How Does Location Impact Meaning and Opportunity? Rural Schools and the NCATE Diversity Standard

by Debra Miretzky & Sharon Stevens — 2011
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Background/Context: While there is ample evidence that the K–12 student population is becoming increasingly diverse and the teacher workforce is not, very little literature addresses the specific problems rural teacher education programs may experience attempting to meet the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) diversity standard. A 2005 NCATE-sponsored survey found that an unknown number of respondents indicated difficulty in meeting the requirements of the standard and that “geographically isolated” programs were especially affected. The existing research that targets rural programs tends to describe specific practices. As NCATE and TEAC, the two major teacher education accreditation programs, move toward consolidation, revisiting the expectations regarding diversity is critical.

Purpose/Objective/Research Question/Focus of Study: The purpose of this study was to explore rural SCDEs’ experiences with the diversity standard as well as the implications of these experiences, with the aim of reporting and suggesting possible strategies for enhancing the application of the standard at the institutional and agency levels. We hypothesized that rural schools experience difficulty with meeting aspects of the standard due to the potential limitations associated with the schools’ locations. Research questions focused on how rural programs define diversity, identification of obstacles, priorities for programs, and adaptations. One hundred and sixteen NCATE coordinators and/or deans participated in the study’s online survey.

Research Design: This research was an exploratory study that used qualitative and quantitative methods. The instrument included survey questions and items for open-ended responses.

Conclusions/Recommendations: Rural teacher education programs do experience difficulties with meeting the requirements of the NCATE diversity standard. Respondents singled out recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and candidates, inability to provide high-quality diversity experiences, and location as the biggest issues. Respondents perceived that NCATE focuses on race and ethnicity to the exclusion of other categories. In particular, respondents reported strong beliefs that SES and exceptionalities are more universal and more locally relevant and deserve to be recognized as critical priorities for educating candidates who could build on this competence in working with other diversities—a kind of “transferable skills” perspective. Programs would like to see recognition for “good faith” efforts and would value the
opportunity to demonstrate the strengths and generalizability of their diversity programs. As NCATE and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) move toward consolidation, new frameworks for assessing these frameworks should be considered.

The student demographics of our nation’s schools reflect the expanding population of minority and low-income children, while at the same time, practicing teachers and those in teacher education programs remain largely White, female, and middle class (U.S. Department of Education, 2007; Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). The majority of teacher candidates enter the profession with limited experience with cultures different from their own (Zumwalt & Craig, 2005). Research is clear that justifiable concerns about the potential outcomes of this unpreparedness, including lowered student achievement (Ferguson, 2005; Oates, 2003; Rumberger & Palardy, 2005), increased special education referrals (Boyd & Correa, 2005; Chamberlain, 2005), and dropout issues (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006; Little & Garber, 2004), exist.

Many highly respected scholars and educators have issued clear and unambiguous calls for the need to prepare teacher candidates to effectively teach diverse students and to confront teachers’ own discomfort and anxiety about doing so (Howard, 2006; Landsman & Lewis, 2006; Tatum, 1999). As a result, colleges and universities with teacher education programs have created a variety of courses and activities designed to provide their teacher education candidates with content knowledge and experiences that will foster “culturally responsive teaching” (Gay, 2000). However, the capacity of teacher education programs to prepare candidates to teach in diverse classrooms varies widely. As Hollins and Guzman (2005, p. 512) noted, “program evaluation research suggests that universities are at different points in their preparedness for addressing issues of cultural and linguistic diversity.”

Currently, the most common means of assessing whether institutions have met such goals comes via the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and their diversity standard, which defines diversity as “differences among groups of people and individuals based on ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, and geographical area” (NCATE, n.d.). The standard itself reads:

The unit [teacher education program] designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and provides experiences for candidates to acquire and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions necessary to help all students learn. . . . Experiences provided for candidates include working with diverse populations, including higher education and P–12 school faculty, candidates, and students in P–12 schools.

Meeting this standard presumably means that “all teacher candidates . . . develop proficiencies for working effectively with students and families from diverse populations and with exceptionalities to ensure that all students learn” (NCATE, n.d.).

Little research has explored how rural institutions address the diversity standard and what degree of difficulty they encounter doing so. Rural programs,¹ which represent approximately a quarter of NCATE-accredited institutions, may be more likely to struggle with meeting the standard (Mitchell & Yamagishi, 2005). The authors, who are unaffiliated with NCATE, are faculty at a rural Illinois institution that endeavors to make use of limited opportunities but routinely
encounters logistic and philosophical obstacles in meeting NCATE expectations. It seemed likely that other rural programs would face similar challenges. The purpose of this study was to explore rural SCDEs’ experiences with the diversity standard as well as the implications of these experiences, with an eye toward suggesting possible strategies for enhancing the application of the standard at the institutional and agency levels.

Among other findings, we learned that, while rural SCDEs endorse the NCATE definition of diversity, many expressed strong concerns with what was perceived as a narrow application of the definition by reviewers—concerns that included a focus on race and ethnicity to the exclusion of other types of diversity, such as socioeconomic status (SES) and exceptionalities, that are seen as far more significant. In addition, many respondents commented on a lack of consideration regarding the limitations the respondents faced, not only in terms of candidate experiences but also with recruitment and retention of faculty and teacher candidates. We discuss the implications of these findings and offer recommendations and suggestions for future research. Chief among these recommendations is the suggestion that NCATE consider the full range of diversity characteristics and the contexts of the rural landscape in the organization’s review of rural institutions, so that accreditation decisions are perceived as—and are—more valid and reliable, based on minimum requirements that are clear and reasonable.

AN NCATE CONTEXT

NCATE was founded by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), the National Association of State Directors of Teacher Education and Certification (NASDTEC), the National Education Association (NEA), the Council of Chief State School Officers (CCSSO), and the National School Boards Association (NSBA), in 1954, replacing AACTE as the agency responsible for accreditation in teacher education (NCATE, n.d.). Accreditation in teacher education is a voluntary process that teacher education schools undergo to burnish their credentials as programs of high quality, integrity, and rigor. States may have their own accreditation processes, but a glance at NCATE’s website shows that the organization is involved with the vast majority of state accreditation processes. NCATE claims 50 partnerships with states as well as Puerto Rico and Washington, DC. In 17 of those states, all public SCDEs are NCATE-accredited; in another 31, a majority is NCATE-accredited. Thirty-nine states have adopted or adapted NCATE standards for state approval of programs; in those cases, institutions that have not opted to be accredited still respond to NCATE standards as the institutions seek state approval for their SCDEs.

