Minority Alternative Certification Candidate Perceptions of Praxis Preparation Workshops

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Abstract

More than 40% of public school students in the U.S. are minorities and that figure is growing (National Center for Education Sciences [NCES], 2017; Niederberger, 2015). However, less than 17% of public school teachers are persons of color (Ingersoll & May, 2011). While African American students make up roughly 17% of public school enrollments, only 8% of the teachers are black with African American male teachers making up less than 2% of the teacher workforce (Hawkins, 2013; Latiker, Washington, Johns, Jackson, & Johnson, 2013; Toldson, 2013.). To address the issues of recruitment, development and retention of minority teachers, Grambling State University, a Historically Black College/University (HBCU), redesigned its certification – only, post baccalaureate alternate route program and created a robust Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree program that includes an intensive focus on support (both pre-service and in-service) and professional development. A Transition to Teaching grant from the US Dept. of Education made this effort possible. This article presents an analysis of participant perceptions and satisfaction with a pre-entry support and recruitment strategy – Praxis exam workshops. The workshops were offered during 2012 -2015 to persons pursuing enrollment in the MAT program.

Keywords: Minority teacher recruitment, Praxis, Alternate Route Certification, Teacher Education, HBCU

1   Introduction

Research indicates that the single most important school related factor influencing student achievement is an effective teacher (Goldhaber as cited in Graham, 2013; Hightower et al., 2011; McCaffrey, Lockwood, Koretz, & Hamilton 2003; Rice, 2003.) This is true across grade levels, content areas and ethnic groups. However, minority student performance consistently lags when compared to that of white students (Hanushek, 2017; Vanneman, Hamilton, Anderson, & Rahman, 2009).

In 2008, more than 40% of the nation's public-school students were classified as minority, but less than 17% of teachers were persons of color (Ingersoll & May, 2011). Moreover, of that number, less than 2% of the nation's teachers were African American males (Hawkins, 2013; Latiker, Washington, Johns, Jackson, & Johnson, 2013; Toldson, 2013). The diversity-gap between students and teachers is a persistent problem for schools (Boser, 2014; Hanover Research, 2014; Ingersoll & May, 2016; Martin, 2011), and the aforementioned statistics, coupled with the expected steady increase in minority K-12 enrollment (National Center for Education Sciences [NCES], 2017; Niederberger, 2015), underscore the ever – present need for improvement in all areas of the educational spectrum including minority student performance and minority teacher recruitment. This article focuses on the latter – recruitment – and presents an analysis of participant perceptions and satisfaction with a pre-entry support used as a recruitment strategy – Praxis exam workshops. The workshops were offered from 2012 to 2015 to persons pursuing enrollment in the alternate route to teacher certification – the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree program – at Grambling State University.

2   Literature

Despite Every Student Succeeds Act's (ESSA) elimination of the Highly Qualified Teacher (HQT) provision from the previous law – the No Child Left Behind Act (U. S. Department of Education, 2016) – it remains clear that students in all grades benefit from having teachers who have the ability to teach effectively. Improved academic achievement requires that there be high quality teachers who can provide high quality instruction. However, despite efforts to improve student performance, especially the performance of minority students in relation to their white counterparts, an achievement gap still exists (Bohrnstedt, Kitmitto, Ogut, Sherman & Chan, 2015; Niederberger, 2015). Recruiting minority candidates and developing those individuals into effective teachers are two important activities that have the potential to lead to improved minority student performance (Hanover Research, 2014). Though, the shortage of minority teachers in the pipeline signifies a need for deeper exploration of minority teacher recruitment efforts. Further, researchers posit that HBCUs and alternative route programs can play a great role in mediating the minority teacher shortage (Collins, Davis & Hilton, 2013; Gursky,

2002; Hanover Research, 2014; Latiker, Washington, Johns, Jackson, & Johnson, 2013).

Recruiting Minority Candidates for Alternative Route Programs

According to Constantine et al., (2009), traditional undergraduate teacher education programs continue to be the largest producer of new teachers. However, each year, alternative certification programs produce one third as many new teachers as are produced by traditional programs (Kee, 2012). Moreover, minorities represent a larger proportion of candidates in alternate route programs than they do among traditional bachelor's degree recipients – a clear indicator that alternate route programs are making substantial strides in reducing the minority teacher shortage (Nettles, Scatton, Steinburg & Tyler, 2011). In addition, alternate route programs via recruitment and support of minority teachers may ultimately impact minority student achievement. Further, as part of the strategy for bringing more minority teachers into the classroom, alternate route educator preparation programs should focus on alleviating barriers by a) providing financial incentives and b) providing extra academic and testing support (Alvarada & Cooper, 2006; Hightower et al., 2011; Marder, Brown & Plisch, 2003; Torres, Santos, Peck, & Cortes, 2004).

Minority Teachers and Minority Student Performance

Recruiting minority teachers and placing them in classrooms with students who look like them, have been shown to significantly impact student academic performance and outcomes. There is a growing body of research that suggests that, minority students who have minority teachers perform better on standardized tests, have higher attendance rates and have higher rates of college enrollment than minority students taught by white colleagues (Achinstein, Ogawa, Sexton & Freitas, 2010; Egalite, Kisida & Martin, 2015; Hanover Research, 2014). In Egalite, Kisida & Martin's (2015) longitudinal study of the educational paths of 2.9 million public school students in Florida, results showed that minority students performed significantly better with minority teachers. This was especially true for elementary–aged Black students whose tests scores improved when their teacher shared their ethnicity.

The present academic achievement gap along with findings from research suggest that teacher recruitment efforts should be focused on high quality minority teacher candidates. But, barriers such as lack of financial resources and the need for academic and testing assistance have hampered minority candidate recruitment efforts.

Praxis entrance exams. Many reasons have been cited for the disproportionate number of minority teachers, particularly Black teachers, in public K-12 schools. Standardized testing practices, specifically Praxis test requirements, have been repeatedly named as a major barrier to minority teacher recruitment (Hightower et al., 2011; Madkins, 2011). Similar to the LSAT for law school or the MCAT for medical school, teacher candidates are required to take and pass measures of general knowledge and professional competency in order to enter (and complete) teacher education programs (Madkins, 2011). The most common, the Praxis test series, includes assessments of core academic and subject-specific content knowledge for candidates entering teacher preparation programs. It also includes assessments of skills for beginning teachers with a focus on specialized content knowledge used in K–12 teaching (Educational Testing Service [ETS], 2017). Likewise, as in other professional fields, standardized tests such as the aforementioned, have been problematic for African Americans who tend to score among the lowest of all racial groups (Madkins, 2011; Tyler, 2011). In fact, during the period of 1994 -1997, of all groups taking the test, "Black candidates had the lowest rate of passing the Praxis I" (Madkins, p. 421, 2011). Sadly, Praxis exams preclude many

minority teachers' entrance into professional programs (Graham, 2013; Hightower et al., 2011; Martin, 2011). The Praxis exam score –gap between minority and majority test takers seems to mirror the teacher diversity – gap that exists in the nation's public schools.

As is the case for more than half of all Praxis test takers, many do not spend adequate time preparing for the tests (Dodson, 2008). Cory Murphy, ETS director of client relations (as cited in Dodson, 2008), suggested that becoming familiar with the wording of Praxis test items, studying test material that they do not know, employing time management skills and reducing anxiety can make a major difference in test performance for many minority test takers. Further, Dodson (2008) offers suggestions for supporting minority test takers that include assisting candidates with understanding what is on the test, how they will be tested and how to best use skills and knowledge to demonstrate their abilities. In addition, providing minority candidates with authentic practice material is also helpful.

3   Methods

This analysis used data collected over a 4- year period, from 2012 – 2015, from participants in Praxis workshops. The workshops were offered as a recruitment strategy and pre-entry support to assist students with meeting the MAT program's Praxis score entry requirements. The surveys were administered in an effort to gauge student perceptions of appropriateness, satisfaction and Praxis exam preparedness as a result of having attended one of the workshops.

