

Challenge 3: Recruiting and Retaining a Diverse Student Body

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The College takes seriously the complex challenges involved in recruiting and retaining a diverse student body. We see this issue as a linked set of concerns encompassing factors including but not limited to:

- Recruiting students into education who might otherwise choose another field
- Recruiting students into Penn State who might otherwise attend another college or not attend college at all because of geographic and cultural issues that might deter students of diverse backgrounds from choosing Penn State
- Recruiting and retaining diverse students who would be deterred by the high costs of attending Penn State and the particular costs of completing COE programs
- Supporting students who do come into the College (socially, academically, and financially)
- Positioning students for continued success as they leave us for professional positions and further education

These challenges are daunting, yet there are current efforts that the College can be proud of, and we note that good progress has been made with respect to many of these challenges. Strategic actions are identified below that should lead to significant additional gains.

I. Strategic Suggestions

The following are new suggestions provided as responses to these challenges in both the near term and the long term.

A. Near-Term Actions

1. Personalizing recruitment of minorities to undergraduate and graduate programs

A common theme among students who are minorities in COE is the critical role that personal connections play in their choice of Penn State, staying at Penn State, and choosing an education related career. Regarding recruitment, they consistently say how a teacher, counselor, relative, or friend recommended and convinced them that this would be the right place for them and the right career to explore. While several programs such as SCOPE, the F.E.A. State Conference, SROP, and other recruitment efforts make these connections on a small scale and continue our effort toward creating a community of partnerships with districts, schools, and school personnel across the Commonwealth, there is another area where the College can expand efforts on a larger scale.

Teachers and school counselors are the two groups that have the most contact with minority students considering profession and college choices. It is common for students to say “my teacher or counselor recommended and said I could do very well

here” (and in fact, teachers ranked third behind self and fathers in DUS’s Education Planning Survey of the incoming freshmen of 2009). The times when teachers and counselors gather in the largest groups are at their state and national conferences where exhibit booths are displayed to spread the word on why students should consider the benefits of their institution and college. The Penn State University College of Education is not currently one of those institutions.

The recommendation is that the College should begin renting a booth at targeted major conferences and send a combination of faculty, students, and/or recruiters there for personal conversations and contacts. These should include guidance counselor conferences and the major subject area teacher conferences; it should also include some conferences that specifically serve diverse professionals, such as the National Association of Black School Educators and the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development.

The significant benefits of this proposal can be summarized as follows:

- A. PSU-COE would increase visibility in the profession that is utilized by aggressively recruiting colleges that do not currently include COE.
 - a. Undergraduate recruitment would be improved by additional personal conversations and contacts with large numbers of professionals that have influence on individual choices of school student careers and college selection.
 - b. Graduate recruitment would benefit by making currently unavailable, direct personal contact with the primary professionals (teachers, counselors, and student members) who will be considering master’s and doctoral programs in COE.
 - c. Continuing education efforts would be able to recruit for current projects as well as gaining insight as to the needs and issues of the primary groups served by COE.

- B. Application of this proposal include the following:
 - a. Create a College of Education display that will travel to four conferences per year; one state and one national conference each for school counselors and for teachers.
 - b. Fund travel for 2 people to these conferences with the responsibility of running the booth. Faculty and students will also be attending these conferences and will be expected to spend some time greeting and connecting with practitioners at the booth.
 - c. It is expected that at least one of the people involved will be a minority.
 - d. Bring college and program specific information along with Penn State COE reminders (e.g. magnets, pencils, etc.) to be given away.

- C. Expected outcomes:
 - a. Increased communication with the primary professionals related to education.

- b. More students be personally recommended to attend Penn State and education related fields.

2. Welcoming “less visible” minorities into a diverse student population

While our vision of a diverse student body includes students from a wide range of ethnic, geographic, and economic origins as well as varied sexual orientations, abilities, and backgrounds, we argue that recruitment among two groups in particular needs additional attention and, if given such attention, might result in significant progress right away with relatively little input in terms of new resources. These groups are (a) veterans and (b) people with disabilities.

