

Focus Group – School of Education – Students of Color

4/28/22, 4-5PM, Zoom

Students were invited 4/14/22

Students were reminded 4/27/22

Students were reminded 4/28/22

Questions:

1. Tell me about your experience in the Education department at UCM.
 - a. Classes / Professors
 - b. Administration
 - c. Advisors
 - d. Peers / Student organizations
2. Tell me about your field placements.
3. What do you like about the Education program?
4. What improvements/changes could the Education program make to improve your learning experience?

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Three students participated in the focus group and 1 student answered questions via email – the email responses are at the end of the transcript.

I introduced myself and explained how I would protect their anonymity and my willingness to answer any questions (they didn't have any). The redacted transcript is below. Students names, specific major & site locations are indicated with an "X". Pronouns were changed to neutral (they/them). My questions and comments are in red so that student responses will stand out.

Beginning of Transcript

I have four questions that will go through, and I will make sure that we don't go beyond five o'clock. I want to protect your time and make sure that we don't go any longer than that.

So first, I just want to hear a little bit about your experiences in the education department at UCM. I'm just interested in globally, generally. How are you feeling about your experience?

And anybody can jump in at any moment.

Student: I would have to say my experience, it was OK. I've been to another PWI. It was OK.

Why was it just OK?

Student: I will say that some of the professors definitely made it less quality, less enjoyable of a classroom.

Student: I know I came across some, some professors that I did feel that were picking on me because of my race. I've had an incident where I was late to class. This is in the middle of the winter too as well, and after Covid, they looked at me and told me that I needed to work on being on time and this and this and that. But some other students came in right behind me and nothing was ever said to them. And I'm just like, hmmm, You know, I'm one to definitely, you know, always ask questions, especially email. I've had some professors like just kind of ignore my email, especially regarding my grade, that I felt that I earned a little bit better. I know one specific teacher they definitely voiced, but he did not like our project whatsoever, and then basically our grade was biased.

Thank you for sharing that. And so you spoke specifically about professors, does anyone else have anything to add about your interactions with professors? Or your classes, in class sessions?

Student: I mean, I haven't had bad experiences with professors, this could just be my program because I'm an X Ed major, but I will say that like going to a PWI and you're black, it's like it's kind of uncomfortable. And of course, HBCUs aren't always an option. So it is kind of uncomfortable when you walk into the room and you're the only person there. Like when I took African-American lit, I was like the only black person there besides the professor. And so then it's just all these white people talking about race and blackness and black literature, and I'm the only one there. And then I'm like, It's like, you can't even really describe it. It's almost like, it's like, (nervous laugh) Do you even know what you're really talking about? I understand you read the book, but like, do you know what you're talking about? And so I've never had like negative, negative experiences in classes and with professors. But just being there is kind of sometimes uncomfortable when you're the only one there.

Are your classes in the education department very diverse?

Student: No. There are only X number of us in X Ed, and I'm the only black person there, I think. There used to be two other ones, but I don't think they're graduating this year. And, but in general, when we have our huge student teacher meeting, I don't really think I saw anyone that wasn't white besides me. And like maybe a handful...

Student: I'm also X Ed, but I just honestly, truly, I just don't go to anything regarding the education, especially the X department. I don't. Like you said we are very few. It is very few of us. I think I've only really met one other person that wasn't or that was black outside of the X Ed. And, I think she was a X major or a X Ed, but they barely came out. But it's just not a comfortable environment. But it just isn't really a comfortable environment, you know?

Student: Mm hmm.

And is that uncomfortable environment, first experience in the classroom? Or is it the university as a whole? Is it a combination of the two?

Student: combination, I mean, just being the only person, that is not something I'm used to. So of course, it's really uncomfortable. And then we're in the middle of Warrensburg. It's not, it is not a fun place to be. There was the whole thing on the billboard that was in the Quad that

nothing happened. So of course, you don't feel safe, you don't feel comfortable, you don't feel like anybody actually cares about you because like when you know, you know what I'm talking about?

