

Transition to Teaching: Lessons Learned by a First-Year Rural Alternative Route Program

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This article describes lessons learned from the first-year implementation of a Grow Your Own teacher preparation alternative route program, Transition to Teaching. Implemented in a rural area in Washington State facing significant teacher shortages, the Transition to Teaching program reaches potential teachers who may not have access to a four-year college and a high-quality, competency-based teacher preparation program. The Transition to Teaching program fulfills the priority assigned by the state to recruiting and retaining teachers from underrepresented groups. Beginning with describing the design of the program and the application process, we discuss students' first-year experiences, lessons learned, and solutions developed. Content, strategies, access, and efficiencies are highlighted and advice for new programs is provided. In the end, we prove programs comparable to Transition to Teaching require clear collaboration and coordination as well as oversight to ensure teacher candidates are successful.

Keywords: Grow Your Own, alternative route teacher preparation, rural education, teacher shortage

All students deserve access to a quality education; however, every year some students are denied this opportunity due to factors beyond their control, such as their zip code. This inequity, or opportunity gap, is felt strongly in rural America. According to the National Center for Educational Statistics, over half of the public school districts in the United States, including those in Washington State, are located in rural America (National Center for Education Statistics, n.d.). Thus, in 2010–2011, the opportunity gap applied to nearly one-quarter of the total public-school population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2013). More troubling is the link between the opportunity gap and poverty (Nicosia, 2017). Findings from a report from the U.S. Department of Agriculture published in 2017 indicated that education is closely linked with economic outcomes and racial and ethnic minorities in rural areas lag White students in educational attainment (Nicosia, 2017). Unequal access to

qualified teachers was found to be a factor in larger opportunity gaps between students of high and low socioeconomic status in the United States (Akiba et al., 2007). Addressing this gap between students in non-rural and rural America requires that all students have access to qualified, effective teachers who understand the school and community cultures in which they serve.

Regrettably, there is a teacher shortage in rural Washington State (Geiger & Rosenberg, 2018). "Washington has experienced a 250% increase in the demand for new teachers. . . . Not only is there a teacher shortage but there is a need to improve the diversity of our educator workforce. Today 44% of Washington's children in our public schools are students of color but only 10% of the certificated staff are teachers of color" (Adams & Manuel, 2016, p. 3). Student diversity is rapidly increasing; in the last five years, students of color have increased 4% across the state (Professional Educator Standards

Board, 2018). For this reason, the state has adopted a strategic goal to increase the number of new educators who self-describe as coming from an underrepresented cultural background and are located in high-need areas, such as rural Washington (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021b). One way in which the Washington State Professional Educator Standards Board has supported achieving this goal is encouraging the development of alternative route programs for teacher certification (Adams & Manuel, 2016).

Alternative routes to teacher certification in Washington State aim at addressing teacher shortages by improving the persistence of educators in the field as well as recruiting to increase the diversity of educators. In the rural areas of the state, a Grow Your Own alternative route program has the potential to address historic struggles with retention of teachers and current problems with recruitment as well as to increase the number of prospective teachers from underrepresented populations (García & Cook, 2017; Connally et al., 2017). Focusing on the shortage of prospective teachers, and specifically those from diverse backgrounds, will directly address the persistent marginalization of underrepresented populations in rural Washington (Adams & Manuel, 2016; Carter Andrews et al., 2019).

In this article, we describe the lessons learned in developing and implementing the first year of an alternative route program created for rural Washington called Transition to Teaching (T2T). T2T began as a brainstorming session that launched a two-year planning effort and partnership between a university, educational service district (ESD), two community colleges, and 17 rural school districts. The outcome of this work was a program designed to address issues of rural poverty by reducing teacher shortages in a rural, difficult-to-staff region in Washington State. Intended to grow the numbers of special education, English language, bilingual, and elementary education teachers in rural settings, the T2T program prepares prospective teachers to understand the context of poverty in rural central Washington State. We explore the barriers to entry into the teaching profession confronted by members of rural

communities, briefly describe the program design (e.g., how it was developed to address barriers to teacher preparation), and offer lessons learned in the first year of the T2T program.

Barriers to Entry into the Teaching Profession

In order to be successful, alternative route teacher education programs need to address barriers to the teaching profession that prevent participation (McCarthy, 2015). A college completion gap between urban and rural students, and it is widening, even as rural Americans are increasingly better educated (Nicosia, 2017). Barriers to college completion and teacher certification include financial costs, testing requirements, differing languages, need for academic support and tutoring, assistance navigating federal student aid and university admission requirements (Adams & Manuel, 2016), and, significantly in the rural areas of Washington, lack of access to an Educator Preparation Program (EPP).

Rural north central Washington is served by two community colleges but lacks a four-year institution of higher education with a physical campus. Students must travel from home, at least several hours away, to attend a university. For financial, family, and cultural reasons, this is often not possible (Krupnick, 2018). Another barrier to attending college is the cost, made more difficult by the travel distance (Krupnick, 2018). In general, 50% or more of the population in these rural districts are at or below the poverty rate, as indicated by the state's low-income measure (Washington Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, n.d.). In order to afford college, many students must work and live at home but cannot do so if attending a university requires travel. A third factor is a lack of a support network (Mottet, 2019). Many students from the region would be the first generation of their families to attend college. Typical of this demographic, students lack support from family and friends to negotiate the college process (Krupnick, 2018; Mottet, 2019). Finally, a significant barrier to college programs is the program admissions requirements (e.g., testing and testing fees) required for entry (Bennett et al., 2006; Nettles et al., 2011; Professional Educator Standards Board, 2018).

