

EDUCATION MATTERS

By Ryan G. Van Cleave

AMAZING MINDS AND INTELLECTUAL HAPPENINGS

SCENE continues its community-centered focus by presenting some of the most exciting intellectual happenings taking place in our community. Education Matters focuses on higher education, with an emphasis on difference-making programs, professors and students. This month, we proudly feature USF Sarasota-Manatee.

Now that University of South Florida Sarasota-Manatee has achieved separate accreditation from the main campus in Tampa, they're able to be much more responsive to local needs. An outcome of that is USF-SM will soon be a four-year institution — they'll begin admitting freshman in Fall 2013, providing area residents with a four-year university experience in the same location, and also including master's degree program opportunities.

What's the benefit of that? Dr. Terry A. Osborn, Dean and Professor of the College of Education, explains that "students who go away for school, often settle elsewhere." USF-SM's new four-year programs will provide access to local students who will stay local versus finish up a degree in another city only to stay in that city. That's certainly one way to give back to the community. And with 4700 students to work with annually — and that figure is sure to shoot up after 2013 — that's a lot of potential impact.

The U.S. government is increasingly concerned with positive educational impact, too, which is why the old tenure system is being nationally reconsidered in light of a new merit-based system that is predicated on how well the teachers are helping students make learning gains (tests such as the FCAT are just one way to evaluate this). Those test scores are now aggregated back to the school that taught the teacher.

As you can imagine, the environment for training new teachers is changing as a result, Dr. Osborn notes. "Schools are held more accountable for their teachers than ever before." But that's not a bad thing for USF-SM, which has the region's only nationally-accredited school of education. They've taken pride in their tradition of partnership with local school districts and view this new accountability and assessment as a unique chance to shine.

Their partnership with Sarasota and Manatee County schools includes having advisory councils to talk about USF-SM's student teachers. "It's a way to check up on our graduates and student teachers, and get both feedback and suggestions," says Dr. Osborn. But it's more than that: USF-SM has quality control agreements with both superintendents, a kind of money-back guarantee. Osborn explains: "If one of our graduates isn't performing well as a teacher in the classroom, we'll go back into the schools and remediate the problem." It's tough to name another school anywhere that feels that kind of responsibility with their graduates once the final GPAs are released.

Part of the reason USF-SM feels so confident about the ability of the teachers they're putting out into local schools is because of a new program called PAINT: "Partnerships for Art Integrated Teaching." This program came about after the 2000 Champions of Change study which demonstrated that regardless of economic background or academic ability, students learn well through art. The idea is this: if you integrate arts into teaching, you make positive learning gains for people.

"That a university is taking a leadership role in this approach," says Nancy Roucher, the Chair of the Arts Education Task Force for the Arts and Cultural Alliance of Sarasota County, "sends a strong message to the entire educational establishment that the arts are essential to every student's learning." Most educators, though, witness daily the power of the arts in classroom. Plus there's mounting empirical evidence, such as how cognitive neuroscientists at seven major universities have found strong links between arts education and cognitive development (e.g. thinking, problem solving, concept understanding, information processing and overall intelligence). Other studies clearly demonstrate that arts students outperform non-arts students on SAT tests.

It's more than just improved test scores, though. Roucher explains: "The arts are valuable in their own right. They tell the story of who we are, where we've been, and where we're going. The arts have intrinsic value that builds imagination, inventiveness, creativity. When you integrate the arts with other subjects in an authentic way (where the art content and the subject area content are equal) you are giving students joyful learning — plus the knowledge and skills they will need for the 21st century workplace."

Johnette Isham, the Executive Director of Realize Bradenton, adds, "Teacher education programs like PAINT instill the value of imagination and arts and subject matter instruction that increases the ability of young people to think, speak, and act creatively with community in mind."

No college of education in the country has bought so fully into arts education across the board, points out Dr Osborn. He adds that it's a profoundly positive way to impact what USF-SM graduates do for local schools. "We're small enough to care, large enough to lead," he says about his university's ongoing commitment to excellence. Perhaps other colleges and universities throughout the rest of the U.S. will turn to USF-SM's success for a blueprint on how to truly impact a community through innovative, responsible, arts-based education. **S**



Rogers Garden 5th graders created art pieces called "What I can be with a college degree" and presented those pieces to the USFSM College of Education.