

Promoting the Retention of Prospective Teachers Through a Cohort for College Freshmen

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This article describes a cohort of freshmen planning to become teachers at Montclair State University (MSU) in New Jersey. The goals of the cohort are to identify freshmen, especially students of color, with an interest in becoming teachers, to provide them with a supportive community as they make the transition from high school to college, and to increase their retention at the university and in teacher education as a result of this early support. A study of the cohort highlights six salient elements--identifying prospective teachers in their first year in college, creating a sense of community that supports them in the transition into higher education, supporting their adjustment to the university environment, building confidence in their academic skills, socializing them into the teaching profession, and mentoring students who feel competing pressures from home, peers, and school.

Two factors are intensifying the need for new teachers. First, large numbers of teachers will soon reach retirement age (Hussar, 1999). Second, the number of students is increasing at unprecedented rates. The student population is projected to surpass 48 million by 2008, up from 43.5 million in 1993 (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 1997). The growing number of students of color is also heightening the need for teachers of color. They can be role models for children of color (King, 1993), serve as resources for colleagues (Villegas & Lucas, 2002), and facilitate connections between home and school for students of color (Gay, 2000; Irvine, 1990; Robinson, 1997). However, the demographics of the U.S. teaching force contrast sharply with those of the K-12 student population. In the 1995-96 school year, for example, students of color comprised 35.2% of U.S. elementary and secondary public school enrollments, while people of color constituted only 9.3% of the teaching force (NCES, 1997).

In this article, we describe an initiative to identify college freshmen with an interest in teaching--especially students of color--and to retain them through graduation and entry into a teaching career. College freshmen constitute a readily

accessible pool of potential teachers. Nevertheless, it can be difficult to attract and retain such students in teacher education. Freshman and sophomore students may turn their attention to professions other than teaching if they receive no encouragement or support from the institution to become teachers prior to declaring a major (Hood & Parker, 1991) or if they have not taken required courses when it is time to enter the teacher education program. If they do not find a clear direction by their second or third year in the university, they may drop out altogether.

Attracting and retaining students of color in teacher education can be especially difficult (Villegas, 1997) for a variety of reasons: competition by other academic programs for students of color (Kirby & Hudson, 1993); the challenging conditions of teaching, particularly in urban schools (AACTE, 1987); the relatively low salaries of teachers (Archer, 2000); and increasing parental pressures on many students to choose other professions that have higher status and salaries (Gordon, 1994). In addition, many students of color may leave the university before reaching their sophomore year if they receive no support in the difficult transition from high school to college (Rendón & Garza, 1996; Tinto, 1987). Especially if they are among the first in their families to attend college, they may find that becoming part of the college culture distances them from their family and friends, resulting in stress on their relationships and on their own sense of identity (Gándara, 1995; London, 1989; Rendón, 1992). These and other factors contribute to the attrition rate for students of color in higher education (Swail & Holmes, 2000; Tinto, 1987).

A cohort--that is, a group of students who share activities and courses over some period of time--can serve as a mechanism for supporting and retaining prospective teachers of all racial/ethnic backgrounds. When students enter a college or university as part of a group, they have a built-in support system that can make a big difference in their adjustment to and success in the institution. Such a support system can be especially critical for non-traditional students (Arends, Clemson, & Henkelman, 1992; Villegas & Clewell, 1998). The ongoing interactions with

one or more faculty mentors and cohort facilitators can ensure that students receive needed academic, social, and personal support. When they are part of a cohort group, students of color, in particular, can feel a sense of belonging they might not otherwise feel, especially on predominantly White campuses.

Cohort groups would seem to be a promising means for bringing students into teacher education and providing support to keep them in teacher education through graduation. While a cohort structure for teachers entering a teacher education program in their second or third year of college offers these benefits to participants, a cohort that begins even earlier--when students enter the university--can provide critical support in students' transition into higher education and potentially contribute to their retention in the university and in teacher education.

