

4 CORNERSTONES OF PROFESSIONAL LEARNING

Fundamental principles
pave the way
for educators' actions

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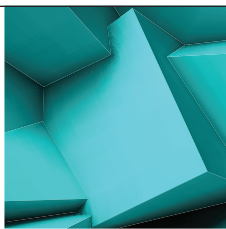


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Learning Forward Executive Director Stephanie Hirsh will retire in 2019 after 31 years with Learning Forward, 11 of those years leading the organization. Here she reflects on changes she has observed in the field and shares her key takeaways on the present and future of professional learning.

By Stephanie Hirsh

My motivation to take on the role of executive director of the National Staff Development Council in 2007 was not very different than what inspired me as a first-year classroom teacher. With each new professional role, I saw the opportunity to extend my impact on more students.

I have always been driven by a fundamental principle of my faith: the concept of *tikkun olam*, which means to repair the world or leave it better than you found it. I found my pathway in professional learning.

Given my long tenure in education — and particularly in professional learning — you would think that I have learned everything there is to know about professional learning and would have moved on to something else. But professional learning is about continuous learning and improvement. There are always more questions for us to consider.

As I reflect on what I've learned, I want to acknowledge

the countless intelligent, insightful, and concerned members, colleagues, mentors, and scholars who have influenced my work. What I view as my most memorable contributions have been accomplished in partnership with others.

I believe there are many elements essential to establishing effective systems of professional learning. Here I will discuss four that I consider critical to achieving the ambitious outcomes we all desire for students.

Since the establishment of the first Standards for Staff Development in 1995, the work of NSDC and then Learning Forward has consistently been rooted in those fundamental principles. While the four cornerstones outlined here extend beyond Learning Forward's Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011), they are built on a foundation of the standards as well as the research and elements included within the standards.

LEAD WITH EQUITY

Learning Forward recently updated its vision to include equity: *Equity and excellence in teaching and learning*. The vision statement represents the inspiration, challenge, and essential purpose for pursuing more effective ways to serve educators and students.

Attaining equitable outcomes for all students has long been a priority for Learning Forward. Equity is the reason for the Standards for Professional Learning, Learning Forward's beliefs, numerous books and articles, and presentations. However, we recently recognized that our intentions weren't explicit in the vision statement or our strategic plan, and the board of trustees expedited the official revision to the statement.

We soon discovered that adding equity to our vision statement meant more than elevating current efforts aligned to it. It means that our board and staff must decide what we mean by equity and what practices and programs may need to change.

Therefore, Learning Forward has committed to further exploring and defining equity and cultural diversity professional learning. We recognize that we need a shared definition of equity and then a plan for how it will manifest itself in the daily work of the organization. With equity as the vision, how will the organization prioritize its resources and measure its impact?

Learning Forward staff members will examine their assumptions, beliefs, and biases with regard to diversity, equity, and inclusion; consider which have implications for the work; and establish a plan to address them through services, publications, program offerings, the revision of the



A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I have always tried to embrace and further the benefits of living in a racially and culturally diverse society. Growing up, I wasn't exposed to much racial prejudice or the civil rights upheaval happening across the U.S., so I was unprepared to experience my own version of cultural prejudice during college.

Once I had that experience, I became determined to learn

and connect with people from all backgrounds and cultures. I enrolled my children in a voluntary desegregation elementary school so that they experienced the benefits of a multicultural society early on. I enlisted support from people with a wide range of backgrounds and ethnicities and selected projects that gave me opportunities to experience greater diversity. I recognize today I could have done more.

As much intentional work as I did to expand my thinking related to diversity, equity, and race, I was unprepared for Glenn Singleton's keynote address at our 2001 Annual Conference. He helped me to realize that I couldn't view the world through someone else's lens. The best I might hope to do is to respect each person's story and learn from it. It's a lesson I try to keep at the top of my mind.

Standards for Professional Learning, and our operational processes and policies.

Even as we undertake this work, countless students and their teachers need our help now. While a majority of these students go to school in our most impoverished communities, others may be less visible in rural and suburban communities. Racism is only one of the challenges they may face. There are the challenges of poverty, learning differences, family trauma, addiction, and more. We must continue to prioritize and serve the educators facing the greatest challenges with the best wisdom and tools backed by research and evidence.

