

**From the Top of the Class to the Front of a Classroom: Student Perceptions of the Teaching Profession at a Highly Selective Liberal Arts University**

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**Abstract**

Teacher education programs at small liberal arts colleges and universities are among the most vulnerable to decreased enrollment, yet they are uniquely positioned to provide well-rounded future teachers and educational leaders for a democratic society. To inform recruitment efforts, this study examined students' perceptions of teaching careers and their motivations to study education at one small, highly selective liberal arts university. Findings suggest students perceive the teaching profession as honorable but lacking prestige. Their decisions to study education were impacted by personal desires, institutional structures, and professional structures. Findings offer insights into improvements that small college and university teacher education programs can make to attract and retain future teachers and develop thriving, innovative programs.

*Keywords:* teacher education, teacher recruitment, liberal arts

Liberal arts colleges have long been involved in teacher preparation (Yacek & Kimball, 2017), though they are often overshadowed by larger public universities' teacher preparation programs (Bjork et al., 2015). Liberal arts colleges are uniquely positioned to prepare future teachers and educational leaders in a democratic society due to the breadth and depth of their curricular focus and admissions selectivity (Bjork et al., 2015; Wilkins, 1931; Yacek & Kimball, 2017); however, negative perceptions of teaching careers among high-achieving students and skepticism towards teacher education programs by liberal arts university administrators present challenges to the sustainability of such programs (Mancenido, 2021; Yacek & Kimball, 2017). For these reasons, some undergraduate teacher education programs at liberal arts colleges and universities have been ended, including programs at Denison (Bjork, 2015), Chicago (Bronner,

1997), and Harvard (Roberts, 2022). When positioned within a context of the broader professional crisis of teacher recruitment and retention, questions are raised about the viability of collegiate teacher education and, specifically, the vulnerability of the smallest programs. Knowledge of the factors that influence students' decisions to study education and pursue teaching certifications at small liberal arts colleges and universities can be useful for developing institutional or programmatic plans that assist in the recruitment of and investment in the nation's highest achieving students as future teachers.

### **Context – Teacher Shortage Crisis**

The United States faces a massive shortage of qualified teachers. Nearly half of all public schools in the US have vacant positions (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). There are an estimated 55,000 unfulfilled teaching positions, and underqualified teachers are filling an additional 270,000 positions (Nguyen et al., 2022). This includes at least 4,300 vacant positions in Virginia (Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission, 2023). The teacher shortage is due, in part, to fewer college students choosing to study education. Fuller (2023) reports that nearly a quarter million fewer students enrolled in teacher preparation programs nationwide in 2021 compared to 2009; Virginia is ranked in the bottom five states with the largest decreased enrollment (-55.7%).

Student perceptions of teaching is a factor in decreased enrollment. Students report viewing teaching as a profession with lower prestige and salary than other licensed professions such as medicine, law, and engineering (Ingersoll & Mitchell, 2011). High-achieving students often view teaching as an inappropriate career choice (Mancenido, 2021). Consequently, few of America's highest achieving students enter the profession (Wilson, 2011); and elite liberal arts colleges are less likely to offer teacher preparation programs than other schools (Reback, 2004).

Yet, scholars suggest attracting top students to careers in teaching could lead to extraordinary results in teacher effectiveness, like that seen in Singapore, Finland, and South Korea (Auguste et al., 2010). If the US hopes to meet the rising need for qualified teachers, then it is salient to consider the value and impact of multiple types of teacher education programs, including the potential for small teacher education programs at liberal arts colleges to attract high-achieving students and future leaders in education.

### **Literature Review**

Since the birth of normal schools in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, teacher education in the US has developed into a broad, varied arena with initial professional licensing being obtainable through state-approved programs at many different types of colleges and universities. This includes small departments of education at private liberal arts institutions that are often overshadowed by larger university programs (Bjork et al., 2015). Several vulnerabilities exist at small liberal arts programs that are not present to the same extent at larger universities (Bjork et al., 2015; Yacek & Kimball, 2017). For example, in Virginia, there tends to be fewer program completers at liberal arts colleges than the number of completers at larger universities (Virginia Department of Education, 2022). Logically, it follows that fluctuations in enrollments have potential to impact the ability of smaller programs to offer courses, hire support staff, and withstand administrative cuts. This is particularly concerning when viewed in the context of their already tepid existence as professional programs at liberal arts colleges (Kimball, 2013).

