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February 2000

New Jersey City University Recruiting and Retaining Diverse Groups of Students in Special Education Preservice Programs

New Jersey City University, classified as a minority institution of higher education, offers certification training at the bachelor's and master's levels, leading to a New Jersey 'Teacher of the Handicapped' certificate. Practices described in this summary were developed during several federally funded projects in the 1990s:

(a) Recruiting and Training Undergraduate Minority Special Educators (Project EXCEL); (b) Recruiting and Training Multicultural Special Educators (Project DIVISE); (c) Recruiting and Training Early Childhood Special Educators; and (d) Recruiting and Training Bilingual Special Educators (Project PEERS).

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Recruitment

Before the 1990s, university admissions and recruitment personnel did not promote special education programs, nor was the Department of Special Education involved in promotion. Efforts to understand the low enrollment showed that: (a) students were not aware that the Department existed; (b) many qualified non-white students simply did not consider special education as a career; (c) personal experiences led to negative views about special education among some potential trainees; and (d) non-white students were preparing for professions that offer better salaries.

Steps the Department has taken to improve enrollment, particularly among non-white students, have included:

* Becoming part of the University's marketing program and **communicating with admissions personnel** about the students that should be recruited;

* Organizing and maintaining a **recruitment database** of contact information on interested students from under-represented groups;

* Involving **current students as recruiters** to speak at high schools and meet with students at an open house during campus tours;

* Contacting **high school guidance counselors** with information and requests for referrals;

* Conducting an aggressive **recruiting campaign**, including genuine efforts to **"sell" special education as a career**;

* Producing a **recruitment video**, for use particularly with high school students, which (a) depicts multicultural peer models; (b) shows students involved in activities; (c) describes strong connections among faculty and students; (d) emphasizes the supportive atmosphere; (e) demonstrates that students have access to a variety of experiences; (f) emphasizes preparation for an important, exciting career; and (g) provides a short series of testimonials by students.

* Conducting **surveys of students** to learn more about their reasons for entering the program (see attached survey instrument).

Retention

In the early 1990s, attrition was a problem for both the University and the Department of Special Education. A range of retention strategies have been implemented by the Department during the past decade. Some of these strategies have also improved recruitment because trainees speak positively about their experiences with friends, colleagues, and relatives.

* **Infrastructure improvements:** Two new courses offered since 1994 emphasize diversity, particularly in urban settings: (a) Multicultural Issues in Special Education (3 credits) and (b) Working with Families from Diverse Backgrounds (3 credits). Multicultural elements were added to all introductory courses. Programs were streamlined, and it was made easier for undergraduate and graduate students to understand advisement sheets and the advisement process.

* **A welcoming student-centered climate.** The Department's image was improved to reflect a warm and welcoming atmosphere. Students are always welcomed and greeted with a smile, and are provided attractive spaces to study, chat, and hold meetings. They have access to a coffee maker, microwave, and refrigerator and to the Department's photocopier, on appropriate requests. Candy and snacks are available; job opportunities are posted; and decorations are put up in keeping with seasons and holidays.

* **Faculty attitudes.** The faculty values all students and sees each one as bringing unique strengths to the program; cultural differences are valued. All students have equal opportunities, and this means going the "extra mile" for everyone. No student waits for more than 10 minutes for a faculty appointment; advisement is always prompt and courteous. Faculty members tell students that they appreciate them, and the secretary plays a key role in student communications

* **Enrichment meetings** held each month are open to all students. An agenda is developed covering several topics or concerns each month. Students share concerns and ideas about coursework, schedules, field experiences, and topics of interest in special education, and receive administrative information with question-answer periods. The Department has also introduced study hours.

* **Surveys of students** are conducted to learn what the Department is doing that students find supportive and determine the Department's weaknesses (attached).

Evidence of Effectiveness.

* **Percentage changes in the non-white enrollment.** As of 1994, 42 percent of New Jersey City University's enrollment was comprised of students from under-represented groups, but only 10 percent of the Department of Special Education enrollment was composed of such students. The undergraduate enrollment of the Department changed as follows between 1994 and 1999.

Percentages of Undergraduate Special Education Majors, By Race/Ethnicity

	<u>1994</u>	<u>1995</u>	<u>1996</u>	<u>1997</u>	<u>1998</u>	<u>1999</u>
- Hispanic	2	4	7	8	9	13
- African American	6	9	10	15	19	15
- Asian/Pacific Isl	2	2	2	2	2	2
- White	90	85	81	75	70	70
Percent non-white	10	15	19	15	30	30

* **Increases in student numbers.** The total number of all undergraduate special education majors increased from 70 in spring 1994 to 130 in spring 2000.

* **Reputational effect.** Results of a 1999 formal survey of new, incoming African American graduate students showed that 83 percent learned about the program from friends and colleagues; among new, incoming African American undergraduate, 87 percent learned of the program from friends and relatives.

* **The top three reasons for enrolling,** as shown in the 1999 survey, are that: (a) special education is a good career (90 percent); (b) the Department's reputation is attractive (85 percent); and (c) the Department addresses issues of urban education (77 percent).

* **Improved retention.** In the early 1990s, attrition was a problem for the University and for the Department of Special Education. As of spring 2000, however, the Department's attrition is only about 10 percent per year, whereas approximately 50 percent of University students are not retained to graduation.

* **The top three reasons for remaining** enrolled, as of 1999, were: (a) the supportive Department atmosphere (87 percent); (b) faculty sensitivity to individual needs (80 percent); and (c) the program's capacity to address the diverse needs of students.

Department of Special Education, New Jersey City University Student Questionnaire

Step 1: Please respond YES or NO to the following statements. YES = is a factor. NO = is not a factor.

Step 2: Rate how important each factor is/was to you in your decision to answer YES. NO answers do not receive a rating (5 = highest rating; 1 = lowest rating in importance to you).

I chose Special Education at New Jersey City University as my field of study because:

	YES	NO	Scale 1-5
Reasonable cost			
Proximity to my home			
Reputation of the department faculty			
Program addresses the issues of urban education			
Heard there is a supportive department atmosphere			
Heard there is clear advisement			
Special education offers a good career choice			
Heard special education was an 'easy' program			
Friendliness of the faculty			
Heard positive comments about the college			
Program's ability to address diverse needs of students			
Diversity of student body			
Prepares one for graduate education			
Availability of additional help, when needed			
Other students provide academic and social support			
Ease of transportation			

Please indicate your top three choices from the above list:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

I remain in the Special Education Program at New Jersey City University because:

	YES	NO	Scale 1-5
Faculty and staff are sensitive to my individual needs			
Reputation of the department faculty			
Continuing education is a requirement of my current job			
Program addresses the issues of urban education			
Supportive department atmosphere			
Clear advisement			
Someone on staff is always available to help me			
Friendliness of the faculty			
I have identified one faculty member as a mentor / advisor who provides strong support			
Program's ability to address diverse needs of students			
Other students provide academic and social support			
Course requirements are clear and reasonable			
I feel accepted by department faculty and staff			
Diversity of students in the Special Education Program			

Please indicate your top three choices from the above list:

- 1) _____
- 2) _____
- 3) _____

Step 3: Check spaces below:

A. Male Female

B. American Indian/Native American
 African/Black American
 White American

Asian or Pacific Islander
 Hispanic/Latino American
 Other; please specify _____

The Alliance Project (#8029K4085) is supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). Opinions expressed herein are those of the sources and do not necessarily represent the position of the U.S. Department of Education..