

AN EVENING TEACHER CERTIFICATION PROGRAM DESIGNED FOR ADULT LEARNERS

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Abstract

As more and more teachers leave the classroom, states are looking to actively recruit the returning adult learner into the teaching profession. This study examines an innovative teacher certification program in South Carolina whose goal is to do just that. Issues such as planning and scheduling are presented that offer insight into the design and delivery of this unique and responsive certification program. Though this program is unique to South Carolina, it is applicable to all who seek to recruit the adult learner.

Introduction

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (2001), by 2011, some 3.65 million public and private school teachers will be needed to educate the growing number of school-aged children. To accommodate such an enrollment surge, the United States will need to increase its overall teaching force by roughly fourteen percent (NCES, 2001). A state like South Carolina, for example, produces approximately 2,400 teachers per year. Based upon current and projected graduation rates, teacher education programs will only produce about three-fourths of the teachers needed in this state. The South Carolina Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement asserts

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that this shortage may last well into the next decade (CERRA, 2003). Even if out-of-state hiring continues at its current pace, South Carolina will “still need to attract over 1,000 new teachers to fill classroom vacancies for the 2003-2004 school year” (CERRA, 2003, p. 11). South Carolina faces the vexing problem: How to recruit, produce and retain qualified teachers?

The Program

In an attempt to address the teacher shortage, as well as a desire to facilitate the personal and professional needs of adult learners, the Columbia College Evening Elementary Education initial certification program was created. Columbia College is a liberal arts Women’s college affiliated with the Methodist Church in Columbia, South Carolina. When it established its co-educational Evening College, both the campus admissions office and the College’s Department of Education received numerous inquiries from prospective applicants interested in an evening teacher certification program. These inquiries typically came from full-time working adults, most of whom were serving as teaching assistants in local schools.

The College administration was interested in providing a degree program for these applicants. It soon became clear that, while the College was seeking ways to increase the numbers of well-qualified teacher candidates to meet both state and national needs, several conceptual and logistical problems would need addressing.

Course Offerings and Field Experience

An integral component of the certifying degree program at Columbia College is the sequencing of three practica or teaching experiences which begin in the students’ sophomore year. The level of involvement in the classroom increases with each placement, culminating in their senior year with the assumption of all classroom responsibilities for a minimum of two weeks. This is a relatively seamless sequence for day students, yet has proven to be more problematic for evening students. This question was raised initially: How can students fulfill their experience requirements while working?

There were several issues involved. Of primary concern was that fulltime workers generally do not have a flexible schedule that would allow them to leave work (or home), travel to a (possibly) remote school setting, complete 2-4 hours of classroom observation each week, and do so at a time and location convenient for their Columbia College supervisor. Also, many of the evening students were currently serving as non-certified teachers or as teacher aids, some with years of classroom experience. To address these issues, the Education Department approved policies (open to all, but designed for the needs of evening students) that would allow students to complete the first field experience at their own school or at a location near their workplace. Approved students who had prior or current teaching experience, (either working as teaching assistants or as non-certified private school teachers), were allowed to waive the classroom observation requirements of their first field experience, yet still were expected to fulfill all other requirements such as lesson planning and lesson delivery inherent in this initial field experience.

Though in some cases this special dispensation could be granted, the majority of students would need flexible work schedules in order to complete school-based field experiences during normal school hours. For the final field experience, all students would need to complete full-time student teaching, requiring them to restructure their familial obligations, take a leave of absence from their current jobs or, in some cases, resign their jobs completely. The Education Department was careful to inform prospective students prior to enrollment of all the field experience requirements and the inevitable sacrifices they would produce. Though students are initially somewhat confident that such accommodations can be made, the majority continue to struggle to fulfill these requirements.

Lessons Learned

At the outset of the project, it was assumed that adults would be more focused, more organized, more realistic, more self-knowledgeable, and more able and willing to fulfill all the requirements posed by the assessment system of a teacher education unit. We learned, and

literature supports, that adult learners have many personal and professional responsibilities that often equate to devoting less time to their academic pursuits (Kaplan & Saltiel, 1997; Osgood-Treston, 2001; Richardson & King, 1998; Tice, 1997). We further learned that, though full of enthusiasm and passion, many adult students were unrealistic in terms of their time and academic skills levels. These issues clearly influenced student retention. Of the 72 students who initially enrolled in the program, 33 either withdrew or changed majors in their first year, which equates to an attrition rate of 46%.

Changes Made

Since the programs start in 2001, several changes have been made. To retain more students in the program, two initiatives have been implemented. The College now provides an elective (and free) course to all entering students entitled the Evening College Seminar. This seminar is offered prior to the start of each semester and addresses issues such as study habits, time management, reading comprehension, and note and test taking skills. In addition, greater effort is being made to ensure evening students take placement and proficiency tests in reading, writing and mathematics prior to enrollment in the college, and that students are quickly informed if any remediation is necessary.

Advisement is essential to the success of the adult learner. We realized early on that both the program design and course sequencing intimidated and confused many evening students. Program and course requirements are made very clear to potential students in a variety of ways, including information sessions at recruitment Open Houses, printed information, and initial and continual advisement sessions. In addition, a change was made so that transcript evaluations of previous college credit was completed prior to the start of the program, thus ensuring that students know exactly which courses they need to take before beginning their program.

Conclusion

Though several conceptual and logistical issues remain, we are hopeful that the evening elementary education certification program at Columbia College will continue to grow. Columbia College is committed to addressing the teacher shortage in South Carolina, albeit in an admittedly modest way, by producing competent, caring classroom teachers. The College is also committed to fostering diversity on campus and to facilitating access to those students who may not have had such an opportunity earlier in life. The adult learner brings to campus not just a wealth of life experiences, but also a deep commitment to individual and collective learning, which enhances both Columbia College, as well as the lives of the students they teach. Though it is still too early to gauge the “success” of our program, we encourage other teacher-training institutions to develop evening certification programs that cater exclusively to the unique personal and professional needs of adult learners. We have learned that they are well worth the commitment.

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