



Roads Less Travelled

Karen Wixson



My life and career can be characterized as a series of roads less travelled. I began my academic journey as a woman with family responsibilities at a time when the academy was largely dominated by men and women were expected to know their place. I pursued service-oriented scholarship in an environment that favored more basic research. I was unexpectedly thrust into the policy arena as a result of my scholarly pursuits. I became a dean when I had never aspired to this type of leadership. The following describes my journey on these roads and the lessons I learned along the way.

Early Years: Beating the Odds

I am the oldest (naturally) of three girls born to professional, classical, musicians. Although I didn't get the musical gene, I did end up at the University of Michigan for most of my career, which is where my parents met and married. I was born in California but moved to Long Island when I was in the sixth grade—big change! Skip to college in 1965 at the University of Wisconsin (UW). Hard to believe, but I remember debating with my roommate about whether we dared wear slacks instead of skirts to class. At the end of my sophomore year, I dropped out, married and had a child. When the marriage failed, I picked up my 18-month-old son and returned to Madison to finish my undergraduate degree. In the two years since I had left, much had changed. There were co-ed dorms, no curfews, and no dress code. My age peers were busy protesting the war in Vietnam while I was worried about daycare. It was much less common to be a single parent in those days than it is now, especially one who needed assistance to complete a bachelor's degree. I recall one of my male professors asking me when I was going to stay home and take care of my child! Many policies and procedures

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discriminated against women in my situation—a theme that persisted in my life for many years.

I completed my degree in behavioral disabilities at UW in 1972, remarried, and took a special education teaching position in upstate New York. I recall hearing other teachers making assumptions about their students' behavior and performance in relation to their home situations and remember thinking, "They're talking about me, and the assumptions they're making don't apply to me, so they probably don't apply to many of these parents and students either." While teaching, I completed a master's in special education at SUNY-Binghamton and had my second child. Not making assumptions about people based on limited knowledge of their situations is one of the lessons I learned during this period of my life. I also learned that I was a strong, resilient person.

Doctoral Studies: Learning to Live and Work Outside the Box

After several years of teaching and a master's in special education, I entered a doctoral program in reading education at Syracuse University (SU). My background in special education gave me a strong foundation in areas such as child development, individual differences, task analysis, and behavior management but my knowledge of reading was seriously lacking. To address this gap, I completed a master's in reading along the way to my doctorate. Drawing on my special ed background, I worked closely with the Syracuse Reading

Clinic throughout my program, which meant a heavy emphasis on diagnosis and remediation of students with reading difficulties. In pursuing this area of interest, I came to see as essential the knowledge gained from my background in both special education and reading.

During my doctoral studies, I was primarily interested in problems of reading comprehension at the elementary level. Unfortunately, this was not an area of interest among the reading faculty at SU at the time. However, my advisor, Diane Sawyer, supported my interest and helped me access mentorship outside SU. Her willingness to do this is something I attempted to emulate later in my career as a doctoral advisor. I was supported in my interests through attendance at relevant conferences where I met and learned from faculty affiliated with the Center for the Study of Reading at the University of Illinois, most notably P. David Pearson. David also introduced me to other doctoral students with similar research interests including Taffy Raphael and Kathy Au who became life-long friends and collaborators. In addition, two other SU doctoral students and I were able to work with Rob Tierney, who was at the University of Arizona at the time, on our dissertations. Not only did Diane help me find mentors outside SU, she also encouraged me to study across departments and disciplines. Through courses in psychology and communicative disorders, I became excited about how constructivist thinking was manifest in areas other than reading. However, others in the Reading Department discouraged me from going outside the department. I think this was the beginning of my understanding of the impact of highly departmentalized structures in higher education.

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program, there was still a strong message that we were to behave like the guys—i.e., stay focused and don't let anything like family responsibilities get in your way. I embraced this message and took it with me as I began my academic career. It was only much later that I began to question the wisdom of this and to believe that some of my experience as a woman, wife, and mother added a positive dimension to what I could bring to leadership. Thankfully, much has changed since those days for both men and women.

