

# Ringling the Bell for Education



Rich Taylor

# Four Sooner families have made possible new facilities to match the mission of an often-overlooked campus college.

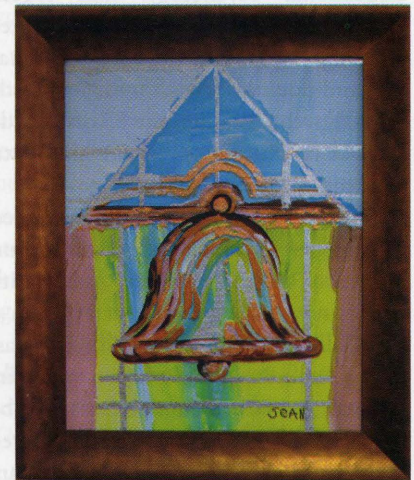
BY SUSAN OWEN ATKINSON

**T**he lobby of Collings Hall was standing-room only December 6, 2010, packed with students, faculty, dignitaries and University supporters spilling down the main hallway. A bright cold day, guests arrived bundled in coats, only to look for places to put them when they hit the warmth of the crowded lobby. But the warmth was more than just temperature. It came from the excitement of shared memories and a family's pride in honoring a strong woman who believed to her core that educating children was one of the world's most important jobs.

The occasion was the dedication of the newly renovated and expanded home of the Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education (JRCOE), now a 54,000-square-foot instructional facility dedicated to nurturing and growing Oklahoma's next generation of educators. In the first college in the history of the University of Oklahoma to be named for a woman, future teachers and administrators are being trained to face a future that looks very different from the one that Rainbolt, an OU education alumna, first met at Stand Watie Elementary School in 1950s Oklahoma City.

Unlike other colleges whose graduates may go on to lucrative professional careers, the JRCOE trains students whose future compensation will be paltry by most standards. "And yet," observed OU President David L. Boren at the dedication, "teachers change the course of society. Beyond the family, there is no relationship more important than the connection between teacher and student."

The \$9.5 million renovation and addition to Collings Hall were made possible by gifts from H.E. "Gene" Rainbolt, his son, David Rainbolt, and daughter and OU Regent Dr. Leslie Rainbolt-Forbes, all of Oklahoma City, and Sandra and Brian O'Brien of Houston. In addition to gifts enabling



The renovation/expansion of the newly named Jeannine Rainbolt College of Education required the creativity of Meyers Architects' Marcia Gallant with OU staff architect Deborah Brewer, and the interior vision of Meyers' Katie Byers and OU's Rick Skaggs and Tara White.



bricks and mortar, classrooms were outfitted with the latest technology by support from the Anne and Henry Zarrow Foundation and the Maxine and Jack Zarrow Family Foundation, both of Tulsa.

During remarks at the dedication, Sandra O'Brien, a 1957 COE graduate, declared, "I believe this is the most important college on the OU campus." She is particularly proud of the O'Brien Bell Tower, which features a 3,000-pound bronze school bell cast in 1934. The bell tower is an imposing gateway into this revitalized center of learning.

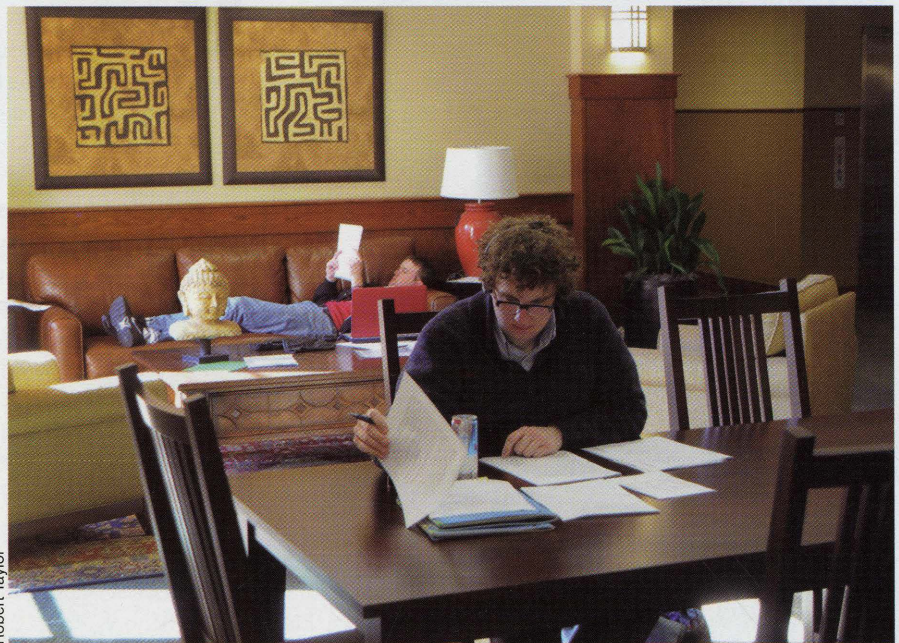
The JRCOE encompasses three departments—Instructional Leadership and Academic Curriculum; Educational Leadership and Policy Studies; and Educational Psychology—that together offer an astonishing array of degree-granting programs at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels. According to the JRCOE webpage, there are 83 distinct degrees or certification programs that a student can earn within the college.

