Overview, Exhibit 3: Conceptual Framework

The Conceptual Framework is the rationale and organizing principle that guides the curriculum, programs, and outcomes for Preparing Exemplary Practitioners. It is grounded in research, knowledge, and experiences that describe what undergraduate and graduate candidates should know and be able to apply in their professional settings. It incorporates 10 descriptors, clustered into 3 interrelated and overlapping thematic commitments to preparing professionals to engage in field-based inquiry, to demonstrate professional excellence, and to contribute to the betterment of society.

National and state standards, including the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), Georgia Professional Standards Commission (PSC), and Specialized Professional Associations (SPAs) also are incorporated as criteria against which candidates are measured. We believe that we have developed a Conceptual Framework that articulates our philosophy and undergirds all programmatic efforts. The commitments and their descriptors are outlined as follows, yet we recognize that this organizational structure is fluid and descriptors may overlap and enhance all three commitments.

Commitment to Field-based Inquiry:
- **Inquisitive**: We believe that candidates should understand educational research and the implications for practice, have the ability to assess achievement and growth, and to question practices and investigate alternative solutions in educational settings.
- **Adaptive**: We believe that candidates should be able to demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to attempt promising new approaches for effective educational improvement.
- **Proactive**: We believe that candidates should be able to advocate for the removal of barriers and practices that impede educational improvement.

Commitment to Professional Excellence:
- **Leading**: We believe that candidates should be able to demonstrate effective leadership skills to initiate and facilitate educational improvement.
- **Reflective**: We believe that candidates should be able to demonstrate critical thinking skills and the ability to recognize their own internal strengths and weaknesses.
- **Knowledgeable**: We believe that candidates should be able to demonstrate general knowledge inherent in a liberal arts curriculum, advanced knowledge in content areas, proficiency in technology, and specific knowledge in professional education.
- **Decisive**: We believe that candidates should use data to make informed decisions that will drive educational improvement.

Commitment to the Betterment of Society:
- **Culturally Sensitive**: We believe that candidates should understand diversity among individuals and groups, be committed to equity and the belief that all children can learn, and have the tools to prepare their students and clients for the global world they will face as adults.
- **Empathetic**: We believe that candidates should be sensitive to the cultural, religious, gender, sexuality, and socio-economic differences that are reflected in their communities and ensure that these differences do not impede their educational progress.
- **Collaborative**: We believe that candidates should be able to develop skills to work effectively with various stakeholders involved in the educational process.
Graphic Schema for the Conceptual Framework

The design reflects our new theme of “Preparing Exemplary Practitioners” and our shared commitment to field-based inquiry, professional excellence, and the betterment of society. To provide continuity and preserve historical perspective, we retained the 10 descriptors of the qualities our programs strive to instill in our candidates (adaptive, proactive, decisive, leading, reflective, inquisitive, knowledgeable, collaborative, empathetic, and culturally sensitive), changing just a few to put them into parallel grammatical structure. The result, we feel, is a more contemporary graphic that conveys our forward-thinking approach to global education.

It also aligns with our College Vision Statement:

The College of Education at the University of West Georgia will lead the professional preparation of exemplary practitioners who individually and collectively influence the betterment of society within diverse, changing environments. As part of a doctoral comprehensive university, we are committed to teaching excellence, evidence-based practice, exploration and communication of new knowledge through applied research, and multifaceted collaboration.

Changes to the Conceptual Framework (since last review)

In 2009 the College held a retreat for all faculty and staff to examine our beliefs and vision and to make suggestions for revising the conceptual framework. From there, a committee worked over numerous iterations that were returned to the faculty many times seeking feedback. Through a college-wide process designed to analyze the existing conceptual framework, the faculty and staff reached consensus on several shortcomings. First, the language of the conceptual framework was focused on the development of teachers, though our college programs prepare educational professionals for a wide variety of roles. Even the theme “Developing Educators for School Improvement” was limited compared to the actual scope of preparation programs within the College. Second, many believed the Vision Statement was wordy and generic and not focused on what makes UWG unique. Third, the language used throughout was not up-to-date and did not reflect our current approaches or philosophies. Finally, the Conceptual Framework descriptors we had chosen were hard to remember, not written in parallel structure, and were not organized thematically.