Alternative Route Programs in Washington State

Alternative route programs in Washington State are designed for career changers or members of the educational community (e.g., paraeducators, front-office staff, or emergency certified classroom teachers) who want to earn a teaching certificate. In comparison to traditional teacher certificate programs, alternative route programs are more flexible, affordable, clinically based, and shorter. In addition, Washington State alternative programs are also intended to be Grow Your Own programs that work in partnership with districts and tribal schools to recruit teachers from the community, especially from marginalized populations, who can diversify the educator workforce. Teachers in Grow Your Own programs are already members of the rural community who understand the cultural practices, norms, and language (García et al., 2019).

Washington State programs have differed in their approach to addressing barriers to the teaching profession either by prioritizing district and school needs or by adapting traditional certification requirements (Mitchell & Romero, 2010). Washington State alternative route programs work to address barriers through both approaches. In this way, alternative route programs are seen as “drivers of innovation” (García et al., 2019, p. 71) in the educator preparation field and as a strategy to diversify the educator workforce. The Professional Educator Standards Board (PESB) regulates alternative route programs in Washington State.

PESB provides four pathways that EPPs can provide for prospective teachers to pursue their teaching certification (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021a). As shown in Table 1, the T2T program, in an effort to extend learning opportunities to all teacher candidates, offers prospective teachers all four pathways to certification.

Route 1 (R1) is for prospective teachers who do not have a bachelor’s degree, have a transferable associate’s degree, and are already employed in a participating school district, usually as a paraeducator or paraprofessional (“para”). This route leads to a bachelor’s degree and a teaching certificate but also requires that prospective teachers work to obtain additional endorsement as a teacher of English language learners, bilingual education, or special education.

Route 2 (R2) is for prospective teachers who already possess a bachelor’s degree and are employed by a participating school district, usually as a para. R1 and R2 prospective teachers are classified employees and are sometimes serving in other roles such as secretary, bus driver, custodian before being recommended by their district as possessing strong potential as a teacher.

Route 3 (R3) is for prospective teachers who already possess a bachelor’s degree but do not work for a participating school district. These prospective teachers are typically returning adult learners who are changing careers.

Table 1

Alternative Route Pathways to Teaching Certification (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021b)

Alternatives	Population Served
Route 1	Paraeducator or other district staff, pursuing both a bachelor’s degree and teaching certificate
Route 2	Paraeducator or other district staff with a bachelor’s degree
Route 3	Career changer with a bachelor’s degree
Route 4	Teacher of record with a conditional certification

Route 4 (R4) is for prospective teachers who already possess a bachelor's degree and are employed by school districts as teachers of record under a conditional certificate from the state. A condition of the certificate is that the teacher pursue an appropriate teaching certificate in a timely manner.

The Key to Alternative Route Success: Strong Partnerships

While alternative route programs in Washington State differ in the types of routes offered, program length, curricular design, and program assessment, or which endorsements they might provide for teacher candidates, *all* programs depend on strong partnerships with districts. Successful university–district partnerships require shared goals, ongoing needs assessments, and a structure that ensures the partnership's vision and mission are being met (Goree et al., 2019). Other characteristics of a successful university–district partnerships are mentor teachers committed to supporting teacher candidates, committed teacher candidates, and supportive administrators from both sides of the partnership (Coon-Kitt et al., 2019).

In any Grow Your Own setting, the partners are central to identifying individuals who might be interested and able to become effective educators. External partners can include school districts, tribal communities and schools, non-profit organizations, community colleges, or any number of groups interested in promoting a diverse educator workforce. Our external partners' investment in "growing" future educators in their communities included marketing, recruiting, advising, supporting, and, in some cases, funding prospective teachers in the program. Unlike most of the alternative routes in the state where universities partner with one district, a unique quality of our program is that we have collaborative partnerships with more than 40 districts across a wide swath of the state (García et al., 2019). We work closely with district partners and regional community colleges to seek out and advise potential teachers in rural central and eastern Washington.

In addition to these external partners, internal university partnerships are essential for the success of the program. Our internal partners, such as the

Records and Registration, Financial Aid, and Budget offices have created new systems and structures needed by the program to allow for flexibility and to reduce institutional barriers to college attendance that had been invisible. The secret to these partnerships includes a shared mission we have collaboratively developed, consistent communication efforts, and a willingness to be flexible when possible.