Yes, yes, I do.

Student: Yeah. So when that happened, no one really said anything about it. I don't even think my like my white classmates even knew about it. But of course, we all knew about it.

What would have been helpful, thinking specifically? Because that's a real specific example of something that happened during your tenure at UCM. And what could your professors have done that would have been helpful for you?

Student: I mean, just acknowledging it, you know, like just at least saying something about it, they don't have to sit there and apologize to me, but they're at least saying, Hey, this is an issue around campus and maybe just talking to the whole class. I want you guys to be more thoughtful, more, you know, like literally anything. And I like my professors, but like, no one said anything. So.

Other thoughts about your classes or your interactions with your professors or even administration in the school of ED, office professionals or advisers or anyone else that you're interacting with?

Student: This might be unrelated to, you know, my experience, but I definitely feel that I feel that we should definitely include curriculum that's based around, you know, African-American students. Some of us will not be able to go into teaching in the higher areas or the higher quality areas of schools. Some are. Some will be in like, you know, lower poverty areas. So I definitely feel that we should definitely get a curriculum that is based around that. Sometimes resources are not the same as others, so I feel that we should definitely have courses that accommodate to different levels of education.

But when you say you want a course that talks more about or teaches you more, you're referring to how to teach students of color. Or are you talking about curriculum that talks about diverse people? Tell me a little more.

Student: More so the curriculum. I'm saying it's so like majority of the classes that we take now. I know for a fact I would never, ever use any of this stuff in any later setting in my classroom, other than probably a couple of occasions. I know that uh, in certain poverty areas start and focuses are in place. Certain properties are highlighted more than others. So I definitely feel like certain classes should highlight those properties in certain areas rather than it's just, you know, I give it, I guess, or offer more courses that are better equipped for students for a student that will be going to those fields.

So students who are going into diverse school districts?

Student: Yes.

And who will be teaching nonwhite students?

Student: Yes. Yes. Basically.

Are there other issues with curriculum or other thoughts about curriculum? Meaning the curriculum that you are getting, the courses that are being offered to you and the what the content of those courses is.

Student: Well, I think it could be improved. And, I don't know how anyone or who's in charge of changing that, but it is like, they are in X Ed too, and, all our classes are like, Besides the couple that you can take, they're all its British modern poetry. It's American poetry. And then, you know, if you have a certain professor, they may sprinkle in one or two nonwhite people, but everything is so white centered. And that's just how X Ed is like. That's just like what they teach us in high school. We don't really get a big variety or a variety of other people, so that's just what they teach you in college and basically that's what you're going to teach in high school. But just getting a chance to actually learn about more than like cannon literature, which is "cannon" literature, but it's going to be a bunch of old white people and it's not really what we want to learn is not what our students are going to want to learn. And then also, I think there could be some type, of course, that could prepare people more for working in different areas because we're not all going to work in X district (affluent/white/suburban), you know, most of us don't want to work there. And the most have ever gotten talking about poverty and talking about, um, like race discrimination and differences. And everything was kind of one week when we talked about how different schools give students different resources. And that's nice and all, but I already knew that. And so it would be something if we actually went more in-depth and then actually had a class where we focus on these things and actually talk about how this is a real problem. It is not just a one-week assignment. This is something that actually goes on and that you'll probably have to deal with if you're not working in X district (affluent/suburban).

Mm-Hmm. So inclusion of how to prepare students to teach in diverse environments sounds like it will be really important to add or to integrate into some of the other courses.

Other things? What about advisors? Nothing.

What about peers or student organizations?

Student: Well, back to advisors, my advisor, honestly, truly, I don't hear from my advisor. I don't hear from them at all unless I reach out, unless it's something that they need from me. I think really..... (student's audio cut out)....

