

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

**“A Summary of Employer Perceptions”**

Focus Group Study Conducted on August 11, 2015

Moderated by: Dr. Erin Robinson

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## 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.

### **CAEP Standard 4 requires the following:**

The provider demonstrates the Impact of its completers on P-12 student learning and development, classroom instruction, and schools, and the satisfaction of its completers with relevance and effectiveness of their preparation.

### **Sub-Standard 4.3 elaborates more about employer satisfaction. It states:**

The provider demonstrates, using measures that result in valid and reliable data and including employment milestones such as promotion and retention, that employers are satisfied with the completers' preparation for their assigned responsibilities in working with P-12 students.

### **CAEP Standard 3 requires the following:**

The provider demonstrates that the quality of candidates is a continuing and purposeful part of its responsibility from recruitment, at admission, through the progression of courses and clinical experiences, and to decisions that completers are prepared to teach effectively and are recommended for certification. The provider demonstrates that development of candidate quality is the goal of educator preparation in all phases of the program. The process is ultimately determined by a program's meeting of Standard 4.

### **Sub-Standard 3.1 elaborates about recruiting to meet local hiring needs. It states:**

The provider presents plans and goals to recruit and support completion of high-quality candidates from a broad range of backgrounds and diverse populations to accomplish their mission. The admitted pool of candidates reflects the diversity of America's P-12

students. The provider demonstrates efforts to know and address community, state, national, regional, or local needs for hard-to-staff schools and shortage fields, currently STEM, English-language learning, and students with disabilities.

**This study addresses all of these identified components.**

**Goals of this Study:**

Canisius College enjoys strong partnership relationships with many schools and school districts across the area. Some of these partnerships rise to the level of the Professional Development School as defined by [NCATE](#). These partnerships operate under formal agreements that include two-way communication, resource sharing, and significant input into the operations at both institutions. Many partnerships are considered advanced partnerships that share many characteristics of a PDS, but do not operate under a formal agreement.

In the past, Canisius College attempted to communicate with supervisors of actual program completers. This proved to be a very ineffective way to gather perception information. We found that very few students responded to us asking for their supervisor contact information. Then, even fewer of the supervisors responded to the survey which was done on paper at the time. In 2013 we decided to move to the use of a Focus Group Survey of local employers instead. We noticed that our PDS and advanced partnership schools employ a lot of our graduates so it seemed to make sense to invite them on campus and give them the opportunity to tell about our graduates, their perceptions of our programs, problems facing the field of education, and recommendations for improvements to meet the needs of changing professional circumstances.

The first focus group of employers was conducted in 2013. This current study was conducted on August 11 following a nearly identical format. A faculty member from outside of

teacher education moderated the focus group. The questions were broad and conversation was allowed to flow naturally. The agenda ended up being driven more by the participants than by the guiding questions.

### **The Focus Group Study**

Dr. Jeffrey Lindauer began the event with an introduction. He stated:

Thank you for coming out today, we appreciate you taking some of your time to come out and help us with some of the discussion about our candidates and alumni. We did this focus group a couple years ago and really got a lot of good feedback from the principals and superintendents. I believe everyone is different from two years ago so that is really a good thing. It helped identify some of the things that we were doing well with our preparation candidates and also some things we should consider doing better with them. So, I am sure we are going to get the same kind of feedback today. We are really interested in continuous improvement in our teacher prep programs and so this is really a good opportunity for us to pick your brain and see what is going on in your environment and then if you have any information that you can share about our student teachers that came through your schools or alumni who are teaching currently in your districts, that helps us get a good idea of how we are doing.

Nancy Wellenzohn then described the procedures that would be followed. She said:

I have a list of the questions--now, these questions are not set in stone questions--our moderator will go off in whatever direction you take us, so don't use this as something that is cut in stone. But, I also wanted to give you a mechanism in case there is something you want us to know but you don't feel comfortable saying out loud, you can write it down on the piece of paper. Don't put your name on it, just leave it laying around and we will find it. It is perfectly fine for us to include anonymous comments in our study, so I wanted you to have the opportunity to do that.

The participants of the study were asked to sign an informed consent form. They were told that should they wish their responses to be stricken from the record at any time their request would be honored.

## **Participants**

The participants in this focus group study were building and district level administrators from partnership schools from the area. They were prescreened to ensure that they had knowledge of Canisius graduates. The participants are as follows:

1. Bill Kresse, Principal at City Honors in the Buffalo Public School District
2. Marty Pizur, Principal at Sweet Home Middle School in Amherst, NY
3. Charlie Smilinich, Principal at Dodge Elementary School in Williamsville Central Schools in Williamsville, NY
4. John McKenna, Principal at Fletcher Elementary School in Tonawanda City School District in Tonawanda, NY
5. James Bialsik, Coordinator of Secondary Education at Sweet Home Central Schools in Amherst, NY
6. William Boatright, Principal at Stanley Makowski Elementary School in the Buffalo Public School District
7. Lyn Bass, Principal at Tapestry Charter High School in Buffalo, NY
8. Scott Martzloff, Superintendent of the Williamsville Central School District in Williamsville, NY

## **Guiding Questions**

This focus group survey was a semi-structured interview. We did have several questions designed to start the conversations on several topics. The moderator was allowed to follow-up as appropriate taking cues from the participants. Dr. Robinson was not trained in the field of education, so her follow-ups were not biased toward any preconceived notions. The questions used for this study are as follows:

- 1) Let's begin with what Canisius graduates *know*. Would you say that your Canisius alumni generally follow best practices in the field? Do they seem to know the key content in their fields? Do they know how to teach that content?