University Requirements

In addition to state requirements, universities also have specific requirements for students who wish to earn bachelor's degrees. R1 teacher candidates must meet university entry requirements by providing evidence of a transferable associate degree or its approved equivalent. The EPP also stipulates prerequisite courses before program entry including demonstrated math proficiency (i.e., courses that meet designated proficiency for the university), English/writing proficiency (e.g., research skills, analytical writing, synthesis), and a communications course (e.g., public speaking, intercultural communication). These courses are freshman/sophomore level courses (i.e., 100 and 200 level). To earn a bachelor's degree, teacher candidates are also required to complete a course in global studies and diversity. Although we have a mandatory diversity course in our program that meets this requirement, all of the above requisites can be completed either at a community college or at the university.

In implementing T2T, we brokered adaptations to the typical university and EPP requirements to address known barriers. These included changes to admissions, registration, and course designations. For example, the T2T program and coursework had to be approved through the university curriculum review process before the program could recruit prospective teachers. Finally, in order to hold courses off campus, approval was required regarding reporting requirements, and unique memoranda of understanding were reached with our cooperating community college partners, the relevant ESDs, and school districts.

Addressing the Barriers in the Program Design

For many qualified teacher candidates, unpaid residency requirements commonly stipulated in traditional preparation programs are a primary barrier to entering the teaching profession (Wexler, 2016). For this reason, in the T2T program, we endeavored to maintain or find placements where teacher candidates could serve as employees of the district in a paid internship experience, including benefits. Persistence can be problematic, and our partners noted issues with the retention of people pursuing online programs. To encourage persistence, the university faculty and partner personnel committed to the success of teacher candidates, for the most part, recommended by administrators at the partner districts. This commitment has taken different forms depending on the circumstances but has included additional face-to-face meetings with teacher candidates, modified job assignments, changes of placements, and additional support to complete assessments.

Financial

Our regional comprehensive university is a low-cost public alternative for many students. However, providing access to university financial aid, conditional loan scholarships from the state, and low tuition for self-financed teacher candidates further eased the financial burden of college. In addition, several partner districts provided further financial support by supplementing transportation and lodging costs for teacher candidates who still had to travel significant distances just to reach the community colleges for class sessions.

Course Delivery

Another barrier to success was course delivery. Our district partners were adamant about providing a cohort for their teacher candidates based on the high dropout rate of prior employees trying to complete an online program independently. They reported that teacher candidates often felt isolated, alone, and unsupported in online programs. Connections and relationships are central to teaching and learning. Utilizing a cohort model provides not only regular contact with onsite faculty and staff, but, more importantly, fellow teacher

candidates who are going through the same program and experiencing the same struggles and frustrations can communicate with and support each other. Like other Washington State alternative route programs, the T2T program was developed to incorporate hybrid course delivery, qualified instructors, a competency-based approach, individualization, and flexibility, as well as offer accelerated pathways for teacher candidates to earn specialty endorsements such as English Language Learners, Special Education, and Bilingual Education. Perhaps the most valuable part of our program was the course delivery method. We provided the only on-site teacher education program in the region. Combining a face-to-face, on-site experience with online elements allowed our teacher candidates to stay home and keep working at their current jobs.

Hybrid Coursework

Hybrid coursework offered practical benefits that reduced barriers for teacher candidates, such as allowing them to remain at home and employed after an intensive 2-week summer academy. Teacher candidates came to the campus of a local community college partner and met every day for 2 weeks in mid-summer. Coursework focused on orienting teacher candidates to the program and discussing the essentials of the teaching profession from foundations of assessment and management to introductory material on reading, special education, and English language learning. This intense experience laid the groundwork for the teacher candidates' experience in their schools the following term. In addition, teacher candidates were able to bond as a cohort, which helped with supporting one another throughout their program.

During the academic year, teacher candidates met monthly as a cohort to engage in face-to-face learning on Fridays and Saturdays at the campus of a local community college. In these meetings, teacher candidates learned specialist and core content teaching methods as well as lesson preparation using the university lesson plan format.

Qualified and Experienced Instructors

Program faculty adapted the courses they regularly taught in the traditional program for the

T2T program. They integrated program and state expectations with teacher candidates' prior experiences to design modules that included class time, hybrid materials, and course assignments that aligned with state competencies and the needs of rural Washington State teachers. Due to the nature of the program, seat time was limited so instructors had to develop courses to cover essentials during online sessions and apply content in face-to-face sessions. Through hybrid coursework connected with supervised practicum requirements, teacher candidates learned the skills needed to be successful teachers.

Competency-Based Approach

Using a standards-based approach, Washington State identifies competencies for

elementary teachers (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021a). The outcomes of any preparation program are verified by the competencies of each teacher candidate, judged by the evidence provided in coursework, fieldwork, or prior experiences in teaching settings. The PESB identifies five core competencies as indicators of proficiency and readiness: content knowledge, understanding the learner, learning community, instruction, and assessment. Each of the core competencies has a multitude of sub-competencies (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021b). For example, one competency for the state residency certificate in elementary education appears in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Elementary Education Competencies (PESB, 2021a)

5.0 Assessment.

Candidates, individually and/or collaboratively design and implement a wide range of assessment strategies to inform instruction and support student learning within and across academic content areas.

