DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 415 267 TM 027 968

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TITLE Effect of Timing on Teacher Education Follow-Up Survey Results.
PUB DATE 1997-11-00
NOTE 12p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Mid-South Educational Research Association (26th, Memphis, TN, November 12-14, 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Beginning Teachers; Elementary Secondary Education; *Employment Patterns; *Graduate Surveys; Higher Education; Research Methodology; *Response Rates (Questionnaires); Test Construction; *Vocational Followup
IDENTIFIERS University of Tennessee

ABSTRACT

The potential effect of survey timing on information about teaching employment rates for teacher education program graduates was studied. It is possible that the low rates found by some surveys are more a result of the time of the survey than of low response rate. A secondary purpose was to obtain information about the hiring practices of school systems with regard to when prospective teachers are first offered employment and when graduates prefer to be surveyed. Questionnaires were sent in the spring to 280 students who completed initial teacher preparation programs at the University of Tennessee and became eligible for employment in 1993. Questionnaires were returned by 182 of these graduates (65%). All but 35 of these graduates had returned an earlier survey in the fall. Of the 182 respondents, 121 taught the entire year, 35 did not teach at all during the year, and 26 taught for some portion of the school year. March was the month in which the highest number was employed in teaching. Results of the two surveys show that graduates are more likely to be employed in the spring, but that they are easier to locate in the fall after graduation. Identification of those not yet teaching may be a benefit if faculty and staff know who is still available as vacancies occur. Graduates preferred the fall survey. An appendix contains the cover letter and data collection forms. (Contains 3 tables and 13 references.) (SLD)

Effect of Timing on Teacher Education

Follow-up Survey Results

by

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the
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Memphis, Tennessee
November 12-14, 1997

Introduction

Follow-up surveys of program graduates are routinely conducted by institutions preparing teachers, but the procedures used and the purposes of those surveys are varied (Boser, 1988). Sometimes multiple types of information are sought: program evaluation or how well the content was taught, program relevance, employment, demographic information, and future plans.

The major methodological concern in doing surveys (including follow-ups of graduates) is usually how to obtain a high response rate. Dillman (1978) avoids mailing surveys around holiday times and during December. Holidays create increased demands on the postal system and provide greater opportunities for people to be temporarily away from home. He also notes that people tend to write and receive more letters during December than at other times of the year, and questionnaires are probably less likely to be returned. Alreck and Settle (1985) also warn that lower response rates can be expected during holiday periods or during other times when respondents may be particularly busy and/or receive a lot of mail. They also state that higher response rates from businesses or organizations are more likely during the middle of the month than around the end of the month. They recommend that researchers be alert to external events that might influence the results and/or the response rate.

Depending on the purpose of the survey, a high response rate in follow-up surveys may be over-emphasized, with similar results having been obtained with response rates below 50% (Boser, 1994; Hogan, 1985). One survey design element which appears to have been relatively overlooked is the impact of timing (time of year) of the survey on the results. Medical researchers such as Walter (1994) have recognized that epidemiological data may vary on a seasonal or cyclical basis. Colleges and universities routinely do follow-up surveys, usually by mail. There are guidelines for conducting surveys, mail surveys, and even specifically for follow-up surveys (Fisher, 1988; Lindsay, 1985; Roth, 1981; Stevenson, Walleri, & Japely, 1985). The time of year for conducting surveys is mentioned in few sources (Fisher, 1988; Hoinville, Jowell & Associates, 1978; National Education Association, 1930; and Roth, 1981), usually without benefit of supporting research. The comments regarding timing are primarily directed toward facilitating response rates.

January surveys of school superintendents provided the poorest returns (National Education Association, 1930). Hoinville, Jowell and Associates (1978) perceived December as a poor month for conducting surveys, along with times when places of employment might be closed annually (and employees might be away from home on vacation). Fisher's (1988) comments were consistent with those of Hoinville and Jowell but were applied more specifically to teachers. Fisher cautioned against conducting alumni surveys in the summer or during holiday seasons that occur during the school year (Thanksgiving, Christmas, and Easter). October, November, and January through March were considered the optimal months for mailings. Maruyama and Deno (1992) also focused on the school year cycle when discussing research in schools (not just surveying alumni who are employed in schools). In

addition to the period between Thanksgiving and Christmas, they did not recommend doing research when school is starting in the fall.

