

**CANISIUS COLLEGE
SCHOOL OF EDUCATION AND HUMAN SERVICES**

“A Summary of Employer Perceptions”

Focus Group Study Conducted on August 15, 2013

Moderated by: Dr. James Donnelly

Report Written by: Dr. Nancy Wellenzohn

INTRODUCTION

CAEP Standard 2 requires the following:

The provider ensures that effective partnerships and high-quality clinical practice are central to preparation so that candidates develop the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to demonstrate positive impact on all P-12 students' learning and development.

Sub-Standard 2.1 elaborates more about clinical partnerships. It states:

Partners co-construct mutually beneficial P-12 school and community arrangements, including technology-based collaborations, for clinical preparation and share responsibility for continuous improvement of candidate preparation. Partnerships for clinical preparation can follow a range of forms, participants, and functions. They establish mutually agreeable expectations for candidate entry, preparation, and exit; ensure that theory and practice are linked; maintain coherence across clinical and academic components of preparation; and share accountability for candidate outcomes.

Goals of this Study:

Canisius College has established partnerships with many schools and districts from across Western New York. Some partnerships are classified as Professional Development Schools, following the guidelines for PDS relationships as set forth by NCATE (<http://ncate.org/LinkClick.aspx?fileticket=FcHbf2B%2b670%3d&tabid=125>). The PDS relationships include vibrant, two-way communication that enables Canisius to hear and react to the needs of the schools/districts and for the schools/districts to actively employ our vision and goals for teacher preparation occurring within their schools. In addition to the formal PDS relationships, Canisius also maintains advanced partnership relationships with other schools/districts with the same goals in mind, the difference being that a formal PDS arrangement has not yet been established.

It is important for Canisius College to ask for feedback from these partners in order to assess our effectiveness and make any changes needed for improvement. In the past, this feedback was solicited via e-mail and mailed surveys sent directly to employers who have hired

specific graduates. These e-mail addresses were provided by the graduates after securing employment. The effectiveness of this method of feedback collection was constrained by the response rate of the students in providing the e-mail addresses of their supervisors and by the response rate of those supervisors. The SEHS decided to employ a different method of data collection that might provide more meaningful results while contributing to the partnership relationships described above. It was decided that a Focus Group Study would meet both goals which are to provide rich, descriptive data and to foster development of positive partnership relationships with administrators in the schools where our candidates are employed after graduation. These same sites are also where interns and student- teachers are placed during clinical portions of their preparation programs.

The Focus Group:

The Focus Group study was conducted on Thursday, August 15, 2013 during a luncheon meeting held on campus. The Canisius College Director of Field Experiences and Partnerships personally invited administrators from several of our PDS schools and advanced partnerships. These leaders were selected because the Director was aware that these schools/districts are significant employers of Canisius College graduates from teacher preparation, administrator preparation, and counseling preparation programs. Six respected leaders took us up on the invitation to participate in this Focus Group Study.

Sweet Home Central School District has a PDS relationship with Canisius. We were fortunate to have two leaders from that district participate. Tony Day, the Superintendent of Schools, and Jolene Reinholz, Principal of Sweet Home High School, were both able to attend this session. Tapestry Charter School is also a PDS school for Canisius. We were fortunate to

have Christina Lesh, Principal, and Jack Turner, Assistant Principal both in attendance. The City of Buffalo Public Schools is a major employer of Canisius graduates. They are the biggest employer of K-12 professionals in Western New York. Darren Brown, the Executive Director of Talent Management and former Principal of the Buffalo Academy of the Performing Arts, was also able to attend. We were fortunate to also have Mark Crawford, the Superintendent of the West Seneca Central School District which is another major public school district in Western New York.

While it is impossible to say that this group is representative of all employers in Western New York, they are significant field placement partners and employers of our candidates after graduation. Their insights do help us to measure the perceptions of Canisius graduates and do provide guidance for needed changes going forward. This exercise proved to be a very worthwhile endeavor. This opportunity is important to the schools as well as Canisius. As Tony Day put it:

I also know that [qualities] we seek in our graduates because... we had established a rubric of sorts of our own that drew heavily, and compiled a lot of the work of people that we had studied, and Liz [Canisius Director of Field Experience] would take that work back to here so that those points would be built into the Teacher Education Program. So, we always thought that Canisius people had a leg up coming in knowing the kinds of things that we were seeking.