While Learning Forward's vision statement leads with

equity, excellence is always its critical partner. In meeting the needs of a wide range of students from varying backgrounds, education advocates never compromise on rigor and high standards.

The bar for all children remains high so that students leave school positioned to hold high aspirations for themselves and succeed on their chosen path. Our intention is that the work we do will result in finding great pathways for integrating excellence and equity. This important mission is one that any organization may need to undertake if it has made a similar commitment to equity. ●

INVEST IN TEAM LEARNING

From the release of the first Standards for Professional Learning, I have been deeply interested in the potential of learning communities. If we expect every student to succeed, then every educator engages in collaborative professional learning. Through such embedded learning, educators strengthen collective capacity that has the potential to ensure more students experience meaningful teaching and learning.

I have yet to see a school that has successfully addressed the challenges associated with poverty, English language learners, special needs, resources, and staffing without an explanation that includes a deep investment in professional learning.

This professional learning is not a workshop or adult pull-out program. Rather, it is best captured by the phrase “collaborative professionalism.” I am grateful to my valued colleagues Michael Fullan, Andy Hargreaves, and Carol Campbell for elevating this concept as the defining element to success in Canadian school systems and schools (Campbell et al., 2016; Fullan & Hargreaves, 2016).

Within these systems and schools, everyone shares collective responsibility for the success of every student. In these schools, structures to support ongoing learning and improvement are built into the fabric of the school day and are not up for negotiation. Daily, leaders learn side by side with every staff member. Everyone is committed to growth with the intention to achieve tremendous outcomes for students.

At their most productive, learning teams put teachers in the driver’s seat of professional learning. They provide the structure and purpose for teacher collaboration, study, and problem solving. Their core work centers on educators



studying and understanding the curriculum and instructional materials in use in their context. Learning teams also incorporate the following components.

Within high-performing learning teams, professional learning is intentional and driven by clear goals for student and educator change. Structures are in place so that educators can build the foundation and access the support they need to make substantive improvements in classrooms. Learning teams

A PERSONAL REFLECTION

I've seen the difference between systems that prioritize effective team learning and those that don't through the experience of my daughter, Leslie, and her lifelong friend, Megan. Early on, they discovered a shared passion for teaching and often role-played as teachers in classrooms.

They went off to college together in pursuit of their teaching degrees. The first of their three practice teaching assignments was kindergarten in a Title I elementary school. The school had regular time each week for grade-level teachers and their student teachers to meet. Teams typically used this time to plan lessons and debrief after teaching.

Megan's cooperating teacher was in this group. Leslie didn't participate

in the team learning because her teacher said they didn't have time, and she wasn't sure how valuable team learning would be for them.

The young women went on to have two more student teaching assignments. Leslie's assignments improved from the first one. When the time came, Megan immediately went to work for the school system where she graduated high school, while Leslie took a job at Disney in Orlando. She later returned to education, and her career path has included elementary teacher, elementary Master Teacher in a TAP school, and instructional technology and elementary science coach. Today she is an assistant elementary principal. After several years of teaching, Megan earned her administrative degree and is now an

elementary principal.

The story of Megan and Leslie illustrates one of the glaring challenges we face in schools. Research has shown that variation of teaching quality within a school is often greater than variation across schools or districts.

Consider Leslie's first kindergarten classroom. Her students benefited solely from the expertise of their one teacher and her student teacher. By contrast, Megan's students benefited from the expertise of an entire team of teachers. I wonder today how that impacted the trajectory of their students. I know how it impacted Leslie's. Observing this experience so close to home cemented my commitment to advocating for high-quality team learning for every teacher.

that share collective responsibility for the success of groups of students are essential to increasing access to great teaching and reducing variability across classrooms and schools.

Within high-performing learning teams, teacher leaders are recognized for their commitment to classroom teaching. Research affirms that there is no substitute for effective teaching when it comes to getting great results for students. Systems and leaders demonstrate respect for teachers when they ask the best teachers to lead learning teams. By asking teachers to lead, and recognizing and compensating them when possible, we establish systems with potential to keep our best teachers working with students.