A Freshman Cohort for Prospective Teachers

This article presents findings from a study of a cohort for freshmen with an interest in becoming teachers at Montclair State University (MSU) in northern New Jersey. The short-term goal of the cohort is to identify freshmen with an interest in becoming teachers, especially students of color, and provide them with a supportive community as they make the transition from high school to college. The long-term goal is to increase their retention at the university and in teacher education as a result of this early support.

MSU enrolls approximately 10,000 undergraduates and 3,000 graduates in numerous programs. In Fall 1999, when the Freshman Cohort was initiated, 61% of the undergraduates were White and 32% were students of color. (Seven percent of undergraduates did not identify their race/ethnicity.) Many students come from largely White suburbs. Approximately half of all undergraduate students go on to graduate from MSU within six years, but only about 29% of African Americans and 18% of Latino students graduate within that amount of time. From 15% to 18% of students admitted to the undergraduate preservice teacher education programs are students of color.

Two groups of students have now participated in the Freshman Cohort; one group entered in

Fall 1999 (to be referred to here as Cohort 1) and the other in Fall 2001 (Cohort 2). (Because of personnel changes, there was no cohort in 2000-2001.) The Freshman Cohort was implemented in Fall 1999 as an initiative of the Teacher Education Advocacy Center (TEAC), established in 1997 to promote the recruitment and retention of students from racial/ethnic minority groups in teacher education. Students who in their applications expressed an interest in teaching were invited to participate through a letter mailed the spring prior to their freshman year. Other freshmen were subsequently recruited to ensure racial/ethnic diversity. Thirty-six students (18 in each cohort) have participated--25 females and 11 males. One student was 17 years old, and the rest were 18 or 19. The proportion of people of color in the cohort (50% for Cohort 1 and 56% for Cohort 2) was considerably higher than that in the teacher education program overall. Seventeen were White, nine were Hispanic, eight were African American, one was Asian, and one was East Indian.

There are two central components of the cohort. First, students register for the same section of each of three courses: Psychology 101, a large lecture course; English Composition; and Freshman Experience, a one-unit course specifically designed to help beginning college students acclimate to campus life and the academic community. The faculty members who taught these three courses for Cohorts 1 and 2, two of whom were African American, were identified as being sensitive to issues of diversity and eager to work with prospective teachers. Eleven members of Cohort 1 also enrolled in the same sections of the first two courses in the teacher education sequence in Fall 2000. Twelve members of Cohort 2 also enrolled in the same section of Introduction to Literature in Spring 2002.

The second central component of the cohort is that the students are paired with mentors who are faculty members in arts and sciences. The hope is that having a built-in relationship with a faculty member will give the students ready access to information and assistance that will help them negotiate academic or bureaucratic difficulties they might face and make them feel

more at home on campus. The mentors agreed to meet with their mentees two or three times during the semester and to serve as a resource for the students as needed.

In addition to these two elements of the cohort, the students also meet individually with the counselor associated with TEAC. The purpose of this meeting is to make them aware of TEAC's existence and services, including the availability of ongoing support through this pre-existing community devoted to supporting prospective teachers, especially teachers of color. The Cohort 1 students also attended meetings twice during the semester at which they were provided with information and discussed their experiences in the cohort.

The Freshman Cohort Study

We have gathered data to help us understand whether the cohort is accomplishing the goals set for it and how future cohorts might do so more successfully. We are examining the cohort from two perspectives. First, we are following the progress of cohort students to see if they remain at the university and go on to become teachers. Second, we have sought to gain a more in-depth understanding of the perceptions of cohort participants through surveys and interviews.

Both authors of this article teach prospective and practicing teachers as faculty members in the College of Education and Human Services at MSU. One is the director of TEAC, and she initiated and coordinates the cohort. The other, who is not directly involved in the cohort, collected data about cohort participants' perspectives through anonymous surveys and focus groups with students in both cohorts and, in Fall 1999, interviews with the TEAC director and three course instructors and documentation of two meetings attended by students and mentors.