Description of the Format:

The Focus Group was moderated by Dr. James Donnelly who is a professor in the Counseling Department. At the time, Dr. Donnelly was new to Canisius so he was able to act as an impartial moderator of the discussion. He had no previous relationship with any of the participants. The session was attended by Dr. Jeff Lindauer and Dr. Nancy Wellenzohn, but the

role of the Canisius staff was to just ask clarifying questions, if needed. The Canisius staff were not active participants in the Focus Group.

Dr. Donnelly was prepared with several topics of conversation which were loosely developed using the Canisius College SEHS Conceptual Framework. The topics included graduate knowledge and skill, graduate impact on K-12 students, service inclination of graduates, and professionalism/interpersonal qualities of graduates. Ice breaker questions for each topic were provided by Dr. Donnelly, but the conversations were free-flowing and took the direction prompted by the participants, not the moderator.

The Focus Group discussion lasted about 90 minutes. The discussion was recorded and was later transcribed for analysis. The transcripts were reviewed and coded by Dr. Wellenzohn using NVIVO 9.0. Codes were identified “in-NVIVO” which means they were identified as the responses were being read, not in advance. These codes allowed for the development of themes which provided the framework for analysis. A discussion of the themes and presentation of the data associated with each are presented below.

THEMES

I. Knowledge and Skill of Canisius-Trained Teachers

Canisius-prepared teachers have a reputation for being well-prepared, both in their content knowledge and in pedagogy. Mark Crawford related:

I would say that for our student teacher candidates who are graduates we have hired from Canisius, the knowledge in their content area is very strong, especially when I think about our 7th and 8th grade teachers that went through a Secondary Ed preparation (whether it is Science, or Language Arts), it is a very rich background. And they have a deeper understanding than a surface-level declarative knowledge. It is more than that. For our elementary teachers, those that picked a concentration seem to have a better handle on that specific content area. Sometimes, I know they don't need to pick a specific content area. But, they know their field. They know their discipline well. As far as pedagogy, they know

developmentally what is appropriate for children and what is going to make learning engaging for children at that age. As with any first-time teacher, there is some need for a learning curve, but they still know how to make learning exciting for them.

Christina Lesh believes that Canisius graduates have both content and pedagogical content knowledge. She related a story about a graduate who was able to find a creative way to teach important content, and she was most impressed with how she did it. She related:

I can give you one specific example. In 2010 we had a student teacher candidate, that we actually just hired, and for one of our learning expeditions, which was about the human body, and making wise decisions about your body so that you don't harm yourself, she came up with a really engaging way for these students to look at the different body systems like an amusement park. The kids made visual models of the different human body systems as an amusement park, but what happens if you gum up the gears and start making bad decisions. The kids had a lot of fun with that, but they had to really dig in deep to the content to understand how to create the visual. For a student teacher candidate—she was in the master's program at the time, so she wasn't in the undergraduate program, but it really reflected a deep understanding of the content.

Darren Brown agreed with Christina Lesh and Mark Crawford. He said “I know that the content knowledge is deep. It is a very thorough content knowledge.”

Tony Day thinks that the strength of the program is connected to the partnership communication that happens day in and day out. He related:

Well, if we are answering the question now--what does Canisius do better, and what should it keep doing? The program is grounded in best practice. The people that are writing the program, the people that are creating the expectation for kids. They are tapped in to practice in the field, and as a district where we try to model and emulate that same concept, forges a much stronger relationship because that value that as a professional, you have to keep learning, and there is a way that the research says to try it. That you have to personalize it to make it work in your own way, but I think that link is there. And, I think it has been open.