- 2) Now let's discuss *impact on students*. Please describe ways that you have seen Canisius alumni affect outcomes including student learning, achievement and personal development. Are they skilled at using assessment data to guide their instruction?
- 3) How about *service to your school and to the field*? To what extent have you seen your Canisius alumni become active in helping the school, community and the field of education in extra-curricular kinds of activities?
- 4) Now let's discuss *professionalism and interpersonal qualities*. We'd like to hear about your observations of Canisius alumni with regard to such things as: ethical and moral behavior and attitudes, respectful communication with students and parents, and how effectively they embrace the diversity of your school population.
- 5) Are there areas of educator preparation that are underserved? What certification areas do you perceive as high needs and why?
- 6) Finally, do you have *any other observations* to share about Canisius alumni? Do you have any recommendations for improvement of training and preparation?

I will reiterate that these questions were meant to get the conversations going. Once that happened the conversation moved in unpredictable ways. Generally, all of the topics were addressed, but some ended up generating significantly more conversation than others.

### **Procedures for Coding and Analysis**

The entire focus group interview was recorded for both audio and video. This was done in case responses in the audio recording were difficult to attribute to a specific speaker. The discussion was transcribed for detailed analysis. A qualitative research software called NVIVO from QSR was utilized to code and analyze the data. The data were coded in NVIVO which means that no preconceived codes were applied. The codes were generated from the data. The list of codes that were generated are as follows:

1. Strength of Canisius Program
2. Content Knowledge of Graduates
3. Caring of Graduates
4. Faculty Support and Insights
5. Impact on Learning

6. Importance of Field Experiences
7. Professionalism of Canisius Teacher Ed Graduates
8. Value Added by Canisius College
9. Dispositions vs. Training
10. Involvement in Community
11. Selectivity at Canisius College
12. Needed Improvements in Teacher Education
13. Future Staffing Needs
14. Regulatory and External Influences
15. Difficulties Faced by Teachers Today

The entire transcript was reviewed and codes were applied. Data were extracted according to the codes. These codes led to broad categories for discussion. The remainder of this report is organized using the broad categories. They are:

1. Characteristics of Canisius Completers
2. Quality of Canisius Programs and Faculty
3. Challenges Facing Teachers Today
4. Future Direction for Teacher Education

### **Characteristics of Canisius Completers**

The common perception expressed by all participants in the focus group was that Canisius College program completers are highly capable and well-prepared. It should be noted that when speaking of Canisius graduates, the participants were mostly referring to teacher certification graduation. There were a few that addressed other certification areas, but by and large the conversation centered on teacher preparation.

An initial question focused on content knowledge, one of the participants quickly expressed his satisfaction with this aspect of Canisius College graduates. James Bialsik had a particularly strong opinion. He related “I think the level of content knowledge is superb and I think the teachers coming out have a very deep level of content knowledge.” Others at the table

agreed, although some helpfully pointed out an area that could use a little reinforcement.

William Boatright stated:

One concern that a lot of us are having in Buffalo is competency in terms of teaching math at the elementary level, so that is one area I have seen, not just Canisius, but all graduates, come out struggling with, or are not as prepared, to teach math at a high elementary level. It is an issue of focus for all of our veteran staff at the elementary level, but in particular, it is a focus that we need to take a look at to see what is happening in terms of preparation--particularly in the Methods course.

This sentiment was echoed by Scott Marzloff who said:

I would echo that in particular for math and for elementary teachers. In our district, for 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade, we departmentalize. So you could have an elementary teacher only teaching math to 5<sup>th</sup> grade students all day or maybe 6<sup>th</sup> grade students all day. And that can be a challenge to find people who are comfortable with the subject matter and who are up to date on the Common Core Standards and the modules, and so that would be a particular emphasis that would be of interest to us as a school district to find people with those type of mathematic skills and who actually are ok with doing math. There are a lot of teachers that are adverse to it. It's not really their thing. They love kids which is great, but we really need people with content expertise as well.

There is one theme that was expressed multiple times by the participants. As a group, it is evident that the Canisius College candidates care about their students a great deal and that this has a very positive impact on their performance in the classroom. The candidates form strong personal bonds with the students and are genuinely interested in their well-being. James Bialsik related:

I can think of a couple of student teachers who have finished their placements, moved on and we have held events at the school and they have come back to participate in those. That says a lot that they forged those connections not only with their cooperating teacher but with the students as well. They, on their own accord, felt like they wanted to come back and continue to get to the school community. To me that's a real strength.

This sentiment was echoed by Charles Smilinich who stated:

I can think of a couple people in the district that I am in now, in Williamsville, and I'll focus on the word "alumni" because they are veteran teachers, not only have they just taught and kept their core values but they've also continued that throughout their

career. The one individual I'm talking about has been there for 18 years. He pursued his administrative degree here and now he's an acting assistant principal in our school district. Which is kudos because he did it through Canisius but he kept his core values by coaching, giving back, and volunteering nonstop, but he never lost that passion for teaching and education. Obviously it's helped him along the way but that says something about the program itself that he's able to keep those core values as well.

This story is especially significant because he is referring to a Canisius graduate from many years ago who has continued to grow and develop as his career progressed. He attributes his work ethic and caring to the programs that he completed at Canisius in both teacher education and educational leadership.

