

University of Wyoming and Colorado State University Partnership: Fulfilling the Need for FCS Teachers in Wyoming

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Although Wyoming has been ranked near the top states in the country for starting teacher salaries (National Education Association, 2016), it cannot meet its family and consumer sciences (FCS) secondary-level teacher needs. In 1995, the FCS teacher preparation program at the University of Wyoming (UW) was eliminated, leaving the state without a means to fill FCS secondary-level openings. After years of trying to fill FCS teaching openings with out-of-state candidates and Wyoming high school students' continued interest in the FCS teaching profession, other options needed exploring. As a result, during the period of 2014-2016 university personnel from UW and Colorado State University met to develop a collaborative partnership for FCS teacher preparation.

The University of Wyoming (UW) Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) teacher preparation program administered jointly by the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources-Department of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS) and the College of Education-Department of Secondary Education, was eliminated along with all vocational education programs except Agriculture Education as part of a university refocusing in 1995. Wyoming (WY) was left without a FCS teacher preparation program and a mechanism to fill secondary FCS teacher openings.

Despite the lack of a FCS teacher education program, UW students continued to inquire about licensure. Vincenti, a UW FCS faculty member and former University of Massachusetts FCS teacher educator, was often asked to advise students interested in becoming FCS teachers but lacked options other than recommending they enroll in an out-of-state teacher preparation program.

The prospect of leaving WY and paying out-of-state tuition to obtain a degree in FCS education isn't appealing to most students. In 2006, the WY legislature created the Hathaway Scholarship which encourages WY high school students to prepare for and pursue post-secondary education within the state. (WY Department of Education, 2016). For many students, the scholarship makes a college education possible.

Concerns related to tuition costs for UW college students and the quality of teacher preparation options, prompted creative efforts to fulfill the WY FCS teacher need. As a result, over a three-year period (2014-2016) discussions took place resulting in the development of a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between UW and Colorado State University (CSU) FCS teacher education program. The CSU FCS teacher preparation program was chosen because of its quality and proximity to Laramie, WY.

Need for FCS Educators Nationally

Werhan's (2013) survey of state FCS administrators, Career and Technical Education data collectors, and FCS state leaders representing all 50 states, found half the states reported having continuing trouble hiring enough licensed FCS teachers. As a result, some districts have been forced "to make the hard decision to either close a program or hire teachers who are not fully prepared for the scope of work of FCS teachers" (p. 44). However, because some states did not report data, Werhan concluded estimates were low. The unresponsiveness in some states can be explained by lack of state-level FCS leadership, over-extension of responsibilities, and/or lack of specific and consistent data collection.

Despite a national decline in the number of FCS teacher preparation programs, a decline in the number of FCS teachers and teacher candidates over the past 10 years, and increased emphasis in public schools on "core" academic courses tied to school funding, all 50 states still offer secondary FCS programs. In fact, nationally, some programs are doing very well and demand is increasing (Tripp and Ownbey, 2016).

A shortage of licensed FCS teachers has led to alternative methods of obtaining the FCS endorsement in some states. These alternative methods have impacted the quality of FCS programs because of inadequate academic preparation for teaching the breadth of FCS content and lack of preparation in experiential learning using the holistic integrative perspective of FCS content and co-curricular youth leadership (Werhan, 2013, pp. 44-45).

Need for FCS Educators in Wyoming

"During the 2012/13 school year, 21.9% of WY teachers were age 55 or older and 13.7% were eligible for retirement, a statistic that will continue to grow" (Bullard et al, 2014, p. 5). Additionally, Bullard et al. (2014) stated that the public-school enrollment is expected to grow, likely exacerbating a shortage of teachers (p. 12).