We can't hear you, X. Does anybody else have anything to say about an adviser or peers or student organizations? Nothing....

Are you guys involved any with the student organizations?

No? Well, what about your fellow students in class, I know that you talked about being one of the only, if not the only in class, how do you feel your interactions are with your peers in class?

Student: I feel like I'm taking over the whole conversation (laughter)....

That's OK.

Student: I'm just fine with my peers, like I said, there's like X of us this last year, it's only been a handful. And we all known each other for the past two years and I'm cool with they're good people. They're fun people to be around and it's nice when they're nice. So you kind of think less about being the only one there, but then it's always in the back of your mind. And you know, race is never going to get brought up because everyone's too scared to talk about it. So it only gets brought up if you bring it up, and then no one really knows how to respond to it because they're scared of saying the wrong thing or they just don't know. Or maybe they just don't care. You know, there's all these reasons, and so you never really get the chance to talk about things that could kind of affect you more than it will ever affect them, because there's just no space for it.

Are there any classes that you guys take that talk specifically and openly and directly about race?

Student: African-American lit. That was the only class I took that actually, it's you can't really get around that.

Student: So, yeah, African-American lit for me, too. And I think I was the only black student in that class. But even then, I gave more feedback in that class than them. They really...they were just new to everything and honestly, just not really paying attention, to be honest with you.

So, X, you were talking about your advisor when your audio cut out. Did you have anything else to say? You said that the advisor does not reach out to you. You always have to kind of initiate that contact. Did you have something else to say?

Student: Oh, no, my bad, my phone clicked out. But no, I didn't have anything else to say.

OK. I just want to make sure we didn't miss anything. Hmm. So what about your field placements?

Student: uhhhh.

Student: laughter...Oh, let me be honest, I got placed into my high school...I'm currently observing at X school right now. I didn't get placed until maybe late March. And honestly, with my busy schedule, it was really hectic to even fit an observing day into it. And let alone trying to meet that 30 hours. I'm busy Monday through Thursday all day until about 7:00 or two o'clock, three o'clock, depending on the day. So that was definitely there could be communication could be better on that end. I didn't get an email from that, whoever he was until like three or four months later until I re-emailed him. So...

When you say you're busy until three or four o'clock, are you busy in a school or busy in your class taking classes or you're working outside?

Student: I'm busy with... I do, OK, so I have classes all day, but I also work in the center, the multicultural center, I'm a tutor there as well, so I'm there all day. And I also go over to the multipurpose pool and I'm a lifeguard there as well. And I'm also on the ABCD Association of Black College Dance Company and on the Secretary Board. So my weeks are literally packed, including performances, and...

Well, you said you didn't get a notice about your field placement until March. Is that normal, are you supposed to find out in the beginning of the semester or how did you think that would be different?

Student: Can you repeat that my phone is, it keeps going out.

Sure, I was just wondering, you said you got notice notified in March about where you were supposed to be doing your field placement. Were you expecting to get that in January or is it typical to get it earlier than that?

Student: Yes, it's typical to get it around January, February. They try to place you toward Feb, because they know that students have a busy schedule typically, or that, you know, high schools have different schedule, bell ringers and not all classes are in the X department and whatnot. But my professor that I had, he did not reach out email. I think I sent him an email around January. And then re-emailed him again around March, asking like, Hey, it's getting to crunch time and I'm going to need this grade and these papers. It's really crunch time right now. I had to ask my liaison for permission to go ahead and observe a little bit after May 6th because I don't, I'm not sure, I am over-prepping to make the 30 hour deadline.

Student: And...there was there was some mess with that, I have to say, I don't know what, everyone's kind of got delayed. And so if you were only getting 30 hours, you were like their last priority because they wanted to make sure people that were doing like the 50 hour one's or doing student teaching got placed first. And it wasn't like a big old...like it was...we were all waiting forever.

So you have more than one field placement throughout your four years or your time getting your degree.

