A number of factors have made finding qualified educators a challenge. A September 2009 National Center for Policy Analysis (NCPA) brief, “Alternative Certification Programs: Meeting the Demand for Effective Teachers,” noted that growing school enrollment, an increase in the number of teachers retiring or leaving the profession, and legislated class size limits are the key issues. Rebecca Garcia and Jessica Huseman note in the brief that, in order to meet this challenge, all 50 states and the District of Columbia have established alternative certification programs. Education researchers have found, however, that these programs vary widely from state to state, and in the National Research Center for Career and Technical Education’s (NRCCTE) 2007 publication, “Study of State Certification/Licensure Requirements for Secondary Career and Technical Education Teachers,” Chris Zirkle, Lindsay Martin, and N.L. McCaslin of The Ohio State University even reported that no two states’ requirements were exactly alike.

In 2009, the NCPA brief reported similar findings, noting that each state had its own requirements for alternative certification, and while some states and school districts have become more open to alternative certification, other states are very restrictive. To make matters even more confusing, education researchers and other experts often argue among themselves about the evidence used to determine the quality and effectiveness of traditional versus alternative teacher certification programs. In February 2009, Mathematica Policy Research released the results of a study that found elementary school students whose teachers chose an alternate route to certification scored no differently on standardized math and reading tests from students whose teachers chose a traditional route to certification. Very quickly others responded, among them the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education and Linda Darling-Hammond with the Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education, calling the study flawed because it sought out schools that hire large numbers of alternatively certified teachers from non-selective programs. Darling-Hammond noted that both alternative and traditional teachers in the hard-to-staff schools selected for the study had less training than most teachers nationally, and neither group was highly effective. So as the arguments continue, the need still remains.

In her presentation at the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in May 2009, Emily Feistritzer with the National Center for Education Information (NCEI) and the National Center for Alternative Certification noted that one-third of the approximately 150,000 new teachers hired in 2006 came through what the states identify as alternative routes to teacher certification. In 2007-2008, 62,000 individuals were issued certificates to teach through alternative routes, which is nearly double the number just five years ago.

According to Feistritzer, candidates who are licensed to teach through alternative pathways tend to have the following characteristics: They have at least a bachelor’s degree; pass a screening process; engage in on-the-job training; complete coursework or equivalent experiences in professional education studies while teaching; usually work with mentor teachers; and meet high performance standards. Feistritzer notes in her overview of alternative routes to teaching from 1985 to 2009 that the programs tended to be market driven and resulted in “tailor-made programs designed to meet specific needs for specific teachers in specific areas.”

In a 2009 NCEI survey, when asked, “Would you have become a teacher if an alternate route to certification had not been available?” 47 percent of those surveyed responded, “No.” If the NCEI statistics are even close to being accurate,
Preparing CTE Teachers in Washington State

The Competency Block Certificate Program at Central Washington University (CWU) is designed to help career and technical education (CTE) teachers build a strong foundation in teaching methods, classroom management, assessment, leadership and educational technology. It was also the first business and industry teacher preparation program to be approved by the Washington State Higher Education Coordination Board. According to the program’s director, Jan Bowers, “The program was established to meet the shortage of teachers and to help us get the best people to meet that shortage. People from business and industry have rich experience that can make the learning real for students.”

Offered at four regional centers in Washington state—Kennewick, Renton, Stanwood and Wenatchee—the variable-credit program allows students to register for the credits they need to fulfill their requirement needs and 24-hour Internet access to curricula, schedules, exams and electronic messaging, the CWU Competency Block Certificate Program is providing the flexibility and the tools that can build a successful career in education. What it has achieved has not gone unnoticed. Last year this program received a CWU President’s Sphere of Distinction Award—an award that is given to innovative and resourceful approaches to academic, student and campus life giving regional, national or international prominence to CWU.

An Alternative Route in Eastern Illinois

When Eastern Illinois University (EIU) began building its alternative teacher education program in 2001, it started by surveying administrators in the state to find out what their needs were. Jim Kestner, the program’s coordinator, says, “Although we couldn’t meet them all, we were able to identify certain needs we could meet.” As a result, in 2003, the EIU College of Education and Professional Studies received approval from the Illinois State Teacher Certification Board for its alternative route to teacher certification program, and students can now become certified through the program in the areas of math, science, foreign languages, family and consumer sciences education, business education and industrial technology education.

The program begins as a Web-based course, but there is also an eight-week summer session on EIU’s campus, with classes generally running from 8:00 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. Monday through Friday. To be admitted to the program, candidates must have a bachelor’s degree from an accredited college or university (with a GPA 2.65 or higher) and a major or minor in the intended area of certification. They must also have passed the Illinois Basic Skills test and the subject matter test for the areas in which they intend to become certified. In addition, they must be able to document five years of relevant work experience in their intended certification area.

“[We have had quite a mix of people],” says Kestner. “Most have not been teaching but have an interest in becoming teachers, some have already been teaching with a provisional vocational education certificate, and some have been teaching in private schools.”

The program includes an internship, and the applicants must have secured a commitment from a school district to be hired and paid as a full-time teacher for the internship. Although EIU doesn’t take a formal role in internship placements, it does assist in certain ways. For example, a mailing is sent to all Illinois superintendents and high school principals telling them about the program and letting them know they may be contacted about internships. If a district indicates that it has a need in a specific area and is looking for teachers to fill that need, EIU will work toward connecting the prospective candidates.
With CTE teacher education programs striving to prepare future teachers to the highest standards, and experienced teachers serving as models of excellence, the need for teachers can be met.

In CTE, the program has been successful in all areas, but more applicants are beginning their careers as novice teachers.

Another thing that makes the program valuable, says Kestner, is that “As a cohort program, it allows them to build long-lasting relationships. Working with other people from all walks of life who are taking the same courses becomes a really important experience. They form long-lasting friendships with teachers all over the state. They can turn to one another for support, and that network becomes a really powerful thing.”

The school administrators are also very happy to have teachers who bring real-life experience to the classroom. Kestner offers just one example of why they feel that way, and it will be familiar to any career and technical educator. “High school students always ask, ‘When are we going to use this?’ and our candidates always have an answer,” he explains. “The schools really like that.”

Modeling Excellence

Bringing new teachers into our profession is vital, but whether they arrive through traditional or alternative routes, their first years of teaching will include both rewards and challenges. How they are able to make the most of the rewards and best meet the challenges will be important in keeping them in the classroom. New teachers may look to their more experienced colleagues as mentors and role models, and what they see may affect the quality of their teaching, according to the results of a recent study.

In “Teaching Students and Teaching Each Other: The Importance of Peer Learning for Teachers,” which was published in the October 2009 issue of *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, C. Kirabo Jackson at Cornell University and Elias Bruegmann at Cornerstone Research found that the performance of teachers is affected by the quality of their peers. Using student examination data linked to longitudinal teacher personnel data, Jackson and Bruegmann document that a teacher’s students have larger test score gains when the teacher has more effective colleagues (based on their own students’ achievement gains).

Jackson and Bruegmann also found that less experienced teachers are generally more responsive to changes in peer quality than more experienced teachers, suggesting that novice teachers should be exposed to effective experienced teachers. Their evidence of what they call the “spill over effect” demonstrates the importance of veteran teachers modeling excellence for novice teachers.

With CTE teacher education programs striving to prepare future teachers to the highest standards, and experienced teachers serving as models of excellence, the need for teachers can be met. And whether they are young, enthusiastic new teachers fresh from college, or career-changers bringing rich real-life experiences into the classroom, the more prepared they are, the greater their chances of remaining in the profession that so greatly needs them.