Once the conversations about anecdote began, it was contagious. Others began to chime in with their stories as well. John McKenna related:

It just hit me that last year, not this year, we started an Invention Convention which is a project based initiative at our school. It was a Canisius grad that had started that program, of course with a team. It was a really neat thing that not only went above the call of duty, but went right along with STEM initiatives and also parent involvement. It was at night, it was all nighttime stuff, so it was all going above and beyond. We do a lot with the Make a Wish Association, too and I know that all the staff...but the Canisius grads who we do have there are just more than willing to get actively involved with all those types of things, not just school but whole community activities to actively involve the parents and everyone involved.

William Kresse then stated:

Well I just have another anecdotal story...We have a teacher who got an undergrad and masters at Canisius College--newer to the field...in the 6th or 7th year, but we started taking our 8th grade class to up to Pathfinder Island in Canada in the middle of nowhere with no electricity or running water. As we got closer to this year, a few faculty members peeled off and once they started to understand the reality of what life would be like up there for four days with these 8th grades. But, this person hung with us and she was apologizing because she wasn't doing the polar plunge each morning but she's still climbing mountains and other crazy things. A few weeks later she comes to me and says "Hey listen, I'm expecting and that's why I wasn't doing crazier things." She was an amazing part of this trip and she gave up four days of her life that weren't compensated in any way because she knew it meant a lot to the students.

This conversation led the participants to consider how much of this was a result of a candidate's disposition and how much of it was the Canisius preparation. Their subsequent responses seemed to recognize that both are needed. It is important for an individual to have essential dispositions to be truly successful, but a high-quality educator preparation program can develop dispositions along with content and pedagogical knowledge. William Boatright put it this way:

I see that the students are receptive in terms of wanting to know what they don't know so I looked at the questions I chuckled to myself because we know new teachers who come out don't really know anything and anybody who has taught and you ask them, they will say I didn't know anything when I started teaching. But I think you get prepared up to a certain point in terms of a good theoretical basis, a framework, some notions about what are the best practices of good teaching, I think the graduates have that and I can attest to that from having several student teachers in our building and we have some graduates currently working in teaching positions. But whether it is through the testament of the graduates themselves or whether it is something that is happening in this program, they appear to at least have the dispositions to be open to the development that they need in order to get better, in order to acquire the skills that they need to get.

Charles Smilinich wondered if it is more innate than learned. He wonders:

I think with anything with that question, it is dependent upon the person and not necessarily the alumni as a group because each individual is going to handle this a little bit differently. If you have a difficult situation they're going to handle it a little bit differently than somebody else. That's just going to be their own "with-it-ness" that they are going to develop maybe through conversations here at Canisius, and maybe how they deal with certain issues and certain problems, but really that's dependent on the person and how they handle a certain situation. That can be learned, but really that could be something that separates them in the field of education itself.

The term "dispositions" even began to take on a new meaning as the conversation progressed.

Some felt that teachers need to have an openness to assessing their own biases and working outside of their comfort zone. William Boatright put it this way:

I think that would help with the learning curve immensely because every school community is different in terms of what their learning needs are and the different levels. I would say one of the areas...and I've seen this across the board...we have to spend time...when we look at dispositions where, in order to...and we use diversity so much...but really what we are talking about...in order to go out and work with a

population of students you have to be acutely aware of your own biases, your own background, what you bring to the table, and how that affects the group of learners that you're going to work with. Then, how do you go about developing a relationship, how do you go about checking your own preconceived notions, and things of that nature? And then to have that set expectations that, no matter what, all of your kids are going to be successful and that's an innate core value. We just have to make sure that we're spending time going through those areas. We always say we want teachers to be prepared to work with a diverse group of learners, but what does that really mean? I think it means really deconstructing, and then saying let's talk about learners that speak different languages, that are have different abilities, that come from different parts of the country, that come from different parts of the world, that have different religious backgrounds. And how are you working through your own lens, how are you working with your colleagues' lenses, your students in your classes? All of those things are important. Those are the things that when people say they aren't prepared...we spend a lot of time speaking about content...I don't think we spend enough time talking about the dispositions that you have to have and how you go about building relationships in the community that you're getting ready to work with....wherever the community is, whether you're going to work with a classroom in Buffalo or whether you're going to work in Williamsville, for example.

Lyn Bass concurred. She discussed the importance of being willing to know the students and to check judgements at the door. The candidates need to teach within the students' reality, not their own. She related:

I feel like it's important to build teachers comfort with relating to families in a human way and understanding that there are lots of needs whether you're in the suburbs or in the city. The fact is, there's a lot of mental health needs. My background is originally as a psychologist. The fact is that wherever you are, there are lots of kids who, you don't know what they're coming in with and you don't know what's weighing on them and their family. It's having discussions and working with teachers in preparation about the difference between feeling sorry for them and speaking down to them, but rather that you understand the complexity of that and hold expectations still but be sensitive about it and not be judgmental and be welcoming. I agree that we need to reach out to families and it needs to be our warm invitation to them for positive things to be coming in about meaningful feedback about their kids' performance. In designing our high school we had the luxury of building in that every teacher is also a crew leader, so it's like an advisory group. But for a lot of people who are trained in secondary education, it's like "I'm not comfortable with that, I'm not a counselor." Well no, you are. It's okay. It helps if people are oriented in their training to the fact that a teacher's job goes well beyond just content. It's wonderful. It's the good side of it and I think it humanizes it, and makes it more motivating to teach actually if you reach out and have that other dimension, be more comfortable, and develop bonds with parents. That's what makes it fun.