### **Teacher Education at Liberal Arts Colleges**

From the start of collegiate teacher preparation in the United States, questions were raised about whether liberal arts colleges should engage in teacher education (Kimball, 2013). The most common critique stems from the idea that the mission of a liberal arts education differs from

professional preparation or other vocational types of training (Kimball, 2013). This conceptual difference plays a factor in why teacher education programs at liberal arts institutions “are regularly submitted to skepticism and marginalization at the hands of administrators” (Yacek & Kimball (2017, p. 4). Similarly, this marginalization mirrors the way that the highest-achieving students are socialized, explicitly and implicitly, by society to view that teaching is not a suitable career choice for them (Mancenido, 2021).

There are a multitude of reasons for the inclusion of teacher education at liberal arts institutions. For one, it is commonplace for other types of professional preparation programs to be offered at such institutions, including journalism, accounting, and business administration, as well as graduate studies in law or medicine (Kimball, 2013). Additionally, a strong moral and prudential case can be made for teacher education at liberal arts colleges based on common institutional missions to contribute to local communities, society, and the political economy of a democracy (Kimball, 2013; Wilkins, 1931). Moreover, the inherent role of teachers as intellectual leaders aligns well with the scope of knowledge gained through the liberal arts. Illuminating this point, Yacek and Kimball (2017) suggest “the liberal arts and teacher education become intrinsically complementary enterprises” as they can create liberally educated teachers and not merely skilled actors (p. 7).

In an adamant defense of teacher education at liberal arts colleges, Ernest Wilkins (1931), former president of Oberlin college, wrote that the broad education of citizens in a democracy requires the utmost attention from all types of colleges and universities. Furthermore, Wilkins (1931) wrote, “The (teaching) profession by its very nature calls for men and women of exceptional ability and personality... The privately endowed liberal-arts college is in a peculiarly

good position to exercise such selection” as these institutions already have in place selective admissions processes (Wilkins, 1931, p. 583).

Research on teacher education programs at modern liberal arts colleges is limited, though one professional organization, the Association of Independent Liberal Arts Colleges for Teacher Education (AILACTE), aims to share “concerns, issues, and viewpoints in teacher education as they pertain to member institutions” (AILACTE, 2024, para. 2). AILACTE annually publishes a journal aimed at enhancing teacher education at private liberal arts institutions. A review of published articles from the past five years reveals no studies directly addressing student recruitment, perceptions of teaching, or the sustainability of teacher preparation programs at liberal arts institutions. However, Peacock’s (2020) Liberal Arts Teacher Education (LATE) framework, a four-dimensional agenda aimed at comprehensive teacher preparation, is suggested as a tool to “facilitate recruitment” of teacher candidates (p. 3). Recent AILACTE articles tend to deal with pedagogy, such as writing instruction (Thomas & Wheeler, 2022), disposition development (Young et al., 2022), and virtual learning (Baliram et al., 2021; Shedrow, 2021), more so than examining programmatic structures.

### **High-Achieving Students Becoming Teachers**

Research suggests recruiting top performing students into teaching careers could lead to increases in K-12 student achievement (Hanushek et al., 2019). Only 23% of teachers come from the top one-third of college students (Auguste et al., 2010). With fewer teacher education programs at elite colleges (Reback, 2004), fewer top performing students seek to become licensed teachers. Some students choose non-credentialed alternative pathways to teaching. For example, Teach for America (TFA) is a non-profit organization that recruits, trains, and deploys students from the nation’s top colleges to teach for two-year periods in low-income schools. TFA

candidates do not have to be licensed teachers or have collegiate studies in education. TFA recruits heavily at many of the nation's top liberal arts colleges. In Virginia, Washington and Lee University and the University of Richmond have made TFA's list of top contributors within the last decade (TFA, 2014). TFA is highly selective, accepting between 11-15% annually, giving it an air of prestige among college students at the nation's top schools, though its recruitment has dwindled in recent years (Berman, 2023). Relatedly, TFA has faced criticism for underpreparing its candidates and producing high staff turnover at its schools (Thrush, 2023).

