

# **FIRSTHAND LEARNING FROM THE FIELD**

**A Self-study of Graduates  
Carried out by the  
Sonoma State University School of Education**

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#### **ABSTRACT**

There are many stories of the King who, when feeling isolated from the people he ruled, dressed as a pauper and went out to learn firsthand how the common people were faring—and what they thought of their ruler. In the same way this report describes a study where Sonoma State School of Education faculty went out to learn firsthand about the realities of the classrooms and schools in which their graduates were working. Adopting the stance of learner, rather than teacher, these faculty asked recent graduates to show them their teaching, their classrooms and their schools. They asked the graduates to teach them about their goals for their students and the issues they were facing as new teachers. In addition, they explored carefully with these graduates the ways in which they did, and did not, feel well prepared by their Sonoma State educational programs. This report describes the process of that study, the themes that emerged from the faculty study of their graduates, and the overall benefits of this kind of common sense approach to gaining feedback from the field.

# **FIRSTHAND LEARNING FROM THE FIELD**

## **A Self-study of Graduates Carried out by the Sonoma State University School of Education**

The Sonoma State University School of Education contracted with Inverness Research Associates<sup>1</sup> to provide assistance with developing a new evaluation system. One aspect of that system was a field study involving graduates of the School of Education. We of Inverness Research Associates helped to design the study and to guide it as School of Education administration and faculty carried it out. In this report, we provide an independent, external perspective on the process and preliminary outcomes of the field study.

### **I. BACKGROUND**

#### **Genesis of the study**

In a letter dated June 30, 1998, the Committee on Accreditation, writing in behalf of the California Commission on Teacher Credentialing, granted the Sonoma State University School of Education the status of “accreditation with substantive stipulations.” One of those stipulations was that the School of Education design and implement a “comprehensive unit-wide evaluation system” that would “regularly inform program planning and decision making.” As part of its response to that stipulation, the School of Education designed and carried out a field-based study of School of Education graduates who are currently teaching in nearby school districts. The purpose of the field study was twofold. One goal was to help faculty see firsthand the current realities of their graduates’ teaching contexts. A second purpose was for the faculty to explore the degree to which and the ways in which School of Education programs had (or had not) contributed to the graduates’ preparation for teaching. The School of Education contracted with Inverness Research Associates to assist in the design of an overall evaluation system, and also to guide and facilitate this field study.

Of the 22 full-time faculty in the SSU School of Education, fully 14 participated in the field study. This involved a minimum of two days’ time commitment and, for several faculty members, upwards of four or five days. The dean and department chair also participated in the study; furthermore, they served the faculty in a vitally important supporting role, creating the sample of graduates, locating and contacting them, and handling the myriad time-consuming logistical arrangements for the field visits. We believe these levels of participation, alone, signal the School’s real commitment to self-evaluation for the purpose of improvement.

#### **This report**

In this report, we (of Inverness Research Associates) describe the study and summarize initial findings that appear to be most relevant to the School of Education as they consider changes in courses and the program as a whole. Our discussion is preliminary, and not intended as a blueprint for specific programmatic changes. Rather, we mean to capture the highlights of a process we believe has real potential to become a significant feedback loop to the administration and faculty of the School of Education, and thus a powerful, and ongoing, contributor to the effectiveness of the School.

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<sup>1</sup> Inverness Research Associates is an educational evaluation and policy analysis firm headquartered in Inverness, CA. Dr. Mark St. John is President.

## II. GOALS OF THE FIELD STUDY

Although the accreditation stipulations motivated the School to create a new evaluation system, the external purpose quickly faded into the background. The following intrinsic goals are what gave real shape to the field study:

### *To build a School-wide learning community*

The School of Education wanted to create an authentic process for building a learning community among faculty in all programs. Such a community can help faculty members work and problem-solve across their departmental boundaries, and can generate wisdom to inform practice at all levels of the School.

### *To foster data-driven reform*

Like many reformers at the K-12 level, those in higher education are turning to models of reform that place data at the center of discussion. The School of Education wanted to design a study that would ground faculty members' proposals for improvement in field realities. They wanted to create an efficient mechanism for increasing the feedback from the field, so that the realities of the field and the experiences of their graduates could inform the design of programs and courses.