Institution and Alternate Route Program

Recognizing the need to recruit and develop effective alternate route teachers for partner high need school districts, Grambling State University's (GSU) post baccalaureate licensure program underwent a massive overhaul. In 2011, GSU, a Historically Black College/University (HBCU) in Northern Louisiana, was awarded a multi-year, Transition to Teaching grant from the U. S. Department of Education. With this federal initiative, GSU redesigned its certification-only program to offer a multi-faceted, support intensive, graduate degree program. The Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree program, designed according to specifications contained Bulletin 746 – Louisiana Standards for State Certification of School Personnel guidelines for The Master's Degree, focuses on:

a.) providing degree candidates with comprehensive, research - based education, training, professional development and support to influence quality and retention;

b.) addressing the critical need for highly qualified elementary, math, science and special education teachers and;

c.) increasing the number of traditionally underrepresented/minority groups in K-12 and STEM teaching disciplines.

To counter chronic problems in recruiting, training and retaining minority teachers in partner high – need schools and to meet the unique needs of participants, the project combines traditional pedagogical instruction with intensive, comprehensive and sustained professional development and support. Upon successful completion of program requirements, participants earn a Master of Arts in Teaching degree and are eligible for standard, state Level I teacher certification. Though an advantage of the program is that degree and certification requirements can be completed in as few as 14-16 months, teachers are provided with professional development, mentors and support all the way through the first three years of teaching.

Admission requirements. To be admitted to the MAT program, applicants have to obtain passing scores on both the Praxis I – Core Academic Skills for Educators and Praxis II – Subject Assessments. (A composite score of at least 22 on the ACT is accepted in lieu of a passing Praxis I score.) It is important to note that students who are currently enrolled at the university have access to an on-campus Praxis laboratory. In the Praxis lab students can work one-on-one with the laboratory coordinator to review materials and can take practice tests for any PRAXIS I exam using PLATO software. The Praxis Lab is also equipped with various books and paper-based practice materials for Praxis I and Praxis II exams (Grambling State University, 2017). However, the Praxis support lab is not available to non - enrolled students. Most MAT applicants are either recent college graduates or mid-career changers and therefore they cannot use this service. Consequently, a large percentage of MAT program applicants did not have access to any testing support and accordingly, had difficulty passing either one or both of the Praxis entrance exams. This was distinctly evident during the first year of offering the redesigned program. Of the more than 50 applicants, only four candidates met Praxis I and II test score requirements and were admitted to the program.

Strategy

Beginning in the spring semester of 2012, intensive and comprehensive pre-entry support, in the form of small group, Praxis test preparation workshops, was offered monthly during the fall and spring semesters and twice during each summer session. The workshops, facilitated by The Williams Consulting Group - a group of African American male educators, were offered to address testing issues and to ensure that a larger number of applicants had the tools and skills necessary to successfully meet Praxis score entry requirements. The free, Praxis workshops were open to all MAT applicants. Because many applicants were unfamiliar with the structure and format of the Praxis test, the workshops provided intensive tutoring and practice on Praxis-like test items in the areas of reading, writing and mathematics. Workshop facilitators were hands-on and worked with participants to reduce test-anxiety and increase test-taking skills.

To ensure that potential program participants were aware of this free pre-entry support, the MAT program recruiter made information about the Praxis workshops a focal point of information sessions and recruitment fairs. Information was also included in recruitment messages, print and promotional materials, and on the MAT program webpage. To further ensure that potential participants received information, workshop dates were also publicized via campus media relations and campus and community radio stations. When potential participants made inquiries (via phone or email), Praxis workshop information was provided. Moreover, the recruiter sent emails and text messages reminding applicants of upcoming workshops. Participants could attend the workshops as many times as necessary.

Data Collection and Analysis

To gauge student perceptions of appropriateness of workshop information, at the end of each session, a Likert scale questionnaire was administered to all workshop participants. The survey included questions that related specifically to the workshops' content, design, instructor/facilitator and usefulness. The survey also included one open-ended question that allowed respondents the opportunity to include additional comments or suggestions about the workshops. From 2012 – 2015 paper surveys were administered to 218 Praxis I workshop attendees and 32 Praxis II attendees.

For Likert scaled items, survey respondents could select one of the following responses: 1 = strongly disagree, 2 = disagree, 3= somewhat, 4 = agree or 5 = strongly agree. Descriptive analysis of responses was conducted to determine the number and percent of responses for question. For open-ended questions, respondent feedback regarding any aspect of the workshop was subjected to thematic analysis via close reading of the open-ended responses. Close reading is an exploratory method that allows for the detailed analysis of words and interpretation of texts (Kain, 1998). With the close reading method, several themes emerged. Thematic coding was used to categorize participant responses to the open-ended questions. On average, responses to open-ended questions were one to two sentences in length and contained varying ideas ranging from "great info" to statements about the workshops' content and feelings of preparedness for the Praxis after workshop attendance (i.e., "I feel more prepared for Praxis I"). Each response was carefully probed and broken down into single-concept phrases. Each concept constituted a separate unit of analysis. Single sentence responses that contained multiple concepts were broken down into single-concept phrases as well. For example, one response was "I am a visual learner and I enjoyed the presenter working the problem out on the dry erase board". This response was broken down into two separate phrases: a) "I am a visual learner", b) "enjoyed the presenter working the problem out on the dry erase board". This was done for all open-ended responses.

4 Findings

Praxis I Workshops

Surveys were collected from 148 of the 218 Praxis I workshop attendees which, represents a response rate of 68%. In addition, 63 of the workshop participants provided responses to the open-ended question. With regard to Likert scaled responses, it was indicated that a majority of respondents strongly agreed that the workshops included relevant content, stimulated learning, included sufficient practice and would assist the student with obtaining a passing score on the exam. Table I summarizes these data.

Table 1. Praxis I Workshop - Participant Survey Responses

Survey Item	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither Agree nor Disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1. Content was relevant.	89	7	1	0	3
2. Activities stimulated learning.	90	6	0	1	3
3. Sufficient practice.	90	5	1	0	3
4. Workshop material will be useful in Passing Praxis.	95	1	1	0	3

N=148

With regard to the open –ended question responses, thematic examination (close reading, categorizing and coding) resulted in 143 units of analysis. Upon first read, the units of analysis were sorted according to two major themes. This resulted in one category for Positive Aspects and one for Negative Aspects. With subsequent reads and as themes continued to emerge, units in the positive category were then separated into one of six sub-themed categories: Workshop Presenters, Workshop Content, Workshop Quality, Workshop Structure, Participant Satisfaction and, Workshop benefit - Praxis preparedness. Units in the negative aspects category were separated into five sub-themed categories – Workshop Presenters, Workshop Content, Workshop Structure, Workshop Materials and Workshop Logistics.

Of the 143 units of analysis, 88 were categorized as responses that were positive (Figure 1.). Of that group, most of the responses were related to workshop quality (35%) and workshop presenters (26%). With regard to workshop quality and presenters, respondents expressed that the workshop was very informative and that the instructors were knowledgeable, enthusiastic and helpful. One respondent wrote, "It is evident that presenters ere very well informed". Another respondent wrote that the workshop "provided all I needed to prepare for Praxis".
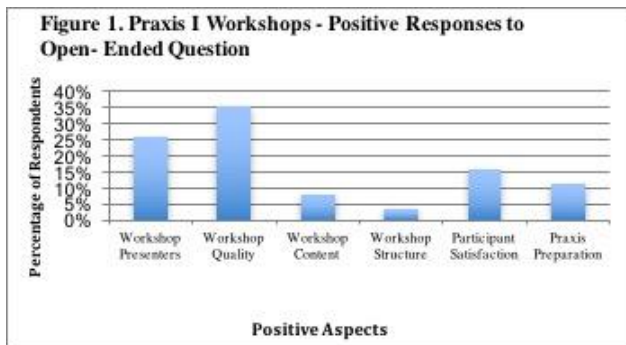

