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## ABSTRACT

George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia, offers a doctoral program that concentrates on teaching in the community college. Many higher education programs in the country include community college education courses, but the focus of these programs is educational leadership and administrative responsibilities. The National Center for Community College Education (NCCCE) at GMU offers the only program in the country that focuses on academic disciplines in the community college. Students complete a series of courses in their own fields of study, as well as courses in the history of the community college and the current status of the community college. The program of study for the Doctor of Arts in Community College Education requires a minimum of 55 credits beyond the master's degree, completion of a teaching internship, passing a comprehensive exam, and completion of a dissertation. Students may transfer credits from other universities. The program is interdisciplinary, which allows for inventive and resourceful dissertations. This article argues that the program is a practical and academic response to the community college professional who wants to improve her/his teaching and scholarship skills. (NB)

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## The National Center for Community College Education: A Doctoral Program with *Difference*

*A doctoral program specifically designed for  
two-year college faculty offers unique opportu-  
nities.*

by Victoria N. Salmon

### Introduction

For years, several prominent scholars and educators associated with the community college have encouraged faculty training and development particular to the two-year school's needs and responsibilities. Cohen and Brawer in their well-known text, *The American Community College*, acknowledge that preparation for teaching in the community college is scattered and often nonexistent. They write that "an emphasis on breadth of preparation and on sensitivity to the goals of the community colleges and the concerns of their students" is necessary for future faculty (78). However Cohen and Brawer's research reports that, "few community college instructors were prepared in programs especially designed for that level of teaching. Few had even taken a single course describing the institution before they assumed responsibilities in it" (78).

Leaders within the English discipline have echoed these comments. Frank Madden, Mark Reynolds, and Howard Tinberg have made insightful statements about the serious deficiency in designing programs for potential and existing community college educators. Madden asserts in a recent essay:

Teaching English in the two-year college  
does not require less graduate school train-

ing. Ideally, it requires extensive preparation in both content and pedagogy—preparation that takes into account the nature of introductory courses and open admission/general education students. (725)

However, little discussion about formalized academic programs concentrating on teaching in the community college exists in academic texts.

For over ten years, a program that serves current and potential community college educators has escaped attention of many in higher education. The National Center for Community College Education (NCCCE) at George Mason University (GMU) in Fairfax, Virginia, was established in 1988 to encourage research, to increase knowledge and skills, and to promote the value of teaching in the community college. Many higher education programs across the country include courses on community college education; however, the focus of these programs is educational leadership and administrative responsibilities. Although students do take courses in educational leadership, the NCCCE student's program of study is *different* because it focuses on academic disciplines, the only community college education program in the nation to do so. Graduates from this program complete a series of courses in their own fields of study as well as courses in the history of

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the community college and the current status of community colleges. They are required to investigate, to examine, to deliberate, and to share theories and practices that affect community colleges around the world. The students may enroll in a certificate program or the doctorate program, a Doctor of Arts in Community College Education. The Center is vigorous in its efforts to preserve the value of a community college education and in its efforts to prepare future faculty.

NCCCE is dedicated to community college teaching. Other higher education programs offer courses on community college education, but they do not offer degrees that promote the two-year school as a viable and beneficial part of the academic community. In 1987, educators and administrators from the Virginia Community College System (VCCS) and George Mason University collaborated to create this unique program. George Vaughan, who had served as president and administrator at several community colleges, was the original director of NCCCE. He continues to write about the community college instructor's efforts to "break with tradition and [...] define scholarship" on her own terms (214). The NCCCE is nationally known through such organizations as the American Association of Community Colleges and the Association of Community College Trustees. It has been highlighted in *Community College Week*, *Community College Times*, *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, and *The Hispanic Outlook in Higher Education*.

While studying and conducting research in this graduate program, some students can receive Chancellor Fellowships offered by the VCCCS to Virginia community college faculty. Students who live in the nearby state of Maryland are able to pay in-state tuition through a reciprocal agreement between the two states'

offices of higher education. However, the student population of NCCCE comes from beyond the Virginia and Maryland borders. Several students live and work across the country—Montana, California, North Carolina, etc. These students come to GMU to complete part of their course work and return home to teach and to write their dissertations. Many of the doctoral students in the program can be labeled as "nontraditional"—like many of the community college students they plan to serve. The NCCCE student body consists of current community college faculty and administrators, retiring government or military personnel, and second-career professionals.