Since enrollment in teacher education is decreasing nationwide and the ability for high-achieving undergraduate students to pursue collegiate licensure programs is suspect, concerns have been raised about the sustainability of existing small teacher education programs. Understanding liberal arts college students' perceptions of teaching careers and motivations for choosing to study or not study education can illuminate the ways these small programs might be responsive to their students and lead to innovations in recruitment to, not only survive, but thrive on their campuses.

### **Method**

Washington and Lee University (W&L), in collaboration with a neighboring small liberal arts college, offers a nationally accredited educator preparation consortium that results in professional teacher licensure in 21 endorsement areas, including elementary, vocal and instrumental music, several world languages, and multiple middle/secondary content areas. W&L is considered a highly selective university with an acceptance rate of approximately 17%. Since prior research suggests students at highly selective liberal arts universities are less likely to pursue teacher licensure than students at other universities, and since W&L's educator preparation program competes with on-campus recruitment efforts by alternative programs like

TFA, the researchers were interested in uncovering the motivations that underpin students' decisions to study education and pursue teacher licensure while an undergraduate student at the institution.

This study sought to answer two specific, interrelated research questions:

1. How do students at a highly selective liberal arts university perceive careers in teaching?
2. Why do these students choose to pursue or not pursue careers in teaching while an undergraduate?

### **Researcher Positionality**

Bourke (2014) suggests researchers should interrogate their positionality, or their identities that interact with the setting and participants, to make apparent biases. The authors of this study are intimately connected with the students and program under investigation. One author is the program director and a faculty member, the other is also a faculty member in the program. Both authors were educated in large public universities' teacher education programs and worked as public -school teachers prior to their current roles. We acknowledge that these life experiences influenced our personal decisions to become teachers. We view our biographies as a strength as they produce positions from which to relate and constructively interpret students' responses based on unique life contexts. Similarly, the authors' faculty status enabled the crafting of relevant questions based on insider knowledge. The potential negative influence of this closeness to students was mitigated through ensuring respondents' anonymity.

### **Research Design**

The research project adopted a self-study methodology to examine the authors' own "professional practice setting" (Pinnegar, 1998, p. 33). Self-studies of this nature provide a

constructivist and collaborative lens to form context-specific understandings of the research questions (Beck et al., 2004). In applying this methodology, focus was given to understand the specific factors that impact the students at W&L. Dually, the self-study methodology enabled program reflexivity and responsiveness to the findings. A later section of this article will describe programmatic changes due to the results of this study.

While W&L takes part in a teacher education consortium with another small liberal arts college, the researchers decided that the participant pool would only include students enrolled as full-time undergraduates at W&L. This decision was due to the highly selective admissions process at W&L and the desire to understand specific institutional and cultural factors at the university that may not impact students from the partner institution in the consortium.

Data were collected via electronic questionnaire (Appendix A). The questionnaire contained both open and closed response items. It was sent to approximately 85 undergraduate students. These students were selected based on the criterion that they were active undergraduate students that were currently enrolled or had been enrolled in at least one education course during their time at W&L. Thirty-five students responded to the survey for a 41.2% response rate.

Closed-response questionnaire items were analyzed through measures of frequency. Open-ended items were analyzed independently by each researcher through open coding of written responses. The researchers then collaborated to compare their codes and negotiate disagreements. This type of coding technique strengthens the reliability of the findings (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Codes were categorized to reveal themes that answer the research questions. While data were gathered from only one source, the juxtaposition of open and closed items enabled some internal comparison of findings.