Figure 1 Praxis I Positive Responses

Of the 143 units of analysis, 55 (38%) were categorized as responses that were negative or that indicated a need for improvement (Figure 2). Of that group, most of the responses were related to workshop structure and specifically, the length of the workshop (36%). With regard to length, it was indicated that the workshops should be longer with several respondents indicating that "more time" was needed. The next highest are of need
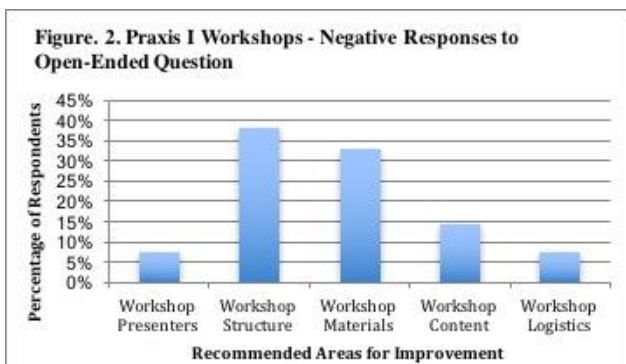

Figure 2 Praxis I Negative Responses

was workshop materials, in that of the 55 negative units of analysis, 33% addressed a need for materials. Respondents indicated that there was a need to improve the number and quality of instructional materials used in the workshop. One respondent wrote that there was a need for "clear copies to read and understand".

Praxis II Workshops

Surveys were collected from all 32 Praxis II workshop participants. In addition, 30 or the respondents provided feedback to the open-ended question. With regard to Likert scaled responses, it was indicated that a majority of respondents strongly agreed that the workshops included relevant content, stimulated learning, included sufficient practice, would be useful, and prepared them to take the Praxis II exam.

Table 2. Praxis II Workshop - Participant Survey Responses

Survey Item	Strongly Agree %	Agree %	Neither Agree nor Disagree %	Disagree %	Strongly Disagree %
1. Content was relevant.	84	6	6	0	4
2. Activities stimulated learning.	81	13	0	3	3
3. Sufficient practice.	78	13	3	3	3
4. Workshop material will be useful in Passing Praxis.	91	3	0	3	3
5. I feel prepared for Praxis II	71	6	6	0	6

$N = 32$

With regard to the open –ended question responses, thematic examination (close reading, categorizing and coding) resulted in 80 units of analysis. Upon first read, the units of analysis were sorted according to two major themes. This resulted in one category for Positive Aspects and one for Negative Aspects. Of the 80 total units of analysis, 53% were categorized as responses that were positive. With further analysis of units in the positive aspects categories, three positive sub-categories emerged: Workshop Presenters, Praxis Preparedness/ Confidence and Workshop Quality. Analyses revealed that most of the positive responses were related to workshop quality (38%) and participants' feelings of preparedness and confidence for the Praxis II (33%). With regard to workshop quality, respondents expressed that the workshop was great, informative and relevant. One respondent wrote, "My parents have spent a lot of money on Praxis preparation for me. This workshop was better than any of those workshops". With regard to feelings of preparedness, respondents indicated that the workshop helped them to prepare for the Praxis II and that they felt confident that they would obtain a passing score. One respondent wrote, "I feel confident and more prepared than I did for the other Praxis

II exams". Another respondent wrote, "I really enjoyed the workshop and feel confident in taking the Praxis II SPED examination". Figure 3 depicts the percentage of responses in each of the three positive sub-categories.
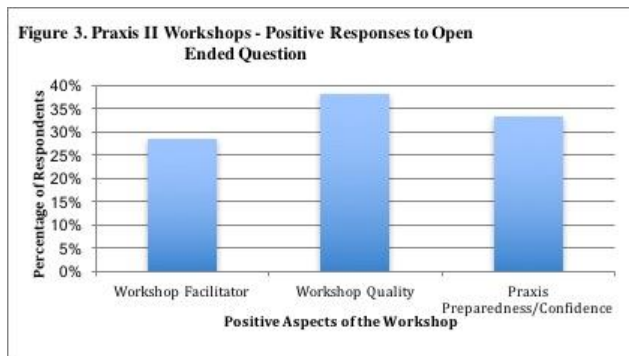

