

EdForward: Bridging Research and Practice through Entrepreneurial Partnerships

The UC Davis School of Education has been committed to bold innovation from its inception. Determined to do work that has relevance to real educational challenges in and out of schools and to be willing to try a different approach to solving ongoing challenges, the School established a center within the School dedicated to applying entrepreneurial principles to the development of products and services for students, teachers, parents, and community leaders.

EdForward: the Center for Innovation in Education was launched in 2010. Its first director Traci Schmidt helped build partnerships, researched hundreds of potential projects, and is now driving the launch of a novel project called Navigate Autism (see more below). In November 2012, Cynthia Sommer joined as the center's new director. Over her 20-year career, she has cultivated a diverse background in corporate and nonprofit management, healthcare marketing, online education, and product management. She has been a business instructor at local universities and community colleges and received an Outstanding Service Award from UC Davis Extension. She earned a BA from Stanford University and an MBA from Wharton.

In her role at the helm of EdForward, Sommer must wear many hats—from product developer to convener, conduit, and cajoler. Her most basic goal is to “make sure the pipeline stays packed with ideas for the School to spur innovation in education.”

“EdForward has the opportunity to strike up different kinds of partnerships, ranging from traditional K-12 relationships, to perhaps more disruptive ones, where we can be involved with game-changing companies or technologies,” said Sommer. “We are thinking double-bottom line, where new initiatives make a difference for all students while also being self-sustaining.”

Navigate Autism

One of the most exciting projects that has advanced from the EdForward pipeline is Navigate Autism, a collaboration that brings together information and resources to help parents of children with an autism spectrum disorder (ASD).



Cynthia Sommer

Undertaking months of research, focus groups, and discussions with families, providers, insurance companies, and regional centers—all stakeholders in the complex system of care in California—Schmidt and others, including the UC Davis MIND Institute are working to launch a one-stop digital collaborative. Education professor Peter Mundy also consulted on the project.

“The hub could simplify the administration of autism treatment and services through a website of collaborative tools and development of a system to personalize content for those who navigate the system of care,” said

Schmidt. “Users will include parents, care providers and payers who will benefit from increased efficiency, reduced stress, and better information. Bottom line, we want to make it easier and more accessible for parents to make informed decisions.”

“One child may have six different organizations providing or administering services to her, including a medical doctor and her school. The parents are the gatekeepers. The Navigate Autism project flips the usual paradigm from pushing information out to first educating parents about the system of care and asking what the parents need. As a result, it has the potential to provide an easier way to get all the stakeholders on the same page for the child,” said Schmidt.

The final prototype is slated for launch in July (a name for the final product is yet to be determined). “If we are successful in connecting all the stakeholders in this way, we can significantly improve the day-to-day lives of these families and the educational outcomes for students with autism,” said Schmidt.

Summer Enrichment Camps

EdForward serves students directly, through its summer enrichment programs. Beginning with just a few camps in summer 2011, the program has grown in number of offerings and geography. “UC Davis and the School are an attractive alliance, and administrators are thrilled we’re bringing our programs to them,” said Sommer. She cited Andee Press-Dawson, director of community programs, as having cultivated partnerships with Campus Recreation and other regional partners, including Hacker Lab, Loomis School District, and

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NextEd. A number of scholarships are also available for students with need. A sampling of programs includes:

- **Adventures in Enrichment Camps** (grades 2-8), offers week-long courses in subjects from cooking to robotics to dinosaurs.
- **Jumpstart to College** (entering 12th graders), explores everything about applying to and succeeding in college in a two-week summer session.
- **STEM Summer Camp for Girls** (grades 5-7) motivates students to take on the rigors of high school science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) classes. Courses are offered in a variety of communities, including Chico, Colfax, Folsom and Loomis.
- **Summer Fun with a Brain** (grades 5-8) taps into the “maker” movement, with 3-D printing and product development, among other things. Offered off-campus at West Sacramento Early College Prep and the Hacker Lab, a place for programmers, designers, and entrepreneurs in Sacramento.

Projects in the Pipeline

There are many stakeholders in any given context who can benefit from the power of the School’s research and expertise, and vice versa, says Sommer. The EdForward team constantly scans the field for potential collaborations, talking to parents, educators, administrators, and industry to explore new solutions for ensuring young people thrive in our region. Here are some projects in development.

School of Education Portal:

A website to promote the School as a thought leader and regional resource on education innovation and for community building with our network of educators and other interested constituencies. “By centralizing information about the multiple offerings within the School,

we’ll make it easier for people to engage with us and allow us to get know who is coming to the site and to School events,” Sommer said.

Roominate: A DIY wired dollhouse-building kit, designed for kids (girls, in particular) to have fun with STEM while building hands-on skills and confidence. Recommended for ages 6-10, the Roominate kit brings together creativity and engineering through basic circuit building, furniture building pieces, and decorating accessories. In a meeting with the company founders, ideas ranged from developing activity guides and STEM-based lesson plan, to workshops and summer camp sessions.

College Success Strategies: Two modules are proposed to help improve the college readiness level of local high school students, create a smooth transition for students entering college, and promote local higher education options. The Learning Exchange and Sacramento City College, Davis Center, have indicated interest in the modules, which can be offered at regular intervals throughout the year to coincide with new quarter/semester enrollments.

Education Technology: Leveraging the School’s expertise in education technology and its connection to a vast network of teachers, EdForward is considering an “educators as entrepreneurs” event to bring teachers into the discussion about educational technology and to tap into the pool of venture capital funding. “There is a lot of ed-tech investment by venture capitalists going to developers, but not as much to understanding whether any of the products actually facilitate learning,” said Sommer. “There are resources within the School that can help answer that.”

“All of these projects let us put our stake in the ground as innovators, promote the School’s expertise, and build the expanse of our relationships. If some of our pipeline converts to viable programs or new business entities, that’s all the better for the School and EdForward because it strengthens our ability to take to trial the next idea for innovating education.”

For more information on

EdForward, visit <http://education.ucdavis.edu/edforward> or contact Cynthia Sommer at csommer@ucdavis.edu.

