Achieving the "Demographic Imperative": Barriers and Possibilities for Diversifying Teacher Education at UD

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Introduction

"I appreciate that the kids, they can automatically be like, 'Okay, somebody looks like me.' I may not be able to do anything for them, but, right off the bat, they may sense some sort of empathy."

"In the classes that we have, you have these little blips about minorities. You can learn about them from a book, which kind of bothers me, honestly. You can't learn about kids from a book, people from a book."

"I don't think that ignoring differences is good, either. You're black, or you're German, or you're whatever you are. Me saying, 'I don't see color,' that is absolutely—pardon my French—bullsh*t. That's absolutely ridiculous because it exists, and stuff happened."

These comments were made by University of Delaware undergraduate teacher education majors in focus groups made up of students of color, first-generation college students, and students from low-income backgrounds. As these students noted, recruiting and preparing a diverse teaching force benefits all teacher candidates as well as the students they serve, from infancy through high school. Their comments also highlight a palpable problem in so many teacher education programs: the lack of racial and socioeconomic diversity.

The nationwide problem that some scholars call the "demographic imperative" encompasses three related issues in teacher education: "1) the increasing diversity of the students enrolled in U.S. public education; 2) the gap between such students and their teachers in terms of their lived experiences; and 3) the disparity in educational outcomes between students of color, low-income students, and their white middle-class peers" (McDonald, 2007, p. 2049). Across the U.S., colleges and universities are working not only to increase the diversity of their student population and to

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increase the educational outcomes of students from underrepresented groups, but also to reap the benefits of a diverse student population[2].

For programs that prepare future teachers, the benefits of diversity take on heightened importance, given teachers' direct role in shaping the perceptions and abilities of future generations. Teacher preparation programs that include diverse student and faculty populations and embrace diversity systemically can help narrow the achievement gap (Irvine, 2003; National Collaborative on Diversity in the Teaching Force, 2004) and develop a teaching force that advocates for equity and works in partnership with members of the diverse communities in which they practice (Cochran-Smith, 2004). With the generous support of a 2012 President's Diversity Initiative grant, the Collaborative to Diversify Teacher Education at UD, a group of teacher education faculty from across the UD community, studied how these challenges manifest themselves on our campus and what can be done to overcome them.

1. Our Study

As is true nationwide, the University of Delaware's teacher candidates tend to be white. The majority of our students earn teaching certification in our undergraduate programs; in these teacher education programs, approximately 21% of the UD students enrolled in Fall 2012, the year of our study, were of a "minority" status (11% were first generation college students, 8.5% were racial minorities, and 5.1% were low-income; note that students may belong to more than one category).[3] In contrast, the 2012-2013 Delaware public school student population was 32% African American, 13.8% Latino/Hispanic, and 3.5% Asian, while 52% of Delaware's public school children were students from low-income households (See Figure 1.)[4]

Figure 1: Demographic Differences

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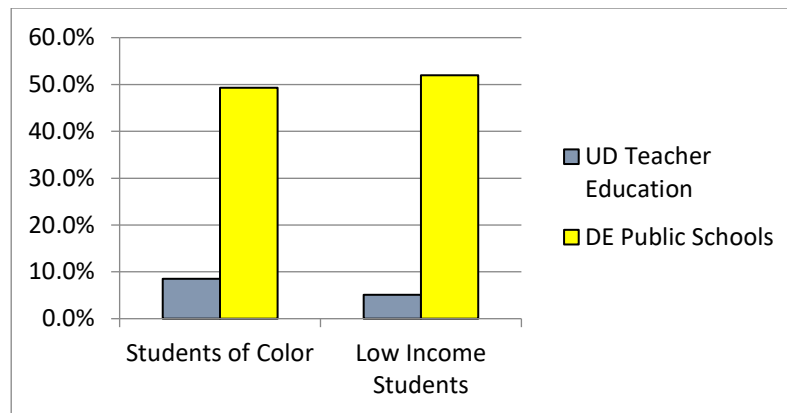
[2] Both qualitative and quantitative research have demonstrated clear educational benefits of diversity on the student body, including reducing prejudiced attitudes (Daye, Panter, Allen, & Wightman, 2012), deepening learning experiences and developing more nuanced notions of individual and group identities (Henry, Fowler, & West, 2011), and more actively participating in society as democratic citizens (Gurin, Nagda, & Lopez, 2004). In fact, both ethnic and socioeconomic diversity have recently been identified as essential ingredients in favorable campus climates (Park, Denson, & Bowman, 2013).

[3] Data from Spring 2012 enrollment figures (provided by the Delaware Center for Teacher Education).

[4] Data from State of Delaware: http://profiles.doe.k12.de.us/SchoolProfiles/State/Student.aspx.

Narrowing the demographic gap between the students we prepare and the public school students they teach is the major goal of the Collaborative to Diversify Teacher Education at UD.

