

Out from the Basement: Vision & Education

Michael Petersen

“I thought it was excellent, I thought the School of Education . . . was probably another one of the jewels of [LMU].”
Katherine Moret, LMU Alum

For decades, the Department of Education at LMU was stuck in the basement under Sacred Heart Chapel. Fr. Koppes, the early leader of the Department recalled, “We . . . had a maximum of . . . 12 fulltime faculty; there was not room for anymore. Probably our enrollment was about 300 . . . It was good,” Koppes asserted, “but it was small.” Fast-forward to 2011 and LMU’s Department of Education is now the School of Education, with more than one hundred staff members, twelve hundred students and a Doctoral Program. Symbolically, the School of Education has also moved from the basement to a place of prominence in University Hall, a journey due in large part to the work of visionary leaders, a commitment to Jesuit ideals, and an unyielding belief in the power of education.

It was in 1990, when Fr. Koppes became the Chair of the Department of Education, that real changes began to occur. By that time, Koppes had already developed a long history at the University, working as a part-time education faculty member in the mid-1970s and then serving a nine-year term as Academic Vice President. Not long after he became Chair, the Department was upgraded to the School of Education and Fr. Koppes became its first Director. Under his guidance, the school kept on “.... building our programs a little bit. Not so much adding, we really didn’t add many programs until we got over [to University Hall]. But just strengthening.” More specifically, Koppes explained that in the early years, much of the strength of the School of Education rested with its teachers.

Indeed, whatever the department lacked in size, it made up for in the dedication of its faculty. Ernesto Colin, a graduate of both LMU and the School of Education, was drawn to the University because of one such dedicated faculty member, Shane Martin. In the 1990s, Martin, a former LMU graduate, was a new professor serving under Father Koppes. When he first met Colin, Martin was completing his work on his doctoral dissertation, studying diversity and the experience of ethnic minority students at an all-boys Jesuit high school, Bellarmine College Prep in San Jose. As part of his research, Martin interviewed Colin about his high school experience. After the interview, Martin asked Colin where he was going to college. “I gave him the truthful answer,” Colin remembered, “that I didn’t really know. I’m a first generation college student. I didn’t really have a great sense. I was doing well at that high school, but I didn’t have too many visions beyond that.” Martin gave Colin his business card and invited him to visit LMU. Colin kept that card and, in the fall of his senior year, he decided to give Martin a call. “He was so great about it. He remembered who I was. . . . When it came time to apply. . . I just thought, man, LMU felt good.” With Martin’s help, Colin received a leadership scholarship and in the fall of ‘95 he was a freshman at LMU, working for Martin in the

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Department of Education. “He was such an amazing mentor. . . ,” Colin said. “All those professors in the School of Ed took me under their wing.”

In addition to assembling an outstanding faculty, Fr. Koppes established path-breaking programs as well. Not one to let the lack of physical space discourage him, he kept growing and improving the school in whatever ways he could. For example, Fr. Koppes worked hard to connect the Department with the nearby Catholic elementary and high schools, most likely influenced in part by his previous career as an educator at such institutions. “As a Catholic university...we’ve got to serve the Catholic schools,” he said. In the late 90s, he also helped develop Partners in Los Angeles Catholic Education (PLACE), a program that recruits graduates right out of college to teach in Los Angeles Catholic schools. Modeled after the University of Notre Dame’s Alliance for Catholic Education (ACE), it consisted of three pillars: teaching, academic preparation, and community spirituality. “We [have] been considered the best replication of the ACE Program in the country,” Fr. Koppes said, “I consider that my legacy.” As it turned out, it would be a legacy marked by success.

As Fr. Koppes worked within the School of Education, Fr. Lawton, LMU’s President at the time, made the School of Education a personal priority. Describing his thoughts at the time, Fr. Lawton recalled, “One of the crying needs in the world in general, and of this particular metropolitan region, is education,” said Lawton. “It’s a need to really provide educated teachers and school superintendents and principals...it’s an important need, and we can meet it.” Fr. Lawton not only wanted the LMU School of Education to serve the Los Angeles community, but also to embody LMU’s emphasis on ethics and social justice. In short, he wanted a uniquely Jesuit School of Education that would educate men and women in Los Angeles who would go and serve others.

With Fr. Lawton’s support, Fr. Koppes pushed forward. In 2000, he was made the Dean and the School of Education officially moved its offices and faculty over to University Hall. With the new space, the School could serve its students and community like never before. In 2004, as both enrollment and hiring continued to increase, the decision was made to expand the school even further by adding a Doctoral Program. It was the University’s second such program, the other being offered by Loyola Law School. This proved to be an invaluable addition for the School of Education and a great opportunity to advance its mission. Explaining the import of the Doctoral Program, Koppes recounted Fr. Lawton’s view, “If you’re going to have an influence in the city . . . then you have to prepare people that will be influential. In education that means you get a doctorate.”

In 2005, visionary leadership was passed from Fr. Koppes to Shane Martin. Describing Martin, LMU graduate, Katherine Moret, described him as “way ahead of the curve.” For Martin, Los Angeles is vital to the mission of the School of Education. “I think we’ve made a huge impact on Los Angeles,” said Martin. In fact, Loyola Marymount’s School of Education graduates have developed a bit of a reputation. “They’re known for three characteristics,” noted Martin, “first of all, for stepping into educational job settings and knowing exactly what to do. Secondly, knowing why they

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do it. . . . Thirdly, our graduates emerge as leaders.” As the reputation of the graduates improved, so did the School’s reputation. “Because of the success of our faculty and the graduates of our program . . . we really have grown in reputation and stature in the greater Los Angeles area, throughout the state, and even nationally,” Martin said. But despite this remarkable growth, Martin states, “We've never lost what I think was the core strength from the school. . . . That individual care of our students, the importance of the mission and passion around education, and the realization that in educating the educators, we're really able to touch the next generation. . . .” In fact, because of its location in Los Angeles, Loyola Marymount continues to reap the benefits of the improvements made by its graduates. “We in the School of Ed train people that work in public and Catholic schools, high school, and that's where we get our students from . . . They're the ones that carry the message to a lot of kids that might want to come here,” Fr. Koppes said. It’s a continuous cycle pushing Los Angeles and LMU forward.

Under the leadership of Fr. Koppes and Dr. Shane Martin, the school has fulfilled Fr. Lawton’s mandate, combining top-notch academics with a culture of service. It’s an environment where both faculty and student can work together and thrive. “It’s who we are at LMU. It’s the mission and the values, all of that. That’s where I wanted to be,” said Karen Huchting, current Education professor and graduate of both LMU and the School of Education. Martin is equally enthusiastic: “I love it. I love what I do. Every day I wake up and just think about my job and I'm one of the luckiest people in the world.” The small department in the basement has blossomed into a far-reaching and nationally recognized School of Education that LMU is proud to call its own. In a time when the physical presence of Jesuit educators is diminishing, LMU’s School of Education is spreading the ideals of Jesuit education further than ever. And the mission of LMU’s School of Education is nothing less than to change the world, one student at a time.