

Examining Lessons Learned During the First Year of a Grow Your Own Teacher Preparation Program

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Abstract

This paper outlines how four community colleges, and a large public university, collaborated to support over 80 paraprofessionals who sought to finish their bachelor's degree and earn licensure. Funding from a statewide "Grow Your Own" initiative allowed the teacher educators at the community colleges and university to put in place structures to support non-traditional students, and each other, during the first year of this program. Lessons learned and next steps are highlighted.

Keywords: grow your own programs, collaboration, teacher shortage

Teacher attrition, led by resignations, retirements, and frustrations exasperated by COVID-19, has led to teacher shortages in many school divisions across the United States. Another factor impacting the teacher shortage is a decline in the number of individuals interested in the profession, as demonstrated by the lower number of students enrolling in teacher preparation programs (American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, 2022). Furthermore, many experts in education agree that the teacher shortage is heightened in certain

geographic regions, particularly rural and urban school divisions (Jacobs, 2021). Although no one solution is likely to resolve shortages for all school divisions, Grow Your Own (GYO) initiatives have sprung up across the county in order to provide quality teachers to divisions in need.

GYO programs support individuals who want to be teachers and who want to return to their “home” divisions, once they graduate, and teach in local schools. These programs can vary in who is recruited and how they are supported (Muñiz, 2020). Although participants in GYO programs can be traditional college age, many GYO initiatives focus on paraprofessionals who are already employed by the schools and are familiar with the communities and the specific needs of their students. By utilizing local talent, GYO programs can lead to increased positive school climate and meaningful relationships with families.

GYO programs offer affordability, access, and attainment for their participants. This is especially important for future teachers of color. Research shows that teachers of color, regardless of teaching area, are sorely underrepresented (Guarino et al., 2006). Ideally, according to Gist et al. (2019) and others, GYO programs should be committed to increasing racial, ethnic, and linguistic congruence between teachers and student populations. In addition, GYO programs should work to eliminate the barriers related to the recruitment, preparation, and retention of teachers of color.

In rural and urban areas, retention is highest if teaching positions can be filled by members who are from the community. The belief is that teachers who have ties to the community are better able to serve the children of the community. These teachers understand the rural or urban lifestyle and have community ties (Goodpaster et al., 2012). Thus, GYO programs that encourage participants to remain in the community can be an asset to school divisions.

In 2022, the Commonwealth of Virginia provided James Madison University (JMU) with 4.2 million dollars to: 1) address the teacher shortage; and 2) work to diversify the teacher workforce across the state. Since GYO initiatives are widely considered a best practice for recruiting and supporting teachers in underrepresented communities (Wills, 2017), JMU decided to partner with community colleges and use this funding to support non-traditional students who wanted to complete their degree in order to become an inclusive early childhood, elementary, or special education teacher. In return, the participants agreed to teach in their school division for two years once they graduated. The purpose of this study was to answer the following question: What lessons did the teacher educators at the community colleges and university learn during the implementation of a GYO program?

Literature Review

To situate our work, we chose to highlight the research related to the role of paraprofessionals in schools, teacher preparation programs in institutions of higher education, and GYO program initiatives in education.

Role of Paraprofessionals in Schools

Over time, the role of paraprofessionals has evolved from helping teachers with clerical tasks to providing direct support and instruction to students (Martin, 2009). According to the U.S. Department of Education (2004), paraprofessionals by definition are school employees who: (a) provide one-on-one tutoring; (b) assist with classroom management; (c) coordinate trainings and staff development; (d) conduct parental involvement activities; and (e) provide instructional support services under the direct supervision of a highly qualified teacher.

Paraprofessionals today play a critical role in schools across the United States. Whether in a general or special education classroom, they work to ensure all students can access academic

success regardless of background or ability level (Martin, 2009). As essential members of the education team, their roles and responsibilities vary depending on the needs of each particular school. The education of paraprofessionals can range from not finishing high school to holding a master's degree. Despite this wide range of "school learning" the paraprofessionals know the schools, students, and what is expected out of an effective teacher (Delgado et al., 2021).

In Virginia, where this initiative took place, there are currently over 3,500 unfilled teacher positions which is an average of 26 openings per public school division (Povich, 2023). Furthermore, open teaching positions are seeing much lower applicants than in previous years (Camera, 2022). One way that many divisions across the United States are working to address this teacher shortage is to utilize the paraprofessionals they already employ. Furthermore, because many paraprofessionals come from diverse backgrounds and experiences, there is a wealth of practices, cultures, and histories from which they can draw from while working with students (Johnson & Lehner, 2021). In fact, Villegas and Davis (2007) argue that teacher diversity could be increased by supporting paraprofessionals in becoming teachers. This could lead to classroom teachers better reflecting the student population both racially and linguistically (Connally & Dancy, 2016).

Community Colleges and Universities

Teacher preparation programs play a vital role in ensuring that teachers have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to provide high quality services to children (Sumrall et al., 2017). This is true regardless of whether that education occurs at a community college or a university. Research suggests that the majority of students who begin at a community college intend to transfer to a four-year institution to finish their degree (Laanan, 2003). However, historically, few community college students successfully transfer to a four-year university

(Jenkins & Fink, 2016) and only half of those students earn a bachelor's degree (Monaghan & Attewell, 2015).

Thus, transfer initiatives are occurring across the United States to improve communication between two- and four-year institutions of education. The transfer initiative in Virginia began in 2018 when it was requested by the legislature. The goals were to: 1) remove barriers to transfer; 2) improve credit efficiency; 3) address time-to-transfer; and 4) ultimately, improve degree attainment at both community colleges and four-year institutions. The process included collaborative course development including course descriptions, objectives, and even suggested course materials. The impact improved transferability and created a true two-year + two-year program so students who begin at a community college and transfer to a four-year institution, can finish their degree in four years.

Grow Your Own Programs

As noted earlier, GYO programs are one strategy for addressing the teacher shortage by preparing more classroom teachers. GYO programs are partnerships between community-run organizations, local school divisions, and institutions of higher education that work together to recruit and prepare individuals to teach in local schools (Garcia, 2020). The research suggests that recruiting local individuals to become teachers results in addressing the teacher shortage, diversifying the teacher workforce, and increasing retention rates in the classroom (Valenzuela, 2017).

Creating programs to increase the number of teachers is not new, but many GYO programs specifically focus on recruiting teachers of color. Teachers of color have historically faced barriers to traditional paths to licensure and GYO programs offer access to teacher licensure to individuals of color from various class, language, and social backgrounds (Gist et al.,

2019). The benefits to diversifying the teacher workforce are great. In 2021, the teacher population in the United States were 80% White, 9% Hispanic, 6% Black, 2% Asian, 2% multiracial, <1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and <1% Pacific Islander, while the student population was 45% White, 28% Hispanic, 15% Black, 5% Asian, 5% multiracial, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native, and <1% Pacific Islander (NCES, 2023). The mismatch of race/ethnicity and cultures between teachers and students can negatively impact student achievement, especially when there is a lack of culturally relevant pedagogy (Valenzuela, 2017). On the other hand, racial and ethnic congruence between teachers and students can lead to academic achievement among students of color emphasizing the need to diversify the teacher workforce (Valenzuela, 2017; Villegas & Irvine, 2010).

For states aiming to begin an initiative such as this, Muñiz (2020) highlights seven characteristics of high-quality GYO programs. These are recruiting candidates of the local community, making the program accessible with and without a bachelor's degree, providing support for finances, academics, and socially, maintaining a sustainable funding model, having paid and supervised work-based experiences, encouraging collaboration and communication among all program partners, and tracking student success and program impact. These ideas can help a program get started. While much of the research highlights the benefits and potential of GYO programs, the literature provides limited information on the challenges to GYO students completing their degree. Gist et al. (2019) describes structural and relational barriers that exist to students in GYO programs. These include licensure assessments, networking opportunities, and building social capital. Licensure assessments are a barrier to teacher candidates in GYO programs and traditional teacher preparation programs (Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009). Finally, much of the research focuses on identifying types of GYO programs, recruitment efforts, and

graduation rates. Thus, we aimed to focus on the perspectives of the partners involved to better understand the lessons learned during implementation of a GYO program.

Method

A sociocultural lens provided a nuanced understanding, within this phenomenological study (Schram, 2006), of the lessons we learned while implementing a GYO program at the community colleges and university. Phenomenology, as a methodology, can assist researchers in understanding the experiences of individuals as they engage in shared experiences (Creswell et al., 2007). In this paper, we identify the phenomenon as the GYO program.

Context

As noted earlier, the GYO initiative came about due to legislative funding. A significant portion of the funds provided financial support for the GYO students. The paraprofessionals who needed to start or finish their associate degree did so at one of four community colleges (Blue Ridge, Laurel Ridge, Brightpoint, or Tidewater). The paraprofessionals who already had their associate degree took courses online through JMU. The financial support included tuition, fees, access to online tutors, and vouchers for state licensure exams.

The funding also provided a stipend to each community college whose service area included one of the eight school divisions across the state chosen to participate in the GYO initiative. This stipend was seen as a way to support the community college teacher educators who did additional work to support the GYO students such as recruiting, advising, helping with enrollment, and assisting students in the transfer process. The individuals who received the stipends we called Community College Liaisons. The authors of this paper are the four Community College Liaisons (Lori, Mark, Meredith and Virginia), as well as the Director (Joy) and Assistant Director (Katie) of the GYO program.

Recruitment

We followed a similar recruitment process for the paraprofessionals in each of the participating school divisions. The Director of the GYO program and the Community College Liaison typically met with the school divisions in the late fall to set a time for a joint information session for current paraprofessionals. The recruitment meetings with the paraprofessionals were conducted in person and virtually. They were usually held outside of school working hours. We explained the program to the paraprofessionals and the process for enrollment at either the community college or university. Each school division had their own way of handling which paraprofessionals were recommended for program enrollment. After the selection process, the paraprofessionals met with either their Community College Liaisons or the Director or Assistant Director of the GYO program depending on where the paraprofessional was in their college career.

Participants

The 38 paraprofessionals at the university and the 49 paraprofessionals at the four community colleges continued to work in local schools while taking courses. All of the courses at the university were online whereas the courses at the community college were either online or in person.

The paraprofessionals enrolled at the community college had a vast array of college credits, ranging from none to having already completed an associate degree in areas other than education. Most were somewhere in between. As such, each required one-on-one advising. The Community College Liaisons met with the paraprofessionals at least once per semester for academic advising. Out of the 49 paraprofessionals enrolled at the community colleges, 34 were

White, 12 were Black, two reported being two or more races, and three paraprofessionals did not specify their race.

The paraprofessionals at JMU moved through the online teacher preparation programs in a cohort, enrolled in courses with other. The cohort model helps build community and positive relationships among participants. The Director and the Assistant Director often met with the paraprofessionals as academic or personal issues arose. Out of the 38 paraprofessionals at the university, 25 were White, seven were Black, four reported being two or more races, and two paraprofessionals did not specify their race.

The four Community College Liaisons for the GYO program (Virginia, Mark, Meredith, and Lori) ranged in years of service in this role from less than six months (Mark) to three years (Lori). All were former classroom teachers, and one was also a former school administrator. Their primary responsibilities at the community college varied from instructional faculty and department chairs to academic advisors. All four were selected as Community College Liaisons based on their role at the community college and their respective community college's proximity to the partnering school divisions selected to receive funding through state legislation. The two teacher educators at the university, Joy and Katie, served in the roles of Director and Assistant Director of the GYO program. As former classroom teachers themselves, they drew on their experience to best support the paraprofessionals.

For the purposes of this paper, we chose to focus on the lessons we learned through the first year of implementation of a GYO program supporting paraprofessionals enrolled at the university and at the community colleges.

Data Sources and Analysis

Early on in the creation of the GYO program, we, the Community College Liaisons and the Director/Assistant Director of the GYO program, established monthly meetings to discuss various aspects of the program. The meeting topics include recruitment efforts, student enrollment, student registration, communication with students, advising of students, process of funding distribution by the University Billing Office, transfer guidelines for students ready to apply to the university program, problem solving when issues arose, and a time for questions and answers as needed. Notes were taken during these meetings.

As the Community College Liaisons and the Director/Assistant Director of the GYO program met with students, they took notes detailing what, from the students' perspectives, were going well and what needed to be improved specific to their participation in the GYO program. The students were required to meet with the Community College Liaison at least once a semester, but they often met more often depending on the paraprofessional's needs.

The notes from the monthly conversations and student meetings shed light on the lessons learned while implementing a GYO program. To analyze the data sources, we followed Creswell and Creswell's (2018) coding procedures. First, we read and discussed the notes from our monthly group meetings. Then we examined the notes from the individual student meetings. While examining both data sources, we focused on aspects of the GYO program we should keep or revise. Patterns were organized by themes, and we used peer debriefing with outside researchers to validate interpretations.

Findings

During the first year implementing the GYO program at the community colleges and university, we, as teacher educators, learned several lessons which included: 1) the specific needs

of paraprofessionals; 2) university, community college, and school division policies; and 3) the importance of collaborative relationships.

Specific Needs of Paraprofessionals

One important lesson we learned during the first year of implementing the GYO program was that non-traditional students, who work in schools full time as paraprofessionals, require different types of support based on their needs. Each paraprofessional joined the GYO program with different life experiences which included: their responsibilities as adults; how long it had been since they were a student themselves; and their various levels of comfortability with technology.

All of the paraprofessionals in the GYO program were adults, most of whom worked full-time jobs while also balancing their family responsibilities, often caring for both children and aging parents. At the community college, the paraprofessionals set their own pace of enrollment. They often took one course at a time which in turn slowed down the completion of their degree. The converse also occurred when the paraprofessionals thought they could handle being both a full-time student and employee and ended up with unsatisfactory grades. This slowed down their transfer time to the university and required students to find alternative funding to retake courses. One paraprofessional shared, “I thought I could do it but then by the time I realized I could not ... it just became too much.” At JMU, the Director and Assistant Director of the GYO program saw similar issues although the students moved through the courses as a cohort. Every semester there seemed to be at least one student who got “off track” because life happens such as a death in the family, mental health issues, or a spouse's loss of a job.

Furthermore, with an age range of 23-73, some of the paraprofessionals had not been in a classroom as a student in more than 30 years. For those older students, starting or returning to

college and adapting to new technology at the same time was challenging. Due to work schedules and class offerings, many paraprofessionals elected to take asynchronous online courses at the community college but found them challenging due to not having “face time” with instructors.

At both the community college and university, several of the paraprofessionals struggled with online learning technology (Canvas, email, Google Drive, etc.). “If I could just turn this all in on paper, I would be golden,” a paraprofessional shared during a phone call with the GYO Director, Joy. In addition, many used school division issued computers which sometimes did not allow the paraprofessionals to download certain programs or access particular platforms needed to complete their course work.

University, Community College, and School Division Policies

A three-way Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) was signed between JMU, each participating community college, and the school division(s) in their service area. However, during the first year of the GYO program, we learned that although the MOU outlined each stakeholder’s responsibilities, there were still a lot of policies that needed to be developed or revised in order for the paraprofessionals to have a successful experience in this program. These policies included: the need for individualized advising; streamlining financial disbursement; and navigating practicum and student teaching while working full time.

Out of the six of us, only Meredith was an actual full-time advisor. However, it became clear that many of the GYO paraprofessionals required individual advising due to having a smattering of college credits and/or associate degrees from institutions outside of Virginia or even outside of the United States. This was especially true in the Tidewater area where there is a large military student population. One paraprofessional was especially frustrated stating, “If I did

the work, why won't Virginia accept it? Just because I didn't do it here?" Often this advising crossed institutions due to the specific transfer agreement requirements, which after multiple emails, we (the paraprofessional, the Community College Liaisons, and the university team) often met via zoom to determine if course credits would transfer and meet graduation requirements.

As teacher educators, we had little experience with the financial side of our institutions. Working with the university and community college business offices, as well as those that oversee financial aid, was a big learning curve. Luckily, the experts in those offices were able to provide examples of how other scholarships distribute funds which assisted in streamlining the funding disbursement. This allowed the paraprofessionals at JMU and the community colleges to register for courses without having to pay ahead and then being reimbursed.

The MOU outlined the expectation of flexibility in helping the paraprofessionals meet the requirements necessary for licensure such as practicum hours and student teaching. The majority of the school divisions allowed the paraprofessionals to use their current classroom assignment for their practicum hours. Other paraprofessionals were told to use their planning time and/or lunch breaks to complete the required hours. One paraprofessional shared that their school division, "said that I cannot do any observation during my contracted hours at work... if this is going to be an impossible or very difficult feat moving forward, there is a chance that I may not continue with the program at this time." Some of the paraprofessionals were placed in classrooms or schools that did not align with their degree choice. For example, one paraprofessional worked in a high school but was seeking a degree and licensure in elementary education. Being in a different building than where practicum hours needed to be completed,

made it challenging for the paraprofessional to meet the requirements for their courses. Thus, some paraprofessionals had to transfer to classrooms or schools that aligned with their degree.

Collaborative Relationships

The importance of collaborative relationships is not a new concept to us as teacher educators; however, we were surprised how quickly and deeply those relationships developed not only between the six of us but also with the paraprofessionals we were working to support.

We all agreed that the biggest contributing factor to the collaborative relationships developing between the Community College Liaisons and the Director/Assistant Director of the GYO program were our monthly zoom meetings. Not only did this help everyone get to know each other across the five institutions, but it allowed us to share knowledge which helped us solve problems of various sorts. Mark stated, “Each member of the team has their own thoughts, views and opinions. Being able to work together for a common goal has been beneficial for each of the institutions along with the students who benefit from this great program.” The ability to connect paraprofessionals enrolled at the community college directly with university faculty and program leaders made the process of transfer more successful and gave the paraprofessionals a positive experience in applying and completing a college program. Many of the Community College Liaisons were the only teacher educators in their department. Meredith shared, “Through the team meetings, I was able to strategize with the other liaisons to create best practices and timelines for connecting with students and other institutional partners.” Being able to converse regularly with others who also work at a community college provided a sense of community that we have grown to rely on.

As noted earlier, we also developed collaborative relationships with the paraprofessionals. Due to their work schedule, we often spoke with them via phone or zoom at

nights and on the weekends, getting to interact with their children and/or pets as they often wanted attention during these times. These conversations helped keep the paraprofessionals motivated. One paraprofessional shared, “I extend my thanks to Katie for the constant reminders ... I feel like JMU was a great choice because the reminders help me stay on track with everything.” Likewise, the paraprofessionals got to know all of us on a similar level. For example, since Joy got a new puppy near when many of the paraprofessionals started the program, they would often ask about it when meeting with Joy. In addition, we met more formally with the paraprofessionals in the GYO program several times a semester, which as teacher educators, is not something we typically do unless a student is in a course we teach.

Discussion

This article highlights the lessons we learned at the community college and university during the implementation of a GYO program. By choosing to frame the paper this way, we hope that other teacher educators can use what we learned in applicable ways. In this section, we focus on how we reflected on the lessons learned and took action in order to better support the paraprofessionals and/or to revise aspects of the program.

As the first year progressed, we quickly learned the various paraprofessionals' needs and worked to get them specific support. There are many resources at the community college and JMU that students can access remotely such as learning and technology supports. During conversations with the paraprofessionals, we began sharing specific people in these departments they could ask for which seemed to make reaching out for help a little less scary. Instead of being reactive to the paraprofessionals' needs, now in year two of the GYO program, we are being proactive. For example, we created videos to help the paraprofessionals navigate the application process to JMU which we realized last year was very confusing for many of them.

During orientation meetings, we now provide an overview of Canvas, the learning management system, so that the paraprofessionals have a basic understanding prior to courses starting.

Delgado et al. (2021) notes that paraprofessionals have a lot of expertise specific to the schools and students they work with. Our goal was to provide the necessary supports so they could also be confident in the role of a student.

Abbate-Vaughn and Paugh (2009) noted the following as barriers for non-traditional students interested in becoming a teacher: 1) cost; 2) licensure assessments; and 3) loss of income while student teaching. The legislative funding that JMU received helped alleviate the cost, with the exception of textbooks, provided tutors and paid vouchers for the licensure assessments, and the memorandum of understanding, signed by the community colleges, school divisions, and university prevented any loss of income during student teaching. Despite the alleviation of some barriers, during the first year of the GYO program, we spent a lot of time navigating other university, community college, and school divisions policies. Since we had the opportunity to work with eight different school divisions, we saw how various divisions navigated their own policies. For example, as we noted earlier, some school divisions do not allow the paraprofessional's job to count as practicum and instead they require their employees complete these hours "off the clock." Muñiz (2020) writes about the variety of supports that non-traditional students receive. When we meet with school divisions now, we simply share what other school divisions are doing to support their paraprofessionals. This has led to some reconsideration of policies, no action yet, but we are hopeful.

Collaborative relationships were easy to build but at times challenging to maintain due to busy schedules. However, always at the back of our minds were the statistics of low transfer success (Jenkins & Fink, 2016; Monaghan & Attewell, 2015). Having standing monthly

meetings provided a block of designated time to have conversations about the GYO program.

When Joy saw the call to present at the Fall 2023 Virginia Association of College and Teacher Educators conference, she mentioned it to the group. Presenting together allowed us to see each other in a different light. For example, Lori is very funny and Katie likes to be over prepared.

That experience led to further conversations which ultimately led to writing this article together.

Limitations and Next Steps

Our study is limited in that we only gathered data for the first year of the GYO program and focused specifically on the lessons we learned as teacher educators. Furthermore, as is the case with qualitative research, our own personal experiences and current roles at our institutions likely may have impacted our understanding of the data. However, this study shows how those at two- and four-year institutions can collaborate to support non-traditional students who are interested in becoming teachers by navigating existing policies while building strong relationships.

Research suggests that GYO programs provide a pathway into the field of education for candidates of color and can lead to high retention rates (Carver-Thomas, 2018). Although the demographic data for the first year of the GYO program is more diverse than the on-campus student population at JMU, more needs to be done to address the mismatch of race/ethnicity and cultures between teachers and students. One way we can do this is by having conversations with school divisions about the importance of selecting paraprofessionals of color for the GYO program. Furthermore, as a program, we need to reflect on how we are ensuring that the courses and policies at the community colleges and university are not only culturally relevant but also culturally sustaining to best support a more diverse student body.

We argue that it is not enough for paraprofessionals to earn a degree. We want them to remain in the profession. Beginning teachers who participate in an induction program have higher satisfaction, commitment, are more likely to implement best practices, use effective classroom management strategies, and create an overall positive classroom environment (Schwan et al., 2020). Mentorship and professional development are also key in retaining all teachers but especially teachers in high-need communities. Thus, we argued it was essential for all GYO participants, once they finish their degree, to have access to a university run induction and mentoring program at no cost to their school division.

Findings from our GYO implementation efforts also have important implications for legislative policy. Education programs across the United States are actively developing new and innovative programs, working diligently to recruit students who reflect the demographic characteristics of the students they will teach. However, there are still too many barriers. For example, policies related to admission into teacher preparation programs and requirements for teacher licensure at the state level need to be amended in order to make a dent in teacher shortage and increase the diversity of the teacher population.

Conclusion

As teacher educators, we are passionate about our profession and will do just about anything to support those who want to become teachers. The GYO program offers paraprofessionals the opportunity to start or finish their degree by providing funding with the expectation that they continue to work in the school division they are already employed in. We hope that as other teacher preparation programs implement alternative pathways, equally innovative changes, specific to teacher education accountability and accreditation policies, can

begin to occur at the state and national levels. We welcome any opportunity to be part of the conversations and more importantly the action that must happen.

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