"The variety is broad because the needs of students and future educators are unbelievably diverse," observes Joan Smith, who is now in her 16th year as Dean of the College of Education. "In the past, teacher education focused on preparing teachers and curriculum content. We believed that if teachers were well prepared, they would do well in the classroom, and student performance would naturally follow. In the past 20 years, the focus of teacher training has shifted completely away from a teacher-centered environment to a learner-centered environment. As a profession and an academic discipline, we've come to realize there is simply no such thing as one way to learn."

Dean Smith adds that without a doubt the biggest change in teacher education is the ongoing introduction of classroom technology—"the ultimate tool for individualized instruction." Thanks to the gifts from the two Zarrow foundations, the college now includes math and science



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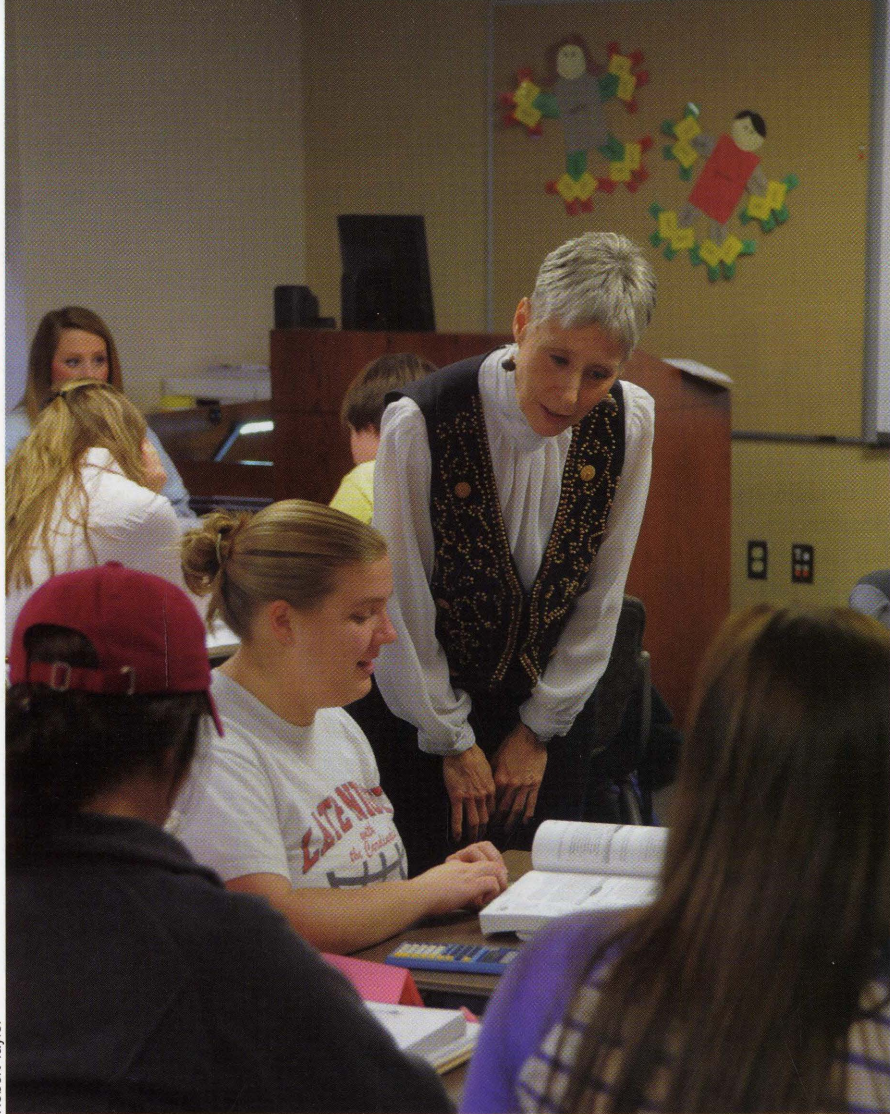
**The presence of several attractive, comfortable lounge areas scattered around the redesigned Collings Hall has resulted in a positive social change among OU's education students, who can be found there throughout the day and evening, studying, meeting with project teams or just relaxing between classes.**