Werhan and Whitbeck's (2015) national study of state superintendents supported the demand for FCS teachers in WY. This study was conducted to ascertain state superintendent's knowledge of the status of FCS programs in their districts, future need for FCS teachers, and the availability of licensed candidates to fill open positions. The study revealed 66-75% of the WY school districts reporting offered middle school and/or high school FCS programs with 20% (n=5 of 26) indicating no FCS courses were offered. Further, two of the superintendents in districts not offering FCS courses indicated the reason for the lack of a FCS program was the inability to find qualified teachers. Almost 59% of WY superintendents reported it being somewhat likely or very likely that they will need to hire a FCS teacher in the next three years with approximately 63% reporting having some difficulty or great difficulty finding licensed FCS teacher candidates, especially in rural districts. Seventy-one percent preferred hiring a teacher education program graduate, but were willing to take alternative credentials, such as content experts prepared through alternative routes (42%) and individuals with a teaching credential who were transitioning to teaching (50%), if necessary to fill the positions (D. Whitbeck, personal communication, November 18, 2015). WY superintendents indicated that their biggest concern with hiring through an alternative route was a lack of deep content knowledge, followed by other concerns such as inability to understand the role of FCCLA as an extension of FCS content, and lab safety and management (Vincenti, 2015).

Another indication of the need for qualified FCS teachers in WY came from Andrea Bryant, Executive Director of the WY Professional Teaching Standards Board, who indicated that three superintendents called her during the summer 2015 reporting challenges in filling FCS

teaching positions. They all succeeded, but were using some very “creative” ways such as having an Agriculture teacher teach a human nutrition course. These types of arrangements also reinforce the lack of geographically flexible licensed teachers waiting for open positions (Andrea Bryant, personal communication, October 9, 2015).

The state data collection inconsistency was reinforced by Vincenti’s finding that 52% of WY superintendents indicated they weren’t required to report teacher shortage areas to a state agency. In addition, because the WY Department of Education collects only aggregate data on Career and Technical Education, Vincenti surveyed the 92 FCS teachers in October 2014 with 49 (53%) responding. Ninety-four percent of the respondents expected an opening over the course of the next few years, primarily due to their own retirements. Sixty-two percent believed qualified teachers would not be available to replace them when they leave. The respondents also indicated that over the past four years approximately 118 to 130 of their students had expressed interest in becoming a FCS teacher. Some did find out-of-state options, but more than 90 chose other majors because they needed to attend UW to obtain lower tuition and Hathaway Scholarships.

Vincenti’s concern about tuition costs for UW college students and the quality of teacher preparation options, prompted her to seek creative ways to fulfill the WY FCS teacher need. In 2011 she reached out to Mallette, FCS teacher educator at CSU, as a viable partner for creative problem-solving because of the strength of CSU’s FCS teacher preparation program and its proximity to Laramie, WY. This effort was slowed by changes in the UW’s core curriculum and other graduation requirements, as well as changes in key university administrators.

Partnership Benefits

Because of the shortage of licensed FCS teachers, the UW and CSU FCS education partnership’s goal is to increase the number of well-prepared teacher candidates primed to fill FCS teaching positions in both states. Identifying the benefits of the partnership for each program was an important first step. The most significant benefit for UW is the creation of a process for WY university students to complete a quality FCS teacher preparation program unavailable at UW so they can fill WY secondary-level FCS teaching positions. Benefits for CSU include increased FCS program teacher candidates, increased course enrollments, and increased tuition revenues.

Partnership Concerns and Challenges

With every university partnership come challenges. The UW and CSU partnership faces some significant challenges. The fact that the two participating universities are in different states adds complexities to the partnership agreement. Below are only a few of the more significant questions addressed while developing the partnership MOU.

1. Is it possible for UW students to earn a dual bachelor of science degree upon completion of all requirements at both institutions resulting in UW and CSU counting graduates as program completers?
2. How does a UW student stay continuously/concurrently enrolled at UW during the semesters they are completing their teacher preparation at CSU?
3. How will cross-institutional advising be handled so the transfer to CSU is as seamless as possible?