For the majority of teacher education programs that seek accreditation, there is no getting away from participation in the NCATE process, whether they would choose this route willingly or not. Until 1997, NCATE had little competition in the accreditation business; however, that year, the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) was established as an alternative to NCATE and, at this writing, has about 100 member organizations, including Boston College, Hofstra University, Michigan State University, New York University, Princeton University, and the University of Virginia at Charlottesville. NCATE continues to assess, by far, the majority of teacher education programs in the United States, with 657 institutions on full or provisional accreditation. At this writing, NCATE and TEAC have announced their intention to work toward consolidation; both governing boards have approved the creation of a new accrediting body that
will be functioning by the end of 2012 and will be called the Council for the Accreditation of Education Preparation (CAEP).

Many states have requirements for SCDEs regarding coursework, standards, or both which are even more stringent than NCATE’s alone. Examining state approval requirements is beyond the scope of this paper; however, a brief review of 25 states with significant rural areas produced some remarkably precise requirements for SCDEs regarding diversity requirements. In terms of coursework, for example, Georgia requires that its teachers be prepared to “teach from multicultural and global perspectives that draw on the histories, experiences and representations of students from diverse cultural backgrounds.” Iowa teachers, as part of their diversity preparation, must be prepared to work with mobile students and students who abuse drugs. Nebraska’s state policy calls for training that fosters “the ability to recognize the ways in which dehumanizing biases may be reflected in instructional materials.” More often than not, SCDEs are expected to meet multiple sets of standards and a broad range of requirements.

According to NCATE, to attain accreditation a program must undergo a thorough external review by trained professionals. Programs must show evidence that they effectively prepare teacher candidates in a way that meets standards developed by a consortium of educational organizations. Additionally, programs must demonstrate that their teacher candidates are prepared effectively before pursuing licensure (NCATE, n.d.). Generally, programs are assessed for continuing accreditation every 7 years.

While there have been recent criticisms of whether NCATE accreditation actually improves teacher preparation programs (Allington, 2005; Johnson, Johnson, Farenga, & Ness, 2005; Levine, 2006) and K–12 teacher performance (Vergari & Hess, 2002), NCATE accreditation is considered (and marketed as) the gold standard of teacher education accreditation. In addition, as Levine (2006) pointed out, the process plays a dominant role in the organization and content of teacher preparation curriculums, as faculty and administrators work to incorporate the types of content and experiences that reflect the aims of the six standards the programs will be assessed on.

The Diversity Standard

The diversity standard (Standard 4) adopted by NCATE in 1977 came about in a culture of growing awareness of the need for “schools to integrate the curriculum with content and understandings about ethnic groups” (Banks, 1993b, p. 20) and was implemented “as a means to [reinforce] the Supreme Court’s desegregation mandate” (Baltodano, 2006, p. 123). Development of the standard was supported by prominent national education groups such as AACTE, the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE), and the National Council for the Social Studies (NCSS). The early standard was concise: “The institution gives evidence of planning for multicultural education in its teacher education curricula including both the general and professional studies components” (NCATE, 1977). James A. Banks, a noted scholar of multicultural education, believed that the creation of this standard stimulated the growth of multicultural education in teacher education programs (Banks, 1993a). He wrote:

One of the most influential developments that occurred during the early emergence of multicultural education was the issuance of Standards for the Accreditation of Teacher Education
by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 1977. These standards required all of its member teacher education institutions, which consisted of about 80% of the teacher education programs in the United States, to implement components, courses, and programs in multicultural education. (Banks, 1993b, p. 21)

Rural Schools and Diversity

Many SCDEs, particularly those in or near urban areas, are able to take advantage of nearby districts that provide a ready supply of classrooms filled with K–12 students representing the broad range of diversity NCATE requires teacher education candidates to experience firsthand. While faculty of color remain a distinct minority in SCDEs (and in higher education in general), urban institutions are more likely to be able to recruit and retain faculty and, perhaps only slightly more successfully, given the profession’s difficulty with attracting minority candidates (Villegas & Lucas, 2004), teacher education students of varied backgrounds.

Schools in other locations, especially in rural locations, may confront more challenges. A 2005 NCATE survey (Mitchell & Yamagishi, 2005) of approximately 760 deans and NCATE coordinators, administered as part of an NCATE review cycle, asked respondents to assess the overall standards and accreditation process. The data showed “a high degree of overall satisfaction with the appropriateness and effectiveness of the NCATE Unit Standards” (p. 2), and the vast majority of respondents agreed that the diversity standard and its rubrics and narrative were clearly stated. However, the study authors also reported comments that reflected concerns about the “difficulty of meeting the standard” (p. 7), interpretations of the definition of diversity, lack of consistency in the rubric, a perceived emphasis on counting minorities over development of candidates, and a desire on the part of institutions “to learn about what other institutions are doing” (p. 7). In particular, those respondents from institutions that experience “geographic isolation” reported that they found it “impossible to meet” (p. 7) the requirements to employ diverse faculty, admit diverse students, and provide P–12 field placements in diverse settings. Some suggested the requirements be eliminated. An assertion in a 2001 Education Week article on the emergence of TEAC makes a similar claim about institutional unhappiness regarding the standard, reporting:

[The] diversity component of NCATE caused many smaller institutions to balk. For example, those that could not attract African-American or Hispanic teacher-educators failed to meet that NCATE criterion. Alone, such a deficiency does not disqualify an institution from achieving accreditation. Coupled with other inadequacies, it could. (Blair, 2001, p. 12)

Other than this survey, which is posted on the NCATE website, it is very difficult to find any literature that addresses the specific problems rural schools may experience attempting to meet the diversity standard. Yeo (1999) has done some work on the difficulties of persuading monoethnic rural communities and the teachers who work in these communities that diversity, while not necessarily obvious, can indeed be found in these settings, and that multiculturalism is a valuable framework for considering educational issues. Hollins and Guzman’s (2005) review of research on preparing teachers to work with diverse populations found little in terms of solid findings other than the suggestion that relocation of rural teacher candidates for field experiences, in general, was “helpful and useful to them as teachers” (pp. 496–497). This conclusion came with a caveat that small sample sizes, volunteer participants, and instructors acting as researchers
might skew the results of the studies the authors had analyzed. Other scattered literature records a lack of opportunity in helping agriculture students grapple with diversity (Wakefield, Talbert, & Pense, 2006), the establishment of a reading room as a means of enhancing comfort with diversity (Ploghoft, Ruhl, Crossland, & Wall, 2009), and the use of video conferencing to expose students to diverse K–12 classrooms (Phillion, Malewski, & Richardson, 2006)—discrete concerns or strategies that do not reflect an overall perspective on the issue.