Within high-performing learning teams, teachers experience critical support. Two of the most common reasons for teacher turnover include lack of support from principals and isolation in the job. When principals establish the essential learning conditions (regularly scheduled time, classroom support, and high-quality instructional materials) to ensure teachers have what they need for productive study, collaboration, and problem solving, teachers stay.

Within high-performing learning teams, teachers exercise professional judgment. Throughout the Canada report cited earlier, teachers reported a sense of respect for their professional judgment. Canadian teachers regularly used

data, research, and insights of colleagues before exercising professional judgment. Issuing professional judgment was part of their learning and improvement cycle and was conducted with colleagues as well as on their own.

Ideally, all teachers will experience professional learning as part of their regular work routine — learning that helps them continue to grow, learn, and solve daily problems of practice. Such professional learning engages teams of teachers in ongoing cycles of continuous learning and improvement, building collective knowledge and responsibility for the success of all students represented by the team.

This is the kind of professional learning that benefits all educators and is the reason Learning Forward has embraced networks as part of its strategy to serve educators, particularly in high-needs schools and systems.

At the district, system, or state level, educators have so much to learn in collaboration with peers when they identify problems of practice and commit to collective responsibility and accountability. While the facilitation and learning structures at different levels may vary, the fundamental premise remains: Supported cycles of continuous improvement among committed professionals hold the greatest potential for addressing critical student learning challenges. ●

LEVERAGE HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

Studying and adapting high-quality instructional materials anchors the work of effective learning teams. Learning Forward has elevated the importance of this work for the same reason we amplified the role of equity in our vision — a recognition of the need to prioritize and be explicit about the strategies that have the most potential to transform all students' learning experiences.

As part of launching this work, Learning Forward released a white paper: *High-Quality Curricula and Team-Based Professional Learning: A Perfect Partnership for Equity* (Learning Forward, 2018). The research is compelling and convinced us that attention to the issue is paramount. The deeper I studied, the more I became convinced that teachers deserve both high-quality instructional materials and the learning team structures to support implementation.

We have always advocated that professional learning begins with a determination of the student outcomes intended for the investment. The Standards for Professional Learning include the Outcomes standard, which states that educator professional learning, to be effective, is focused on the content students are learning and the materials in use in a system (Learning Forward, 2011). However, interpretations have differed with varying outcomes for educators and



students, so the time has come to be more explicit.

In 2013, William Schmidt wrote, “As it stands now, students’ chances to learn challenging content depend on whether they are lucky enough to attend a school that

provides it. In effect, a defense of localism in response to questions about content amounts to a defense of inequality in opportunity to learn” (Schmidt & Burroughs, 2013).

The research supporting the importance of high-quality instructional materials is compelling.

A 2012 report from the Brookings Institution compared selected interventions, including placement of math or reading Teach for America educators, placement of more effective math or reading teachers with students, or providing a better curriculum. The curriculum had a statistically better outcome over all other interventions. And something to consider is that placing a curriculum is a sustainable intervention (Chingos & Whitehurst, 2012).

In 2016, researchers from the Center for Education Policy Research at Harvard estimated that in 4th- and 5th-grade math, switching to a top-ranked textbook would translate to student achievement gains of 3.6 percentile points — larger than the improvement of a typical teacher’s effectiveness in the first three years on the job when he or she is learning to teach (Kane, Owens, Marinell, Thal, & Staiger, 2016).

One of the most exciting elements of this movement has been philanthropic investment in organizations like EdReports to review materials for alignment to career- and college-ready standards. EdReports is a valuable resource for school systems during the textbook adoption and curriculum development process. It is also a source of comparison for traditional textbook companies and emerging open source resources that may be less familiar to others.

In addition, philanthropy is supporting the development of open source curriculum to make great curriculum available to all educators. The dollars ultimately saved on materials can be directed to the type of support educators are asking for in terms of time for collaborative study, planning, and adapting materials to the needs of their students.

Over the last two years, some have wondered why Learning Forward is focusing on the instructional materials movement. Multiple experiences led us to the point of making a stronger stance on the critical intersection of high-quality instructional materials and learning team work. Here are a few.

