Graduate Degree Programs with Majors in Brain-Based Teaching with Nova Southeastern University

Celebrating Our 12th Anniversary: The Story So Far!

The year 2013 marks 12 years of positive results from the graduate degree programs with majors in Brain-Based Teaching with Nova Southeastern University. The story of the development of these graduate degrees provides useful insights into what has made them so beneficial to teachers and their students. To date, almost 3,000 educators from across the United States and around the world have enrolled in these programs.

The 1990s, proclaimed by the U.S. President and Congress as “the Decade of the Brain,” ended with a landmark report from the National Research Council on How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School. Around that time, not far from the campus of Northwestern University in Evanston, Illinois, a team led by educational and school psychologist Dr. Donna Wilson was developing pioneering teacher education programs that connected the implications of mind, brain, and education research to classroom practice. The team worked across the United States with thousands of K-12 students sharing and refining learning and thinking strategies and then with tens of thousands of educators in dozens of states and districts.

One initiative with the Florida Department of Education, called Scholarships for Teachers for Action Research (STAR), was a three-year, statewide program for teacher leaders. Participating teachers studied the BrainSMART® framework for effective teaching and then conducted action research projects in their classrooms to assess the positive impact of what they had learned. Another initiative was with two large districts in Florida through Florida Atlantic University supported by a prestigious Annenberg Challenge Grant. A third program brought together educators from across Texas to take part in an approach for using mind, brain, and education research to promote wellness. These initiatives were led by team member Marcus Conyers.

The success of these and the team’s other initiatives nationally led to the development of the graduate degree programs with majors in brain-based teaching with Nova Southeastern University (NSU). These degrees were among the first two of their kind in the world; Harvard University launched its master’s degree in Mind, Brain, and Education in 2002. From the beginning, the brain-based teaching degrees with...
NSU had the goal of empowering classroom teachers with research, theory, and practical frameworks and strategies for strengthening student learning. The focus was on developing a deeper understanding of what mind, brain, and education research suggested was crucial in the processes of how people learn. A parallel focus was on practical frameworks and strategies for increasing teachers’ effectiveness.

Three graduate degree programs are offered online through NSU, accredited by the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and regionally by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS):

- Master of Science with a Major in Brain-Based Teaching (Concentration in Learning and Teaching)
- Master of Science with a Major in Brain-Based Teaching (Concentration in Reading and Literacy)
- Educational Specialist with a Major in Brain-Based Teaching (Concentration in Instructional Leadership)

More than a decade after the degrees were launched, research about their impact on graduates’ professional practice and student achievement is providing fascinating insights about how teachers and their students are benefiting from these pioneering programs. To date, almost 3,000 graduates and students are putting what they have learned from their studies to work in their classrooms and schools. Teachers and administrators from Europe, Asia, the Middle East, Canada, and 48 states in the United States have earned their degrees through these innovative programs.

Meet Dr. Donna Wilson, the Lead Developer of the Graduate Degrees with Majors in Brain-Based Teaching

With her background as an educational/school psychologist and former university chair of education and classroom teacher, Dr. Donna Wilson’s work in teacher education draws on decades of cognitive studies in education and psychology and is informed by more recent developments in the field of neuroeducation. Areas of interest include using principles from the fields of cognitive education and school neuropsychology to empower teachers with research and strategies for achieving joyful, thoughtful classrooms. Her diverse professional experience provides the foundation for a practical approach to effective instruction developed in collaboration with more than 100,000 teachers and administrators.

Dr. Wilson began her career in education as a classroom teacher in Oklahoma. She became fascinated by educational theory as she pursued graduate and postgraduate studies. In the mid to late 1980s, she began studying exciting work about emotions, cognition, and the brain in partnership with one of her mentors, Sally Church. At that time, Dr. Wilson was working as a school psychologist and licensed professional counselor and was able to better understand what she was learning through her work with struggling students.