Early Years at UM: Finding My Way

I completed my PhD in 1980 and took a position as an assistant professor in the School of Education (SOE) at the University of Michigan (UM). When I arrived at UM, there were about 110 faculty and many department-like programs in the SOE. The reading program was run jointly between the Educational Psychology and the Curriculum and Instruction programs. At the time, the country was experiencing an oil crisis that had a major impact on the state of Michigan. The state cut the UM budget by some 20 million dollars, and the University decided to absorb this cut by eliminating or downsizing substantially what it considered to be its “weaker” units, including the School of Education. It was widely believed that the University wanted to close the SOE but that it proved to be too unpopular to do so. In the end, the SOE budget was cut by 40%. What's more, all of the departments, courses and faculty in the SOE were “eliminated” with the

intent that the SOE would rebuild itself from the ground up with fewer programs and faculty. The rebuilding of the SOE focused on three areas, higher education, teaching and learning, and policy and leadership. Faculty were invited to re/apply for their positions. Also during this time, the Graduate School of the University determined that the SOE was not sufficiently research oriented to continue admissions to PhD programs and restricted admissions to the EdD. By the mid-1980s, the faculty had been reduced in numbers to about 35.

During my first month at UM, the chair of the reading area took me to lunch and said, “Well, it's all yours”—meaning the reading program. When I protested that this probably wasn't in anyone's best interest, I was told that if I didn't assume the responsibility, a faculty member from Social Studies would lead the program. At this time there were very few tenure-track or tenured female faculty. I watched those who did go up for tenure fail to achieve it at least, in part, because of their heavy administrative and supervisory responsibilities. Despite this, I accepted the chair position, but indicated that I wouldn't be doing much more than caretaking. A year after I started at UM, a male with a comparable CV to mine was hired at a salary that was 20% greater than mine. When I inquired about this, I was told “He has a family.” Of course, I did also. At the time, as an untenured assistant professor, I decided that it wasn't prudent to pursue this grievance and it wasn't until years later when I

received an offer from another institution at a higher salary that I finally achieved salary equity with my male colleagues with similar experience and rank. I offer this description of the situation at UM to provide context for the times in which I “came up.” Regardless, I was able to publish my research in top tier journals and was granted promotion and tenure in 1985, “on schedule.” The experiences I describe here and below definitely contributed to my thinking when I



became an administrator responsible for organizational and personnel decisions.

I had very few colleagues in my early years at UM either those with complementary research interests or at the same stage of their academic careers. An exception was Scott Paris who had a joint appointment between Psychology and Education Departments and was an early collaborator. Once again, I looked outside the SOE and UM for colleagues both to help advance my work and to advise me on a path toward tenure. One such colleague was Taffy Raphael who was at Michigan State at the time. Together, we convened a group we called the Midwest Reading Research Circle, which included, in addition to Taffy and me, Scott Paris, Gerry Duffy, Laura Roehler, and Keith Stanovich. We met regularly and participants took turns presenting work in progress and soliciting advice from the group.

During this time I also developed a collaborative relationship with Marge Lipson around our shared interest in “diagnosis and remediation.” Marge was a recent UM grad working at Eastern Michigan University and subsequently at the University of Vermont. Marge and I collaborated on a literature review published in the *Review of Educational Research* (RER) and a chapter for the *Handbook of Reading Research* that described what we called an “interactive approach to reading (dis)ability.” This approach promoted an educational perspective on reading ability and disability that contrasted with the prevailing deficit approach derived from a medical model. These publications served as the basis for our diagnosis and remediation textbook, published in five editions (no two alike I might add), between 1991 and 2013. Also during this time, I was invited to join the author team of a major publisher’s basal (core) reading program, which was the beginning of my long association with basal reading programs. This was an activity that wasn’t always looked on favorably by my academic colleagues. However, I saw this work as an opportunity to influence reading

instruction in positive ways for large numbers of teachers and schools, which is one of the reasons I pursued a doctorate in the first place.

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Commitment to Service: Making It Count

Around 1983 I was asked to participate in a meeting with the Michigan Reading Association and the Michigan Department of Education to discuss the state’s “definition of reading.” I did not intend for this to be a long-term relationship. However, the information I shared about current research on reading generated excitement among the practitioners and state personnel for moving toward a more constructivist approach to reading and I was “hooked.” At the time, the willingness of these folks to pursue a different way of thinking about reading didn’t seem so remarkable to me. In retrospect, it was nothing short of amazing that they would put their faith in this unknown, young person asking them to change their way of thinking and to promote this change across the state. I was strongly advised by many not to get involved in this work, because it would be a distraction from my research. However, it was very clear to me that this work of translating current research into practice had the potential to positively impact more educators and their students than any of the research I was pursuing at the time. And, as noted previously, that’s why I had pursued a PhD in the first place. So, I determined to “make it count.”