## Participants

Demographic information about participants is presented in table one. The gender identity of participants contained a larger discrepancy than at the university at-large (51% female; 49% male) but was generally representative of education courses. The racial identity of participants paralleled the racial composition of the larger student body at W&L as a predominately White institution. All participants were US citizens.

**Table 1**

*Participants Demographics*

Measure	Items	Frequency	Percentage
Gender	Female	28	80%
	Male	7	20%
Race	White	30	85.71%
	Black/African American	2	5.71%
	Mexican/Mexican American	1	2.86%
	Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander	1	2.86%
	Hispanic, Latin, or Latin American	1	2.86%
Class	Senior	14	41.81%
	Junior	8	25.53%
	Sophomore	10	29.41%
	Freshman	2	5.88%

In addition to these demographics, respondents reported their majors and minors. Students at W&L may pursue more than one major or minor at a time, but not more than three total designations. Education and Education Policy are two distinct minors. Students may choose to minor in Education with or without teacher licensure. Student majors represented in this study

were Economics (n=6), Psychology (n=5), Politics (n=4), Accounting/Business (n=3), History (n=3), Philosophy (n=2), English (n=2), and Music (n=2). The following majors accounted for one respondent: Chinese, Religion, Biology, Sociology, Art History, Environmental Science, Math, Classics, French, and Spanish. Also, one student was undecided, and one respondent did not provide a major.

The minors represented in this study were Education (n=11), Poverty and Human Capability Studies (n = 10), Education Policy (n=9), and Middle Eastern Studies (n=2). Each of the following minors accounted for one respondent: Africana Studies, Creative Writing, Women Gender and Sexuality Studies, Mass Communications, and Latin and Caribbean Studies. Students cannot formally declare Education and Education Policy minors at the same time. Seven respondents did not provide a minor. All students reported a GPA in the range of 3.0 to 4.0.

### **Findings**

Data suggest college students at W&L hold mixed perceptions of the teaching profession, and their decisions to study education were impacted either positively or negatively by factors under the themes of personal desires, institutional structures, and professional structures. The follow subsections detail the findings to evidence these themes. Results of select closed-response items from the questionnaire are presented in table two.

**Table 2***Results of Select Closed-Response Questionnaire Items*

Item	Strongly Disagree	Somewhat Disagree	Neutral	Somewhat Agree	Strongly Agree
Most people believe teaching is a prestigious profession.	4 (12.90%)	19 (61.29%)	6 (19.35%)	2 (6.45%)	0 (0.00%)
Most people believe teaching is an honorable profession.	1 (3.23%)	3 (9.68%)	0 (0.00%)	19 (61.29%)	8 (25.82%)
A liberal arts degree at a school like W&L is compatible with the teaching profession.	0 (0.00%)	2 (6.45%)	3 (9.68%)	7 (22.58%)	19 (61.29%)
My family would support my decision to become a teacher.	2 (6.45%)	5 (16.13%)	2 (6.45%)	9 (29.03%)	13 (41.94%)
My peers would support my decision to become a teacher.	1 (3.23%)	5 (16.13%)	5 (16.13%)	12 (38.71%)	8 (25.82%)
Teaching is an appropriate career path for a W&L student.	0 (0.00%)	4 (12.09%)	9 (29.03%)	3 (9.68%)	15 (48.39%)
The cost of tuition at W&L is a deterrence for students to pursuing careers in teaching.	2 (6.45%)	1 (3.23%)	4 (12.09%)	9 (29.03%)	15 (48.39%)
The visibility of teacher education at W&L is comparable to other programs' visibility.	11 (35.48%)	15 (48.39%)	2 (6.45%)	3 (9.68%)	0 (0.00%)

### Perceptions of the Teaching Profession

Participants, both those studying education and those choosing not to study education, largely perceived the teaching profession as honorable but lacking in prestige. When faced with the statement “Most people believe teaching is an honorable profession,” twenty-seven participants agreed with the statement either strongly or somewhat (87.1%) and four participants disagreed (12.91%). However, students responded negatively when presented with the statement

“Most people believe teaching is a prestigious profession.” Twenty-three participants disagreed (74.19%) with the statement. Another 19.35% (n=6) viewed the statement as neutral and only two participants (6.45%) somewhat agreed with the statement.

