

TEACHER RECRUITMENT: TURNING THE TIDE

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Family and consumer sciences school programs provide some of the earliest and richest opportunities for children to learn about the importance of families and maintaining healthy lifestyles. Unfortunately, research data document a real and perilous shortage of family and consumer sciences teachers across the nation. Without an increasing supply of teachers, many vital programs may be weakened and some may be eliminated.

This article describes the efforts of one college department to "turn the tide" and increase enrollment in the family and consumer sciences teacher education program. The non-traditional, inexpensive approaches resulted in surprising rewards.

The future and health of any profession rest in its efforts to recruit vibrant members, in its ability to replace retiring members with "new blood". At the present time, there is a shortage of teachers in all subject areas and future forecasts are for an increasing need for teachers. Hall and Miller (1989) predicted a serious shortage of family and consumer sciences (FACS) educators ten years ago. Others continued to document future needs (Burge & Stewart, 1991; Miller & Meszaros, 1996), and the reality of a perilous shortage to meet the demands (Miller & Meszaros, 1996; Rehm & Jackson, 1995). Developing strategies for meeting the teacher shortage is critical because middle and high school FACS programs provide some of the earliest and best opportunities for children to learn about the importance of families and maintaining healthy lifestyles. Students engage in learning activities that empower them to become competent, caring, responsible members of a constantly changing society (Home and Career Skills, 1986, p.1), gaining skills and knowledge "to effect the optimal well-being of families and individuals" (Strategic Plan: 1995-2000).

Although there seems to be little debate about the extant shortage, the challenge is to find the lode of prospective candidates for meeting the FACS teacher shortage. The traditional route has been to focus on high school student populations. Miller and Tulloch (1999) identified a spectrum of teacher recruitment strategies, activities and resources for attracting high school students. They also cited several studies (Dewalk-Link & Lester, 1985; South Carolina Center for Teacher Recruitment, 1995) that identified the strong influences quality high school programs and teachers have on individuals deciding to major in and become FACS teachers. Lee (1998a) interviewed middle school students taking Exploring Life Skills classes. She reported that a majority of them held positive perceptions about FACS, although a small percentage planned to consider FACS teaching as a career for a variety of reasons. As educators address some of the reasons given for not pursuing a teaching career in FACS, middle school students may become a potential population for recruitment.

The pressing problem is developing initiatives that increase the number of teacher educators within a relatively short period of time. Adopting recruitment strategies that target middle and high school students may provide a long-term solution, but the supply may not be available for anywhere from four to eight years. Due to some idiosyncratic factors, the most notable being the perception that FACS is not a core "academic subject", our profession may not

have the luxury of waiting that long without endangering the continuity of FACS secondary programs. For example, in states where FACS programs are not mandated, school district administrators unable to replace retiring teachers may eliminate the program or reduce course offerings. School administrators in states with mandated programs may opt for a variance from the mandate, fill positions with uncertified teachers, or allot portions of the program to other subject areas, such as health.

The teacher shortage crisis is a serious concern for colleges. The Family, Nutrition, and Exercise Sciences Department (FNES) at Queens College of the City University of New York (CUNY) has been grappling with the situation of low enrollment in its teacher education program for a number of years. Numerous and desperate calls from a number of school districts looking for graduates to fill positions is a frequent occurrence, and accelerated the need to find solutions. In the past, efforts to increase enrollment focused on the traditional route, attracting middle and high school students. A number of approaches were used including giving presentations at career days, inviting guidance counselors to a breakfast meeting at the college, and networking with family and consumer sciences teachers and professional organizations. Moreover, a recruitment letter was sent to incoming freshmen introducing them to the department and advising them of the areas of specialization offered. The results were not very encouraging. In the fall of 1997 there were four teacher education majors.

A serendipitous meeting of the author with a former student brought a new perspective to recruitment efforts. While chatting, the alumna mentioned she had been working as a dietitian but was ready for a career change. She was disappointed with the discrepancy between her expectations and the reality of working in the field of dietetics. Teaching seemed like an option because she enjoyed the experience of working one-on-one with patients about to be discharged after a hospital stay. When I mentioned the great need for FACS teachers, she was quite excited and mentioned that she knew others contemplating career changes that might be interested. She was advised of the Special Admissions Program at Queens College of CUNY for students who want to enroll in a master's program in education but lack undergraduate preparation in education and/or some FACS course work. At a subsequent meeting, her transcripts were evaluated, she applied to the Special Admissions Program and began working toward meeting teacher certification requirements.

That meeting led to a new perspective on recruitment strategies. While middle and high school student populations remain important for the future supply of teacher educators, focus was shifted to thinking about populations that could be certified in a relatively short period of time. Alumni, and other individuals with FACS degrees, searching for second careers were attractive candidates to recruit because their degrees in some FACS area meant they may not need very many courses to fulfill the subject matter portion for teacher certification. The FNES department also reached out to two additional populations, teaching assistants and departmental majors with undeclared areas of specialization enrolled in the integrative FACS course (FNES 106-An Introduction to Family and Consumer Sciences).

