

Alumni Focus Group

(12/5/05)

Q: In what ways did you find your program at WPU prepared you the most for your job after graduation?

#1: I don't even know what the title of the person was, but the person who came out and say me in my student teaching experience, actually was a great help in the sense of making sure that the things that were being taught here [in classes] were showing up as I was doing my student teaching. He also, when it came time for me to go out there and look for a job, he was a good person for me to get my foot in the door. He was affiliated with the district where I got my job.

The whole program in general. I was talking to Dr. D. the other day and I can still remember this one thing she had us do... acting as if we were students in an elementary classroom – creating books and bringing the books to younger kids. And we bound these books. I used to do that with my sixth graders. And they loved it and they would actually take the books down to the kindergarten and the first grade and they would read to them. It was just little things like that, that I learned through here that I carried through.

#2: I graduated a long time ago – 1988 – and in that time teaching has changed. I think that they need to teach about curriculum changes and assessment.

When I was in the program they were mainly focusing on special ed – an isolated population. Now we are doing it totally different.

I think it gave me a lot of preparation about how to know about theory and application; development and the stages of the child. The application how to teach the child...that was quite positive.

#3: I am not a classroom teacher. I mentor preschool teachers. A lot of the preschool courses I went through were instrumental in helping me understand what preschool teachers go through and how to face the issues they do.

Q: In what ways do you think the program was lacking and could be improved in terms of what you needed to know on the job?

#3 One thing that is lacking in the program is preparing teachers to work with second language learners.

#1 Spinning off of that, I taught sixth grade and every year I had on average 6 inclusion kids in my class. And I really felt kind of naïve to the whole situation. I didn't know what to do. I had the special ed teacher come in, but she wasn't there all of the time. She would kind of help me modify the tests. But when it came to actually teaching them and how to modify the techniques, I don't feel like that is something I was really prepared for. I knew

how to teach the regular learner, but I didn't know how to teach the special learner. And even though I didn't have that special ed degree, something out there would have been good to have to use that in my classroom.

Q: For New Teachers- Did you feel sufficiently prepared to handle classroom management issues when you first started? Did you find any surprises or unexpected challenges on the job in the first year after you left WPU?

#2: I would say in the beginning, no. I lacked the experience and I learned on the job. They gave us workshops on classroom management and also you learn through experience. The kids teach you as well.

#1: [I didn't have a difficult time.] I had a lot of people come to me because I was told I was given the most difficult class. And I honestly think it's just one of those things you just have. You find ways that work with your student what types of things you need to say or to do in order to get them to listen to you and stay in control. I felt either it came from here or it was something that came inside of me....I felt 100 percent prepared classroom management-wise. That was never an issue for me.

Q: What could we do here to help other teachers who don't feel as confident as you did?

#2 A course in classroom management or it would be part of a course. I also would like them to see them teach a course on philosophy and education - to combine regular ed and not only special ed. Now we have ESL/bilingual students.

#3 I think classroom management is something you really can't teach in college. It comes naturally and it's called learning on the job. It helps to have practicum students continuing with the same cooperating teacher in student teaching. Observe management techniques in practicum and then in student teaching follow-through with the management. Book knowledge doesn't help when you step into that classroom alone.

Q: For Advanced Practitioners- In what ways do you think WPU prepared you for new roles and especially for leadership roles?

#3: For one thing, the professors. To watch their leadership of the classes, the people they were in charge of, was a tremendous role model. I am still in contact with those people, so whenever I have a question or a concern, I can get advice from them.

The classes that I took, everyone of them helped me in the position that I now have. The curriculum ...I had not done preschool for many years and it had changed drastically over those years. So learning about what 3 and 4 year olds should know and learning how to instruct them, that really helped me in assisting my teachers of 3 and 4 year olds. Developmental stages, brain knowledge, all of those things entered into my position.

Q: Did you feel that you were sufficiently mentored in the field during your time you were in the program at WPU?

#2: Yes, before the program I had to put in some hours of experience working with disabled students. Then I had three practicums and student teaching. I felt that was the most effective part of the program...to apply. I had wonderful professors and they supported me and they criticized me and they gave me a lot of insight.

#1: I agree. To this day, still have contact with student teaching supervisor, and we are going back 10 years. He was fantastic. He was always there when he said he would be. He had a lot of constructive criticism. He had a lot of positive things to say about what he saw. And both..he never slighted one or the other. If he felt there were things you needed to improve on, he let you know. He let you know right away. He would come in to observe you then he would say, "OK, let's go and let's talk about this privately." And like I said, after I graduated, he would tell me about positions he heard about. From the program on, he's been a great mentor.

#3: The field supervisors, they are wonderful. They understand what is going on in the classroom and they understand the children. [This is about the field supervisors who come to observe the teachers whom I am supervising in the field.] Problem is when your college teachers are not out in the classroom and what they teach you does not apply when you go back to your classroom.

Q: In what ways did you find that WPU and the College of Education provided a sense of community and supported your learning efforts during your time here? Did you feel that you were part of a community of teachers or prospective teachers or supervisors? How might we do a better job of helping students to feel connected to the College, its faculty, and your fellow students?

#1: One thing I liked about it was when we were doing our methods courses, the same group of students saw the same teachers. You not only formed bonds, not only with the professors, but with students that were in your classroom. One went on to be godmother of my child and I met her here. Had it not been for that sense of community where you are with the same group throughout the courses for the entire year...and the same thing with the professors....seeing them on a consistent basis....and knowing that you are all coming together as one....I thought that was great.