Participants overwhelmingly viewed low salaries as the biggest disadvantage to becoming a teacher, with 90.32% (n=28) referencing it. One participant elaborated in a written response, “The problem (is) with the cap on salary increases being at what some would say is relatively low in comparison to the work and education level expected to be attained.” Similarly, another participant wrote, “The pay is definitely one of the biggest disadvantages, especially considering the type of work a teacher does and how many hours they work, in and out of the classroom.” These perceptions of low pay impacted students’ decisions to study education. For example, one student said, “I need to have a career where I can make a real financial return on the cost of my educational investment.” Considering perceptions of pay and prestige, it is noteworthy that only 12.9% (n=4) of respondents believed teaching is not an appropriate career for a W&L student and 29.03% (n=12) were neutral toward that statement.

In addition to the perceptions of low prestige and low pay, respondents’ open-ended items revealed that teaching was viewed negatively in terms of workload, emotional burden, low autonomy, and limited upward mobility. They used phrases like “an underappreciated field” and “negative stigma” to describe their perceptions of the teaching profession. One student wrote that a big disadvantage to becoming a teacher was due to “the lack of respect afforded to teachers by US society.”

Conversely, participants perceived the advantages of becoming a teacher as rooted in relationships and the social impact of the profession, flexible work schedules, transferable skills, and job security. Phrases such as “build communities,” “disrupt inequality,” and “being a

difference maker” were present in participants’ written responses. Describing the advantages of becoming a teacher, one participant stated, “I personally love being in the classrooms and being able to impact the lives of students. I like the idea of being a role model and someone who students can ask advice from.” Similarly, another participant wrote, “I believe teachers have an important role in shaping the trajectory of a child’s life and therefore influencing the development of the community.”

### **Divergences in Choosing to Pursue a Teaching License**

Several conflicting factors emerged that impacted students’ decisions to study education. These conflicts are organized under the themes of Personal Desires, Institutional Structures, and Professional Structures. Each theme presents both positive and negative evaluations about studying education as an undergraduate at W&L. These themes highlight the differences in students’ perspectives on life, college, and the profession. We note the divergence in perceptions among those students choosing to pursue careers in education and those who are not.

#### ***Personal Desires***

The theme of students’ personal desires centered around the ways respondents represented varying scholarly interests and career or life ambitions. Personal desires played a role for both students choosing to study or not study education as an undergraduate. Among the students who were pursuing an undergraduate pathway toward teacher licensure, they often indicated an intrinsic motivation to become teachers and do meaningful work in their future lives. These views were accompanied with an overall positive view of the profession, including the challenges it faces. Multiple respondents mentioned their desires to work with children and to have impacts in their communities or society at-large as mentioned in the above section.

Conversely, personal desires played a role for some students choosing not to pursue a teaching license. This most frequently included a desire to study another field more than education. Some respondents mentioned their interest in educational policy, but not the specific work of teaching. One student said, “I find teaching and the history and policies behind it interesting but have never had the desire to teach.” For another student not pursuing licensure, studying education was still viewed positively as it complemented their major field of study. This student said, “I chose not to pursue teacher licensure because I have a deeper interest in the field of psychology, but the education department gave me a deeper understanding of child psychology by teaching me about the broader context of a child's environment.”

### *Institutional Structures*

Findings suggested the appeal of pursuing a K-12 teaching license as an undergraduate was connected to college and programmatic structures. In open-ended survey responses, students shared thoughts about the difficulty of meeting the requirements for licensure, including the time commitment for fieldwork and student teaching, in relation to their other major/minor requirements, general education requirements, and opportunities at the university. For example, one student wrote that an unappealing aspect of studying education was that “one often loses an entire semester their senior year [to student teaching].” Another student suggested their major course of study was demanding, so it was easier to “just pursue an alternative pathway to teaching” than to pursue a professional license while an undergraduate. Similarly, another student said they did not pursue licensure as an undergraduate because “I knew I’d be getting my license through Teach for America.”

