RUNNING HEAD: Democratizing Special Education Leadership Workforce

Strategies for Democratizing the Special Education Leadership Workforce

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Abstract

The authors evaluated the procedures designed to recruit qualified applicants from traditionally under-represented populations into a special education doctoral program. A review of the literature revealed that candidates from culturally and linguistically diverse populations were more likely to enroll in doctoral work when universities used expanded recruitment procedures, enhanced admissions processes, and provision of financial support. The descriptive study employed a survey methodology to collect the reactions of sometimes marginalized groups of doctoral students. The study has implications for the production of a culturally inclusive profession.

Faculty in higher education do not represent the diversity that exists in the United States nor do the doctoral students who will become future leaders at the university or district levels. For instance, full-time minority faculty increased from 12.3% to 14.9% in the ten years between 1991 and 2001 (TIAA-CREF, 2005). The under-representation of women and ethnically diverse faculty has been well documented for teacher education faculty in general as well as special education faculty specifically (AAUP, 2001; Artilles & Trent, 1994; Boone & Ruhl, 1995; Brownell, Rosenberg, Sindelar, & Smith 2003, Cockrell, Mitchell, Middleton, & Campbell, 1999; Monteith, 2000; Nettles, 1990; Peterson & Gilmore, 2005; Smith-Davis, 2000; Talbert-Johnson & Tillman, 1999). In addition, there is an insufficient supply of special education doctoral candidates, particularly those from traditionally underrepresented populations, to meet current demands (Smith, Pion, & Tyler, 2003; Smith, Pion, Tyler, & Gilmore, 2003; Tyler, Smith, & Pion, 2003). Some researchers have identified reasons for such underrepresentation. For example, Nettles (1990) reported that, among Black, Hispanic, and White doctoral students at four major universities, Blacks received the fewest teaching or research assistantships. In the study of doctoral candidates by Boone and Ruhl (1995), the only statistically significant demographic variable that differentiated between White and culturally linguistically diverse (CLD) candidates was that 77% of the CLD respondents had children compared to 50% of White respondents; with twice as many CLD as White reporting more than one child. However, the need for program funding opportunities (assistantships, fellowships) was rated highly by both groups. Also, program locale, specifically proximity to home or family, was an influential factor.

Wright (1987) suggested that economic, academic and psychosocial variables influenced the pursuit of doctoral study and may pose particular barriers for CLD individuals.

Given these realities, the FIU faculty designed Urban SEALS (Special Education Academic LeaderS) so as to address (1) the shortage of special education university faculty, particularly those who are CLD; (2) the shortage of other special education leadership personnel, particularly those who are CLD; and (3) the need for special education leadership personnel knowledgeable in educational issues related to urban CLD students with disabilities. The Urban SEALS doctoral program is located in Miami (a multicultural, diverse community) that provided a regional pool of qualified candidates. In addition, the faculty received a competitive federal grant award to fund tuition and stipends, thus providing financial support (Barbetta, Cramer, & Nevin, 2004).

Methods

A descriptive method was employed for this study. Data were collected from several sources including signed notices of program interest in completed at orientation sessions that provided information in individual's names, gender, ethnicity, GRE scores, educational background, and experiences with culturally and linguistically diverse populations. The primary source of data for this report comes from a questionnaire that was developed to assess perceptions of the recruitment and selection process.

Setting

Florida International University (FIU) is a public research-extensive institution that is the top producer of Hispanic graduates in the US and the third largest producer of minority graduates (52% Hispanic, 12% African-American, and 4% Asia). The College of Education at FIU opened in 1972 and has graduated more than 24,000 students.

Further, the COE established and implemented bilingual and ESOL programs since 1977. FIU was the first university to develop a program in multicultural and multilingual education, and has become the model for the rest of the state institutions. In fact, approximately 50% of all teachers in the Miami-Dade County Public Schools hold a degree from FIU (COE Annual Report, 2004). At FIU, the COE graduates and those admitted into the COE teacher education programs include a substantial proportion of Hispanics and an increasing proportion of African Americans.