The purpose of this study was to explore rural SCDEs’ experiences with the diversity standard as well as the implications of these experiences, with the aim of reporting and suggesting possible strategies for enhancing the application of the standard at the institutional and agency levels. The questions guided this research were: (a) How do rural SCDEs define diversity? (b) What is the most important element of diversity candidates need to be familiar with? (c) What are the most significant obstacles SCDEs face in meeting the standard? (d) How successful are programs at meeting the diversity expectations? (e) What activities and resources do rural schools utilize to promote diversity learning? (f) What of these are most significant for teaching and learning and for social and cultural understanding? (g) In what ways do rural schools think out of the box to meet the standard?

HOW DOES LOCATION AFFECT MEANING AND OPPORTUNITY?

METHODOLOGY

Sample

We sent surveys to the teacher education programs of 169 schools categorized as rural by the College Board. We did not know specifics of the population of the area surrounding a given school and acknowledge that there is growing diversity in rural areas in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2010); 8 schools in our original sample were majority Black institutions, as well. Respondents were able to challenge their designation as rural while providing demographic information; all but 3 SCDEs agreed with this classification, and these schools were removed from our sample.

Surveys were sent to the colleges’ designated NCATE coordinators, where identified. In the few cases where coordinators could not be identified, surveys were sent to the dean of the College of Education. The colleges’ administrative staff gave us significant help in identifying the responsible faculty member to receive the survey. We ultimately received responses from 135 schools; 17 were incomplete and removed from the analysis, resulting in a final sample size of 116 (a 71% response rate). Almost half (53) of the survey respondents are institutions that graduate 100 or fewer teacher education candidates each year. Twenty-five percent of the participating schools graduate between 100 and 200 candidates each year, 10% graduate between 200 and 300, and 13% graduate 300 or more. Forty-nine percent of the responding schools are in the southern region of the United States and 35% from the Midwest. Only 10% are from the Northeast, and 7% are located in Western states. Virtually all of these programs are NCATE-accredited, though 30 were anticipating visits from NCATE examiners in either 2010 or 2011.

While a response rate of 71% for an online survey provides a sample size that we believe bestows some reliability, we recognize potential limitations to this study. As noted, survey
responses were provided by only one representative of a given program, and this means that we
must rely on the presumed representativeness of the respondent for an accurate portrayal of the
diversity aspects of his or her program. A few respondents notified us that their completed
survey would be returned once they had received feedback from other faculty and staff, but it is
unlikely that this happened consistently across programs, especially since the survey was sent
during the summer. Another possible limitation is that the respondent may have answered based
on his or her own teaching styles and preferences rather than the program’s overall take on the
issues raised by the survey. For example, we have a colleague who uses media extensively and
effectively in his multicultural courses. If he were the NCATE coordinator responding to the
survey, his comments could reflect more of an investment in such activities than a consensus
based on total faculty feedback might.

In addition, any online survey can engender concerns about confidentiality or other issues
regarding identity or responses. We do not know if respondents may have been concerned about
the nature of our relationship with NCATE, though we made it clear in our e-mail invitation and
on the opening page of the survey that we had no connections with the organization and the
research we were engaged in was solely for our own purposes. Nonetheless, the sample size is
robust, and we believe that the data we have gathered reinforce some unsurprising concerns
about NCATE’s diversity standard while also revealing some insights about how location
impacts the meaning of diversity and the opportunities for experiencing diversity for rural
teacher education programs.

Instrument

We developed the survey questions based on the definition of diversity and the standards to be
met as outlined by NCATE (NCATE, n.d.). The five-page online survey contained one page of
demographic questions (state location, number of graduates yearly, and confirmation of rural
status). The second page asked respondents to clarify their definition of diversity; to choose
among options for presenting diversity in their program (assignments, experiences, readings, etc.)
and to choose which of these seemed most effective for examining and addressing diversity
issues focused on (a) teaching and learning and (b) social and cultural awareness. The third page
presented tables that combined the elements of diversity (race, ethnicity, etc.) and the contexts in
which NCATE expects exposure for candidates, and asked respondents to choose where the
institution’s candidates were likely to have meaningful interaction with each of the various
aspects of diversity (e.g., “RACE: Our teacher education candidates have meaningful interaction
with this element of diversity among faculty at our college/university”). This page also requested
that respondents choose which aspect of diversity they felt was most important for their
candidates to be exposed to and why. Three open-ended questions about obstacles to meeting the
standards, out-of-the-box solutions that the institution had considered or tried, and an “any other
comments” option completed the survey.

UNDERSTANDING DIVERSITY AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Definitions of Diversity

Sixty-three (67%) of the respondents noted that their schools use NCATE’s diversity types
(“ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual
orientation, and geographical area”) as their own institution’s working definition (23 schools did not provide a definition or specifically endorse NCATE’s). Schools that did not use the NCATE definition verbatim tended to provide similar definitions but added categories that were more broadly inclusive, such as “experiences with cultures and individuals different from oneself.” Other schools endorsed definitions similar to NCATE’s but included additional specific elements, such as national origin, family structure, physical ability, mental ability, experiential background, marital status, immigration status, veteran status, and age; this last tallied the most mentions (11) among the additions.

NCATE: Broad Definition, Narrow Application?

As noted, SCDEs do not appear to disagree much with NCATE’s definition of diversity or any of the components the definition articulates. However, approximately a third of respondents expressed strong concerns with what the respondents perceived was a narrow application of the definition by NCATE reviewers. Respondents were not specifically asked if they believed NCATE prioritized particular aspects of diversity but were asked about which element of diversity they believed was most critical to expose their candidates to, as well as the obstacles the schools faced in meeting the NCATE diversity standard. Within these questions and in responses to other sections of the survey, participants volunteered that they perceived NCATE’s interpretation of diversity, as defined in the standard, to be narrower in practice, with evaluators focusing on race and ethnicity:

During our NCATE Visit, the NCATE Chair insisted that we did not meet this [fourth] standard because of our lack of racial/ethnically diverse faculty and students. When I pulled out the NCATE definition, she said, “Well I know, but that’s not really what they are looking for.” I fought her on this and won. I was furious.

There are other attributes [of diversity], but it appears that NCATE reviewers only see the “black or white” issue when addressing this standard!

The Diversity Standard is very broad in its definition but when one tries to make a case that transferable skills related to the area of socioeconomic diversity can help candidates work with different kinds of diversity it is met with little enthusiasm.

Twenty-five comments specifically discussed this limited focus in some fashion, and 12 other respondents referenced the difficulty in recruiting the faculty and candidates the respondents saw as meeting NCATE’s expectations. A summary of these comments shows that the respondents strongly believed that, as one commenter put it, the “one-size-fits-all view of diversity that privileges race over every other kind of diversity” actually limits students’ learning opportunities and does not prepare them adequately for the “very real but somewhat invisible diversities of disability, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender, family structure, etc. that exist in the communities where we are,” particularly if students choose not to teach in an urban area. Respondents felt that NCATE minimized elements of diversity such as SES, exceptionalities, and geographic diversity (such as in Appalachia).

