

Transition to Teaching in Nebraska: Findings from the First Decade

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Abstract

Nebraska's alternative teacher certification program, Transition to Teaching, is housed at the University of Nebraska at Kearney. After 10 years in operation, program evaluation was deemed necessary to assess responsiveness to the needs of teacher candidates and the school districts within the state and effectiveness in meeting those needs. Results of this study showed both strengths and challenges and provide clear direction for the future of alternative teacher certification in Nebraska.

Key words: alternative teacher certification; transition to teaching; online teacher certification

The Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) applied for and was awarded one of ninety-one Transition to Teaching grants distributed by the United States Department of Education in the year 2002. Upon receipt of the grant, NDE partnered with the University of Nebraska at Kearney (UNK) to implement a Transition to Teaching (TTT) alternative certification program. The program began with the establishment of an office within the UNK College of Education called the Nebraska State Assessment Center. The first director of the center was hired to recruit to the program mid-career professionals and recent college graduates with baccalaureate degrees who were seeking to become teachers in the state of Nebraska, particularly in high-need areas (rural) and subjects (mathematics, science, foreign language) unique to Nebraska in grades 7-12.

Requirements for entry into the TTT program were developed and disseminated, and have remained unchanged since the inception of the program (Nebraska Department of Education, 2012):

- Applicant must have a baccalaureate degree that includes at least 75% of the course requirements for preparation in a grade 7-12 field or subject endorsement area. The degree and other subject-area coursework may come from institutions of higher education other than UNK.
- The superintendent or governing body of the school system in which the applicant intends to teach must provide a written request to the Nebraska Department of Education (NDE) for the issuance of a transitional teaching certificate. The request must include documentation that the school system has not otherwise found a fully qualified teacher for the position.
- Assessment of transcripts is completed by the State Assessment Center Director and a plan developed for completion of an approved initial teacher certification program, including passing the Praxis exam. This sequence of professional teacher education coursework must be completed through UNK.
- The hiring school system provides a written plan for mentoring and supervision of the applicant.
- Applicant completes a pre-teaching seminar that includes information and skill development in the areas of diversity, classroom management, curriculum planning, and instructional strategies prior to assuming responsibility for the classroom.
- UNK provides at least one supervisory visit each semester to the school system employing the applicant (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2010a).

Professional teacher education coursework developed by UNK teacher education faculty for the transitional certification program was initiated in the fall of 2003 as a sequence of three six-credit-hour undergraduate (400-level) courses taught online for three subsequent semesters, allowing the new transitionally certified teacher to put pedagogy into practice on a daily basis while teaching in his and her own classroom – in essence, on-the-job training. Course objectives were designed to meet NDE educational requirements for all teachers: reading and writing teaching competencies, training in human relations, special education coursework, competencies in working with learners of high ability, technology competencies, and competency in the assessment of student learning (Nebraska Department of Education, 2008). The eighteen-hour course sequence was complemented

by student teaching (assessment of teaching knowledge, skills, and dispositions by school administrators and university supervisors) in order to fulfill NDE requirements for full initial certification. During the 2010-2011 school year, the student teaching requirement was revised so that it would be completed across the duration of the course sequence, rather than in one semester occurring only at the end of the program as is the case with traditional undergraduate teacher training programs. This change allowed for more consistent supervision of instruction by UNK faculty and school administrators across time (McCarty, 2009).

Small Beginnings Lead to Significant Growth

From the fall of 2003 when nine people enrolled in the TTT program for the first time, through the 2012 academic year (ten academic years total), 249 people have become fully certified to teach in the state of Nebraska through the Transition to Teaching program at UNK. It remains the only alternative teacher certification program in Nebraska for transitional certification. The program has an 81% retention rate (participants starting the program who finished the program), and the subject areas of greatest need that have been met by transitionally certified teachers are:

- World Languages 24%
- Natural Sciences 19%
- Career Education (Agriculture, Business, Family and Consumer Science, Industrial Technology) 17%
- Language Arts 12%
- Mathematics 10%
- Fine Arts 9%
- All other subject areas (Health and Physical Education, Social Sciences, Religious Education) 11%

TTT participants have come from many backgrounds and experiences. Ages of participants have ranged from age 22 to age 63 with most in their early to mid-thirties. Fifty-three percent of TTT participants were female and 47 percent were male. Eighty-eight percent of the TTT participants were Caucasian and 12 percent were minority populations including Asian, Hispanic, Native American/North American Indian, Pacific Islander, Black, and bi-racial. Sixty percent have been mid-career changers, while others have been new or recent graduates and paraprofessionals (Grant, 2010).

