

History by John Habel, original program co-founder, January 2009 (now retired)

Rural-Urban Exchange

Activities to promote teacher-education students' knowledge about teaching diverse students

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The Rural-Urban Exchange Program involving the College of Education and Allied Professions at Western Carolina University (WCU) and the School of Education at North Carolina Agricultural and Technical State University (NCA&T) in Greensboro has been implemented each spring semester since 2002. NCA&T is a research intensive historically black university in Greensboro, a community that is the site of several key events in the civil rights movement and continues to be one of the state's most diverse, politically charged communities. WCU is a comprehensive regional university located in an unincorporated community in rural southern Appalachia that is near a Native American reservation.

Purposes of the Rural-Urban Exchange

When we examine the current status of children of color and other marginalized populations in schools, teacher educators must continue to ask the question, "How do we best prepare teacher candidates to meet the challenges of educating all children?" Part of the answer to the question rests in what the Brown decisions and multicultural education have sought to do in recent decades—promote equity. The Rural Urban Exchange has sought to build the capacity of our candidates to do just that.

It appears that efforts to dismantle the work of multicultural education have gained momentum in recent years. Some of this momentum is driven by the belief that the work of the civil rights movement and other movements is no longer needed or is as near complete as it will be. However, data on school success, achievement gaps, digital divides, and high school diploma and college degree attainment paint a much different picture. If we look specifically at how traditionally underserved youth are faring in schools, we see that the problems that were present before Brown and the multicultural movement persist. While systemic factors influence these problems, we must ask, "What is the role of the classroom teacher in addressing these problems?" Teacher educators, just as P-12 classroom teachers, must design curricula and experiences that meet the diverse needs of their students.

According to a recent report by the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB), the percentage of minority teachers in North Carolina is shrinking, even as the number of minority students grows. The percentage of minority teachers in the state is now less than half of the percentage of minority students. According to the SREB, in 1999, 19 percent of the state's teachers were minorities, and in 2001 the percentage had dropped to 16 percent. Nationally, less than 14 percent of teachers are minorities, according to the National Center for Education Statistics. By contrast, the percentage of minority students in the US grew from 32 percent in 1989 to 38 percent in 2000. For the current school year, over 40 percent of students in North Carolina students are minorities.

Those responsible for the preparation of teachers must engage in dialogue with others ways to provide opportunities to teacher candidates for intercultural experiences that prepare them to become culturally competent educators—teach all students in our increasingly diverse K-12 schools.

Overview of the Rural-Urban Exchange

The first Rural-Urban Exchange occurred during the spring semester of 2002. During that spring, the pilot exchange involved students from WCU and from NCA&T and visiting faculty from each university. According to the model that was established in that first exchange, students and faculty from WCU and NCA&T spend a week on the campuses of their partner universities. The host institution, at no cost to the visiting students and faculty, provides lodging, meals, and other services. The visits include welcoming and closing meals, visits to local public schools, and visits to cultural attractions, special seminars and debriefing and evaluation activities. The eighth exchange will take place in spring semester 2009.

Key components of the Rural-Urban Exchange are opportunities for reflection and discussion by students, and opportunities for the students from the partner institutions to interact in informal social settings. In addition, students complete a comprehensive evaluation instrument, the results of which have been used to revise and plan for subsequent exchanges.

Goals of the Rural-Urban Exchange

1. To provide teacher-education students from WCU substantial field experience in urban communities where they interact with students from diverse ethnic, racial, socioeconomic and language groups.
2. To supply teacher-education students from NCA&T with significant field experience with students in rural communities.
3. To furnish students from WCU and NCA&T the opportunity to work with university and public school faculty who will provide valuable skills and preparation for working with a diverse P-12 student population.

The students and faculty members engage in the following types of activities:

1. participate in field placements in local schools, including schools in Cherokee
2. participate in special seminars and/or workshops on the topic of addressing the needs of diverse students in public schools
3. attend cultural events in the host community, including theatrical performances and museum programs
4. attend social activities

Living and Learning Arrangements

1. Exchange students from WCU receive credit in Psychology or Special Education.
2. Exchange students pair with students at the partner university and serve as peer hosts when their partners visit campus.
3. Exchange students live in on the host campus and obtain meals from campus food service.

4. The exchange takes place during the semester prior to a student's internship or student teaching.
5. Partnerships with local school systems create field experience opportunities for visiting teacher-education students.

Plans for the future include seeking external funding to expand the exchange to include more students and faculty and more institutions. Plans also include establishing other formats for sharing experiences and resources. For example, we would like to make greater use of technology and offer a course that would be team taught by faculty at the partner institutions to students at both campuses via interactive television (ITV). Other proposed uses of technology include teleconferencing and online discussion groups involving participants from both institutions.

The Rural-Urban Exchange Program is one piece of a comprehensive "diversity plan" of the College of Education and Allied Professions for designing, implementing, and evaluating curricula and experiences to ensure that undergraduate candidates for licensure as teachers acquire the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to close the achievement gap and help all students learn in school. The Rural-Urban Exchange Program provides teacher-education students this experience, training and awareness prior to entering the classroom. These experiences include:

- working with diverse higher education and school faculty, diverse candidates, and diverse students in P-12 schools
- designing curricula and accompanying field experiences to help candidates understand the importance of diversity in teaching and learning.

In addition, this program serves as an opportunity for partner school systems to recruit diverse educators and have an impact on improving minority education in North Carolina.

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