Chapter 6
Transformative Partnerships

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ABSTRACT
With all higher education educational endeavors there is a transformative element that enhances the progression forward in terms of academic program development. Teacher education is no exception to this aspect of the evolutionary process. The authors’ story of that transformation and the impact of creative endeavors in teacher education offer a sense of moving beyond the traditional to the transformative in teacher education. Carter (1993) offers that the story can offer a perspective on our work and inform teacher education on the directions we might take to bring about improvement in our efforts to prepare educators for the future. The authors’ story begins with a strong foundation and commitment to understanding the critical elements of successful partnerships. This foundation has served them for 15 years, and two distinct eras of partnership work that delineate the transformation. The authors explore each era: “The Professional Development School (PDS) Story” followed by “10 Years Later.”

LAYING THE FOUNDATION FOR PARTNERSHIPS
With a long history as a teacher education institution, Northern Illinois University (NIU) once had a K-8 laboratory school as an integral part of its College of Education programs. Much like the lab schools of a number of universities, NIU’s lab school closed due to budget and management issues. What had served well as a means to supporting education in the region became another casualty to the movement away from the laboratory school model.

In 2000, the College of Education at Northern Illinois University was awarded a technology grant that required a partnership relationship with a K12 school district. This was the beginning of a long-term relationship with that single district. In the process of extending that partnership, others were also created. To date, over 20 partnerships have been framed around improving teacher education practice.

The concept of the NIU school-university partnership was defined using the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Professional Development School (PDS) key con-
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cepts as the guide. As an NCATE institution this choice seemed logical and natural, but when more closely examining these guidelines, the choice serves to empower the advancement of teacher education. These ten key concepts embody the vision of the college to build strong relationships that centered on:

- Student learning,
- Spanning boundaries,
- Blending resources,
- Types of partners,
- Communities of learners and practice,
- Professional, content, and learning standards, and
- A means to leverage change (NCATE, 2001).

Primary in the development of a partnership between the college and a school district was the focus on mutual benefit for each partner. That first relationship was centered on the acquisition of technology for use in the classroom. Teacher professional development and support were critical and were included within the grant activities. Research and evaluation were also a component of the grant activities, all aspects of the NCATE key concepts.

A significant outcome of that first partnership was a college office with the responsibility of supporting the activities of school-university partnerships. With a director whose role was to ensure communications and support, the role of the office became central to enacting the college mission for quality teacher education.

PARTNERSHIP EVOLUTION

At present the CoE Partnership Office has extended relationships with area school districts by collaboratively developing sophisticated and generative partnerships. The focus remains to serve the needs of the school districts and the college by improving educational opportunities for students, teachers, teacher candidates and faculty; however, each partnership is distinctive, serving the unique needs of the constituents.

In an effort to focus the activities of the partnership work, some of the partners are aligned with specific teacher education programs. The energies of the faculty and teachers are balanced to serve the students and teacher candidates. These relationships are enriched by the extension of university resources to support learning. Technology continues to play a significant role in the evolution of the partnerships and their focus on supporting learning.

Currently there are over 20 NIU school-university partnerships, each with a customized pattern of activities. These activities include Professional Development Schools, Year-Long teacher candidate placements, technology exchanges, professional development, and improved curricula. And, beyond the school districts, the Partnership Office has facilitated the development of partnerships with libraries, museums, and a professional association that serves area students. The primary criterion for pursuing a new partnership is that there is a convergence of activity that supports each partner in achieving its mission.

In all, what started as a requirement for a specific grant has evolved into a dynamic and exploratory approach to changing the work of schools and the university. No longer are they separate and distinct. Rather, now the lines are blurred and the work is “messy,” but the focus remains to ensure that the needs of all the constituents are met. Needs began the concept of partnerships at NIU and continue to guide the work of the vast number of people involved. And, across the years, it has become obvious that by focusing on mutual benefit and need, that partnerships have transformed the work of the NIU College of Education.