

## Characteristics of Effective Teacher-Preparation Programs for English Language Arts

### Yearlong Field Experiences in a Major State University

*Megastate University is its state's flagship institution. It graduates as many as 125 beginning English teachers each year, and it enjoys a national reputation for doctoral programs in English education.*

*As a result of an agreement between Megastate and three school systems serving small towns and the countryside, a group of thirty preservice English teachers spends a full year of field-based studies culminating in fifteen weeks of student teaching. They are taught by two full-time university faculty, one of whom is a gifted tenth-grade English teacher with a three-year appointment to Megastate's College of Education faculty.*

### A New Sequence of Methods Courses

*Amos College, which graduates approximately fifty new English teachers each year, is an "up and coming" institution in a major metropolitan area. It has used new faculty to reconceive and revitalize its vision of how to prepare effective teachers of adolescents.*

*Dissatisfaction with the prior English education program at Amos stimulated eighteen months of collaborative planning between the faculty of the education and English departments. A new program has been in place for a year, in which English faculty assume primary responsibility for teaching a sequence of methods courses in language, literature, and composition. They participate extensively in evaluating student teachers.*

### **Quantity, Quality, and Diversity of Pre-Student Teaching Field Experiences**

*Lindsay State, a commuter institution serving many first-generation college and nontraditional students, graduates between twenty and thirty beginning English teachers annually. As many as half of Lindsay State's English education majors, already hold B.A. degrees in English or a related field and complete its English education curriculum on a postbaccalaureate basis.*

*At Lindsay State, a sequence of highly varied field experiences begins in the sophomore year. Before student teaching, preservice English teachers observe or serve as teaching assistants for no fewer than 125 hours in classrooms of English teachers, most of whom have been recommended or selected by the program director.*

### **Aligning Teacher Education Practice with State Reading and Writing Standards**

*Boswell University, founded as a normal school, evolved by the 1920s into its state's best-known teachers' college, and became a multipurpose regional university thirty years ago. It graduates as many as 100 beginning English teachers annually.*

*As one dimension of overall educational restructuring, the state in which Boswell is located adopted standards for grades 7–12 English classrooms, so Boswell faculty determined that these standards should provide a rationale for restructuring methods courses. Because all teachers in the state will soon be expected to "align curriculum, instruction, and assessment" in light of new standards, Boswell students center their studies on standards, on instruction which is standards based, and on assessment practices designed to help students display what they know and can do.*

Megastate University, Amos College, Lindsay State, and Boswell University are fictional schools, but the vignettes are based on real teacher-preparation programs. We offer these thumbnail sketches of promising or exemplary practices so that other institutions may reflect on, study, or adapt these models for their own college or university. Through the sketches, we want to make clear that many kinds of institutions—those with national reputations and those that are relatively unknown; those serving students who are eighteen to twenty-three years old as well as those with a high proportion of older, nontraditional students; private and public institutions; urban and rural; small private colleges as well as very large universities—can and should aspire to meet these *Guidelines*.

We address this chapter to our colleagues who wish to evaluate existing English teacher-preparation programs, to those who seek ways to improve their programs, and to those charged with designing new curricula for beginning English language arts teachers. This section of the *Guidelines* will also be helpful to those seeking national accreditation of their English language arts programs and to leaders charged with preparing curriculum folios for review by NCTE and for accreditation by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE).

We believe that a strong teacher-preparation program is the product of vision, energy, and sound theory; its faculty includes thoughtful, well-informed educators who continually seek to review and improve the program, finding ways to make it even better. We further believe that these *Guidelines* will help inform the vision of what good English teacher

education is all about, and will provide touchstones for department and colleges of education leaders who must make decisions about teacher-preparation curricula.

## **DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE PROGRAMS FROM THE 1986 GUIDELINES**

The 1986 *Guidelines* delineated three dimensions that characterized successful preparation programs for teachers of the English language arts: “[They must] provide prospective teachers with models of effective teaching, . . . encourage prospective teachers to analyze the nature of effective teaching, . . . and place prospective teachers in schools where they can observe and practice various aspects of effective teaching” (p. 17). Though numerous changes have shaped educational practice in the past ten years, the qualities of sound preparation programs still include these dimensions. Therefore, we use them to explore the vignettes that open this section. These sketches illustrate that there are many paths to follow in developing preparation programs that meet the guidelines on a point-by-point basis, and that work well in a larger, holistic sense.

Megastate University, through its yearlong professional studies/student-teaching program, attends to each dimension called for in the 1986 *Guidelines*. It selects mentor (cooperating) teachers carefully, and, through a grant program, compensates them fairly for in-depth summer training. The program builds in multiple opportunities for analysis of teaching and it provides students with an enviable sequence of opportunities to both observe and practice their craft.

A recent Megastate graduate observes, “I met my mentor teacher for the first time in July. Through yearlong contact with my mentor, and beginning in September, with the juniors my mentor and I taught last year, I feel ready now—truly ready—for being the kind of English teacher kids need and the kind of teacher I want to be.”

Amos College, dissatisfied with the apparent gap between teacher educators and professors of literature, language, and composition, decided to give its English faculty a high level of ownership for teacher preparation. Through their school-based experiences and interactions with faculty in the School of Education, English department faculty have refined their own knowledge of skillful teaching of the English language arts. In turn, this knowledge informs and shapes the content of methods courses in literature, language, and composition. As a result, English professors at Amos are increasingly seen as models of effective teaching.

A linguistics professor at Amos comments, “For a number of years, we felt cut off from what the people in teacher education were doing—or maybe ‘oblivious’ describes things better. Their students took our classes—some were great, some were marginal—but we were unaware of what they, as prospective teachers of English, did beyond that or how they did it. That’s all changed now; two colleagues and I planned the new English Education Pedagogy Core, and, along with a full-time field supervisor, we get to see how student teachers put what they learned on campus to the test in the real world.”