#2: I have a very positive experience in a community. I am still in touch with many professors and some students who were with me.

#3: I was a lot older than a lot of the students in the program and in fact, many of the students in the program were the teachers I was supervising. So it was different.

Q: What are your suggestions for WPU in preparing new practitioners in your field?

#2: You need to prepare teachers to teach diversity. I'm not talking only about special ed. I am talking about language, different classes, poor SES.

You also need to teach more about assessment. I still have difficulty with this. And we want the children to experience success and have love for learning.

#3: To piggy back on what she said. We tend to teach the way we were taught. And in this very diverse world and technological things that are going on, I think that diversity is a big thing and it is not happening. Some schools don't let children speak in their native language. Teachers if they don't understand children, don't want them to speak in that language.

You need to make teachers aware of the fact that it is not wrong to speak in your own language. They need to learn that these children are not dirty and smelly.

#1. There's going to be a million different cultures in your room and SES differences. You have to be prepared to teach to everyone of those levels, if you can call it that. We do a lot of times have a mindset that you're going to get into this classroom and they are just going to sit there and they're not going to have issues going on at home. Everything is going to go wonderful. Their going to taking these tests and some are going to pass and some are going to fail and then they are going to just go home. But I can't tell you how many kids, and you saw too, come into your classroom and have so many different stories going on. You have to prepare yourself for how am I going to handle this and put the teaching aside right now and handle this child.

#3. I've been looking for a class about different cultures. There are things that different cultures view differently. When a teacher says look at me when I talk to you, there are cultures if you look at someone when they are reprimanding you, it is a sign of disrespect. Other cultures it's a sign of respect. WPU should provide a class for Paterson teachers on as many cultural idiosyncrasies for teachers.

Q: What would be the best way for us to bring teachers to a better understanding of cultural differences – other than a course on cultural diversity? What experiences can we provide?

#3: One thing not to do - every classroom between now and Xmas, brings in food. This is not diversity in the classroom. This is "diversity lunch."

#2: We might bring awareness to language. If I say good morning in Arabic, I will say "morning good." Thinking is part of language. Students need to gain confidence to start speaking in English. Also like you said, it is not just about food. Some of them think totally different. Not only in America you have subcultures. Everyone does not think the same or have the same mentality.

#1: I think offering more field experience. In practicum you are only there for two days a week, but when I was there I was asked to begin teaching right away. When I did student teaching, right from the first she put me in to teach. So I think if there was more field experience...I remember my very first class for education, one of the options was to go into a school in Paterson and just observe and if you wanted to help one student you could. And I learned a lot from that. When you just talk about different cultures....you know I'm from a pretty all Caucasian district. My sister is adopted and is Asian American, so I knew of other cultures. But aside from her, I never experienced what goes on in different cultures and SES's. And when I was placed in that school system, you get an appreciation for all different walks in life. If there was some field experience to send upcoming teachers to ...and they come back and reflect on what they see. Take away the teaching and what did you see with these children as far as individuals. And something like that might cause them to reflect on how to be better teachers for the different needs of the students.

#3: Is there a history requirement in the B.A. program? There's a lot of fallacies in the American history story. There's a book out something about the lies that your teachers taught you. I think teachers need to be aware of that no matter what grade they're teaching.

#2: I would like if they would offer a course to make teaching easier for students with challenges. Let's say by using their imagination to learn. Or writing. For learning disabled students who have difficulty in abstract thinking. They are able to learn because most of them are visual learners. So they can imagine and it is easier if they are given the right instructions. Maybe learning style as well.

Q: How would you like WPU to continue supporting your professional efforts after graduation? What kinds of functions and activities would you find useful and which ones would you attend?

#1: Offer workshops, not necessarily college courses for after the school day. To learn a little about like technology, different approaches to teaching.

Another way I was just thinking of is that when an undergraduate student graduates, if there was a way to have an alumni student to be their even if just by email or telephone, if they had a question. I know I would do it. I have a niece who just graduated and many times she has called me to ask for help in interviewing and applying for jobs. Once she got her foot in the door, now she asks me how to approach areas of curriculum and particular students. I wonder who she would turn to if she didn't have somebody else in her life who is a teacher.

Q: So what should we do to make this happen? We have a an electronic Resource Center, and people sign up, but then they do not contact us again.

#1: What about automatically pairing up an undergraduate student who has graduated with an alumni...automatically as part of graduation. You are now paired up with

someone who has agreed to do this and whenever you need them through email or phone, they are always there. Then they always have somebody from WPU. And perhaps alumni can have connection with a faculty member. Let's say if there was something I couldn't handle, then you would be the next person I would go to.

[OR *RELYING ON MASTER'S GRADUATES AS MENTORS*]. I think that would give a sense of community to the different graduating levels too.

#2: You also need to offer courses for teachers on the most recent ...whatever.

#3: Offer teachers courses at a reduced rate...or workshops. [*MAYBE REDUCED RATE FOR WPU GRADS?*]

#3: Publicize special conferences (e.g., annual ESL conference] more widely to alumni with a lot of lead time. It takes long to get approval.

#2: Email to former students through alumni association. [*MAYBE TIME TO REACTIVATE ALUMNI OF GRADUATE EDUCATION ALUMNI GROUP*].

#1 For first few years after graduation, WPU should be a resource for novice teachers.