

Teacher Education in an Interdisciplinary Cohort Model

By Douglas Smith



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The Interdisciplinary Cohort Model of Teacher Preparation at the University of Kentucky has been successful in preparing business and marketing teachers in a one-year period, has made educational foundations an integral part of classroom practice, and fostered collaboration between business and marketing teacher candidates and those from core academic areas. This

model for preparing business and marketing teachers was developed to solve several questions that are frequently posed in today's "get new teachers out quick" environment:

1. How can business and marketing teachers be responsibly prepared in the least length of time?
2. How can foundations of teacher education become

more meaningful to business and marketing education teacher candidates?

3. How can business and marketing teachers learn to collaborate with teachers of other disciplines, particularly academic core teachers?

Preparing Business and Marketing Teachers Responsibly and Quickly

The word “responsibly” is critical because there are teacher preparation “boot camps” around the country that prepare teachers in a matter of weeks. However, there are important issues to consider such as performance and attrition. The university decided that students needed to experience an entire school year so that candidates know how to begin a school year, experience “warning notice” periods to inform parents, work with extracurricular activities throughout the school year, prepare for mid-term examinations, deal with holiday schedule interruptions, begin the second semester, deal with school spring break issues, spring warning periods, final examinations, and end-of-year celebrations and record keeping.

Most importantly for candidate performance, however, is the year-long experience of preparing for standardized examinations required by the No Child Left Behind legislation. That period is followed by the immediate impact of the public release of school scores, the very important interpretation of those scores, and development of plans to improve scores in subsequent years. All of these experiences are

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considered critical to responsible preparation of teacher candidates. Therefore, the least length of time decided upon was a complete academic school year with field experiences starting on the first day of high school in the local district.

How Foundations of Teacher Education Can Become More Meaningful

There are many issues of educational foundations that go into teacher preparation. Those include curriculum development; foundations of secondary education, including school culture, and history and philosophical perspectives; contemporary school reform; educational psychology; multiculturalism; education technology; school law and site-based decision making; and special education.

In traditional programs these foundations are individual courses, and they become abstractions that are difficult for candidates to integrate into practice. In the University of Kentucky model, candidates see the foundations play out in the public schools in which they are continuously involved. Candidates are placed for field experiences into “cohort” schools—one of four public high schools. A lead college professor is assigned to each of these schools to lead follow-up discussions of the educational foundations within the context of the respective schools. Assignments often include working with groups of high school students. Diversity, for example, is

often a topic that candidates generally find to be abstract. But candidates in this model address the diversity in their particular school and work with the diverse students in them.

How Business and Marketing Teachers Learn to Collaborate

Collaboration within a group of candidates in one certification area naturally happens because candidates study together, do projects together, and work together in public schools. However, collaboration across certification areas is more difficult to achieve. Candidates may use the same excuses that practicing teachers use to avoid collaboration such as: they don’t know anyone in those certification areas with whom to work; the physical location of their work assignments is too far from where candidates from other certification areas work; or they don’t have enough in common for meaningful collaboration.

The collaboration mandated in Perkins legislative initiatives requires a model that directly challenges these excuses. Candidates in the University of Kentucky model are assigned to cohort schools in interdisciplinary teams. The teams include candidates from English, social studies, mathematics, science and business and marketing. These students study foundations together, attend class together in their cohort schools, work on projects together, get to know each other very well, and become friends. The collabora-

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tion in curriculum and instruction then becomes easy. They know each other, work in a common area of the public school, and study each other's core content.

Other Advantages of the Model

This model receives a degree of support from other colleges on campus that have historically not regarded schools of education well. The model was designed to include graduates from most of the other colleges on campus; those colleges respect their own alumni, and extend that respect to this program. Since candidates entering this program must meet graduate school requirements rather than undergraduate requirements, this strengthens the support from the colleges on campus from which they graduated, strengthens the reputation of the program within the college, and makes the graduates very attractive to prospective employers. It also yields exceptionally high pass rates on state mandated examinations.

The model also compels candidates to see the whole school as the focus of their field experiences. In the university's previous model, candidates largely viewed their experiences from the context of the classroom of their individual [student teaching] supervising teacher. With this model, candidates get a much more holistic view of the school at that site.

Challenges to the Model

Collaboration is one of the key practices required in this model. Howev-

er, there are major obstacles to collaboration both in higher education and in secondary education. The number of higher education faculty involved in the program is relatively large, and that makes consensus difficult to achieve. The collaboration among the faculty is also cross departmental. But the credit allocation system in higher education and departmental boundaries inhibit collaboration. Large meeting schedules in higher education also make coordination cumbersome.

Collaboration in secondary education has quite different dynamics. The sheer number of interactions that high school teachers encounter per day set a hectic pace. Public school teachers working with the program frequently see as many as 150 students per day in their classrooms. The physical layout of high schools combined with hectic schedules make collaboration within the high school difficult. Further, collaboration in this model not only requires that higher education faculty collaborate with each other, ditto for high school teachers, higher education faculty and high school teachers must collaborate with each other *and* with both groups with candidates in the program. So although collaboration is a major

focus of the model—it is also its Achilles heel. This represents a challenge, but one that can be facilitated and encouraged to reap rewards. The level of collaboration is much stronger in this program than in any other curriculum model.

Differences between CTE candidates and their academic contemporaries also pose challenges. Faculty and candidates in the core academic options (English, social studies, science and math) find that CTE recognizes cultural differences in terms of curriculum structure, academic expectations and practices. For example, candidates in core academic areas expect high school students to be tracked while business and marketing candidates expect that their students will not. Furthermore, candidates in core academic areas find odd the importance placed on student organizations in business and marketing education. There are many successful co-curricular activities outside of CTE, but the Future Business Leaders of America and DECA are more symbiotic with the classroom than many student organizations.

While there are challenges to implementing such a complex model, the rewards seem to outweigh the challenges. The Interdisciplinary Cohort Model of Teacher Preparation is one that successfully prepares business and marketing education teachers in one year—producing graduates who are well prepared for the classroom and report high levels of satisfaction. ■

REQUIREMENTS FOR ENTRY INTO THE PROGRAM

An undergraduate degree in the respective content area is required for admission into this Master's in Education program. Other prerequisites include experience with adolescent children, recommendations, an interview, standardized test scores and consideration of the candidate's GPA.