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Our University – College of Education

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Our University – College of Education

There are hundreds of institutions in the United States recognized today as universities that were called “teachers colleges” a half century ago. As these institutions grew and developed diverse areas of study the title “university” was deemed more appropriate.

No problem here as many organizations evolve and broaden their mission.

It is an oversight for institutions that have a foundation and history as teachers' colleges to abandon that distinctiveness in search of higher aspirations.

High aspirations are good for the soul. And powerful. Aspirational progress is the nature of a university: hopeful organizations striving for positive change in people and communities.

However, in the pursuit of higher aspirations, the genetic code might be lost. A friend of mine from the deep south used to say, “Ya' got to dance with who brung ya'.”

The flagship colleges on many university campuses could be, and sometimes should be, colleges of education. Yet, these colleges are often relegated to second class citizenship. Some bench scientists don't believe there is serious research in these academic units - no “big boy science”. Some social philosophers see too much politics in educational leadership and too much political correctness in teaching strategies and ideas, or not enough. Some humanists see a departure from what a university education is all about, and how school and the results of schooling should make a society better. Some applied scientists in professional schools see education schools as having little to do with new ideas that create new markets for new products.

And then there is work product, the research, the scholarship.

Someone once said that when you go to a convention of sociologists they talk about sociological method, but when you go to a convention of physicists they talk about physics.

For some in the human and social sciences there is a flawed notion, born in simplistic modern thought, that in order to be serious disciplines one type of science is needed, and it must conform to the scientific methods of the 20th century.

Really? And empiricism has no value?

“Physics envy” drives some colleges of education to abandon the historic essence of who they are. Ideas of why, how, when and what to teach are

inadvertently left behind. State and federal bureaucracies don't help by funding educational study that looks like flimsy microbiology married to funky psychology rather than forums to foster enriched teaching and learning.

This inevitably leads to poor imitations of an idealized and limited view of science potentially detrimental to the art of teaching and learning, yet simultaneously vital for students from kindergarteners to post-doctoral researchers.

The power of excellent teaching is transformative. I heard a mathematician say, "I need to be good at differential equations, and the quality of my teaching is not something I can have much impact on."

What a tragedy for an educator to hold such a limited view.

And further, how unfortunate that people who understand teaching excellence and its impact on learning cannot find a way to make that insight accessible to a good mathematician. I can hear Harlow, "You can lead a horse to water but..." And further still, and most unfortunately, how sad that the forces at work in universities might lead to professors assuming that whether or not you are a good teacher is a roll-of-the-dice.

No science here, of any stripe.

At our university and every other that has teachers' college roots, a college of education should be openly and highly valued for sustaining the masterwork of the ageless craft rather than imitating social, physical, or life scientists.

What's to apologize for? How is that second class?