Best Practices Article: Teacher Recruitment for an Alternate Route Program in a Rural Area: Methods and Lessons

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Abstract

Teacher shortages in the United States have resulted in the development of alternate route teaching programs to better provide teachers, especially in difficult to staff schools such as those in rural communities. In order to address rural teacher shortages, the Mississippi State University College of Education implemented a fully online, alternate route, teacher preparation program to recruit, prepare, and retain teachers for rural middle level (i.e., middle school) classrooms in the state. The rural nature of the state meant that extensive recruiting efforts were required in order to reach qualified participants. This article provides a description of this work and provides a reflection on the various recruitment efforts of the program in an effort to inform others. Specifically, three categories of strategies are discussed: (a) fostering and maintaining relationships, (b) targeting an appropriate audience; and (c) using various communication methods. While each of these methods provided various benefits, the relative timing and significance varied depending on the stage of program development or implementation.

Keywords: alternate route programs; recruitment rural areas; teacher preparation

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Many states face an array of challenges, especially in the ability of schools to recruit and retain sufficient numbers of high quality teachers (e.g., Ladner, LeFevre, & Lips, 2010; Sutcher, Darling-Hammond, & Carver-Thomas, 2016). Teacher quality is a significant concern in the United States, but even more so in rural and urban areas that are difficult to staff, and compounded further in schools that serve low-income and minority students (Barth, Dillon, Hull, & Higgins, 2016; Cowan, Goldhaber, Hayes, & Theobold, 2016; Ingersoll, 2003). Policies aimed at addressing teacher shortages often sidestep the issue of recruitment, focusing instead on teacher retention (e.g., through induction and mentoring programs or by requiring a length of service in exchange for scholarships or other financial incentives), addressing working conditions by focusing on school leadership or the career pathway for teachers or providing new teachers with professional development and other learning opportunities (Aragon, 2016; Barth, et al., 2016), and even by creating four-day work weeks (Colorado Department of Education, 2017).

Alternate route programs, in which individuals who already have bachelor's degrees can obtain teacher licensure, were conceived in the 1980s as a means to address teacher shortages. Alternate route programs increase the pool of potential teachers but are usually centered in urban areas and/or on college campuses. One way to address teacher shortages in rural areas is to offer quality alternate route degree programs through an online delivery system, which can overcome the barrier of proximity to a campus or program. However, one primary challenge is recruiting for such programs. The aim of this article is to describe various strategies and lessons learned for teacher recruitment to an online, alternate route, program in an effort to inform others who are developing their recruitment efforts for alternate route teacher preparation programs.

Teacher Shortages and Rural Schools

Teacher shortages, especially in rural areas, mean many teachers teach one or more sections out-of-field and many school districts fill positions with non-certified personnel (Beesley, Atwill, Blair, & Barley, 2010; Monk, 2007). It is understood that teacher quality, including teacher certification status and degree in field, has a significant impact on student outcomes (Betts, Rueben, & Danenberg, 2000; Darling-Hammond & Youngs, 2002; Ferguson, 1998), especially for those at most risk (Sanders & Rivers, 1996). The problem of teacher shortages is especially prominent in middle level (i.e., middle school) classrooms, which is particularly devastating for schools with diverse student populations (Gándara & Maxwell-Jolly, 2000), as well as having an impact on individual students' achievement and engagement in school (Balfanz, 2009; Balfanz et al., 2014).

Problems recruiting teachers for middle level classrooms are compounded in rural areas (Education Commission of the States, 2016). Sparse populations in rural areas limit the size of the potential teacher workforce. Isolation and poverty may make rural areas less desirable than others (Barley & Brigham, 2008; Collins, 1999). Rural schools may offer lower salaries and more challenging working conditions (e.g., requiring teachers to teach multiple subjects or to play multiple roles) than their more urban and suburban counterparts (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

Rural schools may have more success recruiting and retaining teachers who are already local residents than attempting to import teachers from other areas (Beesley, et al., 2010; Collins,