The relationship with the Michigan Reading Association and the Michigan Department of Education lasted well over a decade. It evolved through numerous phases from promoting a “new” definition

of reading for Michigan, to revising the state reading tests, to developing integrated English language arts (ELA) standards. All of these activities were accompanied by a great deal of professional development around the state. There were many collaborators throughout these efforts, but those I worked with most closely included Elaine Weber, Ed Roeber, and Sheila Potter from the Michigan Department of Education; Charlie Peters, a curriculum specialist from a large intermediate school district; Laura Roop, also a curriculum specialist at the time, and many leaders from the Michigan Reading Association. One of the first things we did was to promote a “new” definition of reading for the state of Michigan through a publication in the *Michigan Reading Journal* in 1984. This article covered much of the same research presented in the groundbreaking publication *Becoming a Nation of Readers* published by the National Academy of Education, NIE and the Center for the Study of Reading in 1985.

Based on the conceptualization of reading described in the 1984 article, work started on revamping the state’s Michigan Education Assessment Program’s (MEAP) reading assessments. As we began this work, another collaboration was formed with researchers at the Center for the Study of Reading, notably P. David Pearson and Sheila Valencia, who were working on a similar project for the state of Illinois. Among the innovations in the newly designed Michigan and Illinois reading assessments were the use of full-length, naturally occurring texts representative of what students were likely to encounter in schools at the time. This was a dramatic change from the short paragraphs assiduously crafted by test developers that had prevailed in reading assessments since they were first developed. In addition, these assessments introduced measures of background knowledge, metacognitive knowledge, and student attitudes, interest, and effort. As with my work on the “definition” of reading, the collaboration with the Michigan Reading Association and

Reading Redefined: A Michigan Reading Association Position Paper¹

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— Nancy Seminoff, President (1983-84)

INTRODUCTION

Students lack of critical reading skill is one of the most frequently commented upon problems in education today. Consistent with its tradition as a leader in the field of reading education, the State of Michigan is taking positive steps to deal with this problem. Recognizing the complex nature of the problem, the state has initiated a comprehensive evaluation of current policies in light of recent theory and research in reading and reading instruction.

This paper has been prepared by the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) to provide information on the new definition of reading that has resulted from the first step of this evaluative process. This definition was approved by the governing body of MRA on October 29, 1983 and will soon be brought before the State Board of Education for its approval. This new definition has far reaching implications for every area of educational practice including policy making, curriculum development, local and state assessment, instructional methods and materials, and teacher training. Therefore, it is essential that educators at every level of involvement including state department personnel, school board members, superintendents, curriculum coordinators, principals, teachers, and teacher educators, begin to consider the impact this definition will have on future educational policies and procedures. The intent of this paper is to provide an overview of the definition, its back-

ground, rationale and assumptions, and to consider generally its implications in four areas — professional development, evaluation, instruction, and policy making.

Background and Rationale

During 1982-83 the Michigan Department of Education (MDE) asked the Michigan Reading Association (MRA) to undertake an examination of the state performance objectives for reading as the starting point for the revision of the current state assessment test. The initial step in this process was a consideration of the present definition of reading in light of recent theory and research in the area of reading. The present definition clearly recognizes comprehension as the ultimate goal of reading, as can be seen from the excerpt below.

The Department’s definition of reading is based upon the assumption that the only legitimate, final outcome of reading instruction is comprehension. That is, although certain enabling word attack skills may be related to comprehension skills, mastery of these skills, in and of themselves and in the absence of comprehension is not a sufficient terminal objective for reading instruction.

In many respects this statement still holds true today. However, in 1977 when the present definition was adopted, our understanding of reading in general and comprehension in particular was more limited than it is today. At that time reading was conceptualized as a series of skills that were viewed as sequential

and hierarchical (e.g., literal, inferential, and applied comprehension). Consequently, the objectives and the reading tests were aimed at proficiency in component skill areas such as contextual analysis, dictionary usage, literal and inferential comprehension. While this view of reading was appropriate for that time, it no longer adequately reflects our knowledge of reading.