Figure 3 Praxis II Positive Responses

Of the 80 total units of analysis, 38 (48%) were categorized as responses that were negative or indicated areas needing improvement. With further analysis of units in the negative aspects category, four sub-themes emerged: Workshop Structure, Workshop Materials, Workshop Content and Workshop Logistics. Analyses revealed that the vast majority of negative responses were related to workshop structure (61%). Specifically, respondents indicated that the workshops needed to be longer, with one respondent indicating "It would be good to have them conduct a Praxis series over several weeks". Figure 4 depicts the percentage of responses in each of the four negative sub-categories.
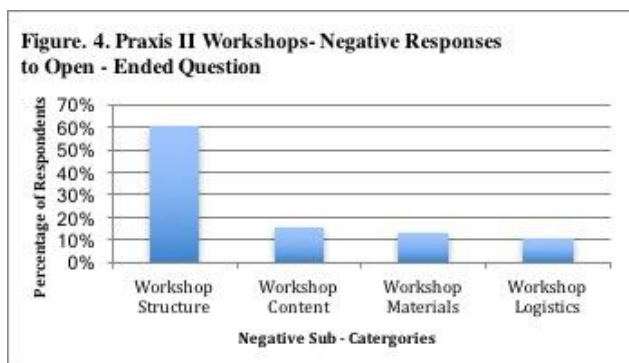

Figure 4 Praxis II Negative Responses

5   Discussion

Challenges in recruiting minorities into the teaching profession are ever-present. Many variables are cited as barriers, with passage of entrance exams being a named as a major deterrent for many potential teacher candidates (Latiker, Washington, Johns, Jackson, & Johnson, 2013; Madkins, 2011). As previously stated, like similar standardized tests, minorities tend to score lower than their white counterparts. Further, ETS confirms that the largest score gaps exist for African-Americans,

whose passing rate is at least 35% lower than White test takers (Tyler, 2011). Despite this trend, HBCUs and alternate route programs continue to lead the way in reducing the minority teacher shortage (Gursky, 2002). With regard to providing Praxis support for minority candidates, HBCUs with alternate route teacher education programs would do well to determine the areas with which minority test takers have the most difficulty and plan interventions with those as the focal point. For instance, Tyler (2011) posits that one common misperception is that minorities struggle more with constructed-response (essay) questions than with multiple-choice questions. However, according to ETS, data show that this is not entirely the case. Rather, it has been found that all races and ethnic groups perform better on constructed-response items than they do on multiple-choice items (Tyler, 2011). From this perspective, the greatest area of opportunity for improvement would be with multiple-choice questions. Therefore, interventions, whether in the form of tutorials, workshops or classes, should give ample time to assisting students with these type questions.

As financial woes are prevalent in state public institutions of higher education, particularly in HBCUs, recruitment is paramount for all programs – both undergraduate and graduate. Because of budget cuts, providing free Praxis workshops as a recruitment strategy may not be feasible. However, teacher education faculty can play an integral role in supplementing any existing Praxis preparation support that may available. In order to become familiar with exam questions and content, faculty members are encouraged to take the exams to become more knowledgeable and in turn, to design effective Praxis support (Latiker, Washington, Johns, Jackson, & Johnson, 2013;). Teacher education faculty can likely facilitate workshops prospective students at a lower cost than bringing in a Praxis Exam consulting group.

Conclusion

In an effort to positively impact the number of minority teaching candidates for the newly redesigned MAT program at GSU, Praxis workshops were conducted and offered to prospective students, as a primary recruitment strategy. This article presented an analysis of participant perceptions and satisfaction with those workshops. The free workshops were offered during the period of 2012 -2015 and participant responses to survey questions indicated an overall feeling of satisfaction with the presenters and the quality and content of the workshops. In addition, workshop participants indicated that they felt the workshops provided information that prepared them to do well on the Praxis exams. The most cited areas for improvement were with the length of the workshops and the instructional materials used.

It is important to note that since offering the Praxis workshops as a recruitment strategy, enrollment in the MAT has continued to increase –from only 4 students enrolled in the first year to 18 and 21 students enrolled in the second and third year, respectively. In addition, students have indicated that Praxis preparation workshops were helpful and one of the program's pre-entry supports that influenced enrolling in GSU's MAT program (Sivakumaran, 2014). The workshops are now an integral component of the program's recruitment and support efforts. Additional summer workshops for those applicants with summer test dates have also been included. Survey responses will continue to be used to refine and prepare future Praxis workshops.

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