There was the learning team I visited that had regularly scheduled daily time for collaboration. The team lacked confidence in its district curriculum and used team time to coordinate use of materials each team member found from the internet for the upcoming unit.

There were the surveys where teachers ranked professional learning communities lowest among their opportunities for professional learning. Why wasn’t this time, for which so many advocated and rearranged schedules, being leveraged for its best purposes?

There were increasing demands from teachers asking for

support in implementing new and higher career- and college-ready standards.

And there was the tremendous response to Learning Forward’s Summer Institutes, when teacher leaders were given the opportunity to go deep into the Standards for Professional Learning as well as materials that could support their planning for high-quality learning experiences for their students.

Learning Forward recognized that teachers deserve meaningful support for their instruction-focused collaborative planning and problem solving.

Over a three-year period, Tracy Crow and I wrote and then rewrote *Becoming a Learning Team* (Hirsh & Crow, 2018). The book outlines a process for unpacking high-quality instructional materials and studying what students need to know and be able to do, giving greater purpose and focus to the work of learning teams.

The five-stage learning team cycle — analyzing data, setting goals, learning, implementation, and assessing practice — is not intended to help teachers prepare a scripted curriculum. To the contrary, this learning cycle supports teachers in reviewing what students are expected to know and identifying what they need to learn to support student learning.

When teachers invest ongoing, dedicated time to studying instructional materials, they set the foundation for transferring their learning into powerful lessons that can be differentiated and personalized to address individual student success.

The high-quality lessons that motivate, engage, and challenge students enable teachers to achieve the success we desire for them.

In many places, this work is not new. Teachers work tirelessly to engage and motivate their students. They are driven to create the perfect learning conditions and materials so that all students can succeed.

To support those educators, we should consider a fundamental guarantee to all educators — a set of instructional materials that have been documented as aligning to state or district standards and a learning team setting in which to unpack, study, organize, plan, and adapt the materials to their students. This is the perfect partnership for spreading great learning and practice within and across schools.

School systems and schools now have an unprecedented opportunity to bring curricula and job-embedded professional learning for teachers together in service of student learning. While we still have much to learn about how to do this effectively, an increasing number of schools and school systems are taking on the challenge and providing powerful lessons for others to learn from. ●

ADVOCATE WITH EVIDENCE

More than 20 years ago, Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) contacted then-NSDC to work on the federal definition of professional development. Our work over two decades led to the new definition in the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), which operationalizes the Standards for Professional Learning into language that describes what effective professional learning looks like in practice.

The definition reinforces that professional learning that impacts educator practice and student outcomes is:

- Based on data from student and teacher performance;
- Planned and executed collaboratively, preferably among a team of teachers with collective responsibility for a group of students;
- Intensive, intentional, and sustained (not an adult pull-out program); and
- Job-embedded (occurs within the school day) and focused on what is happening in classrooms.

Educators and policymakers have a right to expect that their professional learning meets the ESSA definition and aligns with the evidence. While it is critical to review relevant findings of the last decade, I share the caution that all politics is local, and everyone must be a prepared advocate.

In a 1997 keynote address, Hayes Mizell, Learning Forward distinguished senior fellow emeritus, challenged NSDC Annual Conference attendees to document the impact of professional development. He cautioned them that if they failed to show the connection to improved classroom practice and student achievement, their work was in jeopardy.



Attendees were insulted by his insinuation, and many were upset that he would be invited to deliver such a message as a keynote speaker. Thirty years later, his warning came true when President Trump and then the House of Representatives zeroed Title II funding from the federal budget, citing professional development's lack of impact. Title II within the Elementary and Secondary Education Act is the chief source of federal funding for professional learning and is used to cover coaches, leadership development, resources, conferences, and a range of professional learning initiatives.

Fortunately, professional learning's advocates, many of them Learning Forward members, helped Congress understand that eliminating Title II funding could have devastating results. Ultimately, the Senate version of the budget prevailed, and Title II dollars were reinstated in the federal budget.

The reality is that when Congress raised the spending cap, it was no longer forced to make tough choices among competing priorities. Had that not been the case, I'm not sure Title II would have prevailed.