In the six years since the present definition was adopted significant advances in fields such as anthropology, cognitive psychology, education, linguistics, and sociology have made it possible to broaden our view of reading. Recent research holds that reading is a dynamic process that involves the reader’s ability to construct meaning through the interaction between information suggested by the written language and the reader’s existing knowledge. In other words the reader is an active participant in the process. This interactive dimension focuses on how the reader derives meaning from print; what the reader brings to the reading situation in terms of experience, knowledge, skills and ability; how the information is presented in written text; and what effects context has on reading. As a result, difficulty is no longer viewed as an absolute property of a particular reading skill or task, but rather as a relative property of the interaction among specific reader, text, and instructional factors.

Given this theoretical focus, the new definition must respond to factors such as how one’s prior knowledge influences comprehension, how one structures that

the Michigan Department of Education provided the means to involve many practitioners from across the state in reviewing potential texts for the assessment and assisting with item development.

As a step toward “making it count,” my collaborators and I published articles describing our efforts to develop reading assessments consistent with current research including a 1987 *Educational Psychologist* article that lays out the Michigan assessment design in ways that are not unlike what some are writing about in the second decade of the 21st century. Also in 1987, Charlie Peters and I were awarded the AERA Professional Service Award for our work on translating current research into practice.

I was strongly advised by many not to get involved in this work, because it would be a distraction from my research. However, it was very clear to me that this work of translating current research into practice had the potential to positively impact more educators and their students than any of the research I was pursuing at the time.

The work we were doing on Michigan and Illinois reading assessments also attracted the attention of the people at Educational Testing Service (ETS) working on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in reading. We were invited to share some of what we had learned with those who were then responsible for developing the “objectives” and the assessment itself. Starting in 1992, NAEP “frameworks” were developed by contractors other than ETS, and it’s clear that the 1992 NAEP reading framework was heavily influenced by our earlier work in Michigan and Illinois.

In the early 1990s the state standards movement took hold nationally and in 1993, the US Department of Education awarded the Michigan Department of Education a \$1.2M contract to develop the Michigan English Language Arts Framework (i.e., the MELAF project). The majority of these funds were given to UM in a subcontract and I was the PI. This was an ambitious project that brought together individuals from the reading, writing, and speech communities to develop and pilot integrated ELA standards. This may seem logical to many, but these professional communities typically don’t work together having evolved from different disciplines and epistemologies, which makes consensus among them difficult to achieve.

The MELAF project was struggling to reach consensus in 1994 when the state elected more conservative legislators and State Board of Education members. These changes created even more difficulty for the project and occasioned my first serious encounter with the culture wars in reading. There was a campaign by conservative members of the legislature and state board of education to alter the direction of the MELAF framework and to remove UM as the subcontractor. The Family Forum and Phyllis Schlafly even got involved sending materials for people to use in public hearings that called into question the foundation and content of the proposed standards. I entered the conversation with

those who opposed the direction we were taking with the standards. I firmly believed that we could find some common ground that would help us move forward. However, I soon learned that there is little basis for agreement when belief systems are so diametrically opposed.

The attack on the MELAF work served to bring together the various ELA communities to arrive at consensus on the standards. Long story short, Michigan is a local control state and the educators in the state, having been informed by extensive professional development, rallied behind the MELAF work. A toned-down version of the standards was eventually approved by the State Board of Education.

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The MELAF project envisioned standards-based reform as a professional development opportunity. As such four districts representative of the range of districts in Michigan were selected as “demonstration” sites for standards driven curriculum and instruction. I learned a great deal from working on the design and implementation of the professional development for these districts with collaborators who had extensive National Writing Project experience. I came to realize that my approach was too top down. What was needed was an approach that was more sensitive to the contexts and needs of the individuals and districts we were working with. I learned that this is essential to success in designing professional development if it is to be accessible, relevant, and likely to move those involved forward. This is a lesson that has had applicability far beyond the professional development work in this project. I have re-learned it multiple times.

