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Diversifying the Professions: Using Collaboration and Distance Education to Grow Our Own in Northeast Nebraska

Abstract

Faced with a dramatic shift in population demographics and a 1000% increase in the number of English Language Learner elementary school children, four colleges and universities and seven public school districts have joined forces to increase the number minority, bilingual, and ESL endorsed teachers in northeast Nebraska. This panel- workshop session will discuss the project from multiple perspectives. Public school representatives reveal their challenges in serving a largely non-English speaking stude body and their difficulties recruiting minority teachers to rural Nebraska. Higher education representatives explore the barriers and opportunities of articulating courSE over a five year period and delivering the program to a cohort via multiple distance learning technologies. Students in the program discuss the challenges ofbeingfull-til teacher aides, engaged community and family members, ani! full-time nontraditional, first generation, minority students in an exclusive program.

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Faced with a dramatic shift in population demographics and a 1000% increase iJ number of English Language Learner (ELL) elementary school children, four CI and universities and seven public school districts have joined forces to increase number of minority, bilingual, and ESL endorsed teachers in northeast Nebraska. A coalition of higher education institutions including the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Wayne State College, Northeast Community College, and Central Community Columbus solicited a $1.97 million dollar grant from the U. S. Department of Education to work with seven public school districts in northeast Nebraska. Targeting minority or bilingual teacher aides, the project is delivering a full undergraduate education resulting in teacher certification via distance education. Students are grouped in three hub sites and move as a cohort through the five year elementary education program. Students continue working as

paraprofessionals in elementary classrooms and experience practica and student teaching as an ongoing part of their educational and professional experience.

The target school districts include South Sioux City, Wakefield, Schuyler, Columbus Public, Columbus Lakeview, Madison and Norfolk. Together they serve approximately 2500 ELL elementary children. These schools have experienced a shift from a nearly 100% Caucasian student body in 1990 to as high as 85% ELL student body today. Yet the limited turn over in teachers and lack of minority Nebraska certified applicants has resulted in a professional staff which does not represent the school population.

This project has funding for 30 students to earn their undergraduate degree and teaching certificate. In addition, the 30 students and an additional 30 in-service teachers will earn ESL endorsements. Because it is such a large program in a relatively short time period, the four higher education institutions agreed to pool their resources. After determining that UNL would be the lead institution and would ultimately award the undergraduate degree, course transfer guides and articulation agreements assured that all UNL degree requirements would be met. Students begin at one of the two community colleges and will earn an Associate of Arts degree after the first two years of the project. Wayne State College and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln are sharing in the delivery of the upper division courses. One of the requirements of the program is that students continue to work as paraprofessionals in the target schools despite being full-time students. Nearly all of the students have had to work to develop their English reading and writing skills as well as refresh their math skills.

To aid in retention of students in the project, a number of supports have been built into the grant. All tuition, fees, and books are provided for students. Because many of the courses will be delivered via the Internet, each student was provided a laptop computer and home Internet access. Each student is also paired with an in-service teacher who serves as a mentor. The mentors provide support and encouragement as well as tutoring and guidance in the classroom. A project-community liaison works with the students in each site to help them cope with the many demands they face. And the project director works directly with both the students and the higher education institutions.

This project has the potential to impact at many levels. The seven local school districts will benefit initially by having a stable labor pool of highly trained paraprofessionals for a minimum of five years as the students progress in the program. After the students graduate, the local **schools will** have a **pool of applicants** of color when teacher vacancies occur. The ELL children will benefit by having more teachers who have been trained in ESL strategies and techniques. This is expected to increase the academic achievement of ELL students. The higher education institutions will be impacted in their ability to train future teacher education students to work with ELL students and improve their ability to deliver distance education courses. It is expected that the students in the program will grow in their leadership capacity and serve as role models for their families and their communities.

Vicky Jones is Extended Education Coordinator for the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in northeast Nebraska. Ms. Jones promotes UNL distance education offerings and provides support for students in the 28-county northeast district. Ms. Jones has initiated several grant funded projects based on the institutional partnership in the Lifelong Learning Center. Ms. Jones

earned her BS and MSE degrees from Wayne State College and is currently pursuing an Ed.D. through UNL.

Dr. William Lopez is a lecturer in the department of Curriculum and Instruction in Teachers College, UNL. Dr. Lopez coordinates English as a Second Language education at UNL and is actively involved in four federally funded grants to strengthen ESL education in the state of Nebraska. Dr. Lopez earned (degrees).

Donna Niemeyer is the Dean of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences at Northeast Community College, where she has been employed since 1984. She collaborates with both WSC and UNL on numerous articulated transfer classes within her division. Mrs. Niemeyer served as NECC grant manager of a 2002-03 Phi Theta Kappa project: Preparing Tomorrow's Science and Math Teachers. She coordinated the development of the ESL Bridge to Credit Classes program, and is responsible for its management. She served on the Multicultural Initiatives Committee at the College for four years.. Mrs. Niemeyer holds a Masters degree in Community Service Counseling from Wayne State College.

Karin Rieger received both her bachelors' degree in education and master's degree in adult education from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. Karin currently is the Associate Dean of Extended Learning Services at Central Community College in Columbus and has 16 years of experience coordinating instructional and student support services for students taking courses at off campus locations. She is serving as the CCC campus project coordinator with the Northeast Nebraska Para-professional Career Ladder Grant. Karin is very active in several civic and community organizations in Columbus She is currently serving as Chairperson of Leadership Columbus, a Commodore for the Columbus Area Chamber of Commerce and is on the Steering Committee for Taste of Columbus. Karin received the Outstanding Adult Educator from the Adult Continuing Education Association of Nebraska in 1999 and the Peter D. Rush Spirit of Volunteering Award in 1996. Karin resides in Columbus with her husband, Doug and her two children, Kyle and Jared.

Esperanza Villalobos received her Diploma as Kindergarten Teacher from the Escuela Experimental de Maestros de Colotlan, Jalisco in Mexico in 1987. She immigrated to the United States in 1988, married and had four children before earning her GED in 200(Along with her family she moved to Madison, Nebraska in 2002 and began working paraprofessional for the Madison Public School system. Mrs. Villalobos continues to work full time as a paraprofessional in addition to her studies as a full time student working toward a bachelor's degree in education through the Northeast Nebraska Paraeducator Career Ladder program.