Yet, some institutional structures, like time commitments, were assessed differently by those choosing to study education. For example, some students responded that pursuing a

teaching license as an undergraduate was more accessible and affordable than other options. For example, one student wrote that it was “far less expensive and much more convenient to do it now rather than later.” Another student said it was “the easiest and fastest way to meet my goal [of becoming a teacher].” It should be noted that some students were on full scholarships, while others were not.

Institutional structures arose in the way students thought about the quality and usefulness of the undergraduate teacher preparation program. For example, two students voiced the perception that education courses were less rigorous than other courses which made them less attractive. One student wrote, “I saw teaching as something I could learn and study later in my life, as opposed to some things that I can only learn while I'm here.”

However, students who were pursuing licensure placed higher value in their education courses and fieldwork requirements. Many of the teacher-bound respondents referred to the high-quality preparation and valuable experiences provided by studies in education and fieldwork in local schools. They suggested that the education program provided engaging, worthwhile community-based mentoring experiences. One student said they chose to pursue a teaching license because “I want to enter the career as prepared as possible.” Another student wrote, “I want to teach elementary school, so it is important to me that I get the proper preparation and qualification to do my job well.” Another student said, “I chose to pursue licensure due to the attractive price and the immense helpfulness of the faculty in observing me and guiding me through this process.”

### *Professional Structures*

As indicated above, a large majority of respondents (n=28) viewed teaching as a low-paying career; however, this was only referenced by three students in open-ended responses as a factor in their decision to not pursue teaching as a career. While underemphasized in open-ended responses, it is noteworthy that low pay acts as a barrier for some liberal arts students. As one student said:

...When your parents sacrifice so much to pay for your education, I would hope that they would not have to support me after I graduate and that eventually I could even begin to pay them back and support them in ways that a teaching salary simply wouldn't allow.

The other structural barrier present in multiple responses of students choosing not to pursue licensure was the presence of alternative pathways into the profession. Seven respondents choosing not to study education stated this was due to their plan to join Teach for America, their desires to teach in private school settings that do not require a state teaching license, or their desires to delay studies in education until after graduation due to alternative ways to enter the profession. Several of these responses intersected with institutional structures surrounding students' abilities to complete the licensure pathway in conjunction with the requirements of other majors and minors. It is noteworthy that only one respondent mentioned a professional structure as an affirmative reason to study education as an undergraduate. It was the ability to add-on endorsements through Praxis testing in Virginia.

### **Discussion and Implications**

With several liberal arts universities ending their teaching education programs, findings from this study hold potential to inform liberal arts universities, or other institutions of similar size and context, how they might create a program that successfully recruits and retains high



quality teacher candidates. This study illuminates several aspects within control of the university or teacher education program to foster these desired outcomes. These aspects include bolstering efforts to alter students' perceptions about the prestige of careers in education, highlighting the rigor and usefulness of studies in education, and leaning into students' desires for societal impact. This discussion includes aspects of W&L's program which have been altered in the wake of this study.

Respondents viewed teaching careers as lacking in prestige and pay. This data point echoes prior research on high-achieving students' views of teaching careers (Ingersol & Mitchell, 2011), though our findings suggest this was not synonymous with students' considering teaching an inappropriate career choice as prior research suggests (Mancenido, 2021). Many of W&L's graduates enter high paying positions or post-secondary studies in law, medicine, and business; therefore, we are aware that altering students' perceptions of prestige in educational careers can make them more appealing to students. Simultaneously, we recognize the university possesses structures and resources to support some opportune and prestigious activities. Therefore, to change narratives and perceptions about careers in education, our teacher education program has increased opportunities for students to interact with leaders in education. This includes bringing to campus award-winning teachers and administrators, innovative leaders of educational non-profits, and leading authors that contribute to intellectual thinking about US schools. Also, we work with our international education office to support students applying for Fulbright teaching awards and support students seeking non-traditional routes to teaching or other creative partnerships with schools and school-systems. Lastly, we integrate policy analysis and advocacy around issues of teacher pay and working conditions to foster student empowerment and their desires for leadership and societal impact.