### *To build on, and contribute to, the capacity and strengths of the School*

The School of Education wanted to create a study that would tap existing strengths in the School, in the form of faculty expertise, interest, and capacities for self-renewal. They also wanted it to allow for incremental, doable changes over time, within the resources available to the School. This is in contrast to a large-scale, external audit or project that would "shock" the system for a few short years and then disappear. The study thus has the potential to build cumulative, self-sustaining capacity within the School for ongoing development of professional wisdom and change.

## III. DESIGN AND METHODS

The purpose of the study was to enable School of Education faculty to assess the assumptions that underlie their current programs, and better understand the effectiveness of their programs, by examining the current practices and perspectives of graduates. There were several design features of the study that made it both practical and valuable:

### **The approach to the self-study**

The project was framed carefully as an externally facilitated *self*-study, with graduates of School of Education programs acting as expert consultants who could provide unique insight into the value of the program and the actual conditions of work in surrounding schools. In other words, School of Education faculty were not assessing whether graduates were implementing what they had learned, nor were the faculty using graduates' experiences to evaluate one another. Rather, the faculty were trying to learn about the graduates' realities as practicing teachers: about their teaching contexts, their histories, the issues they are facing, how they seem to be faring at the moment, what kinds of supports they have had, and then *finally*, how well prepared they felt for the work of teaching, and how the School of Education contributed to their preparation. This "outside-in" approach was vitally important to the goals of the study. The graduates—who were referred to carefully as teachers, rather than students—accordingly received a small stipend for their role as consultants to the school's self-evaluation project.

The study was also designed so that School of Education faculty played the central roles of carrying out the research, collectively making sense of the data, and beginning to come to conclusions. The dean and department chair were model researchers; further, they served as support to the faculty by handling the time-consuming logistical details. They made it possible, in other words, for the faculty to actually carry out the study. We at Inverness Research primarily played the roles of advisor and facilitator, creating the structures within which the faculty members could learn about the effectiveness of their programs, and facilitating the planning and debriefing sessions.

### **Selection of graduates**

Graduates were selected at random from the rolls of those who had been out of the program for 3-5 years.<sup>2</sup> The dean and department chair contacted them by phone, explained the study, invited them to participate, and sent letters to their supervisors seeking permission to visit the graduates at their schools.<sup>3</sup> Inverness Research Associates advised the School to select more than 12 but fewer than 24 graduates—enough to reflect a reasonable range of programs and teaching situations, but not so many as to overburden the faculty and doom the study. In all, 18 graduates participated in the study. Of these, 9 have multiple subject credentials, 6 have single subject, and 3 have special education credentials. The 18 graduates teach in 13 school districts (reflecting a range of urban, suburban and rural schools) in 4 counties.

### **Visits with graduates**

The fieldwork consisted of a visit to each graduate, which included a classroom observation and interview. We felt it was important that faculty have direct access not only to the expressed views of graduates, but also to their daily work contexts—their students and classrooms. The one-time observations could not provide in-depth understanding of graduates' practices, but they did give a real flavor of field reality to the study. In nearly all cases, faculty had a short pre-visit conversation with the teacher as an orientation to the classroom, with the lengthy interview following the observation.

The visits were organized so that faculty members observed graduates who were not from their own programs; i.e., multiple-subjects faculty visited single-subject teachers, and so on. This design element relieved graduates of intimidation and relieved faculty of over-investment. Also, faculty members paired up for visits to the extent possible, given their workload. Working with a partner provided another “check” on what could be learned from the visit/interview, as well as fostering faculty-to-faculty conversation.

### **Pilot field visits and faculty orientation**

Inverness Research Associates and the School of Education evaluation committee (the dean, chair, and two faculty members) met several times to rough out the plan. The whole faculty was kept abreast of progress and gave their input, e.g., about what questions to ask the graduates. Together, we then did a pilot study in which each of the School's four committee members, paired with an Inverness researcher, conducted visits to the four graduates. These collaborative visits enabled us to test the protocols we had developed (see the Appendix) and, in general, troubleshoot the process. For

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<sup>2</sup> The faculty committee selected this time period for the initial study. In future years, there may be different sampling criteria, depending on specific evaluation goals.