None of the participants in the Focus Group related an incident where candidates were under-prepared in the content area. There was also high praise for Canisius' willingness to counsel candidates out of the field in the very rare instances where the candidate is not a good fit [pedagogically] for education. Christina Lesh mentioned :

...as a professional development school, we are on the one side where we know the students that come through, and being a graduate myself, I know what the preparation looks like. But, being on the side of working closely with our professional development school supervisor, we also know that in the rare instance where we have a student teacher candidate who really does not have the dispositions for teaching, when we come back to Canisius and say, we are really concerned, Canisius has never blown us off. Canisius has always been very responsive to that, and if there was a candidate that needed to be counseled out of the program. You know, I am sorry, we just don't think that teaching is the right field for you. They have always been responsive with that. What that tells me is that when I look at someone who has graduated from the Canisius program and has a teaching certification, we know that they deserve that certification and that they haven't just gone through the motions, and they have the dispositions that are so necessary for teachers.

It is clear that the willingness to truly evaluate the effectiveness of our students gives the employers the confidence that the need to hire the graduates. They truly know that those who graduate have made the cut, both in the classroom and in the field.

II. Knowledge and Skill of Canisius-Trained Administrators

Canisius College Administrative graduates enjoy extremely positive perceptions. In fact, 5 of the Focus Group participants obtained their administrative certification at Canisius. They know the program from the inside and from the outside so this gives their opinions credibility. It would be difficult to find a district in Western New York that does not have Canisius-trained administrators and in some Canisius has trained most of their administrative staff. Mark Crawford from West Seneca Central Schools related:

We have seven current administrators. One is principal at one of our high schools. One is a new principal at one of our middle schools. One is a Director of Special Education. Another is an assistant principal at one of the high schools. Another is an assistant principal at a middle school. Another is a principal at an elementary school. And another who is an assistant in the other high school. Those who are assistants certainly get involved in scheduling. One used to be Chair of Mathematics at that high school. Another was Chair of Social Studies. So, they seem to know their content areas. But they also got to know... because they listen well to the concerns of other department chairs when it comes time to do scheduling. Each one of the seven of them is a very professional, capable, and caring young person who clearly demonstrates a strong service ethic. And, my experience with them is

that they treat everyone with positive regard. They do a great job with the parents and certainly with the young people and children.

Darren Brown of the Buffalo Public Schools related that BPS likes to hire Canisius-trained administrators who interned in BPS schools. He said:

...we knew that we wanted him [a current teacher] to take over one of our Assistant Principal positions. He did his coursework here at Canisius, and interned with us also. And, in the summer, he ran our summer school program. He was top-notch. We knew what type of training he had. And he, actually, was such a big part of the school building, he had been an administrative sub, he was part of the school district management team meetings, participated in the PTSO meetings, and that is truly what we are looking for. We look at all of those experiences you have had, while you were a teacher. We get many people coming to the interviews and saying what they are going to do about... Well, what have you done? So that is what we look for. We actually had someone interview last week and is meeting with the superintendent today, that came in, discussed everything like APPR, composite effectiveness scores, talked about the number of priority and focus schools. They just knew a good amount of information, and in the district they had been to a number of the superintendent round tables. Those are the type of people we are looking for—those that have not just the theory behind the administration, but actually have the experience.

Darren also believed that Canisius administrative graduates are strong because of the network of other administrators and Canisius faculty on whom they can draw for support. He mentioned:

Graduates that come from the administration program, I can say, have already a core group of people that they have access to, including their professor. They know many of the adjunct professors who are actually practicing administrators, so they can reach out to those people. So, once they get in a position, they never feel like they are alone. Not only do they have their colleagues that they have developed a relationship with, but they also have their professors that they are still in contact with that are in the field. When I became an Assistant Principal, I contacted Joe Gentile [a Canisius Adjunct Professor] on a number of issues a number of times. So, I know that that is available and that is still there.

One common experience expressed, though, was the willingness of Canisius-prepared administrators to go over and above the call of duty. This includes being responsive to all constituencies within the schools. Jolene Reinholz felt that it was necessary to call one out by name. She said:

The reason why I brought that up is because Rob McDow, who is African American, works at our school district. Our population of African American students has been increasing substantially over the last couple of years, and Rob, although he is in the District Office, and his responsibilities, of course, don't necessary have to do with, or are tied directly to, student instruction or student management. He is more management, but he has made a point to come to the high school and really become part of the program with our students. So, he actually facilitates a group called Soul, which is a group that was generated by our students who came forward and who like to come together and to have a club, a place for students of diverse backgrounds, to come. Now, it has actually opened up to all students of all races. So, it is a mixed group of kids who get together once a week with Rob as the facilitator alongside one of the teachers, and they bring in different people—local people as role models. They talk to the kids about the importance of education, also about the importance of making sure that they are proud of their heritage, and different ways that we can support that at Sweet Home in our schools. He has done a wonderful job with that. I haven't seen that—where District Administrators actually—he actually asked to be a part of that. And he has a presence in our school. He often comes down and has lunch with the kids. He is a great advocate.

