

## Empowering Education: A closer look at grants driving change in the Mercy University School of Education

**Roseanne Vallice Levy, Elena Nitecki, Shoshana Peterson, Jennifer San Diego, Kristen Napolitano, Amanda M. Gunning, Meghan E. Marrero, JungKang Miller, Bahar Otcu-Grillman and Sudha Ramaswamy**

### Abstract

Many colleges and universities are increasingly relying on grant funding to supplement their efforts to educate and support their growing diverse student populations. Mercy University has a long history of preparing excellent teachers and educational professionals. This article explores how the School of Education at Mercy University has secured and employed federal, state, and local grants to not only strengthen their endeavors to prepare future educators, but to drive innovative change through unique programming and mentoring support.

### Keywords

higher education, teacher education, grant-funded education, mentoring, diverse learners, curricular innovation

### Introduction

The Mercy University School of Education has a rich history of preparing educators who are dedicated to fostering meaningful and lasting impacts in the lives of their students. This mission has been significantly strengthened in recent years through support from several federal, state, and local grants. This article explores these grants, highlighting their role in driving innovative advancements at Mercy University and their transformative influence on educators and students within our community.

### GRAD-PRO Grant: Preparing the next generation of graduate-level professionals

**Elena Nitecki & Jennifer San Diego**

Mercy's commitment to diversity aligns with the growing need for a diversified

workforce across all sectors, including healthcare, education, and business. Fostering success in graduate study to transition into the workforce is key to this endeavor. Mercy University was awarded a 5-year, \$2.8 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2023 under the *Promoting Postbaccalaureate Opportunities for Hispanic Americans (PPOHA) Program* (Award #P031M230013).

This five-year project, Graduate Professional Resources and Opportunities (GRAD-PRO) addresses the need to expand the number of Hispanic and other underrepresented graduate and professional students served by Mercy University. The grant's overarching goals are to: expand postbaccalaureate educational opportunities for, and improve the academic attainment of, Hispanic and other underserved populations; provide an enhanced focus on academic and career alignment; expand and support a culture of faculty mentorship with

personalized interactions between faculty and students and bolster student retention, persistence, and degree attainment by providing supplementary resources, including scholarships, to offset the cost of educational expenses.

GRAD-PRO is committed to enhancing teaching and learning exclusively at the graduate level. The grant focuses on four key areas:

- **Health sciences:** Providing student access to experiential learning in community-based health care settings
- **Education:** Implementing evidence-based practices to promote the success of underserved graduate students in teacher education programs by offering faculty mentoring and induction support
- **Faculty Mentoring Fellowship:** Offering professional development designed to strengthen the faculty's ability to mentor students and cultivate an inclusive, asset-based mindset
- **Business:** Creating a series of advanced certificates in an online format, providing a pathway for graduate students to complete a master's degree in Business Analytics via stackable credentials.

One example of this support occurred on October 24, 2024, when GRAD-PRO and BranchED Grants co-hosted the event *"Voices from the Field: Mental Well-Being in Schools."* The panel included experienced principals and educators from PK-12 schools to discuss the pressing mental health challenges faced by students and educators alike. Among the attendees was the first cohort of Education Scholars, each paired with a faculty mentor who

provides additional support to help guide these teacher candidates through their transition into professional roles within the educational community. Some of the topics discussed included students' struggles to handle change or minor life disruptions, as well as the impact of social media on middle school students. The conversation also touched on strategies to improve mental health, such as building relationships with every student, increasing the presence of social workers, and providing more emotional support within schools. During the discussion, graduate students had the opportunity to ask questions about the challenges that they were facing in their schools and received practical solutions from experienced experts that they could implement as early as the following day.

Another productive fruit of the GRAD-PRO grant is the Faculty Mentoring Fellowship, a program designed to provide Mercy University faculty with evidence-based professional development opportunities to enhance their mentoring of graduate students. The first cohort of Fellows consists of professors from a diverse range of disciplines. Fellows engage in workshops and reflective practices that not only improve their mentoring skills but also ensure that graduate students receive the guidance and support necessary for their academic and professional development. By offering professional development, fostering cross-disciplinary collaboration, and creating spaces for meaningful dialogue, the GRAD-PRO grant ensures that both faculty and graduate students are equipped to transition into successful careers and thrive as the next generation of professionals in the critical fields of healthcare, education and business.