1999; Sutton, Bausmith, O'Connor, Pae, & Payne, 2014). Local residents are familiar with the culture and have roots in the community, and therefore are a good population from which to recruit. Programs recruiting from within communities that have teacher shortages are known as "grow your own" programs. These programs vary with regard to the locus of implementation from the state level, to the district level, or even at a given university level. However, it has been found that teachers tend to prefer to teach in schools that are similar to where they attended school (Boyd, Lankford, Loeb, & Wyckoff, 2005; National Comprehensive Center for Teacher Quality (NCCTQ), 2009), and thus "grow your own" programs can provide a means for developing local talent in targeted ways (e.g., by providing licensure to paraprofessionals) (Eubanks, 2001).

Because they cross geographic boundaries, online programs hold potential for recruiting new teachers for high-need schools (Balassone, 2011). Well-designed online teacher preparation programs, combined with "grow your own" initiatives, can lead to the development of teacher preparation programs that are specifically targeted to particular hard-to-staff communities. The Master of Arts in Teaching Middle Level (MATM) program at Mississippi State University (MSU) aimed to do that, by creating an online alternative certification program targeted specifically for rural schools in our state. However, the mere creation of an alternative certification program may not be sufficient to ensure it meets the needs of particular schools. Effective recruitment strategies can help build awareness of and increase enrollment in well-designed alternative certification programs.

Recruiting Teachers for Alternative Certification

Alternative certification programs, particularly those targeted to meet the needs of rural and other hard-to-staff schools, will only be successful through great efforts to recruit strong teacher candidates. Concerns about teacher recruitment generally focus on the relative low prestige of the profession (Farkas, Johnson, & Foleno, 2000). Teaching is often considered a semi-profession (Ingersoll & Perda, 2008; Lortie, 1975) requiring a great deal of professional expertise but without the respect or autonomy afforded many professions (e.g., doctor or lawyer). This is combined with issues of low pay, safety, limited opportunities for advancement, and perceptions about teachers' working conditions, which combine to serve as disincentives to becoming teachers (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

Strategies for teacher recruitment are often implemented at the state or even national policy level, and generally focus on financial incentives to enter the profession, including scholarships, loan forgiveness, salary bonuses, and housing stipends (Aragon, 2016; Barth, Dillon, Hull, & Higgins, 2016; McClure & Reeves, 2004). States may also attempt to address teacher shortages through changes in certification requirements or through advertising campaigns that promote the profession. These scattershot approaches may have limited impact. Financial incentives, in particular, may not be sufficient to recruit new teachers (Holloway, 2002; Monk, 2007) who often enter the profession because it is a "calling" (Farkas, et al., 2000). In a survey, 83% of teachers indicated that it was important that their job involves work they love to do, while only 30% of teachers with less than five years of teaching indicated that good pay was important to them (Farkas, et al., 2000). Therefore, a degree of altruism and a desire to make a difference often influences teachers to enter the field more than financial incentives. Public relations

campaigns have been tried but may have limited effect in an environment where negative reports about schools and education are common (Masters, 2015).

Specific, targeted recruitment strategies are needed to address teacher shortages in a given geographic area or population, and in particular to encourage enrollment in a particular alternative certification program. Harmon (2001) reviewed teacher recruitment strategies and recommended campaigns that advertise the particular benefits of teaching in specific rural communities. McClure and Reeves (2004) surveyed research and practice literature and identified strategies that can support teacher recruitment to address shortages, particularly in rural areas. These include basing recruitment efforts on data and analysis, including local teacher workforce data, collaborating with local districts, working with universities to design teacher education programs for specific needs, and frequent evaluation of recruitment efforts. There is some evidence that targeted design of alternate route and pre-service preparation programs can assist in recruitment. Recipients of U.S. Department of Education Teacher Quality Partnership Grants (TQP) have had some success developing teacher recruitment and preparation programs that are partnerships between particular districts and teacher preparation programs (Education Commission of the States, 2016).