4. What financial aid opportunities are available to minimize the difference between the undergraduate in-state tuition (with the Hathaway Scholarship) in WY and the out-of-state undergraduate tuition at CSU?

Through conversations, negotiations, and compromise the answers to these challenges were address and resolutions were spelled out in the MOU.

Partnership Agreement Development

A MOU for the partnership was necessary to obtain official university approval at both institutions. An initial draft of the MOU was constructed by the CSU Associate Registrar and FCS teacher educator at CSU. The memorandum includes the purpose, agreements, limitations, a prescribed curriculum for the dual degree, MOU review and timelines and signature lines for the Vice Provost for Undergraduate Affairs, College Dean, Department/School Director, Legal Counsel and the University Controller. The draft was reviewed and revised in separate discussions held at each institution with the Vice Presidents for Undergraduate Affairs (VPUA), College Deans and Associate Deans, Department Heads, and administrators from the Registrar's Office and Student Financial Services. Edits were made and then shared again for a conference call discussion with representatives from both registrar's offices, and the WY State Board for Teacher Standards. A finalized MOU was approved the fall of 2016. Following are a few of the more significant items addressed in the agreement:

Requirements of UW Students

- Complete the FCS Human Development and Family Sciences bachelor's degree program requirements with a minimum of senior standing with no more than 6 remaining credits in the UW program left to meet the graduation requirements. Student must earn a minimum of 150 credits between both programs (120 credits at UW) and (a minimum of 30 credits at CSU) to be awarded baccalaureate degrees from both institutions.
- Complete the remaining UW course requirements for graduation concurrently (online, summer) while taking courses at CSU to maintain continuous/concurrent enrollment at UW.
- Meet the same teacher preparation requirements as a CSU FCS bachelor's degree candidates (i.e. GPA requirement, C or above in all content and teacher preparation coursework, 20 hours of experience working with school-aged children, obtain a passing score on the FCS content exam) and be certifiable in WY and Colorado.
- Pay out-of-state tuition unless they meet the requirements and are chosen to participate in the Western Undergraduate Exchange (WUE), a transfer award offering a select number of students reduced tuition, in recognition of their academic achievement and ability to contribute to their chosen field. Other financial aid options continue to be investigated.

Assurances from CSU Program Administrators

If UW students meet the above criteria and are accepted into the teacher preparation program, they are assured that:

- All qualifications for educator licensing in Colorado and WY are being met, and

- Fulfilling the student teaching requirement in a secondary school in southern WY is an option.

Requirements of Both Institutions (UW and CSU)

- Upon completion of the jointly-approved curriculum at both UW and/or CSU, the courses will transfer directly into each institution,
- Assure the program meets the eligibility requirements for FCS teacher licensure in both Colorado and WY, and
- Faculty will be transparent and collaborative in advising students within the program.

The review and timeline for the MOU was set to remain in force for a total of three years and the two programs agreed to notify each other by May 1 of each year to monitor program activities, capacity concerns, resource challenges, and/or changes to curriculum/admission/transfer requirements.

Conclusions and Recommendations for FCS Educators

The absence of a teacher preparation program and the problem of filling teaching positions with licensed candidates are not unique to WY. There are other states currently without a university FCS teacher preparation program. Consequently, more secondary-level FCS teaching positions will be left vacant or filled with unlicensed candidates increasing the potential of programs to be lost. To turn the tide, states without FCS teacher preparation programs should consider exploring creative ways to develop mutually beneficial cross institutional partnerships to meet the need.

The development of a partnership/MOU takes time, compromise, and the involvement and collaboration of multiple levels of administrators at each institution. It is worth the effort if the result is quality licensed teacher candidates who can fill FCS teacher openings in turn minimizing the opportunity for program closures due to a lack of qualified candidates. As Werhan (2013) stated: “With the groundswell of support for FCS content and the soaring employment prospects for FCS educators, this may be the time to redouble the efforts of the profession to support FCS secondary education and quality teacher preparation” (p. 45).

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