## **Quality of Canisius College Programs and Faculty**

The consensus among the participants was that the education programs at Canisius College are strong. In particular, the group believed that the structure of field experiences is a highlight. Lyn Bass elaborated:

One thing I wanted to add about an improvement of a wonderful aspect of our relationship with Canisius has been the assigning of a student teacher to first their observation time with us, and then continuing with the same teacher for the student teaching experience and it feels like it gives them a greater chance to know our community and routines and all of that to go with the student teaching piece more smoothly rather than just coming in isolation for just a few weeks. So the continuous relationship, it felt like it strengthened their knowledge of the whole experience including the content teaching, their relationship with the supervising teacher under our roof. It was all very positive.

Charles Smilinich added:

I think the exposure earlier would benefit them as well, as opposed to going in your junior or senior year, or whatever it may be for student teaching. I think exposing them right away in their freshman year into a classroom, seeing what the dynamics are versus what their preconceived notions are to what we are currently going through in academics now, because everything is changing quickly. I think it would benefit them by being in the classroom sooner rather than later.

The idea of linking shorter field experiences with the lengthy student teaching experience has benefits to the candidates and to the school. Marty Pizur discussed the benefits to both groups:

I would say, to echo a couple of the points from earlier--at Sweet Home we have done something similar to what it sounds like Tapestry has done too, where we have tried to get some of the student teachers in earlier in the year and we have definitely seen connections being formed. Not only do they better understand our environment but most importantly they get to know the kids, who they will be working with and it is not like they come in and they have a couple of days to know the kids and try to understand their learning style and then all of a sudden be put up in front of room and be expected to set up learning experiences for them. Instead they have a bunch of time to get to know the kids and they have had several opportunities to sit down and plan with the teachers and get that whole perspective as well, and share with the teacher what knowledge they have and then, hopefully, to take away some things as well.

While it is difficult to describe the intangible things that Canisius does well, John McKenna spoke of Canisius in terms of leadership ability. He said:

A lot of that is just having a mindset, you know what I mean? There is the physical stuff that we have to do but it is really in the mind with accepting change, embracing change, and being leaders for change. That is a big part of it and that is where I can see that this school has done a great job.

He continued by relating:

I would like to go back to that one person that I said became a leader right off the bat because she has only been with us 2 years, but she took the lead and trained all the special area teachers on how to write SLOs. It was great that she came prepared with skills but also ready, willing, and able to jump right in and that is a big thing because some people are afraid of change. So sometimes to have people...you have cultivated some really good people who will jump right in. As I said, the one girl that I know, she became a leader to all of our special areas that had to develop these SLO's. Most people, the first time it came out, were like, "How do we do this? I don't know what to do!" She stepped right in and said, "We can do this. I know how to do this." She really mentored a lot of experienced people and wow, what a nice way to come out of the gate as a benefit to our school.

He also recalled another similar anecdote:

The one thing that I would say from the graduates that we have taken in the past few years is that, and I know one in particular who really had great leadership skills and the graduate...we hired her in physical education but immediately took over, after her first year, she became our quasi-Athletic Director because we had to do cuts, and I was very impressed at how someone so young in the field who has limited experience but came out of the gate with so much in her tool box and she was able to take on bigger roles and responsibilities than we originally thought. So, I really saw her as a leader and well prepared leader, ready and willing to step up and take leadership roles which I think is very important too. And I would like to add one more thing. When I have spoken to the faculty here for references, I am always very impressed with how the faculty really knows the students and you get really great feedback and it has really helped us in our hiring as well.

We asked specific questions about how the Canisius prepared candidates might be having a positive impact on the P-12 students that they are serving. Impact is an elusive construct, but the participants were able to describe what impact means to them. Marty Pizur spoke in terms of the use of assessments to drive instruction. He said:

I would say that any of the Canisius grads that we have had on staff have done a nice job in terms of looking at student work and using formative assessment to drive instruction, forming groups flexibly often based on the needs of the kids, whether it is changing instructional practice for the whole class (if something worked or didn't work), or if it is a small, targeted group that they needed to pull often times, they are willing and able to do that. So I would say whatever is going on here, if they are not already coming with that skill, then you are certainly doing what you need to do to at least get that mindset that was brought up earlier, in the place that it needs to be in order to figure it out.

William Boatwright believes that the concept of assessment has been given a bad name and that it is definitely necessary to work to improve instruction in the classroom. Local and national politics have attempted to denigrate the use of data as merely teaching to the test. He thinks:

It is interesting because I don't know enough about your program to know how much time you are spending teaching about how to do assessment or teaching how you use data to drive instruction, but just to echo what everybody is saying... It is so much about mind set and your attitude toward assessment and testing. I have worked with graduate students and student teachers who, for whatever reason, have a biased already developed about standardized testing, about how we track students, and that is not necessarily a healthy thing because you are putting the politics ahead of what the skill is. How are you monitoring student learning? So, whatever Canisius can do to get at that disposition of: this is *why* we assess student learning now...what we do with it is a totally different ball game. But assessing students and using that information to target instruction and remediate poor learners, and help enrich other students--that is an important skill, so we just need to make sure that we continue to make that distinction and the better teachers I have seen (we have some really good...a couple of Canisius graduates come to mind), they do that really well but I also understand that it is because of that attitude and mindset that they bring to the classroom.

