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Elodie Jones

Fort Hays State University, ejjones@fhsu.edu

Betsy Crawford

Fort Hays State University, betsy.crawford@fhsu.edu

Chris Jochum

Fort Hays State University, cjochum@fhsu.edu

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Standardized Isn't Standardized: Eliminating the ACT for Teacher Education Admission

Dr. Elodie J. Jones¹, Dr. Betsy Crawford², Dr. Chris Jochum³

¹Department of Teacher Education & Advanced Education, Fort Hays State University



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Introduction

As nationwide teacher shortages continue to grow (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2018; Garcia & Weiss, 2019; Sutchter et al., 2016), the standards for which a teaching candidate is admitted into teacher education programs have continued to remain steadfast in rigid assessment scores and vast amounts of “hoop-jumping” for potential teacher education candidates who otherwise meet all of the academic and non-academic requirements, with the exception of standardized assessments, such as the SAT or ACT (Ingersoll, et al., 2014; Lankford et al., 2014). After potential candidates with high GPAs, satisfied criteria, and dreams of becoming a teacher were being rejected, in the same week they received a Dean’s Honor Roll letter, faculty began to question key assessments used to admit students. In addition, key accreditation bodies (i.e., CAEP) loosened their qualifications regarding candidate selection and admission.

Key Findings

- Alternative assessments are valid measurements for student ability beyond the ACT, SAT or CORE exams.
- Teacher Candidates reported greater self-efficacy and a sense of accomplishment after re-taking a course.
- The removable of bias assessments may increase the number of diverse candidate entering the teaching field.

Methods

A pilot study (N=6) was designed to explore the phenomenon of ACT-based admission requirements further, enabling pre-service candidates whose only deficiencies were standardized testing to progress through the program based on an memorandum of understanding (MOU). Candidates with high GPA and good academic standing, that were deficient in one content area, agreed to re-take a specific course that aligned in the area of struggle from the ACT. Candidate’s cut score for entry was 22 or higher in the areas of Math, Reading and Writing. Therefore, if a candidate struggled with the ACT Math section they would retake Math110: College Algebra to achieve a B or better. Beyond the MOU and foundational course, individual case study narratives, through interviews, examined themes such as student self-efficacy, shifts in mindset, assessment fatigue, attrition due to standardized assessment(s), and challenging conversations and life decisions with academic advisors.

Analyses

Literature review

Research has highlighted the dichotomy of admissions into Teacher Education (TE) programs that flow between a mindset of rigor and high standards versus “all welcome to enter” attitudes commonly associated with educators (Van Overschelde & López, 2019). The field of education has traditionally maintained high standards and rigor through accreditation (CAEP, 2022); however, a more holistic mindset encompassing human first has created a massive shift. As nationwide schools tackle issues such as Social and Emotional Learning, Trauma, and EDI in PK-12, teacher preparation programs must also be aware of these factors in terms of candidate preparation concerning self-care and P12 students (CDC, 2021; Minahan, 2019).

Contribution to the field

Teacher shortages and attrition are key themes that have been central to the teaching profession for years. However, COVID and emergency remote teaching's endless challenges and increased stress have increased attrition rates (Diliberti, Schwartz, & Grant, 2021). In a cycle of admissions and accreditation, Teacher Education programs have attempted to balance admissions rates to satisfy nationwide openings and meet the needs of accrediting bodies. Accrediting bodies had dictated qualified admissions such as GPA, Standardized Assessments, and various indicators of success. However, with the revision of the CAEP Initial Standards and innovative alternative licensure programs, teacher education programs have leveraged the recent changes with the national-wide call for educators due to ongoing shortages.

Implication for Action

The pilot preemptively led Teacher Education faculty and CAEP Accreditation committee members to align the pilot results with new CAEP standards based on candidate selectivity and admission criteria (CAEP, 2020). After rigorous admissions data analysis and interviews with key administration, faculty, and policy bodies, the use of a standardized assessment (e.g. ACT, CORE) was removed from admission requirements. Undergraduate teacher candidates gain admission based on GPA and course grades over a period of time versus a one-time standardized assessment, thus potentially allowing for more candidates to gain admission to the program and diversifying populations that might not otherwise seek admission (Van Overschelde & López, 2019).

Results

The pilot preemptively led Teacher Education faculty and CAEP Accreditation committee members to align the pilot results with new CAEP standards based on candidate recruitment, selectivity and admission criteria (CAEP, 2020). After rigorous admissions data analysis and interviews with key administration, teacher education faculty, and College of Education policy bodies, the use of a standardized assessment (e.g. ACT, CORE) was removed from admission requirements. Further observations regarding outcomes and assessments in core classes (e.g. Math 110, ENG 201) are examined and discussed by faculty, candidates and administration to dynamically ensure that the best possible measures are being utilized. Furthermore, candidate’s preparedness for entry into Teacher Education, as well as their restricted program, are examined for alignment with both content standards, CAEP Standards and exit assessments.

Conclusions

The adoption of alternative methods, beyond standardized assessments, as a measure of generalized student knowledge, as one portion of entry in the Teacher Education program, has been a successful change overall. Longitudinally, it is important to collect candidate data to ensure that eliminating the ACT did not create more barriers to entry and that candidates are prepared for licensure-based or State-mandated assessments as they matriculate. Moreover, one research-based benefits of eliminating standardized assessments is the potential increase in diverse teacher candidates. Lastly, university departments that support alternative courses (e.g, Math 110) and secondary programs within the Teacher Education will be included as student assessment decisions are made to meet student needs, as well as college accreditation.

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