Teacher Shortage Spurs Colleges To Offer Innovative Programs

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SPECIAL TO HIGHER EDUCATION

There is a teacher shortage across the United States. In decades past teaching was a well-respected career choice and one in a narrow group of professions where women were in the majority. Today females still outnumber males. However, non-competitive salaries, a focus on testing rather than child-centered instruction, and a general lack of societal appreciation of the service provided by teachers are among the reasons why college students — whether female or male — may not consider teaching an attractive career choice.

“The teacher shortage began somewhere between 2008 and 2015,” says Dr. Meemaksri Gajria, professor of education at St. Thomas Aquinas College in Sparkill, N.Y. “The statistics show that between those years we attracted 30 percent fewer people into the profession.”

According to Gajria, accusations by the media that teachers were not performing, and the move to tie teachers’ salaries to student achievement, dissuaded many from entering the profession.

“When you start comparing the salaries of other graduates to those of teachers, teachers just don’t earn that much,” she adds. “Math, science, foreign languages and special education are four areas hit especially hard by the teacher shortage. Gajria notes that fewer math and science majors want to become teachers because areas such as engineering or health are much more lucrative than education. The students interested in foreign languages is small, and they are usually focused on international business careers where pay is not a primary motivating factor. They result in a more attractive salaried.”

“Moreover, today it’s a lot harder to get into teacher education programs than it used to be,” says Dr. Rexton Lynn, assistant dean of education at Ramapo College. “There is basic skills testing that you have to undergo. In addition, a few years ago the New Jersey GPA requirement increased from 2.75 to 3.0 to enter into a program, remain, and finish.”

New Jersey requires that prospective teachers hold at least a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university, complete a state-approved teacher preparation program for licensure, and pass an approved test to meet the basic skills requirement. They must also take the exams required for certification in their specific subjects.

“Testing costs money. Every time you fail a test you have to retake it, and tests can cost about $95 each,” explains Lynn. “People are not going into teacher education because they are frustrated with the process of getting in.”

According to Dr. Julie Norflus-Good, director of special education at Ramapo College and president of the NJ Chapter of the Council for Exceptional Children, teacher shortages are the norm in that field.

“There has always been a shortage in special education,” she says. “There is always a need for teachers who know how to work with children who have special needs. You have to be the right person to be able to work with children of that particular population.”

“Reports from Georgetown University show that unemployment is very low in this profession and satisfaction is very high,” adds Gajria. “Teaching is a very complex but rewarding profession. In the last few years, 57 percent of the students who completed our bachelor’s degree at the childhood level are working full time in schools. The percentage is higher for master’s level or students with 7-12 dual certification.”

A Ramapo College STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Math) educator works with a Patterson youth. Math and science are two areas hit hard over the past 10 years by the teacher shortage.

TRAINING TOMORROW’S TEACHERS

Both Ramapo College and St. Thomas Aquinas College are working towards easing the teacher shortage by offering a wide array of options for students who might consider education as a career.

For example, Ramapo has added the Bachelor of Science degree in elementary education to their roster of education-focused options. Ramapo students can now major in Elementary Education.

Hands-on Curriculum Is Point of Emphasis

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elementary education and work towards certification as a classroom teacher in grades K-6.

“Students also have the option to secure middle school endorsement in language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science,” says Lynn. “This enables graduates of the program to extend their certification from K-6 to K-8 and increase their marketability.”

Ramapo also offers three graduate education programs: Master of Arts in special education, Master of Arts in educational leadership, and Master of Science in educational technology. This last program prepares those with technology skills to help teachers infuse technology into their teaching and into their classrooms. “In this program, you are teaching people how to bring technology into the classroom, you are not teaching the actual classes,” explains Lynn.

Ramapo’s Master of Arts in special education leads to a Master of Education with Disabilities certificate,” says Norflus-Good. “The certification allows people to specialize in a lot of different areas. Some of our students will teach in public schools, others in private schools with children with specific needs, and some in early childhood or early intervention centers.”

Gajria notes that her students learn how to modify instruction to meet the needs of all students.

“This is a cornerstone of what we teach,” she says. “We make sure that our curriculum is very hands-on, that it is imbedded in theory but that they have the practical experience of working with children with special needs. Our students have a very high success rate when it comes to getting employment. Some of our students come into the program without jobs and they get them while they are in the program.”

Among the teacher preparation programs offered by St. Thomas Aquinas is the Master of Science in teaching. This program is designed for people who already hold degrees and are considering teaching as a new career.

“What we’ve done is to offer certification in secondary and elementary areas such as biology, physics, mathematics, art and foreign languages,” says Gajria. “And by offering some extra courses in special education, we are encouraging our students not only to be math or science teachers, history or art teachers, but to also consider special education. I would say that 90 percent of our students are certified in a content area, plus childhood, plus special education.”

St. Thomas Aquinas also offers a number of undergraduate programs to prospective teachers, such as adolescent childhood education, childhood education, and special education, and art education.

“We are also offering a bachelor’s program and combining it with a fifth year in special education. You graduate in four years as a teacher in your chosen field and in the fifth year you continue for your graduate studies in special education,” says Gajria.