Would not have been successful without putting someone specific “in charge”
Organization
- Electronic Sign-up form ([Google Form](#))
- Advertising Flyer Created (handout)
- Collaboration with University Relations, Alumni Association, Budget Office
  - Receiving “swag” to give out to schools
  - Various press releases from UNI including to local newspapers representing the visited school districts (Handout)
  - Information about what UNI alumni are at the visited school
  - Arrangements for travel authorization, reimbursement
- Process
  - From first to second year:
    - A new college senate chair, a new College of Education dean, a new chair of the teacher education faculty, a new education center on campus, a new position for teacher education in the provost’s office, a new president, a new budget reality...and we still got it done!
- Across the two years 75 faculty, 50 locations
Where we went
50 Visits over two years
50 Visits over two years
Outcomes
Major Accomplishments

- Strengthened School-University Partnerships
  Teachers/administrators expressed appreciation for attention given to their efforts

- Supporting efforts of teacher induction and retention
  Alumni reach out simultaneously carried out

- Aligning PK-12 Technology use with University instruction
  Strong effort from Ed Tech faculty both years on this effort

- Greater awareness of teacher shortage areas
  Faculty received first hand accounts of school needs

- Ideas for partnering with PK-12 schools...
Southeast Iowa schools wanted more involvement from UNI

- Muscatine, Burlington, Columbus Junction, Davenport...
- These schools want more field experiences and student teachers, but there is a distance and lodging barrier

Building infrastructure to allow for greater field experience placements

- Continued discussion led to potentially using Community College housing in the Southeast Iowa area to help accommodate week long field experiences and semester long student teaching
- Conversations also led to the PURPLE PANTHER BUS...
Purple Panther Bus

- Tours of primarily students and some faculty on a bus to visit Muscatine schools and then Charles City
- Expanded teacher candidates’ awareness of districts outside the Cedar Valley
- Provided students with a picture of a district compared to a one-classroom/one-school experience
Sharing our experience with others

- Debriefing meetings were held to capture the diverse kinds of visits that took place (handout)
- Shared with board of regents as a highlight of UNI activity in the state
- Multiple press releases
- Intention to submit a report of this initiative for publication
In conclusion: what two years and 50 visits gets you

The data we have collected so far (visit reports, debriefing meetings and subsequent actions taken by our program) indicate the initiative has been quite successful. It is a program we want to continue into the future.
We encourage other programs to do this

- We believe other large education preparation programs might want to emulate this initiative.
  - It has been effective not only because faculty received support and encouragement to leave their offices and be out amongst the schools, but also because of what they were able to bring back to share with others.
  - It addresses a unique problem for larger Educator Preparation Programs when not all faculty involved in the program are able to get out into schools as often as they would like.
    - Providing incentives and support for faculty to go and be in PK-12 schools is mutually beneficial for the quality of the Educator Preparation Program AND for the schools and districts that hire our candidates.
    - Interests and practices become more closely aligned as we take advantage of opportunities to dialogue with each other.

- Overcomes barrier of getting off campus
  - It’s important to do, but it’s hard do
    - Especially getting beyond the most local districts
    - Need for support: financial and leadership
How could your program do this?

- Guiding Questions—take notes, appoint a spokesperson!
  - What current leadership/organization could/would take this on?
  - How would you obtain leadership resources and support?
  - What would need to be put in place to build momentum?
  - How would you ensure useful reporting of visits back to the unit?
  - What variations would need to be made from this model to make it work in your unit?
What did you discuss?
Questions?

THANKS!

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