What Matters Most
In attempting to understand respondents’ priorities regarding rural SCDEs’ education for
diversity, we asked the respondents to choose the one aspect of diversity, out of NCATE’s nine,
that they felt was the most important for their programs to address and for students to experience
while in the teacher education program. The most frequent response, 29%, was that
exceptionalities was the most important category for teacher candidates to be exposed to. This
category was closely followed by SES (27%). Ethnicity (16%) and race (12%) received a much
lower response rate. No responses indicated gender, religion, or sexual orientation as the most
important category. As illustrated by the participants’ comments below, the major themes in
selecting a priority were either a consideration of what has the greatest impact on the classroom
environment and student achievement or a consideration of what aspect of diversity, ultimately,
respondents believed their teachers were most likely to encounter in classrooms, particularly in
their local area.

Exceptionalities

Twenty-nine of the 34 schools that selected exceptionalities as the most important element of
diversity provided an explanation for their answer. A few provided multiple explanations, for a
total of 31 supporting statements. Three themes appeared within their comments—that
exceptionality has the greatest impact on the classroom environment, is the aspect the schools’
candidates will most frequently encounter, and cuts across all other areas of diversity.

Almost half of the respondents offered a variation on the belief that exceptionalities “has the
most direct impact on the P–12 classroom environment,” in no small part because of legal
considerations and the inclusion model of teaching. As one respondent stated:

If the focus is on student learning, understanding exceptionalities which are obstructions to
learning is the most important. I cannot change ethnicity, race, gender, religions, geography, and
socioeconomic conditions . . . but I can address content and pedagogies based upon God given
talents of all spectrums.

The second most common explanation for why exceptionalities is the most important aspect of
diversity was that exceptionalities would be encountered by all teachers, in all classrooms, on a
regular basis. In a summary of the importance of exceptionalities on classroom environment and
frequency of occurrence, one respondent observed:

When teacher candidates enter classrooms, no matter where their location, they will interact with
a variety of exceptional students. Those students will possess the other characteristics of
diversity, but exceptionalities have a direct impact on how they learn and, as a result, how our
teacher candidates teach.

The third most common explanation was that exceptionalities “cuts across all other aspects of
diversity.” One respondent remarked, “As future teachers, I believe that being able to work with
all kinds of gifted and challenged children/youth will provide the best training from which to
generalize to all other kinds of diversity.” Several also noted that exceptionalities can serve as a
“springboard to talk about discrimination” and provide a model for adapting lessons to serve all
students.
In a close second, socioeconomic status was the second choice of 31 schools as the aspect of diversity respondents felt their students needed to be familiar with. Thirty respondents provided explanations for their choice; some provided multiple explanations, resulting in a total of 34 statements. Three themes became evident—that SES is the most prominent diversity type in rural areas, cuts across and impacts other aspects of diversity, and has the greatest impact on achievement.

Half of those who chose SES linked their choice to the prevalence of poverty around them, in their communities and states; one noted, “It is a huge factor in rural schools.” They also mentioned that SES was not as “visible” as other diversities and could be minimized or overlooked as a factor in student learning. Many respondents indicated that teacher candidates are most likely, as well, to find positions in low-income schools, and the teachers “have to understand how socioeconomics will impact learning in these schools.”

More than a third of those choosing SES stated that SES had no boundaries: “Poverty tends to be the ultimate issue. That is the area that has the greatest domino affect for home and school. It tends to have the greatest impact on student achievement.” As with exceptionalities, there was a sense that competence in teaching low-income students would provide a foundation for competence in teaching other students from other groups: “Socioeconomic status crosses all areas of diversity, and if teacher candidates can learn to respect all students regardless of their socioeconomic status, then they will set high performance goals for ALL students regardless of their differences.”

**Ethnicity and Race**

Explanations for choosing either of these elements as the most critical varied. Half of those choosing ethnicity felt that other diversities such as religion, language, and geographic location could comfortably fit under its umbrella; that ethnicity served as a “template for going on to address other aspects of diversity.” Those choosing race as most significant cited their students’ lack of exposure to and experience with other races before acceptance into the teacher education program. As one respondent wrote, students have “less experience with thinking about the theoretical, curricular, and instructional implications of race than some other areas. They come with some assumptions.”

**The Reality of Rural Schools**

One additional theme to the concerns raised about the definition of diversity had to do with the perceived fairness regarding assessment of institutional attempts to meet this broad standard in the context of the schools’ locations. Sixteen respondents addressed this in comments; as one explained:

We feel the standard is good, but we feel that institutions should be pushing whatever situation they find themselves in. In other words, an urban university shouldn’t get a free pass just because there’s a lot of diverse interaction there but no strategy for addressing diversity in the curriculum or field placements. And a rural school shouldn’t get a bunch of slaps on the wrist for not
meeting quotas if they have creative procedures in place to expose their homogeneous student body to urban field experiences and lesson planning requirements that address multiple forms of diversity. I know most NCATE BOE [Board of Examiners] members would agree with this, but in practice it seems that [the] small rural school is not totally understood by NCATE team members from urban and large school environments.

**Faculty**

Responding schools frequently noted four specific challenges: limited diversity among faculty and teacher candidates, the inability to provide an appropriate setting for student teaching, and geographic location. Forty-nine programs cited a lack of diverse faculty and/or problems with retaining diverse faculty as one of the programs’ main obstacles to meeting NCATE requirements. One respondent observed:

Our faculty is not seen as “diverse.” This is hard to believe when one faculty member is an Atheist, one is a homosexual, and one is Asian-American. It seems that the “unwritten rule” of NCATE is having African American faculty. We have a problem attracting African American faculty to our rural location.

Another respondent noted:

For small rural colleges it is virtually impossible for us to recruit culturally diverse faculty. While on-line “course sharing” would be an option, I feel that it is not a satisfactory solution but simply an attempt to satisfy a requirement.

**Candidates**

Forty-six respondents cited a lack of diverse candidates and difficulty with recruiting diverse candidates as top obstacles to meeting the NCATE standard. A number of respondents specifically raised “pipeline” issues as part of their problem with minority recruitment in general:

…a lot more incentives need to be found to encourage students from different ethnic backgrounds to enter the profession of teaching.

It is difficult to complete for the few students of color in the state when all institutions offer free rides.