- 5.A Align assessment strategies with learning targets
- 5.B Use a variety of formative and summative assessments that measure student performance relative to learning targets
- 5.C Effectively use state, district, and/or classroom assessments
- 5.D Use assessments, including rubrics (teacher, student, or institution generated), to promote student understanding of quality work and to improve self-reflection, peer feedback, and goal setting
- 5.E Build student capacity to use assessment to evaluate progress toward learning targets, reflect on learning, and make appropriate learning decisions
- 5.F Analyze assessment results to determine impact on student learning and to adjust instruction to improve teaching and learning (positive impact)
 - 5.F.1 Understand student cognition in order to perform accurate error analysis and alleviate student misunderstanding
- 5.G Modify assessment practices so that students with exceptional needs can demonstrate mastery of concepts in alternative ways

Competency-Based ePortfolio

Competencies can be demonstrated in a number of ways. T2T used an ePortfolio to determine whether teacher candidates had demonstrated competencies and were ready to teach. Teacher candidates developed an online portfolio following the guidelines specified in an individualized Teacher Development Plan (TDP) created during the first summer academy. ePortfolios offer a research-based opportunity for teacher candidates to engage in metacognitive thinking and effective use of technology and implement teacher-reflective practice. They provide a way to document intentional forms of pedagogical knowledge and practice (Denton et al., 2008; Parkes et al, 2013). The TDP outlines prior coursework, relevant experience, and the practicum and coursework requirements needed to complete the program. This document, signed by the teacher candidate, mentor, field supervisor, and program director, serves as a program syllabus to guide teacher candidate learning and assessment.

As indicators of success, ePortfolios are one of the most promising criteria for teacher readiness (Russell & McPherson, 2001). Participants' ePortfolios followed the TDP and showcased the evidence that demonstrated that each competency has been met. Teacher candidates authored contention statements explaining how their submitted evidence met each required competency using evidence from prior coursework, work experience, personal research, and program coursework. These participant-authored contention statements served two purposes. First, they demonstrated that teacher candidates would identify evidence that addressed each competency. Secondly, they helped to provide a basis for forming evaluative judgments about the effectiveness and quality of the program. Successful completion of the ePortfolio was a T2T program requirement for graduation (R1) and certification (R1–R4).

The competency-based approach afforded flexibility into the design of the T2T program as it focused on the needs of and options available to teacher candidates in the way in which competencies might be met. Each participant determined, based on their setting and placement,

how to meet a given competency. For instance, for one of the PESB sub-standards of competency 3.0: Learning Communities, teacher candidates must establish that they can create and foster student engagement, learning, and positive relationships in the classroom (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021a). To do this, one teacher candidate could provide evidence of a completed lesson whereas another teacher candidate could provide samples of student-based evidence. This flexibility ensured equity for all participants while maintaining high standards of performance in the design of the program (Chardin & Novak, 2021).

Flexibility

Furthering the flexibility provided by the ePortfolio, PESB requires that alternative routes be flexible and individualized to meet the teacher candidates' needs (Professional Educator Standards Board, 2021a). Teacher candidates came into T2T with varying degrees of experience and education. For example, 10 teacher candidates came into our program without bachelor's degrees, but one had a master's degree; some were paras and others were teachers of record. The challenge, therefore, was to create a program that met the needs of all teacher candidates but could also be delivered by a small number of faculty and with limited resources.

The T2T program was designed to be flexible and provide multiple pathways to teacher certification. Residency requirements were also flexible, based on prior experience, placement, and teacher candidates' readiness. This flexibility allowed teacher candidates to maintain employment and receive credit for appropriate work experience, but it also required an individual residency plan for each teacher candidate.

Each pathway had a program designed to meet the needs of teacher candidates pursuing that path. For example, R1 teacher candidates needed to meet the number of credits required to earn a Bachelor of Arts in education, K-8 teaching certification, and an additional endorsement in either special education or English language learning. R2 teacher candidates needed appropriate classroom experience in a regular education elementary setting where they could

teach all four core subject areas and still work. R3 teacher candidates needed a standard placement that allowed for a more traditional student teaching experience. Finally, R4 teacher candidates were already teaching but had to be mentored and supervised to further their development as teachers. Thus, a teacher candidate who was successfully meeting teaching expectations while serving as the teacher of record in a self-contained K-8 classroom did not need to do additional clinical residency hours.

Additional Endorsements

The alternative route requirements stipulated by PESB include an additional expectation for R1 teacher candidates. These teacher candidates must pursue an additional endorsement in either special education (SPED), English language learning (ELL), or bilingual education. This is an ongoing effort to address shortages in both SPED and ELL teachers in the state. These endorsements require additional coursework and practica that extend a teacher candidate's program beyond the baccalaureate. Some districts require that R2–R4 teacher candidates also complete an additional endorsement as such is the need in the area.

Lessons Learned

We designed T2T to address barriers to entry into the education profession and to increase the number of underrepresented individuals earning a teaching certificate in rural Washington State. After admitting our first cohort, despite our careful preparation, we learned that we had not anticipated all of the support teacher candidates would need to be successful in the different stages of the program.

