

**Teacher Supply and Demand:
How Do Career Changers' Preparation Programs Really Work?**

Secondary Education

Teacher Recruitment
Non-Traditional Students

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Introduction

The United States is experiencing a shortage of teachers, particularly in critical skill areas such as mathematics and science. The looming shortage caused the School of Education at the University of Michigan-Dearborn to propose a graduate program for initial teacher preparation. The program, proposed in 1998 and inaugurated in 2001, was designed for career changers. Courses were offered in the evenings and student teaching could be accomplished through one semester of paid long-term (not day-to-day) substitute teaching. Career changers were assumed to be people retiring from military service, the civil service, or early retirees from the private sector. The literature portrayed these retirees as vigorous people from 50 to 55 years of age with possible teaching careers of 10 to 15 years. The following sections of this paper portray the School's development of a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) program based on the foregoing career changer assumptions, and then relates what really happened.

Master of Arts in Teaching degrees are a venerable tradition in American higher education. The first such degree was offered by Harvard University in 1947. Many other universities followed the Harvard precedent as the post World War II baby boom expanded K-12 education and a need for many new teachers emerged. Teacher education at the graduate level allowed many veterans to use the G.I. bill (the Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944) to become teachers. In today's volatile economy where career changing is common, a similar opportunity for well-qualified college graduates is appropriate.

Need

After years of surplus the need for new teachers is beginning to outstrip the supply. The average age of a K-12 teacher in Michigan is 46. This is the highest age recorded since such statistics have been gathered. Of the 60,000 Michigan teachers currently employed, 8% are expected to retire each year through 2005. Shortages have already appeared in mathematics and science as well as special education. Many teacher education graduates used to have to work as substitute teachers for a year or more before they achieved permanent positions. Now substitute teachers are in such short supply that the state legislature amended the school code to allow undergraduates with 90 completed college credits to work as substitutes.

Teacher shortages are particularly acute in urban districts. New York City has created a teacher recruitment web site which is updated on a daily basis. Los Angeles sends recruiters across the country. Detroit started the 1996 school year lacking about 300 teachers. Districts advocate alternate teacher certification rules to allow people to enter teaching from non-traditional routes. According to U.S. Department of Labor employment forecasts, high school teaching will be one of the ten best occupational roles though the year 2005 because of the "echo"baby boom and the retirement of many veteran teachers.

Rationale

Because of corporate downsizing and the reduction of the U.S. armed forces from 750,000 to 450,000 people, there are many college graduates who are interested in a career in K-12 education. Some of these people have critical skills, i.e., mathematics, science, or technology. They also bring maturity and knowledge of the job market to teaching assignments. Universities should develop innovative teacher education programs to attract these mature individuals to a career in K-12 education.

Career Changers Profile

There are 154 students in the University of Michigan-Dearborn MAT program. Thirty-five of the students are working as substitute teachers, assistant teachers, or emergency hired teachers. This is a relatively young population--the average age is 29 and all but one are women. This is a group of college graduates who have, in many cases, started families and now have children old enough to attend school. Substitute teaching allows the mothers to have the same hours away from home as the children. In Michigan no credential is necessary to be a substitute teacher. Having experience in the classroom, these women have decided to earn a credential and make teaching their careers. They are not career changers, but people interested in progressing to the next step in their chosen profession.

Fifteen of the MAT students are in sales. These are people with degrees in the humanities or social sciences who found that their marketable skill was that they communicated well. Their average age is 28. This group might have opted for an MBA program, but, apparently, didn't see their future in the private sector. Their communication skills will also be valuable in teaching.

Fourteen students come from positions in manufacturing where they worked primarily in quality control or data processing. They average 32 years of age. These are the people that most commentators think about when they mention career changers. The students have degrees in computer science, the sciences, or engineering. In general, they come from companies that are contracting, at least temporarily. These people may be regarded as career changers although their careers were not of long duration. Only one was old enough to have achieved early retirement with benefits.

The other MAT students represent a cross section of employment choices. Some are receptionists, writers, social workers, realtors, journalists, and small business people. The oldest student is 58 and the youngest is 21. There are five students in their 50's, and 20 students in their 40's. In many cases the 2001-2002 recession has influenced them to seek a career where their services are in demand and their positions will be secure. Interestingly, none of the students were military retirees. Very few had taken an early retirement or buy-out option from an employer.

In light of the claims that career changers are a likely source of future teachers, the University of Michigan-Dearborn experience in the MAT program suggests that retirees from the military or the private sector are not likely to seek careers in K-12 education. The people who are likely to come into alternate certification programs, or programs designed for students who have full-time employment, are in their 20's to early 40's for the most part, and are beginning a career after starting a family or experiencing a lower level job in the private sector. The best place for recruiting future teachers is among the ranks of current substitute teachers.

Abstract

The contemporary literature on teacher supply and demand suggests that career changers including people retiring from the U.S. military and the private sector will be a source of future teachers if only innovative preparation programs can be created to tap this resource. One such program is the Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree at the University of Michigan-Dearborn. After two years of existence, this teacher preparation program has 154 students. The student demographic profile suggests that the expectation that young retirees will enter the teaching field is unrealistic. The average age of the students is 29 years of age and most are embarking on a career in teaching as quickly as family obligations or financial circumstances allow them to do so.