

Memo

To: Provost Susan Bourque and the members of the Committee on Academic Priorities

From: Al Rudnitsky

Subject: Department of Education & Child Study retreat, November 7, 2008

Date: November 12, 2008

Goals: Our primary goal for our retreat was to step back and think about where the field of education is, how we see ourselves as an academic department, and where we would like to be in the future. A related goal was to be better at articulating to our students what we stand for and how a student's course of study advances these educational goals. We planned to use the Smith Design for Learning and the accompanying set of student capacities as ideas that would help guide our considerations.

Outcomes: We had a great conversation, one that focused entirely on our "big picture" goals. At the end of the half-day retreat we developed a set of topics that outlined where our thinking and work needed to take us. We now have an agenda and, I think, the enthusiasm to undertake this work.

Plan: Dedicate time in department meetings to continue this work.

Discussion: The retreat facilitated the beginning of a long overdue conversation in the department. Talking about the "big picture" has a way of being swallowed up by the minutiae of keeping our collective heads above water.

It is a worthwhile and, at the same time, challenging undertaking to think about the knowledge and capacities we seek to develop in our students; pathways through our major that help students become aware of and develop this knowledge and capability; and how we support cultures of inquiry, environmental awareness, historical perspective, and appreciation of diversity. As we engaged in this undertaking at our retreat, we realized that the challenges our department confronts are very complex.

The first thing we confront when we tackle these big questions is the complex and multifaceted mission of the department. Considering the big picture in education and child study is, for us, much more than thinking about how to structure our major. Most of the students who commit some part of their undergraduate work to education are not majors.

Students who are interested in subject matter teaching at the middle or high school level must major in the discipline they wish to teach. Most students, as they complete licensure requirements, minor in education. A student can complete the state approved program sequence of six courses in our department without having to declare a minor. This is worth noting because many of the students we serve are not "counted" when considering only majors or minors. Students pursuing subject matter teaching now have few choices in their course of study (as far as education courses go).

Students who are interested in elementary education can either major in education or complete licensure requirements while majoring in another discipline. Students who choose to major in another discipline are in much the same situation as the subject matter teachers. That is to say, they must complete a six course program of study in education, one that affords little flexibility. Students who do choose to major in education also must complete the six licensure courses. While not within a single discipline, elementary licensure also has its accompanying subject matter requirements. All students preparing for elementary teaching must take courses in math, science, historical studies, literature, and social science. Adding to the complications of program planning, elementary teachers cannot major solely in education and obtain licensure. Therefore, students who want to pursue a major in education at Smith without majoring in a second discipline must obtain a “co-major” in liberal studies. In an ideal world all these students should select subject matter courses that make sense and serve to create a coherent knowledge base for teaching. In the real world, many students declare or discover their interest in education after completing two years of their Smith education. This adds to the difficulties of coherent program planning and advising.

All programs leading to teacher licensure have substantial fieldwork components including student teaching. Typically this takes an enormous commitment on the part of students during their senior year. The time and energy resources students must commit to practice teaching renders things like the pursuit of departmental honors very difficult.

We have always considered it part of our mission to help students accomplish their goals and we often work mightily to figure out how to build a program for students. Recently we have seen and served many more students who plan to pursue teaching in programs like Teach for America. The discussion of our different student constituencies is included to highlight the reality that thinking about pathways through the major is only a small part of thinking about our program’s coherence.

We believe that our department’s academic and intellectual integrity require staying true to the College’s liberal arts context and philosophy. This philosophy has always guided our thinking about the major. We believe the major in education and child study provides students an opportunity to study-in-depth in their broader pursuit of a liberal arts education. Designing pathways or programs of intellectual integrity for all our students is what we hope to accomplish. “Setting our compass” by these principles is made exceedingly complex not only by the diverse student constituencies we serve but by external (licensure) requirements that constrain choices. Worse the requirements and constraints change from time to time as different political sensibilities about teacher education rise and fall. Offering programs within our discipline that honor the liberal arts as well as accommodate outside pressures for a more “pre-professional” kind of education is not easy.

Our departmental retreat has given us the opportunity to think in new ways about addressing these complexities. We have begun to develop a conceptual framework for thinking about how our courses fit together and are best sequenced. Our hope is to

devise ways to address licensure constraints that give students more choice within the department. We think there are ways to construct coherent pathways for the different types of students we have. We think that there are better ways to have students' academic work correspond with the field experiences we want our students to have. A great deal of our retreat work was aimed at articulating this structure in a "narrative" that will help our students to better see how particular courses and experiences fit into their growing knowledge and skills.

We worked on ways to have students maintain reflective records of their journey "through" education. This too should help add coherence to students' experiences. We think we will be able to find ways for all students to practice teach and pursue serious inquiry on a topic of interest and importance. We are considering whether our current capstone for senior majors, now built around producing a research paper in their final semester, can be made better and include all students concentrating in education.

I wish I could report something that looked like a finished product. What I can report is that we have gotten off to a good start.