So far, So Good: Retention of Cohort 1 Participants

Because we are primarily interested in producing more teachers and particularly more teachers of color, our central questions are: Will these young people become teachers? Are we going to retain them in the university and in teacher education? We have followed the progress of

Cohort 1 students at the university and, as of Spring 2002, it appears that many of them are well on the way to becoming teachers. Table 1 summarizes the status of these students.

As Figure 1 shows, 15 of the 18 students (83%) are still enrolled in the university three full years after first participating in the cohort. Unfortunately, two of the three who are no longer enrolled are students of color. Five have already been accepted into teacher education, and another four are still planning to apply to the teacher education program. Thus, it appears that five of the nine White students are still planning to become teachers, and four of the nine students of color are still planning to do so (50% of the original 18 students). Three students have declared other majors besides teacher education, and three still have undeclared majors.

Supporting the Retention of Prospective Teachers: Salient Elements of the Freshman Cohort

Having established that, so far, the majority of Cohort 1 participants are still in school and at least half still intend to become teachers, we now turn to five salient elements of the Freshman Cohort that appear to be contributing to the retention of students at the university and in teacher education.

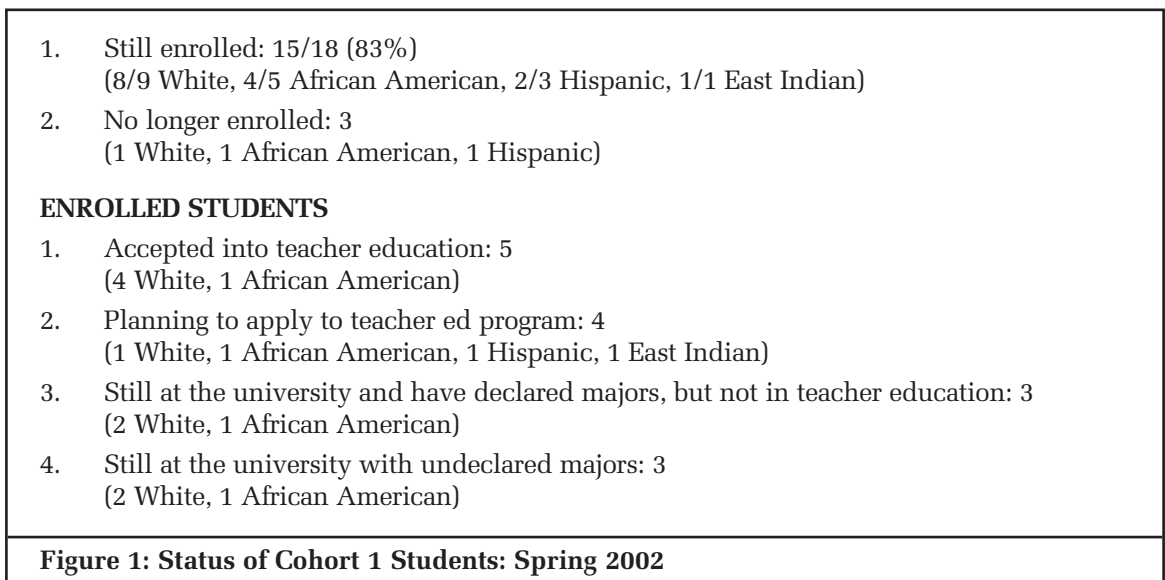
Creating a community of future teachers

By far the most prominent theme in students'

comments was the strong sense of community they developed as members of the cohort. In focus groups and surveys, they highlighted the importance of having a common experience with a group of peers. Some emphasized the academic benefits of being part of a community. They reported that their peers helped them understand difficult course material and filled them in when they missed classes. Some students said they were nervous about being in college classes for the first time, but the familiarity of the cohort allowed them to focus on learning. A Cohort 1 student wrote that she felt "accepted in a group," which made it easier to focus on her goals. Comments of other students illustrate:

- We're among people who are going through the same kind of transition.... We all know what each other is struggling with.... It helps to see familiar faces in the class; we become less tense. (Cohort 1)
- The students all have the same classes, so we all know what we're struggling with and can help each other out. (Cohort 1)
- If you weren't in class, people wanted to know why. (Cohort 2)

All ten survey respondents from Cohort 2 reported that they participated in a study group, and they all agreed or strongly agreed that the study group gave them a support group, gave them the opportunity to work closely with other



cohort members, and gave them the opportunity to get to know the other cohort members well. Only five of the 15 survey respondents from Cohort 1 reported that they participated in a formal study group. Mutual academic support for that cohort group apparently came through individual interactions or informal discussions rather than planned group meetings.

Other students emphasized the fact that the cohort gave them the opportunity to get to know people and to make friends. Some of their comments reflect this emphasis:

- [The most important aspect of the cohort was] the opportunity to make new friends.... We were almost forced into becoming friends, but it was a good thing in the long run. (Cohort 1)
- The cohort made it easier to get to know students.... I thought I was not going to benefit because it would be the same faces, but it made it more comfortable. (Cohort 1)
- There was always a family-oriented environment. It was easier to participate in class and there was always a cohort member to hang with. (Cohort 2)
- I never thought I was going to come to college and like people so much, be so open with people. We have an openness that's very rare in college because you barely have time to get to know people. We got to know each other and now it's awesome. (Cohort 2)
- It seems like we've been together longer than a year. Seems like four years of high school already. We've gone through not liking people, and then falling in love with each other. Seriously. (Cohort 2)

Some students in Cohort 1 highlighted the fact that the cohort was a community of future teachers. One student said that being in the cohort made her feel that she was "not the only person who wants to become a teacher." Another wrote, "I really like the members of my cohort. I can relate to all of them because we all want to become teachers."

As responses to statements 1-5 in Table 1 show, survey data are consistent with focus group comments, also suggesting that the participants felt a sense of community. Eighty percent or

more of those responding to the survey indicated that they got to know their professors well, felt supported by cohort members, made friends in the cohort, felt they were part of something special, and their professors got to know them well.

While students generally felt themselves to be part of a community in the cohort, the racial/ethnic diversity of the group posed a challenge to cohort community building, especially for Cohort 1. One faculty member observed that the diversity of the group was difficult for some of the White students who had not been in such diverse classes before. This was corroborated by the comments of one of the course instructors: "I ordered *Beyond Heroes and Holidays* [as a text]. The Black and Latino kids were happy that someone was now writing about schooling from our perspective, but the White kids weren't ready for it. They didn't want to hear it." From her perspective, students of all backgrounds in the group, including students of color, "need to realize that they need to go a distance to understand others." She felt that the open and honest discussion about issues of diversity in the cohort had supported some of the students in coming to that realization.

Comments of Cohort 2 students suggest that they dealt more openly with conflicts related to race/ethnicity and that they had some success in addressing them:

- My biggest fear was that my opinions wouldn't be listened to.... I was afraid of dealing with differences--like maybe people wouldn't know about what it's like to live in an urban area. But once I got over that, it helped to be in the cohort. It made it easier, like when we dealt with issues of race. First, it was raw, then joking, then everybody understood and we could talk about it real smooth. It was like [cohort members thought], that's how she feels and we can deal with it. (African American female)
- In every other class when we talked about race it was uncomfortable. But in [our cohort] class when we talked about it, I was drained afterwards, but we all understood each other, we knew where each other was coming from. (White female)