This sentiment was echoed by Darren Brown, who commended Jolene Reinholz and her attitude as a Canisius graduate. He related:

Can I just say add one more thing? We would be remiss if we left this session, without me telling you that the best evidence that I can offer for this study of the Canisius alumni embracing of diversity is just to simply watch any of the tapes of the last six graduations that we have had because on the stage is Jolene Reinholz, an alumnus from the Administration Program, and I would ask you to watch the three hundred or so kids and how many give her a hug, you know, a personal hug, and how many of them are kids of color, some of whom she has had to be tough with, engage in conflict, and how successfully she has been able to manage that. That is on display every June.

Jolene feels that Canisius taught her to treat each situation as a unique situation, and to not hold grudges. She mentioned:

I would also add to that...when I think about the teacher leaders or the new administrators that have come out of the program that we have at Sweet Home, they seem to have a really great ability to de-personalize situations when dealing with conflict and dealing with students, in a way that they are always looking for win-win solutions. They have an ability to focus on children when there is conflict and the best needs of the children—let's keep bringing it back. But, there is also the sense that they are resilient--that they can be in a very emotionally-charged situation, especially with my Assistant Principal, who deals with some pretty severe behaviors from time to time. He has the ability to step back and really depersonalize it, and come back the next day with absolutely no residue. There are no hard

feelings. He just wants to get back on track. So, I think that is a really important characteristic, and a really great asset to have.

III. Knowledge and Skill of Canisius-Trained Counselors

The participants of the Focus Group did not have as much knowledge of Counseling graduates as they did with teacher preparation graduates and administrative graduates, but the information that they were able to provide was positive. Darren Brown related his perception of one of his Counselors from the Buffalo Academy of the Performing Arts. He said:

Well, he did it all because our school was grade five to twelve, so he headed up the high school program, so he did a lot of college applications and mentoring, so he did a lot of that. I know the students respected and loved him because he almost got as much applause as I did at graduation. The way he interacted with students—he called them all scholars, and it was those kinds of personal touches... He was an upstanding guy.

Christina Lesh has had the opportunity to work with a Counseling graduate who actually started as an AmeriCorp Volunteer and who is now a teaching assistant. She related:

We have a person with us now. She is going into her third year with us. She came to us through the AmeriCorps Program and we hired her then as a Teaching Assistant, not as a counselor. But, she understands children and she is very good at building relationships. Again, it just feels like it's the same type of experience that the teacher candidates lack—real, long-term consistent counseling experience. So, to be able to really work with children for a long time and to be able to see growth and change and to be able to have those conversations with parents, be prepared to have those really hard conversations with parents who may not want to be accepting of counseling support, or that your child needs help beyond what we can provide here at school.

IV. The Importance of Caring

Woven throughout the discussion of the characteristics of Canisius graduate was a foundation of caring displayed by graduate. The Focus Group participants seemed to believe that this caring was rooted in the Jesuit ideals support all of the educational programs at Canisius. Christina Lesh put it this way:

I have to say that what I have consistently seen is that our student teacher candidates, and the ones that we have made the decision to hire, is that they understand the importance of building relationships with kids. And, that is something that you really can't teach people. You know, that is in them genuinely—they want to become teachers because they genuinely love children. And that is true of our teacher candidates, and the ones that we go on to hire.

