

A FUTURE TEACHERS CONFERENCE —A VEHICLE TO RETAIN, INFORM, AND INSPIRE NEW AND PROSPECTIVE TEACHERS

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Abstract

The Los Angeles Collaborative for Teacher Excellence (LACTE) Future Teachers Conference is a day-long learning event for beginning and pre-service K-12 math and science teachers. The Conference provides information, resources and connections tailored to the needs of prospective and new teachers. A unique aspect of the conference is that a group of new and future teachers serve as partners with college faculty on the planning committee. Thus the Conference not only serves to educate new and future teachers, but also provides leadership training for the planning team members; and, the presence of prospective and new teachers on the planning team ensures that the conference sessions effectively target the intended audience's interests. This conference is the most popular activity for new and prospective teachers in the Collaborative. Over the five years the conference has been held, its attendance has grown to 120-150 participants annually. A planning handbook is available to assist anyone interested in organizing a similar event.

Background

The Los Angeles Collaborative for Teacher Excellence (LACTE) was one of twenty multi-institutional projects, called Collaboratives for Excellence in Teacher Preparation (CETP), funded by the National Science Foundation to enhance the training of pre-service science and mathematics teachers. During 1995-2001, LACTE brought together ten institutions of higher education in the greater Los Angeles area—community colleges, members of the California State University system, and private colleges and universities—to join the national effort in promoting excellence and innovation in science and mathematics education. The project's goal was to improve K-12 science and mathematics teaching, and to increase the number of students from underrepresented groups who choose a career in teaching.

The approach to achieving this goal was four-pronged:

- enhance the teaching skills of college and university faculty, so that they would better educate the prospective teachers, and better model good educational practices;
- provide support for curriculum development and program revision, to allow faculty to develop and revise content and incorporate a variety of effective educational approaches, such as active learning, cooperative learning, inquiry-based teaching, inclusion of formative assessment procedures, and problem-based learning;
- work within the university culture to enhance the status of teaching, both as a career for math and science students, and as a legitimate focus for university faculty; and,
- recruit, retain, and better prepare more students for the K-12 teaching profession through a series of ongoing support structures, including campus-based student groups, teaching internships in schools and informal education settings, and Collaborative-wide events for prospective teachers.

The LACTE Future Teachers Conference was one of the activities the project originated to help recruit, retain, and better prepare its future and new teachers. A pre-service teacher with a high level of academic preparation and a heightened awareness and knowledge about what it means to be a teacher is more likely to do well and stay in the profession. Retention is critical in addressing the current teacher shortage, since fully 11% of the teachers entering the workforce leave the profession after one year. And after five years, the attrition rate reaches 40%, according to *Before It's Too Late: A Report to the Nation* from The National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century [1]. In California, these percentages are even higher. This is partly due to the limited opportunities available for future teachers to learn firsthand about the teaching profession. The document, *Investing in Tomorrow's Teachers: The Integral Role of the Two-Year Colleges in the Science and Mathematics Preparation of Prospective Teachers* makes a strong case that early pre-teaching experiences can provide a student with the support, encouragement, and resources to continue on this career path [2]. The LACTE Future Teachers Conference was designed to do exactly that.

The Conference, offered annually since 1996, developed from a suggestion from the students themselves. In the early years of the project, LACTE sponsored a series of faculty development workshops to assist the college and university faculty in acquiring new teaching

tools, and to help them incorporate these into their courses. Faculty returned to their classrooms from these workshops with renewed interest and enthusiasm—an outcome that was not lost on their students, many of whom who were prospective teachers participating in the LACTE project. They approached the project leadership and asked if they could have a similar activity, one that would both inform and motivate. The leaders conferred, and agreed that the students should have their own conference, and that they should play a major role in organizing the event. Thus was born the LACTE Future Teachers Conference.

The Conference

Planning of the day-long Conference begins about three months before the date of the event, and consists of a series of four to six meetings, with additional e-mail and phone communication. Student participation and leadership in the planning process and implementation give this conference a unique perspective. The planning team consists of LACTE students, K-12 faculty and LACTE community college and four-year institution faculty. The faculty members provide advice and support to student planners, an ongoing foundation for the planning process and the historical memory, since the student planners tend to change each year.