The enrollment of students at FIU represents a diverse community: approximately 52% Hispanic, 14% Black, 21% White, and the remaining 13% Asian, Indian, non-resident Alien, and other. Enrollment of women is approximately 58% of the total student body. The representation of minority group members among financial aid recipients suggests that at least 50% of the students are minority group members. Black students comprised 5% of all the students receiving financial aid and received 16% of the available funds; and Hispanic students comprised 40% of those receiving financial aid receiving 32% of the funds (FIU Fact Book, 2001).

Intervention

Following the recommendations of the AAUP (2001), the faculty developed an inviting Exceptional Student Education (ESE) program with an urban special education leadership focus. The Urban SEALS program of study was built on an existing ESE doctoral program infrastructure and the COE resources. The program enfolded principles articulated by Cochran-Smith (1999) to prepare urban leadership personnel who teach for social justice. Cochran-Smith (1999, p. 118-119) established six principles to be used when preparing urban teachers to teach for social justice: enable significant work for all

students within learning communities; build on what students bring to school with them: knowledge and interests, cultural and linguistic resources; teach skills, bridge gaps; work with (not against) individuals, families, and communities; diversify modes of assessment; make activism, power, and inequity explicit parts of the curriculum. The Urban SEALS program embeds these principles within the coursework and the non-degree seeking program requirements. In addition, the delivery of the coursework utilizes researched best practices such as establishing collaborative learning communities through a cohort model, creating a focus on standards based-outcomes, utilizing problem based learning, and arranging experiential-service learning as well as non-credit-generating activities such as guest lecturing, attending conferences, collaborating with faculty on research projects.

In addition to creating the compelling program in which candidates would want to enroll, specific recruitment and selection procedures included three major tactics as suggested from the literature on recruitment practices that are effective with those who are culturally and linguistically diverse. These were: expanded recruiting efforts, broadened admission process, ensured financial and academic support (Salend, Whittaker, Duhaney, & Smith, 2003).

Expanded recruiting efforts. Oesterreich (2000) described several characteristics that are effective for preparing minority youth living in low-income neighborhoods, including have a range of pre-college programs, academic support for undergraduates (such as study skills, test preparation), social support (e.g., involving parents and peers, providing cultural affirmation), financial support (funding and support for completing aid-application processes). Many of these strategies were currently utilized by FIU's

COE and contributed directly to the COE's consistently high graduation rates of culturally and linguistically diverse teachers. In addition, the COE was awarded several grants to support the Master's level preparation of educators for Teaching English as a Second Language (e.g., Garcia, 2003) as well as Educational Specialist level preparation of school counselors capable of working with the children and youth with disabilities (McEachern, 2002). This in turn created a rich recruitment pool for the Urban SEALS program. The project co-principal investigators and staff developed and disseminated brochures; advertised in newsletters; sent emails to special education personnel in the surrounding tri-county area; and conducted other recruitment activities to identify and enroll qualified applicants from under-represented populations.

Ensured financial and academic support With the federal funding, all Urban SEALS doctoral candidates received tuition and full-time students received stipends. There were a total of two full-time positions for graduate work and 14 part-time positions. Given the nature of the working professionals who typically enroll in doctoral work at FIU, flexibility in enrollment (full *versus* part-time) was considered an essential feature in recruiting qualified students into the program.. Every effort was made to disseminate information about other funding opportunities; for example, there are several scholarships funded by COE donors.

Broadened admission process The admissions process for the university had been streamlined so as to allow actions to be taken as soon as an applicant's file was complete. In addition, the faculty agreed to support qualified candidates from underrepresented populations whose GRE scores were lower than the desired 1000 by writing letters to the university graduate office recommending acceptance conditional upon successful

completion of the first 12 hours of graduate study. Faculty believed that past success in graduate school and quality work in the field were a better predictors of future success, acceptance decisions relied heavily on this information..