However, there is less known about local strategies that alternative certification programs can employ in order to encourage enrollment. Literature about advertising and public relations campaigns generally focuses on campaigns to raise the prestige of the profession in general rather than targeted campaigns for particular programs (Education Commission of the States, 2016). Over a five-year period, the authors designed, launched, and increased enrollment in an alternative certification program leading to middle grades licensure. The authors collected data and reflected on the strategies that we used to build awareness of and recruit potential teachers to enroll in the MATM. Here, we reflect on the strategies we used to recruit and their relative success.

Teacher Shortages in Mississippi

In the May 2014 report, *Why Rural Matters 2013-2014: The Condition of Rural Education in the 50 States*, Johnson, Showalter, Klein, and Lester (2014) provided a state-by-state look at rural education, ranking Mississippi third among the 50 states in need of rural education attention and improvement. In Mississippi, there are significant teacher shortages (Anthony, Franz, & Brenner, 2017; Mississippi Department of Education, 2017). In 2014, more than half of Mississippi school districts were considered to have a critical shortage with shortages exacerbated by rurality, race, and local funding (Anthony, et al., 2017). In this relatively small state, there were 98 mathematics and 70 science vacancies in 2015. This does not include the number of teachers who are teaching out of area or teaching with temporary licenses. Mississippi also suffers from an inequitable distribution of highly qualified teachers with areas of geographic surplus and need (Sutcher, et al., 2016).

The Alternate Route Teacher Preparation Program

With an understanding of the status of teacher shortages and the challenges of recruiting and retaining middle level educators for rural Mississippi, the MATM program was developed at

MSU with funding provided by a U.S. Department of Education Transition to Teaching grant. One key component of the program included targeted incentives to teach in districts identified by federal requirements as low-income and with teacher shortages. Program participants received $5,000 scholarships and agreed to teach for three years in a partner district. As a hiring incentive, we offered schools a technology package including a laptop, printer, and other items intended to support teachers' participation in online coursework required in the MATM program, as well as to support their success in the classroom. Teachers were potentially eligible for other loan forgiveness programs depending on the school in which they chose to work and the type of position taken.

The MATM program aims to prepare highly qualified middle level educators to serve rural middle schools in Mississippi. The program results in initial licensure to teach all subjects in grades 4 to 6, and an additional endorsement to teach at least one content area in grades 7 and 8. Initial licensure, which allows the candidate three years to complete a supervised internship, is granted after one semester of coursework through the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) alternate route licensure requirements. Candidates then participate in two semesters of a supervised internship to earn the five-year clear license. The program is offered completely online, and candidates can complete MATM from any location in the state.

Recruiting candidates for this program has been challenging given the rural nature of the state as well as the general education level of the state population. Examining the census data for Mississippi, only 21% of the population holds a bachelor's degree or higher level of education. This means that only 21% of the total population of Mississippi is currently eligible to participate in the MATM program given that it is a graduate path to teacher licensure (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010).

Program Outcomes

Over the course of the past five years, 154 participants have started our program and 113 have been hired and placed as teachers of record, which is an average of 22 new teachers each year. The following provides some context for teacher preparation enrollment in Mississippi during the same time frame (U.S. Department of Education, 2016):

- MATM is one of 12 alternate route teacher education programs housed at institutions of higher education (IHEs) in Mississippi.
- From 2012 to 2015 overall teacher preparation enrollment in the state decreased from 4,166 to 3,252 demonstrating a decreasing participation in teacher preparation in Mississippi overall.
- Participation in alternative certification programs at IHEs dropped from 995 to 722 participants in the same time period (data on more recent years is not yet available).
- Statewide, alternative IHE-based teacher preparation program completers made up 26% to 30% of the teacher education program completers from 2012 to 2016.

This information provides insight into our overall effectiveness of recruiting candidates to the program at a time of decreasing interest in the teaching profession. Our program has found successes in a variety of recruiting methods. We have honed our reach and tried for cost-

effective methods throughout the five years since program implementation. In an effort to inform good practice for other programs, this article identifies and provides reflection on the various recruiting methods we have used and valuable lessons learned along the way.