	Strongly disagree (n)	Disagree (n)	Agree (n)	Strongly agree (n)	Percent agree & strongly agree
1. I got to know my professors well.		2	15	8	92
2. I felt supported by the other cohort members.		2	9	13	92
3. I made friends in the cohort.		3	11	11	88
4. I felt I was part of something special.	1	2	19	3	88
5. I felt the professors got to know me well.	1	4	11	9	80
6. I learned to see things from the points of view of people in different cultures.		2	14	9	92
7. I learned how to relate better to people from different cultures.	2	6	15	2	68
8. I learned about campus services that might be useful to me.		1	15	9	96
9. I learned about campus social events and activities.		6	16	2	75
10. Being in the cohort made me feel more at home on campus.	2	5	14	4	72
11. I participated in my cohort classes more than in other classes.	2	6	7	9	67
12. I participated in campus social events.	1	9	13	2	60
13. I increased my confidence that I can succeed in college.	1	2	14	8	88
14. I was more confident to participate in my other classes because of being in the cohort.	2	6	9	8	68
15. I learned about myself as a learner.		2	12	11	92
16. I learned about teaching.		3	11	10	88
17. I became more certain about my career plans.		4	16	5	84
18. I learned about how I learn best.		7	17	1	72

Table 1: Freshman Cohort Survey Responses (n = 25: 15 from Cohort 1 and 10 from Cohort 2)

• You really learn how to think differently, how to think in coordination with others, how to incorporate their ideas into your own. You realize you're not all that different, no matter where you came from. Like me, I'm a North Jersey farm kid and others are from cities.... You have all those stereotypes we brought from high school.... Then having us all come together like that. It helped with the transition between high school and college. You had all those different people and you'd [stereotype them] before you knew them. But then we came together and became one. (White male)

Students' responses to the two related survey items suggest that there is still room for growth in this area (see #6 and 7, Table 1). Twenty-three students (92%) indicated that they learned to see the points of view of people from different cultural backgrounds, and 17 (68%) agreed that they learned to relate better to people from dif-

ferent cultures. While in both cases a majority of students responded positively, the differences in the responses to these two statements suggest that the cohort experience was more successful in helping these young people see the perspectives of people from different cultural backgrounds than in helping them successfully interact with people from different cultures.

Supporting students' adjustment to the university environment

An important step in retaining students is to help them become acclimated to the university environment. If they feel alienated and out of place on the university campus over an extended period of time, they are less likely to persist through four years than if they find a place for themselves as members of the larger university community. The cohort experience helped the students begin to develop a sense of belonging and an accompanying identity as university stu-

dents. One faculty member (for Cohort 1) thought an important benefit of the cohort was helping students find that sense of belonging:

If there was any doubt about their belonging in the university, if they were entertaining any notions of not belonging, somehow the cohort has alleviated that kind of doubt.... The cohort has eased the transition from home culture to university culture. And I think that's where we begin to lose students. It seems to me that when students feel alienated, not part of a group, they're more apt to give up, to go away, to do something else. The cohort makes them feel more at home here at the university.

Another instructor agreed that being in the cohort gave the students "a sense of power, that the university belongs to them, [and] that there are people at the university willing to help them."

Students too recognized that being in the cohort helped them fit in, as their comments indicate:

- You get a lot of resources [from being in the cohort]. You network, find out who's who and who's not.... You network with people who can help you from being in the cohort. (Cohort 1)
- One of the biggest fears coming to college is you're not going to know anybody, you're going to be without friends for a semester and maybe if you're lucky you'll make friends. But [the cohort] was here for us. (Cohort 2)
- It helps to ease the transition between high school and college. In high school you had the same classes with people over and over. Part of the shock to college is you don't know anyone in any class unless you get lucky. This really eased us into it, almost gave a more high-school-esque feeling to it until we can get used to it. (Cohort 2)

As statements 8-12 in Table 1 show, a majority of students reported that being in the cohort helped them increase their familiarity and comfort with the campus and with being students. All but one (96%) reported they learned about campus services that might be useful. Eighteen reported that they learned about social events

and activities on campus (75% [n=24]) and that they felt more at home on campus because they were in the cohort (72%). Smaller proportions, but still a majority, of students reported that they participated in their cohort classes more than other classes (67%) and that they participated in campus social events (60%).