<sup>3</sup> Given the practical realities of availability, the actual sample of participants was not scientifically randomized; however, we are confident that the variation in the actual sample in many ways reflects the pool of graduates teaching in the surrounding region.

example, the pilot visits showed the value of observing in pairs and of designing a simple debriefing process that busy faculty could manage. Moreover, these visits underscored a consensus that the intent of the study was to examine the School as a whole and, thus, the group made a commitment to maintain anonymity of all participants and programs.

Beyond refining the methods of data-gathering, the pilot visits served two broader purposes. First, these visits convinced the committee members of the value of learning directly from those in the field. Their enthusiasm and firsthand accounts of what they had learned from the four graduates seemed to motivate a larger number of faculty members to participate than we expected. Second, their experience in the field enabled them to make a substantive contribution to the orientation session conducted for all participating faculty before they made their visits. Although Inverness Research staff led the orientation, much of the practical advice—as well as enthusiasm about the project—came from the four faculty members who had done the pilot study.

At the half-day orientation session, we spelled out the goals and framework of the study, collectively shared lessons learned from the pilot visits, and together, continued to build and refine the protocol that would underpin the visits and guide the debriefing sessions. Faculty members were not expected to follow the protocol uniformly, but rather to use it as a common reference for the kinds of information needed and for the broad dimensions to cover (teaching history, school context, actual practice, etc.). The only real stipulation for interview technique was to avoid “leading” the graduates to certain observations about the role and nature of School of Education programs in their preparation for teaching.

### **Debriefing the cases**

Two kinds of debriefing sessions were built into the study. First, faculty pairs who made visits together debriefed with one another immediately following the visit. They shared what they had seen and heard about the graduate’s context, their teaching goals and practices, the supports they have, what they felt prepared for and not prepared for, and so on. These conversations gave faculty members the benefit of learning from four eyes and ears, and had the effect (also beneficial) of tempering each observer’s interpretation with the perspective of a colleague who brought a different lens to the visit.

Second, all participating faculty members met for a half-day debriefing session, the purpose of which was to identify themes and lessons suggested by the whole set of 18 cases. To prepare for this session, the faculty members filled out a debriefing framework (see the Appendix), so that they brought roughly standardized sets of notes—often very detailed—from which to report on their visits. Given the size of the group and number of cases, we divided into three groups, each of which discussed six cases in depth. Inverness Research staff facilitated these discussions, helping draw out the key elements of each account and inviting conversation about initial themes that cut across the six cases. The whole group then convened for an hour to explore patterns reflected in the 18 cases and initial thoughts about implications.

For this whole-group debriefing, the graduates’ names, their schools, and the credential programs they had been in were all kept anonymous. This decision came out of the experience of the pilot study, where we learned that such identifying information could interfere with the faculty members’ ability to report on their visits and draw general themes from them. Keeping the graduates anonymous at the sense-making stage of the study helped faculty members listen to the accounts not as individual graduates’ separate stories, but rather as cases that contributed to a broader portrait of field realities.

#### **IV. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR THE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION**

In the following, we summarize the major findings that began to emerge from the whole-group debriefing session. Even at this preliminary stage, we heard faculty members make references to several avenues toward change for both the short and long term. For example, some faculty members said they were going to revisit course syllabi to take into account what the graduates had told them. The pilot Partner School program currently underway (to create a Professional Development School model for the student teaching experience at Sonoma State) may provide a structure for responding to some findings, and several other long-term structural changes may arise. Some of the findings even have implications for the mission of the School. The dean, chair, and participating faculty all expressed the desire to continue exploring the many implications at the individual and collective levels.

##### **Findings that have implications for the overall goals for teacher preparation**

###### *Preparing students to fit in, or to change?*

In teacher education generally, there is an implicit dichotomy involved in the broad objective of programs: should new teachers be prepared to fit into the existing educational system, or should they be prepared to act on that system as “agents of change”? Results of this field study are making the Sonoma State faculty confront this dichotomy because there is some disjuncture between the change-oriented mission of the School of Education and the “fitting-in” (survival) orientation of the majority (if not all) of the graduates.

