



4-1-2011

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Recommended Citation

Zacharakis, Jeff and Foy, Joelyn K. (2011) "Diversity: Its Essential Importance to NCATE Accreditation," *Educational Considerations*: Vol. 38: No. 2. <https://doi.org/10.4148/0146-9282.1127>

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Diversity: Its Essential Importance to NCATE Accreditation

Jeff Zacharakis and Joelyn K. Foy, Guest Editors

This issue of *Educational Considerations* focuses on the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) Standard 4 - Diversity. It is not without merit that our teacher preparation institutions are held to a diversity standard by the most prominent accrediting agency. Metaphorically, having this standard is akin to holding a driver's license. You can reach the standard and still not be a great driver. Though NCATE sets benchmarks at Unacceptable, Acceptable, and Target, reaching Target level (the highest level) does not necessarily imply that your institution is doing an exceptional job at developing an environment among students and faculty that creates a culture where everyone, regardless of ethnicity, race, socioeconomic status, gender, exceptionalities, language, religion, sexual orientation, or geographical area, is welcomed, nurtured, and valued. To achieve this standard, one might merely argue that the educational unit met the minimum requirements, though it may not have achieved a spirit of diversity. In fact, during the development of NCATE Standards, we might surmise that many colleges and universities develop a checklist of what is needed for accreditation rather than ask the questions, what are we doing and what should we be doing? Accreditation becomes nothing more than meeting a minimum standard.

This being said, NCATE Standard 4 is critically important, if for no other reason than it reminds us that understanding and embracing diversity is important in a culturally diverse society. Despite what some politicians and pundits may say about sexual orientation, immigration, poverty, and people who do not abide by mainstream thinking, our country, as well as most of our communities, is a diverse patchwork of competing cultures, norms, personalities, and biological gifts. Embracing diversity is not something that is or is not politically correct; it is something that is essential, regardless of political persuasion, to the long-term sustainability of our republic. How do we move forward if we always surround ourselves with people who look and talk like us, practice the same religion, have a similar belief system, and fit our cultural norm? Though many may want to deny our country's diversity, we believe it is the underlying strength of our national identity, and for that reason alone, NCATE Standard 4 is important.

For this issue of *Educational Considerations*, we sent out a national call for papers. Out of the many strong manuscripts we received, seven were selected through a blind review process. A multi-university contribution from Kansas State University, the University of

Arkansas-Fayetteville, and East Carolina University uses Mezirow's perspective on transformative learning to explore how preservice and inservice teachers may benefit from critical self-reflection when their assumptions are challenged by cultures and languages different from their own. An article from the University of Southern Florida begins by describing the mismatch between the demographics (mostly white and female) of its students in the College of Education and the surrounding urban community (mostly people of color) in Tampa. It then describes the process of how they developed engagement strategies between the students, faculty and community, a process of "multilevel activism." This article also emphasizes in detail the many benefits of a standing diversity committee as an integral part of a college of education.

An article from Indiana University of Pennsylvania provides a useful map of how the institution met NCATE Standard 4. Kerr and Dils recount how the university created conceptual frameworks and identified diversity competencies within the philosophical underpinnings of teaching diversity. The impetus was not just to meet NCATE standards but, more importantly, to respond to the changing demographics of their students and communities. In particular, the university made good use of INTASC (Interstate New Teachers Assessment and Support Consortium) principles to enhance teacher preparation.

Hughey's article shows how one size doesn't fit all students in education by focusing on how Kansas State University met NCATE Standard 4 for future school counselors. This article is an important addition to this issue because it shows how the needs of school counselors are not necessarily the same as those of classroom teachers. In the same vein, an article from George Washington University focuses on the unique set of dispositions, knowledge, and skills needed for new urban teachers. Its authors argue that in addition to teaching and managing skills, preservice teachers must also develop professional dispositions that include social justice and equity.

The final two articles, one from Azusa Pacific University (APU) and the other from Florida Atlantic University (FAU), describe how self-study processes were used to better understand student and faculty perceptions toward diversity. Through faculty and student surveys and focus groups, Azusa Pacific University's School of Education identified several areas for improvement. There were disconnects between what white students and faculty understood and what students and faculty of color understood. In addition, there was little knowledge, skill, or understanding among students and faculty around sexual orientation. The APU study guided its educational unit in preparation for reaccreditation, and the FAU study resulted in the college "transitioning from a culture of compliance to a culture of engagement."

Together these seven articles provide snapshots of how several institutions not only prepared for NCATE reviews and accreditation, but also how this process, in part, changed the way their institutions viewed and addressed diversity in preservice preparation. Those who have been involved in the NCATE accreditation process know how difficult, time-consuming, and expensive (in terms of faculty time and resources) NCATE is. We hope that through these articles you will not only better understand how a few educational units approached this process, but will also see why Standard 4 is an important part of NCATE accreditation.

Jeff Zacharakis is Associate Professor of adult education in the Department of Educational Leadership, Kansas State University. He is Chair of the Diversity for Community Committee, one of four standing committees in the College of Education. This committee is responsible for strengthening a diverse culture in the College, and addressing related issues through research and professional development.

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Educational Considerations, Vol. 38, No. 2, Spring 2011