Building academic self-confidence

Confidence in their academic ability is another aspect of students' academic identity that can contribute to their persistence in college (Getz, 2000). Being in the cohort appears to have helped some participants increase their confidence in their ability to succeed in college. Twenty-two survey respondents (88%) agreed that being in the cohort helped increase their overall confidence in their ability to succeed in college (#13 in Table 1). Just under two-thirds (17; 68%) reported that the cohort increased their confidence in non-cohort courses (#14 in Table 2). This discrepancy suggests that being in the cohort had a greater impact on students' general sense of academic confidence than on their confidence about participating in particular classes.

For Cohort 2 members, participating in study groups appears to have also helped them build their academic confidence. All ten survey completers either agreed or strongly agreed with the statements below. As we mentioned previously, only five Cohort 1 students reported participating in a study group. Three or more of those five students also agreed or strongly agreed with each statement.

Being in the study group:

Made me feel more confident about doing the course work.

Helped me develop better study skills.

Helped me understand the course material.

Helped me do better work for my courses.

Students were also asked to indicate the extent to which they improved in a number of academic areas as a result of their participation in the cohort. While not direct indicators of confidence, a belief that one has become stronger in these areas would contribute to a sense of confidence. These areas and the students' responses are presented in Table 2. The majority of the students reported that they improved *a little* or

a lot in all eight academic areas they were asked to rate. All the students felt that they had improved their writing ability and their ability to think critically; all but one reported that they improved their academic self-confidence and general academic ability. Twenty-two respondents felt that they had improved their writing ability a lot—clearly an important skill for succeeding in college.

Focusing on teaching, learning, and becoming teachers

The focus on teaching and learning in some cohort courses helped participants begin their socialization into the teaching profession in the first semester of their freshman year. The faculty hoped this would encourage participants to follow through on their early interest in teaching as a career. One faculty member said she thought the cohort members came to understand themselves as learners better, and she hoped that being introduced to the themes of the teacher education program early would help them deepen their understanding of those themes as they progressed through the program.

The Freshman Composition course for Cohort 1, the Freshman Experience courses for both cohorts, and, to a lesser extent, the Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature courses for Cohort 2 integrated issues of teaching and learning into the course content. The Freshman Experience course instructor said that “virtually everything... [in the course] was

about teaching.” He had the students write about why they wanted to be teachers, and interview a faculty member about why he or she became a teacher and then incorporate those ideas into their own views about teaching. They wrote about the most influential teacher they had had. They discussed study skills, how students learn, how they themselves learn, and how they would teach compared to how they have been taught. The last assignment was to compare high school and college teaching. The Freshman Composition instructor encouraged students to “critically think about themselves as learners,” including how they learn best. She asked them to examine what happens in schools and how that influences learning. For one assignment, she had them write a short paper about a high school course in which they “learned a valuable lesson.” They described the teaching strategies used and explained which were particularly effective and why. The instructor of Freshman Composition and Introduction to Literature for Cohort 2 was the advisor for English majors seeking teacher certification and the instructor of the university’s English education course. While she did not concentrate as much on teaching and learning as the other two instructors, she encouraged students to reflect on how they learned how to read and write and what strategies might help them become better reader and writers. In the Introduction to Literature course, for example, she assigned pairs of students to be writing part-

	Did not improve	Improved a little	Improved a lot
1. Writing ability.		3	22
2. Ability to think critically.		10	15
3. Academic self-confidence.	1	13	11
4. General academic ability.	1	15	8
5. Reading ability.	2	12	11
6. Strategies for being a good student.	3	8	13
7. General communication skills.	3	9	12
8. Study skills.	4	12	8

Table 2: Students’ Perceptions of Their Improvement in Selected Areas as an a Result of Participating in the Freshman Cohort

ners and asked them to think about how that classroom approach helped them learn to write better.

