



# UNC

## Center for Urban Education

### Leadership Council Chronicle

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## Practicing What We Preach: How to Teach People to Teach



CUE Professor Lisa Mesple helps students and future teachers conquer their fear of math.

### Thinking about Becoming a Teacher?

The UNC Center for Urban Education (CUE) is enrolling new students for the fall 2021 semester through July.

Call Dr. Rosanne Fulton, Director, at 303-637-4334 or [email](mailto:rosanne.fulton@unco.edu) her for more information.

Watch our [short video](#) to learn more about the CUE teacher-preparation program.

[Watch Video](#)

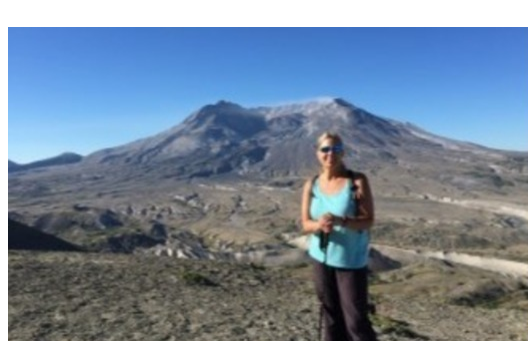
Math anxiety is real, and it starts early. According to [EducationWeek](#), it affects about 50% of the U.S. population and shows up in students as early as the age of five. That anxiety escalates and leads to difficulty with and avoidance of math. [Education Next](#) reported that by the eighth grade, only 32% of U.S. students are proficient in math at grade level.

### Create an Equitable Classroom Environment

At [UNC Center for Urban Education](#), Lisa Mesple teaches a series of three required math classes to teacher candidates. That means she's teaching math, and she's teaching how to *teach* math. "I believe all humans are highly capable mathematicians," said Mesple. "One of my goals as a teacher is to help all students unpack their innate mathematical abilities, which have been buried beneath years of negative experiences."

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Mesple empowers students from day one. She calls out traditional privilege—how the teacher and the more competent and confident students usually take over the class—and changes the dynamic to, "We are all practicing math together." In Mesple's classes, students' voices and ideas are heard and valued, sometimes for the first time. They learn how to create an equitable classroom environment by *feeling* it themselves.



CUE Professor Lisa Mesple employing stress-reducing techniques.

### Use Strategies that Squash Anxiety

Mesple also uses specific teaching strategies to help her students conquer their math anxiety. In order to give all students time to come up with their own answers, she does not time their activities. Another strategy is to assign activities that all students can engage in, while making them difficult enough that students can work more complex aspects as their ability allows.

Yet another strategy is to avoid putting students on the spot to do math publicly. "I ask for volunteers and then talk to other students in private. Not having to do math on demand helps them face their anxiety and work through it."

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Mesple worked as a paraprofessional and studied to become a teacher after having three daughters. "I understand what it is like to work in a school all day, take classes in the evening, study, and parent children," said Mesple. "It was hard, but teaching is one of the most rewarding careers I could imagine. I have loved it for more than 35 years," she said. No wonder she can teach *how* to teach!



Cynthia Navarro is a CUE Professor and Principal at Excel Academy. She helps future teachers learn how to work with students with special learning needs.

### Teach the Theory and the Practice

Another CUE professor, Cynthia Navarro, uses her own methods to develop excellent future teachers. She has developed a strong knowledge base and mentoring skills as a result of decades of being a teacher and principal in Denver Public Schools. At the Center for Urban Education, she instructs teacher candidates how to make modifications and accommodations in elementary classrooms for special education (SPED) students. It's not an easy subject!

Is it a modification or accommodation? A modification changes what the students learn, and it may or may not keep the content up to standard or grade level. For example, students may complete different homework problems than peers, answer alternative test questions, or create alternative projects.

An accommodation, on the other hand, is a slight change the teacher makes that helps a student overcome a learning difficulty. That might mean reading to the student aloud or extending the amount of time to complete an assignment.

### Treat Each Student as an Individual

"The teacher must individually evaluate each student's abilities and their success within the classroom environment, then choose an appropriate modification or an accommodation," Navarro said. The process requires strong analytical skills and discernment. It also requires the teacher to see each student as unique and therefore find a unique resolution to a learning difficulty.

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Navarro helps teacher candidates develop these all-important skills by facilitating hands-on activities in the classroom. She also invites her students to observe teachers applying the techniques live in classrooms at [Excel Academy](#), where she is the principal.

### Relate to the Students

Teaching students with special education needs requires teachers to relate to the students, something Navarro says the teacher candidates are good at. "The CUE students they work with, as the students they work with," said Navarro, "and that means they are better teachers for the children."

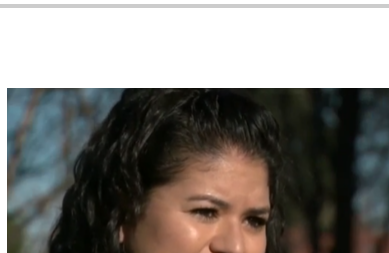
*"It's important that the students see that I'm a leader of color from their neighborhood, working in their neighborhood."*

Navarro is from Denver, Colorado herself. "It's important that the CUE teacher candidates and the students in my school see that I'm a leader of color from Denver, working in Denver," she said. "They know I can relate to them, and they can relate to me."

Navarro also gives the CUE teacher candidates her personal cell phone number, responds to their questions immediately via text, and has an open-door policy with no set office hours. Her flexibility builds meaningful relationships and helps her students see her as a partner in their learning.

At UNC Center for Urban Education, we develop excellent teachers by immersing them in classroom environments that mirror the ones they themselves will someday create. We model the high-quality teaching that our teacher candidates will mirror with their own students.

## Called to Teach: Denver7 News Features Two CUE Teacher Candidates



In a recent Denver7 news story, two UNC Center for Urban Education's teacher candidates of color explained why they feel it's more important than ever for them to become teachers. Denver7 ran the story on February 8, 2021, citing Colorado Senator Rachel Zenzinger's concerns about the rate at which teachers are leaving the profession. Watch the newscast, which features teacher candidates Belen Gomez Ruelas and Morgan Farley, [here](#).

## Newsletter Archive

Did you miss previous issues of the *Chronicle*? Visit the [Leadership Council page](#) on our website, scroll down, and click on past newsletters.

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