

A Case Study of the Enrollment of African-American Transfer Students in a Special Teacher Education Project

By Gwendolyn S. Minter & Robert B. Young

Leaders throughout America have urged the education community to focus on the shortage of certified minority teachers in elementary and secondary education (e.g., Baez & Clarke, 1989-1990; Carnegie Task Force on Teaching as a Profession, 1986; Franklin, 1987; Gill, 1989). The leaders have stressed the need for minority students to identify with educators who can serve as role models and mentors. They have emphasized the importance of students receiving some of their instruction from teachers who are similar to themselves. They have expressed grave concern about who will be teaching minority youth.

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Very recently, programs have been established to address the minority teacher shortage (Anglin, 1989; Berhow & Knowles, 1989; Lyons, 1989). These programs focus on the recruitment and retention of minority students in teacher education, include special consideration for the urban setting, and involve cooperative agreements between universities and community colleges. Urban community colleges could be a rich source of minority teachers, provided that teacher education institutions offer special programs which encourage the enrollment and persistence of these students.

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This study attempted to describe the perceptions and experiences of 12 African-American students who transferred from a community college into a specially designed teacher education project in a predominantly white public state university in the Midwest. Information from the study revealed perceptions of both the community college and university environments. This information can be used to improve the recruitment and retention of minority students into teacher education.

Method

The research used the qualitative case study method in order to devise a conceptual framework. Robert K. Yin (1984) listed three conditions under which the selection of the case study was the preferred strategy: “when **how** or **why** questions are being posed, when the investigator has little control over events, and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomenon within some real-life context” (p. 13). The research intended to describe how and why African Americans enrolled and persisted in a specially designed teacher education project. Most of the events affecting the students’ perceptions could not be controlled. The project was a contemporary phenomenon in a real-life educational context. Since all three conditions were met, the case study was selected as the most appropriate method of inquiry.

This selection of the case study method was reinforced by the words of Sharan B. Merriam (1988): “A case study design can be used to test theory, but a qualitative case study usually builds theory” (p. 57). The proposed research was designed to generate hypotheses about the perceptions of African-American students enrolled in a specially designed program. Therefore, the case study method was the appropriate choice.

The main research questions asked about the relationship between student persistence decisions and: their background characteristics and individual attributes; their expectations and motivational attributes; their institutional commitments; and their reasons for enrolling, their expectations, and their perceived experiences in the project. Subordinate research questions were designed to gather the detailed data necessary for the creation of case studies with “thick” descriptions: “Thick description involves literal description of the entity being evaluated, the circumstances under which it is used, the characteristics of the people involved in it, the nature of the community in which it is located, and the like” (Guba & Lincoln, 1981, p. 119).

Yin (1984) has stated that the case study is an empirical inquiry in which multiple sources of evidence are used. This research involved the analysis of documents about the students, a series of open-ended interviews with each student, and informal interviews with educators involved with the project. These procedures had been proven to be the most suitable for descriptive research (Guba & Lincoln, 1981; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Spradley, 1979; Yin, 1984). They helped to improve

the trustworthiness of the qualitative data (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Egon G. Guba and Yvonna S. Lincoln (1981) contended that the trustworthiness of the data of a qualitative study is determined by the following criteria: “credibility for truth value, fittingness for applicability, auditability for consistency, and confirmability for neutrality” (p. 104). The truth value of the present study was established by cross-checking different data sources and using multiple methods of data collection and analysis. The fittingness for applicability was addressed through the thick descriptions of the case study reports, in which literal descriptions of the entity being evaluated, the circumstances under which they were used, the characteristics of the African-American students involved, the nature of the specially designed teacher education project, and the educational institution in which the research was conducted were included. Consistency was not an issue, for the goal of this study was to present emerging domains within a specific culture. However, an audit of the emerging categories within the study was made by an external judge with experience in qualitative research, in order to give a degree of assurance to the consistency in the development of the categories, thereby addressing the auditability of the study. The neutrality was established by confirming the information obtained from the informants through different sources and methods of data collection.

Relationships among the data were investigated using techniques recommended by James P. Spradley (1979) for the discovery of the concepts and meanings of language native to a particular culture. As domains of terms emerged from the analysis of the data, a taxonomic analysis was conducted for each domain. Subsets of the larger domains were then created. The larger inclusive domains, and their subsets, served to provide the structural framework for reporting the results of the present study.

Results

Following are the results of the cross case analysis of the data. The report follows criteria that Vincent Tinto (1975) considered to be crucial to the analysis of student enrollment and persistence, *i.e.*, the student’s (a) background characteristics and individual attributes, (b) motivational goals, (c) institutional commitments, and (d) project commitments and experiences.