Student: Yes, I think it's one placement, per classification year, so I think one every year.

Oh, OK. And so they're either 30 or 50 each year.

Student: I think about 30. Yeah...

Student: And then you have to do like a bigger one before you start student teaching.

Got you. Student X, did you have something to add?

Student: Ummm, I really wish I...I really haven't had any negative experiences. I'm finishing up my student teaching in the X school district. I think my first, first couple of weeks were a little rocky. You know, a lot of my students are just kind of, make comments like, they weren't necessarily trying to be mean, but where I'm from, there's not a whole lot of diversity anyways. I grew up in a very white farm town. And so, I was really I was the first, um person that wasn't white to graduate from my high school out of, well forever. So it was uh, it was a little different experience for me in high school, but, uh, student teaching here in X, this district, compared to my high school, is much more diverse, and so I had a couple of kids come up to me like, Do you know how to speak X language? Which I'm fine. I've gotten that throughout my whole life. It's something that I don't even second guess anymore. I don't know.

You know, they're not trying to be mean about it. I'm in an elementary school, so the kids don't know any better. They just speak without thinking. But aside from that, that's really the only experience I've had. And I don't take that as a negative thing. It's just kids wanting to learn more about this strange person who's sitting in their classroom and eventually taking over lessons.

So how have, or have your courses prepared you for those types of conversations or, to talk about race in your student teaching?

Student: Yes, definitely. I the one course that I have taken, I didn't really take a whole lot of diversity courses, but the best the best one that I've taken is social justice and diversity with Dr. Christina Richardson.

Is that in the education department?

Student: I'm not exactly sure what it falls under.

What about in your education courses, were there ever any discussions about how to talk to kids about race?

Student: Um, not necessarily in my courses, but I, well both my parents are teachers, so they, you know, discuss with me a lot about how to talk about this type of thing I was adopted and both my parents are white. So they, you know, they've talked to me throughout my years of being alive. So they prepared me for stuff like that. But I personally, I can't say that any of my college courses really helped with diversity aside from the social justice and diversity class.

So anything else to add there?

Student: No

So, I know it could be better to know earlier in the semester. Is there anything else? What about what do you like about the education program?

Student: It's in my experience, everybody is just really, really nice, like, my professors and my old director, like old head of the department and my new one, they're really nice, they're always available to me. And so that's been pretty helpful. They always wanted to help me out and it was nice having an actual relationship with them. That was the first time I actually talked to the professors. Besides, more than just schooling, like outside of class, so I would say they were pretty helpful and pretty nice.

Other things you like about the Education Department.

Student: I will say, there are others, well, honestly, I like the get togethers at the beginning of the semester, I really appreciated meeting the education board and those different type of people higher up that I've never really had the chance to meet; the gatherings, just really, all of you know, the outside of the classroom contacts.

Student: I've been off campus for about a year and a half now. But I know that I get a lot of like weekly emails saying, Hey, just checking in if you need anything, you know. I may not be able

to physically meet with them all the time or ever, really, because I'm about three hours away from campus, but just knowing the fact that if I need something, I can always contact them day, night or whatever and they'll always answer. They're very supportive, even though not everyone in the education department is there, Physically.

Mm hmm. So what improvements or changes do you think they could make to improve the learning experience, to improve your experience as a person of color on UCMs campus in the education department?

What would you like to see them do different or to add or...

Student: honestly, I would like to see more professors of color. Of course. Um, that would definitely give me the feel that, you know, it's OK. You know, there is somebody here that understands me, and they've been in the same predicament that I am. I would also like to see, you know, more African-American literature. I think my X class that I took during my junior year, we touch base with Mexico, I mean, Mexican-Americans, Native Americans, Caucasians, but nowhere near anything slavery related. So I definitely feel that it's important to definitely know our roots. But definitely there is so much literature that even comes from slavery. So definitely African American literature.

What else, what else, what other improvements or changes could they make?