Methods

We designed and implemented a research project during the 2012-2013 academic year utilizing a mixed-methods approach (Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004) in order to triangulate data (Denzin, 1978; Mathison, 1988) about how our teacher education programs consider diversity and how underrepresented students perceive or experience diversity. Our project included four data sources:

- Interviews with the ten faculty members who coordinate our teacher education programs;
- Three student focus groups: two of current teacher education majors, and one of former teacher education majors;
- An online survey of 626 UD undergraduate students from underrepresented groups (students of color, first generation college students, and/or low income students), including 102 (16.5%) current teacher education students;
- Institutional data on enrollment and graduation rates from 2006-2012.

2. What we found

The findings of our study parallel and build on other published research. We highlight some of the key results below.

Graduation gap. Institutional data revealed differences in graduation rates for teacher education majors. The 2011 Middle States report criticized the University of Delaware for its poor retention and graduation rates of students of color, particularly African Americans. In terms of racially minoritized and generational status, teacher education majors in the time period studied graduated at higher rates than did the undergraduate student population overall. In terms of low-income status, however, teacher education majors graduated at much lower rates than low-income students in the undergraduate student population overall. It is particularly alarming that for teacher education students, the income gap in terms of the four-year graduation rate (a difference of 38.7%) was twice that of the overall UD student population (a difference of 19%) (see Figure 2).
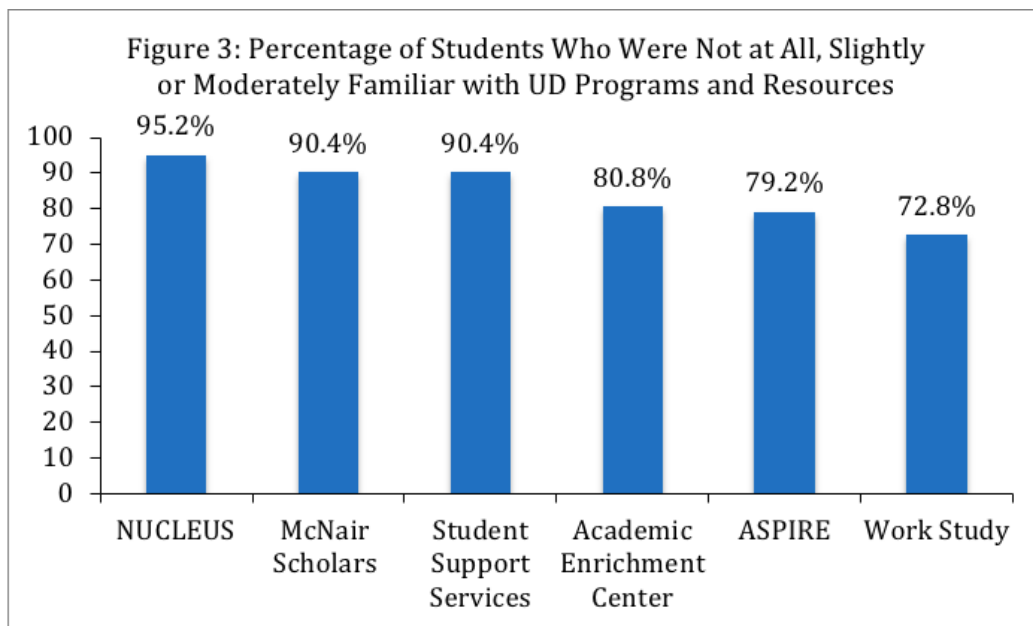
Figure 2: Four-Year Graduation Rates
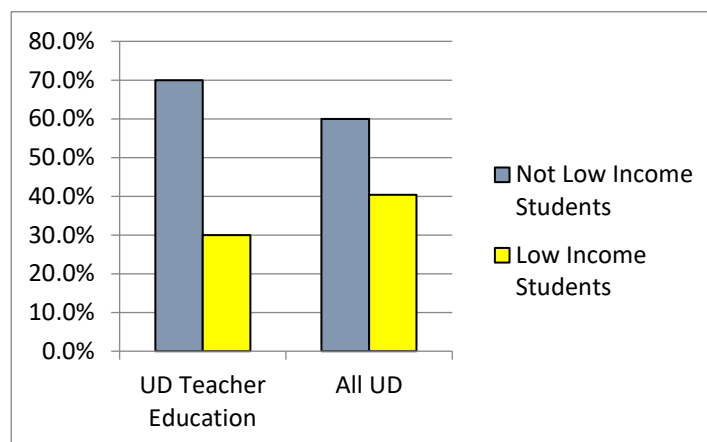
Deterrents to pursuing teacher education as a major. All data sources indicated that a major deterrent was a negative view of the teaching profession; for example, 47% of survey responses indicated such a view. The second major deterrent was money. Salaries were the principal concern: the second most frequent reason cited by survey participants for not going into teaching was "salary too low" (43%). Participants expressed concern that the effort necessary to be a teacher as compared to the salary—the return on investment—was not worth it.