Instrumentation

The project co-principal investigators designed a survey questionnaire comprised of several sections to gather the desired information. A draft questionnaire was distributed to the project leadership advisory board which consisted of national and local experts in special education and urban education. Based on their feedback, minor changes were made to the instrument (e.g., providing more space for responding to the open-ended questions). Part I of the questionnaire asked respondents to list how they learned about the program. Part II collected demographic data (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, years of teaching experience, and degrees earned). Part III asked respondents to use a Likert scale (1 = not at all to 5 = a great extent) to rate various statements about their perceptions of the recruitment procedures. For example, “To what extent do you believe the recruitment procedures were fair and unbiased?” and ”I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were designed to encourage culturally and linguistically diverse individuals to apply to the program.” Part IV listed various design features of the program which were rated by those who applied to the doctoral program. . Part V included open ended questions such as “What barriers or challenges, if any, did you experience in the recruitment process?” Part VI listed program design features that were rated by those who did not apply to the program. Part V included open ended questions such as “What barriers or challenges, if any, did you experience in the recruitment process?”

Reliability

Cronbach alpha coefficients for reliability of respondents' ratings were calculated for survey items related to perceptions of fairness of the recruitment and selection procedures. Cronbach alpha, also called the alpha coefficient, is a statistical measure of the degree to which the items consistently measure the same construct. In this study, alpha coefficients of .888, .858, and .776 were obtained, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. *Reliability of Survey Items: Cronbach Alpha Coefficients*

Survey Item	Alpha Coefficient
Item 10: *To what extent do you believe the recruitment procedures were fair and unbiased?* Item 13: *I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were fair and unbiased.*	.888
Item 13: *I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were fair and unbiased.* Item 14: *I was treated respectfully by project staff.*	.858
Item 13: *I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were fair and unbiased.* Item 16: *I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were designed to encourage culturally and linguistically diverse individuals to apply to the program.*	.776

Overall, these results indicate good reliability; for example, Gall, Gall, & Borg (2003) report that alpha coefficients of .52 and above are considered evidence of good reliability in exploratory research such as this study.

Data Collection and Analysis

Subsequent to receiving approval from the university human subjects review board, the instrument was distributed to admitted Urban SEALS students (N=14) during a mandatory meeting n early November 2005. In addition, the instrument was mailed (along with a cover letter and stamped self-addressed envelope) to a randomly selected group of individuals who attended one of the Fall 2005 orientation sessions (N=30) and

the complete list of students who applied and either withdrew their applications or were denied admittance (N=9). A reminder was sent via email about 6 weeks after the mailings. Only one person (one who had been denied admission) responded to the email reminder with this message: “YOU DON'T WANT TO HEAR WHAT I HAVE TO SAY! Let's leave it at that.” Thus, a total of 19 surveys were completed (14 from the candidates admitted and enrolled in coursework at that time, 5 from those who attended orientation sessions but who did not apply. Four packets were returned due to incorrect mailing address or the person had moved, and 0 from those who either withdrew or were denied admittance). This represented a response rate of 35.8%.

Using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS, 2004), the researchers calculated frequencies for the demographic information and means between the two groups for the survey items. In addition, in order to determine if the ratings from the two groups represented statistically significant differences, the t-test for independent samples was calculated (equal variance between groups was not assumed). This conservative approach was used to calculate the t-tests because of the uneven numbers in each group. A conservative *p*-level was also utilized ($p \leq .001$).

Results

As shown in Table 2, the range of CLD participants who attended the orientations indicates that candidates from underrepresented populations were recruited successfully to consider the program and they subsequently applied and were accepted into the program.