## **BRANCH-ED Grant: Transforming the School of Education**

**Roseanne Vallice Levy, Sudha Ramaswamy, Shoshana Peterson**

In 2023, Mercy University was awarded a three-year grant by BranchED, a nonprofit organization committed to strengthening teacher preparation programs at Minority Serving Institutions. Its primary objective is to enhance the quality and diversity of teacher preparation programs, ensuring teacher candidates are better equipped to meet the needs of today's schools and communities. This grant aligns closely with Mercy University's mission to advance educational equity and excellence for all students.

The grant initiative is guided by three core beliefs:

- Every student deserves access to caring, adaptive, and well-prepared teachers.
- Every teacher deserves preparation that integrates quality with diversity.
- Everyone benefits when collective efforts raise the standard of education.

With this grant, Mercy University's School of Education has embarked on a transformative journey focused on building strong district partnerships, conducting in-depth curriculum reviews and enhancements based on district feedback, and updating data-informed instructional practices. A key component of the initiative is its partnership with the Public Schools of the Tarrytowns, enabling close collaboration with stakeholders to refine curricula and better prepare teacher candidates to excel in current diverse and dynamic educational settings.

A distinctive strength of the grant is the ongoing support provided by BranchED. Over the three-year period, the School of Education benefits from biweekly performance-based coaching, customized professional learning opportunities, essential resources, and targeted support, fostering sustained growth and improvement.

The first eighteen months of the grant have yielded significant accomplishments. In Year 1, the BranchED program required participating institutions to meet at least 80% of outlined outcomes for success. Mercy University's School of Education not only met but exceeded these expectations, achieving a 100% success rate. This milestone also established Mercy University as the first institution to complete the Transformation Center process with such distinction.

Another notable achievement was the collaboration with the GRAD-PRO Grant, which helped host two impactful events. The first, a symposium held in spring 2024, brought together Mercy University's School of Education and its PK-12 partners to address key issues such as teacher retention, student mental health, and the preparation of teacher candidates for diverse, culturally rich student populations. Building on the momentum from this event, the second focused specifically on mental health in schools, as discussed earlier in the article.

As the grant progresses into its third and final year, the emphasis will shift toward sustaining and institutionalizing effective collaborative practices and fostering ongoing, meaningful dialogue among stakeholders. This continued focus aims to ensure the long-term impact of the initiative, strengthening partnerships, and maintaining the momentum needed to advance educational equity and excellence well beyond the grant period.

## **Preparing STEM Teachers for High-need Schools: The MISTI Program**

**Meghan E. Marrero, Kristen V. Napolitano, & Amanda M. Gunning**

Since 2013, the Mercy Intensive STEM Teacher Initiative (MISTI) (NSF Award #1339951 and #2050406) has worked to prepare science and math teachers to teach and persist in high-need middle and high schools. Currently in its second iteration, MISTI is sponsored by the National Science Foundation through the Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program, which supports the development of STEM teachers nationwide, including in United States territories. Here at Mercy, eligible fourth-year undergraduates or first-year master's students with an undergraduate major in math or science can apply to be a MISTI Scholar.

In their first year of the program, MISTI Scholars begin intensive observations in partner schools, which include schools in the Bronx, Manhattan, Brooklyn, Westchester, and Rockland. During this first year, students take classes, including courses in their content area as well as in education, and participate in monthly pedagogical seminars on racism and social justice. Using a book club format, in which Scholars and faculty read the same book or listen to a podcast series, the group engages in deep, relevant, and sometimes uncomfortable conversations about the realities that students and teachers face in high-need schools. These experiences prepare teachers to better meet the needs of their students, who are typically from marginalized groups and often come to school with myriad personal challenges.

During their second year, MISTI Scholars complete a full year of student teaching- one semester in a high school, and another in a middle school. These placements

are under the mentorship of qualified and dedicated cooperating teachers and include visits from clinical supervisors focused on improving teaching practice. The Scholars are also completing their master's degree in Adolescence Education, and earn state teaching certification, qualifying them to teach in any public school in New York State. MISTI provides support for these Scholars in many ways, including tutoring for state certification exams, preparation for the job search, and general personal "cheerleading" as they navigate the sometimes daunting process of becoming a highly qualified teacher.

