

Barriers and Bridges to Success: Factors for Retention of Nontraditional Mexican American Students in Teacher Education

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Abstract

This paper discusses the findings of a qualitative, microethnographic case study of 15 nontraditional, Mexican American students as they completed their coursework in a 2+2 teacher education program in the Midwest. The theoretical frameworks that serve as the basis of this study are Tinto's Model of Student Integration (Tinto, 1975, 1993), Bean's attrition model (1980), and von Destinon's empowerment model (1988). This integrated framework is an inclusive adaptation as it addresses the complex interaction among first-generation, Mexican American students' backgrounds, geographical locations, and the institutions that serve them. The researchers identify characteristics of those students who persisted on to graduation, and they suggest critical capacities and actions among implementers that serve as factors of support in nontraditional student retention and graduation.

Educational institutions across the United States are struggling to address the significant lack of “highly qualified” educators—those licensed in the content

area(s) and the grade level they are currently teaching—in our nation’s schools. Especially in very rural, isolated schools and in large urban schools there are extreme shortages of teachers qualified to teach in subject areas such as science, math, and English for speakers of other languages (ESOL). As part of the No Child Left Behind legislation, states are required to measure the extent to which students have highly qualified teachers—particularly minority and disadvantaged students—and to adopt goals and plans to ensure all teachers are highly qualified (USDOE, 2004). In order to address these measures at the systemic level, leaders and change agents within institutions of higher education (IHEs) and local educational agencies (LEAs) are rethinking how they prepare preservice and in-service teachers.

The shortage of “highly qualified” educators, along with the ongoing increase in the number of retirees and new teachers leaving the field, has prompted IHEs and LEAs to form partnerships to consider new ways of working to effectively deal with this dilemma (Darling-Hammond, 1997; Gay, Dingus, & Jackson, 2003; Hussar, 1999). It is projected that “over 2.5 million teachers needed in the next ten years will be first-time teachers” (Gutierrez, 2006, p. 17) and the majority of the new students they will be serving will be culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD). For this reason, it is critical that IHEs and LEAs help to diversify the nation’s teaching force and provide quality teacher education programs to equip future educators with the skills they need to successfully teach all students (Flores, 1992; Gutierrez, 2006; Hussar, 1999; Valenciana, Weisman, & Flores, 2006).

Surprisingly, the rural Midwest is experiencing the greatest increase in their CLD student population in some of the most remote areas of the region, in districts where it is often difficult to lure and retain teachers (Darling-Hammond, 1997). In the three Midwest communities where the current study was conducted, geographic location and access to resources served as the major hindrances for teacher recruitment and retention (Gutierrez, 2006; USDE, 1998). These communities are located in rural regions of the state without access to a four-year university. The university in this study (which we will call Midwestern State for the purposes of this paper) is located 230 miles from the nearest partner community and 312 miles from the furthest partner community involved in this study.