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Published November 25th, 2009

St. Mary's Teacher Training Going Strong

By Lou Fancher

With daily headlines lamenting the woes and wherefores within the teaching profession, it's natural to wonder about the Kalmanovitz School of Education at Saint Mary's College. How is the economic strain affecting the teachers of tomorrow and the recent graduates of Saint Mary's programs?

"It's been a time when we've been on alert," says Dean Nancy Sorenson, beginning to answer the questions at hand. Surprisingly, she believes today's economic turmoil masks an actual teacher shortage: "It'll be on a dime that it turns and then we'll need teachers again," she states. Nine years as Dean at the college has given Sorenson an imperturbable dignity that runs counter to the field's tumultuous climate. The fact that enrollment has stayed strong this year provides support for her confident position.

If there has been a direct, negative impact at the college, it's in the Beginning Teacher Support and Assessment (BTSA) program. BTSA provides two years of professional development instruction during a new teacher's first five-year credential period. The program's funding strand was recently shifted into a larger pool and many districts are choosing to redirect their limited resources away from BTSA. Sorenson regrets the change, attributing California's high teacher retention rate-close to 85%-in part, to the program.

Monique Della Santina, a second-grade teacher at Donald Rheem Elementary, completed her undergraduate, credential and graduate programs at Saint Mary's. Last year, she came full circle, mentoring Muriel Schilardi through BTSA. "Overall, I think the program is so important," she says. The monumental stress of teaching, especially with cuts to the curriculum and fewer parents volunteering, surprises new teachers. As a mentor, Della Santina was able to provide encouragement and practical techniques for avoiding job burn-out.

A second, larger shift, impacting not just Saint Mary's, but all institutions for teacher training, comes as the result of demographic changes. In many areas, classroom diversity is extreme, posing a tremendous challenge for new teachers. Instead of leading a homogenous group, teachers encounter students with vastly uneven knowledge and experience. Some speak little or no English, many arrive from distressed homes, and others have a cultural background so unlike their peers that standard classroom behavior is a novelty.

"In the last 4-5 years, attention to evaluating students is a large part of the program," Sorenson explains. This means, in addition to the academic subjects and required testing, teachers must decipher and address an array of different learning profiles. According to Sorenson, the result is less attention to teacher training in the arts, math and sciences, and the philosophy of education. On a positive note, there's more cross-collaboration between classroom teachers, support staff and special education teachers.

Leyla Benson, the Principal at Nueva Vista Summit, an alternative high school, values the education she received at St. Mary's. "They give you the hands-on tools," she says, "and they do a thorough job following you as a student teacher." Benson credits the college faculty's depth and attention to detail for continuing to produce "competitive candidates and well-rounded teachers" to meet the job market.

What hasn't changed at the college is the fundamental approach to training teachers. "You have to stay current," says Gail Kirby, Program Director. Kirby has been with the college for two years; arriving after seven years in the Mount Diablo Unified School District. To accomplish this objective, the college offers an eclectic faculty, combining active teachers and experienced professors. Kirby, who still volunteers in area classrooms, says, "If we can't combine practice and research, it's meaningless."

Even in tough times, the educators know what draws young people to the profession. "The transfer of knowledge is powerful," Kirby states simply. Sorenson jumps in with her own take: "Because career options are so broad, there's a deliberateness," she says, "but candidates have a commitment to learning, to serving-and a belief that educating people can be life changing."

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