Alumni And Other Individuals With Degrees

Alumni, and other individuals with FACS degrees, provide an excellent population for recruitment for a number of reasons. Colleges are beginning to value individuals with work experience who probably have honed their communication skills. Graduates usually are mature individuals with a better knowledge of their goals and expectations about employment, and many may have completed a number of the courses needed for meeting the subject matter requirement

for teacher certification. In the FNES department at Queens College of CUNY, for example, in addition to the specialization courses needed for graduation, all students complete a core curriculum, and some core courses, e.g., consumer studies and family relations, are applicable for the teacher education specialization.

Alumni newsletters provide an inexpensive recruitment tool. After the meeting with the alumnae, an announcement was placed in the department's alumni newsletter about the many teaching opportunities available, and noted that further information about teacher certification was available by contacting the department's teacher educator. The results were astonishing; more than 50 individuals responded!! Some calls were from alumni with teaching credentials who had never taught for a variety of reasons, and who subsequently enrolled in the methods course as a refresher before applying for teaching positions. Other calls were from the alumni's colleagues and coworkers, individuals with FACS degrees. The respondents represented a diverse group including school lunch managers, dietitians employed at a variety of sites including hospitals, nursing homes, and WIC programs, and textiles designers and fashion consultants. Some responses were from friends of the alumni who were working in other areas such as elementary education. After preliminary telephone conversations, interested parties met one-on-one with the teacher educator, had their transcript(s) evaluated and discussed options for achieving teacher certification, as well as their goals and motivation(s) for wanting to enter the profession. Those with few or no FACS credits were advised to register for a second bachelor's degree and begin working on completing the 36 FACS credits and the 18 education credits needed for provisional certification. Individuals with a bachelor's degree in some area of FACS were referred to the Special Admissions Program offered at Queens College of CUNY and designed for individuals with a bachelor's degree but lacking undergraduate education course work.

Special Admissions Program

The secondary education department of Queens College of CUNY in conjunction with various academic departments offers a Special Admissions Program. The program was designed for students wanting to earn a master's degree in education but lacking undergraduate preparation in education. Candidates must meet the general matriculation requirements of the college, hold a bachelor's degree with a major or its equivalent in an academic field, and meet the minimum grade point average set by the department. In New York State, provisional teacher certification requires 36 subject matter credit hours in FACS. All department alumni meet that criterion although departmental specialization course work requirements are concentrated in one area and may not cover the broad range needed for teaching. For example, dietetics majors usually lack course work in textiles, clothing and interior design; textile and clothing majors lack courses in foods and nutrition. Students in the Special Admission Program are required to make up any deficiencies. Transcripts also are checked for course currency requirements in some areas such as nutrition and consumer education.

One of the benefits of the Special Admissions Program is that when alumni complete the education course work and any FACS course deficiencies, they can apply for provisional certification and begin teaching before they have completed all the requirements for the master's degree. As a consequence of this flexibility, some alumni are presently employed as teachers while finishing the requirements for the master's degree.

Teacher Assistants

Teacher assistants was another population targeted. It is a desirable population for a number of reasons. First and foremost, teaching assistants have classroom experience working on a daily basis with teachers and students. They know the job description and have a realistic picture of what it is like to be in a classroom with diverse students who can present some challenging scenarios. Secondly, in all likelihood they probably have completed some college credits because of state requirements. State education departments set employment standards for teaching assistants. For example, New York State requires they complete six-college credits by the end of their first year of employment although individual school districts may have more rigorous requirements and/or provide incentives for continuing education. The New York City Board of Education has a Career Training Program that provides tuition reimbursement for up to 18 credits per year (up to six credits each Fall, Spring, or summer semester) at 20 participating colleges. Moreover, if an individual takes at least five credits, they are entitled to two and a half hours of released time per week during the Fall and Spring semesters (Career Training Program Questions and Answers Leaflet). Thus, teacher assistants are viable candidates for recruitment because they are cognizant of the traits, qualities, and skills needed for teaching, aware of the rewards of working with children, have some college credits, and may be entitled to some financial and employment support while completing a degree.

The FNES department reached out to New York City teaching assistants, known as paraprofessionals in New York City. Queens College of CUNY is one of the colleges participating in New York City's tuition reimbursement program. The paraprofessionals' union representative was contacted with a request to speak about the FACS program at the union orientation meeting. The presentation included the mission of FACS education, an overview of some of the exciting courses taught by FACS teachers, and New York State FACS teacher education requirements. There was time for questions, and leaflets were distributed, listing the required courses for the area of specialization and the name and phone number of the teacher educator contact. More than a dozen individuals contacted the department and some of those have started working toward teacher certification.