Roth (1981) and Stevenson, Walleri and Japely (1985) based the timing for follow-up surveys of teachers on the length of time after the individual had completed the teacher preparation program. Roth suggested doing follow-up surveys for program evaluation after one semester of teaching (January) because graduates' recall about the program would be more accurate than after more time had passed. The difficulty of locating graduates also increases with the passage of time following graduation, and the program experienced by the graduate undergoes alteration so the graduates' comments lose relevance over time. Stevenson, Walleri and Japely indicated their follow-up questionnaires were sent nine months after graduation, (approximately the same time as Roth) allowing the graduates sufficient time to reflect on their educational program and obtain employment or continue their education.

A survey of institutions that were members of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) and accredited by the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) in 1986 found that most of the responding institutions conducted follow-up surveys of graduates on a regular basis (Boser, 1988). Re-analysis of the original data showed that 79.3% of the 227 institutions conducting regular follow-up surveys of their graduates did so during the first year following graduation. Many of these teacher preparation programs also surveyed their graduates again later. Of those who surveyed graduates during the year following graduation, the percentage surveying graduates during any specific month varied from none in August to 21.9% in April. Follow-up surveys of first-year graduates were most likely to take place in the spring. March (20.0%) and May (14.4%) followed April as the most frequently reported months for conducting first-year follow-up surveys. The other months, in rank order, were October (10.0%), February (8.1%), January (7.5%), November (6.9%), September (6.2%), July and December (1.9%), and June (1.3%).

The purpose(s) for doing these follow-up surveys has relevance to the decision about their timing. One or more of the following types of information are usually sought: employment, future plans, demographic characteristics, program evaluation (how well the content was taught), and program relevance (importance, relevance of content). Of the 77 who surveyed only their first-year graduates, and did so annually, 70 had multiple purposes for doing so, with most surveys attempting to gather information about program quality (90.9%), program relevance (85.7%), and employment (70.1%).

At the University of Tennessee, Knoxville (UTK), the follow-up survey of graduates has generally been conducted in late fall, usually begun in October or November. One of the major purposes of the survey is to determine the employment of graduates, which enables the College to provide information to faculty members about graduates who are still pursuing teaching positions. Extensive program evaluation information is collected prior to this time when students complete the year-long teaching internship. The data can be processed and the results relayed to faculty and administrators over the summer for utilization in program decisions for the following year), thus program evaluation is a lesser

emphasis in the follow-up survey. As a result of the follow-up of program graduates in 1992-93, conducted in the fall of 1993, 72.8% were identified as teaching in K-12 public or private schools. Follow-up surveys at several other teacher preparation programs in the state are conducted in the spring.

Employment rates of graduates may fluctuate during the school year because some graduates are hired after the start of the school year for interim assignments or to replace teachers who leave for permanent reasons. Some graduates who obtain teaching positions may also leave those jobs because of marriage, relocation, health problems, or other personal reasons. It is possible that survey timing may have greater influence on survey results than low response rate in employment surveys of teacher education graduates.

The major purpose of the current study was to determine the potential effect of survey timing on teaching employment rates of teacher education program graduates. A secondary purpose was to obtain information regarding hiring practices of school systems with regard to when a prospective teachers were first offered positions and when graduates preferred to be surveyed.

Method

In early May of 1994, a cover letter, a business reply envelope, and three color-coded half-page questionnaires (see Appendix) were mailed to all teacher education program graduates of 1992-93 for whom valid addresses could be obtained. The graduates were instructed to complete and return the one questionnaire appropriate to their situation: K-12 Teacher for the Entire 1993-94 School Year, K-12 Teacher for Part of the School Year, Not a K-12 Teacher During the 1993-94 School Year. A second mailing was sent to 166 nonrespondents approximately one month later.

Questionnaires were sorted and responses tabulated by group (color). Responses to identical questions were compared and combined across groups. The number and percentage of graduates employed as teachers was tabulated for each month. The 15th of the month was used as the potential timing of an employment survey. While graduates were requested to provide an approximate day of the month on which they began work, some listed only the month. If a respondent gave only a month as a response, the respondent was treated as having been employed on the 15th of that month.

Data Source

Questionnaires were sent to 284 individuals who completed initial teacher preparation programs at the University of Tennessee in 1992-93 and became eligible for employment as teachers in the fall of 1993. These program graduates had been sent questionnaires in an annual fall survey of program graduates, which was initiated in October of 1993.

Four individuals who completed programs could not be located, leaving an accessible target group of 280. Forty of those individuals completed programs that culminated in a semester-length student teaching experience, while the remaining 240 participated in year-long teaching internships in 1992-93.

Questionnaires were returned by 182 of the 280 (65%) in the accessible target group. All but 35 of those 182 had returned questionnaires in the fall survey. Employment information for 29 of the 35 was available from other sources: 14 were contacted by telephone, 12 were identified as teachers from local school system listing of new teachers, and three were known by College of Education faculty members as having obtained teaching positions. Of the 182 respondents, 121 (66.5%) taught the entire school year; 35 (19.2%) did not teach in K-12 positions during the school year, and 26 (14.3%) taught some portion of the school year.