Student Teaching and First-Year Employment Data

Transitionally certified teachers are evaluated on the same criteria as traditional UNK undergraduate teacher candidates, both at the culmination of student teaching and at the conclusion of one year of employment. They are formatively assessed with the same common assessment tools as indicated in the Accreditation Data Tables available for viewing in the UNK College of Education website. TTT participants are evaluated by university supervisors on their skills in lesson planning for desired outcomes and objectives, assessment and evaluation, instructional planning and materials, instructional delivery, classroom management, and teaching dispositions (collaboration, reflection, responsibility) at the culmination of their student teaching experience as are traditional undergraduate teacher candidates. Data compiled during a five semester period (Spring

2009 through Spring 2011) shown in Table 1 indicates the degree to which each skill area evaluated had been met or had exceeded expectations (Powell, 2011).

Table 1
Percentage of the Time that Transitionally Certified Teachers and Traditional Undergraduate Teacher Candidates Met Expectations in Evaluated Areas

Areas Evaluated	Transitionally Certified Teachers (N = 97)	Traditional Undergraduate Teacher Candidates (N = 763)
Lesson planning for desired outcomes and objectives	96.2	93.0
Assessment and evaluation	91.0	89.0
Instructional planning and materials	92.8	88.33
Instructional delivery	92.0	88.83
Classroom management	89.8	88.5
Teaching dispositions	96.33	95.66

During a seven semester period of Spring 2007 through Spring 2010 first-year employment ratings were gathered from school district administrators who evaluate their first-year teachers each semester on 27 items, using a Likert scale of 5 (excellent), 4 (good), 3 (average), 2 (fair), and 1 (poor). Table 2 shows the average rating for each criterion for transitionally certified teachers and traditionally trained teachers (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2010b).

Table 2
First-Year Employment Ratings Using Likert Scale Averages for Criteria Assessed

Criteria assessed	Transitionally certified teachers (N = 85)	Traditionally certified teachers (N = 576)
1. Considers the needs of diverse learners when planning lessons.	4.08	4.03
2. Identifies and adapts to the needs of diverse learners when teaching.	4.04	4.11
3. Creates a positive learning environment for students.	4.38	4.40
4. Provides appropriate individualization of instruction for special needs students.	4.03	3.92
5. Uses a variety of effective teaching strategies in planning lessons.	4.20	3.98
6. Uses a variety of effective teaching strategies when presenting lessons.	4.21	3.98
7. Plans lessons that engage students in all levels of thinking and learning.	4.15	3.91
8. Teaches lessons that engage students in all levels of thinking and learning.	4.08	3.87

9. Assesses individual learners' needs.	4.04	3.94
10. Plans learning activities clearly related to lesson objectives.	4.22	4.20
11. Uses teaching techniques related to lesson objectives.	4.20	4.12
12. Uses teaching techniques related to learner needs.	4.10	3.99
13. Uses available instructional resources.	4.39	4.10
14. Incorporates technology to facilitate student learning.	4.24	3.82
15. Uses technology in planning lessons and/or classroom management.	4.17	3.76
16. Teaches appropriate curriculum in all content areas.	4.38	4.28
17. Assesses the learning of all students.	4.19	4.10
18. Uses assessment results to plan instruction.	3.72	3.79
19. Uses bias-free interpersonal skills with all students.	4.30	4.24
20. Communicates effectively with students.	4.26	4.24
21. Communicates effectively with peers.	4.25	4.19
22. Communicates effectively with supervisors.	4.32	4.23
23. Communicates effectively with parents.	4.03	4.09
24. Makes decisions using professional ethical standards as a guide.	4.37	4.23
25. Uses effective classroom management strategies.	3.96	3.96
26. Participates in continuing education and/or professional growth.	4.20	4.07
27. Communicates appropriately with colleagues via internet.	4.16	4.15

Although the number of transitionally certified teachers was not large enough to merit drawing statistically significant conclusions, such data would indicate that the quality of teaching for TTT participants is at least comparable to that of traditionally prepared teachers, both at the conclusion of student teaching and at the end of their first year of employment.

