

# ■ Preparing rural community college professionals

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*A limited number of universities offer graduate programs that focus specifically on preparing rural community college leaders. At the same time, community colleges are facing projections of unprecedented turnover in both administrative and instructional leadership. The rural community college is a unique educational institution which faces distinct challenges in meeting its mission in regions traditionally under-served by higher education. Future leadership in the rural community college will require innovative thinking by the colleges themselves and colleges of education to prepare students who would like careers in rural institutions. The following case study suggests innovations to help colleges of education prepare leaders for rural community colleges.*

## Introduction

Researchers have identified many challenges unique to small, rural community colleges and the distinctive problems facing those who lead these institutions (Killacky, & Valadez, 1995; Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006). Community colleges are often the only institutions of higher education serving rural America, and leaders of these institutions face challenges which are not found at other two-year colleges or at universities. Leaders need preparation through programs of study that will prepare them to address the community college's special role in serving rural communities. Graduate programs in colleges of education have, however, seldom adequately prepared leaders to meet the special needs of rural service regions.

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Preparing future rural community college leaders will require colleges of education to plan for innovations in areas such as curriculum content, delivery format, and instructional methods. Without adequate planning, a college of education will, at best, provide only mediocre educational experiences for an important and growing group of potential students. Additionally, leaders of colleges of education cannot accomplish the task without the expertise of present community college leaders.

## **The opportunity**

A very limited number of universities offer successful graduate programs that focus specifically on preparing community college leaders, and enrollment in these programs has declined in recent years (Duvall, 2003). Despite the unique challenges facing rural areas and the growing enrollment in rural two-year colleges, graduate leadership programs expressly for rural community colleges are even more difficult to find. Some in higher education have become concerned that graduate leadership programs are such a low priority to universities that programs focusing on rural institutions may not survive (Evelyn 2001). The situation has developed as community colleges face

projections of unprecedented turnover in both administrative and instructional positions due to retirements:

Community colleges are facing an impending leadership crisis. College presidents, senior administrators, and faculty leaders have been retiring at an alarming rate—a trend that is expected to continue as baby boomers age. The average age of people in these positions continues to increase, and upcoming retirements in the positions are projected to be higher than normal. As a consequence, higher numbers of administrators must be trained to fill community college leadership roles. (Shults, 2001, p. 1)

Graduate education programs prepared to meet the demand and focus on the unique requirements of rural institutions can provide a needed service to rural college regions. According to Duvall (2003), colleges of education that are most successful at addressing the leadership needs of community colleges will be innovative, will challenge traditional ways of thinking, and will focus specifically on community colleges.

## **Rural community colleges and colleges of education**

The rural community college is

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indeed playing an important and expanding role in today's higher education community (Pennington & Williams, 2004). The mission associated with most rural community colleges describes the comprehensive nature of the institution (Bogart 1994):

- Open access admission,
- A comprehensive curriculum,
- A student-centered learning environment,
- A community-orientation to programming, and
- A significant role in regional economic development.

The complexity of the rural community college mission emphasizes the need for well-prepared professionals to provide both administrative and instructional leadership at the institution. Given the increasing demands in rural regions—which have been historically underserved by higher education—there should be a movement among colleges of education working closely with rural community colleges to develop quality programs that prepare leaders for these particular institutions. Graduate education for rural college leaders must be professionally valuable and personally meaningful; such criteria require a change in the attitude and philosophy of

any college of education which hopes to prepare rural community college professionals for the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

### **Rural community college challenges**

The unique nature and mission of the rural community college must be at the forefront of graduate program planning. The challenges generally involve issues related to geography, economics, finance, and politics:

- Rural community colleges are often charged with serving a relative small population located within a large geographic area.
- The distance between the college and its students is a fundamental concern that often leads to the expense of building campus-based housing or dormitories.
- Geographic isolation also poses a problem in recruiting and retaining faculty members who may not be attracted to the political and cultural values found in many rural areas (Vineyard, 1979).
- Rural community colleges are expected to provide comprehensive programming to a relatively small number of students; the inefficiencies that accompany this demand prevent institutions from taking advantage of the economies

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of scale which benefit larger institutions.

- Rural community colleges usually have a smaller, less diversified tax base to financially support the college and its mission.
- It is difficult for rural community colleges to obtain funds from outside sources because of limited resources for grant writing and grant administration (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006).
- Rural community colleges generally lack political clout within both state legislatures and higher education systems.

