

# **From Business to Business Teacher: A University's Challenge to Overcome a Critical Shortage**

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## **Abstract**

*The business education program at Appalachian State University has spent the last five years working to help alleviate the critical shortage of certified business teachers in North Carolina's middle and high schools by (1) providing faculty and staff resources to counsel and advise alternative certification candidates (2) offering state mandated courses with flexible starting and ending dates to correspond with school schedules; and (3) using distance learning and Internet technologies to provide courses to teachers in their home locations. This paper provides an overview of alternative certification and the experiences of the participants in the program.*

## **I. INTRODUCTION**

With shortages across the country, alternative routes to teaching have become increasingly popular. Forty-one states now have some type of alternative path that allows non-education majors to enter the teaching profession. Two-thirds of the 1,354 colleges and universities that train teachers have at least one graduate program for midcareer professionals [Berry, 2001]. An estimated 125,000 educators have graduated from alternative certification programs in the United States since 1984 [Cromwell, 2002]. Do alternative certification programs attract the best-qualified persons to the field? Who are the alternative certification teachers? How does one teacher-training program meet this challenge? This paper will attempt to answer these questions as they apply to the students in the Business Education program at Appalachian State University.

## **II. NEW FEDERAL MANDATES**

The United States unlike other industrialized countries in the world has no centralized educational system. Most decisions regarding education have been delegated to the states. Thus there is much variability in all aspects of schools and teacher training. The reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) commonly referred to as the "No Child Left Behind" legislation has caused confusion and controversy regarding the hiring and training of alternatively certified teachers. Essentially the federal government is becoming more involved in areas that were traditionally left to the states. Among the controversial aspects of the new legislation, principals must notify parents of their right to know the credentials of their child's teacher including the scores that the teacher made on the national teaching exam. In addition, schools nationwide are required to test students at every grade level, which places more emphasis on teacher accountability. "The federal government

is mandating a single test-based accountability system for all states . . . requiring annual testing at every grade level, and requiring states to disaggregate their test scores by racial and socioeconomic backgrounds . . . accountability has come to mean testing and testing alone . . . This is the surest way to guarantee that the test will become the content” [Elmore, 2002].

### III. QUALITY TEACHER CONTROVERSY

The crisis in available teachers coincides with the nationwide debate over student achievement. There is an obvious relationship between teacher quality, teacher quantity, and student achievement. Numerous studies have shown that next to family background, teacher quality is the most important influence on student achievement [Hardy, 2002].

With the federal requirement that entitles every child to the best-qualified teacher, the question that arises is, “What is a qualified teacher?” On one side of the debate are those who would abolish certification or make it much easier to attain. Individuals like Michael Poliakoff, President of the National Council on Teacher Quality would offer higher pay for competitive specialties that show shortages. Poliakoff feels that market-based strategies would be the answer to the shortage in these critical areas. University of Virginia professor Frederick Hess favors a less stringent approach to certification than most states currently have. Under his plan, any college graduate would be eligible to teach as long as he/she could pass a criminal background check and a test of essential skills and content knowledge for a certain discipline and grade level [Hardy, 2002]

Another alternative to traditional teacher certification comes from the Abell Foundation, a Maryland think tank. This group reviewed the literature relative to the effect of certification on student achievement. Analyst Kate Walsh and her group concluded that most of the studies were lacking in scholarship and were “astonishingly deficient.” Walsh proposed that a more effective measure of teacher quality is verbal ability, which is a reliable predictor of a person’s intellectual skills. She suggested that the measure of a teacher’s verbal skills should be publicized so that principals could use this as a condition of hiring [Hardy, 2002].

Walsh’s position has brought a strong rebuttal from Linda Darling-Hammond, one of the most often quoted teacher educators. Darling-Hammond states that the “world is just not as simple as Walsh would like to make it appear.” She calls into question the studies that Walsh stated measured verbal ability. Darling-Hammond contends that the tests also measured professional knowledge and subject knowledge, which were also strong indicators of a teacher’s ability [Hardy, 2002].