Table 2. *Results of Recruitment and Selection Activities*

	N	M	F	White	Black	Hispanic
Orientation Attendees & Walk-ins	115	na	na	na	na	na-
Completed Interest Inventory	88	8	80	14	25	49
Completed University & Graduate College Admissions	28	8	20	8	5	15
Accepted	16	2	14	4	5	8

At the time of the survey data collection, 16 individuals had been accepted and had begun their studies in the Fall 2005 semester. Subsequently, two accepted candidates who could not enroll in the Fall coursework (1 Hispanic male and 1 white female) withdrew from the program due to increased work demands. Two new doctoral candidates (2 Hispanic females) were later recruited and began their studies in the Spring 2006.

Overall, the recruitment efforts employed by the faculty of Urban SEALS were successful with respect to enrolling qualified culturally and linguistically diverse candidates. The demographic profile of the newly admitted doctoral students shows an increase in candidates from underrepresented and culturally linguistically diverse populations. Specifically, during 2004-2005, there were 7 (6 females, 1 male) candidates enrolled in coursework or completing their dissertation studies: 1 Black (14%), 2 White (28%), 4 Hispanic (58%). After the recruitment procedures in the Fall 2005, there were an additional 16 candidates (14 females, 2 males): 4 Black (25%), 3 White (19%), 9 Hispanic (56%).

Respondents, accepted students and those who attended orientations, mentioned that similar approaches helped them learn about the program. A total of 32% mentioned that receiving a brochure about the program was effective. Other effective approaches included recommendations by colleagues (15%), supervisors (15%), faculty members in

the program (15%), notification through a list serv or email at work (15%), and other (5%). Open ended questions revealed some interesting perspectives about the recruitment procedures. For example, one respondent wrote, “I think the selection process was conducted fairly. In fact, I believe FIU did a great job with the students that were admitted in the program. We are a very diverse group [of people] that get along wonderfully.” Another wrote, “Publicize more to diverse cultures of minorities (e.g., Haitian, Caribbean, etc.).” And another noted, “More advertising.”

Overall, the perceptions of fairness of the recruitment and selection procedures resulted in mean scores that showed differences in perceptions in mean scores between the two groups. As shown in Table 3, mean ratings on items related to perceptions of fair recruitment procedures differed slightly between the two groups. Overall, the mean ratings from respondents who were admitted rated each item more favorably compared to respondents from those who attended orientation sessions but did not apply to the program. Means hovered around 3 on the 5-point likert scale for those who did not apply compared to means around 4.7 and above for those who did apply.

Respondents from both groups rated three items similarly (that is, no statistically significant differences were detected even though the means differed slightly): *To what extent do you believe the recruitment procedures were fair and unbiased? I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were fair and unbiased. I was treated respectfully by project staff.* This indicates, that overall, these three items were perceived similarly by members of both groups and increases confidence in the conclusion that the recruitment and selection procedures were fair and unbiased.

Table 3. *Mean Responses on Survey Items: Perceptions of Fair Recruitment Procedures*

Survey Item	Mean	S.D.
To what extent do you believe the recruitment procedures were fair and unbiased?		
1 Applied (N=14)	4.7857	.57893
2 Did Not Apply (N=5)	3.0000	1.41421
I believe the recruitment and selection procedures were fair and unbiased.		
1 Applied (N=14)	4.8571	.36314
2 Did Not Apply (N=5)	3.0000	1.2274
I was treated respectfully by project staff.		
1 Applied (N=14)	5.0000	.00000
2 Did Not Apply (N=5)	3.8000	1.30384
*I believe that the recruitment and selection procedures were designed to encourage culturally and linguistically diverse individuals to apply to the program.*****		
1 Applied (N=14)	4.7143	.61125
2 Did Not Apply (N=5)	3.4000	.54772