Deterrents to progress in the major. Additional financial barriers included tuition and program fees. More than 70% of survey respondents identified tuition and housing costs as extremely to moderately challenging. Students who left teacher education reported that student loan forgiveness for going into teaching and scholarships for teacher education majors might have helped keep them in the major. Teacher education fees, such as those for background checks and certification tests, were rated even more of a barrier than certification test scores or grade point average requirements. Furthermore, when we analyzed results by subgroup, those with family income at or below the poverty line perceived teacher education fees as being more challenging to their degree progress. Combined with the low graduation rate of low-income students discussed earlier, we see that the additional costs of teacher education programs are a serious issue that needs attention.

Campus resources. While the majority of students did not identify a lack of academic support as a barrier to their degree progress, a question about resources on campus yielded surprising results. The survey asked how familiar students were with various support/enrichment programs and services available at UD. (See Figure 3.)

Figure 3: Percentage of Students Who Were Not at All, Slightly or Moderately Familiar with UD Programs and Resources

More than 90% of current or former teacher education students were at best minimally or not at all familiar with programs like McNair Scholars or Student Support Services. Even the organization that specifically targeted teacher education students during the time of this research, ASPIRE (Academic Support Program Inspiring Renaissance Educators), was not fully recognized, with 79.2% of current or former teacher education students being moderately, slightly, or not at all

familiar with the program. All of these resources and programs are operating on UD's campus and serve as potential supports to students from underrepresented groups; however, clearly they need to be better publicized and utilized.

UD's racial environment. Fifty percent of program coordinators expressed concern about the homogeneity of students and staff in teacher education programs. In focus groups, racially minoritized students questioned whether the university valued their presence and expressed the feeling that they were merely a token. Students of color, Latino and Asian students in particular, were more likely to say that their teacher education program never strengthened their sense of racial/ethnic identity. African American students were more likely to say they felt the need to minimize an aspect of their culture in order to fit in. African American students were also more likely to say that they felt they were expected to speak on behalf of all members of their race/ethnic group, that they felt left out because of their race/ethnicity, and that they witnessed their race being stereotyped. These results are similar to those reported from a broader survey on UD's racial climate: "White students more frequently expected and found the campus climate to be welcoming for all people and groups than students of color" (UD Campus Climate Survey Results, Report to the President, 2011, p. 4). A number of issues related to campus climate at the University need to be addressed in order to better recruit and retain diverse teacher candidates.

3. What we recommend

Findings of our research suggest that advocating for the teaching profession as a whole, supporting "pipeline" program development, centrally coordinating and supporting outreach and support efforts, and improving the campus climate are essential steps in addressing the demographic imperative at the University of Delaware.

Advocacy for the profession. UD's teacher education programs can impact the recruitment and retention of diverse teacher candidates by better marketing and publicizing the field of teaching, particularly by showing it as a vibrant career related to social justice and making a difference in the world. One of the most promising ways to achieve this goal is for universities to provide long-term support for teacher education faculty to collaborate with community members; such partnerships can promote greater understanding of the many benefits of the profession. Because the negative public discourse about public education and teaching influences students and their support system, teacher education faculty and leaders need to work with the Office of Communication and Marketing and the Delaware Center for Teacher Education to educate, market, and publicize to the whole community. In addition, we can make students more aware of what opportunities for advancement exist, from school building to department to district administration (team leaders, department chairs, instructional coaches, principals, superintendents) as well as regional, state, and national positions, as a number of study participants expressed the mistaken belief that teaching entailed "doing the same thing every day."

Pipeline and Grow-Your-Own programs. Related to advocacy is the development of "pipeline" programs, in which secondary students who express an interest in pursuing a teaching degree come to campus to attend classes, meet faculty, and learn more about teacher education. The "Success Through Education" conference, held at UD for the last four years, sought to initiate such a pipeline. Another related recommendation is to follow the examples of universities that have developed "Grow-Your-Own" programs, in which teacher education programs partner with local

schools to recruit, mentor, and train culturally diverse and low-income high school students through college, and place them in employment as teachers in their communities. In very well-funded programs, financial aid incentives also are included. Grow-Your-Own programs can provide rich opportunities to show youth from underrepresented groups that teaching can be a rewarding career related to social justice and making a difference in the world.