Results and Discussion

There were fluctuations in the percentage of graduates employed as K-12 teachers during the school year (see Table 1). The number teaching increased from a low of 124 (at the start of the school year) to a high of 143 (March 15) before declining to the 135 who were teaching at the end of the school year. Thus the percentage teaching might have varied as much as 10% depending on when the graduates were surveyed. Of those who taught part of the school year, the highest number employed in any single month was in March.

Table 1

Teaching Employment During the School Year

Time of Year	Taught part of the year	Taught all year	Total teaching	
			n	%
Start of school	3	121	124	68.1%
September 15	7	121	128	70.3%
October 15	10	121	131	72.0%
November 15	13	121	134	73.6%
December 15	13	121	134	73.6%
January 15	16	121	137	75.3%
February 15	18	121	139	76.4%
March 15	22	121	143	78.6%
April 15	21	121	142	78.0%
May 15	19	121	140	76.9%
End of school	14	121	135	74.2%

Comparison of employment information from this survey with the employment data obtained in the regular fall follow-up survey for these same individuals, to provide a measure of validity for the responses, also showed remarkable consistency, with the only discrepancies being attributable to the time at which individuals who taught only part of the school year completed and returned their fall surveys.

Of the 121 graduates who taught all year, 78.5% accepted the first job they were offered, and over half of the initial job offers (for those who taught all year) were not received until sometime during the month of August (see Table 2).

Table 2

Timing of First Job Offers for Full-Year Teachers

Month of First Job Offer	n	%
March	4	3.3%
April	1	0.8%
May	5	4.1%
June	12	9.9%
July	26	21.5%
August	70	57.9%
September	3	2.5%

When the graduates were asked when they thought the follow-up survey should be conducted, the majority recommended the survey be continued as an October activity (see Table 3).

Conclusions

The decision of when to conduct a follow-up survey of graduates must be based, at least in part, on the purpose(s) of the survey. If determining the teaching employment rate is one purpose, those conducting the survey should be aware of the probable fluctuation in results during the school year. More graduates are likely to be employed by spring. Graduates are easier to locate in the fall, and identification of those not yet teaching may benefit if faculty and staff know who is still available when openings occur. The graduates who were part of this survey clearly preferred the survey continue as a fall activity.

Perhaps more importantly, when comparing results of one's institution with those of other institutions or groups of institutions, it is important to recognize when the surveys were conducted for all comparison groups in order to avoid unfairly biasing the results of such comparisons.

Table 3

Recommended Timing of Followup Survey

Month	Group			Total	
	Did not Teach	Taught Part of Year	Taught All Year	n	%
September	0	0	1	1	0.5%
October	23	14	93	130	71.4%
November	0	0	2	2	1.0%
December	1	3	2	6	3.3%
January	4	0	9	13	7.1%
February	1	0	2	3	1.6%
March	0	0	0	0	0.0%
April	0	1	0	1	0.5%
May	1	0	0	1	0.5%
Early	0	1	0	1	0.5%
September or October	0	1	0	1	0.5%
Later	0	0	1	1	0.5%
December or January	0	0	1	1	0.5%
February or March	0	1	1	2	1.0%
Spring	0	0	2	1	1.0%
October and January	1	0	0	1	0.5%
October and April	1	0	0	1	0.5%
October and May	0	1	0	1	0.5%
No Opinion	3	4	7	14	7.7%
Total	35	26	121	182	

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APPENDIX

Cover Letter and Data Collection Forms

May 9, 1994

Dear 1992-93 Teacher Education Program Graduate,

In mid-October of last year we began our follow-up survey of those who had completed their teacher preparation program here at UTK in 1992-93. We heard from many of you via mail, called others for whom we had telephone numbers, and were eventually able to determine the job status of 260 (91%) of the 285 in the survey. We would like to share some of the results with you:

65.3% were employed as full-time teachers in public or private schools
1.2% were part-time teachers
6.9% were in interim teaching positions
1.5% were in post-secondary teaching positions
1.5% were teaching in settings other than K-12 or post-secondary
2.7% were otherwise employed in the field of education
6.9% were substitute teachers
1.5% were teacher aides
7.7% were employed outside the field of education
2.7% were graduate students
2.0% were unemployed or listed themselves as housewife/househusband

The percentages in some categories were higher when considering only those who were interns: 73.2% were full-time teachers in public or private schools, 1% were part-time teachers, and 7.6% were in interim positions. Some of those who were not teaching had turned down offers for teaching employment and/or did not seek teaching jobs.