It is time we heed Mizell's advice and document the impact of our work. Since 1997, Learning Forward Senior Advisor Joellen Killion and noted educator and author Thomas Guskey have provided us with guidance and tools to assist us with the work of evaluating professional learning (Killion, 2017; Guskey, 2000). Combined with leaders' ongoing advocacy for professional learning, we have the tools to ensure that national and local policymakers have the information they need to share our advocacy for investments in professional learning.

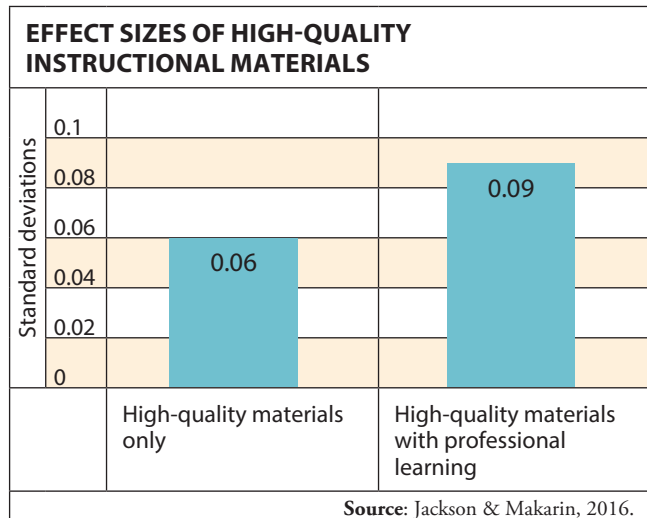
Learning Forward will continue to promote, document, and report the positive findings that link professional learning to improvements in educator practice and student achievement. Here is some of the compelling evidence that can be used to guide decision making and leveraged in conversations with policy makers.

THE EVIDENCE

COACHING

Coaching works. However, like most programs and interventions that have an evidence base, there are effective and ineffective ways to implement it. That is why we see some studies that report no or little effect from a coaching program. And yet, when implemented with fidelity, coaching is a powerful example of sustained and intensive professional learning.

A 2018 meta-analysis examined 60 rigorous studies of coaching. The analysis found large positive effects of coaching



on teachers' instructional practices. Across 43 studies, researchers found that coaching accelerates the growth that typically occurs as one moves from novice to veteran status (Kraft, Blazar, & Hogan, 2018). This is just one powerful study that documents that effective coaching helps teachers get better faster.

COLLABORATIVE LEARNING

Collaborative learning structures may come in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs), action research teams, lesson study groups, and more.

Multiple researchers have documented that teachers who collaborate in PLCs to continuously improve their practice and their students' learning experiences have a measurable positive impact in schools (Ronfeldt, Farmer, McQueen, & Grissom, 2015; Saunders, Goldenberg, & Gallimore, 2009).

One example from New York City documents student achievement gains across grade levels when teachers engage in purposeful, content-focused interactions. In a two-year investigation of 1,014 4th- and 5th-grade teachers that looked at changes in student math scores, researchers found that when teachers worked with high-ability teachers in purposeful, content-focused interactions, instruction, student scores, and teacher performance improved (Leana, 2011).

Learning teams can be the catalyst for a more collaborative school culture in which adults and students share a collective responsibility for achievement and growth.

CONTENT-FOCUSED PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

There is growing agreement that the quality of the materials teachers use impacts the quality of instruction, and therefore the materials they use in their professional learning is very important.

Above we've shared the evidence that shows that merely improving the quality of the materials alone makes a big difference. A study from the Center for American Progress notes that, given the return on investment compared to other interventions, "if schools have access to objective and reliable information on curriculum quality, they should throw out a lower-quality product and buy a higher-quality product without hesitation" (Boser, Chingos, & Straus, 2015).

While there is plenty of compelling evidence about the impact of high-quality materials in schools, we need additional research on the role of professional learning in implementing those materials. Still, in one study on the use of online lessons, researchers found that pairing professional learning with materials increased their impact (Jackson & Makarin, 2016) (see graph on p. 9). I look forward to learning more as the field continues to explore this important intersection.