The participants were also impressed with the professionalism and commitment of the faculty in the Teacher Education program at Canisius. They especially like when college faculty and K-12 faculty have opportunities to interact. The common core as developed to support K-12

education, but it was important that college faculty become familiar with the standards because they will be directly related to the skill of their future college students. James Bialsik described it this way:

Well, just as an example of that, it was a really nice experience back in April. Chris McGinnley, from Williamsville, and myself were able to come here and speak with the Math Department here at Canisius as well as a few members from the Education faculty as well just about the Common Core Standards and give a presentation that, quite honestly we probably would've given the teachers about four years ago just to get them in the know about how these changes are affecting K12 and what they really mean for the students coming up to the college level. Number one, how the students will have learned differently and how they'll be expecting different things when they get to their college level and their mathematics courses. Also, how we can start to prepare our teacher educators with those ideas in mind. I think the more we can partner in both directions, you know the K12 can help higher ed and higher ed can help k12. I think we can do some really great things.

Lyn Bass had a similar story to related:

What comes to mind is people I've known from Canisius who've done things that are sort of, outstanding in a way and unusual. We had, at the beginning of last year, two of the professors from the secondary Ed program asked if they could come and actually, together; teach a section of English 11. They wanted to get back in to see, again, what it's really like. They're professors in this so they wanted to come and teach a section, and they did it for half a year. They wrote a paper and it looks fascinating and it's remarkable that they would have wanted to immerse themselves in what the real life of teaching is. Quite honestly, there were days that they were like "Wow, this is really much more challenging." It was very enlightening for them and it would enrich, obviously, what they would be sharing with their students who are preparing to be high school teachers. So, that was very unusual thing that I admired.

All agreed that this kind of interaction is essential for the development of future teachers and for the success of the K-12 students. The importance was underscored by William Boatwright who worries:

There are lots of gaps right now because the standards and assessments have changed so much in the past 3-5 years. What I was going to say is that we're in an era right now where there's an intense focus on leader and teacher practice as it leads to student outcomes. I think universities and colleges need to kind of mirror that approach. One of the questions I always have is how much is the current faculty, at a place like Canisius, how much are they aware of changing practice, changing standards, what that actually

looks like? I know I've said to the folks working with our student teachers that I would love to have members of their Education faculty come out to either a staff meeting or an in-service training so they can actually see real time, what it is that principals and teachers are dealing with so that they can adjust their practice because there are so many different gaps right now. You mentioned math as one, but there's a technology gap, there's a new literacy gap because of the way we need to communicate language and critical thinking to our students that means we have to change our teaching practice to yield to those things. I think the more we can engage university faculty to actually spending more time in schools and spending more time in training so we can see a quicker return on an investment.

In general, though, the administrators did speak highly of Canisius faculty and supervisors. In particular, Lyn Bass conveyed:

I have been impressed in working with the supervisors from Canisius and also the candidates...and then the teachers who come to us—we have hired quite a few people from Canisius with of our professional development relationship...impressed with the fact that they seem to take the field seriously. They have a sense of professionalism. There is a sense of responsibility to the people who they have been educated by, and then to us. So I have been impressed with their seriousness about it, they seem on top of content and the one thing, and I feel like I don't want to start with a negative here, but the one thing I wish teacher training included, more so when are people are being prepared to teach in a high school, is more emphasis on behavior management, working with high school kids, working with urban high school kids and working within the structure that we need to take into account. It's not just about teaching the subject. It is also being able to own the room and all of that, which I know are hard skills to develop and some of the candidates have shared with us that they have not had a lot of that, they have not had a lot of time to be discussing those things. So that aspect of it would be something that I wish was perhaps more emphasized.

She also decided to add an anecdote about Canisius College's Service Learning program that is available to all students, not just those in the School of Education and Human Services. Many courses across the college offer such learning experiences in many diverse courses. She recounted:

My exposure to Canisius College itself included, is it Sister Pat? She oversaw the expectation that everyone in many different courses and many different fields here are expected to be out in community and doing things. I just feel as if the people we've taken on are willing and sensitive and that's a part of what you do when you're in the

community. For us, as a charter school, we're really trying to be flexible and don't have, necessarily, a lot of money for supporting extra stuff and payments for things. We really appreciate that there is this generous spirit of service and a dedication to the fact that work, particularly in the city, is important. It's not, "What am I going to get paid for that?" It's not that at all; it's quite the opposite. We are really seeing the benefit of that.

### **Challenges Facing Teachers Today**

The participants were very interested in having a discussion about the challenges that are facing teachers in today's social and political environment. The changing demographics in the schools have created needs for new types of knowledge, especially related to financial difficulties faced by families and communities. John McKenna put it this way:

I think that getting teachers to understand that the overwhelming responsibility is theirs to reach out to families and to go the extra... I don't look at our relationships with families as a 50/50 thing. We have to do, like 90%. You have to be ready for that, and ready, willing, and able to do that. It's not that people out there don't want to work with you, but I think there are a lot of situations in communities in places where we need to be the ones. We have to be the ones who really reach out and help and support people in our communities. I know Tonawanda, not like Buffalo where I know there are more needs there, we have so many families now where there's so much neediness and teachers really need to be the ones who are willing to go the extra mile to be the ones who initiate through daily communication and not fault and say, "We have bad parents!" It's our job, as a school, to be the ones who reach out to the community. There's a startling national statistics to kind of scare me that like 50% of teachers are gone from our profession within 5 years. I think that's kind of an interesting and sad statistic and maybe there's lots of dynamics that go into that, but probably a lot of it is people get in and realize how unbelievably demanding this profession is. A lot of it is that we are working with communities sometimes that don't share our same values. We have to be the ones who are ready to work with all the dysfunction that's out there in positive ways to know that that is a big part of our work, and embrace it. Otherwise, I think you'll get burnt out fast. Go in knowing that the burden of responsibility is yours. You have to be willing to take on that with a good, positive frame of mind.