The support from MISTI continues in the Scholars' first few years of teaching. As brand-new teachers, MISTI Scholars participate in monthly meetings with their cohort, faculty mentors, and clinical supervisors. They discuss successes and challenges, venting frustration and getting advice from others dedicated to their success. The clinical supervisors visit them approximately three times each semester, providing additional support and in-classroom coaching. In the Scholars' second year of teaching, they meet less frequently, but are in contact via text message and email, still relying on their cohort and faculty mentor for advice and connection.

Research on MISTI has shown the program to be quite effective in preparing teachers to persist in high-need schools, which is not easy. Teacher shortages are rampant, and it is even harder to staff schools in high-poverty neighborhoods, or subjects such as math, science, and special education. Thus, preparing teachers who will persist in the profession is critical. The program has found that activities including intensive mentoring, the cohort model, and long-term support have helped the MISTI Scholars to continue working in high-need schools (Marrero, Brandon, Gunning, &

Riccio, 2023). The MISTI program staff is confident that they will continue to prepare excellent STEM teachers committed to teaching the neediest students.

**Preparing PK-12 Teacher Leaders in STEM: NSF Master Teaching Fellowship Program**

**Amanda M. Gunning, Meghan E. Marrero, Elena Nitecki, Kristen V. Napolitano**

The STEM Master Teaching Fellowship (MTF), funded through the Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program from the National Science Foundation (Award # 1758317) for six years, 2019-2024. The project supported 14 prekindergarten through high school teachers in math, science, and computer science to develop as STEM teacher leaders through the fellowship. These teachers were selected from four local high-needs districts through a competitive application and interview process. The Teacher Fellows each completed 9 graduate credits in STEM pedagogy, which are part of an advanced certificate in STEM education at Mercy University. Two cohorts of seven Fellows each completed the coursework in a year and a half and then embarked on leadership projects of their choosing while fulfilling their teaching service commitment; attending meetings; presenting their work and supporting other teachers.

During the first three years, both cohorts completed the following graduate coursework:

Introductory Course:  MTHE 542 – Enhancing	This course explores teaching key mathematics standards using STEM for a compelling context for instruction. The course will introduce theory and practice for teaching and assessing the integration of STEM. Participants will study the history of STEM education
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Mathematics with STEM	and history of reform movements in mathematics and science education. Participants explore connections among reform-based and 21st Century recommendations in teaching, while learning to use technology as a tool for promoting student understanding. 3 sem. hrs., 3 graduate credits. <i>Instructor: Elena Nitecki</i>
Engineering Course:  SCIE 553: Engineering for the Classroom	In this course, teachers will become proficient with the engineering design cycle and the Science and Engineering Practices, as outlined by the new (implemented Sept. 2017) NYS P-12 Science Standards. Teachers will learn how to apply engineering practices to integrated projects for secondary students, while raising awareness of careers and innovations in engineering. Students will demonstrate an understanding of the history of engineering and its impact and shaping of society in the United States and globally. 3 sem. hrs., 3 graduate credits. <i>Instructor: Amanda Gunning</i>
Capstone Course:  SCIE 554: Leadership in STEM Education	This capstone course supports teachers in becoming leaders within their schools to assist other teachers and facilitate lesson study, professional learning communities, curriculum design, and peer feedback and coaching. Teachers use a model of vertical articulation in which they engage in a cycle of collaborative coaching and reflection, and action research, to improve teaching and learning in their classroom. 3 sem. hrs., 3 graduate credits. <i>Instructor: Meghan Marrero</i>

In addition to supporting the Fellows’ learning and growth, the STEM and Education faculty involved in the grant formed a professional learning community (PLC) to support the STEM pedagogical growth of the Education faculty teaching the courses. This PLC specifically focused on each of the courses as it was taught and then supported revisions of the course presentation before it was taught again to

the next cohort. This model succeeded in improving these new courses at the university and developing more STEM teacher preparation skills in the faculty. Specifically, elementary specialist, Dr. Nitecki, noted a great deal of growth through this process, newly positioning her as a STEM education expert. (Gunning, et al, 2021a).

