

Purpose: The College of Education conducted a focus group in the fall of 2019 to determine areas of strength and weakness of initial programs based on employer responses to questions on newly hired candidates.

Methodology: Thirty educators from P-12 schools, and an Intermediate Unit (special education services), received invitations to participate in a College of Education Focus Group. An experienced sociologist and university professor conducted the focus group to establish an open and non-threatening environment. Participants received a \$50 stipend. Due to the low participation rate for the face-to-face focus group (13.3%; 4/30), two other strategies, including one-on-one interviews (3%; 1/30), and structured written feedback (7%; 2/30) also occurred using the same questions, and were included in the dataset. Implementation of these three strategies enabled the collection of specific feedback regarding the COE Teacher Preparation Programs. A total of 7 (23%) supervisors and/or administrators, representing the fields of special education (n=1), elementary education (n=5), and secondary education (n=1) provided assessment data. Among these seven administrators, a total of 19 BU completers (five special education, 12 early childhood, and two high school), provided reference points for the qualitative data.

Limitations: As a result of the low participation rate (23%; 7/30) plus an uneven representation across all grade levels, caution should occur with over-generalization of findings.

Results: Specific “themes” identified across all three data collection strategies reveal fairly consistent opinions of administrators regarding the areas of strengths and challenges BU teacher preparation completers demonstrated in the classroom. The following discussion identifies general findings relating to the seven questions. It should be pointed out that none of the responses revealed grade-level specificity but provided a broader concept.

1. **What are your expectations for a first-year teacher? (CAEP 5.5)** First year teachers are expected to:
  - Gain curricular and standards knowledge for their assigned grades
  - Continue to develop classroom management skills
  - Identify and focus on self-improvement goals for each marking period
  - Participate in school-related professional communities
  - Exhibit professional dispositions and expected behaviors (appropriate use of social media and collaboration)
  - Work closely with mentors and instructional coaches, plus ask questions to seek knowledge
  - Be self-motivated and eager to excel in teaching
  - Possess a collaborative nature
  
2. **Describe your Bloomsburg University completers (CAEP 4.2, 4.4)** Bloomsburg University completers:
  - demonstrated understanding of learners, specially their educational and emotional growth and development in relation to content and instructional practice
  - Organized and prepared lessons which included differentiation and developmental appropriateness
  - Understood role as an educator and the school system to gain social services for students, as appropriate

- Demonstrated strength in professional learning, ethical practice, leadership and collaboration
- Accepted leadership roles on PBIS Tier I and II teams, extra-curricular student activities, and coaching responsibilities
- Demonstrated strong foundation with regard to assessment, planning, and instructional strategies, along with willingness to accept constructive criticism and continued learning
- Demonstrated the need to possess more realistic behavioral expectations for students with serious mental health concerns, including the use of non-traditional approaches with these students
- Lacked confidence to independently communicate or build collaborations with parents

**3. What are some strengths and weaknesses that you see in Bloomsburg completers regarding their knowledge, skills and dispositions in the areas of a) the learner and learning, b) content, c) instructional practices, and d) professional responsibility? (CAEP 4.2, 4.4)**

- With regard to the area of the learner and learning, most completers demonstrated understanding of learner development, differences and environments. One completer struggled with the appropriate use of learning centers and developmental appropriateness. It was suggested that more time should be spent on personalized learning and how that ties to digital learning for students.
- With regard to the area of content, Bloomsburg University completers possess strong content knowledge and application. The only concern related to understanding the balance of digital learning with a traditional approach.
- Pertaining to the area of instructional practice, Bloomsburg University completers possess strong assessment, planning, and instructional strategies foundations. New teachers continue to gain knowledge and skills in these areas. Classroom management skills are strong. One area mentioned for improvement was the skill of pacing instruction.
- The area of professional responsibilities had the most specific recommendation for improvement. Although completers are “coachable”, focusing on the positive and not the negative should be incorporated in the teacher preparation curriculum. This includes focusing on the positives in the school environment, classroom, and communications with others, particularly parents.

**4. What are some ways that Bloomsburg could better prepare our teacher candidates to be highly prepared for their first year of teaching? (CAEP 2.1, 2.3, 5.5)**

- Include school safety in the teacher preparation curriculum (active shooter training)
- Increase pre-student teaching experience expectations, including diversity field experiences, internships, and Professional Development School opportunities
  - Increase the length of the student teaching semester to four months
  - Include more data-driven instructional practices in the curriculum, including strategies for forming student learning groups, and learning tied to digital content in the curriculum

**5. Describe the impact on student learning that Bloomsburg University completers make on P-12 students. (CAEP 4.1)**

- Possessed fresh ideas and nurturing dispositions, positive impact
- Taught the whole child working as team players for positive student outcomes

- Produced the second highest ELA I-Ready growth in the school district, plus scored green (on track)
- Produced greatest student IEP achievement gain compared to previous teacher's outcome
- Demonstrated the greatest potential as substitute teachers, resulting in full-time employment in the school district

**6. In what way has any Bloomsburg University completers accomplished important milestones while in your employment? (CAEP 4.3)**

- Implemented curriculum with fidelity
- Decided to assume a leadership role through active engagement in Professional Learning Communities
- Hired as literacy assistants and substitute teachers their first year, then hired as full-time teachers the second year
- Promoted Bloomsburg University completer to Dean of Students
- Projected to be satisfactory teachers but too early to determine. Hard evidence is needed to support impact

**7. How can Bloomsburg University strengthen its partnerships with your school or district through mutually beneficial collaboration? (CAEP 2.1)**

Two themes emerge from the responses including the need for more extensive pre-student teaching experiences through the establishment of more Professional Development School partnerships, and promotion of substitute teacher partnerships. Developing Professional Development School experiences with rural school districts prior to student teaching benefits both the BU teacher candidate and the school district. In addition, BU can strengthen partnerships with school districts by developing substitute teacher partnerships before teacher candidates graduate. Substitute experiences provide benefits to BU completers looking for teaching jobs. Several rural school districts currently experience a teacher shortage with more schools actively hiring teachers who are student teaching.

**Conclusions:** As stated previously, caution is exercised to not over-generalize the Focus Group results. With that stated, analyses of respondents' comments indicate Bloomsburg University completers demonstrate 4 many positive attributes relating to knowledge, skills and dispositions. The Bloomsburg University teacher preparation programs provide a strong foundation in the areas of learner development, content, instructional practices, and professionalism. Areas for consideration of further development include increasing university and school district partnerships, incorporating current practices related to school safety, inclusion of strategies leading to positive communications with parents and others, and increase content related to data-drive instruction