TTT Participant and Administrator Survey Data

As encouraging as the results were from student teaching and first-year employment data, further study was warranted to determine what variables may contribute to the skill ratings of the TTT participants. To this end, the TTT program director applied for and received a research grant from the National Association for Alternative Certification (NAAC) in March 2012 in order to ascertain what aspects of the transitional certification program positively contributed to the attainment of teaching skills by the participants, and what aspects of the program might be improved to better meet the needs of both school districts across Nebraska and TTT participants.

In April 2012 a 54-question survey developed with Qualtrics survey software (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2012a) was sent via email to the 249 TTT participants who had completed the program during the previous ten academic school years. A 25-question survey was emailed to 530 school administrators in all Nebraska school districts, some of whom had employed transitionally certified teachers. Each survey queried respondents as to program aspects that were most helpful in preparing transitional candidates for teaching. Completed surveys indicated a 23% response rate from TTT participants ($N = 58$) and an 8% response rate from school administrators ($N = 45$). The survey was constructed primarily based on key TTT program elements and items drawn from UNK First Year Employer evaluation data (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2010b).

Participant Data

Of the TTT participants completing the survey, 58% were age 40 and younger and 42% were over age 40; the number of years they had spent in their previous occupations ranged from one to 25, with 13.5 years being average. Responses to survey items specific to program satisfaction revealed both areas of strength and areas of challenge. Satisfaction with the transitional certification program as a whole was largely positive, with 69% of respondents indicating that they were Somewhat (32%) or Very (37%) Satisfied when asked about level of satisfaction on a five-point Likert scale using 5 (very satisfied), 4 (somewhat satisfied), 3 (neutral), 2 (somewhat dissatisfied), and 1 (very dissatisfied). Table 3 shows additional program aspects and the combined percentages of Somewhat and Very Satisfied responses.

Table 3

Program Satisfaction Ratings for Somewhat Satisfied and Very Satisfied Responses

What is your level of satisfaction with...

the TTT as a whole?	69%
the online coursework in the TTT?	58%
the field experience requirements of the TTT?	72%
the length of time it takes to complete the TTT?	63%
the cost of completing the TTT?	63%

Comments indicating dissatisfaction with the program centered on cost, especially the requirement of paying for student teaching credit hours when they were already employed as classroom teachers. Others were thankful that their school districts had paid for the program and that they deemed it affordable.

Table 4 indicates the degree to which specific course components in the transitional certification program were helpful to participants in their teacher preparation. The average value of each item is shown below from highest to lowest with Likert ratings of 5 (very helpful), 4 (somewhat helpful), 3 (neutral), 2 (somewhat unhelpful), and 1 (very unhelpful).

Table 4

Course Component Ratings Using Likert Scale Averages for Criteria Assessed

Please rate the following course components of the TTT in terms of helpfulness to you.

field experience	4.13
email/phone interaction with instructor	3.88
discussion forums	3.81
readings/resources within the Blackboard site	3.63
written assignments	3.50
quizzes/tests	3.50
textbooks used	2.94

All of the components earned a 5 rating by at least one respondent; only two course components, quizzes/tests and field experience earned a 1 rating by at least one respondent. As expected, the field experience component (actual teaching in a classroom) rated highest, as one learns best by doing (Feistritz, 2005). This together with interaction with instructors and interaction with each other in the course sequence appears to be most crucial to course quality, and as Draves (2007) noted in *Advanced Teaching Online*, the core of any online course is the interaction and dialogue between and among its participants.

Respondents were asked about the degree to which the transitional certification program helped them to develop their teaching skills. Table 5 shows the combined percentages of Somewhat Prepared and Very Prepared responses to each item, using Likert ratings of 5 (very prepared), 4 (somewhat prepared), 3 (neutral), 2 (somewhat unprepared), and 1 (unprepared).

Table 5

Course Component Ratings Using Likert Scale Averages for Criteria Assessed

How prepared did the transitional certification program help you to be in...

