

As classrooms diversify, MU's K-12 teacher recruitment program hopes to keep up

COLUMBIA — Linda Rodriguez thinks in numbers.

The MU freshman education major can spend hours talking about triangles, algebra and the practical benefits of math.

She happily explains why you should walk the hypotenuse of a triangle instead of around the corner or why a bag of mini Snickers candies is a better deal than four king-sized bars.

“There’s a lot of kids that think that math isn’t useful, but you can see the world in math,” Rodriguez said. “The reason why I want to be a teacher is because I’m pretty sure I can make math fun.”

Rodriguez came to MU as a part of the Dorsey Scholars program, which began working in fall 2015 to recruit and retain high-achieving minority and first-generation college students who want to be teachers.

The program provides networking opportunities, mentoring from faculty and other students and a need-based scholarship each year, said program director Norma Jackson. It also provides resources such as study sessions, partnerships with the student success center and preparation for a state teacher’s assessment to help the scholars get through their first years of general education classes and into the teaching program.

It’s meant to attract teachers who reflect a shift in public school student enrollment.

In 2014, the number of nonwhite students in public schools surpassed the number of white ones for the first time in U.S. history, but only 16 percent of teachers were of color, [according to the National Bureau of Education Statistics](#).

The enrollment at MU’s College of Education reflects the national trend. In 2015, only 12 percent of undergraduates were people of color. In the four years before, about 90 percent of the undergraduate population was white, according to a College of Education diversity report.

For people of color like Rodriguez, who is Hispanic, the lack of teacher diversity meant going from kindergarten to her senior year of high school with no instructors of color.

“When I went to school, I never had a teacher who looked like me — it was really white teachers only,” Rodriguez said. “I still connected with my teachers, but I felt like if I had a teacher that looked somewhat like me, that I would have more of a connection.”

Working to diversify

It’s been more than a year since student protests, strikes and the resignations of the University of Missouri System president and MU chancellor. Since then, [MU has created a Division of Diversity](#),

[Inclusion and Equity](#), an office for Civil Rights and Title IX, instituted mandatory diversity training for new students and promised to increase the number of faculty and mental health professionals of color on campus.

The College of Education has been looking for ways to diversify itself long before last fall. In 2011, the school opened the Office of Recruitment and Retention to find and keep more students from underrepresented groups.

The first years of its existence were mostly dedicated to researching and finding the best way to recruit minority students and keep them in school, said College of Education Dean Kathryn Chval, who took over as dean in July and before that served as acting dean and associate dean.

Now, the office has honed in on scholarships as a recruitment tool, Chval said. But getting students to campus isn't enough — you need to keep them there and ensure they're successful.

That's where faculty and student mentors come in.

"Everyone that comes into higher ed has to learn how to navigate our culture," she said. "What do we do to support students, especially freshmen, so that they have a sense of belonging and also that they know how to culturally navigate our campus?"

Zandra de Araujo is the faculty mentor for the Dorsey Scholars.

As a first-generation college student and a Latina, de Araujo said she can relate to the scholars on a personal level. She remembered going to the University of Florida as an undergraduate and struggling to adapt to her new environment, and hopes she can make the Dorsey Scholars' college years a little easier.

"They go through so many of the same things that I did, hopefully they're working through it in a more supportive environment," de Araujo said.

Recruiting students

Rodriguez, whose first language is Spanish, remembers sitting silently in elementary school in Indiana, and later in Lee's Summit, Missouri, always unsure of what the students next to her were joking about or what her teacher was saying.

"It was horrible," Rodriguez said. "When you are a little girl and you are in kindergarten and you see (other students) and you don't know what they're saying, it's horrible."

She fell behind in classes, having to communicate through a translator. But when she was 10, she mastered English well enough to participate in class discussions and make friends.

In high school, Rodriguez found a passion in math and took a courseload full of difficult math classes. When it was time to apply for colleges, she applied to Purdue, Pittsburg State University in Kansas, and several of the University of Missouri System campuses.

Rodriguez was nearly set on attending Pittsburg State when she found out she was accepted into the Dorsey Scholars program. She met with several members of the Dorsey Academy and was persuaded to come to MU. She's pursuing degrees in secondary mathematics and mathematics.

Her ultimate goal is to reach students who look like her and to create an environment where every child can see his or her potential.

"It was hard for me to believe in myself because I thought that if there are not many teachers that are Hispanic, I thought maybe I couldn't do it," Rodriguez said. "But if I could be a teacher, I could influence so many kids."

Diversifying

Beyond the Dorsey Scholars program, the school has launched several other initiatives, including the inception of The Bridge, which creates a space for students, faculty and professional staff to talk about their experiences and learn more about other cultures. It has started teach-abroad programs in countries such as India, hosted a diversity lecture series and a series of workshops about culture and diversity topics.

"If you want to be successful as a person or in your profession, you're going to interact with people who differ from you," Chval said. "And so how do you equip (students in the College of Education) to be successful working with people who are different than themselves?"

It's a task that remains formidable. There are 12 Dorsey Scholars in a college of nearly 1,000 undergraduates, the majority of which are white women.

The first class of Dorsey Scholars came from all over the country, but for now, the college will focus on recruiting future teachers from Missouri. All five scholars in the freshman class are from Missouri, Jackson said.

It's part of the state's "Grow Your Own" initiative based on the idea that most future teachers and school staff go back to teach in their hometown in their home state.

As a state university, it's MU's responsibility to prepare quality teachers for Missouri children, Chval said.

Money from the program comes from MU, but Jackson said she hopes to find enough private donors to make more scholarships available for additional students.

"I think if we continue to be able to increase the number of the students going through the pipeline," Jackson said, "I would say that would be a success."

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