On the other side are those that would strengthen state requirements. Betty Castor, president of the National Board for Professional Teaching Standards advocates strengthening current certification programs and is skeptical about the usefulness of alternative certification in alleviating the teaching shortage. Another critic of Walsh’s position is Melinda Anderson, a spokeswoman for the National Education Association; Ms. Anderson says that Ms. Walsh’s proposal “promotes teaching as some kind of volunteer work, some kind of avocation” [Hardy, 2002].

### IV. THE BUSINESS TEACHER SHORTAGE

As schools of business have shown increases in enrollment, the number of undergraduate business teachers has continued to decline along with business school involvement in training

teachers. Many Schools of Business such as the one at Appalachian State University were founded to help train business educators. This is no longer the case. Therefore, we have become increasingly dependent on individuals that make mid career transitions into teaching.

The shortage of qualified business teachers has existed in North Carolina for a number of years. Although school systems recruit teachers from other states with surpluses, they still need more licensed teachers than they can find. In fact the numbers are currently so low in the traditional undergraduate Business Education program at Appalachian State University that alternative certification students outnumber traditional students approximately five to one.

### **Alternative Certification Requirements**

Alternative programs in North Carolina require that the individual teacher have a bachelor's or master's degree preferably in the content area for which they have been hired. However, sometimes schools hire business teachers with other majors. In such instances, teachers can be issued a one-year emergency license to teach out of their academic area. Teachers hired this way can face the daunting challenge of gaining both the academic concentration as well as the education requirements. Therefore, most schools do not wish to hire teachers under these difficult circumstances.

Teachers who are hired to teach business in an alternative certification program send their transcripts to the State Department of Public Instruction for evaluation. The department determines the competencies necessary to meet state requirements and instructs the candidate to find a university training program to complete within the next five years. Once the candidate contacts our business education program, we review the transcript and design a course of study to meet the individual teacher's requirements. The plan will include not only designated courses but also supervised visits from university personnel as well as videotapes, conferences, and artifacts of successful teaching. Once the candidate completes the coursework and other requirements, he/she is then recommended for an initial license to teach.

### **The Appalachian State University Business Education Program**

Teachers who are certified to teach business education should: (a) understand subject matter in ways that allow them to organize it and make it accessible to students; (b) understand how students think and behave, and what they find interesting; (c) find out what students already know, and how to motivate them; (d) recognize how to deal with student differences arising from culture, language, family background, and prior schooling; and (e) adapt lessons on the basis of that understanding. "Teachers today must know how to connect with students who face a wide range of challenges including dysfunctional families, a complex and morally ambiguous culture, and a boring school curriculum out of sync with high tech learning styles" [Hersch, 1998].

To achieve these goals, the Business Education program at Appalachian State has adopted something of a mixed model with both a traditional undergraduate program and an alternative certification program. Our program is longer than some of the shortcut programs. However, given the special circumstances, we have made adaptations to a changing student

population. To do this we have developed shorter summer sessions with beginning and ending dates that fall within the school systems' summer recess.

During the regular academic year, our faculty members travel to various community colleges to teach afternoon and evening classes for the alternative certification teachers. These classes often are Internet based or web assisted with only a minimum number of face-to-face sessions. Other delivery systems include holding classes at two locations simultaneously using the infrastructure of the Information Highway and distance education. Professors alternate teaching locations so that groups get equal time with the instructor. Students in these programs may never travel to the main campus.

