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National Association for Multicultural Education - Summer Institute, 2012

Summary

I attended the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) Summer Institute at Northern Illinois University in DeKalb, Illinois, June 28-30. The theme of the institute: “Addressing the Demographic Imperative: Recruiting and Preparing a Diverse and Highly Effective Teaching Force” brought together teacher educators, primary and secondary school teachers, administrators, and community activists to work to address the imbalance of teachers of color in relation to the percentages of students of color. One of the primary goals of NAME is to improve the recruitment and retention of students of color in teacher education programs. I attended as part of the Valley Partnership group, including NDSU and MSUM, and funded by the Bush Grant.

General points addressed during the Institute:

There is a critical shortage of educators of color in classrooms throughout the US, and this is a particular concern in school districts with large ethnic/racial minority populations. Central to this is the concept that teachers serve as role models for students and contribute to guiding promising students into teacher education programs. Thus, a lack of teachers of color perpetuates a lack of students of color pursuing education credentials. Indications are that high-achieving students of color are more likely to pursue business, pre-professional or health-related fields of study than education, and the sense at the Institute was that this could be largely attributed to perceptions of teaching being low status and a largely white field.

Traditional teacher education programs may throw up roadblocks to the success of African American and Latino students, in the form of standardized tests, disposition guidelines, student teaching placements and financial demands. Such roadblocks are perceived to push such students out of teacher education and into other fields of study. The financial strains are not unique to students of color, but may be exacerbated by wealth disparity and populations of color. Teacher licensure requirements that students pass three standardized tests that they must pay out of pocket serve to discourage candidates, particularly those who fail the initial test on one or more occasions. It is a widely recognized phenomenon that African American and Latino students as an aggregate score lower on standardized tests than their white counterparts. This creates a unique challenge for a program which relies heavily on such exams as a gatekeeper to student advancement. Student teacher placements have the potential to place additional strain on financial resources, as well as further isolating students of color, and disposition forms may alienate students whom they penalize for regular use of non-standard English or forms of dress and comportment that are appropriate to cultural

contexts. Code-switching is one of the advantages that teachers of color may have in diverse classrooms and which may run counter to disposition guidelines.

Institutional racism and white privilege remain significant problems and barriers to the success of both students of color and faculty/staff of color. Teacher education programs remain overwhelmingly white and majority female, perpetuating both the traditional bias of “feminized” careers (lower status and pay) and a form of missionary mentality when dealing with students of color. This last point may relate to the concept of the “white man’s (woman’s) burden” and perceptions of white privilege within US society. Presenters and participants at the Institute argued vigorously for the need to foster teacher educators of color as a remedy to some of these concerns, but also noted that covert institutional racism and overt/covert personal racism play roles.

One final general topic, which underscored all of the sessions, is that successful teacher education programs for students of color provide support for the students that extends beyond the education classroom and student teaching placements. It may include tutoring or support in other academic areas (such as writing), cohort models that incorporate elements of team-building, efforts to engage the families of students as supporters (and taskmasters), and post-hiring support to avoid the sense of alienation that many new teachers experience.

Objectives endorsed by presenters (& generally by NAME):

NAME has a strong social justice mission and seeks to improve both the lives of people in the communities in which educators work, and the access to education that is of quality and which respects diversity. As part of this mission, NAME presenters advocated blurring the lines between classroom and community, and encouraged teachers to become active in the family lives of students (communicating with parents and grandparents, using family as motivators for struggling students). This is key to the presenters’ concepts of support for students who might otherwise drop out of programs.

When students fail, NAME presenters advocate very clearly identifying for students how they are not succeeding and advising them out of the program, offering them an education studies degree that will not lead to certification, but which will lead them to a degree that they might use as community organizers or to work toward counseling or administrative careers (**argh!** - *my emphasis*). The benefit of this approach is that it provides a safety net for students at risk of not achieving certification.

Presenters were mixed on code-switching and the ability of students/teachers of color to use ebonics or vernacular English in coursework and the classroom. Some were passionate about the use of these vernaculars as a way to engage students, but others were adamant that standard English is necessary for professional and academic

communication. A major emphasis for all presenters was the need to maintain elements of culture relevant to students as a means of connecting with their communities.

Central to the identity and purpose of NAME is building equity: in a quantitative and qualitative sense. A simple measure of this on a national level would be achieving parity in the percentages of ethnic makeup of teachers and those of students. This quantitative equity is one of the main points of the summer workshop. Qualitative equity may take the form of developing teacher education programs that work to reduce roadblocks to students of color or to those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds. This last point would include students from the ethnic majority, as well.

