

An Interview with Spencer Niles

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There are many things that have come to define my time here in the Counselor Education program at William and Mary, but a sense of gratitude for being exposed to the excellent faculty, staff, and my future colleagues, will be what comes to stand out. Never before have I been in a setting where everyone with whom I interact possesses some quality, trait, or disposition that I wish I could emulate. Being surrounded by such inspiring individuals is one of the distinguishing features for graduate students in the School of Education. Having the opportunity to interview our new Dean, Spencer Niles, a world-renowned counselor educator with countless contributions to the counseling field, falls into that pattern very nicely.

Dean Niles' accomplishments are greatly valued in the field of counseling. He is author and co-author of more than a hundred publications and he is the recipient of numerous awards such as the highly esteemed David Brooks Distinguished Mentor Award, The Eminent Career Award, and American Counseling Association's Extended Research Award. His reputation earned him several offers to serve as dean for other programs that he respectfully declined. He explains that, though some may have had a great faculty or a high national ranking, they lacked a sense of community that he feels makes William and Mary's School of Education unique. "We are small enough for a community, but large enough to be excellent. I think many programs claim this, but William and Mary really exemplifies it. That's what makes us really special."

Prior to being offered the position, Dean Niles' speech to the School of Education told of how some programs grow to be so large that students could graduate without having a single class taught by a core faculty member, and how for those programs, this is more the norm than the exception. For those of us seeking a career in academia, we have prepared for the sad reality that faculty are inundated with countless responsibilities from their institutions and are faced with pressure to expand programs to meet those obligations. In poorly run programs, faculty are overworked, tired, and minimally motivated to exceed the expectations of them. As a result, students can be



left feeling unimportant or used, mirroring the negative feelings and attitudes of faculty and administrators. The School of Education is a complete contrast to this, something that Dean Niles had been aware of for some time, observing from afar while advising students in other programs.

"We have great teachers that not only do excellent work in the classroom, but they do outstanding research as well. This is not always the case as many universities say they value teaching but actions don't always reflect their contentions. We mean it here. And while it's not requisite, it's always nice when that kind of work can be done in a beautiful building on a beautiful campus at a tremendous university with a stellar reputation."

Dean Niles' topic of interest is hope, and he believes that it is central to skill development. His model is guided by Snyder's Hope Theory, which defines hope as the cognitions that frame the expectation and ability to attain important goals (Snyder, 2002). But it is more than just the expectation that a goal will come to fruition; hope involves a person's determination and capacity (known as agency) to devise and follow through with the plans and strategies necessary to attain those goals (known as pathways). A hope that Dean Niles has for the School of Education is fostering a sense of "mattering" for everyone - faculty, staff, and students.

"It is important that people feel that they

matter - that their work and presence matters to the community. I want to do what I can to foster this sense among faculty, staff, and students within the SOE."

Mattering is defined as, "the feeling that others depend upon us, are interested in us, are concerned with our fate, or experience us as an ego-extension" (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981; p. 165) and has been described as the belief that we are cared for, significant to others, and appreciated by them (Elliott, Kao, & Grant, 2004). Research has indicated that fostering a sense of mattering does indeed matter (Wicker, 2004) and higher education institutions that foster a sense of mattering can see positive influences in student retention, better student performance, and increased energy and enthusiasm among administration, faculty and staff (Schlossberg, 1989). Additional studies document the relationship of mattering with positive qualities like self-esteem and mental health (Pearlin & LeBlanc, 2001; Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981).

"I want this for students and for the school, and we each have a certain responsibility to foster this. We all have an obligation to be excellent in the services we provide the community, and ultimately, students excelling in their field will come to reflect favorably on our school. It's what we want for them and it's what students ultimately want. "

In the short time that he's been here, Dean Niles has already taken purposeful steps in fostering a mattering environment. He has met with some faculty and staff, and wishes to meet everyone, preferably by setting foot into their own office, to get to know who they are and hear what they hope for themselves and the School of Education in the upcoming years. Within three years he would like to see the school having an environment where everyone is feeling supported and experiencing a sense of mattering. "I want to be a part of creating that positive environment, but that's a collaborative endeavor."

In addition to fostering a more positive climate, Dean Niles understands the necessity of doing what he can to portray the School of Education in a positive light. "Things like national rankings are important and are things that I of course have to pay attention to. But fostering a sense of mattering for everyone involved - faculty, staff and students - will lead to those top rankings."

Dean Niles would certainly know – he led multiple programs at Pennsylvania State University (two undergraduate, seven masters and five

doctoral) into rankings within the top 20 in the nation. Prior to that, he was the Assistant Dean for the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia for two years, which was also ranked within the top 20.

Dean Niles holds other visions for the School of Education, one of which is creating more global opportunities for students to learn. "I would love for our school to grow relative to our internal collaborations. Such collaborations create a natural appreciation for diversity relative to global contexts, values, and challenges."

Throughout his career, Dean Niles has served as a visiting scholar and professor in several international countries, and has, on occasion, taken students with him. He tells of the richness of learning how different cultures can shape the knowledge and process of education and counseling, and how our practice improves from that understanding. He would like to see more opportunities for students to come to that realization on their own and have similar, if not more extraordinary, experiences.

"I love working with students and will seek those opportunities formally in the classroom and informally with student groups. I have also taught each year and I look forward to resuming that activity as the deanship allows."

My hope for this article is to give readers a fair and encouraging introduction of Dean Niles, both as a professional and as a person, and express what we, as a school, can come to expect from him. While we all collectively feel the loss of our former dean stepping down, we can take great comfort that our new dean is one who is fully committed to all of us and that, through his leadership, the School of Education is in very capable hands. "I come from a long lineage of educators and have great respect for the tradition of William and Mary's School of Education. I hope to honor and respect that tradition in my work as dean."

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