The real challenge for the School probably lies in exploring ways to go beyond the dichotomy—to prepare new teachers to function effectively in the system so that they can survive (even thrive) in it and, at the same time, to instill in new teachers deeper notions of teaching, learning, and systemic change so they can keep a higher order vision in mind as they are learning the basics of actual practice. As one faculty member put it, “How can we help candidates fit in enough to get and keep their jobs, but not surrender to the status quo once they’ve received tenure?” To be sure, this may be an idealized goal for the School, but it can serve as a valuable guide to critical self-assessment and program development.

###### *Addressing the challenge of equity*

The mission of the School of Education includes a commitment to equity, and faculty members readily give voice to this commitment. In observing a range of classrooms, they sometimes questioned whether the graduates (and sometimes the school structures themselves) were providing all students with the kinds of supports that reflect the social justice values framed in the School mission. In particular, faculty members were struck by how often the graduates grouped students by ability level, missed chances to take a multicultural approach to their teaching, and struggled with ways to teach English Language Learners. Together, these observations made the faculty question how effective they were at advancing the value of inclusiveness, and at showing prospective teachers “the how” of multicultural education and instruction of students with native languages other than English.

As faculty discussed these challenges to equity and inclusiveness, it became clear that there are unresolved questions among the group about how their goals of equity and social justice actually do play out, how they ought to play out, and what priority they should have, both in the School of Education and in the schools. This field study, alone, is not sufficient to help the faculty resolve these

questions, but we believe it can play an important role in placing (or keeping) dilemmas related to equity on the table, and in infusing their discussion with images from real classrooms.

## **Findings that have implications for structures and processes of preparing teachers**

### *Integration of two components of professional training*

Professional training consists of two general components, which we refer to as *input* of knowledge and *corrective* experiences. By input of knowledge, we mean courses and other elements of preparation in which beginning teachers gain knowledge about curriculum, child development, pedagogy, equity, and other matters of teaching and learning. By corrective experiences, we mean student teaching placements and other field experiences in which students try out practices in the teaching realm and receive feedback that enables them to try again and receive further corrective guidance.

One finding of this study is that nearly all graduates tend to experience the two components as being more disjointed than integrated. In the words of one faculty member, “The graduates seem to consider theory as course content that stays in the university classroom, rather than as something to bring to their teaching experience.” Similarly, the following comment by a graduate reflected an experience shared by several, who said the coursework was interesting but not well enough linked to practice: “I got the big ideas...[but] The coursework is so out of context. You don’t know how to use the information.” Furthermore, faculty members asked seven of the graduates how they would rank the value of the SSU program on a scale of 1 (low value) to 5 (high value). The average ranking was 3.6<sup>4</sup>. Their reasons for this modest rating generally had to do with this disjuncture.

The cause of the less-than-ideal integration seems to be partly structural: coursework generally takes place away from the field, and supervisors in the field are generally not core faculty. The pilot Partner School project (a Professional Development School model) currently underway may turn out to be a structural change that can lead to better integration. We believe that efforts to create more coherence between coursework and field experience should be a high priority for the School.

### *Usefulness of educational theory*

A few of the 18 graduates relished coursework that emphasized theory—they could readily identify important theorists, and they currently make use of theory as a lens with which to analyze curriculum, practice, and even policy. However, the majority of graduates do not find theory useful, nor does theory seem to guide their approaches to teaching. There are two general explanations for the relative lack of usefulness. First, graduates want a bridge from idealized notions of learning to the very complex realities in which they are working. Second, most graduates prefer multiple theoretical perspectives over one-dimensional (or “narrow”) ones, especially when it comes to matters of pedagogy.

In their daily work, the graduates are grappling with curriculum frameworks and classroom materials that others have selected for them and which they are expected to implement,<sup>5</sup> with management of students with varying skill levels, with problems of discipline, and with state standards, assessments, and other top-down mandates, including some related to pedagogy. Increasingly, teachers are being

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<sup>4</sup> Asking for these informal rankings was an optional interview question. The seven ranks reported were: 3,3,3,3,4,4,5.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these reflect competing theories of learning, even within the same school—for example, an elementary school that uses Open Court for reading and Mathland for mathematics.

asked to implement curriculum programs such as Open Court, Mathland, Insights Science, and so on. The graduates had little (or no) experience or training in the skills needed to negotiate structured curricula. In fact, the view of many graduates is that the theories they learned tend not to directly address these realities of their work, or they do so in a way that puts the graduates at odds with the mainstream of practice and policy where they work, rather than giving them greater tools or flexibility. Individual faculty members are beginning to consider ways they can adjust course syllabi to link theory and reality, for example, by inviting students to examine how theories are reflected in actual curriculum materials they are expected to implement in the field.