Student: Ummmm, like they said, more professors of color. I only had two, I had Professor Sengupta had her four world masterpieces, and I had Geoffrey Williams for African-American literature. But, that's it. And I feel like I know not everybody wants to come to Warrensburg and live or teach here, but somebody had to have wanted a job here. And I think it would be nicer for not even non-whites, but for white students to also see professors of color because, A lot of them are just used to seeing white people, a lot of the people that I know at Warrensburg, I'm the first black person they've ever spoken to, so I feel like they need to see more people teaching them stuff and more people in power that are not white and like that would help the program as a whole.

What do you think the Education Department could do to attract more students of color?

Student: Well, I know the multicultural center we work with, Dr. Spencer and Kate, through gear up a lot. So, we bring a lot of black high schools from St. Louis, Kansas is not even just black students, students of color in general, we bring them down. We give them to student of color experience. We give them a tour of the campus. We are there to answer any questions. We give them basically the real deal about our experience and how if they were to ever choose a PWI, we want to help them. And so, I'm saying that we can transcribe that into an Education department based in some way. So, yeah.

Special programing to bring more students on campus to expose them to the department.

Student: Yes, because I know Dr. Scott. She's definitely...her and...I forget, honestly, I forgot her name, her and Dr. Scott are two women of color that are not actual professors, but they

work, they just got hired on and they are some of the people who are looking to bring more students of color on campus.

So it sounds like you guys have really had similar experiences in some way, at least two of you. And I'm just wondering, what about your other classes outside of the education program? Have they been similar or has it been different?

Student: Slightly different, and I think that's because when everyone's taking genetic classes, everyone's there. But in my own major in education, just in general, there's not a lot of like there's not a lot of students of color. And I wish there were more and like you were asking, how do we know how you attract more educators of color to like to come into the program because I already knew what I wanted to do, so no one had to know how to give me a tour, no one had to tell me, Oh, well, maybe you should look an education, I already knew that. But other kids who may not know what they want to do. They're never going to know until they get here. And then they might see that they're the only Hispanic person in X education. And they're like, OK, I don't want to be here anymore. And then how do you fix that?

So in your General Education classes, there were there was a little bit more diversity than there is in your particular program?

Student: Yes.

And in those situations, you felt more comfortable or at ease because there were more people that looked like you. You weren't the only.

Student: I wouldn't say that I was more comfortable, I'm from X, Missouri, it's mainly black and Hispanic school for when I went there. So, it was a culture shock, so I didn't like being the only black person there or the only nonwhite person there, or there's five of us spread out across the room of 40 people. I didn't like that, and I don't know. I don't know if I can ever like, get comfortable with that. And I guess I have to, because now I do have a job in a school district where most of the teachers are white. So...and know it's like, How? Who's going to listen to me when I'm the only one there? And I don't think that anyone's doing it consciously. I don't think that anyone's trying to keep you out because of what you look like. Some people will, of course, like we know that. But like, I just think that is harder for you to actually share anything when there's no one else there that can back you up.

So, going into your career or going into a teaching position and knowing that you're going to be one of the only, do you feel like there's any support that you can reach back to the department to get some support for how to handle that or how to manage that?

Student: I don't know. I'm going to be teaching in X district, so...

I'm really excited to hear that, congrats.

Student: Yeah (laughter), I will be at the X HS, and in the department there, I don't think there's any other black people or just nonwhite people in the X department at that school. There are, there is the assistant principal that's black. There are some teachers, but it's mostly all white staff. So, I don't feel like I can't reach out to anyone, but I also it's kind of like, when and how

do I reach out to people if I can't always go to the black assistant principal, you know, like I can't always do that, I have to talk to my department. Sometimes you think they're going to be mean to me, like I've met, most of them are going to be mean to me. But like, if there really is an issue it's kind of hard, like, what do you do?