education centers that are well-equipped for 21st-century learning. Along with the new addition, the existing building was retrofitted with the newest technological capabilities.

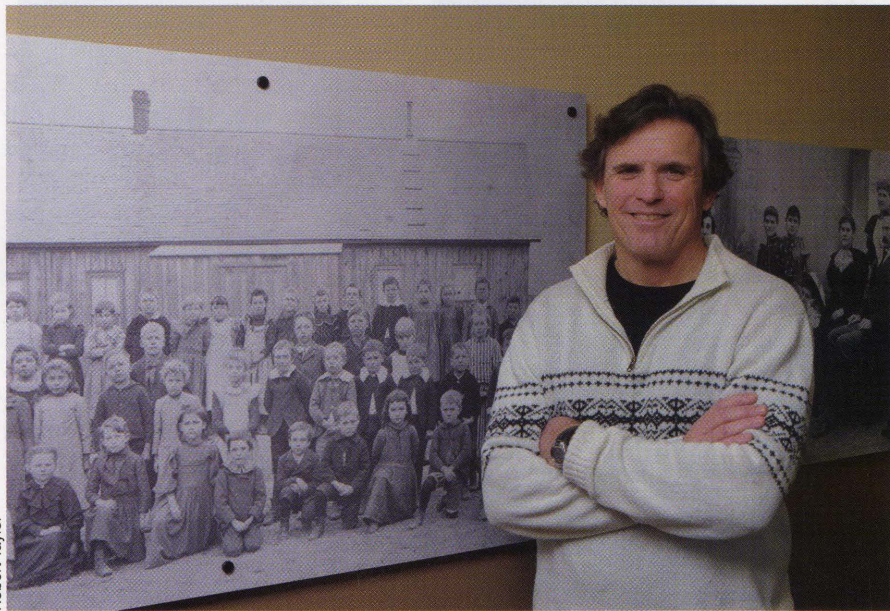
"We now have a state-of-the-art facility that provides exactly what we need in terms of technology," says Dean Smith. "We finally have space to provide a good instructional environment. Nationwide, many school districts now provide individualized instruction methods that tailor

learning to meet the needs and abilities of all students. Philosophically we agreed wholeheartedly with that, but we lacked the resources and facilities to train our teachers how to provide individualized instruction. Because of these generous gifts from the Rainbolt, O'Brien and Zarrow families, we're taking a giant leap forward in preparing our teachers for the demands of the 21st-century classroom."

Dr. Lawrence Baines chairs the JRCOE's Instructional Leadership



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**TOP:** Assistant Professor Sacra Nicholas notes the energy generated by the new Collings Hall, which has brought once-dispersed classes back under one roof. **BOTTOM:** ILAC chair Lawrence Baines loves the photographic tributes to his profession's early days that don the walls now surrounding Collings classrooms equipped with the technology that has enhanced his ability to teach.

and Academic Curriculum (ILAC) Department. He muses about how classroom access to the Internet has completely changed his teaching paradigm. "Before, I might think of a reference in class, ask students if they knew this person, and maybe none of them knew whom I was talking about. After class I would find Internet references, print them and bring them to the next class. Now I pull up the Internet right there in the classroom, project it onto the screen, and we all learn together, right there in the moment. This is a huge change."