Based on this analysis, several changes were made to the conceptual framework. First, the language was broadened to reflect the variety of programs within the College; for example, the theme was changed to “Preparing Exemplary Practitioners.” Second, the Vision Statement was completely revised through many iterations and now captures the direction we envision for the College. Third, the language and literature base of the Conceptual Framework was updated, and finally, the descriptors were modified for parallel structure and
then clustered into three commitments our faculty members embrace. To develop the graphic schema, we held
a competitive process, and a student’s design was chosen as our visual representation. In October 2009, the
faculty and staff voted to approve the new Conceptual Framework. We then met with school and community
constituents for input on operationalizing it and later developed visibility strategies to help ensure that all
college faculty, staff, candidates, and constituents know and understand the principles underlying the framework. Our
Conceptual Framework is a dynamic, living model that is under continuous revision. We seek feedback from
college within the College of Education as well as from colleagues in Arts and Sciences and Business, the
educational community, and graduates about ways to strengthen it and ensure we operate according to its
ideals.

Knowledge Base for Professional Commitments and Dispositions

Literature in the field serves as the basis for College of Education’s Conceptual Framework that drives the
work of the unit. We draw from myriad theories and research to build candidates’ knowledge, skills, and
dispositions, as follows:

**Knowledge**
We expect that our candidates are **knowledgeable** of the liberal arts curriculum, have advanced knowledge in
content areas, possess specific knowledge in professional pedagogy, and are **inquisitive** to keep their
knowledge base up-to-date. We believe that the educator’s acquisition of knowledge is paramount to being
able to disseminate knowledge to the learner. Hashweh (2005) indicates that educators need to develop
didactical constructions that allow them to “preserve the planning and wisdom of practice.” Through
development of content knowledge and pedagogical content knowledge, educators are better prepared to plan
learning activities and choose instructional strategies that will benefit all learners and deal with the intricacy
of classroom environments (Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf, 2009). With a strong knowledge and
pedagogical knowledge base, educators will be better prepared to meet the demands of contemporary
“globalized curricula” (Jacobs, 2010).

**Skills**
We value skills essential for good educational practice, including candidates’ ability to be **inquisitive,**
**adaptive** and **proactive,** as well as their ability to demonstrate that they then can be **reflective** and use data to
be **decisive** in driving school improvement. When educators are **proactive,** they positively affect the
performance of students in all educational settings. Fullan (2007) states that those who attend to changing
practices and who understand those changes will be empowered to do exceptional work, and thus positively
affect the environments in which they work. In settings which are increasingly diverse, excellence for all
students depends on the educator’s ability to adapt instruction and instructional strategies to meet the needs
of all learners (Cushner, McClelland, & Safford, 2003).

We believe that educators should be **proactive,** working to become effective advocates for the removal of
barriers that impede learning and hinder systemic change. Reactive educators spend too much time
responding to situations that arise in their schools. As educators become more proactive and improve their
professional practice, they have a greater impact on the learners with whom they come in contact (Jacobs,
2010). Wilmarth (2010) states that in order to promote positive learning outcomes, educators must be
actively involved with their students and the curriculum to ensure that the concepts which students are
expected to master remain relevant as “we enter the post literate era” (p. 81). To affect systemic change,
educators must employ strategies to know the students with whom they interact so that learning occurs for all
students (Wagner, 2001).

We also know that educators must be reflective, and use data and their own understanding of the educational
context to become **decisive** about educational improvement, especially as they grow in experience and
degree level. Because critical professional reflection of one’s own practice and the process of making instructional decisions plays an integral role in teacher empowerment and the improvement of educational practice (Mertler, 2009), it is vital that educators are able to demonstrate knowledge and skills in reflection and effective data-driven decision making. When educators are capable of—and skilled at—making well-informed decisions (i.e., based on available student- and school-level data), they become empowered to take professional risks, implement appropriate changes to practice, and lead change and improvement efforts (Mertler, 2009). Increasingly, the importance placed on educational accountability means that educators at all levels must show proof—tangible, statistically valid evidence—that what they are doing is working, and that students are learning faster and better (LaFee, 2002). The ultimate goal of a process of data-driven decision making is for educators to critically examine their curriculum and their instructional practices in light of the students’ actual performance on the variety of assessments used to measure academic learning and progress, and to use those data to improve educational practice (Mertler & Zachel, 2006). We try to promote and model our belief in redefining school effectiveness to reflect the value added to a child’s development each year they spend in school (Monson, 2002).