Student Background Characteristics and Individual Attributes

The majority of the case study participants in the study were raised in predominantly Black, middle-class communities, enjoyed their pre-college educational experiences, and perceived themselves as being academically successful in high school. Because of variations in the types of communities, no inferences were drawn regarding the type of community where raised and student persistence decisions.

When comparing the educational background of the parent to parental support

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regarding the student's college attendance, the present research indicated that parental advice and encouragement are not affected by educational background. Most parents of the participants advised them to attend.

Student Goal Commitments

The student participants desired to become teachers while enrolled in primary and secondary schools, but made their decisions to pursue teaching careers after having enrolled in college. Their reasons for selecting teaching careers were altruistic and based on their desire to exert a positive impact on the lives of minority students. They felt the educational systems needed to be improved for the education of minorities, and perceived themselves as possessing the necessary attributes to serve as role models for minority youths—those of intelligence, articulation, and a natural ability to relate to children. They felt they possessed the qualities necessary to be outstanding teachers, and expected to have a major impact on the lives of their students.

The more pragmatic reasons for pursuing the teaching profession focused on previous job experiences and family considerations. Most subjects had experienced job dissatisfaction with previous employment and/or positive job experiences related to aspects of teaching. Results also showed that the case study participants who were parents mentioned the flexible work schedule of the teaching profession as one of their reasons for pursuing teaching. The desire to be available to their school-aged children during holidays and vacations was one of the most mentioned reasons for career selections.

Significant others played a major role in the career decisions and educational goals of the students. The persons who had played significant roles in the students' teaching career choices were overwhelmingly those who were employed in the field of education. It was interesting to note, however, that most subjects' parents had not worked in the education field, nor did they advise the students to pursue teaching careers.

The participants' educational goals were similar. Most expected to be academically successful, and to achieve a bachelor's degree in teacher education within two years. All participants expected to continue their formal education and to receive master's degrees in education; several students wanted to earn doctorates.

Institutional Commitments

Considerations Prior to Enrollment in the Project. Many students had attended both a metropolitan public university and a community college and, while differing in their expectations, had similar perceptions of both. Their perceptions of the university were generally negative, citing racial prejudice and lack of academic and social integration. However, their perceived experiences of the community college were basically positive, citing good academic and social integration as reasons.

The participants had either achieved their goals at the community college, or based on revised career goals, decided to withdraw in order to enroll in the teaching leadership program.

Considerations Involving the Host University. The students had differing expectations of the academic and social environments of the new host university, ranging from expectations of it being a small, Black college to a large, racially segregated, and insensitive university. However, findings indicated that participants perceived the academic environment of the university to include good student-faculty relationships and high quality instruction. They perceived the faculty as caring about their teaching and students.

After matriculation, the case study participants perceived the social environment of the university to be racially segregated. They perceived themselves as being isolated from the white student body and unwelcome, however, they felt strong affiliation and attachment to the African-American student participants of the project. While case study subjects did not perceive themselves to be socially integrated at the university, neither did they expect acceptance or sensitivity to minority students from the student body or the faculty. Consequently, their expectations of the student body matched their perceptions.

The only area in which student expectations of the academic environment were related to negative perceived experiences was in that of transferred credits. They expected transfer credits to place them at the Junior level, with only two remaining years to graduation. They were disappointed to learn that, while many credits were transferred, three years were required for undergraduate degree completion.

Project Expectations and Experiences

The areas addressed pertained to the student's (a) reasons for applying to the project, (b) motivations and educational goals as related to project participation, (c) student expectations of the academic and social environments in the project prior to admission, (d) student perceived experiences in the project, and (e) student decisions to persist or withdraw from the project.

The participants' primary reasons for applying to the project related to their expectations of financial assistance and student support services, and their conceptions that the project was a separate teacher education program designed to prepare minorities to teach minority pupils. They considered the project to be a catalyst for African-American students interested in pursuing teaching careers, and felt it provided an excellent opportunity to attend a major university on a full-time basis with all expenses paid.

The students' career goals stemmed from perceptions that African-American teachers are needed in the field of education and can serve as necessary role models to minority students. They held educational expectations that the project would provide the supports needed by minorities and non-traditional students to be

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successful in reaching teaching career goals. The motivational goals of the participants appear to have been met by the project's mission and objectives, because after extensive interviews and a complex application process, student participants decided to accept admission to the project.

Students admitted to the project had similar expectations of the academic and social environments of the teaching project. Academic environment expectations were similar in that the participants expected academic counseling and social activities to be provided by project administrators. They also expected to participate in a project seminar course designed to address the special interests of minority students pursuing teacher education degrees. Social environment expectations included full remission of tuition and residency fees at the university, and several expected to receive an additional \$5,000 stipend for personal expenses.

