Chapter 10
Rethinking How We Design Programs:
Listening to Our Students

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ABSTRACT

The landscape of higher education continues to change causing us to re-think the way we offer programs. Redesigning programs by listening to students pushes us to make radical changes. This chapter shows how the authors changed the content and delivery model by constantly reviewing student input on how we offer an online, competency-based alternative teacher certification program. They created annual measures that define program success, reviewed lead metrics to gain insight on areas working and needing improvements, and made ongoing changes to design and offer the program after listening to students' needs and desires. The program changes included continuous daily enrollment, changes in the instructor model to support student progression, an advising model focused on supporting individual student success throughout the program, and enhanced mentor support for fieldwork. The goal is to offer credentialing programs in different ways that prioritize accessibility, affordability, and applied field-based opportunities.

INTRODUCTION

Raising the quality of PK-12 education in the U.S. is complex, with state and local agencies facing a convergence of challenges, including budget shortages, overcrowding, social and economic inequities, and curriculum disparities. Among the most serious issues thwarting progress — teacher shortages and access to candidates well prepared to meet teaching standards and performance expectations. This has been a long-standing issue schools face when hiring teachers.

In the U.S., we are failing to attract and welcome people to the teaching profession. Reports put teacher attrition as high as 40% for those in their first five years of teaching, with most leaving the field because they feel unprepared or lack support from mentors (Garcia & Weiss, 2019).

Now, powerful internal and external factors and competition from new entrants into the market are reshaping the landscape of teaching, causing teachers to face challenges that the PK-12 system is struggling to address. At higher education institutions, declining enrollment and budget cuts exacerbated by the coronavirus pandemic are forcing critical and extreme changes, including decisions to close traditional teacher education programs.

To have any chance at alleviating the growing number of teacher shortages, traditional and non-traditional institutions responsible for educating teachers have to consider new business models that meet potential teachers where they are in their lives, careers and educational journeys. It's time for a wholesale rethinking of how we recruit, educate and support teachers for the workforce of the future. That includes modernizing teacher credentialing programs to focus on what future teachers need in a constantly changing world.

In this chapter, we describe how we applied a continuous improvement process over time to modify an online, competency-based alternative teacher certification program (TeacherReady) to meet student needs (Ahistrom, 2015). The changes we've made to the TeacherReady program offer recommendations for how we re-think the way we offer programs to meet students' needs. Changes in our approach to offering a competency-based program focused on what the individuals wanted and needed as they were working toward achieving a professional teaching certificate. By doing so, we've disrupted the traditional higher education model for offering programs of study.

TeacherReady Program Description

TeacherReady is an online, competency-based alternative teacher certification program for the Professional Education Unit at the University of West Florida. It is a non-credit program offered through Continuing Education. TeacherReady was one of the first Florida Educator Preparation Institutes with full state approval for the program awarded in 2005. The program has received national accreditation (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) as part of the University of West Florida Professional Education Unit. Completers of TeacherReady earn an initial Florida Educators' Professional Teaching Certificate. This is the same professional certificate awarded to traditional teacher education program completers. The TeacherReady program is designed for students to complete the program in 12 months.

Teacher Candidates Enrolled in the Program

The TeacherReady program serves candidates who are second career professionals, hold at least a bachelor's degree, and have a desire and passion for teaching. Our program candidates reside and live all over the world. They can choose to teach in the state of Florida or work with their existing states to gain certification within a state that has reciprocal relationships with the state of Florida. In addition, we partner with universities that allow students to count hours toward a master's program upon completion of the TeacherReady program.

On average about fifty percent of our students currently teach in a classroom and the other half work their existing jobs while completing the program. Also, we intentionally focus on recruiting candidate groups who are not predominate in the teaching profession (male and non-white) and prioritize recruit-

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