**Dispositions**

In addition to the dispositions linked to the knowledge and skills above, we believe educators must be *culturally sensitive* and *empathetic* in order to meet the needs of all students who come to schools from a wide variety of cultural and ethnic backgrounds. We expect our candidates to create educational learning environments that are equitable, which requires them to embrace multicultural and global perspectives, reflect upon their personal attitudes and beliefs about diverse groups in today's classrooms. Cruickshank, Jenkins, & Metcalf (2009) stress the importance of understanding the uniqueness of each learner. Indeed, educational excellence depends substantially on the educator’s ability to adapt instruction for diverse students. Our definition diversity includes, but is not limited to, ethnic or racial diversity. We believe that educators must be aware of the various ways their students are diverse—in terms of intellectual capability, culture, sexual orientation, language, family situation, educational experience, interests, and affluence. Educators must also be adaptive when planning instruction, which should be designed so that all students can succeed. Hollis and Guzman (2005) note that it is imperative that educators understand the correlation of their own knowledge and dispositions and how these affect their perceptions of students in diverse classrooms.

Finally, all of the above relate to the importance of educators leading—whether it is in their role as teacher or as part of the administrative team. We believe that school leaders should be *collaborative* individuals who have the skills to work effectively with various stakeholders involved in the educational process. Today’s educators collaborate within professional learning communities (PLCs), making data-based decisions about collegial learning to increase their effectiveness with students (Baccellieri, 2010; Hord & Sommers, 2008). PLCs are comprised of educators committed to working collaboratively in ongoing processes of collective inquiry and action research to achieve better results for students they serve (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). They are based in the notion that the key to improved student learning is continuous, job-embedded learning for educators. One of the key characteristics of PLCs—or “communities of practice” (James, Milenkiewicz, & Bucknam, 2008), as they are also known—is that innovation and experimentation are not viewed by the members of the PLC as tasks or projects to be completed, but rather as the way of conducting day-to-day business.

Leading educators also facilitate effective communication with parents, and the broader community. Marzano (2003) and Molner (2002) stress the importance of ongoing communication and support for families from educators. Research has shown that there is a positive link between parental involvement and student learning outcomes (Fan, 2001). In an increasingly diverse society, educators must also consider a number of variables and approaches as they work toward breaking the “one size fits all” model (p. 103) for working with students and their families (Voltz, Sims, & Nelson, 2010).
Perhaps most importantly, effective leaders regularly challenge their core beliefs about education and society (both theoretically and in practice), in order to create schools that serve diverse populations (Hoff, Yoder, & Hoff, 2006). In a rapidly changing world marked by an increasingly global economy, complacency toward difference is no longer an option in schools. School leaders must continually research best practices that improve education for all students, learn to recognize the subtle and complicated patterns of discrimination and inequity that can exist in schools, and ultimately create multicultural climates that prepare young people to be successful in the diverse settings in which they will function as adults (Allan, Hoff, & Estler, 2003).

**Commitment to Diversity**

We are dedicated to four cornerstones that illustrate our commitment to diversity. First, the institution works to create a diverse setting for our candidates at the University of West Georgia so they can learn from and engage with faculty and fellow-candidates from a wide variety of backgrounds and beliefs. We do this by actively recruiting diverse faculty and students, creating a welcoming environment, and encouraging active engagement among our entire university community. Research points to the benefits accrue when institutions encourage and support a climate that embraces multiculturalism and diversity (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2003; Hurtado, 2001).

Second, we believe that candidates must learn about diversity, and face their own biases and assumptions if they are to be well-prepared for the educational settings they will face in the future. We do this by including our classroom teaching a wide variety of readings, perspectives, and scenarios, giving them the opportunity to explore their own understanding of diversity in a safe setting. We want our candidates to move away from attempts to assimilate those who are culturally different, and instead develop curricula aimed at helping students understand more about themselves and others (Noguera, 1999).