Yes, you're right. It's very difficult when you're in a school and there aren't a lot of people that look like you and you're a young teacher. And so, you know, you have a lot of questions and, you know, learning how to navigate that. And, you know, as people of color, we have to learn to navigate not just the typical experience, but we navigate in our skin. And that's a different level of navigation. So I hope that each of you will really reach out and find someone who can mentor you and support you as you're going into these. Regardless of what the diverse makeup of the school is, it's really important to have somebody that looks like you, or at least who really understands what it's like or is trying to understand what it's like to be in your position and can help and support you, because that's going to be really important. OK.

Anything else you guys want to add, I have gone through the four questions really was about telling me anything about your experience that you might want to share about your field placements, specifically what you like about the program and what changes you think could be made to improve the equitable education experience for all students. So any last words or final thoughts anybody wants to share? Or add to what you've already said, and again, I'll remind you, if you think of something later, tonight or tomorrow, just shoot me an email.

Well, if nobody has anything else to add, I won't hold you any longer.

I really appreciate you guys giving your input. I was really happy to do this on behalf of the School of Education because I think it's really, really important that your voice be heard and that faculty really think about what experiences students of color are having in their classroom and in their departments, and work to improve those experiences for all students. So, I really appreciate you being here and sharing so vulnerably about your experiences.

And again, I would like to assure you that I will make it all anonymous and remove anything that might allow anyone to identify you. And again, this is being shared with Dean McCoy.

I'm not sure if she's going to, then I'm not sure on what she's going to do with it in terms of is she going to totally turn it over to someone in the education department to read it. Or if she's going to pull out some themes or some major points and then share that. But I do know that it's being used so that they can make some changes, and they really wanted to hear from the students about their experiences. So, thank you so much for being here.

And any time you guys ever want to reach out or need anything, if you think there's something I can help you with. Please feel free to contact me. Thank you for being here, everybody.

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Email responses from one student who could not attend – on next page...

Questions

Tell me about your experience in the Education department at UCM.

a. Classes / Professors

My classes are fine, my professors are aware of situations that arise with the diversity of students' backgrounds. That being said, all of my block professors/instructors are white women.

b. Administration

I have not had any dealings with anyone in administration.

c. Advisors

Brenda Fuhr is the bomb.com, she is truly fantastic and does a great job remembering who each of us are and is able to help us navigate our busy schedules.

d. Peers / Student organizations

I am not a part of any student organizations as I am at the MIC campus. But I have had good experiences with my peers.

2. Tell me about your field placements.

In my young learner block I was placed in a X elementary school, it was a great experience being in a mostly diverse classroom. This semester I was placed in a X elementary school. This particular school was also diversely mixed as they were a combination of zip codes and Section 8 housing. The students were a good challenge for me to experience this semester.

3. What do you like about the Education program?

I like that the education program is accessible at Lee's Summit and it is flexible for those of us who are 'adult learners.' I like how early I have been able to get into the classrooms, rather than just our last semester of schooling.

4. What improvements/changes could the Education program make to improve your learning experience?

I think that it should be a priority of UCM to have a more diverse selection of professors and instructors. There are some things that people of color experience and have to endure, that while some of these professors may have seen their previous students experience, they themselves have not experienced it. I do not think that racial issues are a large issue in UCM, however I think that it would be important for us students to learn how to incorporate Critical Race theory into our teaching. Even just making sure everyone knows what it is and the key points of it, would be important.

I will admit that when I received the email about this survey, I was upset. It feels performative and that UCM is just throwing a bone, if you will, to people of color. Selecting the students that have a different race or ethnicity in their profile, and secluding them in this survey in my opinion, it diminishes whatever it is that UCM is trying to achieve in knowing how to better approach people of color in their curriculum. It feels inappropriate and should have been a survey that was sent out to all students in the education department, then you only take the readings from the students that identify as people of color. From there you then apply the readings and adjust the program or curriculum however is needed.