We propose the following actions to increase recruitment and retention of students from these two groups:

- A. Create coordination between military returnees and vocational rehabilitation where additional funding can be found in both categories and potential combined for a strong funding option for qualified individuals.
- B. Develop cohorts form specific these groups and local individuals that can add a form of self-support group strength to augment individual strengths and provide a target group for COE to support.

3. Improving retention of all kinds of students through meaningful involvement in the intellectual work of the College

We know that one of the best ways to unite diverse groups of people is to involve them together in meaningful work. Thus we recommend that the College dedicate itself to involving new students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, deeply and significantly in the research activities underway in COE.

Individual faculty members already reach out to graduate students in their own programs to involve them in research projects. This model however, only relies on traditional word-of-mouth method and misses valuable opportunities to diversify our research teams assist students in finding productive niches within the intellectual community of the College. Two initial actions are suggested to begin improvement in this area.

- A. A current list of research and other professionally related projects going on within COE which can use undergraduate or graduate student support will be developed and kept up to date. That list will be shared with all students, but with emphasis for students from underrepresented groups. Students will be encouraged to explore potential involvement in these projects. Orientation sessions for students at all levels, including graduate orientations in the various departments as well as welcome events for new undergraduates, should also include tables with research project information for students to browse and even in-person invitations from faculty seeking team members.

- B. COE will consider setting aside funding for economically disadvantaged students through work study or wage payroll positions on the research projects identified through the above recommendation, or for additional educational and professional development that would extend beyond the traditional eight semesters of undergraduate enrollment. The goal of this funding is to afford students opportunities for earlier connection with the college, enrich the educational experiences and professional development of the future of our professions and hopefully address some of the financial burdens facing our disadvantaged students.

B. Long-Term Action

The degree to which our community includes and nurtures students from diverse backgrounds depends upon the cohesion of our COE community in general and the how well we communicate and collaborate across the typical boundaries of race, class, discipline, department, or rank. While explicit supports for students from underrepresented backgrounds are important and needed, it is also the case that our ultimate goal is not simply to help such students survive within our established institutional culture but instead to transform that culture through full participation of all its diverse members. The current physical environment hinders progress toward that goal.

COE lacks the repeated, informal opportunities to talk together that arise only when people work in physical proximity to one another in shared space. Meetings, presentations, and work sessions that would rightly interest members of the College from a diverse range of perspectives tend to occur within the conference rooms and offices of separate departments and programs. Reaching out to others generally means to those people we see every day, already know well, and with whom we share workspace and program responsibilities. What this model misses are vibrant opportunities to enrich our work with the broader range of perspectives offered by the diverse group of people available in the College.

Remedying this situation requires common space, outside of our established offices, in which people repeatedly “bump into” one another and gather to talk. Such space would promote the informal interactions that occur in places like a coffee shop, lounge, or commons. The College should make securing such a gathering place a priority in a new building and/or modification of Chambers, Rackley and CEDAR buildings. This would be a central meeting place where conversations could spill over from classes and meetings into a more public coffee shop-type space. It would be a place where research teams working together over coffee could invite others to their tables, and where overall college members would be more persistently visible and available to one another across the work day and work week.

II. Gauging Our Progress

We offer the following ideas for examining the full extent of this challenge and assessing our progress in meeting it:

- A. COE will establish a specific plan for acquiring and utilizing university statistics in tracking diverse student enrollment and progress.
- B. The COE Assessment Committee, as part of their overall plan for accessing student evaluation, will develop questions that speak to undergraduate and graduate student experience as Penn State students in the College of Education and also to their training in commitment to diversity issues as professional educators. This information will be tracked for different groups based on demographic questions related to the diversity categories of students.
- C. Qualitative assessment of the experience of diverse students will be a portion of the assessment process in COE. Each year COE will interview students representing diverse groups to develop in-depth personal pictures of their personal and educational experience. These analyses will be used to develop themes and specific issues to be reported and utilized as a part of an ongoing assessment of students' experiences and potential ways to improve those experiences. For example, rich case studies of individual students from diverse backgrounds would be helpful in communicating both within and beyond the College about the complexity of these issues, their implications, and potential action steps in very different ways than quantitative statistics provide.