Redesigning the Teacher Education Program at the University of South Dakota

Rick Melmer

I'm grateful for the opportunity to give you a teacher education perspective from a dean’s view. I’ve been dean of the School of Education at the University of South Dakota (USD) since 2008. I’ve come to this particular position with a very long history in K–12, so I have had to make a bit of an adjustment in my thinking. Some of those transitions have been easy, and some have been much more difficult, and I’m still a work in progress in terms of making that shift to a higher education perspective. USD has recently received a grant from the Bush Foundation out of Minneapolis, which was earmarked for a redesign of our teacher education program. We are currently in the midst of that redesign effort, and we’re looking at four key pillars that are going to drive our redesign process: recruit, prepare, place, and support.

Recruit

We need to recruit a higher quality of teacher education candidate and also recruit people in specific areas. Right now at the university we graduate anywhere from 100 to 150 students a year, so we’re very small compared to many other universities. In our analyses, we’ve found that we tend to graduate a lot of elementary education majors. Many of these students start out in other areas, but because the content becomes either too rigorous or too irrelevant, they have a tendency to move to elementary education. In my estimation, then, we are overproducing elementary education majors and underproducing teacher education candidates in key areas, mainly 7–12 content areas. What’s more, across the state and region we are

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overproducing in our larger communities and underproducing in many of our rural areas. So we are trying to come up with a way to incentivize 7–12 education majors and also incentivize young people to work in underserved areas. Too often we treat all of our education graduates the same—that is, we reward elementary education majors the same as we do everybody else, and then we wonder why we have a disparity in terms of producing too many of one and not enough of another. We are looking at specific ways to incentivize the high-need areas—both geographic and content area. So far we have not been terribly successful, but we are working on it. In our particular state, we have Indian reservations and very remote areas that are clearly in need of a variety of teachers. But too many of our young people choose to teach in our larger communities, leaving the underserved areas struggling to find high-quality teachers and underperforming as a result. So I’m hopeful that the university, through the efforts of the Bush Foundation grant, will begin to service those agencies a bit more purposefully.

Prepare

The second area is to prepare students differently than we have in the past—for classrooms of today, not classrooms of yesterday. We have formed a partnership with the New Tech High Foundation (now New Tech Network) and opened a New Tech High School near the University of South Dakota, so our secondary-education-trained students will be rotating through this high school to see what project-based learning is all about. As a result, they are going to be able to go out into their teaching assignments with a project-based learning focus. Our faculty members are being trained alongside the New Tech High faculty members in Sioux Falls every summer in the hopes that they will come back and illustrate and implement the New Tech High foundation in our methods courses for our secondary education majors. We are also trying to listen to more of our graduates. Some of our students have told us that their main areas of concern as they head out into the field are classroom management, meeting the needs of diverse learners, and implementing technology into their classrooms. I went back and looked at our curriculum and saw that it was very weak in those three areas. We know how adept young people are at using technology, but when it comes to implementing technology in a meaningful way in the classroom, many of them are struggling; they do not know how to do it effectively. We are now working on changing our curriculum in a way that reflects the needs of our graduates in those three areas.
We also need to do a better job of balancing theory and practice. Some of our students have noted that there is an imbalance between theory and practice, and though they didn’t elaborate on the disparity, I would be willing to bet my next paycheck that they are talking about too much theory and not enough practice. Therefore, we need to be more purposeful about implementing more practice in the curriculum.

**Place**

We need to be sure we are placing students in schools that are ready to receive interns and student teachers, and right now we don’t believe this is the case. Coming from my K–12 background, I’ve actually been quite surprised that the practicing teachers—the field-based supervisors—aren’t better prepared to handle student teachers or residency students. To address this problem, we are attempting to do more co-teaching training so that our field-based supervisors are getting the kind of training they need to help guide and direct our interns and our residency students as they move out into the field. Up till now, we’ve taken the warm-body approach: happy if someone was willing to take one of our students. We want to change that mentality to make sure that those supervisors in the field are ready to take our students, and if so, to talk about what that entails. This means we are going to have to expand our pool of schools and our network a bit to make sure that we are finding the very best people out there to support our students in the field. In addition, we are moving from a twelve-week student-teaching experience to a full-year residency model. Starting this year, students will spend three years on campus, then one year in a school. We are now working our way toward that model as our students work through the curriculum.

**Support**

Currently, once a student graduates, the only agency that keeps in touch with him or her is the foundation office, in the hopes of asking for donations later in life. We have been happy to say goodbye to our graduates, to wish them the best of luck in their future endeavors, and to not contact them after that. This is all about to change. The Bush Foundation requires a two- to four-year induction program upon graduation, and that will begin with this year’s freshman class. We are excited about this, in that it will be a great
way to get feedback on our program. Graduates will be able to tell us in a very vivid way what they know and what they don’t know, and we’ll be able to make the program more effective and help these people become more successful.

In summary, the key pillars we are focusing on are (1) recruiting a higher quality and quantity of student, (2) preparing them in a way that is going to help them move into today’s classrooms and be more effective, (3) placing them with established teachers who are ready to mentor instead of just willing to house students, and (4) supporting them beyond graduation.