Program Initiation

Institutional Barriers

Institutional barriers complicated the application process for T2T applicants. Like many institutions, ours required that applicants first apply to the university and then apply to a specific program (major). T2T applicants were considered similar to transfer or post-baccalaureate applicants because they were entering the university with an associate's or bachelor's degree. Applicants struggled with the admissions process, including the separate

applications required for both the university and T2T program, the differing due dates and university fees required, and the paperwork required for funding, including financial aid applications like the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). Multiple due dates set by federal, state, university, and program policies created confusion. In addition, because the cohort began in the summer, the program spanned two academic years so applicants were required to submit two FAFSA applications to be considered eligible for financial aid. Given the complex process coupled with the distance of applicants from campus, many did not meet the due date or fee requirements on time. In addition, we were surprised to learn that many applicants did not have daily access to computers or internet service in their homes; this made the application process a struggle.

To find a short-term solution to address these issues, we worked with the districts, community colleges, and ESD to make computers or computer labs in schools available after school for applicants' use. We requested extensions from the state and university for the first cohort and personally contacted each applicant via email and phone several times to respond to questions and offer admissions advising. In order to address this issue going forward, university admissions personnel and T2T personnel developed a single application form to serve both university and program entrance needs as well as an advising protocol for admissions officers to direct appropriate applicants to this application. Program personnel also worked to streamline the website so that it offered better advising and information based on the first cohort's experience, including links to the FAFSA, university and program applications, and other required forms.

In addition to the challenges of funding and course delivery, new college students faced the institutional challenge of navigating the unfamiliar territory of a higher education institution. About a third of our applicants were first generation college students. Figuring out how to work within the university system to register, pay fees, obtain financial aid, and understand course requirements proved daunting to them. Working closely with various departments of the university, we were able to remove these barriers at the individual student

level or advocate for changes based on program of entry. While time-consuming and sometimes frustrating for all involved, our efforts minimized unforeseen bureaucratic hurdles for applicants and those admitted to the T2T program.

An additional unforeseen institutional barrier to program completion was lack of access to university advising. Teacher candidates were unsure what courses to take, when to take them, or what courses from their transcripts would count toward university requirements. Typically, university advising for incoming and new students is staffed by a separate advising unit. Because the T2T program is an alternative program model than what advisors usually support, we found that T2T teacher candidates needed to be individually advised by T2T faculty. Because this level of advising is outside of the normal workload of faculty, advising workload for instructors needed to be considered. T2T teacher candidates have unique and specific needs throughout the program and require ongoing advising to offer direction and support to those who might otherwise feel frustrated and abandoned.

Testing Barriers

As predicted from the literature (Bennett et al., 2006; Nettles et al., 2011; Professional Educator Standards Board, 2018), a significant barrier to entry to the teaching profession for applicants was the prerequisite testing. All applicants to the T2T program were required to take a basic skills test, and those with a baccalaureate were required to take a content pedagogy test. Several applicants did not pass the basic skills test prior to program entry; one applicant did not pass the content pedagogy test before program entry.

To address this, we first provided test preparation and remedial assistance during our summer academy. In addition, we requested an extension for teacher candidates to remain in the program while preparing to retake their exams. At the same time, the state began a review of testing barriers and revised the policy to remove the passing score for the basic skills test and made passing the content pedagogy exam a program exit requirement. This state-level policy change greatly reduced the testing barrier for entry into the teaching profession.

At Admission

Once admitted, teacher candidates had difficulty registering for their summer coursework. Because the T2T program was unique, the courses were not available to other university teacher candidates. This meant that the courses were not searchable in the online registration platform and teacher candidates had to enter unique course codes to register successfully. In addition, the T2T program received permission to waive several, but not all, university fees. Teacher candidates with unpaid fees were not able to register. Given students' limited internet and computer access at home, the registration process proved complex and frustrating for many in the initial cohort.

To address this, we created step-by-step instructions with screen capture images of the registration process and course codes needed. We walked several teacher candidates through the registration process via phone during an advising conference. Despite this, multiple teacher candidates arrived at the first summer academy unregistered. We worked with the teacher candidates one-on-one to register them and arranged for late registration fees to be waived.

Difficulty Securing Qualified Instructors

As a self-supported program funded through grant and tuition dollars, finance for the program was limited. In addition, T2T was constrained by university barriers around faculty teaching loads. As a whole, T2T struggled to engage qualified teaching faculty due to university requirements that (a) faculty teach all courses as overage to their regular loads, (b) faculty often have to stay overnight to teach classes in rural areas because they travel 2- to-3 hours to the classroom locations, and (c) faculty have to pay for travel costs up-front and wait for the university system to reimburse these costs. For these reasons, we looked to ESD, community college, and district partners to recommend qualified faculty to teach courses in their regions. This plan met with some success. Partner-faculty were clearly qualified and knowledgeable about P-12 student needs in the rural area and could provide the application of theory to practice for specific methods courses. However, they also had to teach the courses as overage to their full-time job loads,

and the university processed their employment contracts as adjuncts, requiring extensive hiring processes, time commitments, and sometimes significant delay before compensation was processed.

Unexpected Travel Costs

A significant portion of the T2T budget was devoted to travel costs, which was anticipated in the original budget proposals and grant application. However, we anticipated that the use of technology, such as Zoom, could replace some face-to-face visits. The technology expectations did not pan out as anticipated. Supervisor and mentor training, partnership meetings, and mentor conferencing were less successful via electronic meeting platforms than face-to-face interactions. Consequently, we spent additional funds in to mediate, problem solve, and train partners. This resulted in limited funding for developing more innovative curriculum and for visiting sister programs across the state and nation to learn more promising practices.