**Two tailed t-test for equal means (equal variance not assumed), $p \leq .001$.

However, the *t*-test for independent samples revealed a statistically significant difference ($p \leq .001$) for only one item: *I believe that the recruitment and selection procedures were designed to encourage culturally and linguistically diverse individuals to apply*. Those who attended orientation sessions but did not apply reported their disappointment about the need to meet a minimum score on the Graduate Record Exam (a requirement demanded by the university graduate college). Another source of data besides the rating scales can help to illuminate the concerns raised by respondents from both groups. Representative verbatim comments about the barriers and challenges faced

by those who attended orientation sessions but did not apply to the program included: “I truly do not think that (GRE) should have been the main factor for admission.” Indeed, members of the group that were admitted voiced similar comments about the barriers and challenges: “The GRE exam and its new components [were a challenge.]” and “Getting GRE scores accepted [was a challenge.]” On the other hand, several respondents who had applied to the program wrote positive comments such as, “It was a pretty smooth experience.” And, “I did not experience any challenges through the admissions process.”

The SEALS program of study was designed on the basis of several recommendations from the literature on recruiting and retaining under-represented populations. Specifically, the program faculty incorporated a cohort model, service learning and other leadership activities, a curriculum and program of study that enfolded TESOL and/or Urban Education cognates, and financial support for tuition and fellowships. On survey items related to program design features, both prospective candidate as well as those who were admitted appreciated the availability of financial support in addition to features of the Urban SEALS academic program yielding mean ratings of 4.2 and 4.8, respectively. Two major difference in ratings occurred for the program design features. One requires participation in non-credit leadership activities (e.g., conference presentations, teaching undergraduate classes, community leadership projects). Those who chose not to apply rated this program design feature as 2.2 on the likert scale (1 = no influence and 5 = a great influence). In contrast, those who were admitted to the program rated this program design feature as 4.5 on the likert scale. Similar differences appeared in their ratings of the cohort model design feature. Those

who chose not to apply rated the cohort model as 2.4 compared to a rating of 4.9 from those who were admitted.

Discussion

In this study, there was a noticeable increase in the number of qualified special education doctoral candidates from traditionally underrepresented populations (nearly doubling the percentages of black candidates with percentage of Hispanic candidates remaining the same). The expanded recruitment efforts (e.g., orientation sessions, brochures, personal contact with project personnel and faculty etc.) seemed to be correlated with this increase. Although it is not possible to state that the recruitment procedures *per se* were solely responsible for the increase, the applicants viewed the procedures as fair. However, the people who did not apply did not rate items as highly nor did they view the program design features as positively. This may be an understandable artifact of the situation itself.

In the admissions process, written comments to open ended questions on the survey indicate that the faculty and project staff were valued in terms of maintaining effective lines of communication between the University Graduate College, the COE Graduate Office, and the special education program faculty. Many respondents who were admitted explicitly mentioned the helpfulness of the project staff in keeping them informed about their status. However, perhaps the most important action that Urban SEALS faculty took on behalf of the current doctoral cohort is to practice a flexible admissions process. One example of this flexibility is that applications could be submitted and acted upon continuously rather than at one or two specified times per year. In fact, the flexibility has been invaluable. For example, when 2 of the fall candidates

needed to withdraw due to work demands, their slots were filled almost immediately due to the flexible admissions process.

Additional examples of the importance of flexibility in admission procedures include (1) choices between full-time and part-time study and (2) conditional acceptance due to GRE scores. Many of those who applied to the program as well as those who attended orientations but did not apply mentioned their appreciation of the choice to attend full-time or part-time. Moreover, of the 16 students admitted in the fall 2005, 4 were granted conditional acceptance due to GRE scores that ranged from 940-970. The faculty are keenly aware that retention and graduation rates will be high only with structured tutorials for development of writing skills for those who are speakers of other languages (i.e., 70% speak and/or write in languages other than English) as well as tutorials for quantitative analyses (approximately 40% with low GRE scores for the quantitative section).