**High-Quality Field Experiences**

Forty-eight respondents named the inability to provide a high-quality K–12 setting for students’ field experiences; some specifically noted difficulties meeting expectations for race or ethnicity categories:

The region of the state in which we are located, and thus where we place most of our students for field experiences and student teaching, has a very low percentage of racial minority students in K–12 schools. Hence, it is difficult to place our students in racially diverse schools for field experiences and student teaching.
While the overall difficulty with assuring diverse experiences in nondiverse areas is the most obvious issue for teacher preparation programs, some respondents pointed out other less obvious challenges:

Some of our best teacher models are in school settings that are not seen as “diverse.” Many of our “diverse settings” provide poor teaching models, limited technology, and limited outcomes for student learning.

Guaranteeing and/or documenting diversity in field experiences in terms of religion or sexual orientation.

Not all schools with diverse (ethnically/racially) populations want to have interns—they still believe having interns will detract from their ability to meet high stakes standards (whereas we show in school after school how having our interns leads to improved student achievement).

**Location**

Finally, 32 respondents identified simply “location” as a general problem:

We are not near a major metropolitan area where people who are diverse might find others like themselves, and this makes recruitment more difficult.

We live in an area that is fairly small and in which people tend to seem to be alike. Helping students see diversity in this can be quite a challenge.

We do not attract faculty of color to our institution very readily. This is a very homogeneous area that doesn’t offer nearly as much on the local cultural scene as what faculty of color from urban area graduate schools desire as a living environment.

**Meaningful Interactions with Diversity**

Considering the potential limitations of geographically isolated areas, we asked about opportunities for candidates to have meaningful direct interactions with diversity in the varied settings required by the standard. We asked schools to report on interactions in the contexts of (a) faculty at the college/university, (b) faculty at field experience schools, (c) fellow students, (d) K–12 students during field experiences, and (e) K–12 students during student teaching experiences, for each of the nine elements of diversity as defined by NCATE. Gender was the only category the respondents from rural institutions reported candidates came close to having full interaction with. Respondents from rural institutions reported much less interaction with the other elements, although in some categories, such as SES and exceptionalities, this depended greatly on where and with whom candidates were interacting.

**Table 1. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Ethnicity with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus**
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<td>K–12 students in student teaching schools</td>
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Table 2. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Race with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

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<td>Fellow students in teacher education classes</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in field experience schools</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in student teaching schools</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in SES with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic status</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at our college/university</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at field experience schools</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students in teacher education</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
classes
K–12 students in
field experience
schools 104 97% 1 1% 2 2%
K–12 students in
student teaching
schools 101 94% 2 2% 4 4%

Table 4. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Gender with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at our college/university</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>98%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at field experience schools</td>
<td>91</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students in teacher education classes</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>91%</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in field experience schools</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>97%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in student teaching schools</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>96%</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 5. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Exceptionalities with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exceptionalities</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
<td>f</td>
<td>%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at our college/university</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at field experience schools</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students in teacher education classes</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>60%</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in field experience schools</td>
<td>107</td>
<td>99%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in student teaching schools</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 6. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Language with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at our college/university</td>
<td>47 44%</td>
<td>50 46%</td>
<td>11 10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at field experience schools</td>
<td>28 26%</td>
<td>57 53%</td>
<td>22 21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students in teacher education classes</td>
<td>38 36%</td>
<td>55 51%</td>
<td>14 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in field experience schools</td>
<td>78 73%</td>
<td>15 14%</td>
<td>14 13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in student teaching schools</td>
<td>68 63%</td>
<td>19 18%</td>
<td>21 19%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Religion with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at our college/university</td>
<td>61 57%</td>
<td>28 26%</td>
<td>19 18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at field experience schools</td>
<td>41 38%</td>
<td>24 22%</td>
<td>42 39%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fellow students in teacher education classes</td>
<td>60 56%</td>
<td>24 22%</td>
<td>23 22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in field experience schools</td>
<td>57 53%</td>
<td>18 17%</td>
<td>32 30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K–12 students in student teaching schools</td>
<td>54 51%</td>
<td>19 18%</td>
<td>33 31%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 8. Frequency of Agreement that Students Experience Diversity in Sexual Orientation with Faculty and Students On and Off Campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sexual Orientation</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>Unsure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td>f %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty at our college/university</td>
<td>44 41%</td>
<td>31 29%</td>
<td>32 30%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
At the K–12 schools where students have field experiences, respondents from SCDEs reported that candidates were more likely to interact with faculty from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds, and about half reported interaction with racial and ethnic minorities:

We have difficulty getting data about K–12 faculty characteristics. While we might ask about these elements, it is a challenge to help these faculty understand why it is important to respond. Because we place many, many candidates (over 600 per semester in 3 field experiences), we cannot just limit our placement pool to those faculty who do respond.

Exposure to religious differences and differences in sexual orientation was more difficult, probably in large part because religious preference and sexual orientation can be quite difficult to determine in a diplomatic manner:

[Some] aspects of diversity are nearly impossible to identify (e.g., sexual orientation) without asking questions that might be deemed as an invasion of privacy and/or illegal . . . it is difficult, at times, to provide exposure to students in some areas of diversity that either exist in very small
measures due to the nature of the make-up of the rural community or the “culture” of the rural community itself. This is problematic.

Overall, respondents reported that meaningful interactions with ethnicity, race, SES, exceptionalities, and language are more likely to occur at the K–12 schools where candidates have student teaching and field experiences, and there was greater certainty that meaningful interactions occur at field experience locations rather than at student teaching locations. We hypothesize that, because program staff are responsible for organizing field experiences (generally accomplished while students are still taking classes), the staff put diversity at the top of the list whenever possible in terms of desirable sites. However, we do not know how many students choose to return to an area nearer their home for student teaching (as is the option at our university) and may therefore be self-selecting into a less diverse experience. The highest number of unsure responses centered on religion and sexual orientation and likely reflects the difficulty of ascertaining these characteristics. Language, geographic background, and sexual orientation of faculty at K–12 schools generated the lowest number of affirmative responses regarding meaningful interactions for teacher candidates, probably for similar reasons.

Providing Information about Diversity

To better understand how rural schools meet the diversity standard, we asked about the activities and resources the schools use to incorporate the element of diversity (see Table 10). We also asked whether institutions provided information about diversity through a stand-alone multiculturalism course or through an infusion of diversity throughout the curriculum. Sixty-three (54%) of programs offered a stand-alone multiculturalism course; 60 of those programs required this class to be taken. This course was the only option for providing diversity information for five programs. One hundred nine schools (94%) provided diversity information by infusing the concept throughout the curriculum. Of those, 49 used this approach in addition to the required course on multiculturalism. By far, SCDEs used reading assignments, in-class activities, guest speakers, lesson planning, and lecture/discussion as diversity teaching tools, with videoconferencing, political or advocacy experiences, distance learning, and collaboration with other departments much further down on the list.