Recruitment Methods and Lessons Learned

Our recruitment methods included multiple approaches in an effort to seek out and use all services, resources, and opportunities available. Targeted financial and technology incentives provided by the Transition to Teaching grant were significant components of the recruitment strategy during this time period, but even with these incentives, many approaches had to be taken to attract qualified program participants. Program staff have consistently and continuously gathered and examined data on recruitment methods in order to evaluate and maximize our efforts. One useful source of data has been a survey of applicants on how they learned about the program. In the first two years of the program recruiting process, the surveys indicated that our most effective ways for communicating about the existence and quality of the program include a web presence (e.g., website, Facebook®, or Google AdWords®) and personal recommendations (e.g., friend/word of mouth; school administrator). These surveys helped us to refine our efforts moving forward.

Our recruitment efforts were under constant development. We added new approaches to better reach quality applicants and streamlined other approaches that were not as effective. In the following section, we fully reflect upon multiple recruitment methods in an effort to share what worked and the reasons that they did. We categorize these multi-faceted recruitment methods into three main activities: a) foster and maintain relationships; b) target appropriate audiences; and c) use various communication methods. We believe these activities represent three facets of a complete recruitment process and highlight the types of methods people should consider when recruiting for alternate route programs, particularly those that serve rural schools and communities.

Foster and Maintain Relationships

One major component of our recruitment efforts included creating and cultivating relationships and networks with personnel who are connected to potential teacher candidates, including principals, faculty advisors, and students. We sought to leverage the strong relationships common in rural communities (Howley & Howley, 2005), by building a trusting network with a variety of stakeholders connected to potential teachers.

Relationships with school principals. We used multiple strategies to cultivate relationships with principals of area schools. As we launched the program, we made an effort to schedule face-to-face meetings with principals. This was challenging at first in that a significant amount of time was spent trying to get in touch with principals who were not initially interested in meeting with strangers. We supplemented scheduled appointments with cold-calls and drop-in visits. If just one or two principals agreed to meet in a selected area, we made an effort to drop in at other nearby schools to meet the staff, offer free promotional items (e.g., sticky notes and insulated lunch bags), and inform the principals of available services.

After the initial meeting took place, administrators often phoned in an effort to look for new potential hires or to invite MATM program staff to speak to their teacher assistants about getting certified through the program. Face-to-face meetings generally resulted in increased responses to emails and phone-calls as well. These relationships were reinforced on our part by "thank you" notes, "good luck" messages before major events and testing windows in the state, and through a monthly newsletter. We published a quarterly e-mail newsletter, sent to administrators across the state, with stories about program updates, student spotlights, and free curriculum resources. In the summer issue, we featured program participants excepted to earn licensure before the first day of school in the fall. We kept track of newsletter "clicks" and believe that the newsletter helped build awareness of our programs.

We fostered ongoing relationships as well. When principals sent potential applicants to the MATM program, we made an extra effort to follow up with the candidate and ensure they had the information needed to apply. We assumed that principals made referrals for individuals they hoped one day to hire as teachers. This helped build goodwill between the program, candidate, and principal. Overall, building solid relationships with partner principals took a great deal of work but was worth the effort. Once principals with hiring shortages learned about the program and interacted with our staff, they trusted the quality of the program, and began to recommend the program to qualified potential applicants they wished to recruit to their districts.

Relationships with faculty advisors. Strategic choices were made to identify university-based student advisors who might identify and direct potential candidates to our program. We reached out to advisors in departments with majors consistent with subject areas in middle level schools about our program (e.g., English, history, mathematics, and biology) and highlighted teaching as a potential career avenue. We also sought recent graduates from programs in which students were less directed about their potential career path; hence, we also targeted those advising in an interdisciplinary degree and majors not normally associated with teaching (e.g., psychology, political science, and business), but who might have a strong background for teaching in self-contained elementary education middle grades classrooms (grades 4 to 6).

