

Ed.D. program evolves to serve needs

by Yvonne Johnson

With its focus on producing master teachers to influence, create and lead systemwide change, it's no surprise WestConn's Doctorate of Education in Instructional Leadership program itself continues to adapt and evolve in its third academic year.

"We're not making changes for the sake of change," said Professor of Education Dr. Marcia Delcourt, the program's coordinator. "We're looking to make improvements and finding ways to make the program better."

There are a number of significant developments in the program designed primarily for K-12 educators, such as the potential creation of a partnership with Central Connecticut State University (CCSU), addition of more students, and adaptation of the focus for particular courses, and the program as a whole.

"We feel it's important we provide a quality program that competes with the 12 other instructional leadership programs in the country and responds to the unique needs of our students and the region's school systems," said Dean Programs Dr. Ellen Durkin. "We're getting feedback from our students through their course evaluations, talking to local school administrators to find out their concerns and responding to what we hear."

Newtown High School science teacher Frank Lalanca is one of the students working to add the Ed.D. to his credentials.

"I'm interested in improving education at the classroom level, and the program focuses on that," said the 35-year-old Sandy Hook resident who was selected by the Teachers Insurance Fund as 2005 Teacher of the Year in Connecticut. "The whole concept of the program is concentrated on the grassroots approach to improvement. We're looking at one person helping another person improve — and we're

improving ourselves at the same time."

He and his classmates know the university wants their feedback and will respond to them. "I think there are serious efforts to meet our needs," Lalanca said. "They recognize that we're a unique group of professionals — many of whom have a lot more experience than the 11 years I have in the classroom — and they really have our needs in mind."

Based on input from the students and local school administrators, the university is developing a partnership with CCSU to give WestConn Ed.D. students the chance to earn an Intermediate Administration or Supervision (092) Certificate. This endorsement from the State of Connecticut Department of Education allows educators to become department chairs, assistant principals or assistant superintendents.

WestConn didn't offer the certification initially because the Ed.D. program is focused on "instructional leadership," Durkin said, which draws

educators who want to remain in classrooms as they lead improvements, but nearly half of the students enrolled in the first cohort said they'd like to earn the endorsement, and several western Connecticut school administrators said they need educators with the credentials.

"We didn't initially anticipate the demand," Durkin said. "But it's a good example of WestConn being responsive to the needs of students and the community."

CCSU already offers the certification, so Durkin and Delcourt are working with officials there to create the partnership. Under the proposed agreement, the WestConn students will be able to apply credit from three of their Ed.D. courses to five 092

certification. CCSU will deliver two other courses in Danbury, and the students will complete supervised internships in their school systems.

Another particularly noteworthy development in the program's progression is the addition of a second



Ed.D. student Frank Lalanca (second from left) discusses a science experiment with his students.

Ed.D. program evolves to meet student, community needs (cont'd.)

students specific information about upcoming courses and expectations. During the reception, the first group of students joined the program's advisory board, faculty members and staff to greet the second cohort.

University officials want the first cohort students to mentor the second group. So instead of bringing in a professional expert to guide the students through a particular issue during the fall semester, the university gave the two groups another chance to interact. During a November conference, the first cohort students formed groups based on the nature of their research and made presentations about their dissertation topics to each other and the second cohort.

"It allowed the first cohort students to be in a leadership position and to showcase what they've learned. They discussed their dissertation topics and outlined how they plan to accomplish the research in their school systems," Durkin said. "The cohort two students got a realistic preview of what's ahead for them. Hopefully, it will get them thinking. We want them to go back to their classrooms thinking about the research topics they might explore in their schools."

The program is being tailored to ensure the students complete their dissertations and avoid a pitfall common to other doctoral programs, Delcourt and Durkin said. The "all but dissertation" or

"A.B.D." phenomenon refers to students who completed all the coursework for doctoral degrees but never finished their dissertations. The faculty members plan to work with the students every step of the way to avoid A.B.D.

As part of the effort, faculty gave the first cohort students feedback as they admitted problems or issues in their schools and developed the topics they plan to research. Each student is assigned a primary dissertation adviser, who is a member of the faculty, and two secondary advisers, who may be faculty or others who have earned a doctorate and have expertise related to their research. The goal is to ensure the students have the support needed to complete the dissertations, which typically are comprised of hundreds of pages, to provide in-depth insight about the research topic.

"I'd like the students to feel confident we'll provide as much support as they need to be successful," Delcourt said.

It's a threat that is common throughout the program's progress. Durkin and Delcourt said it's one they expect to continue.

"We're using feedback from the students to improve the program just as they would use feedback in their classrooms, schools and school districts to make improvements," Delcourt said.

"I don't see that ending. I think it will continue to be a focus as we move ahead." ■