My colleagues – notably David Pearson, Sheila Valencia, Sheila Potter, Charlie Peters, and Ed Roeber and I wrote about our experiences with reform and innovation in reading curriculum, instruction, and assessment in journal articles and in three Handbook chapters including another edition of the Handbook of Reading Research. Largely as a result of this work, I was promoted to full professor in 1991. Perhaps my story can serve as an example of how it is possible to pursue “service-oriented” activities and make them count not only to the field but also to the academy.

UM Deanship: Learning to Lead from “In Front”

Returning to the situation of the UM SOE, after the budget reduction and downsizing, a national search was conducted for a dean who would be charged with rebuilding SOE into a research-intensive school of education. Cecil Miskel was hired in 1988 to fulfill that roll and was highly successful at accomplishing this goal. I was elected to the UM Graduate School Executive Board in 1991 and made it my mission to see that admissions to the PhD were reinstated for the UM SOE. I worked together with others in SOE, notably Jan Lawrence, who had a long history with SOE, and this goal was accomplished before the end of my term on the Board in 1994. Also at this time—surprise—I had my third child!

A major turning point for the UM SOE in reinventing itself was recruiting a group of leading education scholars and researchers in the early 1990s. This group of faculty was instrumental in helping UM become one of a small number of institutions selected by the Spencer Foundation to participate in a new doctoral studies initiative that included funds for pre-doctoral fellowships. In 1996, I was appointed Associate Dean for Graduate Studies. In this role I continued to “lead from behind” as I had since joining the SOE in 1980. However, none of my

previous leadership roles prepared me for becoming Interim Dean in 1998 when Cecil stepped down and the national search failed. I had never aspired to a deanship. It was a very steep learning curve for me to learn how to lead from in front. To be honest, I did not become completely comfortable in this role until my last year as dean, 2004-5.

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Among the issues I wanted to address as dean were the need for greater inclusivity and support for faculty--especially untenured faculty, increasing attention to issues of diversity, developing greater consistency among teacher ed programs, and re-engaging with practitioner communities. To be sure, I had a great deal of assistance from my faculty colleagues in multiple efforts to move SOE forward on a number of fronts. To name a few—Ron Marx (who chronicles some of his work at UM in another piece for the Acquired Wisdom collection), Annemarie Palincsar, Eric Dey, Virginia Richardson, Gary Fenstermacher, and Ed Silver. It’s also worth mentioning that during my time as dean, my work with ELA standards continued under the auspices of the Center for the Improvement of Early Reading Achievement (CIERA). CIERA was the U.S. Department of Education reading center, which in 1998 had been awarded to UM SOE in partnership with Michigan State’s College of Education along with several other universities and was co-directed by Freddy Hiebert and P. David Pearson. When the award for this center was made, the culture wars in reading were still going strong and proved to be a challenge for CIERA. Despite this challenge, CIERA produced a solid body of work that continues to be referenced today.

As part of the rebuilding process, the SOE had hired over 20 assistant professors but only about a quarter to a third of them were promoted and tenured. To address this, I recruited Paul Pintrich to serve as Associate Dean with part of his responsibilities focusing on initiating mentorship activities among untenured faculty. Paul conducted mentoring sessions himself, but he also set up mentoring committees for each untenured faculty member who requested this type of support. The untenured faculty member would indicate the tenured faculty member/s with whom they would like to work and Paul would broker the relationships on behalf of the untenured faculty member. These types of mentoring activities along with revised promotion and tenure procedures that provided more feedback earlier in the pre-tenure years greatly improved the percentage of untenured faculty that were promoted and tenured. Paul extended his mentoring activities to doctoral students as Chair of the Combined Program in Education and Psychology until his untimely death in 2003. He was dearly loved and appreciated and is still greatly missed.

The combination of my previous administrative experiences and my hard-won comfort with “leading from in front” gave me the confidence to chart a course to help address these issues and move the SOE forward.

The move to a research-intensive SOE had resulted in loss of connections to practitioner communities, which had previously been a prominent feature of the UM SOE. It seemed important to re-engage with these communities as central to our mission and the mission of a public university. A first step toward increased relations was to hire into the clinical faculty track. This track had been approved for the SOE but no hires had been made. Clinical faculty were hired with ties to local practitioner communities, which helped SOE re-connect. I also created a position

for an outreach director who could bring together faculty and practitioner communities. The idea was to help faculty extend and scale up their work beyond the basic research phase by matching them with practitioner communities interested in implementing their work. This pairing would then provide the practitioner community access to recent advances and also provide the faculty member with additional funding to continue the work. We had some success with this but not as much as I hoped, which I attribute to concerns from faculty that this was more “service” than “research.”