University Systems

The university supports innovative, self-supported programs and T2T, specifically. Administrative support from sectors ranging from finance to advising contributed countless hours of brainstorming and problem solving to make T2T possible within the structures of the university system. However, because T2T was designed to be “outside the box” of typical undergraduate degrees, institutional bureaucratic systems raised significant barriers to program development, implementation, instruction, and support.

While in Program

Despite efforts to design a program that intentionally addressed barriers for rural teacher candidates, we found that we had applied assumptions about traditional students to the T2T population. Technological barriers and divergent practicum placement support became apparent for teacher candidates in the program.

Technology Barriers

Many potential teachers in rural areas have limited access to educational opportunities through

traditional colleges. Typically, opportunities are available in online-only format or from institutions that offer less desirable applied degrees. One of the benefits of the T2T alternative route program was that it offered a hybrid pathway to teaching certification in rural areas. As we planned for coursework in both face-to-face and online settings, we anticipated familiarity with technology (e.g., access to a computer or computer lab), ability to use programs in the Microsoft Office Suite, knowledge of how to attach documents in an online platform, and some facility with learning management systems such as Blackboard or Canvas. As did Dukes and Jones (2007), we found that several teacher candidates did not have access to home computers or home internet and required practical advice for online education. We developed instruction on how to use internet services with the whole class, practiced basic skills as a group, and then individually met with teacher candidates to provide remedial services.

Practicum Issues

In their article describing how to redesign curriculum to advance teacher education, Banks et al. (2014) described the importance of designing clinically based teacher preparation programs that intentionally, cohesively, and consistently merged coursework and fieldwork. We predicted that most teacher candidates would be paras in R1 or non-certificated teachers in R4, currently employed by the district. Based on this, we anticipated that teacher candidates would have easy access to placements in classroom settings. However, as mentioned above, many teacher candidates who entered the program were not district employees (R3). Even teacher candidates who were employees struggled to find mentor teachers and classrooms that met the requirements for the K-8 teaching certificate because, in their roles as employees, they were placed in special education or ELL settings. In addition, there was confusion with our partners around the role of the field supervisor—traditionally a liaison between the university and the placement site. In earlier conversations with district partners, we anticipated that districts would utilize building coaches or district teaching mentors, such as a Beginning Educator Support Team (BEST) mentor, to serve in this role.

The BEST program is a program facilitated through the Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI). However, for many of the small rural partners, this was not possible, and the supervisor assigned was the building principal. However, the principal also served as the teacher candidates' employment supervisor, presenting a potential conflict of interest. Because the supervisor was a district, and not a university, employee, there were some issues with training expectations, attending training sessions, correctly using university assessments such as the lesson plan template, and following policies around problem-solving when issues arose.

When teacher candidates were employees of the school district (e.g., R1 and R2), we learned we had to negotiate their roles while completing practicum. For example, a teacher candidate who served in the role of a paraprofessional in a specific setting such as special education, needed to have a practicum experience in a general education setting to demonstrate skills and knowledge in the elementary competencies. In one district we were able to work through the district and union to set up a time where the teacher candidates would trade with another paraprofessional who was working in a general education setting. This way the teacher candidate was able to complete practicum requirements while continuing with employment in the district. In another situation, where a teacher candidate was serving under a conditional certificate as a middle school math teacher, we were able to work with the district to have that teacher candidate work to meet competencies in other core subject areas during their preparation time and also utilizing a district-provided substitute teacher. We learned these were delicate negotiation processes, but we were grateful that we had partnered so closely with our districts; thus, when issues arose, we were able to remedy them quickly.

Because field experience and residency are formative learning experiences, several teacher candidates who struggled in their roles as uncertificated first-year teachers were accountable in high-stakes ways for learning mistakes, including loss of future job opportunities. Clarification around the role of the supervisor and the principal and the learning expectations of residency became a priority

for the first year of the partnership. Of particular importance was how to communicate most effectively with all partners. Our regular partnership meetings were held with a representative from each district and the ESD, usually superintendents or human resources representatives. Ensuring that meeting details reached building principals and others who had the responsibility of implementation became a priority. The communication channel needed to be broadened to include specific mentors, principals, coaches, and others in building support roles while still maintaining strong partnership communications with superintendents and district representatives.

This highlights one of the issues in our large partnership: divergent support and resources among districts in the partnership. Some districts provided a building coach, ongoing mentorship and support, and travel reimbursement. Other districts had less capacity to offer support, either in mentorship and supervision or in finances. This impacted placements as well as course and program outcomes. Specifically, the lack of music, art, and physical education specialists to observe and interact with teacher candidates meant that the program outcomes for the first quarter had to be met differently than originally planned in the four-quarter curriculum.