James Bialsik concurred. He said:

Marty always refers to it as the three-legged stool; the connection between the teacher, the parent, and the student. Just really to get that point across that that has to be strengthened. When you have that connection, and when you have that line of communication open between all three of those parties, you're able to achieve so much more and you're able to build so much more. If any one of those parts is missing, you're

not going to be there. So, just all of these ideas about how to engage with the community and also understanding that the school's function is to serve the community and not the other way around. I think sometimes that gets lost in translation. We're blaming the parents for not doing what they're supposed to be doing when really it's our job, as people have said, to engage them and try to bring them in and try to show them that school is a place to bring the community together. You know, it serves other functions besides just educating kids. It really needs to be that hub within the community.

All agreed that there is a mismatch between the population of teachers and the population of students, especially in urban areas. It is incumbent upon teacher preparation programs and the candidates to bridge that gap. Many candidates are coming to teacher education from a background significantly different from the one where they will work. William Kresse described it this way:

I think there are some really good points here, with what William was saying about how we have to put our own biases aside and hold off on the judgement. Lynn was talking about being warm and welcoming and I think Scott was talking about how the job is very different today. You have to reach out to parents, you have to engage them. I think teachers going into the field need to understand this job is so much different. I taught with a teacher who was in her, like 15th or 16th year, and it was one of those situations where there's a struggling student and automatically a zero was given because something wasn't handed in and it just crushed the kid's grades and year. We said, if you want to think about a penalty then have that child go back and do the work so they're not getting off the hook then it doesn't create the confrontation and you know, she said "This isn't the way they did it back at Sister of the Lake when I was....," and I said to her, "That is not the kind of school we're trying to run and that's not what we're going for. There were some good things back then but we're running a very different type of school." It made a difference to this particular teacher and she came back and said "I really thought and rethought a number of things because of that." Just to add to what everybody else is saying, I think just for teachers to understand that they are taking on the responsibility now in a contemporary teaching setting of being public figures. Our social media, our video, everything that is out there now makes us no longer anonymous. Some people aren't comfortable with living that lifestyle and taking that on their shoulders. They've got to know it's going to be there, whether they want it or not. Even if their social media presence, personally, is minimal or heavily guarded, others will take them into that realm whether it's recording a conversation in class or on an extracurricular activity. It has to be known that they're being watched at all times. They've got to know that our public has very high expectations for educators.

The key will always be to establish frequent communication with the families to bridge any gaps.

The communication needs to be multi-faceted and frequent. Marty Pizur provided an apt description:

I agree with everything that's been said...maybe finding opportunities to get them to do that piece that was just talked about. I'm thinking of even just taking that observing role and being part of parent conferences, open house, all those sorts of things even down to phone calls and being present in the room when a veteran teacher is having a conversation with a parent. I find that with a lot of the technological advances there's actually been a decline in some of the communication; either in the frequency or in the fact that it tends to depersonalize the relationship. It might be that email that no matter how you write it is not going to come across as well as if you just picked up the phone and made a phone call. It's going to be a heck of a lot quicker in the long run, because there's going to be these emails that could be contentious going back and forth anyway. If you had the phone conversation you can feel the environment of the conversation going on as well. The other piece would be dealing with grades. We have an online system where essentially parents can always peer into the grade book. Teachers oftentimes tell me, "Oh, well it's on there they can look at it." Well, no if there's been a decline in the student's progress you need to pick up the phone and have that conversation and make sure that they're acutely aware of what's going on and what do you see going on behind it and what you can pull from them to maybe build off and repair that situation.

### **Future Direction for Teacher Education**

The discussion of issues facing today's teachers led naturally into a discussion of what should be done to support teachers in this fast changing environment. The state sometimes moves very quickly and that leaves everyone, including both school districts and education preparation providers, scrambling. A few years ago the APPR process was revised. This is the Annual Professional Performance Review. The state provided school districts a very short timeline to get this new system established. Now that things are up and running, the participants mentioned that it would be best for new teacher candidates to arrive in their schools with a working knowledge of the system. Scott Marzloff stated:

I think one important aspect is, and I don't know to what degree you do this already, is to expose them to some of the NYS approved rubrics through APPR. A lot of districts use

Danielson. We use the Silver and Strong Classroom Rubric, so they understand the lens that their instruction is being viewed through by a supervisor or administrator and they are speaking that same common language so an administrator says you have to do this more; they understand what that means based on their experience with the rubric. So, I am not sure how much you do that already, but if there is a way to strengthen that, that would be optimal.

If teacher candidates arrive as student teachers with knowledge of APPR, perhaps the host teachers will be more comfortable having student teachers work with them in such a high stakes environment. Charles Smilinich related:

Teachers are becoming a little more reluctant to having student teachers in their classroom because of the APPR process so by doing what Scott just said will help them approach this as a team, as opposed to being more reluctant and saying I don't want to give away my class because I may be getting a score from the State. This may be able to open the lens and be more comfortable with it, and I think through a team approach, it could happen.