On the other hand, the results from this study are similar to recent efforts to diversify teacher education programs. For example, Prater and Wilder (2006) described efforts to recruit ethnically diverse populations into undergraduate and post-graduate certification program in special education and English as a Second Language at Brigham Young University (BYU). Similar to FIU's SEALS program, the BYU program design features also included a cohort model and a coherent program based on culturally responsive techniques. Similar to FIU's SEALS program, financial incentives were provided due to a grant from the Office of Special Education Personnel. The BYU recruitment efforts included newspaper articles and, similar to FIU's efforts, brochures, school district announcements, faculty recommendations, and word of mouth. The

percentage of bilingual students at BYU increased from about 12% in 2004 to nearly 19% in 2005. The percentage of non-white students increased from 1% in 2003, to 4% in 2004, to nearly 18% in 2005.

An important component of successful recruitment is the subsequent retention of candidates and graduation. The literature on recruitment and retention of people from culturally and linguistically diverse populations as well as ethnically different populations indicates that peer groups and mentoring must be established early in the program. Part of the success of cohort models appears to be related to the extent to which cohort members support and mentor one another (Teitel, 1997). The SEALS program of study includes a one-credit seminar which formally establishing processes that allow for the advanced graduate students to serve as mentors and buddies to the incoming cohort. It is expected that results will be similar to those found by Twale and Cochran (2000) who reported that the cohort experience was personally and professionally rewarding and promoted friendships and idea exchanges. Towards that end, the SEALS candidates have affiliated with the Center for Urban Education and Innovation which hosts a number of prominent eminent scholars (including Ase Hilliard, Bob Moses of the Algebra Project, and Dr. Lisa Delpit, author of *Other People's Children*). This semester all the doctoral students are taking a seminar with Dr. Delpit. Institutional support at this level also includes the presence of student organizations, academic and tutorial supports such as a writing center, and so on (Marshall-Bradley, Tucker, & Wilson. 2006).

It should be noted that the faculty are intensely aware that the mere presence of candidates from culturally and linguistically diverse populations may not be enough to

ensure that they will be assimilated into the university culture. Two recent studies illustrate this challenge (Johnston, 2006, & Shealey, 2006).

Johnston (2006) described the efforts of her colleagues at a predominantly white mid-western university to make their teacher education program more sensitive to issues of race and social justice and thus better prepare both white students and students of color to be culturally sensitive teachers with diverse students. Students of color comprised 8% to 20% of the student population, and a subgroup were tapped to serve as cultural consultants who met with the faculty to help them recognize and deal with racism in society and occasional incidents within the program itself. These conversations helped to surface what had previously been unspeakable. Johnston (2006) concluded, “Their diverse opinions gave us insights that led to changes in our teaching and personal insights, hopefully making us more responsive to our students” (p. 27).

Shealey (2006) conducted a phenomenological study of the lived experiences of six African American faculty in special education in predominantly white research-extensive institutions. The faculty (4 females and 2 males) represented each region of the US, all ranks (assistant professor, associate professor, professor), and a wide range of experience in higher education (2 - 16 years). Three major themes emerged around impact, resistance, and support. The faculty reported that they pursued their doctorates to have more of a voice in educational policy, teacher education, and school reform. They experienced various levels of resistance from white colleagues and students, realizing that few courses addressed multicultural issues and the departments themselves failed to address ethnic diversity and multiculturalism in systematic and substantial ways. As for support, six of the seven participants reported little to no support from department

colleagues and administrators in developing their scholarship. In fact, they all relied on relationships with faculty of color in professional associations and informal networks.

Although the Urban SEALS faculty have attempted to build in external networks in urban education and special education in order to counteract this form of isolation within the profession, the challenges of democratizing the special education leadership workforce, in other words, are just beginning! Changing the climate of the doctoral program itself is an imposing challenge. The fact is that the landscape of special education leadership personnel, future special education professors, and teacher education faculty in general is predominantly white. We believe that the Urban SEALS leadership program at FIU indeed represents an opportunity to change that complexion.

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