Tony Day's comments were very similar. He stated:

I can think of, on our teaching staff (either current or former teachers) we have had at least six Canisius grads from the undergrad program, and at least two current teachers that have worked their way through the Canisius administrative program, and these are some of the most effective people that we have with kids—mostly because they are really authentic and genuine. There is one... two of our social studies teachers were Canisius student teachers and then hired, and their interactions with the kids are always...you know, they care about the kids. One of them is a performer. The other is a quieter sort of person in the classroom, but both of them go out of their way to create relationships with the kids that you just generally don't see. One of our graduates of the administrative program is also our boys' basketball coach and he has really embraced the diversity within our district.

So these are people that I believe have a very strong set of morals and values, and I think that are very respectful with kids and parents. You know, with respect they sometimes have to say the tough things, and sometimes they have to put their arm around them and hug them at the same time. So, I really believe in that in having a relationship with the student teaching program and then I was actually a member of the assessment committee for a couple years, I recognize that those values are embedded within the program and I think that comes out.

Mark Crawford's thought ran in a similar vein. He said:

Each one of them approaches their work with an understanding that school work is about relationships, first and foremost. And, I resonate with that, and it is nice to see, but as I met them and got to know them, they gave evidence of that orientation.

I know we have several teachers from Canisius, but I work mostly with the administrators. There are the seven positions that I identified, plus the two of us in the central offices from Canisius, I think everybody has a positive regard for children and parents. And you see it in the way in which they deal with very tough meetings. We have some parents where sometimes there is conflict and the tension is high, and they are always patient and respectful. And they are also the people who, more likely than not, jump in their cars and go make home visits. So, their outreach is really noteworthy, and I think a lot of it has to do with the amount of orientation they had when they were here with students. As you said before, Christina, some of these things are inherent in people, and it comes from family and everything else, but they are enforced here. But everyone to a person, in our building of administrators--I have never had a question about the way in which they present themselves with teachers or parents and children when there is conflict, as I am sure Tony will tell you,

as well as Darren, and you ladies. I think our world is full of conflict. We talk about it all the time. Pat Phelan who is on your staff here, will tell you that the amount of conflict that we face on a daily basis has certainly increased. I am in my thirty-ninth year of school work, and it has really increased. There are so many different points of view and different interests, and those kinds of things. It is hard to make everybody happy.

Jack Turner ascribes the caring nature of the graduates to the Jesuit educational foundation. He intimated:

What they do better than others... In the best case scenario, the students who come from Canisius College who have, one way or another, either through religious or non-religious campus ministry. Or, those who have had a lot of experience with the Justice Project, come with that real enlightened Jesuit point of view on life. Having had eight years of deaf education and then two years with the Congregation of the Holy Cross (that mostly tried to convince me that the last eight year of my life were all wrong), I have learned that there are some themes that really come from that Jesuit point of view that are also really excellent for teachers. Like, the one of being in the world, but not of the world. So, when we talk about being able to be personal, being able to care about what is going on around you, but knowing your purpose is somehow higher than that. Again, whether that is spiritual, or non-religious, or religious—whatever. It still works in practice. And then also that idea of “the men and women for others,” and education. If the State is signing you paycheck, you are a servant to the public, whether you like it or not. So, that is part of it. It is civil service, and the second word is as important as the first. The kids who come from Canisius, in the best case scenario, have that. And that is really beautiful, and which I think sets them up for a successful career in education. And they are naturally going to see challenges in—serving a public like Western New York is increasingly poor. So, in the best case scenario, they do that much better than others. When interviewing people, that stands out clearly and draws you to them personally. You want to have that person in the building.

Mark Crawford’s comments reinforced Jack Turner’s believe. He said:

And it is certainly consistent with the mission of the institution. It is service and caring, and to some degree the love they have for the young people they are serving. And they are the greatest cheerleaders of the school, for young people. And it is just a joy to work with. And as Tony says, and Darren got into it, I think there are a lot of people that come from different places, and being born to some degree... all of this is partly science and partly art, right? You can teach the science part, but the art comes from the ability to motivate and inspire somebody. I am not sure that comes out of a program. Those are certain qualities and attributes that a person has inside, but I think what you can do is you can cultivate that and bring it along. And by assigning a high value to those things, you help reinforce a young person’s normative orientation that this is a good thing to be doing.

