

Creating personalized partnerships across diverse districts

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Received 31 August 2023
Revised 6 October 2023
Accepted 6 October 2023

Abstract

Purpose – This work aligns with two of the following NAPDS Essentials: Clinical Preparation and Learning and Leading. The authors collaborated with district partners to determine how to best meet their needs. Additionally, our institution continues to develop a reciprocal relationship; pre-service teachers can hone skills during the clinical field experience, and the university will better support the professional development initiatives of districts with whom we partner. Clinical field assignments are designed with intentionality to align with the needs of our districts. Consequently, pre-service teachers will be better equipped to immerse themselves in the field experiences and effectively address the diverse needs of students. The authors will continue to engage our preservice and in-service teachers and personalize supports.

Design/methodology/approach – A needs assessment was conducted to determine the most appropriate supports for our district partners. A survey was disseminated, and individuals ranked their area for support. The authors followed up with in-service teachers and district leaders to discuss specific strategies that could strengthen academic achievement and social emotional development. Additionally, the data were used to determine how to better equip teacher candidates to serve in the partner districts.

Findings – Two programs that have been highly successful have been the Teacher Assistant to Teaching Professional program which is a specialized grow your own and bringing high school students to campus that are interested in becoming educators their junior year, lastly, the use of Mixed Reality Simulations to strengthen educator preparation. Creating diverse partnerships is not a one-size-fits-all approach in every district. Needs assessment and ongoing conversations are needed to ensure both the district and the Educator Preparation Program are able to support pre-service and in-service teachers along with the needs of PreK–12 students.

Originality/value – This paper highlights diverse approaches to strengthening partnerships and the teacher pipeline.

Keywords Recruitment and retention, Partnerships, Educator preparation

Paper type Practitioner paper

Overview of partnership districts

North Carolina Central University (NCCU) is a public, historically black university (HBCU) founded in 1910 to provide a liberal arts education for African Americans. NCCU is located near the Research Triangle Park and is one of the sixteen constituent institutions in the University of North Carolina (UNC) System and is one of the five public HBCUs in the state system. The university's mission is to prepare students academically and professionally to become leaders prepared to advance the consciousness of social responsibility in a diverse, global society. The current student enrollment is 7553, which consists of 5634 at the undergraduate level and 1919 at the graduate level. Regarding gender, 29.5% of students are male and 70.5% are female. The racial and ethnic composition is as follows: African American



74.5%, White 9.5%, Hispanic 7%, Asian 1.3%, Multiethnic 4.7%, Alaskan Native .004%, Native Hawaiian .0007%. NCCU attracts students from diverse backgrounds, including first-generation, low-income, urban, rural, traditional, nontraditional, NCCU consistently enrolls a sizable percentage (approximately 40%) of first-generation college students; that is, undergraduate students whose parents have not earned a 4-year college degree.

In alignment with the University’s mission, the North Carolina Central University’s School of Education’s conceptual framework is “Preparing Educators for Diverse Cultural Contexts in the 21st Century.” The SOE’s educator preparation program is designed to engender in prospective teachers the ability to see the social and political implications of their actions and the social contexts in which they are carried out. NCCU graduates are equipped to use their skills and knowledge to promote greater equality, justice, and humane conditions in schooling and society.

NCCU has formal and informal partnerships with five diverse districts across central and eastern North Carolina. North Carolina Central University partners range from large urban/suburban districts such as Wake County Public Schools which is the 15th largest district in the country with over 160,000 students, to the smallest partnership at Warren County Schools with 1,800 students. In total, NCCU partnerships with the five school districts touch the lives of over 200,000 students (see [Table 1](#)).

Creating partnerships

Diversity and numbers make creating personalized partnerships more difficult because of the capacity of faculty and resources available to both the university and the district. NCCU takes

Name of district	Number of students	Number of schools	Demographics of students served	Free/Reduce lunch eligibility
Wake County Schools	160,000	192	44.4% White 22.4% Black 18.6% Hispanic 10.4% Asian 0.3% American Indian 0.1% Pacific Islander 3.8% 2 or more races	20%
Durham Public Schools	31,000	56	38.5% Black 33.3% Hispanic 19.4% White 7.8% AI, IP, NA, & 2 or more races	54.8%
Warren County Schools	1,800	8	65.3% Black 13.8% White 9.1% Hispanic 7.1% American Indian 4.3% 2 or more races	68.1%
Chapel Hill-Carrboro City Schools	12,000	20	50% White 17.6% Latino 13.6% black	16%
Person County Schools	4,300	11	49.2% white 32% black 11.3% Hispanic 6.7% Two or more races 0.5% American Indian 0.3% Asian	59.5%

