

Why GSE? Why Now?

Professor of Education David Labaree gave the following remarks at the Jan. 22 party celebrating the education school's changing its name to Stanford Graduate School of Education from Stanford University School of Education. An educational historian, he is the author of numerous prize-winning books, including *The Trouble with Ed Schools*.

You may be thinking the same thing I am: Why are we here? OK, we're changing our name, but why a party? We took the name, school of education, and added a word: graduate. What's the big deal?

As someone who has looked at the history of education schools, I thought I'd try to answer this question, which really has two parts: Why are we changing our name? And why are we doing it now?

On the surface at least, why we're doing it is easy. We're changing our name to bring it in line with the kind of institution that we really are. We're a graduate school of education. Enough said.

But a little background would help. Historically American ed schools have emerged in two forms. The large majority are in institutions that evolved out of normal schools, which over 100 years turned into teachers colleges, state colleges and eventually regional state universities. These ed schools tend to focus on the production of teachers, administrators and other school personnel. The majority of educators in the U.S. graduate from these places. Given their focus and the nature of the universities where they're located, they don't have the resources to deal with advanced graduate programs or do a lot of research. They usually call themselves schools or colleges of education.

On the other hand, a small number of ed schools came into existence through a different route. They were created around the turn of the 20th century within existing elite universities, and they have focused primarily on doing research and offering advanced graduate programs of study. Because of this focus, they typically engage in the preparation of teachers and administrators at a much smaller scale than the others.

The second is a pretty good description of the kind of institution we are; most of our peers call themselves GSEs, so it makes sense for us to do so. But why do so now? After all, we have been operating as a top-ranked graduate school of education for at least 50 years.

Therein lies a tale. The short version is that over the years operating a graduate school of education has proven to be a risky business. Ed schools within former normal schools have a long and stable history of growth and development. But research-oriented ed schools have periodically found themselves under threat.

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The problem is that the successful research-oriented ed school has to maintain a very tricky balance. It has to excel at the production of high-quality research and at the graduation of high-quality master's and doctoral students. At the same time, it needs to be playing an effective role as a professional school — closely connected to the educational professions, responding to the needs that arise from these professions and contributing to the development of educational policy. The kinds of things that professional schools traditionally do.

In practice this has not been easy to accomplish. After World War II, research universities responded to a huge surge in higher

education enrollments by shoring up their distinctive character as the academic elite of the system. So they put pressure on schools to demonstrate that they had the academic chops to be part of such a university. The pressure was particularly strong on professional schools that had had a reputation for being academically weak, such as business and education. These schools dutifully shifted their emphasis in the desired direction — dropping undergraduate instruction, ramping up master's and doctoral programs, increasing research effort and establishing themselves as the academic peers of colleagues across campus.

But this effort threw things out of balance. Many such schools, including our own, became less professional schools of education than graduate schools of educational studies. They focused on high-level disciplinary research on education but with minimal investment in professional training and few connections with the field of practice. And, one after another, research-university presidents starting asking what value

these ed schools added to the institution. "You're not really professional schools," they'd say. "Instead you're doing disciplinary research about education. But we already have people in the disciplines who do this work, and they're the real thing. So who needs you?"

One after another, elite ed schools started to receive the death sentence, or came close. In the '50s, Yale and Johns Hopkins eliminated their ed schools; in the '70s, this happened at Duke; in the '90s it happened at Chicago; in the 2000s it happened at Arizona State. In between in the '80s there was a series of skirmishes that threatened such schools across the country.



David Labaree explains the rationale for renaming the school.

Berkeley had a major battle, which eventually led to the preservation of the school, but it was a near thing. Michigan considered a major downsizing of its ed school, and here at Stanford there was talk of turning the school into a program. Like most of our peers, our own school of education was heavy on research but light on professional identity and involvement in practice.

Here and elsewhere, deans got the message. They have the job of looking around the neighborhood for signs of trouble. So we had a series of deans — Mike Atkin, Mike Smith, Rich Shavelson and Deborah Stipek — who had a clear mandate to restore the balance. This meant shoring up the school's professional mission and connections with practice while still maintaining excellence at producing research and PhD's.

Considering all that was going on, this would not have been an ideal time to announce to the world that we were a graduate school of education, since at that point we needed more than anything else to reassure the university and the world that we were a serious professional school. First we had to bring the mission back in balance.

in educational policy at both the state and national level. We set up a series of major centers focusing on issues of policy and practice. We added an elementary teacher education program. And we developed a close relationship with a local charter school. Overall these efforts have been enormously successful. This is now a school that has established a stable and credible balance of missions.

As a pragmatic matter, these were smart moves to make for an institution that wanted to survive on the high-wire perch of the elite ed school. Those of us who are associated with the school want it to do well for our own personal reasons. But what possible benefit does this kind of rebalancing effort offer for the educators and students in our public schools?

It turns out there is broad array of benefits for both schools and society. A rebalanced graduate school of education can facilitate a fruitful conversation across barriers that have long divided educational research and educational practice. It can provide empirical and theoretical grounding for the work of practitioners, while also

Over the next several decades, the school moved to enhance its professional commitments. We reconstructed the secondary teacher education program, bringing in senior faculty to design and operate a model program that would build on research and enrich the profession. We brought in faculty who forged close relationships with schools, both as research sites and as places for professional intervention and service.

We increased our effort

serving as a resource for addressing the problems that arise from practice. It can offer lift for teachers and administrators who find themselves dragged down in the machinery of schooling, and it can offer ballast for university researchers who find themselves floating high above the fray. Both sides need each other, and a balanced GSE can bring them together.

This, then, is another answer to the question of why we're making a big deal about a change of name: because our newly rebalanced mission can make a real contribution to the field.

And what about why we're making the change now? I already gave the pragmatic answer: Such a move would have been risky. But in addition I think it's because at this point in history the querulous state of school reform means there is urgent need for a voice such as ours — which can insert the long view into a notoriously short-sighted conversation and also can keep the discourse intimately linked to teaching and learning in classrooms. We need an institution that can remind people of the higher historic purposes of education, while also lowering expectations that schools by themselves can solve our most urgent social problems.

And that is the kind of role that our school plays today. We produce research of the highest quality, which shapes the intellectual contours of our field; and we prepare educational researchers of the highest quality, who become some of the leading scholars of the next generation. At the same time, we educate model teachers and educational leaders, who go on to exert an impact on the world of practice; and we provide an informed and authoritative voice in the discourse of educational policy. Therefore now is a good time to declare ourselves as the Stanford Graduate School of Education, whose academic and professional commitments are as clearly balanced as they are clearly distinguished. **SE**