V. Desire to Hire Canisius Graduates

At one point in the meeting, the conversation turned to the hiring of Canisius graduates. The school districts can receive hundreds if not thousands of applications for employment each year. It is difficult to screen for potential candidates to interview. Dr. Wellenzohn asked all of the participants if the “Canisius” brand helped to select candidates to interview. The response was positive and unanimous. Tony Day, Superintendent at Sweet Home jumped right in to say:

I will answer directly your question, Nancy, yes. If it says Canisius, I stop, take a second look. Absolutely. I will also tell you that.... For a long time, student teaching was only done in buildings and it was kind of all over the place. Some people had two or three student teachers here, so it was kind of disorganized. But, I don't know, what—eight years ago, we reorganized, made a process and over a period of time we quickly realized that the candidates we wanted were coming from...because they work with our kids. All these people come in and work with our kids, so it should matter where they come from... I would say eighty percent of the student teachers placed in the Sweet Home School District come from Canisius. I guess we have faith in the program. Not that we deny everybody, but we offer more slots to Canisius because we think they are better prepared.

Well, if we are answering the question now--what does Canisius do better, and what should it keep doing? The program is grounded in best practice. The people that are writing the program, the people that are creating the expectation for kids. They are tapped in to practice in the field, and as a district where we try to model and emulate that same concept, forges a much stronger relationship because that value that as a professional, you have to keep learning, and there is a way that the research says to try it. That you have to personalize it to make it work in your own way, but I think that link is there. And, I think it has been open.

Mark Crawford, Superintendent in West Seneca also answered with enthusiasm. He said:

I have to guard myself because I am biased. I went to Canisius High School, and then to Canisius College, and I have two degrees from here, but I as I think most of us have said, many of us have had very positive experiences with Canisius grads, and I was just going to mention that we have two guys at one of the high schools that are two of a three-person team. They are on a search and recovery mission every year to make sure they get every kid they can to graduate. And they do get in their cars. They do make home visits. They reach out and do everything they can. (approx. 10:30)They have made chuckles at the superintendent meetings that they have to deal with, so let's give these kids the appropriate punishment that they deserve, but Dr Crawford, let's make sure that we keep them in the game. And we do.

VI. Issues Facing Education

The participants of the Focus Group are all dealing with the changing landscape in the field of Education. They are all facing challenges and are thankful for the opportunity to work with college partners to try to find solutions. Mark Crawford is especially concerned about the gap between the highest and lowest achievers and how difficult it is for the schools and teachers to respond to this disparity. He related:

I believe in West Seneca we have a few that were...that passed through. They were kind of the social glue for some of these young people, between home and school, and teachers, and some of the administrators. They get it in terms of the needs of children. When Jolene and Jack were speaking, one of the things that I was thinking about in terms of teacher preparation... I was telling you about my experience in Dryden. In Dryden, we had two thousand students. So, we had children coming to school who were the offspring of some of Cornell's world-class professors, and then we had some coming from trailer parks. So, there was a huge gap between kindergarten students who had Cornellian parents, who had already traveled abroad and were reading at a second grade level, and kids who were in Appalachian poverty with limited experience in terms of vocabulary and with little travel outside of the county. So the discrepancy was enormous. Part of the problem was that most of the teachers tended to have middle class experiences—they went to college, a university, and never knew deprivation in their life. And then to have a boy comes to school without his homework done and they want to make him accountable, so they tell him he can't go out on the playground with everybody. What the teacher didn't know was that he came from a home where the mother was involved with somebody late into the night. There was no supervision of him. He didn't have supper by the way, and she is applying a middle class standard of discipline to a kid who she presumes is living like all the other middle class kids she knows. So we had Ruby Payne come. Ruby Payne has done research on rural poverty and the point is that middle class people have values and those who live in poverty have values. And those who live in poverty also love their children. So, our poverty rate in Dryden was almost forty percent. So, in addition to trying to level the playing field, you have two kindergarten babies come in. One has very limited vocabulary and knows nothing about numbers, unable to sit in a circle, and this little girl whose parents are professors at Cornell, reading at a second grade level. The gap is enormous. So, in order to meet the needs of those children who are coming from those kinds of homes, you have got to have teachers who have the capacity to understand what it is to go without supper, to know how important breakfast is, and lunch in school. And when little Tommy comes in to school and hasn't got his homework done, you don't discipline him by not letting him go outside because it is not his fault. How about ideas like home visits and all those other things? It wasn't until people got into those homes and realized that there is so much lacking.