## V. INDIVIDUAL BUSINESS TEACHERS

Businessmen/women who become teachers may know a great deal from their business experience; but our findings indicate that this in no way insures that they have mastered the essential skills necessary for teaching today [Berry, 2001]. The typical alternative certification candidate in our business education program has an average age of 34 years, with 12 years business experience in some area of management or marketing. Participants are almost evenly split between males (47%) and females (53%). The majority are business majors (71%) with other majors reported including music, behavioral science, industrial relations, and psychology to name a few (29%). These teachers have families and responsibilities that preclude their traveling to the Appalachian State University campus for long periods of time. Many are like the students we interviewed including those that follow:

Graham was a participant in the alternative certification program. He taught at a large urban high school located across the street from a strip mall. The school had 2,200 students, and the campus was lined with twenty-five modular units. Due to the space shortage, teachers like Graham were forced to rotate from classroom to classroom. His mentor was so occupied with his own classes that he had no time to work with Graham. Graham who has since left teaching entirely, had this to say about his experience:

I felt incredibly unprepared for my first day, first week of teaching. I think about the fact that I never had any classroom management. What do you do when a student doesn't do, does do, refuses to do what you ask? It is very hard to keep the students interested because keyboarding is a boring subject . . . . For a first year teacher I have been exposed to a lot of negativity. Each teacher is looking out for themselves and their courses and don't care about the other teachers and programs [McCarthy, 1997].

Anne had a different, more positive experience. She stated: "I wanted a career where I could possibly make a difference in someone's life." Her challenge was being placed in two schools with two sets of responsibilities as well as being paired with a mentor who was the media coordinator. Despite these problems, she stated: "choosing teaching was the best career decision that I have ever made."

Curt is a forty-eight year old former pharmaceutical salesman who was hired to teach high school business education. Curt explained his reasons for becoming an alternative certification-teaching candidate:

When I first graduated from college, I taught physical education for about four years. I liked teaching, but I needed to support a family. I applied for a job in pharmaceutical sales, and they doubled my salary. Twenty years later

and after surviving four buyouts, I decided I had had enough of the corporate world. I could tell your classes some real stories. We wined and dined our customers and did anything to get their business. Just remember that when you go to the doctor that all he or she basically knows about the prescription that you are getting is what the pharmaceutical representative has told them about it. It is scary, isn't it? I was surprised that the school system would give me credit for my business experience, and so I started out at a much higher salary than a beginning teacher would make . . . . Since I taught before I became a salesman, I don't have to take the education courses, but I am getting my fair share of content courses to take. It is hard going to school at the same time that you are teaching. Even so, I really like it and want to do a good job as a teacher. I like the students. My business experience gives me a lot of confidence in teaching young people who have never worked before.

In Curt's situation, he was a former teacher even though twenty years have passed; however, many alternative certification candidates have never taught. When interviewing these new teachers, one finds that some wanted to teach earlier in their career, but the lure of money in the business world drew them away from a school career.

## **VI. A FEW CONCLUSIONS**

There is a definite shortage of teachers throughout the United States in a variety of content areas. Business Education is an area with teaching shortages. Nationwide school systems are now asking themselves how they can continue to meet shortages by hiring uncertified teachers. Will the new federal mandates regarding student achievement and teacher qualifications lead to the end of alternative certification? If so, where will schools find enough teachers? What will happen to the teachers who have been hired with alternative certifications?

As institutions that train teachers address these issues, meeting the challenge of training enough quality teachers has become more complex. There is controversy regarding the quality of the teachers trained in the alternative programs. Conflicts have arisen between advocates for stricter certification requirements and those who would do away with certification entirely. The federal government's new initiatives are causing concern among school systems and training institutions who fear loss of funding if they do not provide quality teachers who in turn create high student achievement.

Faculty who work in the alternative programs enjoy teaching the mature, experienced certification candidates and find that they work very hard to do well in their dual roles as teachers and students. However, there is evidence that business experience is not sufficient to become an effective business teacher. There are successes and failures among alternative certification candidates. In addition the program modifications required to meet the special needs of alternative certified teachers have left business education faculty worried that these shortcut programs are not rigorous enough and provide the Internet version of correspondence courses. Furthermore, students who make few if any visits to campus miss out on traditional interactions involving other students within the learning community. Alternative preparation programs need to be good ones that draw on the expertise of all parties involved to support and train qualified teachers. This is a continuing challenge.

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