Many of the challenges have been present for decades (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006). The longevity of the obstacles led the college of education in the present case study to feel a special responsibility to those who will lead rural community colleges.

### **History is not a guide**

In the past, most people who wanted to become community college instructors were expected to earn a masters degree in a discipline at the university. For community colleges, hiring an individual trained in this way was—and often remains—a gamble. Some people hired from a discipline-based model

have been exceptional instructors right from the beginning of their careers; many have not (Boggs 2004). The typical model for a master's degree in a discipline requires that a person spend many hours learning discipline content but few, if any, hours learning to become a good instructor, methodologies for working with adult learners, or any fundamental understanding of the history and mission of the community college.

To develop effective instructors at the community college, many graduate credit hours should be dedicated to helping new instructors understand the diversity found among students in a typical community college classroom and the basic elements of classroom interaction. Many instructors are under-prepared to effectively teach students who are diverse in terms of age, previous educational achievement, and professional background. Unfortunately, the old model of graduate education does not provide community college instructors the knowledge, background, and skills needed for classroom success.

The requirements to become a community college administrator may create an even less traditional model for a graduate degree (Hammons & Miller 2006). In the past, potential col-

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lege leaders were often forced to choose between K-12 leadership courses or courses designed to prepare leaders for four-year higher education institutions. Neither of these options, even with one or two courses that focused on the community college, led to an understanding of the unique mission, history, or philosophy of the two-year college. The outdated model of preparation often required students to write a thesis or dissertation based on their individual understanding of the literature with little or no guidance from faculty members. Compounding the challenge for those seeking to serve rural community colleges was the absence of coursework on rural issues in higher education and a lack of discussion on the educational and economic needs of regions which generally lag far behind urban areas in terms of per capita income, employment opportunities, and educational achievement (Pennington & Williams, 2004).

The college of education that hopes to improve its preparation of rural community college leaders must begin the process with sincere, realistic, and committed planning. The first step to develop or reinvigorate programs dedicated to community college leadership is to establish—and use—an advisory committee.

Members of the committee should be experienced community college professionals: vice-presidents and deans are most familiar with the professional requirements for instructional personnel, while college presidents and vice presidents can give excellent advice about programming for administrative leadership. Recent program graduates and current students who are working at a community college should be encouraged to join the advisory committee; they can share a wealth of knowledge regarding ways to help the college of education better serve new students.

### **Preparing rural community college professionals: a case study**

One university which successfully used guidance from an advisory committee provides a case study in development of a community college leadership graduate program. At the time the advisory committee was formed, a college of education at a regional comprehensive university in North Carolina was offering Masters of Arts in Education Degrees (MAEd) in Higher Education Administration and in Higher Education Instruction. There were, however, nine community colleges within a two-hour drive of the

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university, so the presidents of these community colleges met with the university chancellor and expressed a need for graduate-level programming specific to the community college. In 1996, there was one faculty member in the program and seven students enrolled in the two master's degree programs. No students had graduated from the program during the two previous years.

The Community College Advisory Committee included three current community college presidents, two vice-presidents for instruction, one vice-president for student affairs, a former community college president, two recent program graduates, and two current graduate students. In addition to programming advice, the members of the committee gave direct information about the current and long-term employment prospects at the represented rural community colleges. Three initial suggestions were developed to revitalize the program. The Committee suggested the program focus on the needs and requirements of rural community colleges. That would provide the opportunity to fill a niche in creating a program of study that would focus on issues of significance to the rural community colleges in

the university's service region. Topics included the community college role in rural economic development, strengthening the college role as a catalyst for community development and change, and enhancing the college as a center of rural life.

The second recommendation was to change the name of the existing degree programs from higher education to community college administration and community college instruction. Focus in the program names allows potential students to understand the emphasis on the community college. As the university in the case study was moving to a clearer emphasis on community college study, other universities in the same state were moving the other direction; they were taking the words "community college" out of their degree titles to reflect a broader emphasis on "higher education." The changes at other universities helped to solidify the niche of the university in the case study as the state's only provider of graduate programming specifically for community college leaders.

The final of the three initial recommendations was to make sure established practices for adult programming were followed in all graduate programming efforts. For example, the Advisory Committee suggested

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offering courses at times and places convenient for adult learners who work at community colleges; consequently, the committee suggested looking into alternative course delivery methods. The committee members also emphasized the need for a program of study which is relevant, practical, and easily applied to the daily work of community college practitioners.