When I was named dean in 2000, the University was preparing its defense of an affirmative action lawsuit that would eventually make its way to the Supreme Court. Then provost, Nancy Cantor, led the way in these preparations and made diversity initiatives a priority for the multiple Schools and Colleges. I embraced this cause and undertook several initiatives within SOE to address issues of equity and diversity. Notable among these initiatives was creating a Diversity Task Force (DTF) to establish and affirm “a visible intellectual thrust” around issues of diversity within the SOE. The DTF was designed to assist the SOE develop a clear stance toward diversity issues that would provide the basis of initiatives for recruiting and retaining more faculty and students of color and for aligning curricula with the values espoused by the SOE with regard to diversity. The DTF chose to take a multifaceted approach to its charge, working at many levels simultaneously and taking advantage of opportunities as they presented themselves. One such opportunity arose when Provost Cantor invited the deans to help the University improve the diversity climate within the Schools and Colleges. The DTF saw this initiative as an occasion to address its charge and supported me in exploring the possibility of working with outside consultants to assist the SOE in its diversity efforts. The outside consultants recommended that we begin with a cultural audit to provide a measure of the SOE

culture as it currently existed to serve as the basis for preparing and implementing an action plan.

The audit was completed in 2001 and presented an extremely thorough picture of the culture of the SOE. This picture, however, was not accepted as valid by everyone, which was no doubt predictable. Many faculty members welcomed these efforts but key senior faculty were less supportive. In 2002, the University leadership changed and with this change came new priorities. In hindsight, I believe that I put too much emphasis on this priority without ensuring full support of key faculty. This was a significant factor in lack of support from key faculty for a second term as dean.

I stepped down in 2005 and after a much-needed break returned to the faculty in 2006. When I returned, I taught a reading methods class and volunteered to supervise the practicum for a number of students who were taking my teaching methods class. Just as when I was doing professional development in the MELAF project, I learned a great deal through this experience. More specifically, I learned that less is more when it comes to preparing beginning teachers, and I revised my methods course accordingly. Other professional activities that occupied my post-deanship years included working on and writing about the Common Core standards in English language arts. Also, Marge Lipson and I co-chaired the International Literacy

Association (ILA) task force on Response to Intervention (RTI). This was another activity that brought together people with diverse perspectives to generate a set of guidelines appropriate for all education professionals involved in implementing RTI programs. These activities also yielded articles, webinars, and a book.

UNCG Deanship: Learning with Acquired Wisdom and Confidence

As I gained perspective on my UM deanship, I discovered that I was interested in trying it again. In 2011 I was named Dean of the School of Education at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). UNCG is quite different from UM in many ways. It's a research-intensive, minority serving regional university rather than a flagship R-1, so its mission and priorities are somewhat different. It's also part of a larger university system so its Trustees also answer to the Board of Governors overseeing the entire state system. UNCG also receives its accreditation through SACS (Southern Association of Colleges and Schools), which has far more influence over programs, policies and procedures than I experienced at UM under North Central Association accreditation. The UNC system and UNCG had been accustomed to a fairly high level of state support but were just beginning to face major budget reductions when I assumed the deanship. As a result of these factors, UNCG was not nearly as entrepreneurial as UM and had limited infrastructure to support entrepreneurial activities.

In addition to differences in the University contexts, the UNCG SOE was also quite different. It had about the same number of total faculty as UM SOE but they were spread across six departments: Teacher Ed and Higher Ed, Special Education, Educational Leadership and Cultural Foundations, Specialized Educational Services, Library and Information Sciences, Educational Research Methodology, and a Counseling and Educational



Development department that consistently ranked in the top 5 nationally. When I assumed the deanship, the decentralized nature of the SOE had resulted in diverse practices such as inconsistent promotion and tenure practices dominated by departments, multiple advising units (again dominated by separate departments), and minimal attention to school-wide mission, vision or strategic planning. Further, the SOE was only a few years away from NCATE accreditation, which was something I had minimal experience with as UM SOE had ceased involvement with NCATE during Cecil's Miskel's deanship. It was clearly going to be a challenge to bring about the coordination both within SOE and across UNCG necessary for a successful NCATE review.

