

**Ray Neag Endowed Professor of
Teacher Education**

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THANK YOU MESSAGE

The generosity of Ray and Carole Neag to the University of Connecticut, the Neag School of Education, and to my own scholarship and teaching has been extraordinary. I am deeply honored to hold a professorship that acknowledges their commitment to education and to the common good. The Neag Endowed Professorship has given me the greatest gift for an academic, time. It has allowed me to give my time to others, most notably doctoral students. During the past two years, when so many students have felt isolated and alone, and when our teaching has been disrupted by the need to teach online and forgo face-to-face interactions, the Neag Professorship afforded me the opportunity to spend one-on-one time with students in my classes, supporting them as they found ways to care for their children and for themselves, to pursue their doctoral studies even when it seemed nearly impossible. This has been particularly important for international students and students of color, and I am grateful that the Neag Professorship has allowed me to support them financially, intellectually, and personally.

At the same time, the endowed professorship has allowed me to pursue projects concerning teaching and teacher development. This includes participating in efforts to synthesize historical and contemporary literature on the teacher workforce to inform national policy and local practice. Having taught for over 40 years, and participated in multiple state and national efforts to enhance and improve the teaching profession, I have reached a moment in which I want to look across those experiences and reflect on what I have learned. The Neag Endowed Professorship allows me the freedom to explore ways to put this lifetime of learning together in a project that would lead to a book written for the general public about why teachers and teaching matters.

I am forever indebted to the Neag family for their generosity to me and to so many others—students and faculty alike—in the Neag School of Education.

RESEARCH AND TEACHING

My teaching focuses exclusively on doctoral education, which is unique in that students are transitioning from mastering the knowledge produced by others to producing their own knowledge. This transition is both intellectually and emotionally challenging: students are asked to take intellectual risks, to pursue independent research, and to invite challenging criticism to test and strengthen their work. Much of this learning takes place outside of the classroom in the schools where they are conducting research, in conversations with mentors, in professional meetings during which emergent ideas are tested and debated.

I teach two classes a year that focus on the development of necessary professional skills. For the past two years, those classes have focused on conducting qualitative research and writing for publication. I often have students from across the University in these classes, which enhances the experience for us all. One learns so much from dialogue with colleagues who come from other disciplines, use different research methods, have different assumptions, and use different theories. It is invigorating to encourage these students to embrace their differences, and use them to inform the kind of lively debates that are essential to high quality academic work. I am thrilled when students find intellectual partners in my classes who become lifelong collaborators.

This past year, because we returned to face-to-face instruction, I found teaching especially rewarding. Having spent more than a year in isolation, students were hungry for the relational aspects of teaching and learning, and listened to each other with full hearts, pursued projects with passion, and embraced being challenged. I have never felt so connected to students as I did this past year.

My research was equally satisfying. With colleagues, I am completing one project on teachers' learning about computational thinking and how they can integrate relevant, inquiry-oriented projects into their teaching across grade levels and subject areas. Since the project was implemented during COVID-19, we also learned a great deal about the challenges teachers faced during the pandemic; the endowed professorship afforded me time to negotiate the adaptations we needed to make as a result of the pandemic. It also allowed me to hire several graduate students who were essential members of the research team. I also launched a new project which will entail collecting a set of essays that address the broad question, "Why teach?" The U.S. is currently facing a precipitous decline in the number of people interested in teaching as work, and as a life's career. My goal is to reflect my own journey as a teacher—in K-12 schools and in universities—and consider how public critiques of teachers, the press to hold schools accountable to limiting metrics that reduce the complexity of learning to numbers, and other social forces are shaping the contemporary teacher workforce.

PUBLICATIONS, CONFERENCES, AND AWARDS

The support I received led to the publication of two technical reports, two articles in leading educational research peer-reviewed journals, and two white papers for national organizations. Several other papers are in draft form and will be submitted for publication in the coming months. I was also able to make four national presentations, including for the National Academy of Education (NAE) and the National Academies of Science, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM), as well as an international presentation in Dublin, Ireland for the Association for Teacher Education in Europe (ATEE).

I am perhaps most excited about a paper, based on my presentation to teacher educators from over 17 European countries, in which I consider the role of teacher educators in a democracy. In that paper I consider three questions: How do we, as individual teacher educators and as a community, learn to "read" the world in ways that help us understand how teacher preparation is being shaped in our times? How do we prepare teachers to participate in democratic dialogue that embraces difference and the difficult conversations those differences involve? How do we participate in that same dialogue with empathy, integrity, and understanding? Because teacher educators around the world are also grappling with such questions, I am particularly excited to consider how the challenges we face here in the U.S. are similar to and different from those faced in other nations. Digging into this topic has allowed me to read broadly in scholarship on democracy and philanthropy and education.

By far, the most astonishing news this year was my election to the Academy of Arts and Sciences. As a former American history major and then teacher, I'm thrilled to be part of a tradition with roots in the creation of our democracy and of interdisciplinary deliberations to inform the common good. Founded in 1780, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences is an independent research center dedicated to the cultivation of "every art and science which may tend to advance the interest, honor, dignity, and happiness of a free, independent, and virtuous people." My own goals include understanding how teaching plays a role in advancing the honor and dignity of the American people. Participating in this Academy is an honor and will allow me to interact with a broad swath of extraordinary artists and academics. Teaching is complicated moral, practical, and intellectual work, and teachers are central agents in enhancing our intellectual heritage, striving to improve our democracy, and truing our moral compass. In these trying times, we need good teachers more than ever and I hope to enhance efforts to recruit and retain a diverse and talented teacher workforce in the coming years.

SERVICE AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

I always aim for an appropriate mix of local and national service activities. This past year, this meant serving on the editorial boards of four leading education research journals, as associate editor of the Elementary School Journal with other UConn faculty members, and on half a dozen advisory boards for projects funded by the National Science Foundation and the Institute for Education Sciences. It also involved contributing to a National Academy of Education project on Evaluating and Improving Teacher Education Programs.

Locally, it involved serving on numerous Neag School committees, the President's Athletic Advisory Committee, the UConn Postdoctoral Fellowship Seed Grant Competition, and the University Senate. In my role as chair of the Curriculum and Courses Committee for the Senate, I was responsible for facilitating part of the process in the Senate's proposed revision of the undergraduate general education curriculum. This has been an extraordinary opportunity to learn more about the University governance system, and to support the revisions of general education, an essential component of undergraduate education.

LOOKING AHEAD

I believe in the tripartite mission of higher education which honors equally research, teaching, and service. And I feel fortunate to be allowed to attend to all three of those missions, which mutually reinforce and enliven one another. Thus, my goal for the coming year is to continue to strive to teach well, to do research that teachers and teacher educators find relevant and meaningful, and to shape policy—at the local, state, and national levels—in ways that support the common good. I am especially excited to continue working with doctoral students, who—if we faculty have done our jobs right—will go on to do work that surpasses our own, and to begin working with colleagues in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences on projects that inform our democracy about the significance of teachers to our public good. I fully recognize the privilege afforded me through Ray and Carole Neag's investment in UConn and the Neag School of Education, and am humbled by their generosity.