

Claire Darmstadter

Hey, everybody, I'm joined today by Kimber Wilkerson, UW Madison Faculty Director of the Teacher Education Center and also Professor of Special Education. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Kimber Wilkerson

My pleasure Claire.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah so before we dive into the more specific things that you might have knowledge on related to the teacher pledge, it'd be great if you could just give us some background on how you got into your current position and what your education career was like prior.

Kimber Wilkerson

I've been at UW Madison since 2002. But prior to being a professor, I was a special educator in the Seattle Public Schools. And then I, after getting my PhD became an assistant professor, and here I am today, this many years later. And I have in my current role, because of my continued interest in the preparation of educators, and you know, just wanting to make sure that as much of our energy as possible goes into creating infrastructure that allows us to prepare as many new educators as possible.

Claire Darmstadter

And before we dive into the Pledge aspect, I don't believe your area of specialty is language development, but I was wondering if you could kind of give us a little bit of advice or tips on how we can kind of include that within special education. Because I know, for example, personally, my degree is not in special education. But as a language educator, I will for sure be working with students who have needs that are beyond what I can provide with my expertise. So for teachers who are kind of leading the classroom, they might be working with an additional teacher who's providing support services. How can they kind of have a positive, collaborative partnership, so we can best support students in these language classrooms?

Kimber Wilkerson

So I like what you said about the collaborative relationship. And I think that's key. Unfortunately, it can be to the detriment of students and families if people become too siloed. So there are certainly students with disabilities, who are multilingual learners, there are certainly lots of opportunities for people to collaborate. And if people get siloed in their expertise or their comfort levels, then that's, like I said, just to the detriment of students and their families. So it's good for everyone to have a little bit of, you know, understanding of what other professionals in the school do. But we can't be experts in everything. So acknowledging that but also prioritizing collaborative relationships with other professionals in the school is, I think, very important.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, and our main topic today is the UW Madison 2030, Teacher Pledge. And essential focus here is kind of connecting multilingual and aspiring multilingual individuals with

opportunities to use these language skills within the fields of education. And we know that there's often a lot of financial barriers that can kind of get in the way for that. So I'm really excited by what the teacher pledge offers as a way to kind of mitigate some of these concerns, maybe make teaching a little bit more financially viable. So can you just kind of walk us through what it's about, what it entails and maybe how the requirements are a little bit different for people going into language positions?

Kimber Wilkerson

Yeah, so the Wisconsin Teacher Pledge is, you know, as you know, a new loan forgiveness program that is targeting people who are going into teaching and want to pledge to teach in Wisconsin for three to four years, depending on what school you choose, or what area of specialty you are in. And it is meant to encourage people to consider teaching as a major, consider, you know, coming back to school and getting their master's degree to become a teacher. But it is focused on those kind of like initial teachers. So the pledge does not apply to people who are coming back to get a second license. So that's maybe one important distinction, but you reference that you think, people who may be out in the community or in the state more broadly, who maybe worked in a school maybe have good experiences, the schools maybe wish something were different about schools, right. There's a lot of different motivations for wanting to work as an educator, and the hurdles seem high. So I agree with you that anything we can do to try to make a welcoming pass, and help educate people about what their options are at UW-Madison. I think the teacher pledge is a very exciting program in that it makes, you know, for people who already have a bachelor's degree if they come back and get a master's degree and become a teacher, that they can have up to the cost of in-state tuition and fees. And for undergraduates, there are a couple pathways, one being people who come here as freshmen and choose to choose a teacher education major. And the other is we're just working on a transfer program with Madison College. So people who could do two years at Madison College and then come and have their tuition and fees covered for the second two years when they're in a teacher education program. So we do have a website and you could probably link to that on the teacher ed center page. And a woman named Carly Marco is kind of our expert on teacher pledge. So anyone who hears this and thinks like, oh, I might do that, or I'd be interested to know, if I qualify, I would encourage them to check out the website or reach out to Carly directly, and she'd be happy to give them more information.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And just a couple of really basic questions. First of all, I know you mentioned there is a Madison College two-year transfer program. But for people who come in as freshmen, is this having just the two years when they're in the teacher program covered? Or is this all four years?

