Teachers-in-Residence Bring Together Theory and Practice
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UWM and the Milwaukee Public schools are working closely together in a program designed to improve the links between the theory and practice of teaching.

The Teachers-in-Residence (TIRs) are one example of "boundary spanners," says Marleen Pugach, professor of curriculum and instruction. Boundary spanners are people within the schools and universities who help bridge gaps in understanding between collaborating organizations.

The idea behind teachers-in-residence is to bring public school classroom teachers to campus to offer their "real-life" expertise to aspiring educators and to various university projects and collaborations. In turn, the teachers in residence return to their classrooms with new leadership skills and insights into the academic underpinnings of education.

UWM's Teachers-in-Residence program began in the spring of 2000, funded through a Department of Education grant. Nineteen experienced MPS teachers joined the UWM faculty for two years to work on teacher preparation and continue development of their own leadership skills in a variety of projects. Another 12 joined the program in 2004, and seven teachers are now working or being recruited as TIRs.

All the TIRS are selected on the basis of successful teaching experience in urban schools, interest in helping prepare other teachers and skills in both leadership and collaboration. Past and current TIRS now serve on the selection committee for new TIRs.

Teachers-in-Residence have joined faculty members in co-teaching education students, worked with student teachers, collaborated with other departments in developing content courses for future educators and worked on projects with the Milwaukee Partnership Academy (MPA).

The MPA and the Teachers-in-Residence were featured in a new book "Boundary Spanners: A Key to Success in Urban P-16 University School Partnerships." As more typical because of the collaborative nature of Teachers-in-Residence, the book chapter was co-authored by Linda Post, chair of the Department of Curriculum and Instruction, Pugach and former TIRs Melissa Hedges and Sharonda Harris.

UWM's long history of collaboration with MPS was instrumental in establishing the TIR partnership, say the authors, and those collaborations have continued with the TIR program. Four of the Teachers-in-Residence are involved in working on the Milwaukee Mathematics Partnership. Other current TIRs are or will be working through support from the Carnegie Foundation's Teachers for a New Era project.

Ideally, says Post, the School of Education, would like to be able to fund more Teachers-in-Residence through such grants in partnership with MPA. UWM's involvement with the Milwaukee Partnership Academy has been critical in the TIR program, says Pugach. UWM was able to work out details, schedules and contracts for the teachers through its MPA ties with the schools and the teachers' union (MTEA).

In the chapter in the Boundary Spanners book, the authors wrote: "Through all these efforts a level of trust and shared goals had been established over an extended period of time that made the TIR program possible.

Teachers are attracted to the program for a variety of reasons, but many want to help new and aspiring teachers benefit from their own experiences.

“I liked the idea of being able to be in at the ground floor in helping prospective teachers who will be working in an urban setting,” says Judy Gundry, a second-year TIR. She’s been a teacher for 20 years, ten of them with Webster and Sherman Middle Schools in MPS, and says her own transition to an urban classroom was challenging.

“Even though I grew up in Milwaukee, the urban classroom setting was foreign to me. I had a very difficult transition.”

UWM, which provides more than half the teachers for MPS, does a good job in educating teachers for urban schools, and Gundry says she’s pleased to be part of that effort. “That’s a major focus (of the School of Education). How do you address the complexities of the urban setting to empower students who haven’t had much power?”

Gundry, like the TIRs working with the MMP on mathematics education, is also involved in developing course content for aspiring teachers. In the Spring 2007 semester, she’s working on a Pedagogy Lab in connection with an English content course for teachers. “I’m working on the issues they’re bringing up in theory and helping students with what that means for them as a K-12 teacher.” For example, she says, the class may discuss the concept of language and the privilege associated with standard English in theory. She helps the aspiring teachers think about how teachers can compensate in the classroom in working with students who speak non-standard English or English as a second language.

Other TIRs have been involved in helping develop such courses as the “Big Ideas in Science” classes with science faculty. The TIR working on that project helped the content experts link theories in chemistry, biology and geosciences with local science standards. The TIR was also able to help develop student-centered learning strategies for lab activities.

Gundry is teaching a seminar class for student teachers, connecting the methods they’ve learned with their classroom experiences.

Not everything goes smoothly all the time. One of the TIRs, now working with the MMP, discussed her difficulties in switching from talking about theory in a meeting with mathematics faculty, demonstrating practical techniques for classroom teachers, talking to mathematics education faculty about both theory and practice, then teaching education students. That’s all in one day.

While some early TIRS felt the leadership skills they gained weren’t always recognized when they returned to MPS, Judy Gundry thinks the experience will benefit her in the classroom and in working with MPS colleagues.

“I feel that (being a TIR) has been a chance to get back and get all the professional development anyone could need. Sometimes you’re so focused on the practical and the day-to-day in the classroom, you don’t have a chance to read the theory. This is a great experience in connecting the theoretical to the practical.”