Lindsay State, a small, centrally located teacher education institution in a community of close to 200,000, has taken advantage of its size to provide an array of superior pre-

student teaching field experiences. Each Lindsay student works with two or more cooperating teachers (many of whom are Lindsay State graduates themselves) who provide strong models of effective professional practice. Further, students are given diverse opportunities to build their understanding of learners and learning; for example, they may work with middle-class seventh or eighth graders in one field experience and urban, culturally diverse adolescents during student teaching.

As Lindsay State's English education program director explains, "Our students need the broader view, need to see that good English teaching may occur in any classroom, so we make sure they have a chance to work with younger kids in a middle school, with nominally at-risk kids in either a rural or inner-city school, with the 'brightest and the best'—you name it. They may be reluctant at first, but they return to campus with comments like, 'Hey, this wasn't so bad! Maybe I could get interested in working with the junior high set after all. They're so energetic!'"

Boswell University capitalized on its state's reform movement by participating in it. By emphasizing standards-based teaching—that is, by teaching preservice teachers how to develop lessons and instructional units that are aligned to curriculum standards—Boswell makes sure that its graduates will be among those teachers in the state who accept as a matter of course the alignment of goals, teaching practice, and assessment strategies. In this fashion, Boswell students "analyze the nature of effective teaching" while participating in the systemic reform of educational practice.

A Boswell methods professor observes, "This is dramatically different from the teach-test-reteach by which many of [the students] learned." It is also dramatically different in the sense that only rarely are state departments of education, local systems, and teacher-preparation colleges in step with one another. This professor points out that cooperating teachers are, in general, unfamiliar with standards-based teaching; but through Boswell's program, teacher educators, practicing teachers, and preservice teachers collaborate in developing a realistic understanding of how restructured English language arts teaching can work.

## **TWO NEW DIMENSIONS OF EFFECTIVE PREPARATION PROGRAMS: LINKING TEACHER EDUCATION, ENGLISH, AND PRACTITIONERS**

Successful English language arts preparation programs are frequently linked closely to one or more larger entities in English or education departments. Recognizing the increasing complexity of teacher preparation today, English teacher educators rely less often than in the past on a sequence of English classes, a catch-all methods course, and student teaching to produce well-prepared beginning English teachers. Rather, they form productive partnerships with language and literature faculty, with secondary curriculum specialists, and with professors of learning and human development to enhance programs that otherwise would be strong as much by happenstance as by design.

Amos College, for example, recognized that English faculty had to play a central role in teacher education, and Lindsay State's field-based secondary block program is a fusion of general secondary curriculum studies and English methods. Its secondary curriculum course

reinforces developing knowledge of such areas as curriculum restructuring, untracking, technology, and multicultural education.

The second new dimension that the 1996 *Guidelines* identify for effective teacher-preparation programs is providing opportunities for prospective teachers of English to construct their own unique versions of the beginning "English language arts teacher." Increasingly, well-informed teacher educators recognize that when we do our jobs well, students who complete our programs are makers of their own teacher selves, not merely the human products of our lectures or unit requirements or portfolios. Programs that recognize—we might even say *salute*—this principle are characterized by humility on the one hand, and, on the other, by pride and respect for each student's authority over his or her own learning. These programs also do not attempt too much all at once, and they recognize that beginning teachers continue to develop their abilities and insights regarding effective professional practice.

Megastate University's program of extensive field-based studies illustrates this point. Through these experiences, preservice English teachers may test, reconsider, and refine what they "know" of skillful teaching in an environment of real teachers, real students, and real schools. And Lindsay State students, through courses rich in collaboration and well-conceived projects later used in student teaching, are, in the words of its *English Education Student Handbook*, encouraged to "make their own teacher."

## REVIEWING TEACHER-PREPARATION PROGRAMS: THE NCTE-NCATE CONNECTION

In *How English Teachers Get Taught* (published by NCTE in 1995), Peter Smagorinsky and Melissa Whiting analyzed eighty-one syllabi for undergraduate English methods courses and found that the 1986 *Guidelines* "permeated, in one way or another, most of the syllabi" (p. 101). Institutions seeking accreditation from NCATE (National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education) are given the opportunity to have their English teacher-preparation programs reviewed by NCTE. (For a complete description of the connection between NCTE and NCATE, see the *Handbook for Preparing the NCTE/NCATE Folio in English Language Arts*, published by NCTE.)

Since 1988, teams of NCTE members have evaluated many English education curriculum folios prepared by American colleges and universities. Folio reviewers have found many programs in compliance with the NCTE *Guidelines* on their first submission; many others have, on a second or third submission, been found in compliance with those guidelines. Through the folio review process, some major universities have discovered that in order to meet the profession's current expectations for teachers of English language arts, changes must be made, new courses designed, and ways found to offer substantive laboratory and clinical experiences at the pre-student teaching level. Already folio reviewers report that courses addressing adolescent literature, multicultural literature, literature by women, nonprint media study, and composition methods—all areas emphasized both in the 1986 and now in the 1996 *Guidelines*—are far more likely to be required of prospective teachers of the English language arts than they were in the mid-1980s. Folio reviewers have also found numerous small institutions (those serving as few as a thousand students and with as

few as three or four English education graduates annually) that have been remarkably resourceful in finding ways to implement program components which meet the criteria set forth in the *Guidelines*.

We believe that structuring teacher-preparation programs in accordance with the principles and objectives contained in these *Guidelines* will improve instruction for English education majors, and ultimately, for the students those preservice instructors will teach.