In 1989, Dr. Wilson attended a conference at the University of Tennessee in Knoxville on developing learning potential based on the work of Reuven Feuerstein. Feuerstein’s moving story of his work inspired Dr. Wilson to continue her studies, with the aim of...
learning more about potential intelligence and cognitive strategies to help children become functionally smarter. At the same conference, she heard Robert Sternberg share his understanding of intelligence as practical, creative, and analytic. Sternberg advocated for educating our citizenry to take on the challenges of this era and to actualize their strengths through these broader conceptualizations of intelligence.

In the early 1990s, Dr. Wilson decided to earn a doctorate degree in educational psychology and pursue becoming a teacher educator. She wanted to share what she was learning with those who have a powerful influence on children’s learning—classroom teachers. She studied at the University of Oklahoma and cotaught as a school psychologist with classroom teachers and presented on a cognitive approach to teaching in the Norman, Oklahoma, school district before joining the Georgia University System as a teacher educator.

In 1997, Dr. Wilson took the opportunity to do postdoctoral study at Feuerstein’s institute, the International Center for the Enhancement of Learning Potential in Jerusalem. Here she met psychologists, medical professionals, and educators from across the world, including the Russian-born psychologist and researcher Alex Kozulin who translated to English some of the work of renown psychologist Lev Vygotsky. Upon completion of her postdoctoral studies in structural cognitive modifiability, Dr. Wilson served as the chair of education at University of Detroit Mercy, where she developed a graduate program for teachers putting cognitive research into practice. She and Marcus Conyers then went on to colead the teacher education initiatives in Florida and Texas.

For more information on the impact of these programs on graduates’ professional practice and student learning:

Bridging the Gap: The Impact of Graduate Degree Programs Connecting Mind, Brain, and Education Research to Teaching and Learning

In surveys of recent graduates, educators say these brain-based teaching programs added more teaching strategies to their toolbox (97%), taught them the thinking skills students need to succeed in school and in life (95%), and improved their teaching effectiveness (92%).

Helping All Learners Reach Their Potential:

Georgia teacher Joe Frank Uriz

What Teachers Say About Graduate Programs That Integrate the Implications of Mind, Brain, and Education Research

Eight teachers participating in in-depth interviews for this ethnographic study share how earning their graduate degrees in brain-based teaching enhanced their understanding of how students learn, improved their professional practice, and resulted in gains in student achievement.

Empowering Teacher Leaders: The Impact of Graduate Programs Connecting Mind, Brain, and Education Research to Teacher Leadership

Graduates of the brain-based teaching programs agree that their studies have prepared them to assume teacher leadership roles: 91% of teachers surveyed strongly credited their graduate education with their development as teacher leaders; 93% are involved in at least one teacher leadership activity; and more than 70% are involved in five or more such activities.
Three core concepts captivated Dr.Wilson in her studies and helped to shape these degree programs:

1. Most everyone has the potential to do well academically and in other aspects of their lives if they are willing to put forth the necessary effort required to learn the knowledge and strategies to do so.

2. Success is primarily the result of hard work and the use of effective strategies rather than the product of innate ability.

3. Virtually everyone can develop the essential cognitive strategies needed to enhance their learning performance if they are taught those strategies.

The positive results of these degree programs have been shared at leading academic conferences, including the International Association for Cognitive Education and Psychology, American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, and American Educational Research Association. Codevelopers Dr. Wilson and Marcus Conyers have written more than 25 books and educational journal articles, including the forthcoming Five Big Ideas for Effective Teaching: Connecting Mind, Brain, and Education Research to Classroom Practice, which will be published in the spring of 2013 by Teachers College Press.

From the beginning, the focus of these graduate degree programs has been to translate the implications of mind, brain, and education research into practical frameworks and strategies for strengthening student learning. Developing the programs with K-12 students in their classrooms and with thousands of teachers across the country has resulted in the integration of cutting-edge research with a highly practical approach that empowers graduates with what they need to guide their students achieve their full learning potential. As graduate Diane Dahl says:

“This graduate degree empowered me with research and practical strategies that I applied right away in my classroom and increased student learning. My students gained five months in reading in just two and a half months! I recommend this program to any teacher who is passionate about making a positive difference in the lives of their students.”