The information above reflects the status of our program graduates in the late fall of 1993. The numbers might have been different had we conducted the survey later in the school year, perhaps in the spring. Many of the teacher preparation institutions in the state participate in a coordinated follow-up survey that begins in mid-April. One of the reasons we conduct our survey in the fall is so that we can identify those of you who are not teaching but would still like to find teaching positions. I relay this information to the Career Placement Office so they will know who is available when school systems contact them during the year.

We do not want to misrepresent the employment rates of our graduates, but we are concerned that the information we obtain may be biased when compared with what we might have found at some other point in time. I would like your help in determining how the timing of the survey affects the results, and I would like your opinion about when we should do the survey.

Enclosed are three forms. Please select the one that is appropriate for you, complete it and mail it back to me as soon as possible. It should take no more than a minute or two of your time, but your answers will be very helpful to us and to current and future interns. The identification number is used only for monitoring returns. Your input would be greatly appreciated.

Sincerely,

Judy Boser,
Follow-up Survey Coordinator

Employment During the Year Following Completion of the Teacher Preparation Program

K-12 Teacher for the Entire 1993-94 School Year

If you were employed as a teacher in a K-12 setting and taught the entire 1993-94 school year, please complete this form and discard the others. If part of the year was served in an interim position, please indicate dates of the interim appointment.

Interns who are completing their internship programs often become discouraged because they may not be offered a position until shortly before the start of school. It would be helpful (and perhaps encouraging) if they knew when they are most likely to be offered teaching positions.

1. When were you first offered a K-12 teaching position? _____ (Month) _____ (Day (Approximate))

2. Did you accept the first K-12 teaching position you were offered? ❑ Yes ❑ No

2a. *If No,* when were you offered the position you did accept? _____ (Month) _____ (Day (Approximate))

3. In what month do you think the follow-up survey of program graduates should be conducted? ❑ October (current practice) ❑ Other month (Please specify) _____

If you have comments or suggestions for current and future interns regarding obtaining a job or the first year of teaching, feel free to write them on the back of this sheet. We would also appreciate your ideas about how we might improve our follow-up survey so that more of our program graduates would respond and would respond to the initial mailing. Thank you.

Please return this form in the enclosed self-addressed, postage-paid envelope.

Employment During the Year Following Completion of the Teacher Preparation Program

K-12 Teacher for Part of the School Year

If you were employed as a teacher in a K-12 setting for only part of the school, please complete this form and discard the others. If part or all of the time teaching was in an interim position, please indicate the dates of the interim appointment.

1. When did you begin applying for a K-12 teaching position? _____ (Month) _____ (Day (Approximate))

2. When were you first offered a K-12 teaching position? _____ (Month) _____ (Day (Approximate))

3. When did you begin teaching? ❑ Start of School year or _____ (Month) _____ (Day (Approximate))

4. When did you stop teaching? ❑ End of School year or _____ (Month) _____ (Day (Approximate))

5. What was your occupation prior to the teaching position? _____

6. In what month do you think the follow-up survey of program graduates should be conducted? ❑ October or (current practice) _____ (Please specify other month)

If you have comments or suggestions for current and future interns regarding obtaining a job or the first year of teaching, feel free to write them on the back of this sheet. We would also appreciate your ideas about how we might improve our follow-up survey so that more of our program graduates would respond and would respond to the initial mailing. thank you.

Please return this form in the enclosed self-addressed, postage-paid envelope.

Employment During the Year Following Completion of the Teacher Preparation Program

Not a K-12 Teacher During the 1993-94 School Year

If you were not employed as a K-12 teacher (including interim position) at any time during the school year please complete this form and discard the others. If you were employed as an aide, a substitute, or a teacher in a setting other than K-12 ,please use this form.

1. What was your occupation during the 1993-94 school year? _____

2. Did you apply for one or more K-12 teaching positions? ❑ Yes ❑ No

2a. *If Yes,* when did you first apply? _____
Month Day (Approximate)

3. Were you offered one or more K-12 teaching positions? ❑ Yes ❑ No

4. In what month do you think the follow-up survey of program graduates should be conducted? ❑ October (current practice) ❑ Other month (Please specify) _____

If you have comments or suggestions for current and future interns regarding obtaining a job or the first year of teaching, feel free to write them on the back of this sheet. We would also appreciate your ideas about how we might improve our follow-up survey so that more of our program graduates would respond and would respond to the initial mailing. Thank you.

Please return this form in the enclosed self-addressed, postage-paid envelope..

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