Jack Turner wonders if the homogeneity of the pool of teachers makes it difficult to truly understand the constituencies that need to be served. He opined:

There is some research on who goes in, right? It is not going to be an education poll. And the research doesn't support that being in the top ten percent of your class makes a difference. Because the last stuff that I read was if you could be in the top quarter of your class, coming out of high school...that tends to... you look where the grade is...teachers come from the top twenty-five percent. But then, smaller numbers, higher quality. I think there is something to be said for, in some cases, smaller is better as long as you have the capacity to do that. So that feels good too. And then, something about recruitment—and I am not even sure that this is really Canisius's job, but certainly it is worth putting out there. But, not just who goes in in terms of body, but who goes in in terms of what America looks like. The student teachers that we had from Canisius College last year were great. All of them were very good. We hired some. Others got placements at many other places. But they were all twenty-one, white women from the suburbs, and three quarters were Italian. It was striking. It was actually weird being in the room. I was actually looking around thinking like for one, I am the only male. There is no one of color. And I think, what are we doing here? Because we are about to go into a school that doesn't look like this. Fifty percent of the school is male, and we have many students of color. This doesn't work, right? So, finding a way to control and recruit specifically who goes in is, I think, important.

VII. Issues Facing Teacher Preparation

The Focus Group participants were very willing to offer advice to Canisius to respond to difficulties that are being faced by all in the field of education. Darren Brown recommended:

What I do think that we need to do a better job of at Canisius is culturally proficient teaching, and understanding the dynamics of working with students of poverty, urban school districts, or even school districts that are very close to urban school districts, because their school's level of diversity is increasing also. What we are seeing are candidates who appreciate working with students in poverty, but they cross the line of pity. We want to make sure we are not doing that. That is why it is important (like what Dr Crawford was saying), that they actually have experiences—not just read about it, but actually have experiences of dealing with students in poverty, because we do have students—not just from Canisius but from all over the United States—who see these kids and don't want to, you know, suspend them because they think they are going home to a mom that is probably on drugs. And you automatically...I take offense to that because I grew up in Buffalo, my mom isn't on drugs—not that I got suspended!

Mark Crawford offered similar advice. He said:

So, my advice, and this is not just from Canisius. It's everywhere. I saw it in Hamburg to some degree, and in West Seneca, you may be surprised to know, we have thirty-two percent

of our kids on free or reduced lunch. There are some very serious issues with poverty in West Seneca. Same thing--we have a lot of wonderful teachers and administrators. But there are some who, again, never suffered any deprivation. They will nod their heads and say, "yep, I understand it." Well, they never lived it. And sometimes the way they respond to some of the parents and the kids when things don't get done on time, or its one thing or another, suggests to me that they don't really get it. So my advice would be to this institution, to take your middle class teachers and make them a little more sensitive to the range of kids that they are likely to service. You know it's easy to teach the kids who are coming from the middle and upper-middle class, who have never been deprived, and whose parents make sure they get their homework done and show up for everything. One of the things we finally tried was—because sometimes the poor single mothers had to make a choice between filling a propane tank or fixing a flat tire. So they couldn't get to a parent-teacher conference. It wasn't that they didn't care or love their children less than someone else. But someone looks at a widescreen TV and says, "Well, they don't care." But, we are not understanding it well enough. So, I would offer that that is something that maybe everybody could think about.

Jack Turner turned his attention to the field experience portion of teacher education programs.

