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# Teacher Test Shows Wide Racial Gap

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NORFOLK — Twenty-seven percent of Norfolk State University education students passed the PRAXIS I basic-skills test for teachers in 2000, the lowest rate among Virginia colleges, a state report shows.

Hampton University, a predominantly black college like NSU, had the second-lowest rate, at 33 percent. The rate at Old Dominion University, which is predominantly white, was 75 percent.

The numbers, officials say, reflect a nationwide problem: a treacherous gap separating black and white pass rates on the exam.

Another Virginia study, released Thursday, showed gaps exceeding 30 points on all test sections. Sixty-six percent of whites passed the math section of the paper-and-pencil version of the exam last year; 24 percent of blacks did.

Jean B. Braxton, Norfolk State's education dean, said some students who failed parts of the PRAXIS got As in high school math and English.

Too many school systems "have not addressed the different learning styles of our students," said Braxton. Black students, for example, tend to learn better in groups than working independently, she said. But too many people "think there is one cure-all."

Norfolk State has strengthened help sessions for PRAXIS, including summer workshops, Braxton said. Last year, it instituted a rule barring students from entering the teaching program unless they have passed the exam.

The state this week tightened PRAXIS standards for all colleges: On Wednesday, a policy took effect requiring education students to pass the exam before they complete their college's teacher preparation program.

The goal is to ensure top-notch teachers, but it could boomerang against efforts to alleviate the shortage of minority teachers.

Braxton said Norfolk State's rule has reduced the number of students in the program — she said she couldn't say by how much — but quality matters more than quantity: "The graduates we produce will be ones who meet state and national standards, who are committed, caring and competent. If it means 50 good teachers or five, that's what we need to do."

In recent years, the state has swung in different directions on the PRAXIS, stiffening some requirements and loosening others. In 1996, the Board of Education instituted the highest scores required to pass in the country.

But last month, the board made it easier for some students to pass: It combined the required minimum scores for each test section — reading, math and writing — into a composite score. That means if a student fell below the pass rate in math by two points but exceeded the required writing score by three points, she would pass.

The new scoring system allows tests from as far back as 1996 to be rescored. Braxton said NSU has begun to recalculate scores and expects its pass rate to rise “significantly” because some students failed a section by one or two points.

The state permits teachers who haven’t passed the PRAXIS exam to teach for three years under a temporary license. Of the new teaching licenses issued by Virginia last year, 48 percent were temporary licenses. One primary reason was that teachers had not taken or had failed the test.

Until recently, the state had not instituted PRAXIS requirements for colleges. But for at least a couple of years, some schools — including Christopher Newport and Virginia Wesleyan — have required students to pass the PRAXIS at least before their senior year.

That’s why their pass rates in the state report — which looks only at students about to graduate — stand at 100 percent.

ODU, like Norfolk State, last summer began requiring students entering its teaching program — usually in the junior year — to pass the PRAXIS.

A 1999 report from the Educational Testing Service showed a gulf, nationwide, between blacks and whites on the PRAXIS: 82 percent of whites and 46 percent of blacks passed all sections.

It’s not unique to that exam: On the SAT, taken by high schoolers, whites had an average score of 1058, compared with 860 for blacks, in 2000.

The Educational Testing Service report warned that the “push to diversify the race/ethnicity of the teaching force has collided head-on with the higher standards movement.” Raising PRAXIS requirements, it said, could exclude “a disproportionate number of minorities from the profession.”

Elaine P. Witty, the retired dean of NSU’s School of Education, gained national prominence for homing in on the minority teacher shortage. But she supports the efforts by NSU and the state to toughen PRAXIS requirements. “I think the public is demanding accountability in terms of tests,” she said Thursday.

Witty, however, said that test scores don't tell the whole story. Teaching colleges, she said, need to work harder to collect other "indicators of quality," such as the performance of children taught by their graduates.

Norfolk State, Braxton said, is pinpointing students who need help and offering them options ranging from summer workshops to one-on-one sessions.

"We understand here that there are some things we have to put in place to help our students," she said. "Our focus now is to put on the market a student who is prepared to teach, who is well-versed in their content area and who will be able to work well with children."

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