Diversifying Teacher Education: Fostering Inclusivity through Recruiting Underrepresented Students at Tennessee Tech University

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Abstract

In the face of a swiftly evolving student demographic marked by increased racial, ethnic, and linguistic diversity, the teaching workforce is undergoing a concerning decline in diversity. Teachers in Tennessee are not adequately representative of the students they serve. Extensive literature suggests that students are more likely to thrive academically when exposed to teachers from diverse racial backgrounds. This diversity gap is evident in the teacher preparatory program at Tennessee Tech University, where enrollment of underrepresented minorities in the College of Education is statistically lower than in other university departments. To address this disparity and with the support of a faculty research grant, the researchers initiated a proactive approach. They developed specialized campus tour activities tailored for minority middle and high school students, establishing partnerships with local schools to attract prospective attendees. Taking on the logistical and financial responsibilities of bringing students to the university, the researchers organized engaging sessions with faculty and staff, guiding the students on a comprehensive walking tour of the university facilities. Upon arrival and departure, the students completed a Qualtrics survey, delving into aspects such as campus life, the application process, and overall satisfaction with the university's commitment to fostering a diverse student culture. This article aims to share valuable experiences, research findings, and identify opportunities for future endeavors focused on increasing the enrollment of minority student educators in the College of Education at Tennessee Tech University.

1   Introduction

The teacher shortage in America is widespread, and the shortage of teachers from "underrepresented or underserved groups" is even higher (Ravenell, 2018; Sutcher et al., 2019). Research shows that there is a need for higher education institutions to address diversity issues as leaders of these institutions consider their mission and vision to increase diversity on their various campuses (Barnett, 2020). Overall, teachers in Tennessee do not represent the students they serve (Ravenell et al., 2018). When considering that students are more likely to succeed when exposed to teachers of diverse races (Aragon, 2018; Gottfried, et al., 2022; Philips, 2019), the researchers set out to address this issue by looking at our own college's recruitment for diverse teacher candidates and find out what barriers or obstacles were affecting our low numbers.

The student Profiles and Enrollment Trends report for our College of Education from 2018 to 2022 showed that the admission of students from underrepresented groups has been consistently low. Considering the university's proximity to the Metro Nashville Public School district, named "the most diverse district in Tennessee"

(Metro Nashville Public Schools, 2024)," more must be done to ensure diverse teacher representation for our students. In 2021, Tennessee took a significant step towards addressing the problem by passing the "Educator Diversity Policy," a beacon of hope that sought to address issues plaguing TN schools, such as the lack of diverse educators (Tennessee General Assembly, 2021). This policy brings a wave of optimism and potential solutions to the table. With teacher recruitment of diverse candidates at the forefront of our concerns, we sought to research the causations and possible solutions to the problem. To do this, we wrote a grant for faculty research within our university and were selected to be funded. We wondered if students just weren't aware of all the really interesting STEM-related things that our Education students get to study, participate in, and be a part of, so we thought we would bring different middle school and high school groups to campus to show them the facilities and the sorts of learning that our Education students use. We wondered if students were just bored when they thought about Education as a career.

2   Methods

We used mixed methods to gather data and analyze it, gathering both qualitative and quantitative data. We used a Qualtrics survey with questions for the students to answer. Questions 1 through 13 and question 16 were questions that simply needed to be selected from a list of responses, giving us quantitative data and questions 14 and 15 were open ended questions and so students could opt to write a response or not respond at all, giving us qualitative data. These surveys were adapted by the researchers from a questionnaire given to visiting students in the recruiting office of teacher education. It was given surface validity when experts in the field reviewed it before it was submitted to the Institutional Review Board to gain approval within the University. Next, we reached out for support letters from gatekeepers in each participating school district. Once everything was documented properly and students actually came to visit campus, we had students complete the survey the first time as a 'pre-visit' set of answers and then after the students had visited, we had the students complete the survey again as a 'post-visit'.