He feels that not enough time is spent in the field. He said:

I really appreciate the previous comments made by the panel. And I think they are all true if you accept the current paradigm of what teacher preparation looks like right now. I think it is good. But I would like to say out loud that the way, I think, that teacher preparation works right now is probably not okay for where we want to go with education in general. Undergraduate education does not have enough hours in a school. There is not enough practical experience, and like that internship model which we all want to sort of say out loud, wow, we would really like to have a more—a year-long practical internship model that does not exist at many places, and it really does not exist in Western New York. And so I appreciate very much what students get in their four years, and the educational training that is available to them now through NCATE or CAEP, or whatever it is now. But just knowing that our young people would benefit more from having more practical experience in the classroom... Because the one thing that they do have is good content knowledge, I will say that myself, but they are not slick and they don't make intelligent moves in the classroom in the same way that they would have if they spent, let's say, five hundred hours or some increased number, for their placement in the school—during the day, taking classes in the evening, working side by side like a true intern or a true junior partner throughout the course of an entire school year. In that way, they know the Spanish, they know the history, and in general they have an idea of where to start with management, but they don't have that so deeply because the paradigm doesn't really allow them to do that.

Jolene Reinholz agrees with that sentiment. She likes how pre-student teaching and student teaching are beginning to take place in consecutive semesters in the same school. She related:

At Sweet Home next year, we are looking forward to having a number of student teachers who are doing their observation assignments with the teachers that they will be doing their student teaching with. So, we are really looking forward to having that continuity for that expanded time period where the candidates come in and really get to know Sweet Home and its culture and its students before they start really diving in and having all that responsibility that is tied to their student teaching. So, I think that is valuable.

Christina Lesh agrees that longer placements would allow student teachers to follow through with their efforts and see the end results. She related:

At Tapestry, what we do is that we have student-run conferences, and unfortunately our student teachers are not part of those experiences because of what Jack was talking about—sort of a fragmented teacher preparation program, the way that it falls in the school calendar removes that opportunity for our student teachers candidates. They are done—even the ones that come with us in the fall, or they are pre-student teaching and they come back in January—they are done right before we do those meetings in December. And then they are gone before we meet again in June. So, the opportunity to really build relationships with parents... I don't know that it is necessarily their fault that they don't have those skills, they just don't have the opportunity to have some real, authentic opportunities, and then feedback about how they did and how they could improve.

Tony Day agrees with the need for longer internships. He stated:

I would piggy back on that concept of: we need this kind of placement, or we need this kind of placement.... I would rather see the length of placement and the continuity over time. I think a good teacher is going to emerge in our high school or a Tapestry. Good teachers will emerge, but they need to understand the whole piece of it. This “little fragment of six weeks, and then a little fragment of six weeks”—I think we can do better than that. Having served on the Assessment Committee at Canisius, I think Canisius is doing a better job than most in ascertaining whether or not the people in the program are suited. There are cut points and checks along the way, but I think there should be more performance tied to it—putting candidates in front of kids as soon as possible because I think Darren made a good point. You can make a lesson plan, you can do all those things, but until you stand in front of kids, it really doesn't matter.

And finally, Jolene Reinholz added “if they were there for a full year, like you are saying, then the requirements for the exam would occur when the student teacher was ready to have them occur, versus it has to happen by Week 3 of your placement because by Week 7, you are gone.”

CONCLUSIONS

This Focus Group proved to be a very enlightening endeavor. It allowed local employers to use their own words to express their perceptions of Canisius College, the programs, students, the issues facing education, and their recommendations for teacher preparation going forward. This conversation served to reinforce the notion that Canisius College's education programs are strong and that graduates are well-respected. It also provided a venue for partnership schools to have input in the development of programs at Canisius. Several conclusions are apparent.

1. Canisius College Teacher Preparation graduates are well prepared in content and pedagogy.
2. Canisius College Administration graduates are well prepared and highly regarded in the field.
3. Although the Counseling graduates were not as well-known to this group of administrators, the ones that were known are seen in a positive light.
4. Local employers see the caring nature of Canisius graduates as being related to the Jesuit foundation of the college.
5. Canisius Graduates are usually willing to go over and above the call of duty. This may also be related to the Jesuit ideals espoused at Canisius.
6. A Canisius degree is a desired credential that leads employers to select candidates for interviews from among huge numbers of applicants.
7. Education is facing huge challenges including the great disparity in ability that teachers face among students in their classrooms.
8. The teaching force is not diverse and does not represent the population that it serves.

9. Teacher preparation programs need to emphasize culturally responsive education – teachers need to know more about the students that they will teach.
10. Field experiences need to be longer so that graduates are able to see the fruit of their labors and well as the difficulties faced over times.