Educating the Agents of Change: SU’s Doctor of Education

By Dan Norris ’14

According to the National Center for Education Statistics’ most recent National Assessment of Adult Literacy, 11 percent of Maryland and Delaware residents lack basic prose literacy skills. Politicians, parents and community leaders on the Eastern Shore have all proposed various solutions to this growing challenge for P-16 education.

Starting in fall 2014, Salisbury University is taking an important step to address literacy by offering a new doctoral degree program, the Doctor of Education (Ed.D.) in Contemporary Curriculum Theory and Instruction: Literacy. The Seidel School of Education and Professional Studies identified the need for a doctoral program focused on literacy by surveying teachers and administrators in SU’s associated Regional Professional Development Schools (RPDS) on the Delmarva Peninsula. “The doctoral program in literacy is a great example of the Seidel School’s commitment to the University mission of promoting life-long learning in a democratic and interdependent world,” shared Dr. Cheryl Parks, dean of the Seidel School. “The program will reach a broad range of constituents with the goal of promoting effective literacy learning in a variety of contexts, from early childhood to adult learners.”

The program’s director, Dr. Judith Franzak, officially began work in June; however, she arrived on campus last spring to promote the program with interim director Dr. Maida Finch. Both educators view this degree as a unique opportunity to make a difference in the educational process, both regionally and eventually nationally.

SU’s Ed.D. program is more than a broad-based degree aimed at improving education; it is a unique option for a doctoral degree in two significant aspects. First, the Ed.D. is a practitioner-focused terminal degree that targets both teachers and education administrators. Finch explained that most traditional Ph.D. programs in education tend to undervalue the experience of practicing teachers. The SU program challenges this notion because students are expected to integrate their professional experiences with the program coursework. Franzak added that in SU’s Ed.D. program, a teacher’s classroom experience is “a great asset. Not only is [classroom experience] valued, but it is essential to this work.”

SU’s Ed.D. program is based on a problem-solving collaboration between students and faculty, creating a learning environment based on the research of each student. Finch explained that the program is: “Interested in having practitioners look at what is going on in their local context, what problems and challenges they are facing...considering what they know in terms of theory, research and curriculum, and what solutions they can propose. Then [the student should] be able to study and analyze the effectiveness of whether or not those are working.”

Second, the degree has a specific focus on literacy, which Finch said broadly means, “The multiple practices people are using to communicate with text.” Whether that is a practitioner “teaching basic [reading and writing skills] to adults or a second grade teacher addressing the question of how to read aloud effectively to children or what’s happening in children’s literature.” To address the need delineated by RPDS teachers, the Ed.D. practitioners’ workplaces will become sites for action research that will explore a range of literacy issues. Franzak explained that “doctoral students will be able to integrate their professional context with their graduate studies through this program.”

The students in a cohort examine their individual research and apply research-based pedagogical concepts, “localizing and actualizing an abstract notion of research” to solve literacy issues. Franzak also explained, “a key concept in the program is being an agent of change and supporting educational practice that will promote equitable achievement across the board for all students.” This model also creates the possibility for a section of the cohort who come from the same school or district to address problems thematically across the group, illuminating a concept of applied learning that is unique for a doctoral program.

The Ed.D.’s Dual Effect on Literacy

Rick Briggs, principal of Mardela Middle and High School, is an ideal student for the Ed.D. When informed of his acceptance as a member of the fall 2014 cohort, Briggs said he was, “cautiously excited to see what the blend of different doctoral models [in SU’s Ed.D.] is going to look like. I think [the Ed.D.] can be a win-win situation that benefits me as an individual while helping the students and staff here at Mardela.”

As the school’s principal for the last three years, Briggs works with teachers who are tackling regional literacy issues in the trenches. With his undergraduate degree in mathematics, a concentration in secondary education and master’s degree in administration, he taught algebra for five years before becoming an assistant principal. Due to his background in mathematics, Briggs believes that the Ed.D. will better prepare him to address literacy among the over 650 students in his school.

Because of the school’s sixth- through twelfth-grade range, Mardela presents unique challenges to a professional educator, which makes it a perfect site for literacy research. The wide range of student ages in a small environment means that Briggs can closely examine actual outcomes of theoretical literacy questions. He elaborated: “If I want to look at literacy in a social studies classroom, I have seven different social studies teachers with whom I can work.” This creates more options for research that will benefit the school and is an example of how
Prior to applying to SU’s program, Briggs was exploring degree options with Mardela’s RPDS liaison Dr. Ron Siers, who shared his experience with various doctoral programs. That conversation piqued Briggs’ interest in the new Salisbury degree. Currently, classes are offered in an evening format, and future plans include hybrid and online courses. The course schedule is designed to make the degree attainable for a professional like Briggs who has a family. Beyond adding solely to his theoretical knowledge acquired through his B.S. and M.S., Briggs was interested in research that “lends itself to what I’m doing every day. While I’m doing something for myself professionally, [I am] ultimately helping the staff and students at Mardela as I develop into a well-rounded educational leader.” The terminal degree will be necessary when Briggs is ready to move into a more supervisory role in the education system. He initially thought that not being in a classroom would be a detriment to his research. But after discussing this challenge with another principal in the program, he believes that because he has a “positive working relationship with all the teachers,” he can help the students while collecting data that will “serve to benefit my research and the program.”