Disposition Issues

One thing we understood from our traditional preparation program was the importance of teaching professional dispositions to teacher candidates. Anticipating that many of our teacher candidates would be moving from a para role to that of a teacher, we felt it important to inculcate the values of the teaching profession. We did this in a way that was meant to foster inclusive excellence (Martinez & Punyanunt-Carter, 2021) through an exploration of implicit bias in behaviors and schooling norms (Hammond, 2015). Specifically, in order to better understand schooling cultures and norms, we intentionally embedded equity practices as a model of how teachers engage versus forming judgments of behaviors that do not align to school culture norms (Chardin & Novak, 2021). One expectation we made clear to our district partners was that all teacher candidates, regardless of route,

would be included in professional development opportunities available for teachers. What we did not address adequately was expectations for professional conduct relative to dispositions of teacher candidates with administrators, teachers, university personnel and faculty, and fellow teacher candidates. We knew that starting a new program in such a short time frame might lead to frustrations on behalf of our teacher candidates, and we advised them regularly that when the inevitable setbacks occurred, we would work to correct miscommunications and misunderstandings in a way that would not be detrimental to them. Despite these assurances, we were surprised at the impatience and quick use of electronic communication to jump to negative conclusions by a significant number of teacher candidates. These incidents occurred enough to prompt comment from instructors and district personnel alike. Schools expect teacher candidates to demonstrate professional dispositions, especially their own employees who are transitioning roles, but given their new status, teaching candidates did not consistently perform to this expectation. Thus, we realized the need for more explicit conversations around the change of roles from para to teacher.

On the basis of our experience, we recommend that alternative route programs allot time at face-to-face sessions to inculcate teacher candidates to professional expectations and teaching dispositions. This should include explicit descriptions of the ways to interact with peers, school personnel, parents and families, university instructors, and students and to provide practice in presuming possible alternative explanations for behaviors (Hammond, 2015). For instance, the use of the Gudykunst and Kim's (2003) three-part communication protocol, Dray and Wisneski's (2011) Mindful Reflection Protocol, and clear discussions defining microaggressions and triggers that activate threats in the brain (Hammond, 2015) can help teacher candidates to understand the purpose of professional expectations and teaching dispositions. It is equally necessary to establish guidelines for appropriate dress and language. We also suggest describing typical school culture and behavioral expectations including preparation for observations, meetings, and time spent at school.

Further, we suggest presenting teacher candidates a protocol to follow when questions and frustrations arise. Importantly, from a university perspective, teacher candidates need to be expressly taught that teaching is an iterative profession, and they should expect that their work will require reflection, revision, and resubmission, be it lesson plans, lessons, or even the edTPA.

Mentoring

In addition to barriers experienced by teacher candidates, we experienced unexpected challenges to the T2T alternative route design and implementation—specifically, issues with mentor and supervisor training. Traditional programs match teacher candidates with mentor teachers with whom teacher candidates work closely to observe and refine their own teaching. In T2T, teacher candidates had several different contexts that had to be considered. R1 and R2 teacher candidates were often paras working in special education or ELL settings. This meant that they had to find time to work in a general education classroom. School districts we partnered with sometimes had to revise employee work schedules to allow this to happen. R4 teacher candidates teaching in their own classrooms needed a mentor to be alongside them as they taught. R3 teacher candidates tended to have a more traditional experience. They worked to find a mentor teacher in whose classroom they volunteered time and gained practice teaching experience. All mentor teachers were asked to take part in our training to learn university expectations and requirements for our teacher candidates.

Field Supervision

In our traditional program, field supervisors employed by the university supervise numerous teacher candidates and work with mentor teachers to oversee teacher candidate preparation. With the remote location of our teacher candidates, finding field supervisors was a challenge. Larger districts provided a supervisor from its central office. Smaller districts sometimes provided principals or curriculum coaches to serve as supervisors. Supervisors observed all teacher candidates at least six times including completing observations of teacher candidate teaching and meeting with both teacher candidates and mentor teachers.

Summary of Advice for New Programs

Several decisions we made in implementing T2T addressed barriers our teacher candidates felt when entering the teaching profession. The cohort model and weekend seminars encouraged teacher candidates to develop relationships with faculty, staff, and each other in expectation of increasing retention. The cohort developed a strong support network that made a difference to the success of each individual teacher candidate and even beyond the program and into the first year of teaching. All

but one teacher candidate in the first cohort successfully completed the requirements to earn a teaching certificate and remained employed in the school district. There were real successes in the first year of T2T. However, we also experienced growing pains and had the sense that we had not done enough to dismantle the barriers that impeded participant success in rural Washington. Table 2 summarizes our advice to new alternative route programs, based on the lessons we learned in our first year.

Table 2

Lessons Learned – Barriers and Advice

Barrier 1: Admissions Process	
Items	Advice
1: Application Requirements	Item 1: Combine university and program online applications and establish one due date.
2: Program Application	Items 1 & 2: Provide dedicated program staff to help with admissions advising or work with university admissions to provide a dedicated advisor to work with alternative route students and understand the admission differences for their applications.
3: University Fees	
4: FAFSA Requirements	Items 2–6: Bring the advising to the potential students: hold multiple on-site advising sessions, with available laptops or lab spaces, to complete applications (including the FAFSA) with assistance.
5: Multiple Due Dates	Item 3: Advocate for a reduction in university fees, especially for those services off-site students will not utilize.
6: Distance to Campus	
7: Lack of Access to Technology	Item 6: Request a local ESD or district representative be assigned to liaison with school staff for the admissions process. This person can also serve on your advisory board or planning team.
8: Testing Barriers	Item 7: Work with stakeholders to open and staff computer labs in local schools, districts, and community colleges in the evenings and on weekends.
	Item 8: Provide test-preparation through the community college or other stakeholder partner.
	Item 8: Advocate for a change in admissions testing for program entry in your state.