Students are active and respected decision makers throughout the process, and deal with virtually every aspect of the Conference except managing the finances. Even there they are kept well informed, so that they understand the various issues involved with securing and budgeting the funding for this type of event. The following lists clarify how the students and faculty work in concert to produce this Conference.

Under the guidance of the faculty, the student planners are responsible for:

- selecting the topics for the sessions;
- identifying and contacting potential speakers for the sessions;
- making arrangements for morning refreshments and lunch;
- preparing the packets for distribution on the day of the conference;
- securing the attendance prizes.

The LACTE faculty planners are responsible for:

- supplying the feedback from the previous year's conference;
- describing desired qualities of speakers;

- supplying contact information for some potential speakers;
- supporting the students as they select and contact speakers;
- preparing and distributing the agendas and minutes for the planning meetings;
- preparing the materials for the packets;
- preparing and distributing correspondence with the speakers;
- handling all financial aspects of the conference.

Student autonomy, in defining the focus and the structure of the Conference, is a hallmark of the event. Although not foreseen at the time the first Conference was being organized, giving students the power to make decisions proved to be very wise because they understood, in way that faculty couldn't, what issues most concerned future teachers. At times, the faculty involved felt that important topics were being left out, or that there might be too great an emphasis on areas that they saw as less critical; but by design, the student planners have the final say as to topics, presenters, and structure. Faculty are there only as advisors and mentors.

At one point in the LACTE project, its National Visiting Committee (an oversight body required by the National Science Foundation on CETP projects) was critical of the absence of Conference sessions devoted to certain issues. However, when they learned that the students, and not the faculty, had made these choices, the National Visiting Committee reconsidered. They agreed that having given the students the mandate to make these choices, the project was obligated to respect them. In the final analysis, the National Visiting Committee applauded the Collaborative for doing so. In addition, the event attendance and the evaluations of the event have shown again and again that the students on the planning team accurately identify the areas of greatest concern to new and prospective teachers.

Early on, the student planners made it clear that they wanted a mix of sessions on "how to teach" math and science topics, and sessions on practical aspects of preparing to become and function as a teacher. Their instincts proved correct; these practical sessions were the popular offerings, and in the later years of the Conference were offered repeatedly throughout the day. They were also the sessions rated most highly by the attendees in their evaluations.

A sense of the types of sessions offered at the Conference can be gleaned from the following list. In the typical conference format, sessions run concurrently throughout the day, with four or five running in parallel.

Classroom Management for the Elementary School Classroom
Classroom Management for the Secondary School Classroom
"Rainbow, Color and Light"—A Science Lesson for the Elementary Classroom
"An Ocean of Air"—An Inquiry Lesson for the Secondary Classroom
"Making Math Meaningful"—A Lesson for the Elementary Classroom
"Math Magic"—A Lesson for Fun for Elementary School Students
"Physics Phun"—A Hands-on Secondary Science Lesson
Using the Graphing Calculator in the High School Math Classroom
A New Teacher Panel for the Elementary Grades (or for Secondary Grades)
The Bilingual and Dual Immersion Classroom
Using Technology in the Elementary School Classroom
Integrated Student-Centered Technology Lessons
"El Niño Impacts"—An Interdisciplinary Lesson for High School Science
Résumé Writing and The Interview Process
The Credential Process in the State of California
A Principal's Advice to New Teachers
How to Evaluate Job Offers: Comparing Salaries and Benefits
How to Become a Substitute Teacher and the Tricks of the Trade

Another unanticipated outcome of the Conference was that it provides new teachers with a venue in which to present their work and view themselves as teachers of teachers, as well as teachers of students. By the third year of the Conference, some of the sessions were being presented by graduates of the LACTE program and by some of the former Conference planners who were by then teaching. It was gratifying to see that these young teachers had carried the lessons of the LACTE project so effectively into their own teaching. It was also exciting to see them sharing these lessons, from their perspective as new teachers, with those following in their footsteps. This "coming full circle," from student to teacher of teachers, is a powerful endorsement for the leadership preparation provided by the LACTE project.