Table 10. Frequency of Respondents’ Use of Activities and Resources

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity or resource</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reading assignments</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>96%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class activities</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>95%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest speakers/resource people</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>91%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>89%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture/discussion</td>
<td>99</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments/projects/presentations</td>
<td>98</td>
<td>84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student teaching placements</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>83%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Films/videos</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>80%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>77%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals/reflections/personal</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting culturally diverse schools</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>76%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research studies/papers/essays</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>64%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Reference materials/bibliographies 72 60%
Service learning projects 62 52%
Student research presentations 60 52%
Exams 57 51%
Role play/simulations 58 50%
Action research projects 53 47%
Web-based diversity resources 56 47%
Conferences attendance 55 46%
Professional organizations 53 46%
Visiting scholars 38 32%
Visits to off-campus sites 40 30%
Collaboration with departments 27 24%
Distance learning 27 22%
Political or advocacy efforts 22 19%
Videoconference classes 11 10%

We also asked which activities are most effective for the aspect of understanding diversity in a teaching and learning context as well as understanding diversity in a social and cultural awareness context. In terms of the activities that facilitated understanding in a teaching and learning context (see Table 11), respondents believed that student teaching placements were most effective; however, this choice was followed primarily by traditional classroom activities, such as the use of case studies, assignments, projects, and lesson planning. As for understanding in social and cultural contexts (see Table 12), the three top choices were guest speakers, visiting culturally diverse schools, and student teaching placements—none of these traditional in-class activities. Among these two sets of top choices, only guest speakers, as the eighth choice, was included as effective for the teaching and learning context. Visiting culturally diverse schools was not a choice, and case studies and lesson planning were not factors for social and cultural awareness contexts.

Table 11. Most Effective Activities and Resources for Fostering Understanding of Diversity in Teaching and Learning Contexts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity or resource</th>
<th>f</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student teaching placements</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case studies</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lesson planning</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assignments/projects/presentations</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visiting culturally diverse schools</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-class activities</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest speakers</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journals/reflection/biographies</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service learning projects</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lecture/discussion</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reading assignments</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action research</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 12. Most Effective Activities and Resources for Fostering Social and Cultural Awareness
Activity or resource | $f$ | $\%$
---|---|---
Visiting culturally diverse schools | 31 | 29% 
Guest speakers | 31 | 29% 
Student teaching placements | 23 | 22% 
In-class activities | 22 | 21% 
Reading assignments | 19 | 18% 
Journals/reflection/biographies | 17 | 16% 
Service learning projects | 17 | 16% 
Assignments/projects/presentations | 14 | 13% 
Visits to off-campus sites | 12 | 11% 
Lecture/discussion | 12 | 11% 
Case studies | 11 | 10% 
Visiting scholars | 10 | 9%

The most effective strategies for promoting social and cultural understanding among students, at least for our respondents, appear to involve interaction with individuals who have personal experiences to share and direct interaction with diverse populations at off-campus locations; in contrast, after student teaching, the activities chosen as most effective for understating diversity issues in teaching and learning contexts are more typical classroom activities.

Recognizing that a method or activity is effective and actually being able to employ it on behalf of teacher candidates are two different things. For that reason, some of the most commonly used methods to incorporate diversity in teacher education programs as reported by respondents are not necessarily on either list of “most effective” options. This dichotomy is an illustration of the limitations rural schools experience, in terms of their capacity to provide students with more desirable opportunities. Visiting culturally diverse schools was chosen as the second most effective strategy for building social and cultural awareness, but it was 10th out of 27 on the list of most used activities (albeit with a healthy 76% share). Student teaching placements, the top choice for understanding diversity in teaching and learning contexts, was seventh on the list of most used activities; case studies (second choice) came in 10th. The activities most frequently used to meet the diversity standard are all on-campus efforts, and, with the exception of possible costs for bringing in out-of-town speakers, are staples of teacher education classrooms and easily implemented by instructors.

**Out-of-the-Box Possibilities**

Considering the limitations rural SCDEs contend with in addressing the requirements of the diversity standard, we asked in an open-ended question if the respondents’ institutions have considered alternative or out-of-the-box options to expose candidates more broadly to diversity or to more productively maximize the resources the schools have available. Numerous respondents reported that their programs incorporate or consider alternatives for fostering diversity opportunities. The greatest number of programs was using or seriously considering partnerships, virtual experiences, or longer-term off-campus experiences. Another 14 respondents from SCDEs answered yes to the question without offering details or noted that alternatives were on the table but obstacles such as money, time, or resistance by administration or faculty were making implementation difficult.
Table 13. Out-of-the-Box Options

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Out-of-the-box options</th>
<th>Number of SCDEs</th>
<th>Specific options cited</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Partnerships</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>With historically Black colleges/universities; Native American tribes, Job Corps programs, urban school districts</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virtual classroom experience</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>With other SCDEs or with K–12 classrooms</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-campus experience (long term)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>Interim sessions; multiple week or semester-long experiences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>China or other overseas countries where students teach</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Campus events</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>Conferences, workshops, speakers summer camps for K–12 students</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service learning</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>In diverse communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Institutionalized options</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Universal Design for Learning framework; scholarships targeted at minority candidates; funding for student attendance at conferences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coordination with other programs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Campus or local ESL programs, for experience with ELL students</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eighteen programs have developed partnerships with a variety of external groups, including Historically Black Colleges and Universities, other institutions of higher education, Native American tribes, Job Corps programs, and urban school districts; five others are actively discussing possibilities for partnerships. One enterprising program has:

developed a Professional Development School (PDS) within a distant county at an Urban School. We refer to the program as the Rural-to-Urban Internship Program. It is our hope to have a number of such arrangements that allow candidates who know they would like to teach in an urban environment be in such schools as interns.

Another respondent provided the following details for connecting his or her program candidates to diverse faculty and candidates:

One of our professors has linked with a faculty member in a historically black institution and through electronic assignments in a Foundations course, students interact with each other. Some video-conferencing occurs as part of courses and teachers and students from our urban districts are brought to campus via campus visits or through some follow-up technology activities.
Eleven programs make provisions for some type of longer-term off-campus experience, whether during an interim session between semesters, for a specific number of weeks, or for a semester. One particularly well-organized experience, lasting 4 weeks during the break between semesters, is described as follows:

[Students] are challenged to work in places and with the intensity necessary to help them see the world through the eyes of those with whom they will work . . . Our students may choose to work in very dense urban areas if they are from rural settings or to work in a small community in Appalachia if they are from urban areas. Some go to work on reservations or volunteer in a Muslim school, or any number of other individually designed experiences. Before they have this experience, they take a course titled Education and Culture and they must prepare for the experience the semester before through reading, interviews, and other experiences.

