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Recruiting and Retaining Students of Color for Careers in Education

Jennifer Robinson

Montclair State University

“Teachers of color are able to serve as ‘culture brokers’ who may assist in bringing cultural expertise to the teaching profession.”

The need to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of the United States' teaching force has been documented widely (Bailey, 1996; Villegas, 1996). This need is further heightened by statistics which suggest that by the year 2050, racial and ethnic minorities will number more than half of the school-age population in our nation's schools (Villegas, 1996). The number of ethnic/racial minority teachers and prospective teachers in U.S. schools has declined slowly and steadily since 1990, such that it is projected that by the year 2000, the number of minority teachers may be a mere 5 percent of the total national teaching population.

The situation is further complicated by the declining numbers of non-White students attending college. Poor and inadequate schooling accounts for why minority communities graduate fewer students who are prepared for college, much less qualified to enter the teaching profession. College admission standards, many of which have been raised, do not take into account talented students of color who do not meet traditional entrance criteria. Disadvantaged students who have potential are often discouraged when faced with reduced or discontinued financial aid opportunities due to state and federal cutbacks.

Other factors which account for the underrepresentation of people of color in teaching include the inability of teacher education programs to attract and graduate students of color. At present, teachers' low salaries and difficult work conditions are deterrents to individuals who might consider teaching as a career option. Many students of color who enter college have broader opportunities and incentives to enter fields other than education, thereby making the pool of eligible minority teacher applicants smaller. Hence, there are multiple barriers to the recruitment and retention of persons of color into the teaching profession.

This crisis has serious implications for the future of education and for our society in general. First, a dearth of persons of color in positions of authority in our schools casts a myth of racial and ethnic inferiority in the minds of White and non-White students. Teachers of color are necessary to serve as role models for all students who desire to participate in a democratic society (Villegas, 1996).

Second, increasing the numbers of minority teachers will provide inside perspective and expertise in the area of cultural understanding in what will become the largely ethnic, racially-mixed school systems of the future. Teachers of color are able to help students of color understand the political and social consequences of rejecting academic achievement

as a reasonable personal life choice (Villegas, 1996).

Teachers of color are able to serve as "culture brokers" who may assist in bringing cultural expertise to the teaching profession. Finally, as families of color interact with schools, a racial and ethnically diverse teaching force can assist in the mutual adaptation of home and school environments (Ascher, 1987).

In response to the call to recruit highly qualified teachers of color, the Newark Board of Education, Newark Teachers Union, and Montclair State University established the Newark Scholars in Teaching Program, designed to establish Future Educators Clubs in schools throughout the city. Future Educators Clubs aim to assist Newark students in making the transition from high school to college, and from college into teaching.

The mission of the project is to interest middle and high school students in a teaching career by providing information about the field of education and opportunities for first-hand experiences related to teaching. The project promotes accomplishment by supporting high academic standards, positive self-image, and the demonstration of leadership inside and outside of school. Beginning in sixth grade, students in these clubs participate in a variety of assisting activities with teacher mentors in their classrooms. Mentors also engage students in discussions and outings related to the teaching profession. Future educators who rank in the top 25 percent of their high school graduating class are eligible to become Newark Scholars in Teaching at Montclair State University.

A competitive four-year scholarship is offered to one graduate of a Newark high school who has participated in Future Educators to pursue a major in teaching at Montclair State. Through foundation and university support, full tuition, and room and board waivers have been made available to a limited number of students since 1991.

On campus, the minority Teacher Candidates Organization provides ongoing support, encouragement, inspiration, and information regarding life on a predominantly White campus and the Teacher Education Program. Students meet to network and hear speakers who offer advice and counsel regarding college and the teaching profession. Monthly meetings provide students with a relaxed and friendly environment in which new relationships can develop around academic and career concerns. The professional focus helps students identify specific areas in need of personal improvement. It is in this atmosphere that students develop the skills to negotiate the rigorous and complex teacher education program.

Minority teacher education candidates also volunteer their time by engaging in university-related activities. They encourage visiting middle and high school students from urban school districts to perform well in school. These undergraduates serve as vital role models and they are well-received by younger peers.

Most recently, this continuing pilot project has received additional attention and funding

support from the College of Education and Human Services to expand and further advance the mission to recruit people of color into teaching. A task force, consisting of school and university personnel and students, has been established to oversee the institutionalization of this and other recruitment and retention initiatives. In addition, one faculty member has been granted release time during the next two years to guide the progress of the task force and to oversee implementation of recommendations.

As a member site in John Goodlad's national project for the simultaneous renewal of teacher education and the schools—The Agenda for Teacher Education in a Democracy—and as a member of the newly expanded Holmes Partnership, it is expected that Montclair State University will provide leadership to other institutions of higher education that are serious about addressing this critical issue.

PRESENTER

Jennifer Robinson is Assistant Professor of Education at Montclair State University in New Jersey. She has been active in various aspects of school reform and renewal throughout her career, which began in the Chicago Public Schools. As a research associate with the Center for Policy Research and the Institute for Urban and Minority education, she conducted evaluation research on school improvement projects in New York City and Newark, N.J., public schools. She has been a consultant to schools and districts in New York, New Jersey, and Connecticut in the areas of parent involvement, multicultural education, simultaneous renewal, and curriculum change. Her work in teacher education includes serving on the Advisory Board for the National Teacher Training Institute for Math, Science, and Technology (NTTI), and for 13/WNET in New York. Among other responsibilities, she is Co-Chair of the University Committee on Inclusion of Persons with Disabilities at Montclair State. Her most recent work involves her assignment as Director of Minority Teacher Recruitment.