Baines also notes positive social changes among students promoted by the sensitive interior design created by OU's Architectural and Engineering Services Director Rick Skaggs, his assistant Tara White and approved by President Boren. "I think it's accurate to say our students are gushing about the new facility—they just love it! The designers intentionally created attractive common areas for students." There are several such areas throughout the building, as well as an outdoor courtyard with tables, umbrellas and chairs. "Students are always using these areas, talking, working on their laptops."

On a reflective note, Baines adds, "I believe the new building sets the tone for our curriculum and raises the expectations of both students and faculty. We're proud to say that our building is now a reflection of the college's philosophy of valuing a learning environment for the mind."

"In the past, our focus was curriculum, with a one-size-fits-all mindset about learning," which, he notes, has been changed completely by the country's growing diversity. In an urban school setting, a teacher may encounter recent immigrants with no English, children of migrant farm workers who attend school sporadically, plus students of different races and religions.

"Educating teachers today means giving them strategies and a toolkit that reaches the potential of each of those stu-

dents,” he says. “Our teacher training is more intensive than ever, training teachers multiculturally, multi-lingually, and by exposing them to multi-sensory learning techniques.”

For Sacra Nicholas, assistant professor in ILAC, the biggest change is that science and math education are now taught under one roof for the first time in decades. “Before, nearly 60 percent of our classes were taught outside of Collings Hall. We’ve now been able to create one cohesive learning home for our students.”

Nicholas observes that the energy generated by the renovation and addition also has helped redefine the direction for Elementary Education. “We’re leaner and cleaner. We’ve slightly decreased the hours required for certification, enabling students to complete a bachelor’s degree in four years—before it was four and a half, with student teaching coming after graduation—but we’ve beefed up the intensity of the senior-year field training, echoing a national trend. During their first semester as seniors, education majors now spend three days a week in a school. Second semester, it’s five days a week.”

Nicholas contends that OU teachers are highly sought after because they are so well trained. “By the time they complete a bachelor’s degree, our students will have between 200 to 300 hours in field experience. This allows us to attract the best and brightest future teachers in our state and in the region.”

One newly minted JRCOE initiative is the Global Educators Program, which includes a three-semester certification in language, culture and pedagogy with a six-week, summer Spanish Immersion Experience in Puebla, Mexico. Students earn certification in Communication, Culture and Pedagogy for Hispanic Populations in Educational Settings (ESL/ELL). Still under development, the JRCOE is creating a similar program for French language, culture and educational system immersion with the Academie

d’Amiens/ Jules Verne University (UPJV) in Amiens, France.

In addition to its three departments and various program areas, the JRCOE includes many programs designed to enhance teacher training, often through community interaction and partnerships. The JRCOE website describes some of these programs including the K20 Center for Educational and Community Renewal. This interdisciplinary consortium of school-university-community partnerships emphasizes authentic learning, technology integration and cooperative networking.

The Oklahoma Writing Project seeks to improve the quality of composition instruction in elementary and secondary schools. The program, which has professionally prepared more than 500 teacher consultants, is part of the National Writing Project, a network of university school programs across the nation. The Science Education Center’s mission is to remain at the forefront of research in this area, while preparing teachers and professionals for scholarly work and personal development that improves science education.

JRCOE senior and Norman native Christine Engelbrecht served as president of the student chapter of the Oklahoma Education Association in 2010-11. She is thrilled with the Collings Hall renovation and expansion. “The building is wonderful. We have places to gather and talk. We can finally hold chapter meetings in our own building, which means we get much better participation. It feels like we have a home now; we’re not roaming all over campus. For a long



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**Their family names prominent in the transformation of Collings, sophomore Lauren O’Brien, left, and graduate student Katherine Rainbolt carry on the dedication to teaching that began with their grandmothers.**

time, it seemed like nobody outside the college cared much about us. The renovation lets everybody know that JRCOE is very important to OU. The school bell makes a big statement of who we are and what we do here.”

Jeannine Rainbolt was a tireless, passionate advocate for advancing the cause of quality education in Oklahoma. Her family’s milestone gift means that teachers trained at OU will be well prepared for the demands of the 21st-century classroom. The college bearing her name is an intellectual home of which both students and faculty can be proud—and in a building that inspires them all to reach higher, equipped with technology that brings all corners of the globe right into the classroom. These achievements would have delighted this woman who knew that there was no profession more vitally important than teaching.

*Susan Owen Atkinson is a freelance writer living in Norman.*