There were many more suggestions provided by the participants on how teacher education could be improved to meet the needs of today's classrooms. James Bialasik suggested that more than one methods class is needed to facilitate learning of content knowledge. He suggested:

The one thing that I have thought about is I believe that they are still only taking one methods class which focuses on the pedagogy of delivering that content and I always that it was maybe not enough when you are talking about certifying someone in either 5-12 or 7-12...to teach that span of grade levels. It might be nice to offer other opportunities to focus a little more on the pedagogy of different levels of a discipline and how to actually deliver that content in a little bit more of a prescribed way depending on the grade level.

Scott Martzloff suggested that candidates be purposefully trained on how to speak to parents. He suggested:

You have a lot of teachers who are either new teachers or very experienced teachers who are reticent to contact parents, especially by phone or hold a meeting. That relates to whether there are academic issues or issues with grades or issues with behavior management. They almost need more professional development. I've often thought, in my career in education, that maybe they need a script, you know..."Hello, this is Mr./Mrs.

so-and-so. I'm calling in regards to a situation with your son/daughter..." You know, to be able to feel comfortable to reach out to parents. I know that many parents often say, "The teacher never contacted me. If I would've known my child's grade was going down by 35 points in a marking period, I would've intervened 4 weeks ago before it became the final marking period." That happens all the time, so to be able to provide them with the tools they need and the toolbox, so to speak, to communicate well with the parents, would be very beneficial for all graduates of education programs.

John McKenna emphasized the importance of integrating technology in the classroom. He described a professional development opportunity that helped him to see how technology can be a great asset in the classroom. He recounted:

I just went to a Google camp the other day. There are so many uses for Google to reach out. I know maybe some parents in certain places may not have technology, but everybody has phones, pretty much now. The communication pieces that we were talking about the other day were amazing. I think we should do classes for how to utilize, not just Google, but other electronic ways to reach out. There are so many possibilities but I don't think our teachers really know that either so uses for Google and technology to reach out from the schools should really be almost mandatory.

The use of technology might lead to useful innovations like a flipped classroom. John McKenna continued:

Another thing you can think about and maybe offer is how to flip a classroom. That's another huge view in the last couple years and that's really taking off.

The availability and use of technology is definitely taking off. James Bialcik related:

We're going into our second year with 1:1 iPads in grades 6-12 and many of our teachers are doing some sort of a flipped model as far as offering that instructional piece that their students can home and view on the iPad, then they come back in the next day and the classroom looks more like practice, teacher facilitators. They're not doing a whole lot of direct instruction. Just another piece to the technology in general has just been what the students are able to produce as a result of using the technology. That's really where it's heading. The flipped learning is a nice tool to be able to change the way that the classroom time looks. Students are really so much more able to figure out things on their own. It's really incredible. Just as an example we had more students than ever challenging AP exams this year and actually many of them did quite well--challenging exams we don't even offer at our school. They're wanting to take them and they're doing pretty well on them. I think students are feeling empowered now that if they want to learn something they can go on the internet and figure it out. They don't necessarily need to take a class to help me learn this. I think that has been a really big shift, what students are able to do on their own--outside of the classroom. We're actually piloting several

blended classes this year, as well, where a traditional elective that might have met every day, this year is going to meet every other day. Half of the content will be flipped and will be put outside of the classroom, so they will do some in class every other day and then they learn outside of class on the iPads every other day. I'm excited to see how it turns out. Honestly, that's going to give them more of a college-type experience because when you get to the college level, typically classes don't meet every day but the expectation is you're still working on that particular content area everyday even when you're not in class face to face. So we're hoping that's going to shift the way... Number one, the number of electives we're able to offer, and number two, the number of electives students are able to take and it will also be able to give them a little bit more of a college-feel/college-experience to those courses.

Finally, discussion turned to the topic of how candidates relate to students and their families. This is always a challenge for new teachers. Charles Smilinich emphasized this when he said:

I think we need to teach the teachers more that they need to seek first to understand. The reason I say that is because, a lot of times teachers enter the profession and in the environment they're teaching in they'll be considered middle to upper-middle class. They could be teaching in a poor environment or they can be teaching in an extremely wealthy environment. Don't talk down to your people if you're in a poorer environment and think that you're better than them because you are a teacher and you're telling them how to do something. You don't know their situation. The only way to know their situation is to live in their shoes, and that's preconceived notions. Maybe the parents from the poor environment had a poor experience in schools. Our job is to repair their relationship to invite them into our community school to make the community school. In the richer environments is you find is that the parents are, I'm not going to say helicopter parents, but they may talk down to the teachers and we have balance that as well to let people understand the role of that realm as well. I think it's very careful in how you do it and you have to be a very thoughtful person. I think, really, if we can get people in the environments quicker, it will really benefit them to know the environment that they're in.

He continued with comments on conflict resolution:

I think conflict resolution is an innate skill a teacher must have, too and I think we need to help with that because I think that the teacher's first experience...and I can remember this in my last school that I was a principal at in Niagara Wheatfield, is that we had a teacher, 5th year, phenomenal teacher, high flyer...but the first time there was a conflict I came into the room and I said I'll sit there with you. The parent went at it with the teacher pretty good and I saw the teacher just deflate; they didn't know what to do, because they didn't how to answer questions when the parent was extremely angry with them. I think that's something too that we have to teach our future teachers as well as our

current teachers this conflict resolution and how to handle yourself professionally, as opposed to making this a personal, emotional piece.

He even wondered if coursework on mental health should be offered since teachers are often faced with these situations in the classroom. He wonders:

Do the teacher prep courses offer something in terms of mental health? The reason I asked that is because I was reading research last week that said one in five children have a mental health disorder in the classroom. Is there anything we're doing to correlate that so people understand the clientele they're getting? In a class of twenty-five, they may have 5 or 6 children with a mental health disorder and how are you going to deal with that, not knowing about that.