Since one of the most consistent challenges facing rural community colleges is the ability to find qualified instructors (Pennington, Williams, & Karvonen, 2006), the university created a post-master's Certificate Program in Community College Teaching in the College of Education. The certificate is offered to those with a master's degree in an academic area who want to learn more about the community college as an institution as well as some effective classroom instructional methods. The Certificate Program requires eleven graduate credit hours. Since the hours are part of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Community College Teaching, many full-time community college employees have used the certificate to continue their graduate careers by pursuing a second master's degree. Colleges of education considering new graduate programs

in community college education may want to offer the certificate program first to determine regional interest in a full master's degree in community college teaching. Such planning will help the program director and dean of the college of education work more effectively with various academic disciplines at the university to deliver graduate hours required by accrediting agencies to prepare rural community college instructors.

To prepare leaders who will face the unique challenges at rural communities, several core principles were incorporated in the curriculum. Topics emphasized throughout the program of study include economic development and the limited job opportunities in many rural areas, working with first-generation college students, issues related to the community college role in addressing rural poverty issues, the challenges of hiring qualified faculty (including adjunct faculty), funding inequities and limited grant opportunities for smaller institutions, the lack of political clout in rural areas, and the low status of small rural community colleges within the higher education community.

### **Program delivery methods**

Planning practical guidelines for working with adults is an impor-



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tant consideration in developing a community college education program. The students are typically working adults who in many cases seek a degree for advancement in employment at the rural community college. For many of these adult learners, there have been several years since they were undergraduates. Consequently, it is important to create an atmosphere in which potential students feel physically and psychologically secure. For example, advertisement and recruitment should be designed to attract those who are currently working at a community college. College of education program directors need to work with current community college leaders in promoting graduate programs to faculty and administrative staff and also help to arrange recruiting visits to the community college. One of the most effective ways to recruit new students is for university faculty members to travel to the community college to meet potential new students on site at a time that is convenient for the students. The university in the present case study found late afternoon and early evening generally successful times for recruiting visits by graduate faculty members from the college of education.

Adult students often have

unique course scheduling and sequencing requirements. It is rare to find a rural community college employee who can attend classes on a traditional university schedule or travel to a university campus. The college of education needs to initially plan for alternative scheduling which acknowledges the adult learners' family, work, and community responsibilities. Weekend intensive courses have become a particular favorite of working adult students. Meeting on Friday evenings and the following day over five or six weekends per semester per course, enables students to meet course contact hour requirements with a minimum of interruption to their schedules. Long-term planning is extremely important. Students need to know far enough in advance which weekends will be filled with course requirements to allow them to plan their personal life obligations.

Geographic convenience is also offered through teaching online and interactive television sites located at community colleges. The college of education that is able to deliver courses close to the workplace of adult learners has a true advantage in student recruitment and retention. Some combination of delivery involving face-to-face, in-



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teractive television, online, and independently-scheduled courses can be the most effective and efficient program delivery mix for the students. It does, however, require considerable advanced planning by the graduate program director and the faculty members to deliver courses in an advantageous format.

The university in the case study found that students like an assortment of delivery methods and an interactive approach. It established relationships with several community colleges that had interactive television (ITV) facilities. Selection of delivery sites for ITV courses was based upon two criteria. First, colleges were selected as “pod sites” because they were located close to, and geographically in the middle of, three or four other community colleges. The pod sites could conveniently serve graduate students who were employed at as many as five community colleges. In other instances, ITV sites served small, geographically isolated community colleges where faculty and staff could not travel to the university’s main campus or to a pod site. Programming was delivered to the isolated community college campus for a limited time, allowing graduate students to complete the entire degree program without leaving

their home campus. One of the most popular delivery methods for working adults has been “hybrid courses” which combine two or more delivery modalities: the most common combination is face-to-face paired with online instruction, but an alternative which reaches more people in rural areas is interactive television (using community college pod sites) combined with online delivery.

Technology creates concerns and opportunities for rural community colleges (Pennington, Williams & Karvonen, 2006), and graduate programming must acknowledge its important role. Rural community college leaders recognize the potential of technology to help with administrative processes and instruction for a geographically dispersed population. Yet, concerns are raised over the ability of rural community colleges to hire and train faculty to use the distance learning technology available. To meet such concerns, the graduate program requires students to take courses using at least a hybrid format. It also advises potential community college instructors in the program to take fully online courses to become familiar with the challenges facing their students who take distance learning courses.