The Integrative FACS Course

Another population considered for teacher education recruitment resided within the FACS department. This potential group of applicants, "majors" who have not declared their area of specialization, was discovered when the author, the department's teacher educator, was assigned to teach the "Introduction to Family and Consumer Sciences" integrative core course. The course, an introduction to the profession, examines FACS' history, mission, and philosophy, and explores its integrative nature. One activity involves inviting individuals from diverse FACS fields to speak about the joys and the sorrows, the requirements and the responsibilities, of their careers. This is done, in part, to broaden students' understanding of the depth and breath of the field (as opposed to viewing it only from their area of specialization), and to increase their vision of employment options within areas of specialization. All departmental majors are required to take the course, ideally in their freshmen year, though because of myriad constraints and situations the class is a blend of students with different class standings. Some of the students in the class have not identified an area of specialization; they may be freshmen or transfer students with associate degrees in liberal arts eager to explore the many FACS options, or individuals not quite decided. The class offers a wonderful opportunity to highlight the invaluable role FACS education plays in society as well as the need for FACS teachers.

For the segment on education, the author assumed the role of an outside speaker and spoke about the rewards of teaching, the many job opportunities available, the range for starting salary, and potential vertical career moves to positions such as principals and superintendents. During the same presentation, students from the methods and materials for teaching FACS course and the student teacher seminar were invited. They shared their reasons for choosing teaching as a profession and described their experiences and interactions with children and FACS teachers in the schools where they did their observations or where some were student teaching. Recent teacher education graduates also were invited and spoke about life in a secondary classroom.

Students speaking to students, answering their questions, and talking about their experiences is a powerful recruitment tool. Almost without exception, the student teachers' enthusiasm and love for what they were doing became apparent to class members. This recruitment technique resulted in quite a number of undecided FACS majors coming in to talk about the teacher education major. Student comments on the assigned Speaker Evaluation Form included: "Wow, I didn't realize teaching could be fun"; "What they're doing in their classes sounds so much better than what we did in my home economics class . . . I wish we learned how to plan menus and evaluate diets, study child psychology and work with children in pre-K programs". Without fail, they indicated that the students and recent graduates made teaching sound like a gratifying career. They expressed surprise about the variety of FACS courses taught in middle and high schools, and were unaware of the potential for moving into administrative positions.

Results and Implications

Increases in enrollment in the teacher education major from the targeted groups, alumni, and other individuals with degrees, teacher assistants, and FACS majors, who have not declared their area of specialization, are very encouraging. In 1997 there were four students enrolled in the teacher education program. Two years later there are 27 individuals taking courses and working toward certification. Eight individuals received provisional certification and are presently teaching.

The results of the recruiting efforts of one college suggest that the tide may be turning and the shortage of teachers can be alleviated. Continuing to seek out unorthodox methods and populations to meet a serious situation may prove to be one avenue for meeting short and long-term goals of increasing the numbers of FACS teachers. The results also appear to emphasize that members of the FACS profession are on target with recently published literature about recruiting suggestions and ideas. Recruitment strategies similar to those undertaken by the Queens College of CUNY FNES department in 1997 have subsequently be suggested by others (Lee, 1998a, 1998b; Miller & Tulloch, 1999; Mimbs, Stewart, & Heath-Camp, 1998).

Recruiting currently employed individuals such as teaching assistants and alumni, however, brings the challenge of reconceptualizing how a department delivers its programs. As Lee (1998a) noted, individuals employed full time need convenient class scheduling to meet their time needs such as classes offered late afternoons or evenings, weekends and in the summer. Colleges should explore initiating distance learning programs or offering courses at satellite sites especially in states where few (and sometimes no) FACS teacher education programs are offered or where colleges with programs are not centrally located for easy access.

The FNES department tried to meet the needs of full-time working students or those who have to travel great distances to the college by allowing them to take individual courses at

different colleges to meet some of the FACS requirements. Some FACS courses may rarely be offered at convenient hours and times of the year for a variety of reasons. Students were encouraged to take them at a local community or senior college. For example, students could take textiles, clothing construction and interior design courses at either a community or senior college offering degrees in fashion design and merchandising.

Another issue that emerged from working with non-traditional students was the enormous amount of time needed for counseling, advising and assisting them through the process. Individuals who have not taken courses in a number of years need extra reassurance. The rewards can be enormous, however, because the students are serious, do high quality work and bring a plethora of personal experiences that enrich their education.

In summary, the tide appears to be turning for the author's college, and with continuing efforts at long-term recruitment strategies, there will be a supply of teachers to meet the goals and challenges outlined by the American Association of Family and Consumer Sciences in the millennium.

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