The combination of my previous administrative experiences and my hard-won comfort with "leading from in front" gave me the confidence to chart a course to help address these issues and move the SOE forward. I got my hand slapped more than once for doing things that were considered risky and/or outside the norm for the School and the University. However, in the short time I was dean (2011-2015/16), the faculty, staff and I accomplished a great deal together.

In my first year as dean I created associate dean positions in Research and Assessment, and Academic and Student Affairs and named Terry Ackerman and Sam Miller to these positions. I also created a new Office of Student Affairs and Advising that brought together all undergraduate advising. Strategic planning efforts initiated that year yielded four school-wide areas of emphasis that served as the basis for many activities in the subsequent years, namely access, excellence and success, community engagement, globalization, and technological literacy. An Access and Equity Committee already existed in SOE and it agreed to develop administer and analyze faculty and staff surveys as a means of understanding issues related to diversity and inclusiveness within

SOE. Voluntary, ad hoc, special interest committees were established in other areas of emphasis to assist in identifying needs and promoting efforts in these areas. For example, the technology committee under the leadership of Anthony Chow identified the need for more online course and program offerings to increase enrollment and revenue and considered how faculty might receive training and be compensated for their efforts in this area.



Other entrepreneurial efforts included activity of the Education and Research Methodology department, under the leadership of Randy Penfield, to establish the Office of Assessment, Evaluation, and Research Services and the Nonprofit Evaluation Support Program. These offices provide low-cost consulting services and technical resources in the areas of assessment, program evaluation and data analysis and, at the same time, support doctoral students and provide them with extensive hands-on applied experiences.

The international group coordinated by Ye (Jane) He engaged in a variety of

activities including creating an international student handbook, conducting workshops on academic writing for international students, developing an SOE global website, and furthering relations with institutions of higher education and schools overseas as sites for ongoing and future faculty and student exchange programs.

Three faculty members from different SOE departments – Colleen Fairbanks, Barb Levin and Micheline Chalhoub-Deville – approached me about their interests in community engagement. I supported their efforts to create the Coalition for Diverse Language Communities (CDLC). CDLC promotes community-engaged research, outreach and advocacy, policy work and professional development. It is comprised of faculty, staff, students and community members who work collaboratively on year-round projects aimed at enhancing the educational opportunities and well-being of children, youth, and families from diverse language communities.

To prepare for our NCATE review I co-lead, with Cheryl Greenberg and Barb Levin, a group of core teacher education faculty and staff to develop a set of objectives that integrated those from state and various professional organizations including NCATE. We then did a cross-walk of existing practices that provided evidence of progress towards these goals. Where evidence was missing, we initiated efforts to gather information and data from across the multitude of programs across the University that were involved in teacher education. Cheryl and Terry Ackerman then coordinated data gathering and analysis with the assistance of doctoral students from the

I attribute my success as a dean at UNCG at least in part to the fact that I took a personal interest in helping the faculty and staff pursue the interests that motivated them and that advanced the school.

ERM department. All of this led to both improved practices as well as a successful NCATE review.

When I assumed the deanship, I also assumed the role of principal investigator to a Teacher Quality Partnership (TQP) grant from the former PI who retired when I arrived. When surplus funds were available from this grant, we were able to successfully repurpose them in an effort to re-imagine our Teaching Resource Center and create a maker-space dedicated to educating faculty and pre- and post-service teachers in using technology in their teaching. This effort provided the basis for a second TQP grant focused on transforming teaching through technology and provided for maker spaces in participating schools so pre- and in-service teachers could implement what they were learning in their methods classes in their own schools. This was just another of many examples of faculty and staff pulling together to make happen something larger than their own work. Key among these folks was Clara Chu, the Chair of the Library and Information Studies department, who provided the initial vision; Christina O'Connor, the brilliant leader of the TQP grant/s; Meredith Carlone, the assistant dean who did the heavy lifting on ensuring that the maker-space became a reality; Matt Fisher, a staff member with the drive and creativity to lead the maker-space; Terri Jackson, the development officer who found additional resources to ensure the ongoing support needed to maintain the maker-space, which is now the SELF Design Studio.