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## Potential Challenges

One of the most significant dilemmas faced by a college of education in developing a graduate degree program is that rural community colleges are not fully understood by most university administrators and faculty members. Support for the potential community college graduate program must come in general terms from the entire university administration and specifically from the dean of the college of education. Part of administrative support means the community college graduate programs must be accepted as integral to the mission and philosophy of the college of education. Even if, as is often the case, the college of education has a primary focus on secondary education, it is critical that courses focused specifically on the rural community college be developed. So-called "mixed programs" which integrate community college courses into a secondary education curriculum do not benefit community college graduate students. Significant differences exist in the mission, role, and philosophy of the community college from the objectives in other secondary education.

Another potential concern is the appropriate faculty mix in the college of education's com-

munity college leadership program. By hiring faculty members with a strong combination of professional experiences and educational background (e.g., community college leadership, adult education, etc.), the college of education can create a rigorous, effective program of study. Additionally, the graduate program director should be seen by rural community college leaders as a practical instructor, responsive advisor, and student mentor who understands and employs adult learning concepts. The program director must believe in the mission of the community college and be acknowledged to have the best interest of the program students and the community colleges they work for as a foremost priority.

Using a variety of part-time faculty in the college of education helps build a strong program which can address the challenges of preparing leaders for the rural community college. Part-time faculty appointments can take many forms: (1) short-term appointments, (2) visiting scholars, (3) adjunct instructors with practical community college administrative experience, and (4) adjunct instructors with professional experience in law, finance, politics, government, and community relations. Ap-

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appropriate and professional part-time faculty can add to the legitimacy of any graduate program, particularly for specialized courses in rural community college finance, education law, and rural community development.

### **Conclusion: key lessons**

1. Community colleges can influence programming and curriculum development at a university college of education. The task begins with “leader-to-leader” conversations: individual or group conversations between community college leaders and the dean of the college of education. Rural community college presidents need to communicate with universities about their institutions’ requirements and how colleges of education can help to meet those needs. Deans and other university leaders must be open and responsive in trying to meet their requests.
2. Once curriculum development begins at the college of education, community college leaders can volunteer to serve on the program advisory committee. No other entity determines the direction of the community college leadership graduate program as much as an advisory committee comprised of current and recently-retired community college professionals as well as current students and recent program graduates.
3. The dean of the college of education must understand the role of the rural community college. Advisory board members must meet with the dean, program directors, and faculty members to be sure the program curriculum continuously evolves to address the changing demands of rural community colleges.
4. Adult friendly course delivery and convenient time requirements must be established which are specifically designed for those working at rural community colleges. Hybrid courses, involving a combination of delivery modalities and interactive instruction, are often most effective for students who are community college practitioners.
5. The program of study must be seen as rigorous, practical, and relevant. Admission standards must be strictly maintained, internship and practicum experiences must lead to valuable and functional experience, and high standards and high expectations must permeate the program.
6. Faculty members and program leaders must keep current on issues facing community colleges and maintain a strong record of research, publication, and presentations on topics related to the community college.
7. Though “word-of-mouth advertising” among graduate students at their college can make or break a community college leadership program, a systematic student recruitment program is required

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for program success. By working with community college leaders, university faculty can make recruiting visits to community college campuses, speaking directly to potential students about the likely benefits of pursuing graduate education in community college leadership.

8. Graduate colleges of education and community colleges need to work together, focusing on shared characteristics rather than the particular aspects that differentiate them from one another. Collaboration often begins with faculty from the college of education providing professional development workshops and in-service training on community college campuses. Often the workshops are targeted for specific groups, such as adjunct faculty (Williams & Pennington, 2002).

As a result of implementing the plan devised by its advisory board in 1996, the program in the case study has had remarkable success. During the 2006 spring semester, over 75 students were enrolled in the two master's degree programs, and more than 24 students graduated in the past year. In addition, there were 28 students enrolled in the university's new Doctor of Education Program (Ed.D.) in Community College Leadership. The first doctoral students will graduate in Spring 2007. There are now four full-time university faculty members dedicated to the community college leadership programs as well as several adjunct faculty instructors who work in leadership positions at area community colleges.

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