Table 1.
Demographics of partnerships

Source(s): Table created by authors

a two-prong approach to creating and sustaining personalized partnerships for each district. The first prong is meeting with district-level personnel to hear the vision of the districts and assess the needs. The second prong is partnering with individual schools in districts to support their school improvement plans on leadership teams or through quarterly meetings. This approach allows NCCU School of Education to see the district from a macro and micro level. The downside of using this approach is stretching already thin resources at the university level such as faculty, student capacity and academic programming. When using this approach, the institution partners with only selected schools in the district and additionally with the overall district, either in human resources or professional development. The personalized partnership is created using various methods such as consulting with the principal or working with teachers and other staff in a particular area such as developing strategies for behavior and building classroom culture. School of Education faculty can provide professional development for the whole staff and individual teachers to improve their capacity in teaching. These conversations normally take place with the Chief Academic Officer and/or Superintendent. With these conversations, the school partnership director avoids the pitfall of spreading university Education Preparation Program resources too thin by directing resources to multiple schools working on the same issue.

For example, Wake County Schools has over 190 schools and 160,000 students. In Wake County Schools, NCCU School of Education partners with select schools, in different regions of the county to maximize the partnership. In Warren County, we partner with the entire district and every school through the Human Resources department. The liaison from the district and the partnership director meet quarterly or more to discuss the needs of the district and how the School of Education can support. Over the years, this has been to hold Praxis sessions with teachers that still needed to pass state licensure exams or giving classroom management support to teachers at specific schools.

Partnering districts rely on Schools of Education to graduate exceptional teacher candidates to facilitate instruction of students in PreK–12. The School of Education's priority is to the students they serve at the university level. When a district or school's goal or program does not support education preparation goals of the university, then crucial conversations should occur as to whether the partnership should continue or be severed. It is imperative conversations take place between the university and district level about ways an effective partnership can be established and sustained (Farah, 2019; Rader & Pennell, 2019). Consequently, it should focus on the university's goal as an Education Preparation Program and the district's goal of supporting its academic culture. Across the nation, Schools of Education are being looked upon from partnering districts to keep up the production of teachers needed to fill vacancies across the teaching profession. North Carolina Central University is not alone in not producing enough graduates to fill vacancies in partnering districts. Districts must realize they have a large responsibility for promoting the teaching profession starting with raising the profile of excellent teachers and highlighting the works of schools in their district.

Personalizing partnerships allow Education Preparation Programs to utilize faculty expertise and research; furthermore, it affords faculty an opportunity to receive constructive feedback on their areas of expertise and research. A pitfall of conducting partnership research in schools is that faculty are not able to always control the variables of their research due to school dynamics such as the change of a teacher or administrator, transit population of students, changing schedules and curriculum materials over the course of the research. The needs of the district or schools may not support the focus of the partnership university's research. The opposite is when faculty expertise and research does not match district or school needs and goals. Districts and schools are usually focused on programs and curriculum that have an immediate effect on test scores and school culture; however, Education Preparation Programs focus on the research behind major areas such as literacy, math, and behavior. Education Preparation Programs cannot teach every program available

to schools in every academic and social area. With that in mind, Education Preparation Programs focus on the research behind all these programs and curriculums. Intentional partnerships between Education Preparation Programs and districts should be aligned where both partners are improving their academic goals while producing productive citizens.

Personalizing partnerships

NCCU has created personalized partnerships by building relationships at the school and district levels. One focus of partnership conversations is increasing the teacher pipeline with a subtopic of increasing the number of minority teachers to the profession (Jones, Holton, & Joseph, 2019). The Clinical Experience Director meets with district human resource directors to discuss the Teacher Assistant to Teacher Professional Program (TA2TP), which encourages districts to grow their own teachers through teacher assistants already employed in the district (Farah, 2019; Gist, 2018). Districts pay the cost of attendance to NCCU while candidates agree to a loan forgiveness contract by teaching in the district for four/five years after graduating. All instructional assistants have some college credits applied toward degree completion. NCCU provides the district with the requirements for admittance to the university and the TA2TP program and the district oversees the selection process of their employees. Informational sessions are held before instructional assistants apply, and at the end of each semester. Touchback sessions with district personnel also occur each summer. Person County Schools and Warren County Schools have TA2TP programs where the district pays for instructional assistants to finish their degree in return for a three to four-year commitment to teach in the district. Person County Schools have completed two cohorts of TA2TP and Warren County Schools is starting their first cohort. Former TA2TP participants who remain in their school after graduation are better equipped to support the students and parents. TA2TP creates a reciprocal partnership between NCCU and the district, whereby teacher quality is strengthened, and enrollment increases in the Teacher Education Program.

To maintain active partnerships, NCCU aims to address the unique needs of each school district. However, many of our neighboring school communities have similar needs. Not only does our institution provide professional development in specific areas, but assignments for preservice teachers are also aligned to meet the diverse needs of students in surrounding districts. NCCU also uses recruiting as a tool to leverage partnership. Preparing preservice teachers to implement quality instruction and strong recruitment can also aid in decreasing teacher attrition. The section below will highlight how we have customized supports and leveraged partnerships to improve teacher quality.