Problems or difficulties that I see for VCSU in implementing objectives:

Most of the initiatives described and the problems addressed at the NAME Summer Institute focused on urban school districts or teacher education programs in universities with large African American or Latino populations. Valley City and North Dakota as a whole do not fit these characteristics. In that sense, many of the solutions presented work only partially or would be poor fits to our circumstances. Also, one of the key points reinforced during multiple sessions by various presenters centered on treating these student populations differently than the traditional teacher education candidates. Extra test prep, revenue sources to pay for standardized tests, tutoring support, and special mentoring were all presented as minimum requirements. My concern is that our traditional teacher education students would see this as inherently unfair if they are not beneficiaries of these.

In terms of recruitment of students of color into education programs, SEGS finds itself at a bit of a disadvantage (in my perception) to the BIT and MSHPE (particularly HPER) programs in that student athletes represent a significant infusion of culturally/racially diverse students, but most come with the desire to pursue business or health science degrees. These observations are based on my perception, and may be flawed, but I see this as incongruous to the experience with local student athletes, many of whom come to VCSU to pursue teaching/coaching career paths. Of course, this is stereotypically true of history students, so I may be observing an anomaly related to my field. At any rate, it seems to me that the greatest gains in terms of recruiting students of color into VCSU teacher education is to be made among students already on campus, not by directly pursuing the urban students addressed in the NAME Summer Institute. See the section below for a description of how this may present an opportunity for SEGS.

Another key area in which the realities at VCSU and the objectives discussed at NAME do not mesh is in the faculty of SEGS. There is not a single person of color on the tenured faculty at this time. This is an issue at the campus level which was identified in the recent HLC visit, but which specifically bears upon the issues addressed in the

NAME Summer Institute. Not only does NAME advocate for educators of color to serve as role models, mentors and advocates for students of color, but to serve in these capacities for white students, too. Our curriculum attempts to acknowledge diversity and develop an understanding of it in our students, but our campus does not reflect that as a core belief in the most tangible way. This is not meant to be a criticism of the faculty of SEGS, but I do think it is an important reality upon which we need to reflect.

Opportunities for VCSU that the objectives present:

Unlike the primarily urban school districts and teachers colleges that were represented at the NAME Summer Institute, Valley City has access to a rural, ethnic minority population that would fit the goal of providing diversity on our campus. Furthermore, this group would benefit from the same sorts of social justice and community-building objectives that NAME embraces. Native American communities face very similar issues in terms of wealth gap, education completion rates, and the need to develop a middle-class, professional population on the reservations. This could mesh very well with VCSU SEGS' core mission of providing quality teacher education. We might increase recruitment at high schools with significant American Indian populations, and revive and actively promote articulations with tribal colleges to smooth the way for their AA graduates to complete education degrees. Other potential articulations with community colleges with greater diversity than our region and Wyoming could prove beneficial, but the tribal colleges specifically could bring diverse students to VCSU's campus.

The recruitment of student athletes of color into teacher education programs should be a specific objective of SEGS. Although some students of color who come to VCSU do pursue education degrees, there does not appear to be a concerted effort to promote these studies. NAME strongly links the preparation of teachers of color with community-building and social justice, which may be appealing to students who plan to return home to other states after their VCSU studies. Teaching careers may also be a more secure path into the middle class for students who will return to communities in economic crises. Likewise, it may be productive to target Transition to Teaching efforts toward members of communities of color who are interested in retraining and earning their certification.

The development of coordinated Praxis prep for all students struggling to pass the Praxis I exam, and improved counseling of students who are struggling in general and who should drop the program could be broader benefits of building such a program for students of color. In particular, the articulation of a degree program that includes education coursework but does not lead to licensure (but which is more focused than University Studies) might be a worthwhile goal. Currently, students make use of the Learning Center for test prep, but that is on an individual basis. More coordinated preparation might be useful.

Consider the dynamics of the search and hiring practices that have led to a homogenous teaching faculty. Of course we want to hire the best candidates for open positions, but it seems that a program as large as SEGS should by nature have persons of color on the faculty. This is a personal bias, here, but I would like to hope that such a person need not be employed specifically to teach the cultural diversity courses, but be teaching on merits other than race and experience in a minority population.