This finding is obviously related to the one immediately above, and the solution to both problems probably lies in the School's giving more attention—in both program structure and content—to *explicit* coherence between coursework and teaching experience.

### ***An emphasis on skills in classroom instruction***

This field study generated roughly 30 hours of direct observation of classroom practice. Two patterns emerged from these data. First, with few exceptions, the teachers were fundamentally competent in their instruction and management of students. Second, in the content of what they taught and their stated goals for teaching, the teachers gave overwhelming emphasis to development of basic skills, and little attention to the core ideas and most exciting problems of the disciplines. The classic example of this was the use of a poem to build vocabulary skills, but not to explore and appreciate the rhythms and evocative power of language. Observers saw (and heard about) almost no instruction that could be called project-based and none that could be called inquiry. Although students were generally engaged in lessons, for the most part they did not seem to be intellectually challenged by them. The faculty observers were disconcerted by this pattern. As one said, “We have creative credential students, but somehow they become procedural teachers.”

There seem to be two explanations for the pattern, and they have somewhat different implications for the School of Education. First, many of the curriculum materials that schools provide to these teachers translate into skills-based learning, and the state's emphasis on high-stakes tests reinforces that approach. In other words, the educational system communicates to teachers a preference for skills-based teaching. Second, we wonder—and we have no way of knowing—whether the content knowledge of the graduates (their knowledge of science, literature, history) is rich and deep enough to give them the means to infuse any curriculum they are expected to teach with the intellectual excitement that reflects the disciplines.

Any School of Education's contribution to teachers' content knowledge is necessarily limited. Students come to credential programs with a college major in hand, and although credential programs can be somewhat selective, they ultimately are not responsible for the nature and depth of candidates' subject matter preparation. However, Schools of Education can rethink their relationships with other university departments, as well as the content and pedagogy they use in their own methods courses. Even with the understanding that they affect beginning teachers for only a thin slice of their overall education, School of Education faculty can ask themselves: to what extent do we provide models of intellectually rich experiences in the disciplines, as well as practical skills? Where should our emphasis lie? Also, as stated above, Schools of Education can ask themselves about the extent to which they wish to prepare their graduates to fit into the system or change it.

The SSU faculty seems to have a real desire to see their graduates providing students with more opportunities for creative projects and inquiries, as well as building their basic skills. At the same time, the faculty is developing a more realistic sense of the extent of (or limits to) the effect of their credential program on graduates, given the histories that graduates bring into the program and the

contexts in which they end up teaching a short year later. Beyond looking at adjustments in coursework and other components of the credential program then, the faculty may want to explore additional avenues through which they can form longer-term relationships with graduates during their early years of teaching.

***Building a School of Education professional community while preserving context-sensitive credential programs***

The 18 graduates spanned all grade levels and a wide range of teaching contexts, including special education positions in a county office and boys' center. As the faculty members reported on visits, it became clear that the cultures of the schools, the norms and structures of the teacher communities, the problems schools deal with, the supports and barriers teachers face, and the values schools espouse—all of these differ dramatically across the contexts of elementary, middle, high school, and special education. The design of this study enabled faculty members to cross their usual program boundaries and help one another learn. However, very real differences in school contexts mean there are some different implications for the various credential programs. Thus, while it is important to foster a School-wide ethos and professional community, it also seems important to appreciate programmatic differences and be careful about defining what issues and questions exist in each of the programs.

**Findings about the process of self-study**

Although the self-study took real time and effort, the participating faculty members gave it a strong vote of confidence and said they wish to make it an annual project.

***The value of feedback from the field***

The participating faculty members said it was good for them to go into the field and see firsthand the actualities of the environments in which their graduates are working—the students in their rooms, the collegial and administrative climates of their schools, and the increasingly potent, complex demands of state and district policies. It was also instructive to see the actual practices of the graduates and then to engage in a neutral, structured, generally non-threatening discussion of what they had observed. Although there may still be some tendency among faculty to idealize the roles and practices of their graduates, we believe that ongoing reality checks such as this one will enable them to build their own course content and programs around grounded images of real students, teachers, and schools. The participating faculty members said they thought they should carry out this kind of study on an annual basis as a way of learning about how they are doing.

