

Addressing the Disconnect between CSU Policy and Professional Expectations of Teachers

Author: *Alexander Taghavian*

University: California State University, Sacramento

Course: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies EDLP 225 :: Advanced Seminar: Ethical Decision Making

Instructor: Dr. Rosemary Papalewis

Term: Spring 2004

Introduction

Ann Olmsted (1978) posited that society recognizes teachers, like doctors and lawyers, as professionals: persons with formal training, mastery of knowledge, and social values congruent to a specific occupation. As with most professions, the gateway to certification or licensure entails completion of an accredited university program. The California State University, graduating over half of the state's incumbent teachers, upholds policy that maintains insufficient admission criteria to credential programs (Keleher, Piana, & Fata, 1999). To illustrate: faculty cannot screen out academically qualified students that exhibit questionable behavior, that which conflicts with the social values of the teaching profession. This study explores the ethical implications faced by teacher education faculty when making admission decisions within the CSU system.

Background

Before proceeding, we must establish the importance of professionalism as a backdrop to this discussion. Professionals must be cognizant of social constructs prevalent in their work environment. For instance, a teacher needs to understand and address children's interests, school culture, political process, parental expectation, and confidentiality. How well one negotiates these factors speaks as much to their professional competency as their depth of content knowledge and pedagogical skill.

Changing scenes to a CSU campus, consider the following scenario. A teacher education candidate frequently engages with faculty and staff before an admission decision occurs. Perhaps the student requires program advising or needs clarification on application procedure. During these interactions, the student exhibits combative behavior, arrives at appointments late, and ignores policy despite specific instruction from a faculty member. However, their academic history reflects an acceptable grade point average and they pass the admission interview, the only criteria for acceptance into program. By admitting this student, faculty discount transparent ethical concerns. Will other students feel alienated by this student's behavior? What impact will unprofessional conduct have at the school level during fieldwork experiences? Could the partnership between the university and school site become strained? Is this student destined for failure as a teacher by lacking the social values of the profession?

Adherence to the CSU enrollment management policy creates this dilemma. Accordingly, a program may only adopt supplementary admission criteria if the number of eligible applicants exceeds what can be accommodated (CSU Chancellor's Office, September, 2002). Unless the program meets this definition of 'impaction', admission decisions must be based upon academic qualification, completion of prerequisites, and passage of interview (http://www.csustan.edu/TeacherEd/MSCP/MSCP-Handbook_Appl-Sp2003.pdf). Thus, faculty could not develop additional admission criteria that would screen out the above student. On the other hand, the ethic of justice is upheld. Consider these outcomes: admission decisions are consistent with institutional policy; students receive equal treatment when compared to each other; and the influence of bias is reduced.

Discussion

Present enrollment practice fails to adequately address the ethical concerns that exist in teacher preparation. Again, universities stand as the gatekeepers into the field. The public, thereby, entrusts the institution to send out neophyte educators equipped with both "cognitive and non-cognitive qualities" critical to the profession (Olmstead, 1978, p. 12). Perhaps chief among these professional ethics is recognizing the affect of the teacher's actions on the children's interests (Luckowski, 1996). What impression would an unprofessional teacher make upon their students over the course of an academic year? How could a teacher advocate for a child if they are oblivious to the school culture and politics? Hence, admission criteria should reflect not only university policy, but also professional expectations closely linked to personal competencies.

Mill's Harm Principle provides another context for evaluating this topic. Would the harm brought about by denying the professionally incompetent student offset the repercussions of admitting him/her upon the university, district, and community? The rejected student cannot pursue their career aspirations. Moreover, the opportunity to better develop professional competence as part of the teacher education experience is never extended. Potential for abuse of admission decisions may promote injustices: a faculty member may deny admission to a student on a personal grudge or disapproval of their hairstyle.

Now let us consider the contrary. First, combative behavior, irresponsibility, or social ineptitude, examples of unprofessionalism, alienate other students in the university classroom or workgroups. Coping with such a student creates added stress to campus faculty and staff. Secondly, similar issues will emerge during the student teaching experience, thereby weakening partnerships between the university and districts. Lastly, upon graduation and employment, the parents, guardians, and children will experience the detrimental affects of the incompetent teacher. The exasperated parent might ask, "How did this person ever get hired as a teacher?" While much of this responsibility falls upon the hiring district, we cannot forget that the university certification distinguishes the teacher as a professional.

Conclusion

As a state institution that emphasizes access, the CSU does not have the same latitude in determining selection criteria that private or competitive public universities possess. That said, teacher education faculty must adopt alternative measures to address admitting unprofessional or behaviorally problematic students. Demonstrating the ethic of critique and care, faculty could develop advising strategies and remedial interventions when problems arise. For instance, a student that repeatedly misses deadlines and arrives late to class could be required to take a professional ethics course. Or, a socially ungraceful student may be enlightened by a compassionate faculty member during a one-on-one meeting. Until changes occur with enrollment management policy at the executive level, faculty will need to take such steps to resolve the present ethical dilemma. Failure to do so will undermine the perception of the teacher as a professional.

References

CSU, Chancellor's Office. (2002, September). *The California state university enrollment management policy and practices*. Long Beach , CA.: California State University .

Keleher, T., Piana, L. D., Fata, M. G. (1999). *Creating crisis: How California 's teaching policies aggravate racial inequalities in public schools*.

(Report No. SP 040-345). Applied Research Center , Oakland , CA. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 458 205).

Luckowski, J. (1996). *Professional ethics among practicing educators*. (Report No. SP 036 769). Report prepared for the Certification Standards and Practices Advisory Council. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No.395 926).

Olmsted, A. G. (1978). *Professions, judgment, and the selection process*. (Report No. SP 012-332). U.S. Department of Health, Education & Welfare, National Institute of Education. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 151 335).