

How Student Societies Make Stronger Teacher Candidates

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Throughout the university system there is not a single program that is perfect at delivering what is required for post-secondary students to be fully prepared for their future careers. The Education field, despite its nature and its goals, is no exception. There is no way within a four-year program, and in other cases only a two-year program, an Education could program provide student teachers with all the information required to be completely successful in their first couple years of full-time teaching. By nature of the profession, educators are life-long learners. But Education Student Societies (ESS) can supplement the program offered by their respective College or Faculty. The University of Saskatchewan Education Students' Society has been quite successful at supplementing their Education program. This organization has implemented many programs and services that enhance the experience of Teacher Candidates at the University of Saskatchewan. The ESS offers opportunities for expanding leadership skills, opportunities for increasing meaningful professional experience, and opportunities for early professional development.

General Education Program Deficiencies

Before going into some of the solutions that can address an Education program's weaknesses it would be prudent to discuss some of the general areas of programs that can lack strength. To be clear, these are not any specific faults of the Education program at the University of Saskatchewan, but are general areas where any university program may fall short at any given time.

Inability to Do it All

One of the biggest drawbacks of any pre-professional program is its inability to properly inform students of all facets of the profession they wish to enter. But this not

due to a poorly structured and (or?) delivered program, but more because to do so would turn four year programs into eight and ten year programs. But even then those who are newly entering the profession would still not be completely prepared for what they are going to face. There is just too much information out there for colleges/faculties of Education to cover. Furthermore, there are specific nuances of the profession that cannot be taught, but have to be experienced to be fully understood. Finally, the teaching profession, like many others, can change at a moment's notice. Professors, being somewhat detached from the day-to-day life of current teachers, cannot possibly make the necessary adjustments and keep students completely up to date.

Theory Trumps Practice

Unfortunately because students of education are just that, students, they must spend a good deal of their time in the university learning the theories of education. This means that a large portion of time is spent in the university classroom instead of the elementary or secondary classroom. This further translates into a lack of opportunity to apply their craft before the internship and the start of their career. That does not mean that there are no opportunities for students of education to practice teaching while in the university classroom. There are many presentations that take place and lesson plans and unit plans to be written. And just as if in a school, feedback is gained from these exercises that do help student teachers to improve their teaching skills. But these opportunities are not as effective as those gained within a formal or informal schooling environment. In these situations, student teachers are discussing concepts and teaching them to their peers. This allows for communication of ideas at an equal level and using concepts that all student teachers understand and use themselves. In a school setting

teachers do not necessarily have this opportunity. They need to be able to articulate what it is they are trying to teach at a level that their students will understand. This skill does take practice.

Followers Rather than Leaders

The dynamics of university are much the same as the dynamics of a school. It starts at the top with administration. For Universities, that is the President, Vice-Presidents, and Deans. Underneath them are the next level, Department Heads and Professors. In schools the administrators are the Principals and Vice-Principals and underneath one would substitute Teachers for Professors. At the bottom of the ladder in both cases, we find the students. The students in the formal university scheme are not the leaders of the institution. They are there to follow their professor's and their program's directions. In many ways this does not allow university students, student teachers included, to develop their leadership abilities within the formal university framework.

Education Student Societies Can Offset these Deficiencies

University education programs may not be able to provide a fully balanced program that will equip student teachers with everything they need to become successful teachers, but that does not necessarily mean they have to be satisfied with the situation. Student societies have a lot offer their constituents outside the realm of social events. They can easily supplement their respective education program in ~~and~~ an informal and effective manner. The University of Saskatchewan ESS has established programs and events to do just that. The organization has developed successful programs that have given student teachers opportunities to enhance their knowledge of the education

profession, to increase their opportunities for practical experience, and to develop leadership skills that can be transferred over to the teaching profession.

Development of Leadership and Planning Skills

The University of Saskatchewan ESS holds an annual charity event that fosters leadership skills that will become quite useful during a person's tenure in the teaching profession. This event is Santa's Education Student Helpers (SESH). SESH is an initiative begun by the ESS in December of 1996. Originally, SESH involved students raising money through activities such as bake sales, steak nights, 50/50 draws, and personal donations. The money was then donated or used to purchase gifts for various organizations and community schools. SESH has grown so that fundraising is now done throughout the fall semester, culminating in a formal evening of socializing and a live and silent auction of donated items held in the Education Student Lounge. All funds raised during the annual campaign go directly to Saskatoon community schools for them to use as needed.

The annual SESH event is one that takes a lot of planning and effort in a short period of time. Due to the constraints of university life, students who help organize this event generally have little more than a month to plan the whole event. This short time frame requires a very stratified organizational structure, to ensure that SESH is as successful as possible. With this high level of stratification comes a large amount of delegation. There are committees each with a specific task and set of responsibilities to make SESH a successful event. Each committee has two co-chairs who are expected to ensure that all areas of their committee are covered. In some cases this requires little effort and in others, large effort is required. But the event allows those who are directly

involved in its planning and production to increase their ability to organize and lead a group of people.

Another career benefit of the SESH fundraiser is to expose student teachers to types of extra curricular activities they may encounter during their career. A good relational example would be graduation. SESH would allow student teachers to see what is involved in producing a successful graduation ceremony and banquet. They would learn how to set-up necessary committees and what areas may require more attention and oversight than others. The same could be said for fine arts productions and sports tournaments. Another indirect benefit of SESH is to teach student teachers how to work as a team with their colleagues while heading up plan-intensive activities.