While a few respondents expressed concerns about the adequacy of virtual experiences for teacher candidates, 16 programs provide or are considering some type of virtual classroom experience, usually either a connection with other teacher education programs or, less commonly, with a virtual classroom that allows students to observe and interact with K–12 students. One respondent described an upcoming initiative, Electronic Kits for Investigating Diversity in Schools (EKIDS), which is:

a web-based simulation with 21 complete school files from students at our partnering K–12 institution in Texas. These school files will be used by faculty and students at our institution to investigate diversity topics throughout all education preparation courses. Faculty and administrators at our partnering institution will serve as experts and consultants for the project.

DISCUSSIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

Rural teacher education programs experience difficulties, to a greater or lesser extent, with meeting the requirements of the NCATE diversity standard. Respondents singled out recruitment and retention of diverse faculty and candidates, inability to provide high-quality diversity experiences, and location as the biggest issues. There was little disagreement with the NCATE definition of diversity; a number of programs even added additional components. For many respondents, however, the reality on the ground seems to reflect a narrower perspective, as they perceive a focus by NCATE on race and ethnicity to the exclusion of other categories. In particular, respondents reported strong beliefs that SES and exceptionalities are both more universal (in terms of their reach) and more locally relevant (in terms of the populations being served by the program) and deserve to be recognized as critical priorities for educating candidates who, as more than a dozen programs noted, could build on this competence in working with other diversities—a kind of transferable skills perspective. What is experienced as a “numbers game,” for some, eclipses the work done to “provid[e] a COE curriculum in which 1) all candidates can learn and succeed; and, 2) candidates can develop a learning environment in the classroom in which all students can learn and succeed.” While these findings may not be particularly surprising, they do not appear to have been addressed in any meaningful way in the literature; consequently, there is presumably little understanding of the implications for SCDEs and their programs.
Respondents from SCDEs strongly endorsed the need for a diversity standard. Some expressed this need directly, as the following:

We feel that the diversity standard should remain and it enables us to help our college focus on the importance of exposing our faculty/staff/candidates to diversity issues, populations and experiences that we would not otherwise be so compelled to do.

Others expressed this need indirectly, as part of a response to other questions:

Every school and classroom has students and faculty with a unique assortment of characteristics; not realizing that every child is unique assures that a teacher will be ineffective with the majority of the class at some time or another.

Respondents clearly took their responsibility to prepare students for diversity seriously.

Respondents were also aware and understood that NCATE must have measurements in place to guide the organization’s accreditation process, but the tension between the assessors and the assessed seems to center on whether measures should reflect, for example, “how we prepare students to work with diverse students [versus] how diverse our program/faculty are.” While agreeing that, ideally, every teacher candidate would have a comprehensive set of experiences with the entire spectrum of diversities, many responses indicated a desire to have NCATE focus more on what programs are actually able to achieve in terms of preparing candidates, despite the limitations, rather than whether the programs met particular requirements. One respondent expressed this simply: “The issue is not the standard. It is the reasonableness of expectations in the specific context. Context counts.”

We are left with some important considerations about the implications of rural schools’ ability to fully address and meet the NCATE diversity standard. For one, if rural schools believe that exceptionalities and SES are the most common and most significant aspects of diversity for the schools’ students to be familiar with, is that an acceptable focus for the schools’ programs? If, as some respondents believe, the capacity to work effectively with these populations translates into effectiveness with a broad range of diversities, can the reinforcement and documentation of transferable skills become the direction SCDEs should go in? Second, respondents agreed that the more exposure to varied aspects of diversity—preferably in face-to-face interactions—candidates have, the better. Having said that, can we reasonably expect all programs to meet the expectations for such a broad range of interactions, despite the limitations of location?

Where Should the Investment Lie?

We did not ask respondents about the amount of time and the financial and personnel investments their schools made in pursuing NCATE accreditation. The work leading up to and during an NCATE evaluation can be exhaustive and intense (Bullough, Clark, & Patterson, 2003). While some prominent teacher education programs have shunned accreditation entirely (UCLA, Berkeley, University of Illinois Champaign-Urbana, University of Pennsylvania, and Harvard, among others), others have opted for TEAC accreditation, including a few high-profile programs such as Boston College and the University of Virginia, which moved to TEAC after having been previously accredited by NCATE.
A recent *Education Week* article framed the two organizations:

Differences between the two accreditors are striking. NCATE requires schools to provide evidence that their graduates have the knowledge and skills to teach successfully, but some colleges have complained that the process of accreditation is tedious, expensive, and time-consuming. TEAC, meanwhile, allows institutions to set their own standards for teacher proficiency within what it describes as “a framework of continuous assessment and improvement,” but critics say the group lacks a set of national standards. (Honawar, 2007, p. 7)

We want to take a moment here to briefly discuss TEAC, and specifically consider whether the TEAC process offers possibilities for addressing some of the issues raised by rural teacher education programs. We want to make it clear, as well, that we have no ties to TEAC.

The TEAC process is indeed presented by its president as less “prescriptive” (Murray, 2005, p. 309) than NCATE’s and employs what Murray (2005, p. 314) called a “tight/loose argument: tight on the TEAC outcome, loose on the program’s means of accomplishing the outcome” (author’s emphasis). These outcomes, according to TEAC, are “fully compatible with NCATE’s six new standards” (Murray, 2005, p. 309); TEAC, however, does not define what evidence of fulfillment of the standards must be other than to require what the organization calls verifiable, scholarly-based evidence of teacher candidate competency, presented in a formal report that would pass a peer review process. As one of TEAC’s officers put it, a program “sets out to frame its own inquiry into whether or not it is meeting its own goals (which have to line up with the [TEAC] principles) and whether or not its quality control system works” (M. LaCelle-Peterson, personal communication, May 5, 2010).

“Multicultural perspectives and accuracy” is one of three cross-cutting themes (along with “capacity for independent learning” and “technology”) that must be illustrated in the context of three components of candidate learning (subject matter, pedagogical knowledge, and caring and effective teaching skills). Multicultural perspectives and accuracy are defined as:

> evidence that candidates for the degree understand the implications of confirmed scholarship on gender, race, and individual differences, and ethnic and cultural perspectives for educational practice. For all persons, but especially for prospective teachers, the program must yield an accurate and sound understanding of the educational significance of race, gender, individual differences, and ethnic and cultural perspectives. (TEAC Guide to Accreditation, 2010, p. 21)

So, for example, a program must demonstrate that candidates understand how content can be experienced and understood differently and that they are effective in reaching a variety of learners based partially on their understanding of these multiple perspectives, but:

TEAC doesn’t, however, expect a program to import “diverse” learners or export student teachers in order to do it . . . In the TEAC system, attention to such matters and good-faith efforts in creatively addressing them are as much as we ask to see. (M. LaCelle-Peterson, personal communication, May 5, 2010)

TEAC also expects to see faculty diversity demographics that are “equal or better than the statistics for the as a whole” (p. 13) and candidate admission policies that “encourage diversity”
It seems to us that, especially as NCATE and TEAC work “to create a model unified accreditation system” (NCATE, 2010) for the forthcoming CAEP, and institutions decide what where to cast their lot, finding some consensus on what diversity can and should mean and on minimum requirements that are clear, reasonable, and doable in terms of meeting whatever standards emerge is critical.