The focus on teaching and learning in these courses fulfilled the expectations participants had when they signed up for the cohort. Students said they participated in order to become involved in teacher education early in their college careers, to learn what teaching is all about, and to get support for becoming a teacher. Several students said the focus on teaching and learning was a particularly beneficial aspect of their cohort experience. For example, one Cohort 1 student said the Freshman Composition course “explored a lot of different avenues about how to teach, why to teach different ways, and why you teach different things.” Students reported that this focus on teaching helped them begin to think about what it means to be a teacher.

Once again, survey responses corroborate the interviews, suggesting that this concentration on issues of relevance to teachers paid off. As statements 15-18 in Table 1 show, 23 respondents (92%) agreed they learned about themselves as learners, 21 (88%) reported they learned about teaching, and 21 (84%) said they became more certain of their career plans. Eighteen (72%) felt that they learned how they learn best.

Mentoring students who feel competing pressures from home, peers, and school

While cohort participants were becoming part of the cohort community, becoming acclimated to the university, feeling more confident in their academic abilities, and starting to think of themselves as teachers, some--especially some of the students of color--were also facing difficulties in the transition into higher education that could negatively affect their persistence in college. One particularly threatening problem was conflict caused by competing pressures from home, peers, and school. Attending college distanced some students from their peers and this led to conflicts--both internal and external. One mentor wondered if a student who was a single mother, for instance, would end up having another baby before she could finish college. Another student told her mentor that she had been accused of thinking she was

“better” than her friends because she was going to college.

Faculty mentors did not always feel prepared to address these competing pressures on students. They discussed the fact that their higher education experiences had been influenced less by outside pressures from home and peers and they had been more able to focus on their studies. At the same time, commonalities in life experiences, gender, race, ethnicity, and social class backgrounds led some mentors to have considerable empathy for their mentees. There were multiple connections between one mentor and her mentee, as the mentor reported: “We’re both Hispanic, from the same county [in New Jersey]. I know where she lives and where she grew up. I was a school psychologist in her high school. I’ve experienced a lot of what she’s facing.” Other mentors also shared important life experiences with their mentees, including speaking native languages other than English and coming from working class backgrounds.

These commonalities not only helped the mentors understand the perspectives of their mentees but also gave them credibility when they pushed the students to look at their situations in new ways. The mentor quoted above tried to help her mentee focus on her long-term goals instead of letting her frustration at being placed in a remedial math course interfere with her academic success:

What I did...was explain to her that I have a Ph.D. in psychology and there were a lot of courses that I’ve taken that I didn’t like but I did it because I had an ultimate goal. We went over this a lot. I empathize with her. I was just listening to her and I could see that she was angry. I tried to get her to focus on her ultimate career goal.

While anyone could have shared their experience of taking classes they didn’t want to take, the fact that the mentor had had similar life experiences made it less likely that the young woman would dismiss her advice as irrelevant. Having access to such mentors may help these students realize that the conflicting messages they receive from home, peers, and school can be reconciled and may give them some support in persevering with their educational goals. In

fact, the student referred to above has managed to stay in school. As of Spring 2002, she was a junior Elementary Education major with a 2.9 grade-point average.

Conclusion

Our inquiry has led us to conclude that the Freshman Cohort for Prospective Teachers at Montclair State University is addressing six issues that can help teacher education not only tap the pool of prospective teachers – including teachers of color – made up of college-bound students, but also retain them in college and in teaching. First, the cohort has identified students, including students of color, and brought them into teaching more actively and earlier in their college careers than is typical. The invitation to entering freshmen to participate in this special community sends the message that they are valued and sought after as potential teachers. Second, by building a sense of community, the cohort has helped participants through the initial adjustment into the university, alleviating their fears of being isolated and alone. The cohort's built-in support group of students, faculty, and mentors has helped cohort members feel a sense of belonging they probably otherwise would not have because of the strong presence of commuter students on the campus and, for the students of color, because the student population is largely White.

