I think I will rename our council The Dream Team! What a great start to a partnership between faculty, administrators, academic coaches, mentors, supervisors, and stakeholders. Those that were able to attend our first Advisory Council meeting for Early Childhood Special Education proved to be a dynamic blend that provided insightful comments and suggestions to initiate our goal of continual improvement of the Early Childhood Special Education program at Valdosta State University. Our Advisory Council mission was explained by Dr. Obiakor, emphasizing recruitment, retention, graduation, and employment. Dr. Obiakor stressed the fact that we want to continue building bridges between our department, partnering schools, and our community. He expressed that we want to provide an opportunity for members to have a voice in programmatic decisions that affect all involved.

We certainly missed the members that had prior commitments Tuesday evening. It is difficult to compete with the teacher of the year banquet, not to mention Ron Clark’s presentation. There will obviously be no way to pick a weeknight that is perfect for everyone. As we found out during introductions, this is a very busy group with many involvements and commitments. In order to address this issue, we will try to alternate between Monday, Tuesday and Thursday night meetings. Our next meeting is tentatively scheduled for December 5, but we need to check on exam schedules, commencement exercises and so forth. I will give confirmation concerning that date as soon as possible.

After spending time getting to know one another, we were able to continue the meeting with some interesting topics that were sparked by Jamie Bird’s description of our new field model for practicum students. Jamie’s comments led to compliments about the full day practicum model in regard to the opportunities it offers in preparation for authentic teaching careers. Katie Chappuis described a scenario that took place last semester that involved Dr. Graves using a teachable moment to coach a group of practicum students during the full day supervision model. From an administrator’s viewpoint, Ms. Chappuis supports the new practicum model and commends the positive results that are occurring from the full day model.

Michael Smith, one of our stakeholders, was also commending the Early Childhood Special Education department and stated that other departments should take note of the time and effort put forth in preparing students for employment. Michael also echoed Willie Edwards’ suggestion of placing more emphasis on preparing teacher candidates for dealing with cultural diversity. Mr. Edwards, one of our mentor teachers, has done an outstanding job helping us train teachers. During the mentoring process, he has seen a need for providing the knowledge and experience with diversity to our future teachers. Mr. Edwards stressed that preparation such as this cannot be acquired from a textbook. The entire council agreed completely and much of the meeting seemed to revolve around ideas to address cultural diversity preparation.

Dale Gillespie, another stakeholder, contributed ideas on how to get PAGE involved in our diversity training efforts. Dale shared that PAGE is taking a new direction in professional learning, and the director of PAGE, Dr. McGill, is looking for venues to provide trainings for teacher candidates as a part of their service. (PAGE is the organization that provides liability insurance for our students.) Dale is going to inquire about educational provisions for our students that PAGE will possibly sponsor. This year, PAGE has already provided a Code of Ethics training presented by a local lawyer, Tina Folsom.

Dr. Dodds suggested that the tutoring hours that our students are required to accumulate take place in locations that would give a variety of culturally diverse experiences. The students could possibly spend time at the Mildred Hunter Community Center in Valdosta. In a follow up conversation, it was suggested that our department recruit guest speakers from organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, L.A.M. P., and the Children’s Advocacy Center for practicum seminar sessions. Speakers from these organizations could share valuable lessons with our ECSE students.

In summary, our first meeting was enjoyable and successful. We seemed to tackle a major concern of teacher preparation and brainstormed some very manageable solutions to equip our teacher candidates with exposure and training for working with students from different backgrounds.

The next meeting is tentatively scheduled for December 5 at 5:00. A confirmation will be sent out as soon as possible.