(Total mean of all responses = 3.60)

creating an inclusive classroom?	85%
planning for meaningful instruction based on student needs (differentiation)?	83%
understanding student learning styles?	83%
assessing student learning?	71%
utilizing a variety of teaching strategies?	70%
making good instructional decisions in the classroom?	66%
using technology to enhance student learning?	61%
acting as a role model for my students?	59%
using effective classroom management strategies?	41%

Acting as a Role Model garnered several responses indicating that participants believed they were already prepared for this before even starting the program, a logical answer given the motivations for many career changers to enter the field of teaching. Using Effective Classroom Management, one of the lower scoring items on both the student teaching evaluation data and on first year employment evaluation data cited earlier, was seen as difficult to grasp online. “Theories don’t replace practice,” one respondent said. Another said, “Sometimes you just have to be there, experience it and do it.” This underscores the common sense notion that nothing takes the place of real life experience when it comes to learning classroom management skills (Feistritzer, 2005).

Assistance and mentoring aspects of the program were evaluated on a 5-point Likert scale using 5 (very satisfied), 4 (somewhat satisfied), 3 (neutral), 2 (somewhat unsatisfied), and 1 (very unsatisfied), with response ratings shown below in Table 6.

Table 6

Course Component Ratings Means Using Likert Scale Averages for Criteria Assessed

What is your level of satisfaction with the assistance and mentoring provided by...

UNK instructors	3.50
your own school’s administrators	4.15
your own school’s colleagues	3.75

All three items in this section received ratings that ranged from very unsatisfied to very satisfied; this result appears to indicate the unique nature of each individual’s

circumstance relative to their school district of employment and the variance in experiences with multiple instructors in the online program. Several respondents indicated that they would not have survived their first year without such supportive administrators who were familiar with the program. In contrast, one commented that there was “not a tremendous interactive element with [university] teachers.”

Administrator Data

Exactly half of the administrators who responded to the survey were age 51 and older and half were between the ages of 31 and 50. Additionally, 87% were male and 13% were female. All stated they were familiar with the TTT, half were currently employing a TTT, and three-quarters of those who were not currently employing a TTT had done so in the past. They were asked to rate the program on the same satisfaction items as were the participants with one additional item dealing with communication with TTT staff. Table 7 shows the combined percentages of Somewhat and Very Satisfied responses.

Table 7

Program Satisfaction Ratings for Somewhat Satisfied and Very Satisfied

What is your level of satisfaction with...	
the TTT as a whole?	90%
the online coursework in the TTT?	70%
the field experience requirements of the TTT?	73%
the length of time it takes to complete the TTT?	73%
the cost of utilizing the TTT?	59%
email/phone interaction with TTT staff?	57%

One administrator noted that the placement of the student teacher semester at the end of the program did not seem to make sense. As noted earlier, a program change was initiated in the 2010-2011 school year to have participants complete their student teaching requirement across the time span of the program rather than at the end. Another commented that classroom management seemed to be a weak area for the transitional teacher, which was not unexpected given the results of previous data analysis.

Administrators, like the participants, were also asked about the degree to which the transitional certification program helped the transitional teachers to develop their teaching skills. Table 8 shows the combined percentages of Somewhat Prepared and Very Prepared responses to each item as determined through a five-point Likert rating using 5 (very prepared), 4 (somewhat prepared), 3 (neutral), 2 (somewhat prepared), and 1 (very unprepared).

Table 8

Course Component Ratings for Somewhat Prepared and Very Prepared

How prepared did TTT help your teacher(s) to be in...

(Total mean of all responses = 4.16)

creating an inclusive classroom?	80%
planning for meaningful instruction based on student needs (differentiation)?	79%
understanding student learning styles?	80%
assessing student learning?	80%
utilizing a variety of teaching strategies?	77%
making good instructional decisions in the classroom?	83%
using technology to enhance student learning?	77%
acting as a role model for my students?	70%
using effective classroom management strategies?	77%

The administrators who responded to the survey believed to a somewhat greater degree than did the participants that TTT had prepared their transitional teachers well, rating preparedness with an overall mean of 4.16 as compared to the 3.60 overall mean for participants. However, no statistical significance was determined. One administrator had actually gone through the program to obtain initial teacher certification prior to becoming an administrator, commenting, "I obtained my certification through the program. It was very helpful, and I have considered using it to fill any positions that I may have come available." Another stated,

The Transition to Teaching Program provides an opportunity for schools to place the best possible person in the classroom. I deeply appreciate the opportunities the program provided to me when I was a principal and needed to place a teacher. The teachers that we hired at our county did an outstanding job!