Third, we work to instill in our candidates a responsibility to model acceptance and openness to diverse ideas and backgrounds. This means we want them to recognize privilege, understand the consequences of oppression, and advocate for equity in education (Johnson, 2005; Spring, 2009). We believe this will carry over to their roles in the classroom, where modeling these principles helps the youngsters they teach be better prepared for the global world they will face as adults (Allan, Hoff, & Estler, 2003).

Finally, we consciously place students for their practica and internships into public schools that are as diverse as possible. In order to prepare our candidates for teaching in any setting, it is important for them to be pushed beyond their own comfort zone and familiarity. Multiple studies concur with this position that students who report interactions with diverse peers have shown a greater willingness to challenge their own beliefs as they develop teaching philosophies grounded in equity and the belief that all children can learn (Hurtado, 2001).

Specifically, diversity is a focus throughout our curricula. For courses that address diversity proficiencies, please see Standard 4, Exhibit 2: [http://www.westga.edu/coeaccreditation/ncate/documents/Standard_4_Exhibits_dhoff_standard_4_ex_2.pdf](http://www.westga.edu/coeaccreditation/ncate/documents/Standard_4_Exhibits_dhoff_standard_4_ex_2.pdf)

**Commitment to Technology**

Technology is an integral part of the programs, courses, and experiences in the College of Education, and we do not consider it to be a separate entity within our Conceptual Framework. Instead, technology is embedded throughout the curriculum, and we expect our candidates to integrate technology appropriately into instruction (Hur, Cullen, & Brush, 2010; Inan, & Lowther, 2010; Roblyer & Doering, 2009). We want our graduates to have a clear understanding of how technology is changing education (Bonk, 2009; Nelson, 2007) and facilitating achievement for diverse learners (Bray, Brown, & Green, 2004).
Specifically, teacher education programs at the University of West Georgia prepare candidates to use technology through several routes. Most programs require candidates to take MEDT 3401 Integrating Technology into the Curriculum or MEDT 3402 Integrating Technology into the Classroom. These two courses are based on the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) National Education Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS), as well as the Georgia Technology Standards for Educators (GTSE). Both the national and the state standards include objectives related to use of technology to support teaching, learning and the curriculum as well as the use of technology for assessment and evaluation of student learning and instructional improvement (formative evaluation). MEDT 3401/3402 instructional objectives and course activities support these standards. The technology concepts and practices covered in these two courses are subsequently reinforced in methods courses within each discipline. The Business Education and Physical Education programs use a similar model, but they require their candidates to take a discipline specific technology course (ABED 4117 Technology Support Systems for Business, PHED 3401 Integrating Technology into Health and Physical Education for Physical Education) that is aligned to the NETS and GTSE standards.

Four programs (Art, Earth/Space Science, Music, and Physics) follow a technology integration model. The national and state technology standards are integrated into a series of courses within the discipline, and through the series of courses, candidates meet the same technology standards that are addressed in MEDT 3401/3402, ABED 4117, and PHED 3401.

Alternative teacher education programs at the University of West Georgia prepare candidates to use technology through completion of an approved course. Most non-degree programs require candidates to take MEDT 3401 Integrating Technology into the Curriculum or MEDT 6401 Instructional Technology. Business Education also allows candidates to enroll in ABED 4117 Technology Support Systems. Master’s programs require candidates to take MEDT 6401. Like MEDT 3401, MEDT 6401 is based on the International Society for Technology in Education (ISTE) National Education Technology Standards for Teachers (NETS), as well as the Georgia Technology Standards for Educators (GTSE). These standards include objectives related to use of technology to support teaching, learning and the curriculum as well as the use of technology for assessment and evaluation of student learning and instructional improvement (formative evaluation). MEDT 3401/6401 and ABED 4117 instructional objectives and course activities support these standards.

The three main principles of Universal Design, providing multiple means of representation, action and expression, and engagement are supported through both the technology course model and the multiple course integration model. Candidates are required to use technology to present information in a variety of formats to address diverse learner needs; to develop learning activities that require their students to use a variety of technologies to creatively solve problems and fluently express and communicate their findings; and to use technology to develop and sustain student interest and participation. The concepts are introduced and practiced in the technology courses, and subsequently modeled and reinforced in later classes and field experience.

References


