

## ***Negotiating Social Capital at the Intersection of University / School District Partnerships***

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### **VEXATION**

Over the last few years, I have been working to revitalize and grow a secondary teacher preparation program at a small catholic university in Texas. This work has led to the development of two field-based undergraduate courses at local secondary schools. I teach at a public middle school in the fall semester, and a public high school in the spring, both located in a large urban school district and both serving a diverse set of students. I am building relationships with many local school district administrators and teachers. And along the way is my increased understanding of the complexity and contextual nature of building such programs.

This year's vexation centers on the fragile nature of social capital in this setting, given the rapid changes that can occur at both local and regional levels in education. I have spoken at past Crossroads conferences about personnel changes at both university and school district that inevitably occur and how this re-shuffling of the social and political landscape at each site impacts the progress in establishing a successful and sustainable secondary program. In the last year, more changes have occurred that continue to challenge how the program is perceived and it what form it will continue.

At the university, the current dean (who provided strong support for my work) has stepped down. The process of hiring a replacement has been hampered by miscommunication, a contentious atmosphere, a split faculty, and a lack of trust between search committee and administration leading to a failed search. The current professional environment at the university does not foster a shared vision for the future of my program.

At the school district, the superintendent has left and the resulting state of flux in hiring a replacement has many administrators rocking on their heels as they wait to see what the new superintendent will be like. More losses to transfer and retirement have also plagued my best efforts to build a cadre of strong mentor teachers at each site. I have made some friends of administrators at each site, but I also watch as they struggle with the demands of running a school successfully in a climate of repeated testing and assessment. These are the allies that can get you the key to a classroom, or who can help school faculty understand the importance of working with university students, and who can help negotiate the social and political factors of working in the school setting. When they confide that they are thinking of leaving for greener pastures, my blood pressure tends to rise as I contemplate both the loss that would cause to the school environment, as well as my own work to try to shore up the eroding banks of willing and helpful school district allies.

The question and issue I'd like to consider centers on how to respond and be responsive to the vortex of social, political, and cultural elements that occurs at each site, and how to successfully negotiate the boundaries between personnel and programs at each level.

### **VENTURE**

To begin to both unravel and understand the context of working within a large urban school district at two secondary schools, I have become a part of both schools' formal community advisory councils (CAC) and thus have become more in tune with important issues at each site. The CAC monthly meetings also are important for networking with school leaders, parents and others in attendance and have helped school faculty recognize me in the halls. In addition to serving on the CAC for each school, I have also provided professional development workshops for teachers (an extremely important way to establish credibility with faculty), have partnered with the high school science department to co-lead a summer science camp related to our Noyce Scholarship grant, and am serving on a district-wide committee that is focused on preparing high schools for a recent statewide mandate for four years of science for high school students who are college bound.

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One other important accomplishment has been to hire the principal of one partner school as an adjunct to teach one of my courses on site. Having an administrator as an ally and co-instructor for the site based coursework is an important step to building and strengthening that program.

At the university level, I have lobbied for and been approved to teach an introductory science overview course for non-majors, a step that will allow me to gain social capital across schools at the university and will also serve as a tool to recruit students into the Noyce Scholarship program on campus. At the same time, I am working with another school of education colleague to establish a living learning community centered around teaching for social justice. This community will serve as a focus point for students and for my programs (both Noyce and the secondary program in general), with a focus and direction towards preparing a diverse teaching force with a social justice perspective.

Finally, I have been able to work with the assistant president for academic affairs at the university to plan for a more cohesive and unified presence on campus for teacher education. I am now lobbying to build a center for teaching leadership that would bring together four individual efforts (NSF Noyce teacher scholarship grant; the secondary level site-based teacher preparation program; a 300K grant to recruit high school students to teaching , and a small program to place math and science undergraduates in local high schools for content help) into an umbrella organization.

With this type of focused and consistent attention to building and maintaining a voice for the secondary program here, I am confident that the social capital I have accrued will continue to help me grow the work already completed. My biggest concern at this point is how this can be sustained beyond the efforts of one person. Building capacity and providing a strong foundation for the future is still somewhat nebulous to me. I would enjoy feedback from others who have successfully (or unsuccessfully) built and maintained initiatives that center on beginning secondary teacher development. Specifically, what are strategies you have used to successfully grow and strengthen your programs? How have you been successful in working with partners from school districts and community colleges? What suggestions do you have to negotiate the dynamic nature of school / university relations?