Increasing Practical Experience

SESH indirectly contributes to how the University of Saskatchewan ESS helps promote informal practical experience opportunities for the students. The funds from SESH benefit the ESS' Community Outreach Experience (CORE) program. One of the caveats of community schools receiving funding from SESH is that any volunteer opportunities that result from the funds be offered to the student teachers at the University of Saskatchewan via the CORE program.

The benefit of this condition of funding and the CORE program is three fold. First, it allows student teachers to get some practical experiences in a school setting. Second, it exposes student teachers to the community school environment. They get a chance to understand and experience how these schools work before they are ever placed there as an intern or as a full-time member of the staff.

The third benefit relates to helping university students experience teaching *before* they are admitted to the College of Education. The ESS posts the CORE opportunities within the College of Arts and Sciences. This allows those who may be interested in a career in education to experience what it is all about before they make the decision to enter the profession. Furthermore, for those who enjoy the experience and feel that teaching is a profession that would fit their personality and lifestyle, CORE serves as an asset on their application for admission to the College of Education. It shows that they have real field experience and are still committed to the profession. It also helps with the interview process, which at times assesses the applicant's knowledge of how the teaching profession works.

The University of Saskatchewan ESS also offers more informal programs that allow student teachers to gain some practical experience working with students. The organization posts ads for private tutoring or care giving opportunities within the community. Also there are some schools, which are not affiliated with the CORE program, that look for assistance with their school activities (i.e. lunch room supervision). Again, these opportunities are generally promoted through the ESS office.

Rounding Out Student Teachers' Education

As mentioned earlier, there is only so much information that a university program can cover in the short time span of an undergraduate program. At the University of Saskatchewan, the ESS offers events that are intended to complement the information gained in the classroom. The ESS organizes Professional Development (PD) events in a wide variety of areas to help further prepare student teachers for the profession. The process for this program begins in the summer when the University hires a student to be

responsible for coordinating and booking all the PD events for the upcoming year with the various facilitators. Thanks to this forward planning, the ESS has been able to offer these events at a very reasonable price for their student teachers.

The PD events offered by the University of Saskatchewan ESS span a number of different areas. The PD events offered by the ESS cover areas that are missed in classes. An example is the PD, “Getting Started: How Do I Learn to tell Stories?”. In the Elementary Education program the students learn the importance of story telling, but are never given any instruction on how they should go about telling these stories. Another complementary PD is “Literacy for Life & PWIM.” In this PD, the concepts and ideas behind PWIM are taught to those in attendance in an interactive manner. This helps them to understand how they can do the same thing in their own classrooms.

Another area that the PD events cover is specialized topics. An example of this type of PD is “Diabetes in the Classroom.” Student teachers and their professors are aware of the many different medical conditions students can face in today’s classroom, including Diabetes, but their ability to learn about them before entering the profession is limited. This PD covers one of the ever-increasing medical conditions that afflict children. Teachers need to be aware of all the different factors that come with teaching a student with Diabetes. Another example of a specialized topic the ESS PD’s cover is “FASD & Human Sexuality.” Both of these topics are covered in the same session, but are very important for new teachers. Both FASD and sexuality can have an effect on how a teacher approaches the content in their classroom and how their students will learn. To understand both of these areas in a specialized way will help student teachers both when they are on internship and when they become full-time educators.

The ESS also plans PD's that provide general career tips for teachers. These PD's include topics such as "Teacher Professionalism." This PD is facilitated by the Saskatchewan Teacher's Federation (STF) and covers many areas of professionalism that all teachers should be aware of. These include the Code of Conduct, the Code of Ethics, and the Teacher Success Policy. Another very important career tip PD is "Prescription for Tired Teachers." This PD addresses the conundrum that many teachers can face anytime during their profession. How do we face low-energy days and still teach with an impact? This particular PD outlines the types of supports that exist to help teachers when they face such a problem.

There are some added benefits to the PD events besides their content. There are those that offer teaching resources to those in attendance. Examples are "Project Wet" and "Project Wild." These PD's provide the resource guides to help those in attendance incorporate the ideas that they have learned in their own classrooms. Another added benefit is that the ESS provides a certificate to everyone in attendance to be included in their portfolios. These PD's also allow student teachers to create connections with other professionals. Lastly, these PD events prepare student teachers for the PD opportunities they will have throughout their career as teachers.

Conclusion

There are only so many things that a university program can do for its students. Due to time constraints and the inherent inability to teach everything a student needs to know to succeed, they are simply unable to fully prepare students for their careers. The pre-professional programs, including education, have an especially hard time with this. The general shortfalls of most university education programs are inability to cover all the

information in classes, a lack of practical experience opportunities, and an inability to foster leadership skills among student teachers. However, Education Student Societies can supplement their university's programs in many ways. They can address all these areas as best they can, and better prepare their fellow student teachers for their career. The University of Saskatchewan Education Students Society can serve as a model to accomplish such a task. By putting on a charity fundraiser such as SESH, they have been able to foster leadership and cooperation skills in their student teachers. By creating the CORE program and advertising more informal experiences, they have been able to give their fellow student teachers a chance to practice the theories they have learned in the classroom. By putting on Professional Development events the University of Saskatchewan Education Students Society has been able to complement what student teachers learn during their tenure in the education program. All of these initiatives come together to help the University of Saskatchewan Education Students' Society create stronger student teachers.