

Project RESTART: Preparing Nontraditional Adult Teacher Education Candidates to Become Special Education Teachers

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Article:

In North Carolina, where the state must hire 10,000 teachers every year just to fill existing classrooms, highly qualified special education teachers are included in the top three areas of greatest teacher shortage, behind math and science. Such needs, which include an increase in teachers from ethnic minorities, challenge teacher educators to seek innovative methods for recruitment and retention of pools of nontraditional teacher candidates (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; Boe, Cook, Bobbitt, & Terhanian, 1998).

Program Context

At the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG), Project RESTART: Recruitment and Retention: Students on Alternative Routes to Teacher Training, a U.S. Department of Education personnel preparation grant (H325H020046) for high incidence disabilities, has worked to address the critical shortage of special education teachers in North Carolina (Kurtts, 2006). The purpose of the project was to enhance the development and implementation through assessment of a model teacher preparation program that was designed to recruit and retain a pool of highly qualified special education teachers from underrepresented teacher candidate groups.

Program Features

Program Participants

This project focused on nontraditional adults as teacher education candidates, including those from underrepresented groups and those with limited financial resources. The participants were identified as nontraditional adult students if they (a) had been away from formal schooling for at least 12 months and completed high school or earned a graduate equivalency diploma (i.e., GED), (b) were 24 years of age or older or had completed community college transfer work, or (c) were employed as school system paraeducators.

Over the four-year period of the project, there were 34 participants, with 11 (i.e., approximately 33 percent) of these participants from underrepresented groups and 12 employed as paraeducators. During the project period, the special education program at UNCG had 78 total candidates. Therefore, Project RESTART participants constituted almost 45 percent of the program candidates.

Key Program Components

During recruitment, selected faculty presented information sessions about Project RESTART at two meetings each year for area school systems and community colleges. During these meetings, admission and transfer procedures and project criteria were discussed and contact information was shared. In the second year of the project, a Web site was created to provide program information, application forms, and project faculty contacts and share the personal experiences of participants (<http://www/uncg.edu/ses/restart/>). Upon acceptance into the

project, financial support for tuition and fees was provided to each participant. This amounted to approximately \$3500.00 each semester (i.e., full-time enrollment) and \$800.00 each summer session.

Project RESTART participants completed the 127 semester credit hour program of study set forth in the undergraduate special education curriculum for high incidence disabilities, which is aligned with North Carolina Department of Public Instruction requirements and the Council for Exceptional Children's professional teaching standards. RESTART participants and their peers in the undergraduate program took all coursework together during late afternoon classes, allowing the paraeducators to remain employed while enrolled. Paraeducators were also able to complete early field-based experiences, which included 100 contact hours each semester for the first three semesters of the professional program, in the classrooms where they were employed; however, they moved to new classrooms for their student teaching experience.

The mentoring component of the project connected a full-time faculty member and a full-time doctoral student who served as a project coordinator with the RESTART participants. The faculty member served as the advisor to the students and the doctoral student planned and implemented support activities, including monthly meetings to address academic topics such as research skills, reflective writing skills, and interview skills. PRAXIS I workshops in reading, writing, and math were presented twice a semester by an additional faculty member who served as a consultant to the project.

Outcome Data

Program Productivity Data

Project RESTART teacher candidates had an average GPA of 3.39 compared to an average GPA of 3.24 of the teacher candidates not supported by RESTART. North Carolina requires that all candidates applying to teacher education programs pass the PRAXIS I (PPST) tests of reading, writing, and math. To date, all but 4 participants included in the original project have passed the PRAXIS I. The 4 who were unsuccessful with the PRAXIS I chose to leave the program for personal reasons. All Project RESTART participants passed the PRAXIS II tests required for teacher licensure in North Carolina with no participant having to retake the tests a second time.

Of the 34 Project RESTART participants, 20 have graduated from the undergraduate program in special education. Of the 14 who did not complete the program, 4 are now preparing for student teaching and then will graduate, while 6 are currently juniors and will be supported with funds from a no-cost extension of the project. Four of the participants left the program for personal reasons and would be subject to the payback provision of the grant; however, project faculty have continued to communicate with these students and have attempted to facilitate their return to the program.

Participant Satisfaction Data

Two focus groups were conducted with participants, at midpoint and at project's end. While all project participants were invited to participate, 10 volunteered to be part of the initial discussion of experiences in the teacher preparation program and the reasons that led them to pursue degrees in special education. Five of these participants were of African American descent (i.e., 4 female and 1 male), and 1 participant was a Hispanic female. Two participants were white males and the remaining participants were white females. Eight participants were employed as special education paraeducators. Data included transcripts of audiotaped focus group interviews, which were read and coded by three researchers to ensure interrater reliability. Content analysis of data was used to identify emerging themes.

At the midpoint focus groups, emerging themes addressing reasons for entering the program included (a) motivation and desire for personal and professional growth, (b) the choice of special education as a profession, and (c) the critical importance of peer support and mentoring in pursuing a college degree. In addition, participants addressed how the project helped to remove obstacles associated with the return to college and retention, including financial resources and sensitivity to family issues. Some participants identified the importance of becoming a role model to minority children they teach.

In the final focus group, all participants were again invited to share; however 11 volunteered for the discussion. These candidates included 2 white males, 3 African-American females, 1 Hispanic female, and 5 white females. Of these participants, 6 were paraeducators. They identified (a) financial support, (b) networking and relationship building with peers and faculty, and (c) professional development opportunities as key to their success in completing the program. They also noted difficulties they experienced with the PRAXIS I tests for admission to the program.

Program Impact Data

Of the 20 Project RESTART graduates, 17 (i.e., 85%) are now teaching in North Carolina. All paraeducators are employed as special education teachers. Of the community college transfer students, 2 are currently applying for graduate school in an area of education, 1 is working with individuals with special needs in a community agency, and the remainder are working as special education teachers. The follow-up of RESTART participants' employment histories has now led program faculty to begin more formalized procedures for tracking all program graduates.

Discussion

Participant satisfaction, graduation rates, and participants' employment data from Project RESTART indicate a successful effort to recruit and retain a diverse pool of highly qualified special education teacher candidates, including those from underrepresented groups. These project initiatives remain a top priority of the School of Education at UNCG and are supported by continued collaboration with area community colleges supporting transfer students and area school systems in the recruitment of paraeducators to become highly qualified special educators. To date, this project has been funded by the U.S. Department of Education for another four-year cycle with an expanded emphasis on dual licensure in elementary education and special education.

While financial support such as that provided by Project RESTART is important for recruitment and retention, having faculty who create collegial relationships with candidates is a powerful motivator to remain in school and graduate. At UNCG, components initiated by the project, including advising practices, mentoring activities for nontraditional adult students, and PRAXIS I workshops for all teacher candidates are now firmly in place and supported by the School of Education without the need for RESTART funding.

With the critical shortage of special educators, it is imperative to continue to pursue active recruitment and retention efforts in teacher education programs to tap into historically underrepresented pools of teacher candidates. Faculty who recruit potential special education teachers from pools of nontraditional candidates must continue to be sensitive to their unique needs and concerns (Villegas & Clewell, 1998). As teacher educators seek out the most effective practices for preparing special educators for the challenges of increasingly diverse classrooms, the voices of nontraditional teacher candidates may provide programs with insights into how and why they decide to become special education teachers and what supports they find most helpful in completing a program successfully and obtaining employment in the field.

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