Mississippi, like most states, is in chronic need of more mathematics and science teachers (Cowan, et al., 2016). For this reason, we created a "STEM Coalition" of faculty and staff who advise science, mathematics, and engineering undergraduate students. This group was built to link science and mathematics advisors to MATM program staff and resources. As members of the coalition learned about teaching as a career option for majors in their fields and the MATM program as a post-Baccalaureate path to becoming a teacher, major advisors informed students about teaching as a potential employment path after graduation. Regular meetings supported coalition members' role in informing, advertising, and attracting interested STEM students into the middle and secondary classroom. The STEM coalition also helped STEM faculty advisors to identify grants and scholarship opportunities for students wishing to teach. In addition, Mississippi has loan forgiveness plans and grants available to people wishing to become mathematics and science teachers, but this is not usually known to faculty advisors in mathematics and science areas. Regular meetings gave us insight into when and how best to appeal to students pursuing STEM degrees. As a result of this relationship building, program staff began speaking with biology and chemistry majors during one of their capstone courses. We also learned that many STEM majors begin planning their next steps during their junior year,

when MCAT and other test scores are generally returned, enabling students majoring in science to consider an alternative path beyond the traditionally considered prospects of medical or veterinary school. This modified the timing of outreach to more effectively foster interest in teaching as a career and in the MATM program, and we began to see an increase in enrollment of these students. Overall, the relationships we cultivated with faculty advisors were mutually beneficial. Academic advisors gained knowledge and resources for supporting students in pursuing teaching careers after graduation, and we gained better ways to reach and recruit STEM majors into needed teaching fields.

Relationships with students. An often-cited method of learning about the program was *viva voce*. More than one-fifth of the applicants reported on our survey that they learned about the MATM program this way. Program coordinators maximized *viva voce* recruiting by building strong relationships with current students and remaining connected to them during and after the semesters they completed the program. We provided an opportunity for a face-to-face orientation in spring and summer to support the interrelationship between the various members of the program (i.e., faculty, staff, and students). In addition, we held regional meetings of staff, faculty, students, and graduates to maintain and further develop relationships. These activities helped us keep in continuous contact with previous students and allowed new students to connect with former ones. We were able to strengthen support of program participants while simultaneously providing the program with opportunities to share information about the program over time.

Sending "thank you" notes, calling to check on candidates in the neediest areas, and maintaining high-quality services in the program were helpful for garnering positive recommendations from former and current students. Positive referrals ended up being a significant recruiting tool, primarily for their cost-effectiveness. By giving potential teachers the support they needed throughout the entire process, from application to the program through the first years of teaching, our program in effect created its own recruiters. Some students were more vocal with their experiences than others, and they worked as advocates for the program. People often listen to the opinions of those they know and connect with them more readily than through an advertisement.

Target Appropriate Audiences

Not only are relationships important, but these relationships need to be supported through thoughtful and systematic efforts. Our second type of activity involved finding the right audiences for teacher recruitment. Hosting information sessions at targeted events that reached a variety of potential applicants has been a useful tactic. These sessions had the advantage of reaching many people at once, yet also offered the personal touch of creating relationships. We have hosted information sessions at a variety of events including state education-related conferences, community job fairs, and on university campuses.

State conferences. Networking at conferences such as Mississippi Association for Middle Level Educators (MAMLE) and Mississippi Association of School Superintendents (MASS) was beneficial because these events attracted school administrators who often have unlicensed teachers who could apply to the program, or who have hiring needs that the program could potentially serve. Although we often reserved a vendor table to present promotional materials

and discuss our program with conference attendees, we found that presenting a paper or another professional development session was even more beneficial. School administrators were interested in our recruiting strategies, the ways we used technology to mentor teachers, and even program basics. All of these information sessions provided exposure and supported our recruitment. These presentations also provided us the opportunity to clear up misconceptions about alternate route teachers in general, licensure specifics, or programmatic details. After presentations ended, it was typical to have a line of principals waiting to speak to us about filling vacancies or getting staff certified.

The drawback to this type of networking was that conferences are often expensive. However, for the program and budget, the outcome has been beneficial in supporting relationship development with administrators who both hired program candidates and also helped to recruit potential candidates from their pool of emergency certified teachers, teaching assistants, and community members. In addition, when program staff attended a conference, they often scheduled local school visits both before and after the conference to maximize our travel budget and foster relationships with area schools.