Lessons Learned

Both program participants and administrators who hired transitionally certified teachers rated the TTT program positively with administrators to a higher degree. One interpretation of this finding is that administrators were glad to have hard-to-fill openings on their staff filled by competent, mature (as compared to new college graduates), content-area experts, while participants began their new careers being less sure of themselves, uncertain in navigating the terrain of online coursework while learning on the job. Further, students who take all or part of their classes online were found to perform better on average than those taking the same courses through traditional face-to-face instruction (United States Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development, 2010). Once the initial learning curve of online education was managed, TTT program participants excelled.

Most of the critical aspects of teaching were handled well, yet the use of effective classroom management strategies was cited by both groups, as well as student teaching and first year employer data, as an area in which the program could better prepare its transitional teachers. To address this issue, TTT faculty members have revised the online curriculum so that coursework on classroom management, lesson planning, and human relations skills are delivered at the outset of the program. Foundations of education, typically at the beginning of undergraduate teacher education coursework, will now be addressed toward the end of the program. “Flipping” the sequence should give transitional teachers more “tools in their teaching toolboxes” sooner since they are the teacher of record from day one, leading to a higher level of confidence and greater program satisfaction.

Mentoring by and communication with administrators, colleagues, and UNK faculty is a significant contributor to program satisfaction. UNK faculty will continue to work with administrators to encourage support for their new hires. TTT faculty must communicate well with and support program participants. New UNK faculty and administrative hires in the last two years into the program, along with additional training in online course delivery, should help to increase program satisfaction in these areas.

The University has also initiated a slight name change to the program so as not to have it be confused with another alternative teacher certification program with the same TTT acronym: Troops to Teachers. The UNK program has now adopted the name Transitional Certification Program (TCP). A more fundamental change is now in process with the program since the TCP has requested approval to become an area of concentration in the UNK Master of Arts in Curriculum and Instruction Degree program (McCarty, 2012). Upon approval by university administration, the total number of credit hours required by the TCP will change from its present 30 undergraduate credit hours to 24 graduate credit hours. Program participants will then have the option to complete the remaining 12 graduate hours needed for a Master of Arts Degree in Curriculum and Instruction. The number of credit hours of online coursework remains the same, and the number of credit hours for student teaching is reduced. These changes should help to address the concerns of participants about program cost, even though the cost per credit hour is higher for graduate credit hours than for undergraduate credit hours. The cost differential between the undergraduate rate and the graduate rate, \$612 for the entire program (University of Nebraska at Kearney, 2012b) will be more than made up by the boost in teacher salary participants would have in their second year of teaching, often \$1,000 or more for a bachelors degree plus nine graduate credit hours, when participants would have at least 12 graduate credit hours. Additionally, the opportunity to receive a masters degree with the investment of only 12 additional hours of coursework should provide even greater incentive for potential career changers to enroll and help to retain current participants.

Teaching competency, according to alternatively certified teachers, develops best through one’s own teaching experiences and life experiences in general and through the input of other teachers and colleagues (Feistritzer, 2005). To this end, the TTT/TCP program

holds that actual teaching experience is at the core of pedagogical development. It is the vehicle through which participants connect the content of their online teacher education coursework with real students in real classrooms. Since participants in the TCP program come from all parts of Nebraska, many in quite rural areas, they maintain residence in the locations where they teach, contributing to participant satisfaction in the program (McCarty, 2010). However, program evaluation indicates a need for improvement in instruction for learning classroom management skills, communication with university faculty, and costs associated with the program. Programmatic changes discussed in this article address these concerns and reflect on a systemic level what great educators demand of themselves and of their students: lifelong learning. After all, “Learning is like rowing upstream: not to advance is to drop back” (Chinese Proverb).

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