Adventures of a Successful, Collaborative Partnership in Teacher Education

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Palm Beach Community College (PBCC), Florida Atlantic University (FAU) and the School District of Palm Beach County have taken a holistic approach in meeting the district’s needs for highly-qualified teachers while also meeting the needs of the county’s diverse student population. They have partnered on several initiatives over the past two years including:

♦ **Secondary Teacher Project (STP) 2+2:** SACS has recently approved a 2+2 in mathematics and biology teacher education. FAU has housed a coordinator on PBCC’s Lake Worth Campus where they offer the upper level coursework. The three institutions collaborate on recruitment strategies.

♦ **Transition to Teaching (TTT) Program:** FAU works closely with PBCC’s TTT Program offering the upper level methods courses on PBCC’s Lake Worth Campus, thus allowing participants to remain in cohorts as they progress through the program. A TTT staff member is housed at the School District.

♦ **Paraprofessional Retention Outreach (PRO) Program:** FAU offers the introductory course to their ESE teacher education program on PBCC’s Lake Worth Campus as part of PBCC’s PRO Program.

♦ **Florida Future Educators of America (FFEA) Chapters:** PBCC, FAU and the School District each have FFEA chapters and for the past two years FAU has planned an FFEA Conference which has been co-hosted by PBCC and attended by both high school and college students.

♦ **Educator Advisors’ Annual Meetings:** FAU and PBCC education advisors met for the second year this summer to discuss advising for education students along with legislative and articulation issues. Together, they have developed articulation advising sheets to simplify and streamline the advising process.

Faculty Curriculum Collaboration: Education faculty from both institutions have met and will continue to meet to discuss articulation of coursework, textbooks, course content, assessments, and observations to help provide a seamless transition for students.
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Rarely does a discussion on teacher education begin without including a look at the impending teacher shortage. Nationally, it is predicted that by the year 2009, with baby boomers retiring and the expanding population, there will be a teacher shortage with numbers as high as 2.4 million; the number is staggering (Hussar, 2003). This problem is only exacerbated by new and stringent requirements such as those in *No Child Left Behind* legislation, which tell us we must have *highly-qualified teachers* in our classrooms by 2006 (U.S. Department of Education NCLB, 2003). It is expected that approximately 20 percent of newly hired teachers will leave after the first three years and 50 percent will leave after five (May and Hawk, 2001). Factored into the reasons for this teacher exodus are: low and noncompetitive salaries, lower salaries than other new bachelor degree recipients (NCES, 1993); lack of initiatives for professional development; lack of support; increasing classroom demands; and tight federal requirements.

To address the dilemma of the shrinking teacher workforce, educational institutions have had to be innovative in designing programs to fit the needs of the diverse student population, many of who are returning to college to prepare for a second or third career. Additionally, because so many teacher education students begin their education at community colleges, it becomes increasingly important that the transition between institutions is as seamless as possible. Partnerships among school districts, community colleges, and universities appear to be an obvious answer—with each institution coming to the table with meaningful discussion and institutional strengths—
knowledgeable faculty, flexibility, creativity, and research. However, due to competition and territorial issues, these collaborations are difficult and oftentimes unsuccessful.

A report from a National Science Foundation Workshop (1998), *Investing in Tomorrow’s Teachers: The Integral Role of Two-year Colleges in the Science and Mathematics Preparation of Teachers* emphasizes that in order to smoothly transition teacher education students from the community college to the university, these institutions must collaborate by improving “transfer programs, partnerships, and professional development opportunities” (p. 14). This report suggests several ways in which the institutions can work together to increase the teacher workforce, among them:

“1) Work together to develop two-year college SMET programs that provide seamless transition to teacher preparation programs at four-year institutions;

2) Coordinate student advising for prospective teachers between two-year and four-year institutions concerning the transfer of course, financial support, and program requirements;

3) Reduce the cultural barriers and misconceptions between two-year colleges and four-year institutions by encouraging the exchange of faculty and facilitating SMET topical workshops; 4) Increase the number of partnerships between two-year colleges and four-year institutions focusing on joint SMET program development and dissemination; and 5) Promote joint professional education activities involving student groups between two-year colleges and four-year institutions (p. 14-15).

For the past two years, the School District, PBCC, and FAU have done just this. They have collaborated on numerous initiatives in order to streamline the process of
articulation of students from one institution to the other while increasing the number of highly qualified teachers in Palm Beach County.

The Partnership Adventure: The Players

The School District of Palm Beach County covers 2,578 square miles, and in landmass is the largest county east of the Mississippi River. Not only is it the fourth largest county in Florida, but it also the fourteenth largest in the nation. As a matter of fact, this county is larger than Delaware and Rhode Island combined! More than 156,000 public school students attend the 92 elementary schools, 26 middle schools, 22 high schools, 29 alternative schools, and 16 charter schools throughout the district.

PBCC is located in Palm Beach County, Florida, with campuses in Boca Raton, Belle Glade, Lake Worth, and Palm Beach Gardens. The college serves more than 42,000 students and is among the top producers of associate’s degrees in the nation, ranking 12th out of more than 1,100 community, junior, and two-year colleges. In 2002, PBCC established its Institute of Teacher Education to address teacher needs.

One of Florida’s 11 public universities, FAU has an enrollment of approximately 25,000 graduate and undergraduate students. FAU has an unusually large service area comprising six counties spread over 100 miles along Florida's southeast coast with campuses located in Boca Raton, Davie, Fort Lauderdale, Jupiter, and Port St. Lucie. The university is organized into eight colleges that offer 61 undergraduate degree programs and 75 graduate degree programs. FAU accomplishes its mission primarily through its teachers and researchers, its undergraduate educational programs, its graduate and professional offerings, and its linkages to other educational institutions and the community.
To meet the educational needs of the growing population in Palm Beach County, these three educational institutions have come together in an authentic partnership which has resulted in open discussions, streamlined articulation, and increased support and training for teacher candidates.

Developing Seamless Transitions

While some states, such as Missouri, rely on state guidance and agreements between institutions to help students transfer from one institution to another, others, such as Florida and Maryland, have guaranteed the transfer of full credits from the state-prescribed two-year degree to the four-year degree legislatively (Lindstrom & Rasch, 2003). In Palm Beach County, Florida, PBCC, and FAU have worked to further streamline this articulation for mathematics and science teacher education students. In January 2004, the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS) approved FAU’s proposal to house a teacher education program at PBCC’s Lake Worth Campus, known as the Secondary Teacher Project (STP 2+2). With this agreement, PBCC supplies on campus office space to an FAU coordinator who is responsible for program coordination. Students are now able to take upper division courses for mathematics or biology teacher education programs at their community college campus rather than to travel to the north and south ends of the county.

Coordinating Student Advising for Prospective Teachers

Although the articulation from an associate in arts degree to a baccalaureate degree is already in place for public (and some private) institutions in Florida through a state-wide course numbering system, PBCC has worked with FAU to improve the transfer process with regular meetings between education advisors. In June 2004,
education advisors from each institution met for the second annual education advisors’ meeting where they discussed articulation, advising, testing, coursework, and legislative issues in teacher education. Through these meetings, advisors have become more aware of teacher education activities and have formed a subcommittee responsible for developing a general education prerequisite sheet for teacher education, thus eliminating the guesswork in advising students.

Reducing the Cultural Barriers and Misconceptions

In a collaborative effort to ensure education students receive proper and consistent training, appropriate course content, and practical experiences essential to becoming an effective teacher, PBCC and FAU education faculty and staff met during spring 2004 to discuss:

1) textbook content and materials, 2) classroom observation requirements and procedures, 3) student assessment, and 4) activities that enhance learning. This was a preliminary meeting. It was agreed that the group would continue discussion through email, and an agenda was set and plans made to meet on a semiannual basis thereafter.

Faculty members from the three institutions have also collaborated on PBCC’s Paraprofessional Retention Outreach (PRO) Program. The PRO Program was developed through funding from the U.S. Department of Education to help the school district’s paraprofessionals increase their skills working with limited English proficient students while also helping them to meet NCLB requirements. An advisory committee consisting of staff from the three institutions meets monthly to discuss issues facing the paraprofessionals and better ways to communicate the program resources to them. In addition to taking PBCC coursework toward an associate’s degree, participants may also
take an introductory class for the ESE bachelor’s degree which is held through FAU on the PBCC campus.

Increasing the Number of Partnerships Focusing on Joint SMET Program Development

In 2002, PBCC was awarded a U. S. Department of Education Transition to Teaching grant. Its purpose is to transition professionals who hold bachelor’s degree, but not teaching degrees, into teaching careers. To do this, PBCC has created a program that works closely with the PBC School District and FAU—a quality program that trains, supports, and retains teachers in critical need areas in high-need schools.

In Florida, these career changers, who have met subject area requirement, can transition into teaching careers through either a school district’s in-service program or by completing five education courses, including three methods courses. PBCC, FAU, and the PBC School District work together to deliver the instruction for the five required education courses on the PBCC central (Lake Worth) campus, thus enabling program participants to remain in cohorts as they progress through the certification process.

Promoting Joint Professional Education Activities Involving Student Groups

This year, FAU held its second Teacher Education Day, sponsored jointly by FAU and PBCC. Approximately 200 high school, community college, and university students attended, many of them members of Florida Future Educators of America (FFEA). The common goal of this event was to obtain excellence in professional development for these students and to encourage those considering teaching as a career to continue in that direction. The event began with a keynote speaker followed by a series of sessions facilitated by both FAU and PBCC faculty.
The Key to Success

Partnerships are not easy and are often very trying. Their success depends upon those involved and the commitment of the institutions. From the very start, there was a shared vision between the PBC School District, FAU, and PBCC to meet the needs for teachers in the Palm Beach County area through a collaborative partnership. In fact, one of the three TTT Program staff members is located at the school district office, and an FAU coordinator is located at PBCC. Each institution has designated a contact person to act as a liaison to better communicate and collaboratively plan a course of action for each new initiative.

As part of the institutional commitment, partnerships become more substantial when all the players have funds committed to the partnership. In this case, the school district funds additional scholarships for the paraprofessionals through Title I and Multicultural Education. FAU pays for the 2+2 coordinator located at the PBCC campus, and PBCC has funding through two U.S. Department of Education grants along with additional funds from the Community Foundation and College Board.

Finally, for a successful partnership, the individuals involved, not only the institutions, have to bring with them a genuine commitment and love for collaboration.

Conclusion

It is predicted that by 2009, the teacher shortage across the nation will reach numbers as high as 2.4 million (Hussar, 2003). Indeed, Palm Beach County faces severe shortages as it races to train new teachers to replace those who leave while at the same time needing more teachers to meet the needs of the ever-increasing student population in Southeast Florida. PBCC, FAU, and the School District of Palm Beach County have
taken a holistic approach in meeting these demands by pooling their strengths and resources by partnering on several teacher education initiatives. Programs such as the Secondary Teacher Project 2+2, Transition to Teaching, Paraprofessional Retention Outreach and the articulation between advisors and faculty involve on-going communication and collaboration. PBCC, FAU, and the School District of Palm Beach County have chosen to form an authentic partnership that provides support and a variety of exciting learning opportunities for new teacher candidates. This authentic partnership has proven to be a step in the right direction toward lessening the teacher shortage.
References


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