Community job fairs. When recruiting for a distance program targeted to rural areas, community job fairs were an excellent way to meet people in the community. We began by investing some time attending job fairs around the state to determine which ones attracted the most qualified candidates or those most interested in teaching. Although job fairs often yielded a good number of recruits, they were sometimes productive and other times unproductive. One problem that quickly became obvious was that a great deal of time was spent speaking with people that were not actually qualified for the MATM degree program, which requires a bachelor's degree with state-specified GPA and test score requirements. The most effective solution was to share the booth with a similar entity that had a different target audience. We found it particularly advantageous, for example, to partner with the recruiter for an online elementary education bachelor's degree program. Besides offering a "one-stop shop" for attendees who wanted to teach, this recruiting partnership reduced travel and booth cost.

In addition to the job fairs, we also spent time recruiting at community events such as flea markets and small-town festivals or fairs to make connections with local community members, especially in our mostly rural state. Oftentimes, booths at these events were available at little to no cost, and could, therefore, be used to easily supplement our recruiting calendar. We noticed that these events often resulted in recruits several months later, and we considered the objective of these activities to be reputation and relationship building. It was important to take something to give to the community and provide a reason for them to stop by and chat. When the temperature was expected to be high, we handed out free, labeled bottles of water and promotional hand-fans. It was not unusual for a recruit to tell us that a friend or relative had heard about the MATM program after stopping for a fan on a hot day and passed the information along.

Sponsorship of educational programs. One method attempted, but with limited success, was finding and sponsoring programs to target specific groups of people. For instance, we made a targeted effort to recruit African American male teachers for Mississippi schools. There are benefits of having teachers who are representative of the populations they teach, especially with

regard to expectations for achievement, which can have a significant impact on student learning (Gershenson, Holt, & Papageorge, 2016; McGrady & Reynolds, 2013). For this reason, the program sponsored the Men of Color Summit presented by the Office of Institutional Diversity and Inclusion on our campus. Sponsorship built awareness of the program among the students, academic advisors, and other university personnel who attended the event. In this way, we built recognition about the program and we created an ally in the coordinating organization.

On campus recruiting. As a program affiliated with a university, recruiting on a college campus was a natural activity for us. These events were particularly useful because everyone in attendance was near to earning a bachelor's degree and making career-related decisions. We scheduled two types of program-specific interest meetings each semester: 1) a general meeting where all majors were invited and 2) a separate STEM-only event. At these interest meetings, snacks and general program information were provided, boards displayed maps of the available job opportunities in teaching, and pamphlets and other small promotional prizes were given away. The STEM-only event was restricted to juniors and seniors graduating with a degree in science, mathematics, engineering, or a closely related field. Representatives from financial aid were invited to answer questions about specific scholarships and grants available to those wishing to teach a subject classified as "critical needs" in Mississippi. Faculty advisors were also included from specific undergraduate departments, as well as College of Education faculty. Having a strong partnership with the campus career center was helpful when organizing these events. The campus career center helped to promote our activities by advertising events and supporting logistical arrangements.

Communication Strategies

In addition to cultivating relationships and finding target audiences, attention to communication and support mechanisms was an important aspect of recruitment. In order to share information about the program widely, various communication strategies have been employed. First, it was essential to ensure that our new program was listed with the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE). For many potential applicants, the MDE website is the first place to look for information about becoming teachers. Almost immediately after our program information was included on MDE's webpage, we noticed an increase in phone calls and emails. We supplemented that passive recruiting with more active strategies, using both new and traditional media.

Website. One of the most important communication strategies was a functional website. According to survey results, the most significant recruitment effort was the program website, usually arrived at through a direct online search. Therefore, it was important that our program website be available, well organized, and contain information needed for potential candidates. Because we operate in a university setting, we had a number of resources available to us to maximize the quality of the program website. For programs in similar settings, we advise collaborating with offices related to distance education, information technology, and public affairs. Early on, collaboration with the university's distance education department helped with search engine optimization such that the website was likely to be found when potential candidates searched for an alternate route teaching program. Websites can also be directly

submitted to various search engines for indexing, which increases the probability that candidates will find a program.