Dr. Gustavo Mellander, the current director of the National Center for Community College Education, reminds the students in the program that sixty percent of community college faculty and administrators will retire in the next five to ten years. The Virginia Community College System is beginning to experience this change, as are other two-year college systems across the nation. The Center's graduates should have ample opportunities for two-year college employment.

Applicants to the program must have earned a master's degree in a field that is taught in a community college and is also a graduate program at George Mason University. Some of the humanities fields are English, history, foreign languages, and music; other areas include sociology, economics, chemistry, biology, nursing, and computer sciences. In addition to these and other disciplines, students may major in public administration or educational leadership. Students must be accepted into the program by both the academic program and the NCCCE.

The program of study for the Doctor of Arts in Community College Education requires a minimum of 55 credits beyond

the master's degree. Students take 24 credits beyond the master's level in their individual discipline and at least 18 credits in the community college department. Students are also required to do a teaching internship, pass comprehensive examinations in community college education and their individual discipline, and write and defend a dissertation. Students may transfer credits from other universities.

The National Center for Community College Education works closely with the academic disciplines to ensure that students adhere to their programs of study and fulfill all program requirements. Each discipline has an advisor who supervises the NCCCE students in his or her department. Discipline advisors, regular faculty, and program administrators expect each student in the program to participate in professional and independent scholarship.

#### **The University Environment**

George Mason University's main campus in Fairfax serves over 23,000 graduate and undergraduate students in various disciplines. For the 1999–2000 academic year, GMU accepted just over 1600 transfer students from the five campuses of Northern Virginia Community College (NOVA). Past statistics indicate that the number of transfer students from the five campuses of NOVA have been close to the 1999–2000 number, approximately 65% of new undergraduates. Therefore, administrators and faculty members of the GMU community have continual experience working with the NOVA transfer student. The two institutions have coordinated many of their undergraduate programs, and NOVA's administrators, counselors, and faculty maintain an awareness of the academic requirements and articulation agreements between the two institutions.

The faculty and staff of the NCCCE firmly believe that encouraging both pedagogical research and academic scholarship serves the students of the program, the university which houses the program, and the neighboring two-year college community.

#### **The Faculty of NCCCE**

The faculty of the National Center for Community College Education has extensive experience in two-year college teaching and administration. The mission of the program follows the philosophy of George Vaughn, its original director: to investigate, examine, and create research and scholarship pertinent to the community college. The current director, not only teaches in the program, he does research and speaks to various audiences around the world about community college issues. In the past few years, he has been invited to Taiwan and Abu Daubi to discuss community college trends and topics.

Current and past presidents of regional community colleges have taught courses in educational leadership, multiculturalism, and administrative challenges of the future. For several years, Dr. Gail Kettlewell, the provost of the Manassass campus of NOVA has taught a historical overview of the community college. This course is the pre-requisite for all other work within the NCCCE program. Dr. Richard Gossweiler, a former administrator and current history professor at Germanna Community College, teaches another required course within the NCCCE program, Teaching in the Community College. These two courses form the basis from which the program's students learn about the unique attributes of the community college and its students. Doctoral students learn to deconstruct the myths about the two-year schools; they

speculate about the future agendas of the community college; and they do research and writing on multiple topics about the community college. Recent topics include the impact of social promotion on the community college student, current trends in student populations, transition from developmental courses to college courses, and student retention problems faced by the two-year college. As the students formulate theory, they discover pedagogical praxis, and they create scholarship.

Other courses in the program that promote lively thinking and discussion include Community College Teaching: Learning Styles; Curriculum Development; The Community College and Multicultural Issues; and Educational Leadership. After completing their course work, students are required to take the Research and Writing the Doctoral Project/Dissertation course. This course demystifies the research, writing, and defense of the dissertation as well as helps with the administrative hurdles. It is taught by a NCCCE graduate and community college English instructor—the author of this essay. The courses within the Center, in combination with the academic demands of the discipline courses, re-enforce the particular knowledge necessary to teach community college students successfully: disciplinary knowledge, knowledge of student populations, and knowledge about two-year institutions.

