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Using a University Health and Physical Education Majors Club to Recruit Preservice Teachers, Part II

By Craig Parkes and Shelley L. Holden
In a previous article we discussed the persistent concerns regarding declining physical education teacher education (PETE) enrollments and the ensuing elimination of PETE programs (Parkes & Holden, 2020). In recent years it has been suggested that health and physical education (HPE) faculty members must become proactive and purposeful in their recruitment efforts, because prior efforts had been somewhat passive and informal (Bulger, Jones, Tálavera, & Wayda, 2015). We suggested that an HPE majors club was a useful tool to assist in recruiting prospective students and a way to advocate for the future of the profession during this period of uncertainty. Although not all students who enter initial PETE programs should progress to graduation, particularly if they do not display the knowledge, behavior and belief expectations of being a teacher (Kern, Ayers, Killian, & Woods, 2019), there is a need to focus on retaining enrolled students. Among other things, PETE faculty members view the development of relationships with and among preservice teachers as one way to promote program retention (Kern et al., 2019). One particular way in which this can be done is through the development of an HPE majors club. The aim of this article is to advocate for preservice teacher retention and high professional standards for future physical educators by highlighting how a majors club strategically supports HPE students at the University of South Alabama. Student retention initiatives are strategies that have been developed to keep currently enrolled HPE students on track to graduate and/or remain eligible to student teach within the major. Factors that may impact student retention include grade point average scores, state testing requirements, and Educative Teacher Performance Assessment (edTPA) completion (Kern et al., 2019).

Faculty Input

Student organizations are student led but must have a faculty advisor. The advisor’s role is to serve as a resource and attend official events and meetings. The idea for a majors club initially came from the HPE faculty members, with interested students drafting the constitution and submitting the application (Parkes & Holden, 2020). It is suggested that faculty have the power to influence students’ decisions to remain in PETE, particularly when they build an inclusive and supportive culture (Woods, Richards, & Ayers, 2016). However, PETE faculty often have less than desirable contact time to address non-course-related matters with students due to course requirements for state certification and/or a sizable compulsory kinesiology core (Parkes & Weimer, in press). If HPE faculty advisors are actively involved in the majors club, this additional face-to-face interaction time may help to improve student retention. One example is how faculty members helped students who were having difficulty passing the praxis core exam that is required to enter the major. With the additional contact time, these students aired their frustrations to the faculty members who advised students, organized study groups, and provided educational resources to support students. This has helped us to retain several students.

Promoting Success on the edTPA

Across several states, HPE programs have sought to find ways to better prepare their teacher candidates to successfully complete the edTPA assessment. Some institutions have added more coursework and assignments, while others have hired graduate assistants (GAs) to provide support in areas such as creating videos and uploading files for submission (Kuranshi & Oyler, 2017). However, major curricular changes at the state level can take an extended period to complete and hiring GAs comes at a cost that may not be feasible. Therefore, another avenue to support the efforts of HPE candidates is using peer mentoring, which can be provided through an HPE majors club. Graduate students in the HPE majors club serve as excellent mentors to undergraduate students entering the student teaching experience. Based on prior experience, they provide guidance on topics such as portfolio time management, understanding the rubrics and artifacts, video preparation, and submission. Upperclassmen (juniors and seniors) mentor newly admitted HPE majors on edTPA portfolio content, when it takes place in the academic process, passing scores, and the types of course assignments and field experiences that support the portfolio.

The HPE majors club faculty advisors oversee mentoring efforts by scheduling times during the majors club meetings for edTPA discussions. Advisors strategically pair students together depending on their degree program and prior experience to provide timely support. Our state of licensure has recently adopted edTPA, and initially there were minor issues regarding first time pass rates as it was rolled out with the first cohort of students. The HPE faculty advisors believed that students’ lack of experience in creating edTPA portfolios played a big role in these passing rates. Therefore, it is suggested that this type of mentorship effort can help with edTPA success and student retention.

Access to Professional Development Funding

Our institution provides $3,000 a year in Student Organization Association funds to organizations actively enrolled for three continuous semesters. Funds are housed within the department, and the use of funds is determined by the students under the supervision of the faculty advisors. Comparable organizations on campus have utilized funds to assist students in attending conferences, professional development, and career fair opportunities. One of the HPE majors club aims is to provide funding for all HPE students to attend the Alabama State Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation, and Dance student leadership workshop and spring convention. Similar strategies have already been employed and deemed successful by PETE faculty as a way of retaining PETE students through professional development experiences (Bulger, Braga, DiGiacinto, & Jones, 2016). These
events appeal to current HPE students by providing them with timely, valuable, and inexpensive networking and career planning opportunities just prior to graduation.

Conclusions and Final Thoughts

Purposefully recruiting prospective students is an imperative task for PETE faculty during this period of declining enrollments if teacher certification programs are to survive (Bulger et al., 2015). However, there appears to be lesser value placed on the importance of retaining current students to sustain enrollment figures. It is important that HPE faculty strategically support their students and retain them within the major, because it can be considered an easier task to retain what you have than to recruit what you do not. The HPE majors club at the University of South Alabama is proving to be a valuable retention tool because it offers students and faculty increased interaction time to discuss non-courses-related matters, supports edTPA assessment, and provides funds for professional development opportunities prior to graduation. We believe HPE faculty must take an active role in supporting enrolled students, not only for academic success, but also in an attempt to sustain students that they have worked hard to enroll.

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References

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Readers are encouraged to send “Advocacy in Action” submissions to column editor K. Andrew R. Richards at advocacy@shapeamerica.org.

The purpose of the Strategies Advocacy in Action column is to provide tangible, real-world examples of grassroots and national-level advocacy activities taking place in the fields of physical education, health education and physical activity. Submissions should be written in a conversational, practical tone. Columns should be 1,000 –1,300 words (or roughly four typed, double-spaced pages).