The grant took a proactive approach, seeking to bring middle and high school students from underrepresented populations from four different Middle TN high schools that had a significant number of underrepresented youth enrolled. On four different days in the fall of 2023, we brought each group to campus to spend a day touring our College of Education, participating in STEM activities with the College of Engineering, participating in the College of Education's Learning Resource Center's 3D equipment and virtual reality lab, and meeting with Tennessee Tech's Intercultural Center director and student mentors. Further, our College of Education's Dean or Associate Dean initially welcomed the students to campus and our College of Education recruiter spoke to the students about admissions, scholarships, financial aid and more general information about what life is like on campus for College of Education students. We also invested in some 'swag' to encourage our university name. Students received t-shirts, pens, stickers, sunglasses, frisbees and a backpack bag to carry things in. Students filled out an anonymous survey at the beginning of the visit and again at the end of the visit. We aimed to answer whether this initiative of bringing diverse middle and high school students to the Tennessee Tech Campus would influence their decision to consider education as a career and to apply to our College of Education. To collect data, we used surveys and open-ended questions.

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3   Results

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Unfortunately, our findings gleaned little information from the perspectives of underrepresented students. Even though we requested underrepresented populations for these visits, participants in our study were mainly Caucasian. Further, while we were hopeful that schools would send students who had at least some interest in education or who were undecided about a career, education was selected as the students' third preferred major. The schools that participated did not have Career Technical Education programs in education, which could have influenced the findings. Also, not all of the schools that participated had established extracurricular teacher clubs. Since the students' answers to the surveys pointed to their perceived importance of having an adult mentor in their specific career interest area, we found the lack of programming in education at these high schools to be at odds with the current teacher shortage. One of the schools had even gotten rid of and education Career Technical Education program in favor of a cosmetology Career Technical Education program, trading a professional career preparation program for a non-professional career preparation program. However, there were some affirming results for the education career field. The surveys revealed that 85% of those students polled agreed that they could impact an entire community if they became a teacher, revealing how these young students recognize the importance a teacher can make in a community. The overwhelming majority of students (98.5%) agreed that the College of Education had quality facilities for its college students to prepare for the field of education in, and 69.5% of the students agreed that something they saw or heard during their visit on campus made them more interested in teaching. Not surprisingly, the surveys revealed that most students felt money was the greatest barrier to attending college. Of 117 answers to the open ended question, "What potential barriers do you have to entering college?", 53 identified money as a barrier. Student surveys also revealed that most students (42 of 103 responses) thought current teacher salaries were the greatest barrier to going into the field of education. Finally, more female than male participants were interested in becoming teachers. There were 32 females as opposed to 6 males. One respondent preferred not to select a gender.

One other thing the surveys revealed were that the younger the student, the less likely they were to have a focus on a particular major, specifically 9th and 10th graders selecting education as a favored major numbered 7 while 11th and 12th graders selecting education as a favored major numbered 32. Affirming what we had believed, 96% of all students surveyed believed that being mentored by an adult role model who looked like them was important.

4   Limitations

While there was specific information we learned from our research, there were some limitations such as the fact that we had asked the schools involved (who had been selected for their significant number of underrepresented students) to send underrepresented populations to visit campus, but the majority of students from all schools were white. Another limitation was the fact that none of the schools we partnered with had a Career Technical Education (CTE) program in Education, nor did they have formal teacher clubs as extracurricular activities. In our research, students strongly indicated the need for adult role models so that students can have information about the careers they select, but without CTE programs or extracurricular activities, the students will not have been exposed to these adult mentors. Finally, we were interested in recruiting students who might have some interest in education as a major, but most students indicated an interest in Engineering, Nursing or Business.

5 Recommendations

More research needs to be done with larger populations of underrepresented middle and high schools and their students to better understand diverse perspectives on majoring in education and majoring in education specifically in our College of Education. Research should aim to gather information regarding specific factors that would encourage students to enter the field of education instead of keeping the students from entering the field so the factors can be used within our college of education, but also so we can share with others what would influence students to choose education. We also recommend that pre and post surveys be linked to gather more quantifiable information. We further recommend that school districts consider supporting Future Teachers of America clubs and instituting Career Technical Education pathways in the field of Education, both so students are exposed to the field of Education as a career and so that they have opportunities to spend time with role models in the field of Education. More broadly, school district administrators and boards of education could advocate for better teacher salaries, since this was identified as the greatest barrier to entering the field by all races of students.

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