I attribute my success as a dean at UNCG at least in part to the fact that I took a personal interest in helping the faculty and staff pursue the interests that motivated them and that advanced the school. I met with multiple groups regularly and helped to bring together both the personnel and financial resources needed to make things happen. They, in turn, did a great deal of labor-intensive work with the only compensation being fulfillment of their ambitions and those of the SOE. The things

that were accomplished could not have happened without this collaboration.

Life After Academia: Working Behind the Scenes (Again)

By 2015-16 I felt as though UNCG SOE had achieved sufficient stability to embark on the next phase of its growth under new leadership (I was pushing 70 by this time too). At the same time, I was presented with a job opportunity that would allow me to transition away from administrative responsibilities while continuing to work in my areas of expertise. I went to work for Educational Testing Service (ETS) on a full-time basis as the lead content person for the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) reading assessment. Again, there was a lot to learn about my new role as a “contractor” to an enterprise with multiple masters, notably the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Assessment Governing Board (NAGB). I thought I knew NAEP reading as a result of the consulting I had done for the program since the late 1980s, but my previous understanding of the inner workings and politics of NAEP barely scratched the surface. As NAGB undertook to update the framework that guides the reading assessment, another culture war broke out regarding the definition of reading comprehension and its implications for reading assessment. I was not on the front lines of this conflict but felt it nonetheless. After much wrangling, an updated reading framework was approved in August of 2021. Now I am part of the team that works on

Most life experiences have something to teach us if we pay attention. I can't say I've always paid sufficient attention in a timely manner but I continue to try and learn from each new experience.

the implementation of this framework as we move toward its first administration in 2026.

I am planning to move soon from full-time employment to a state of semi-retirement. As I move toward semi-retirement it's difficult to predict what learning experiences may lay ahead, but I continue to learn that each new life experience has something to teach me.

Lessons from the Roads Travelled (So Far)

As a single mom in the late 1960s I learned to persevere amidst discrimination and not to limit myself based on others' perceptions of what is possible. During grad school and my early years at UM I learned the importance of reaching out as a means of broadening and deepening my thinking. Related to this are the lessons I learned about how collaborative relationships are essential for both personal and professional growth.

Also during my pre-dean days at UM, I learned to pursue the activities that provided the best “fit” for my interests and expertise and how to make these activities “count” in an academic environment. Similarly, I began to see my experiences as a woman with family responsibilities as an asset rather than a distraction.

My first experience as a dean taught me that being able to lead from “in front” is essential for successful leadership and for growth in the organization. My second experience as a dean affirmed this lesson and added to it lessons about the importance of taking time to understand others' interests and strengths to successful leadership.

Most life experiences have something to teach us if we pay attention. I can't say I've always paid sufficient attention in a timely manner but I continue to try and learn from each new experience.



About Acquired Wisdom

This collection began with an invitation to one of the editors, Sigmund Tobias, from Norman Shapiro a former colleague at the City College of New York (CCNY). Shapiro invited retired CCNY faculty members to prepare manuscripts describing what they learned during their college careers that could be of value to new appointees and former colleagues. It seemed to us that a project describing the experiences of internationally known and distinguished researchers in educational psychology and educational research would be of benefit to many colleagues, especially younger ones entering those disciplines. We decided to include senior scholars in the fields of adult learning and training because, although often neglected by educational researchers, their work is quite relevant to our fields and graduate students could find productive and gainful positions in that area.

Junior faculty and grad students in educational psychology, educational research, and related disciplines, could learn much from the experiences of senior researchers. Doctoral students are exposed to courses or seminars about history of the discipline as well as the field's overarching purposes and its important contributors. A second audience for this project include the practitioners and researchers in disciplines represented by the chapter authors. This audience could learn from the experiences of eminent researchers – how their experiences shaped their work, and what they see as their major contributions – and readers might relate their own work to that of the scholars. Authors were advised that they were free to organize their chapters as they saw fit, provided that their perceived major contributions to the discipline, 2) major lessons learned during their careers, 3) their opinions about the personal and 4) situational factors (institutions and other affiliations, colleagues, advisors, and advisees) that stimulated their significant work.

We hope that the contributions of distinguished researchers receive the wide readership they deserve and serves as a resource to the future practitioners and researchers in these fields.

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Sonia Nieto, University of Massachusetts, Amhurst

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