Peeking Inside Pandora’s Box: One University’s Journey into the Redesign of Teacher Educator Preparation

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Summary:
There are many variations of the Greek myth of Pandora, who was given a box by Zeus and asked never to open it. However, against the wishes of the god, Pandora opened the box, unleashing evil and badness onto the world. She managed to shut the lid in order that hopelessness would not escape. The state of teacher education is analogous to this myth. Opening the box requires teacher educators to scrutinize teacher education in relation to pressures of high stakes testing, the growth of alternative certification programs, the lack of funding, and the increasing diversity of the student population. Although the obstacles seem ominous, educators hold onto hope and work to provide a suitable education for 21st century, teacher candidates.

The need for revision in the education of teacher candidates is imperative, and also an arduous task for current educators. The first task in accomplishing the goal of revision was the concept of redesigning the program itself to meet the needs of the current society. In this it was found that 25% of students live in poverty, 10-20% has identified learning difficulties, 15% speak another language other than English, and 40% are members of minority groups. Educators must break out of the old mold, and create a new model of teaching for those students who are culturally diverse to be effective. Educators must also realize that basic skills are necessary but not sufficient for the 21st century learner. Segregation of instructional divisions such as regular education from special education can lead future educators to believe that do not necessarily engage with the other. Also, programs that seek to increase the number of teachers with English as a Second Language and Special Education certifications may assist with the shortage of current educators in these fields.

The change process at The University of Texas at Tyler commenced following the review of online survey data conducted with teacher candidates. The survey indicated that graduates and constituents wanted the program to provide more instruction that would prepare them for general education needs in the classroom. It also indicated that the population of the school of education was predominately female and Caucasian. This in concordance with the Texas Education Agency’s own data showed an increasing diverse population of students being in Bilingual, ESL, and Special Education Programs. After reviewing all of the data, the idea of developing a single program that would lead to graduates being able to obtain certification in all three areas- Generalist, Special Education, and ESL was born. With this new plan, the University was able to generate new classes, syllabi, and teaching professionals to turn the program around. Successful implementation of the new program was achieved by three critical variables: personnel, open lines of communication, and organizing courses into a phase structure. A third key element that aided in the transition was the construction of four distinct phases.

The transition from a generic program to new, revamped program was not done overnight, and was not without its own difficulties. However, the ability of students and educators alike to keep an open mind and be flexible and willing to grow with the program were essential to the relatively smooth transition. The University of Texas at Tyler’s education program is stronger than ever before. The faculty and students are now appropriately prepared to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

Citation: