

Profile and Promotion of the Family and Consumer Sciences Teacher Education Student

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Many family and consumer sciences (FCS) university teacher education programs are facing a decline in student enrollment which can lead to serious consequences for the profession. The purpose of this study was to create a profile of the FCS teacher education student and obtain strategies to promote FCS teacher education programs. Illinois FCS teachers provided the qualitative data in this research. Findings from the study can assist Illinois and other FCS teacher education programs in structuring promotion efforts to increase student enrollment.

Nationally the number of students who major in family and consumer sciences (FCS) teacher education has declined in recent years (Lee, 2011). In Illinois, the seven FCS teacher education accredited institutions had a total of 52 FCS teacher education students enrolled during the 2012-2013 school year, representing a 38 percent decline in enrollments in FCS teacher education programs in Illinois in two years (D. Hopper, personal communication, September, 2012). Low enrollment numbers potentially threaten higher education FCS teacher education programs by devaluing the reputation and forcing reduction in programs that can result in the dismissal or reassignment of faculty positions and, essentially, the supply of available certified FCS teachers. With the known demand for FCS teachers (Cross, 2016; Werhan, 2013), the impact of declining enrollments is concerning.

Conversations about enrollment issues among FCS teacher educators at the Illinois FCS Teacher Education Council Spring 2012 meeting were held. The common response in the quest for a solution to these issues was recruitment. While promotion ideas were mentioned, no definitive plan was established due to uncertainty related to the most effective course of action.

Palmer and Gaunt (2007) indicated the first step to successful promotion requires knowing who your audience is and then effectively packaging your product toward meeting the needs of this audience. The purpose of this study was to create a profile of the Illinois FCS teacher education student and obtain strategies to promote FCS teacher education programs from previous FCS teacher education students who are now teaching in Illinois.

Review of Literature

University Program Enrollment

The number of universities offering FCS teacher education have seriously declined in the past few decades. In the mid-1980's, there were 281 FCS teacher education programs reported nationwide; a decade later, that number declined to 171 programs (American Association of FCS, 2012). Currently, there are 103 institutions that offer FCS teacher education programs (Holland, 2017), representing a 63 percent decrease in program offerings since the 1980s. Bull and Cummings (2002) connected low student enrollments with program terminations.

Underlying Factors

To achieve the goal of increased enrollments, programs must first examine the issues that have caused the decline in numbers of FCS teacher education majors to not repeat them. Several external and internal factors have been identified as contributors to the slide among FCS teacher education majors.

External factors that negatively affect enrollment include problems beyond the immediate control of the FCS teacher education profession. Historically, the image of the FCS profession has misguided the perception of what FCS entails (Lee, 2011; Mimbs 2002). For example, FCS-related subjects continue to be recognized by many as inferior to academics within the secondary education level, which could result in some students missing the opportunity to be exposed to the FCS-career path. Although males are not reciprocating similarly in FCS, another external factor is the large proportion of females that are entering nontraditional fields such as engineering and business (Rattray & Calvin, 2010). State reform initiatives, such as academic placement testing and increased high school graduation requirements is another factor that has narrowed FCS course options for students (Pickard, 2004). As a result, students are not exposed to the FCS curriculum or the FCS teacher and therefore are not aware of FCS teaching as a career choice.

Internal factors have surfaced to add to the FCS teacher education enrollment problem. Mimbs (2000, 2002) has identified fragmentation within the FCS profession as a factor (Mimbs, 2000, 2002). Students may not recognize that areas such as child development, nutrition, interior design, and fashion merchandising are related to FCS. Because FCS teacher education draws upon all of these specialty areas, disunity in the profession has a trickle-down effect on the FCS teacher education identity. Fragmentation may also make it difficult to locate FCS education programs at a university due to the absence of an academic home or recognizable name. For example, FCS teacher education is housed at some universities in units with names such as Human Ecology or Workforce Education and Development or Applied Science and Technology. Given the plethora of names, it is not surprising outsiders have a vague understanding of our profession or have difficulty locating the FCS department on a university website.

Another factor, possibly resulting from a combination of external and internal factors, is the way potential students view the profession of FCS education. Rattray and Calvin (2010) indicated that a large majority of secondary students reported they had never even considered a career in FCS or that they did not feel there were jobs available in the profession. Any action taken without addressing the underlying problems contributing to the decline in enrollments would merely provide temporary redress.

Program Promotion

The shortage of FCS teachers has been well documented (Bartley & Sneed, 2004; Cross, 2017; Tripp, 2006; Werhan & Way, 2006; Werhan, 2013) leading researchers and others to focus on promotion or recruitment methods to generate growth. Lee (1998) pinned the promotion of irregular teacher certification approaches to the influx of FCS teacher vacancies. Mimbs, Stewart, and Heath-Camp (1998) studied the career choice influences of then-recent FCS teacher graduates for recruitment purposes. They recommended that recruitment plans revisit such influences to facilitate more productive plans and develop more focused recruitment plans for targeted audiences. Mimbs (2002) suggested that the following factors were important in the recruitment of FCS students: 1) early recruitment; 2) scholarship availability; and 3) community support for programs.

Recruitment efforts documented in the literature largely include recruitment fairs and events (Godbey, 2016; Jensen, Rowley, Skidmore & Hyom-Parker, 2003; Poirier, Sager, & Kounlavong, 2016; Smalley, DeBates, & Smith, 2016). Lee (2011) documented the development of a newsletter series to create a more personal, inviting touch as an outreach method to FCS teachers and their students. Poirier, Sager, and Kounlavong (2016) also identify communication with and the distribution of promotional resources to current teachers as central to their recruitment efforts.

The influential role of the secondary FCS teachers has been a consistent reason why students pursue careers in FCS teacher education (Arnett & Freeburg, 2011; Jensen, Rowley, Skidmore & Hyom-Parker, 2003; Mimbs, 2000). Bull, Uerz, and Yoakum (2000) stated that “teacher involvement in student recruitment was crucial among secondary students choosing a career in FCS education.” Clearly, the FCS teacher at the local level is an important pipeline for university FCS teacher education sustainability; however, their level of self-promotion behaviors is uncertain.

Conceptual Framework

Marketing of FCS teacher education remains a significant role played by FCS teacher educators (Palmer & Gaunt, 2007). Marketing and recruitment together is termed promotion. Promotion is a business process. Marketing starts with market research, a learning process in which marketers (e.g., FCS teacher education programs) get to know everything they can about the interests, needs, and wants of consumers (e.g., potential students). Once the marketing research is completed a program can tailor a message to targeted groups. An effective promotion strategy is beneficial because it is cost and time-effective, creates a concentrated message, provides for a systematic process, and streamlines resources and personnel.

The principles of social marketing are applicable in the development of a promotion plan. Emerging in the 1970s, the social marketing model applies commercial principles that focuses on a targeted group within the population and tailors campaigns and awareness with the aim of achieving specific goals relevant to an organization (Weinreich, 2011). Essentially, the process of social marketing gathers data from an experience-related group to develop a niche marketing strategy.

Applicable to this study, determining the FCS teacher education student profile and generating timely promotion strategies from former FCS teacher education students can help craft a successful message, directed at the right people in the right places. To date, the profile of a FCS teacher education student has not been determined in literature therefore implying broad tactics have been used for recruitment.

The key to social marketing is relating to the audience you are trying to reach. FCS teacher educators need to ask and listen from previous students for a targeted a promotion plan. Seeking information from the targeted population can generate ideas as well as barriers for enrollment. Additionally, by building connections with key people, such as Illinois FCS teachers, has the potential to bring attention and credibility to FCS teaching career path thus yielding positive results for a university FCS teacher education program.

Methodology

Research Purpose

The purpose of this study was to create a profile of the FCS teacher education student and obtain strategies for promotion for FCS teacher education programs.

Method

This study used an online survey with a descriptive research design developed using SurveyMonkey.com. It was pilot tested with secondary career and technical education teachers (n=6) to determine internal consistency and was modified and revised to reflect the comments of the pilot test group.

The final questionnaire consisted of three sections: (a) demographics of the FCS teacher education student, (b) university selection, and (c) promotion strategies. The demographic section asked for participants to select from a list of demographic responses (gender, age range, ethnicity, home location, distance to university attended, type of program, and years teaching) and to indicate their reasoning for becoming a FCS teacher. The second section used an open-ended question to allow participants to describe their reasoning for selecting the university they attended. The final section, an open-ended question, asked participants to describe two strategies FCS teacher educators can use to promote FCS teacher education. Collectively, the demographic and university selection questionnaire sections contributed to creating the FCS teacher education student profile while the third section provided detailed promotion strategies that answered the second part of the purpose statement.

Participants

Palmer and Gaunt (2007) suggested collecting data from previous clients (e.g., FCS teacher education students who are now FCS teachers) to establish a consistent pattern. The population consisted of Illinois FCS Teacher Association (IFCSTA) members during the 2012-13 year. The sampling frame was established using the IFCSTA membership list, and the entire population (N = 152) was studied.

Data Collection and Analysis

Using surveyMonkey.com, a cover letter that included the questionnaire link was emailed to every FCS teacher in the IFCSTA 2012-2013 membership. Participants were given one-week to complete the questionnaire. To increase the response rate, two subsequent weekly emails were sent to remind respondents to participate in the research study (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009). Ninety-four respondents (62%) completed the questionnaire.

Data analysis was divided into three stages (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2006). In stage one, the primary investigator transcribed the data, established response categories, and placed responses in categories. In stage two, the questionnaire, coding rubric, and final results of the coding were independently reviewed by a panel to ensure conformity and validity. In stage three, the data were summarized, interpreted and reported.

Findings

Illinois FCS teachers provided the data to generate a profile of the FCS teacher education student and timely strategies for the promotion of FCS teacher education. Findings provided a profile of a FCS teacher education students as an 18 to 22-year-old, Caucasian females who grew up in suburban areas, outside major cities, or in towns with a population less than 3,000. These students attended a traditional, four-year degree FCS teacher education program and selected FCS teacher education as their program major their freshman year. Respondents noted that they became FCS teachers because of their interest in FCS-related subjects and their high school FCS teachers.

Survey respondents were asked how they decided which institution to attend to earn their FCS teacher education degrees. The majority of participants indicated that being “close to home” was the decisive factor in selecting the university they attended. Interestingly, these teachers reported that the university they attended was within 100 miles of their home. Other factors mentioned related to the selection of a program: (a) the program’s reputation, (b) family or friends went to school there, and some mentioned that they (c) “fell into” the program as an undecided major or switched majors while at their university.

The questionnaire also asked participants to describe two promotion strategies that university FCS teacher education programs could use to recruit. Numerous suggestions were provided, but two categories emerged: (a) FCS faculty led-initiatives and (b) university led-initiatives. The top five recruitment ideas that FCS university faculty suggested included: (a) faculty visits to high school programs, (b) an emphasis on the availability of FCS teaching positions, (c) participation in university open houses and display student work and share success stories, (d) the creation and distribution of contemporary promotional materials including flyers, posters, and downloadable videos of program, and (e) becoming actively involved in FCCLA events. The second category of suggestions was more specific to the function or responsibilities of universities: (a) FCS teacher education programs should be prominent and accessible on university websites, (b) the image and visibility of the profession within the universities should be strengthened, (c) online courses or cohort classes at high schools should be offered to meet the needs of today’s students, and, (d) simply advertise the program.

Discussion

Because of the decline in student enrollments in Illinois FCS education programs has serious consequences for the profession, Illinois FCS teacher educators needed a starting point. This study gathered information from a targeted audience practicing FCS educators to generate a FCS teacher education student profile and identify promotion strategies to initiate a recruitment plan to elevate enrollment in programs.

The profile of a FCS teacher education student is the traditional college-aged, Caucasian female that attends a four-year FCS teacher education program as a freshman with a strong connection with the FCS curriculum and/or FCS teacher. While this demographic data provides the characteristics of the population that should be targeted for pursuing a FCS teacher education degree, it also highlights missing demographics. Touted in other related literature, FCS lacks diversity within the teaching profession, meaning males and minority FCS teachers (Arnett & Freeburg, 2011; Werhan & Way, 2006) as well as those who are considering a career change or those who have stayed home to raise children. For example, reach out to stay-at-home mothers or fathers by promoting the FCS teacher career path as a natural transition from the managing the home to the classroom and off-set a major barrier by providing financial support exclusively for this group in terms of scholarships for tuition, book, child-care and living expenses. Also, to increase nontraditional enrollment, FCS teacher education programs could link with the National Alliance for Partnerships in Equity (NAPE) to increase student access and workforce diversity via professional development and technical assistance. By reaching out to these untapped markets could prove positive results in increasing enrollment for FCS teacher education programs.

The connection between the profile Illinois FCS teacher education major and his/her FCS teachers as an important reason why s/he chose to study FCS education reaffirms the findings from Arnett and Freeburg (2011), Mimbs (2002), and Bull, Uerz, and Yoakum (2000) of

the importance the secondary FCS teacher role is in the recruitment process for the FCS education profession. Clearly, the FCS secondary teacher is a major link in increasing potential enrollment in FCS teacher education programs thus recruitment efforts should start with the help of a secondary FCS teacher. Secondary FCS teachers should be prepared for the important role they play in recruitment. Providing professional development through related conference sessions or sending out a one-page flyer on how to 'grow your own' can help make these teachers become aware of their role. Another way to involve the FCS teacher is to ask for their participation on an advisory board to feel some ownership in a FCS teacher education program.

Concentrating efforts and building relationships with secondary FCS teachers should be a priority among university programs to ensure positive growth in FCS education programs. Relationship-building techniques suggested include sending personal letters or newsletters highlighting program successes or new happenings as described by Lee (2011) or hosting area regional events such as state organizational meetings or FCS-related student events (Godbey, 2016; Jensen, Rowley, Skidmore & Hyom-Parker, 2003; Poirier, Sager, & Kounlavong, 2016; Smalley, DeBates, & Smith, 2016).

In selecting a university FCS teacher education program to attend, majority of the participants in this study indicated their choice was based on proximity of their home, in fact within 100 miles. FCS teacher education programs should perhaps with the help of graduate assistants, identify all schools within a two-hour radius and promote heavily in the identified geographical area.

Interestingly, internal transfer students, students who switch their majors while at the university, are a population source for recruitment as indicated in the findings. FCS teacher educators and/or FCS teacher education students should present to underclassman FCS-related classes or attend undecided major events to communicate FCS teacher education as viable career option. Knowing this information, universities can heavily promote their program to the local surrounding areas and right on campus instead of a state-wide approach which may deem overwhelming and costly.

Promotion Strategies

Two categories, FCS faculty led- and University led-initiatives, emerged as results of asking for strategies on how university FCS teacher education programs can promote students into their programs. FCS teacher educators be more visible and accessible. FCS teacher education student organizations can partner with the local Family, Career, and Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) chapters for coordinated events at both sites. The teacher education students can build relationships with secondary students conversing about the FCS teacher education program in general, courses, college life, and in turn, the teacher education students can gain experience working with FCCLA programming.

The influence of social media today impacts how messages can be distributed, and communicated in a timely and inexpensive manner. Platforms such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, or YouTube can be efficient outreach modes to the suggested profile of FCS teacher education students.

Students today are stewards of technology. Programs need to use this source to their advantage and be responsive to the changing needs of students. For example, FCS teacher education websites need to be reflective of FCS today in terms of attention grabbing (visuals, fonts and colors), information the current and accurate, use of short videos, and a list of job placements and availability as a motivating factor. As a finding in this study, delivery methods

also need to re-examined to include online coursework with quality instruction and (re-) establish cohort groups. Also, websites such as Zinch.com are extremely useful tools that connect students with universities, career paths, and programs of study. Another strategy is to enlist FCS teacher education students to create visual and video-taped recruitment presentations to share with high school students as an assignment. It is important to involve the students majoring in FCS teacher education in the recruitment process so these future teachers will have experience with promotion efforts for their own programs.

As previously discussed by Mimbs (2002), the profession's identity (name uniformity, brand, and philosophical stance) was identified as an ongoing problem connected with enrolments. People in the profession know possible names to search in a search engine tool bar or university websites; however, many lay people do not. However, in efforts to bring uniformity and recognition to the FCS discipline, the American Association of FCS established the Branding Initiative in 2010 that introduced consistent key messages and an icon that has been endorsed by several FCS alliance organizations including the education sector. The intention of the initiative is to bring consistency and unity to the FCS discipline.

According to the social marketing model, research is crucial to determine the most effective and efficient vehicles to reach the target audience and increase demand (Weinreich, 2011). Previous FCS teacher education students in this study identified numerous strategies for Illinois FCS teacher education programs to reach potential students as well as barriers that can be improved for the FCS teacher education discipline. A relatable marketing strategy directed towards the targeted profile will provide a reference point for Illinois FCS teacher educators.

While the findings from this study are not novel, the promotional strategies discussed here brought the Illinois FCS educators who participated in this research to FCS teacher education. Therefore, quality efforts associated with of traditional avenues to promote FCS education as a career option may need to be reconsidered. As Mimbs, Stewart, and Heath-Camp (1998) recommended, programs should revisit current recruitment plans to facilitate for more productive plans and develop more focused recruitment plans for targeted audiences.

Limitations

A limitation of the study is that it only surveyed teachers in one state. Therefore, the findings cannot be generalized to other populations. Further studies might expand the scope of inquiry to other states to determine if similar trends exist.

Conclusion

The projected goal of this study was to assist Illinois university FCS teacher education programs with their promotion process. Essentially, this study sought to gather information from former FCS teacher education students about to ascertain what attracted them to certain universities and strategies to generate program growth. It is hoped that the results will allow Illinois FCS teacher educators to be more focused in their recruitment efforts. While each program is vying for student numbers, as a state we all share in the same issue: the need to increase enrollment numbers. The next step in the process is to address the targeted audience in an effective way by devising a plan specific to each university based on the findings.

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