Table 2 (Continued)

Barrier 2: Registration	
Items	Advice
1: Registration Issues	Item 1: Create step-by-step visual guides to the registration process and publish these guides online for each registration term.
2: Unpaid Fees and Registration Holds	Items 1 & 2: Provide dedicated program staff to help with the registration advising including individualized phone calls and doublechecking rosters.
3: Lack of Access to Technology	Items 2 & 3: Bring the registration process to the participants: Hold multiple on-site sessions, with available laptops or lab spaces, to complete registration with assistance.
4: Difficulty Securing Qualified Instructors Who Can Travel	Item 4: If required, partner with ESD or districts to recruit qualified instructors who meet university adjunct requirements and understand the context for learning in the alternative licensure route program.
5: Travel Costs	Item 4: Market your program internally. Share the benefits of service teaching in the alternative licensure route program to encourage colleagues to sign on as course instructors. Item 5: Expect travel costs to exceed your prediction. Be sure to include visits to other alternative licensure route programs to learn best practices and to troubleshoot with experienced colleagues.
Barrier 3: In Program	
Items	Advice
1: Lack of Access to Technology & Internet	Item 1: Work with stakeholders to open and staff computer labs in local schools, districts, community colleges in the evenings and on weekends.
2: Lack of Knowledge Regarding How to Utilize Technology for Learning	Item 2: Dedicate curricular time in the first weeks to establish background knowledge for technology use. Provide technical assistance and training for common areas of need. Item 3: Allot time at face-to-face sessions to inculcate participants with professional expectations and teaching dispositions.
3: Employees vs Participants	Item 4: Describe school culture and behavioral expectations. Item 4: Teach participants that teaching is an iterative profession, and they should expect to reflect and resubmit assignments.
4: Disposition Issues	Item 5: Don't assume participants will hold positions in the same district.
5: Practicum Support Across Routes	Provide staff and time to place the majority of the teacher candidates in a classroom with a mentor, as you might do with a traditional teacher candidate.
6: Mentor Teacher Training and Support	Item 5: Take the time to talk through hypotheticals. Anticipate a worst-case scenario for performance or behavior by those participants with positions in the district, either as paras or teachers of record, and plan for how the university and district will work together to support or dismiss a participant. Will the participant be viewed as a student or as an employee in moments where mistakes might be made? Be upfront and clear about these expectations so that all stakeholders know next steps, if needed.
7: Field Supervisor Training and Support	

8: Communication With all Stakeholders	<p>Items 5, 6, & 7: If your program works with multiple districts, work with district partners to identify the types and level of support they will provide teacher candidates. Give districts the opportunity to review benefits provided and address how to make sure there are equitable opportunities for program support across all districts.</p> <p>Item 8: Hold regular partnership meetings together with all stakeholders.</p> <p>Items 6, 7, & 8: Mentor teachers and field supervisors who are at a distance from the university. Multiple training and support sessions should be provided throughout the year. Unlike in more traditional programs, mentors and supervisors are supporting a participant on an individualized basis, and they may not be able to rely upon general program guidelines. Assure that program staff that can offer sustained support and training beyond an initial training session. This could include online training modules and regular check-in contact. Mentors and supervisors may be employees of partner stakeholders and will need to know who, to contact in moments of questions or concerns.</p>
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Conclusion

All students deserve access to a quality education. We argue that this begins with access to quality teachers. The T2T program is an effective model of regional leadership and partnership among the university, community colleges, and schools to address the needs in rural areas for qualified and effective teachers who understand the population of learners they serve.

Key lessons learned in the first year of the T2T program include (a) simplifying application procedures, (b) providing personal support for teacher candidates, (c) ensuring effective communication with district partners from district leaders to mentor teachers, (d) explicitly training for teacher candidates in professional dispositions, (e) explicitly framing teaching as an iterative process, and (f) providing access and support in the use of appropriate technology.

Those interested in developing an alternate route program are encouraged to (a) learn about and understand barriers to accessing the profession in your area, (b) create a program with a cohort model and hybrid course delivery, (c) meet with the teacher candidates to the extent possible, (d) work hand-in-hand with university administration to integrate unique aspects of the program with university systems, and (e) commit to the success of teacher candidates.

Many areas in the country are faced with teacher shortages and a lack of diversity in the teacher workforce. This problem may be particularly acute in rural school districts. Providing an alternate route program that affords access to a high-quality teacher preparation program and addresses known barriers to the profession can help to recruit and retain diverse teacher candidates and individuals committed to their local communities. It is our hope that lessons we have learned in our journey so far will encourage others to work to address teacher shortage and increase the diversity of the teacher workforce through an alternate route program.

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