While teacher pay arose as a negative factor influencing many students' decisions, the impact of the price of tuition at W&L remains an unclear factor. Nearly three-quarters of respondents agreed that the cost of tuition was a deterrent to becoming a teacher, but no student referenced tuition as preventing them from studying to become a teacher in open-ended responses. In fact, some students alluded to the cost efficiency, low price, and convenience of getting a teaching degree while an undergraduate. These contradictory findings produced unclear results about the role of tuition on enrollment in the teacher preparation program, but it appears grants or scholarships may produce a positive orientation toward pursuing a teaching license for those interested in it. This finding speaks to a broader issue of equity and access in teacher preparation, particularly as most student teaching internships are unpaid (Erwin, 2022).

Another complex finding from our study was the different views respondents held about the rigor and usefulness of studies in education. This finding is pertinent as teacher education is often marginalized on liberal arts campuses and alternative pathways raise questions about the value of collegiate teacher preparation (Yacek & Kimball, 2017). We recognize that high-achieving students have high expectations for their college courses and a desire for productive intellectual endeavors. We believe teacher preparation is a field that inherently sets high expectations for students, but we speculate that the practical aspects of the work are outside the standard experiences for liberal arts students and, therefore, seen as less than academic in nature.

To join both the rigorous practical elements of teacher preparation and the intellectual expectations of the liberal arts curriculum, we integrate policy analysis throughout the licensure pathway of our program to ensure that studies in education at W&L are equivalent to other social science classes in politics, sociology, or economics. For example, our Foundations of Education course now satisfies a social science credit for the university's general education curriculum.

This social science approach not only attracts academic-oriented students, but also better prepares future teachers for the political landscape of the profession. We believe, as McLellan and Dewey (1895) wrote, that teachers are not “like a cog in a wheel, expected merely to respond to and transmit external energy” but “must be an intelligent medium of action” (p. 15). In addition to policy analysis, we offer non-licensure courses in global comparisons in education and educating for democracy. Open to all students at the university, these courses raise the awareness that studies in education at W&L are rigorous and complex, and not narrowly focused on teacher training. Also, we offer mentored research projects and independent studies that have led to student authored peer-reviewed publications, conference presentations, and new programs for underserved k-12 students in local schools.

The emphasis on education as a social science has engendered more politically-oriented content in our program, including examinations of race, class, and gender. For example, whereas our courses have long examined issues of diversity and culturally responsive pedagogy, students now also scrutinize the political structures that place hurdles to such curriculum and pedagogy. Relatedly, we applied for and received an internal grant to fund two diversity initiatives in teacher education: One was focused on the incorporation of anti-racism literature circles in our elementary and secondary literacy courses, and the second on inclusion of anti-bias, asset-focused training into our directed-teacher seminar. Students reflect on these topics in relationship to their fieldwork. Many students attend local board of education meetings and some explore outlets for social justice advocacy. Lastly, we participate in W&L’s Diversity and Inclusion Visit Experience (DIVE) to meet potential students of color, low-income students, and first-generation college students and inform them of opportunities in education.

Similarly, findings suggest many liberal arts students seek studies in education because of their desire to have an impact on society. We acknowledge that students have many unique definitions of societal impact. We also recognize the ability for our program to build structures to support a variety of students' passions and projects beyond the classroom. This idea of broad societal impact aligns well with the mission of the university to prepare graduates "for lifelong learning, personal achievement, responsible leadership, service to others, and engaged citizenship in a global and diverse society" (Washington and Lee University, 2023, para. 1). We suggest programs should align their work with the broader missions and strategic plans of universities to garner support from administrators.