The goal of the project was to mitigate lack of PK-12 student interest and preparation in STEM, through promoting lasting change that develops STEM teachers to become leaders in their district, thereby supporting other teachers and ultimately improving student achievement and interest in STEM. The Fellows' work was widely successful, providing new STEM programs and experiences for students in and out of the classroom, several of which engaged the larger community, and supported other teachers' professional learning and growth in STEM pedagogy. For example, Fellows led STEM-focused after school or lunch programs for enrichment for students. One program targeted English-language learners and grew from three elementary grades in one school to grades 1-8 across three schools. Three Fellows worked to develop robust community gardens at their elementary schools, which brought in families and other teachers, while providing new, local garden-based curriculum for teachers to use with students. Seven Fellows led other teachers in their district in sustained STEM professional development opportunities. These activities are expanding and improving access to STEM pedagogy in their schools and in some cases, across the district.

The project also resulted in three published articles (Gunning, et al, 2021b; Gunning, et al, 2023; Marrero, et al, 2021), with another currently under review as well as 10 research presentations by faculty at international conferences and more than 30

presentations by Fellows at teacher conferences locally and nationally.

### **Clinically Rich Intensive Teacher Institute for Teachers of English Language Learners**

**JungKang Miller & Bahar Otcu-Grillman**

Mercy University has received an award of \$687,500 from the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) under its five-year CR-ITI/ESOL program from the New York State Department of Education (NYSED) under its five-year CR-ITI/ESOL program (2023-2028). The program prepares teachers in English as a Second Language (ESOL) in order to address the shortage of English as a Second Language/English as a New Language teachers in New York City. The program leads to an Advanced Certificate in ESOL in PK-12 grade and is grounded in clinical practice interwoven with academic content and professional courses in partnership with school districts throughout New York City. This is the second time Mercy University has won this grant since successfully completing the previous term, 2018-2023.

Upon completion of the CR-ITI in ESOL program, teachers will be qualified to obtain additional certification. The CR-ITI in ESOL program leads to an Advanced Certificate in TESOL, an area of teacher shortage in New York City schools with an increasing population of students from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The teachers will be supported by mentor teachers and clinical supervisors. The collegial relationship between the teacher candidates and their mentor teachers throughout the year will give them an improved clinical experience in teaching ESOL besides their regular teaching license. Benefits to Mercy University are a more clinically rich teacher preparation program and strengthened school



partnerships in New York City, where Mercy has two campuses. Another benefit to the university is an increased reputation as one of the finer TESOL programs in the city which has been able to receive this grant after a competitive application process.

The teacher candidates join a teacher orientation and professional development session with the co-directors of the program in the Fall and Spring semesters with their mentors. The program provides professional development opportunities such as memberships to professional organizations in TESOL and attending a conference related to teaching ESOL. Teacher candidates are observed while teaching English once in the Fall and once in the Spring semester by the university supervisors and provided with feedback for further clinical experience. The program co-directors were invited to the NYSED-arranged *2024 Voices United Conference: Advancing the Civil Rights of English Language Learners and Building Pathways to Multilingualism*, held on October 24, 2024, at Fordham University's Lincoln Center Campus. Mercy University was one of the only two universities invited to attend the conference.

Candidates are expected to observe, interview, and interact with professionals in PK-12, and connect between coursework and classroom-based activities. They will apply what they learn to improve their teaching practice and critically reflect on different educational practices.

We seek ongoing advice and feedback from partner school personnel in the areas of program development, clinical practice experiences, and assessment of candidates' potential as teachers. We provide continued support to candidates for the first year upon their completion of the program. Program

directors contact program completers at least twice per year to provide support in their teaching practice, exchange ideas on the best practices, and provide information on professional development (PD) opportunities.

## Conclusion

These featured grants have significantly advanced the growth and development of Mercy University's School of Education, reinforcing its mission to prepare educators who are equipped to meet the needs of today's diverse PK-12 student population. These grants support program improvement, professional learning, career readiness, mentoring and collaboration among stakeholders, driving innovation and excellence in education. Through continued grant support, the School of Education can strengthen its programs and further empower educators to create meaningful, lasting impacts in their classrooms and communities.

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