#### **The English Department and NCCCE**

The English department normally accepts about ten doctoral students in a two-year span; it is one of the most popular disciplines in the NCCCE program. Students take the required composition, literature, and theory courses, which are determined

by the department. Many of these courses have instructional components that allow students to focus on the pedagogy of writing and reading, for example: Seminar in Composition Instruction, Theory of Composition, New Developments in English, and Literary Scholarship. In these courses, and in other English courses, students are encouraged to explore areas that focus on the academic needs of the community college student, integrate these needs into class assignments, and merge this scholarship into future dissertations. A doctoral student in English in such courses may decide to write a bibliographic essay on works that concentrate on composition issues in the community college classroom, or the student may write an ethnography about teaching literature in a particular community college classroom experience. In the same manner, students taking a community college education course are encouraged to use their disciplines when writing or researching materials for class assignments. For instance, a composition instructor or writing center tutor may focus on Howard Tinberg's *Border Talk: Writing and Knowing in the Two-Year College* to illustrate the complexities of the community college student's writing process. In such ways, the pedagogical issues of the two-year college student are often the focus of the graduate student's course work. The NCCCE and the English department, as well as other disciplines, work together closely to ensure that the doctoral students are well prepared to create theory and to investigate praxis that affect teaching in the community college classroom.

#### **Scholarship and NCCCE Graduates**

Since its inception, over 75 doctoral students have graduated from the program, and about ten students a year receive the

program's certificate in community college teaching. Because the program is interdisciplinary, the topics for doctoral projects and dissertations are inventive and resourceful. Some of the titles include "The Influence of Multimedia on Writing about Literature," "The Effects of a Student Orientation Course on Student Retention and Success," "Evaluating Teaching Effectiveness in Community College Settings," "A New Paradigm for Teaching and Learning Theory: An In-Depth Look at Nine Mass Communication Theorists," and "The Visibility of a Voluntary Early Retirement Program for Full-Time Faculty in the Virginia Community College System: A Case Study." Some of the projects have been traditional quantitative studies; some have been ethnographic studies; and one, in particular, was a textbook with accompanying CD-ROM. Current students are working on topics such as distance learning techniques, a computer program for an Introduction to Chemistry course, motivational techniques for the English composition classroom, a comparison course covering French and Spanish Caribbean literature, and a staged musical. Each of these topics uses the community college as its base; for example, the musical will be performed by community college students. The individual disciplines and the NCCCE program encourage the doctoral students to be innovative and imaginative in their final academic writing project. However, such innovation does not mean lessened academic rigor. Projects are of

high quality, and many have received national recognition and resulted in books or articles.

The majority of the graduates have expressed their satisfaction with the program, and most have been promoted or received professional options that were not available to them before earning the doctor of arts degree. The Center's graduates have accepted jobs in two- and four-year colleges across the globe: New York, California, Palestine, Poland. One graduate who teaches speech and drama at NOVA received a Summer 2000 Fulbright Scholarship to Hong Kong and China. The program's success now means that many community colleges are beginning to seek out NCCCE graduates for employment.

### Conclusion

The National Center for Community College Education is a practical and academic response to the community college professional who wants to improve her teaching and scholarship skills. The rigorous program links courses about the history, philosophy, and mission of the American community college with courses within the doctoral student's teaching discipline. Doctoral candidates are encouraged to celebrate the *difference* of the community college student, while they examine new research and scholarship within their own fields of study. As a result, they engage in innovative research and scholarship and prepare themselves as community college professionals.

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Victoria N. Salmon earned her degree in English and community college education in 1997. She is currently an administrative assistant for academic issues at the NCCCE, and she teaches the research and writing course mentioned in this article. She has been an adjunct faculty member at Northern Virginia Community College for ten years, teaching English composition and literature.

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