

ON THE FRONTLINE



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DIRECTOR
CCTE



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— SAMUEL SIMPSON
TEACHER, ALL CITY HIGH SCHOOL



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— MARIA BRANDT
ASSISTANT PROFESSOR
MONROE COMMUNITY COLLEGE

Education's Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education, CCTE is guided by **veteran educators from MCC and three other Rochester-area higher education institutions**: State University of New York at Geneseo, The College at Brockport and St. John Fisher College. It also involves two K-12 school districts – Rochester schools and the suburban Rush-Henrietta Central School District – and the Center for Governmental Research, a Rochester-based non-profit research agency.

The long-term goal of the CCTE project is to develop a menu of K-20 high-impact teaching strategies that will better prepare students for college, shorten the time to completion, improve post-secondary achievement, and satisfy demands for a more-skilled, better-prepared workforce.

"What makes the fellows program unique is that it is structured as a professional learning community that crosses educational sectors," said Ann Pennella, director of CCTE. "We bring them together so they can help each other better prepare for classroom demands and better prepare students for college."

In the first year of the program, 22 fellows spent the first several months in small cross-sector teams gaining insight into research-based pedagogies through reading, online work and classroom visits that would later inform their instructional plans.

They presented their plans last summer and implemented teaching strategies in their classrooms in the fall.

The strategies varied. A number of fellows incorporated collaborative learning techniques in their classes, such as peer teaching, paired writing and group note-taking, to increase student engagement. A few teachers experimented with integrating 21st-century technology tools into their lessons, such as creating digital versions of their notes with embedded audio and having students contribute to blogs.

"The teachers said they are gaining a better understanding of high school and college cultures, especially regarding expecta-

tions, rules and requirements of both students and teachers within those institutional cultures," Pennella said. "The program has also helped many of the teachers, especially those from an urban district, feel more connected both with other educators and with a larger understanding of the educational continuum. We're excited to be able to share the learning that's gone on. We think it will be a valuable contribution. Our ultimate goal is to help students bridge the gap between high school and college and address barriers to college readiness and completion."

Some of the fellows are calling their nascent efforts so far a success. MCC Assistant Professor Maria Brandt teamed up with another English faculty member at the college and a teacher at Rush-Henrietta Senior High School to better understand the high school-college divide by creating common assignments and assessment strategies on student learning for their writing classes.

Focused on improving students' abilities to read critically and communicate coherently and accurately, they had students write summaries of selected authors' work and evaluate their own writing at the beginning and middle of the fall semester.

"Through the course of the semester, students in my English 101 class have improved in two areas: their ability to summarize a text and their sense of the importance of reading closely, that you cannot formulate an accurate and responsible argument without understanding the texts involved," Brandt said. "The students are much more aware now that they need to listen first or read well to grow as readers and writers."

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Brandt and her team are meeting this month to collectively assess students' skills and evaluate the overall effectiveness of their teaching strategies.

"Our goal is to better understand the gap between how high school students are performing on average and how first-year college students are performing on average and help them have higher success levels," Brandt said.

Simpson's multifaceted approach to engaging his pre-calculus students in learning also seems to be paying dividends.

More students are completing their homework and seeking help when they're struggling with it, he said. They drop in for after-school tutoring and regularly visit Simpson's website, where he posts the topics he covered in class, homework assignments and hints for solving the more difficult math problems.

On the first exam since implementing these techniques, the class averaged 85 percent — the highest in his three years of teaching pre-calculus, Simpson said.

"By frequently surveying my students on the best ways I can help them reach their potential and capitalizing on data such as competency exams to drive instruction, I am

seeing students who started the class with poor grades now achieve outstanding marks. They are motivated to do more challenging work and are experiencing the beauty of mathematics," Simpson said.

"In the past, there was some thought given to my teaching techniques but not with the deliberateness I have now," he said. "My efforts in doing the kinds of best practices that many people in the education field talk about doing — looking at data, using it to inform instruction, and teaching differently and smarter — have brought significant results," he said. "CCTE has enlightened me on how a professional learning community focused on research-based pedagogies can help students achieve academic success."

The next step is to replicate that success. Simpson and the other fellows will share results of their work with each other and with educators from their home institutions at a spring forum at MCC. At the same time, a second cohort of fellows will get under way.

Their reports will establish a collection of effective teaching strategies that will be disseminated to K-12 and post-secondary institutions as well as at other community sites. A report on the outcomes of the fellows' work will be posted on the CCTE website: <http://www.communitycenterforteachingexcellence.org/>. ▲

Hency Huen-Eng is a college relations specialist at Monroe Community College who spent 19 years in the newspaper business in New York.

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