This group of administrators graciously agreed to share their insights and opinions with us in this focus group interview. In fact, they appeared thankful that we asked these questions and were willing to act on their advice. Our final topic of conversation was about the local current and future needs for certified teachers. It is important to make sure that we are producing the teachers that are needed in the field. Scott Martzloff was the first to chime in. He said:

We just hired ten new ESL teachers due to new mandates - CR 154. I think that's going on across the State, so that's certainly going to be a high need area. In our district, perhaps somewhat unique to us, when we hire special education teachers we look for a K12 certification range, not just childhood or adolescence. We sometimes have shifting enrollments and things and we don't want to be laying people off. Same thing with foreign language or LOTE teachers, we would love to find people who have dual certification in French and Spanish and multiple languages. But with tenure areas, generally you're going to go in ESL tenure area or a LOTE tenure area such as Spanish or French or whatever the case may be. Those are some of the areas where we have trouble finding...another area that I found recently has been a little more challenging is some of the mental health staff areas, whether that be school psychologists, school counselors, social workers. There seems to be...the number of applicants that we've seen anyway, hasn't been as high as it's been in the past. So that may be another area. I would also say that across the region--across the country--people are dying for substitute teachers. If graduates want to have a job right out of the gate, although it may not quite reach the fast food \$15 per hour, but you know, it is a job and you are gaining experience as a substitute teacher. There's an issue of shortage, that's an area where we need to partner as well.

James Bialsik reinforced the need for substitute teachers. In fact, he feels that this is one of the best ways to become skilled in classroom management. He said:

There's no better way to learn behavior management than to be a substitute teacher. That's a great way to get your foot in the door in a district and develop a lot of those skills that play into classroom management. Everybody's facing sub shortages right now, its reality.

Marty Pizur related a need for special educators, it would be great if they also had a reading background. He said:

I'd add, for special educators too, that coming in with a reading background is going to serve quite well. It's almost a 1:1 correlation these days, at least at Sweet Home where it seems that those students that have special needs also have reading deficits as well so, that's would certainly be helpful.

Lyn Bass concurred with the need for multiple certifications. She related:

Looking at the combo certifications, I always love interviewing people and having people come in who have a certification in a subject area but also literacy or also special ed. It feels like, having anyone who has a cert in any a regular teaching area understanding that they may need to be teaching ESL students and special education students and certainly kids with reading deficits. They need to just understand that their role is so broad these days. I would encourage people to get other certs in other areas of great need.

But, William Boatright cautioned against attempting to earn too many certifications. He expressed this concern by saying:

On the flip side of that I worry when I see somebody with 5 or 6 certifications--it looks like they couldn't decide what to do with their life or maybe they just couldn't find employment or have been unemployed and is not going to be an earth science teacher anymore so they're going to go back and get math certified or whatever. Sometimes that can be a red flag.

## **Summary**

This focus group study was a very fruitful endeavor. The participants have a positive impression of Canisius completers. This is true of their content and pedagogical knowledge, but also of their dispositions and leadership. The willingness of candidates to immerse themselves into their communities aids in their success. Over and over, the participants related anecdotes where Canisius grades went above and beyond the call of duty.

The group is also impressed with the quality of the education programs at Canisius, but also with the faculty and staff with whom they interact. They were especially pleased with opportunities to interact around curriculum, but at the college level and at the K-12 level. They all reiterated their belief in the importance of field experiences...the more the better. They also liked the way pre-student teaching often loops directly into student teaching. This increases the success for all involved.

All of the participants expressed concern about the challenges that are being faced by teachers today, both socially and politically. They lamented the fact that a useful tool like progress assessment has been high jacked to serve more as a wedge issue.

They have noticed that the demographics of the student populations have changed while the demographics of the teachers have not. They expressed a need for more teacher development to bridge that gap. They expressed concern that the differences are making teachers reluctant to reach out to parents to maintain effective communication about the students. This was an extremely important issue to this group of administrators. Contact with parents should be emphasized in the teacher education program so they arrive ready to do this work.

The group offered suggestions for possible changes to teacher education programs. They suggested that changes in regulations for the districts be introduced to the candidate while they were in college so they are not blindsided when they arrive on the job. An example of this would be the Annual Professional Performance Appraisal. Candidates should be well versed on the process and able to produce materials to support their review.

There was consensus that more than one methods class is needed for teacher today. Districts like to be able to move candidates around and there is a big difference between grade 7 and 12 or grade 1 and 6.

The importance of technology could not be overstated. New tools are being developed every day and these tools are leading to innovations such as the “flipped classroom.” Districts are investing in technology and today’s students expect their lessons to use this technology.

The group strongly advised that more work with families be incorporated into the curriculum. They went so far as to recommend role playing and the use of scripts.

The group also suggested work on conflict resolution and possibly even mental health. These topics would equip new teachers with the skills needed to face the situations brought into the classroom on a daily basis.

Finally, the administrators were asked what future certification needs that they see for teacher preparation. Almost universally they mentioned English-as-a-Second Language and Special Education. Some went further to suggest that Special Educators also be trained in Reading. They cautioned, however, not to pursue too many certifications because it could be perceived as a lack of focus.

This report will be provided to the education departments at Canisius College for possible improvements or changes in curriculum. Canisius is extremely grateful for the participation of all involved.