Third, the cohort has helped students feel a part of the larger university community, familiarizing them with different aspects of the university and giving them a safe base from which to explore. Fourth, the support from peers and faculty in the cohort has helped students build their confidence in their academic skills and, in turn, in their ability to succeed in college. Fifth, the focus on teaching and learning in some cohort courses encouraged these young people to begin thinking of themselves as future teachers as soon as they entered the university, thus beginning their socialization into the teaching profession quite early. Finally, some mentors seem to have offered critical support to some students of color, in particular, by directly addressing pressures not to persist in their pursuit of a college degree and a teaching career.

As we discussed at the beginning of this article, student cohorts tend to build community, help

students feel a sense of belonging, and provide academic support that can build skills and confidence. We want to highlight two particular aspects of the Freshman Cohort that distinguish the Freshman Cohort for Prospective Teachers at Montclair and that our experience suggests are especially relevant for identifying and retaining prospective teachers, especially teachers of color. The first is the importance of integrating issues of teaching, learning, and becoming teachers into early general education courses. An explicit focus on teaching and learning can benefit all students as they enter higher education, helping them understand themselves better as learners and develop skills to become better learners and better students. For some students who might not have considered becoming teachers, such a focus might also encourage them to do so. It may therefore be a fruitful way to recruit prospective teachers from among students enrolled in the university. Such integration challenges faculty to maintain a focus on the subject matter of the discipline (e.g., English, psychology, history) while integrating concerns for teaching and learning. Not all faculty members would be interested in such an effort, but some, like those in the study, who recognize the role of arts and sciences faculty in educating future teachers (Goodlad, 1990, 1994) would welcome such a challenge. In comparing the experiences of students in Cohort 1 and Cohort 2, we found that there was a greater emphasis on teaching and learning in the courses for Cohort 1 than for Cohort 2. We will encourage instructors of future cohort courses to embed attention to those critical issues for future teachers in their courses.

The racial/ethnic diversity of the cohort and the explicit attention to that diversity in cohort classes constitute the second aspect of the Freshman Cohort that we believe is critical for attracting and retaining teachers of color and for beginning the preparation of culturally responsive teachers of all backgrounds (see Nelson-Barber and Mitchell, 1992). The cohort groups were more racially/ethnically diverse than most classes at MSU and some of the instructors made it a point to engage students in activities and discussions that highlighted issues of race, ethnicity, and other social group factors. Participants' experiences with regard to

racial/ethnic differences were, therefore, quite different in their cohort classes than in most of their other classes and in their high school experiences as well. Some students--particularly in Cohort 2--referred several times to discussions they had had in two of their cohort classes and expressed a sense of accomplishment that these discussions were "easier" and less "uncomfortable" than they had anticipated. Given the difficulty in changing social attitudes (Haberman & Post, 1998), diversity issues need to be addressed as early in the preparation of teachers as possible (Villegas & Lucas, 2002). By ensuring that students in the Freshman Cohort are racially and ethnically diverse, we can seize the opportunity to do so in the first semester of prospective teachers' freshman year.

This small local study can only hint at the promise of freshman cohorts for identifying and retaining potential teachers. At the same time, we believe our findings, though directly applicable only to our context, are suggestive of the potential benefits of such a cohort. We hope our experiences can inform and encourage others involved in the preparation of teachers who are considering developing a cohort group for freshmen. We are heartened by the progress of Cohort 1 students and will continue to follow them as well as Cohort 2 participants.

Acknowledgments

The authors acknowledge with heartfelt appreciation the contributions of faculty members Saundra Collins, Sara Jonsberg, Sharon Lewis, and Leslie Wilson in the design and implementation of the Freshman Cohort. We also thank Ruth Zerwitz for her ongoing assistance with the cohort and with our documenting of it. Finally, we thank Ana María Villegas for her comments on drafts of this article.

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