***Communicating a commitment to quality***

The graduates gave warm welcomes to faculty members, spoke to them candidly, and said they were happy that the School of Education was taking such an interest in their teaching in the real world, and in thinking of ways to improve the preparation programs. The faculty members thus discovered that a side benefit to the process was that it sent a quite visible message to the community that they are serious about serving their graduates—that they are not in an ivory tower, but they are actually going to schools, asking teachers for their opinions about how their work is going, and asking what they could have done better. With this project, the faculty showed a desire to listen and a degree of humility that was important.

### *Action research as legitimate university faculty activity*

Several faculty members plan to write a paper about the field study for the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting, and possibly for publication. There is also the possibility that they will present this self-study process to their colleagues across the CSU system as a model for self-assessment, program improvement, and faculty development. The field study thus seems to appeal to the faculty as a legitimate form of professional activity, beyond its immediate use as a tool for program improvement.

## **V. REFLECTIONS FROM AN OUTSIDER'S PERSPECTIVE**

Throughout this report (and the study itself), we of Inverness Research Associates have blended our observations with the findings and implications tentatively formulated by the School of Education faculty members. In this section, we provide some further thoughts of our own about the nature and design of the study and its implications.

### **Field-based self-study to inform decision making**

Perhaps the most common criticism of Schools of Education is that they are disconnected from the realities of schools. To some extent, distance is necessary because it provides Schools of Education with the perspective and discretion necessary to support school change and improvement. But the criticism has merit when the distance prevents Schools of Education from providing the best possible preparation to new teachers. We believe, in general, that there are great benefits to Education faculty who inform their own decision making with direct and firsthand knowledge about the actualities of work in real schools with real students.

The visit to the classroom was a crucial element of this study. It was important for administrators and faculty members to go to the schools, look at the rooms, talk to the students, watch the real activity of teaching, and then talk to the teacher about that real lesson. Faculty members' conversations with teachers were grounded in a way that is not possible in focus groups or interviews alone. In fact, our most general recommendation to any School of Education professor would be, "Go spend a day with a teacher."

The Sonoma State School of Education faculty embraced this study with enthusiasm and an authentic sense of purpose. In this first round of data-gathering and discussion, they showed capacity for reflection and non-defensiveness, and they have already begun to discuss specific changes. We believe they have great potential—as individuals and as a School—to make use of what they learned from the field to inform decisions about the mission, structures, and content of their programs.

### **The value of an inside-outside partnership**

An advantage of the design for this study is that all of the researchers were administrators and faculty members who are inside the system rather than outside of it. Their learning is thus occurring in real-time, and the lessons will continue to reside where they matter most—within the School. It is also important that the insiders were working in partnership with neutral outsiders who have an overall interest in high quality education at all levels, but do not have a vested interest in the particular outcomes of the study. Such "naïve" outsiders, if they establish goodwill and trust with those in the School, gain implicit permission to ask harder questions and make more provocative propositions than insiders sometimes can. Outsiders can also give insiders more opportunity to legitimately give voice to a wide range of perspectives and to move away from insular thinking.

We at Inverness Research thought of this relationship as a 20%-80% partnership, in which we (at 20%) created the structures, did the piloting to make sure the system would work and to conduct our own reality check, and served as guides, facilitators, critical friends, and spurs to action. If we had done more of the work, those on the inside (who did 80% of the work) would not have learned as much; and if we had done less, the study may not have been able to stay its course.

### **Transportability of this process to other universities**

We also believe this mechanism for program development has potential for use in other Schools of Education. With minimal resource support, a field study of this scope and structure can be carried out within the normal constraints of department business, and it can be done on an ongoing basis. In its nature and design, the study demonstrates both functional and symbolic commitment to self-review of one's own work. As faculty groups gain experience with this kind of study, they could eventually serve one another, across campuses, in the role of neutral outsider and critical friend. If field studies of this kind were to take place on several campuses, they could generate wisdom of substantial value to the CSU system as they address the challenge of preparing most of California's new teachers.