Advertising. Advertising in media outlets is a common tactic, and the MATM program pursued a wide variety of media channels to advertise the program, including both traditional (newspaper and television), as well as social media internet outlets. Choosing where to invest advertising resources required some experimentation and intuition to determine what works in a given area. Listed below are examples of various forms of advertising our program used to gain program exposure.

Search engine ads. Search engine ads were a less effective investment for our program. Google Adwords allows entities to specify searchable advertisement words that ensure their program or product appears at the top of a search result. Each time someone visits the promoted web page, the advertising organization is charged a fee (up to a specific pre-set budget limit). We spent about six months and $600 on Google Adwords and received over 1,000 visits. However, our surveys told us that only one person referenced the advertisement as part of a decision to apply to the program. The Google Adwords market is very large, and they work with thousands of advertisers. For this reason, getting enough attention to make an impact was very difficult. It would take a very large budget and carefully crafted keywords to achieve success, which means this was not the most efficient way to advertise for our more localized market.

Social media. Social media can be a valuable method for recruitment to an online education program. In particular, we used Facebook to advertise MATM and generate interest. After the program's Facebook page was created, we began by inviting current and prospective students to like or share our posts. A year later, the MATM page only had 33 followers, half of them university staff members and our own faculty. At that point, a new strategy seemed necessary. We realized that much like the Google Adwords campaign, we could target a given audience for advertising to specific geographic locations, age group, and gender, as well as by interests. Being able to target an audience with specificity was an important benefit that allowed us to create a group based on explicit interests and to provide updates about the program.

Within three months of launching the program's first Facebook advertisement, the page had a 2,000% increase in the number of page likes, and this was with limited financial investment on our part. Currently, the page has over 4,700 likes and allows us to maintain continuous contact with our followers. Facebook's administrator tools provided a breakdown of likes by gender, location, and language, making it easier to reach specific audiences. The largest group of people who liked the program page was from the area near the university. This was closely followed by Jackson, Mississippi, the nearest metropolitan area with a high need for qualified teachers. One challenge with the data is that the information was aggregated around the larger cities rather than identifying smaller communities where the potential candidates may reside.

While assessing our reach with Facebook, we soon realized we should refine the advertising targets even further, since at times people who did not fit the target audience were being reached. After researching poorly fitting profiles, we updated our advertising criteria to better align with characteristics of future educators. Conversely, by examining the interests of the followers who were good fits, we were able to guide posts and page boosts better. For example, interests in

education or arts and crafts were both common indicators of potential candidates. It was important that our program closely monitored activity to ensure that we were reaching appropriate audiences.

Newspapers. Traditional print media can also be a recruitment tool, depending on the match between the target demographic and the newspaper's audience. In this regard, we provided press releases and pitched story ideas to local newspapers throughout the state about the program and about program participants. For example, we have had articles published about two of our teachers who received National Association for Alternative Certification teacher awards. This allowed us to earn recognition for the program and its quality. We also purchased advertisements to reach our target audience. For the MATM program, the target audience was relatively broad, including new graduates and those interested in a mid-career change, both in and out-of-state, and we focused our advertising accordingly. For example, the paraprofessionals at the university served as one target group for recruitment into the program because tuition remission benefits provide an incentive to return to school. Therefore, the university newspaper was an appropriate outlet for advertising. The biggest challenge with print advertising was the inability to gather data on how successful the advertisement was. Some anecdotal evidence was provided by individuals who called and referenced an ad or article, but without specific and systematic inquiries, it was difficult to determine the impact. Because of this challenge, as well as budget responsibility, the program continued to advertise in the university newspaper, but we aimed for once or twice per year in specific issues that were printed for release when the campus had an influx of visitors, such as homecoming and graduation.

Television. Rather than paying for advertising spots, we worked to engage with local media. These efforts paid off in terms of local markets. The program coordinator was interviewed several times about education by a local news station who broadcasted to several of the program's partner districts. As a guest on the mid-morning segment, the coordinator discussed ways the program was benefitting the community and Mississippi as a whole and spoke about how to enroll in the program. This resulted in an influx of requests for new information during the days following the segment with several callers specifically referencing the broadcast. We found this was a great opportunity for free advertising that provided helpful program recognition. However, we found that this was not a media outlet that we could count on regularly.