Learning and Leading and innovation

COVID-19 afforded the School of Education opportunities to examine our students' holistic needs more closely. Faculty became much more attuned to the social emotional needs of our students. Further, there became a greater need to prepare our preservice teachers to support their students' diverse nonacademic needs. Foundational courses were realigned to embed the Collaborative Academic for Social Emotional Learning (CASEL) competencies and provide students with ample experiences to acquire the skills. This framework will aid teacher candidates in addressing the needs of their students from a holistic lens; additionally, it will cause them to promote 21st-century skills in their classrooms. Twenty-first-century learning skills emphasize the importance of communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking, all of which are essential to being a productive member of society.

Social emotional learning is an expanded version of 21st-century learning skills. The purpose of Social Emotional Learning (SEL) is to "effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show

empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions” (CASEL, 2007). Modeling these practices afforded faculty more opportunities to support students and demonstrate how specific skills could be effectively implemented in the classroom. NCCU has provided several face-to-face and virtual SEL workshops to neighboring districts. These workshops highlighted the need for greater attention to self-care, and it will be emphasized in courses with more intentionality.

Research on Induction Programs

Through our The Eagle Teacher Induction Program (TIP), support is provided to graduates up to three years after graduation. During this time, graduates and those seeking alternative certification are invited to professional development programs cost free hosted or supported by the university and School of Education. Check-ins of novice teachers take place each semester during their first three years. These may be informal visits to classrooms or virtual meetings on a Sunday afternoon just to give them a space to speak freely. A social event is planned during homecoming for the novice graduate to talk and pair up with a veteran educator of our program. The Induction Program informs practices and affords NCCU the opportunity to further strengthen and personalize partnerships. The individualized support to aid educators can also improve teacher retention.

The School of Education hosted Pack the Nest to recruit rising Juniors and Seniors into the education field. We collaborated with school guidance counselors and high school Teacher Cadet sponsors to promote the event and each year we average about 15 students. Participants engaged in interactive two-day workshops that addressed topics such as school law, effective instruction, classroom management and assessment. Panel discussions from classroom teachers and administrators enabled the participants to gain more insight from the workshop sessions and to interact with former graduates (teachers and administrators) on a more personal level. Additionally, participants were provided with a preview of innovative techniques implemented in Methods Courses. Over two years, several juniors returned to their senior year, two students enrolled at the university and both declared education their major. These personalized partnerships enhance the education for PreK–12 students along with university students and faculty.

Throughout coursework at the foundational level, culturally responsive practices are embedded with intentionality as students connect theory to practice. The evidence-based practices to which students are introduced pertain to the specific needs of those districts with whom NCCU is partnered. Careful attention is also given to ensure teacher candidates can support the needs of all diverse learners. For example, the book study assignments in the Early Field Experience courses (Orientation to Teaching and Human Growth and Development and Psychology), afford candidates opportunities to critically examine and evaluate culturally responsive practices implemented in the field. Furthermore, teacher candidates reflect on students’ needs from a holistic perspective. The assignments address two components: (1) consideration of r students’ various; cultural contexts (i.e., individual, family, community, sociopolitical) (2) critical examination of personal assumptions and biases and the impact it has on students and families (Hammonds, 2015; Markowitz & Bouffard, 2019). As students matriculate through the program, activities incorporate leadership activities which equip students with skills to effectively collaborate with families and stakeholders and to assume leadership and advocacy roles within the classroom. These assignments in our foundational level align to the Profession Development School standard Learning and Leading.

Due to the demands of COVID, many teacher candidates have expressed support in the areas of parent collaboration and classroom management. Similarly, many of the participants in the Induction Program have also communicated this concern. To better support both groups, Mixed Reality Simulations (MRS) have been implemented to provide practice with

this skill. It is a semblance of authentic experiences educators often encounter. During the mixed reality simulation, participants interact with avatars from diverse backgrounds with unique learning styles and behaviors (Aguleria & Flores, 2022). At the end of the experience this coaching, which accompanies the activity, provides participants with a supportive environment in which to hone their skill. MRS support the Learning and Leading Professional Development School Standard.

Creating partnerships involves collaboration and honesty from both partners to avoid pitfalls and problems of fulfilling and sustaining partnership goals (Jones *et al.*, 2016). Partnerships are most successful where there is reciprocity and an invested interest for all parties. Educator Preparation Programs must strive to understand the unique needs of the students, families and communities they serve. It is equally important that partnerships are approached holistically; this increases sustainability and critical examination can occur at the macro level and micro level. Our approach to personalized partnerships affords us the opportunity to support districts while also equipping preservice teachers with skills to be change agents.

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Further reading

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