Evaluation

Determining the value of the Conference to the participants has always been important to the LACTE project. All Conference participants are asked to complete an evaluation form at the end of the day. To enhance the return rate on the evaluations, those who complete the evaluation

receive a ticket for a drawing for education-related prizes, including books and materials, passes to the local IMAX and museums, and LACTE t-shirts and sweatshirts.

The evaluation instrument was designed to capture student response to the Conference, and how they felt what they've learned would contribute to their teaching, or influence their desire to teach. It was used as a summative evaluation of the current year's effort, and as formative evaluation information for the following year. It also collected demographic data from the participants. This data has shown that the Conference has grown in attendance each year, reached a diverse audience, and expanded to include students from Los Angeles area colleges and universities outside the Collaborative. Over the five years of the Conference, 98% of the participants said that the Conference met or exceeded their expectations. All of the attendees have stated that as a result of attending the Conference, they were either more likely to become a teacher or there was no change in their career goals. Typical comments from evaluations expressing participants' thoughts about their likelihood of becoming teachers were:

- “I made up my mind to teach long ago. This just helped me to see different views and learn many more things that will help me when I teach.”
- “My mind did not change. I am more motivated now.”
- “I feel even more strongly about teaching and giving students a high quality of education.”
- “The information received at the conference gave me a better overview of what lies ahead for me, thus taking away any doubts that I had.”

The following comments indicate the value that the attendees found in this event:

- “It is both exciting and beneficial to meet other people with the same goals and ideas, as well as experience professionals sharing their stories and giving concrete help.”
- “Before I was afraid of classroom management, but after today's conference, I think I *can handle it.*”

- “Thinking about the credential process has been scaring me, but the conference gave me hope.”
- “Today's conference really made me feel like a professional. I received a great deal of information and felt that there are supportive people to help me reach my goals.”

Summary

The LACTE Future Teachers Conference brings together expert teachers, principals, and teacher educators to address the many questions college students considering a career in teaching have. It provides accurate information, serves as a meeting place for students with similar career interests, and gives participants encouragement to continue on a career path to teaching. The Conference also offers information and encouragement to beginning teachers, helping them address the challenges they face during their induction years.

A significant feature of the Conference is the integral participation of new and future teachers in the planning process, ensuring that the event effectively targets the needs of Conference attendees. Moreover, student planners develop skills and experience required to plan conferences and meetings for their schools, school districts, and professional organizations.

The fact that four other CETP projects funded by the National Science Foundation (located in the States of Washington, Virginia, Pennsylvania, and Maine) have chosen to incorporate a future teachers conference in their projects offers testament to the effectiveness of such a conference in informing, encouraging, and training future/new teachers. Further endorsement was gained when Washington Mutual signed on to support the Conference for the upcoming year.

Although the LACTE Future Teachers Conference focuses on the preparation of K-12 teachers in science and mathematics, this event can serve as a model for future and new teachers of any discipline or grade level. To assist others in replicating this event, a manual that describes how to plan such a conference, *Future Teachers Conference: Planning Handbook*, was produced with support from the Los Angeles Collaborative for Teacher Excellence [3]. The manual explains how to finance, organize, advertise, and evaluate a future teachers conference, including

such details as selecting a conference site, choosing a time schedule, finding speakers, organizing registration, documenting the conference with video, and finishing post-conference tasks. A variety of forms, letters, and a sample press release are provided in an appendix of the Handbook.

Conclusion

A conference designed by and for future and new teachers can be a tremendously powerful vehicle for informing and inspiring the next generation of teachers. It gives the planners a chance to build their confidence and leadership skills by working closely with each other, K-12 teachers, and college faculty; and, it helps new teachers build the support community so critical to surviving their first years in the classroom. ■

References

- [1] *Before It's Too Late: A Report to the Nation from the National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century*, The National Commission on Mathematics and Science Teaching for the 21st Century, Washington, DC, 2000.
- [2] *The Integral Role of the Two-Year Colleges in the Science and Mathematics Preparation of Prospective Teachers*, National Science Foundation, Washington, DC, 1998.
- [3] J. Kasabian and J. Dewar, *Future Teachers Conference: Planning Handbook*, Los Angeles Collaborative for Teacher Excellence, Los Angeles, CA, 2000, Internet: <http://www.lacteonline.org>