If previous relationships with television media do not exist, paid advertising is an option. Oftentimes, stations will negotiate free "news" slots that inform the public about a program as a benefit to contracted advertising. After receiving such a great response from the free segment, a commercial slot was purchased, with additional free news segments as a part of the negotiated package. This advertising was augmented by social media publicity because the news station carried a strong social media presence in program target areas and thus provided the program with additional exposure.

Promotional Materials. Another method for recruitment involved distributing promotional items to specific target audiences at various events. These methods, though passive in nature, were helpful in promoting program name and information. Posters were an efficient form of recruitment in that they required a small amount of development time, were inexpensive, and yet were effective in promoting the program. We placed these posters in local business windows,

residence halls, restaurants, classrooms, at job fairs, and in extension offices across the state. To make hanging posters across the state easier, members of our STEM coalition agreed to give extra credit to students who put up posters in their hometown. Students sent an email containing four things: a photo of the hanging poster, the name and location of the business, the name of the person approving the display, and the course for which they were getting extra credit.

Simple information cards about the online teacher preparation programs were created for sharing in multiple environments. Program staff left the cards next to mints in restaurants, checkout counters at gas stations, and at other retail stores. Promotional pens were provided to servers of local restaurants for customers to use when paying the restaurant bill. The businesses were grateful for the donation and, consequently, were usually eager to allow our poster to hang in the waiting area. This act reinforced relationships with the community as well.

Conclusions

Multiple methods were employed to recruit candidates for an alternate route teacher preparation program. Although the financial and material incentives supported the recruitment of participants, it was not enough. Not only did we have to ensure that the potential recruitment pool was aware of the incentives, but then the potential pool of participants had to be qualified and interested in joining the teaching profession. Even with such incentives, we had to invest significant effort in all three aspects of the recruitment process: finding effective communication strategies, targeting appropriate audiences, and fostering relationships. However, the relative importance of these methods necessarily varied over time. When the program was first launched, it was important to provide an online presence and a clear representation of our program with the state department of education. Over time, we learned that attention to maintaining positive relationships with both school-based personnel and program participants were critical in supporting our efforts.

Moreover, we found that attending to all three aspects helped serve various purposes of recruitment, especially in a rural area. First, being strategic in how we found audiences at state conferences and through campus and community events (e.g., job fairs) enabled cost-effective approaches that helped us target interested candidates. Second, efforts to communicate and share information about our program were supported by maintaining an up-to-date website, advertising via traditional (e.g., newspaper and television) and modern (e.g., search engines and social media) media mechanisms, and providing promotional materials at events and places around the state. Finally, fostering positive and lasting relationships with school principals, faculty advisors, and students in the program allowed us to build upon the quality of the program to spread personal testimonials that capitalized on methods that worked in rural areas. These personal recommendations were significant in strengthening the purpose and commitment of potential applicants.

Recruiting for the program was not a one-time event. To determine the best methods for recruitment, we constantly evaluated our various recruiting strategies. Continued strategic analysis and evaluation of efforts helped us make informed decisions and changes as needed. We recommend that programs designate personnel to be responsible for monitoring recruiting efforts to ascertain that programs are effectively expending their effort and resources. Tasks such as this

are easily overlooked. Having a specific person supervising and evaluating recruitment will help improve possible success. Regular meetings to discuss recruitment among the program stakeholders will help to ensure that all stakeholders understand the recruitment efforts and can assist as needed to support best outcomes.

Finally, no recruitment strategy replaces program quality. The quality of the MATM degree played an essential role in our continued ability to recruit. It would not have been possible to maintain the positive relationships with former participants and school personnel who became advocates for our program if they did not find that MATM participants were successful in rural districts. Therefore, it is essential that recruitment efforts are examined within the context of the given status of a program, as a new program or as an established one.

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