To do so, we initiated community-based learning that moves beyond the traditional practice of using local schools as only career preparation sites. We embed service projects into our courses and our student-teaching requirements. Additionally, we developed a selective student-led service program that aims to meet the varied needs of local public schools to strengthen our partnerships and work with community leaders to strengthen local high-needs schools (Sigler & Moffa, 2020). These programmatic changes have garnered support from university administrators and created a buzz among students about serving local schools. Furthermore, these opportunities have fostered students' knowledge of a systems-level approach to community change and school partnerships.

### **Limitations**

As a self-study, findings highlight one specific liberal arts context. These results should be transferable to other liberal arts universities with similar contexts; however, results are not generalizable to all teacher education programs and universities. As a study that utilizes both closed and open-ended questionnaire items, some types of quantitative analyses were not

conducted in exchange for emphasizing student voices. Future research might examine the different perspectives of first-year students versus more advanced students; students that have taken more education classes versus those with only one introductory class; or comparing perspectives based on different family income levels. Also, the mostly homogeneous racial and gender identities of participants did not support a robust comparison of these variables. Future research could reveal nuances that remain unexamined in the current study.

### **Conclusion**

While the arena of teacher education in the US is varied across many types of collegiate institutions and alternative programs, we believe teacher educators must work to counter dwindling enrollments and a de-professionalization of teaching. Our smallest, most marginalized collegiate programs are likely to feel the crunch of declining enrollments. Simultaneously, small programs at selective liberal arts institutions may face the dual threat of a tepid existence and institutional perceptions from students, administrators, and others that teaching is an inappropriate career for high-achieving students. Knowledge from this study can be used to counter negativity toward teaching careers, bolster positive motivations, and produce opportunities that align with students' personal desires as well as the mission and resources of liberal arts institutions. Doing so can produce licensure programs that thrive during these challenging times in teacher education.

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**Appendix A**

## Research Questionnaire

1. Class Year:
2. Major:
3. Minor:
4. Gender:
5. Race:
  - American Indian or Alaska Native
  - Asian, Asian American, or Pacific Islander
  - Black or African American
  - Mexican or Mexican American
  - Puerto Rican
  - Other Hispanic, Latino, or Latin American
  - White
6. Home State:
7. GPA:
8. Estimated Yearly Family Income:
  - \$0 - \$20,000
  - \$20,000–\$40,000
  - \$40,000–\$60,000
  - \$60,000–\$80,000
  - \$80,000–\$100,000
  - \$100,000–\$120,000
  - \$120,000–\$140,000
  - \$140,000–\$160,000
  - \$160,000–\$200,000
  - More than \$200,000
9. Do you receive tuition assistance to meet financial need? Check all that apply.
  - W&L meets 100% of my financial need
  - I receive partial financial aid
  - My family pays full tuition
  - I am a Johnson Scholar
  - I am a Questbridge Scholar
10. How many Education courses have you taken?
11. What are your interests in studying education at W&L? Check all that apply

- I plan to pursue the teacher licensure program at W&L
- I plan to be a teacher.
- I am interested in education policy.
- I plan to pursue alternative certification (TFA, Urban Teachers, etc.)
- It met an FDR (General Education Requirement)
- It met another program requirement.
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

12. What do you see as advantages of becoming a teacher?

13. What do you see as disadvantages of becoming a teacher?

14. What are the main reasons you chose to pursue or not pursue teacher licensure at W&L?

15. Do you agree/disagree with the following statements (Likert Scale Responses):

- Society believes teaching is a prestigious profession.
- Society believes teaching is an honorable profession.
- A liberal arts degree at a school like W&L is compatible with the teaching profession.
- My family would support my decision to become a teacher.
- My peers would support my decision to become a teacher.
- Teaching is an appropriate career path for a W&L student.
- The cost of tuition at W&L is a deterrence for students to pursue teaching as a profession at W&L.

16. Do other people's perceptions of teaching influence your decision to study or not study education?

17. How do your friends perceive your choice to study education?

18. How do your parents or other family members perceive your choice to study education?

19. How do you perceive the visibility and status of teacher education at W&L compared to other programs?