If you are interested in digging deeper on this subject, read Learning Forward's April 2018 report, *High-Quality Curricula and Team-Based Professional Learning: A Perfect*

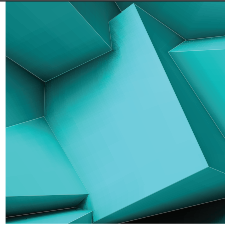
Partnership for Equity (Learning Forward, 2018), which explores the intersection of high-quality professional learning and high-quality instructional materials.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Through its investment in leadership research, The Wallace Foundation has helped us to understand that the principal is second only to teachers among school factors that have an impact on student learning (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

With increasing and ever-changing expectations for school performance, the importance of professional learning specifically for principals has increased.

A recent meta-analysis of professional learning for principals found evidence of positive impact on student outcomes as a result of a sustained yearlong learning program. It also reported that professional learning for principals contributes to lower teacher turnover, which leads to increased school stability and improved outcomes all around (Rowland, 2017). ●



WHAT YOU CAN DO

Learning Forward’s mission states: *Learning Forward builds the capacity of leaders to establish and sustain highly effective professional learning.* We define leaders as those who assume responsibility for their own professional learning as well as support the growth and development of others. The Leadership standard of the Standards for Professional Learning says that leaders are advocates for effective professional learning (Learning Forward, 2011).

I request that educators take the following actions to act

as champions for professional learning and advance each of the cornerstones in their own spheres of influence.

These four cornerstones, gleaned from a career-long exploration of professional learning, are the essential components for educators to leverage as they shape the future of teaching and learning. With each year of evidence from research and practice, we gain knowledge and skills about how to achieve ambitious goals for all students. I anticipate the future with optimism and confidence.

CORNERSTONE 1	LEAD WITH EQUITY. Regardless of context, amplify your commitment to ensuring each and every child has access to high-quality teaching and learning. State your commitment publicly, and openly share the steps you take to define and achieve equity. Examine your own beliefs and practices and invest in building your capacity to achieve equity.
CORNERSTONE 2	INVEST IN TEAM LEARNING. Develop your understanding of what contributes to effective team learning and allocate resources to support it for all educators. Participate in a learning team for your own ongoing growth. Anchor your learning in the study of high-quality instructional materials as the foundation for improving practice and results for all students. Publicly elevate the outcomes of this learning along with the supports required to sustain it.
CORNERSTONE 3	LEVERAGE HIGH-QUALITY INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS. Become familiar with the research about the role of instructional materials in achieving ambitious goals for students. Commit to explore the quality of the materials in use in your context, identify better materials if necessary, and ensure ongoing and widespread access to high-quality materials.
CORNERSTONE 4	ADVOCATE WITH EVIDENCE. Document the impact of local investments to strengthen confidence in professional learning’s necessity among federal, state, and local stakeholders. Develop compelling stories that transform skeptics into proponents. Stand up for professional learning and strengthen the collective voice for the professional learning educators need.

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ABOUT STEPHANIE HIRSH

Stephanie Hirsh is executive director of Learning Forward, an international association of more than 10,000 educators committed to increasing student achievement through effective professional learning.

Hirsh presents, publishes, and consults on Learning Forward's behalf across North America. Her books include *Becoming a Learning Team*, co-authored with Tracy Crow (Learning Forward, 2018); *Becoming a Learning System*, co-authored with Kay Psencik and Frederick Brown (Learning Forward, 2018); *A Playbook for Professional Learning: Putting the Standards Into Action*, co-authored with Shirley Hord (Learning Forward, 2012); and *The Learning Educator: A New Era for Professional Learning*, co-authored with Joellen Killion (NSDC, 2007).

Hirsh writes a column for *The Learning Professional*, Learning Forward's bimonthly magazine. She also has written for *Educational Leadership*, *Phi Delta Kappan*, *The Record*, *The School Administrator*, *American School Board Journal*, *The High School Magazine*, and *Education Week*.

Hirsh has served on a number of advisory boards, which currently includes Learning First Alliance, 2-Rev, Digital Promise, the University of Texas College of Education, and The Teaching Channel. She served three terms as a school board trustee in the Richardson (Texas) Independent School District.

She received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the Texas Staff Development Council, Master Trustee from the Texas School Board Association, and was named a Distinguished Alumna by the University of North Texas.