Participants' perceived experiences in the project were both positive and negative, and they had ambivalence regarding the benefits offered through project participation. The positive attitudes included those related to peer group relationships, registration assistance, and campus housing accommodations. All perceived their relationships with other project participants as primary benefits of membership, and attributed their positive perceptions of the social environment to these relationships. Most also perceived project administrators as sincere in their desire to meet the objectives of the project, and felt the staff and administrators of the project were committed to the mission and goals of the project.

Major criticisms of the project were focused on the lack of clear interpretation of the amounts and types of available financial assistance, and the poorly implemented project seminar course. Many participants felt their negative perceptions were related to the newness of the project, and anticipated improvements as the project progressed.

Ten of the 12 case study participants decided to remain in the teaching project, however, their reasons for persistence differed. All project participants expressed positive evaluations of the project, while all but one participant expressed negative evaluations as well. The project participants decided to persist or withdraw based upon their evaluations of the project and their expectations of future project developments.

The case study participant expectations of the teaching project did not match their perceived experiences. Many expressed misconceptions and disappointments in their expectations of the project, however, most students decided to persist, citing motivational attributes as reasons for their persistence decisions.

Implications of the Findings

In accordance with qualitative design, hypotheses rather than conclusions were generated from the findings. They are based on the interpretations of the general research questions, and address those areas in which limited research is currently available: (a) student goal commitments, (b) student institutional commitments,

and (c) student commitments to specially designed teacher education projects. Because of the nature and size of this study, these hypotheses should be regarded as tentative and subject to subsequent testing.

Hypotheses Related to Student Goal Commitments

1. African-American students will have desired to become teachers prior to college enrollment, but will have made career decisions after enrolling in college.
2. Persons considered to be significant to the African-American student's teaching career choice will have worked in the field of education.
3. African-American students who are parents and have selected teaching careers will consider the impact of their motivational goals on the lives of their school-age children.
4. African-American students in specially designed teacher education programs are not deterred by perceived low teaching salary levels.
5. African-American students pursuing teacher careers will have altruistic reasons for selecting the teaching profession.
6. African-American students pursuing teacher careers will perceive the educational system is not meeting the educational needs of African-American pupils.

Hypotheses Related to Student Institutional Commitments

1. African-American students will tend to have low expectations of the educational institution's social environment, but if their low expectations are countered by minimal positive perceptions of the social environment, they will choose to persist.
2. These students will tend to be more willing to overlook negative perceptions of the academic and social environments if they feel that institutional persistence will help them realize their goals.
3. Negative experiences regarding transferred course credits will not, in and of themselves, lead the student to withdrawal decisions.
4. African-American students who encounter academic or personal difficulties, would prefer to drop below full-time student status rather than endanger their grade-point averages.
5. Students who perceive being unwelcome and isolated from the student body will perceive positive social environments if they establish good relationships with other project participants.

Hypotheses Related to Student Project Commitments

1. The students will have similar demographics and will tend to be female, single-parents, approximately 30 to 40 years of age.
2. The students will most likely have been raised by both parents, in predominantly African-American, middle-class, suburban communities.
3. The students will have had parents who completed high-school educations,

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encouraged them to attend college, and offered minimal advice regarding their career choices.

4. High-school experiences of the students will be similar in that they will have received college preparatory high-school educations, have positive attitudes about high-school experiences, and feel academically successful.
5. The students choosing to enroll in specially designed teacher education programs will have been previously employed and experienced job dissatisfaction.
6. African-American students who have teaching career goals are more likely to apply to teaching projects if the financial aid package offered will cover all educational expenses and some personal expenses.
7. When African-American students perceive the mission and objectives of the project to be supportive of their educational and career goals, they will decide to persist in specially designed teacher education projects.
8. African-American student participants will overlook negative perceptions of a specially designed teacher education project if it has been newly developed, shows plans for improvement, and they perceive the administrators to be sincere.
9. The student participants will decided to persist in the specially designed project if they perceive their membership as having a positive impact on the success of the project.

Conclusion

Results of the present study indicate that much research is still needed in the area of African-American student commitments to specially designed teacher education projects, if current and future projects are to be successful in meeting their goals. The newness of such projects and the likelihood that they will serve as prototypes for future projects require in-depth study of African-American student goal commitments, institutional commitments, and commitments to specially designed teacher education projects.

When conducting future research on specially designed teacher education projects, the criteria to be considered should include the offering of (a) financial assistance, (b) tutorial support services, (c) assistance with transferring from community colleges to four-year institutions, (d) conveniences related to the student's ability to attend classes, (e) development seminars, and (f) exposure to successful minority educators. This is suggested because the present study has found these variables to be indicative of African-American student commitments to specially designed teacher education projects.

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