Program aims for boom in science, math educators

UNT adds formula to help multiply the number of teachers in North Texas

By Amy Dodd Thompson
Staff Writer

The University of North Texas was selected for a new program starting next fall aimed at alleviating a shortage of math and science teachers.

"Teach North Texas" will allow students to work on their bachelor's degree and teacher's certificate at the same time, give students two free one-hour classes and allow them classroom experience as early as their freshman year.

The two free classes are meant to help students determine whether the program and a teaching career are right for them, university officials said. John Quintanilla, a mathematics professor, and Mary Harris, chairwoman of the College of Education, will serve as co-directors of the program, dubbed TNT.

"I love the explosive sound of TNT," university President Gretchen Bataille said during a press conference launching the program Friday.

Students will benefit in the long term by having well-qualified math, science and computer science teachers, Harris said, and UNT will dramatically increase the number of secondary teachers in those fields. The program eliminates some of the barriers to becoming teachers that some students encounter, which include an extra year or more of working on a teaching certificate after receiving a bachelor's degree, she said.

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Plus, "actually seeing children's faces is motivating," Harris said of the early classroom experience.

Once the four-year program is established, UNT hopes to have 60 students graduate each year with a bachelor's degree and teaching certificate.

A lot of teachers are asked to instruct outside their area of expertise to help correct the lack of math and science teachers, Quintanilla said, and the program will help ease that problem.

Students appear interested in the program, he said.

With only fliers put in various classrooms and with little advertising, about 60 students have signed up for more information on Teach North Texas.

Shayla Hart, a junior at UNT, has signed up for the program, partly because of the two free courses and the hands-on training.

"It's beneficial for young teachers like myself because you get to practice," said Hart, who hopes to become a math teacher.

Teach North Texas is a replication of UTeach, started in 1997 at the University of Texas.

According to a UTeach Institute brochure, about 70 students graduate from the program each year, and 92 percent of those students go on immediately to become math, science or computer science secondary teachers.

About 82 percent of them are still teaching after four years, according to the brochure.

UNT will work with the Fort Worth school district to help give students in the program some classroom experience.

The need for math and science teachers, especially at the secondary level, is high, said Cathleen Richardson, executive director of math and science education for the Fort Worth school district.

Currently, the Fort Worth school district needs to fill about 160 open math and science teacher spots, said Fred Van Valkenburg, the district's chief of staff. The need is crucial, and to try to get a "leg up" on other districts, Fort Worth is offering a $3,000 signing bonus, he said.

The Greater Texas Foundation of Bryan and the National Math and Science Initiative contributed $2.4 million to help fund Teach North Texas.

Included is $1 million from the Exxon Mobil Foundation.

The Greater Texas Foundation picked UNT because all the elements needed to replicate UTeach were in place in Denton, said Executive Director Wynn Rosser.

"We know quality teachers make a difference in the classroom," Rosser said.

U.S. Rep. Michael Burgess, R-Lewisville, who got his bachelor's degree in biology and master's degree in physiology from UNT, helped launch the program Friday at the university.

He said the program has potential in increasing the number of motivated math and science teachers who will provide an essential foundation for the nation's future scientists and engineers.

UNT officials say financial assistance and internship opportunities also will be provided to students in the program.

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