Centrally coordinating support for teacher education students. It is clear that UD has resources available to support low income, first generation, and racially minoritized teacher education students, but they can be better coordinated and publicized. One possibility is for ASPIRE to be reframed, revitalized, and relocated as a formal University-wide program, in keeping with the population it serves: students from across six colleges (there are more than 1300 undergraduate teacher education majors at UD, more than 8% of the total undergraduate population). Rather than being a Registered Student Organization, ASPIRE could better serve underrepresented students as a formal organization with office space and its own budget. Not only does what happens in teacher education impact the University as a whole, it also impacts the community at large due to the hundreds of P-12 schools in which UD teacher candidates teach and ultimately become employed. Centrally coordinating support for teacher education students could have a wide impact.

Institutional backing for community connections and outreach. Active institutional support of community engaged scholarship entails changing institutional practices and policies (e.g. tenure reward systems) to ensure that public scholarship work in which faculty partner with diverse communities is rewarded (Ellison & Eatman, 2008). Our research suggests that teacher education faculty who engage in community-based research and service could be brought together in a working group under the Center for the Study of Diversity. We recommend that a broader range of workload configuration options be possible for faculty who work to recruit and retain underrepresented students in teacher education. Further, the national research shows that many institutions with a serious commitment to diversity have an administrator who coordinates diversity outreach and retention. Our research highlighted the need for an administrative position, a coordinator/director of diversity for teacher education at UD whose resources are not grant-dependent but rather are linked to a dependable annual budget. Such a coordinator could assist teacher education programs in becoming advocates for culturally sustaining teaching practices as well as becoming more directly involved in helping students become college ready. This administrator could serve as the leader of ASPIRE, but other options are possible. It is important that the University create a formal, institutional structure for community engagement and outreach conducted by teacher education faculty.

Financial costs of a teacher education degree. Our research shows that financial aid is the most important consideration for underrepresented groups in attending college and selecting teacher education as a major. Some students believe that the cost of a teacher education degree does not provide enough return on investment, especially given that teacher education majors have additional program expenses. For that reason, they may be more likely to consider entering and more likely to complete a teacher education program successfully if costs are manageable and they are not overburdened with debt. We recommend that the Office of University Development establish four-year scholarships for teacher education majors from underrepresented groups with financial need. We also advocate seeking long-term solutions such as student loan forgiveness for students who become teachers. In addition, the burden of additional teacher education expenses should be eased

by the Office of Clinical Studies and the Delaware Center for Teacher Education through having field placements in schools close to campus, helping students with the burden of transportation to schools, and eliminating or subsidizing most, if not all, of the fees associated with teacher education programs including background clearance, student teaching and testing fees.

Campus climate. Teacher education programs, individually and collectively, should be a part of any University efforts to improve campus climate. Our research indicated that although students felt welcome in teacher education classes, they were also aware of the predominantly white nature of the teacher education programs at UD, and they welcomed opportunities for further engagement in multicultural learning contexts (e.g. local schools with diverse demographics). The numerical and proportional representation of underrepresented students is a key factor that contributes to the type of racial campus climate in universities (Hurtado et. al, 1998). Neither the teacher education student body nor program faculty reflect the population of the state that we serve; limited faculty diversity is particularly noticeable in UD's largest teacher education program, Elementary Teacher Education. As a negative campus climate can have harmful effects on the ability to recruit and retain a diverse student population, so too can more diverse students and faculty create a more positive racial campus climate, creating a welcoming environment where students from non-white, middle class backgrounds do not feel alienated and hypervisible. UD needs to address institutional practices related to the recruitment and admission of a diverse student body and hiring of a diverse faculty. Deans and department chairs must require that faculty searches be conducted in ways that are more likely to draw a diverse applicant pool with expertise in equity and diversity in addition to their other areas of educational expertise (e.g. expertise in science education and equity or literacy and equity). Another option is a post-doc program; underrepresented scholars with expertise on diversity and/or social justice in teacher education could be brought to campus with the potential of becoming eventual tenure-track hires. Furthermore, we advocate for conversations and initiatives related to culturally responsive practices with faculty and staff across the university, such as recent efforts sponsored by the Vice Provost for Diversity, the Office of Equity and Inclusion, and the Center for the Study of Diversity. Workshops should be required during new faculty onboarding and should be publicized by individual departments.

Advocating for the teaching profession as a whole, supporting "pipeline" program development, centrally coordinating and supporting outreach and support efforts, and improving the campus climate are essential steps in addressing the demographic imperative at the University of Delaware. If you would like to read the full report, it is linked here: https://www.csd.udel.edu/content-sub-site/Documents/Final%20White%20Paper%2010-31-13.pdf. Questions and comments can be directed to Jill Ewing Flynn at jeflynn@udel.edu.

4. Conclusion

Creating thriving, diverse teacher preparation programs is not only a valid end in and of itself but also an investment in a robust educational ecology: strong collegiate teacher candidates from underrepresented groups go on to become strong teachers who will educate thousands of P-12 students from underrepresented groups, who will then become strong college applicants. We look forward to working in partnership with the University as a whole to address these issues.

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