**Would Less Prescriptive Expectations Help?**

The question seems to be whether there are particular experiences that, regardless of setting, should or must be met to maximize the likelihood of developing educators who are effective teaching diverse student populations. That is what standards are, after all. Again, ideally every candidate would have rich and meaningful interactions with the broadest range of diversity possible and would find himself or herself challenged personally and professionally, in the best sense of the word. However, as we have established, all teacher education programs do not exist in ideal environments for diversity—or at least the type of diversity many believe NCATE wants to see evidence of.

So, should programs be allowed to make a warranted claim that their focus on, say, socioeconomic status as the most important or the most relevant diversity for their region is comprehensive enough to adequately prepare candidates to also teach students of color or English language learners—that the programs are equipping teacher candidates with transferable skills? What about programs that remain committed to building a diverse faculty but in the meantime would like recognition for teacher educators who may not reflect a recognized aspect of diversity personally, but, as one respondent put it, “have had successful experiences with diverse student populations or with projects or programs dedicated to meeting the needs of diverse populations”?

Would a TEAC audit examine such claims with a skeptical eye, recognizing that “colorblindness” (Bonilla-Silva, 2001) can be avoidance of the very real racial issues our society still struggles with? Would it be better if this program was ranked unacceptable on the relevant measure by an NCATE examiner?

These conversations are necessary, and we believe that there may be a compelling case to be made for the option of schools presenting their own evidence to support claims that the schools are preparing teachers to be effective for all students, reflecting the “tight goals, loose steps” framework TEAC claims to honor. If we acknowledge and accept that institutions’ conceptual frameworks should reflect their unique missions (and that these frameworks should not be so broad as to be essentially meaningless), we would argue that assessment of the processes employed for preparing teachers for diversity should be more flexible. When exposing students to the full spectrum of diversities is simply unworkable, or programs must choose between what they judge to be strong learning experiences in a less than diverse setting or placement in a diverse setting that may provide undesirable teaching examples, recognition of the very real limitations of geography and credit for effort should be taken into account. How many interviews must schools schedule with faculty candidates (and pay expenses for) until the schools can meet
a *good faith* standard for hiring? The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act has made it easier to collect data about student demographics, but educator demographics are still a matter of detective work. How much time should be devoted to determining the faculty makeup of student field and student teaching experiences? What if at least some of the time and money spent attempting to meet and document required expectations could be redirected back into the work of the teacher education program? Might this free up resources to pursue out-of-the-box avenues to diversity?

In terms of future research that might not only deepen our understanding of the current situation but also provide insight into broader possibilities, additional work could be done with SCDE faculty, not only those in rural colleges but across a range of settings, to learn more about how programs approach diversity preparation and how accreditation processes support or hinder the schools’ efforts. Given that the current Department of Education expects states to link teacher effectiveness to preparation programs (Duncan, 2009), and given that we know multicultural education can have positive effects on students’ academic achievement and dispositions (see Zirkel, 2008), it is past time to track teachers longitudinally, studying their effectiveness with diverse populations using not only test scores but also other measures such as student engagement or attendance and discipline data. So few longitudinal studies look at teacher preparation for diversity and any outcomes at all (Hollins & Guzman, 2005) that the possibilities are wide-ranging. Based on our data, following teachers trained in programs built upon a transferable skills framework would be particularly intriguing.

Teacher candidates themselves were not participants in the current study. We need to understand better, once they have settled into classrooms, what types of activities, resources, and curriculum have proven to be most helpful, in terms of student outcomes and in terms of teachers’ own beliefs about and behavior toward diverse students. Student teaching and field experiences would probably be viewed as the most effective practices for diversity by these now practicing teachers, as they were by teacher educators. What about other options that are more readily available? What works—what stays with students as they move into their own classrooms and confront the challenges that await? What are the best practices for learning about diversity if diversity is not right outside the front door of the program?

To conclude, we face a challenge that is well documented and enduring—the continued explosion of diverse students of all backgrounds and the continued dominance of White female teachers as the primary educators of our children, in a nation is becoming more segregated in its neighborhoods and its schools (Orfield & Lee, 2005). Naturally occurring interaction between people of diverse backgrounds has never been the norm in the United States and remains far from the norm in many parts of our country. This does not look to be changing. We need to be creative and flexible in addressing this reality. Standards are important and should not be abandoned, but experimentation and adaptability are, arguably, going to be critical in successfully supporting teacher education programs’ impact on future teachers in the relatively short time the programs have the students.

*Notes*

1. This designation comes from the criteria used by NCES to classify schools as one of 12 types. NCES revised its definition of *rural* in 2006 after consultation with the Census Bureau. Rural
areas are designated by the Census Bureau as those areas that do not lie inside an urbanized area or urban cluster. See http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/ruraled/page2.asp for additional information (H. Everson, personal communication, August 6, 2009).

2. See the National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality website at http://www2.tqsource.org/mb2dev/reports/reportTQ.aspx?id=946 for data on state teacher education policy.

3. As of April 2005, faculty at SCDEs was approximately 82% White and 14% minority, with Black faculty the most common minority faculty (Eduventures, 2008).

4. The authors were careful to note that all institutions reviewed in fall 2003 and spring 2004, and all but two in spring 2003, were able to meet the diversity standard, despite these complaints.

5. NCES data indicate minorities (African Americans, Hispanics, Asians/Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans/Alaska natives) increased from 18.5% of rural populations in 2000 to 25.1% in 2007–2008.

6. These written comments were in addition to the selection of faculty and candidate recruitment and retention (discussed below) and the NCATE definition of diversity itself (chosen by 4 respondents) as one of the three main obstacles to meeting the diversity standard.

7. As one respondent described, “For many candidates and their professors, some of their peers appear to be English Language Learners—there are specific ways of speaking and dialect that are unfamiliar to others who might live a short distance away. The richness of cultures and traditions in these regions of Appalachia provide an interesting test bed for NCATE to consider rethinking how to address the diversity standard.”

References


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