Kimber Wilkerson

It is the two years when they're in the teacher education major, and I know our Dean, Dean Hess, is working currently on raising money for possible scholarships to, you know, sort of offset the costs of those initial two years. But yes, right now, it is the full cost of in-state tuition. And the application procedure is very simple. People need to fill out a FAFSA, and that's it. So you fill out a FAFSA, you're in a teacher education major, and then those funds are applied to your

account. And it's not based on it's not based on need. But if depending on your level of financial need, there may be the ability to have some cost of attendance also covered by teacher pledge funds. So overall, I think it's a really positive, enticing, generous kind of financial support, but just for those two years while you're in the program.

Claire Darmstadter

And then once you graduate, the goal, of course, is to keep teachers here in Wisconsin long term, but there is a minimum requirement. And I know it's a little bit different based upon like high need areas or different positions. So most language educators are probably gonna fall into that high need category. So how does that kind of change the requirements?

Kimber Wilkerson

Right, so if you take a position as an educator in a high need field, then you are you only have to, after three years of teaching, you've met the clause, you have no, the loan is forgiven. So it's forgiven at a rate of you know, 50%, the first year you're teaching, 25% the second year, 25% the third year, if you choose a field that is not high need, or you work at a school that is more affluent than you would have four years before the loan was forgiven?

Claire Darmstadter

And is there any risk associated? So if I'm a junior, or a senior, and I commit to this program but then I'm like, *Oh, I think I might want to go live in Virginia*, are there going to be any financial issues that are incurred because of that?

Kimber Wilkerson

That's a great question. So the loan is zero interest, up until the point that you are paying it back. So there are some other kind of teacher loans that start accruing interest from the time you graduate. And that's not true for the pledge, the pledge would only begin to accrue interest at the point that you said, I'm not going to fulfill that time, and I'm gonna get ready to pay them the loan back. And then it is a low interest loan, but you have five years to fulfill that three or four years. So if you taught here in Wisconsin for two years, and then left, you could come back in that fifth year and finish something like that. We do know that some people choose to leave and come back. Some people choose to stop teaching for some personal reason. There are reasons why you could have it sort of stop the clock. But I think it is, it is meant to be as encouraging as possible, and not to be punitive. So the terms are set up in a way that's pretty generous to the person who's taking the pledge.

Claire Darmstadter

And one last question. So there's lots of different types of schools in the state. So we have private, public, charter, there's online opportunities, there might be parochial schools, is it everything? How does that kind of work with what qualifies?

Kimber Wilkerson

Everything, any school, right? So all of the schools that you just named would qualify, and you have to be working at least part time, 50%. So what counts as a year, you know, and what is

considered a high need school would be based on the financial needs of the students enrolled in a particular school. So sometimes an easy way to think of them might be Title One schools, so schools where a certain percentage of the families served by that community live near the poverty line. So, and those are considered high-need schools, sometimes a whole district is considered a new district. But in answer to your initial question, parochial school, private school, charter school, all of those things would qualify as well.

Claire Darmstadter

And then one last question. So I know you're also involved with a SET program that's focused more in the special education realm. And I think if I understand correctly, it's trying to increase the number of special educators who provide services to students who are designated as needing special education services and that it's trying to help get more of them in rural areas. In addition to special ed, there are also growing needs for language educators in rural areas, because we are expanding the language diversity in the state and there's a lot more people in those areas who might have those backgrounds. So for people who might have a language background, but also be interested in special education, is there kind of a way that this program could work with them? Or could you tell us a little bit about that?

Kimber Wilkerson

Yeah, I mean, I would love to work with more people who are multilingual, who want to be special educators, as you're talking about, and that, you know, when you asked about the collaboration between educators, it's sort of dreamy when you can have someone who has, who has that kind of formal training and expertise across those multiple areas. So someone like that would be in high demand, you know, and would be, you know, we would love to have someone with both of those interests. And, and as you noted, there are some rural communities in Wisconsin where there are growing, or at least significant populations of people who speak multiple languages. And this SET program is specifically for people who are getting their master's degrees in special education. So there's the two layers of you know, they qualify for the pledge, because they're going to teach in Wisconsin, but the SET residency program actually offers a living stipend for them, while they do a one-year residency in one of these rural schools. And again, that's another thing if you went to the Teacher Education Center website, you could find the UW SET program and Tessa Nelson-Neigum is the woman who kind of coordinates that program. And if anyone hears this and is curious about that. She also could give more information.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. Oh, thank you so much. Like you said, I will link both of those things below so people can check them out. I'm just really excited how this is going to hopefully increase the amount of people who can consider teaching because it's such an incredible career, but I know financial barriers can sometimes get in the way. So thank you so much, and have a great rest of your day.

Kimber Wilkerson

Yeah, super. Thank you Claire