

Navigating the Pipeline: An Action Research Study on Addressing Paraprofessional Barriers to Teacher Preparation

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Abstract: The teacher shortage in the U.S. has prompted many teacher preparation programs to consider proactive recruitment. This action research study describes one such program's process to recruit paraprofessionals and identify their perceived barriers to certification. Using a plan, act, observe, and reflect framework, the study found three major barriers: lack of funds, lack of time, and the need for online courses. The recruitment efforts resulted in 10 paraprofessionals enrolling in the university, a 17.2% conversion rate. These findings underscore the need for TPPs to develop tailored recruitment strategies that address situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers perceived by paraprofessionals.

Keywords: Paraprofessionals, Teacher Preparation

Introduction and Literature Review

The 2022-2023 school year in the U.S. had an estimated 286,000 positions filled by teachers not certified for their assignment (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024; Learning Policy Institute, 2023). In the state of Texas, the 2021-2022 school year experienced a historic 13.4% attrition rate, with 28.8% of new hires lacking Texas certification (a 10% increase from the previous year) (Texas Education Agency, 2023). Our own undergraduate TPP program realized a 14% decrease in students admitted from 2021 to 2022. To address this, we recognized that paraprofessionals represent a promising and underutilized recruitment field. First, paraprofessionals constitute the fastest growing segment of educators, growing from roughly 400,000 to 800,000 from 1993 to 2019. Second, paraprofessionals that acquire teacher certifications are more likely to reflect the racial demographics of their community, tend to stay in the profession longer, possess valuable school experience, and have strong ties to the community, making them more likely to stay in their positions (Bisht et al., 2021; Carver-Thomas, 2018; Villegas and Clewell, 1998; Fogle and Pua, 2024). Given the lack of collaboration around recruitment between our TPP and local districts, we initiated a Grow Your Own program focused on our paraprofessional population. Our aim was to explore how our TPP and partner districts could collaboratively build a sustainable teacher pipeline, while simultaneously seeking to understand the specific barriers paraprofessionals face (Gist et al., 2023).

Our action research study sought to answer the following research questions.

SRATE Journal

A peer-reviewed publication of the
Southeastern Regional Association of Teacher Educators (SRATE)
2025, Volume 34, Issue 2
SRATE.org



1. What perceived barriers do paraprofessionals face when deciding to pursue a teaching certificate?
2. How do TAMUT's recruitment efforts increase enrollment in the paraprofessional pathway to graduation?

Theoretical Framework

Ekstrom's (1972) framework, which Osam et al. (2017) extended to all adult learners, proposes three categories of barriers to post-secondary enrollment. Situational barriers include sociological, familial, and financial factors; for instance, individuals from low socioeconomic backgrounds may lack the finances and institutional capital to navigate higher education. Institutional barriers are structures and processes of higher education that limit access, such as the lack of advising support Abbate-Vaughn and Paugh (2009) found among paraprofessionals. Finally, dispositional barriers are personal attitudes and motivations toward education. For example, Delgado et al. (2021) noted that paraprofessionals of color may experience a conflict between their own identities and the expectations of a predominantly white profession."

Methodology

This action research study addressed the problem of recruiting paraprofessionals into our teacher preparation program. We followed a systematic process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting to implement a targeted innovation that would provide insights for future program improvement.

Context and Participants

The study was conducted within a TPP at a regional Texas university, where local districts have struggled to hire certified teachers due to post-COVID attrition and our own program experienced depressed enrollment. This prompted the development of additional recruitment efforts. In addition, our teacher preparation program has adopted the US Prep Developmental Framework for teacher preparation programs (US Prep National Center, 2024).. This action-research study specifically addressed objective 4.1: Shared Recruitment. The criteria for shared recruitment included the "TPP and school partners enact and monitor written teacher candidate recruitment plans in order to contribute to a teaching workforce that reflects the demographics of the school district partners." Previously, little collaboration existed between districts and our TPP to build recruitment plans. This action-research was an initial effort to establish such plans.

The participants in this study included K-12 paraprofessionals employed in various districts in the surrounding region of our TPP. These paraprofessionals were invited by campus and district administrators. The recruitment team consisted of university TPP faculty.

Innovation/ Intervention

The recruitment innovation was a multistep process that took place during the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 academic semesters. As part of the Plan phase, the TPP sent an initial survey to paraprofessionals in the region to determine initial interest in attending an informational session about our TPP. The results of this survey confirmed high interest by paraprofessionals in our area

to pursue a teaching certification, prompting the development of our Act phase. During the Act phase, first, TPP faculty met with principals and superintendents to share our degree plans, explain the structure of our program, highlighting the accessibility of the program for paraprofessionals, and to request an audience with their paraprofessionals. Second, faculty met with paraprofessionals in face-to-face meetings. These meetings took two forms: individual consultations or large group informational sessions. During these sessions, TPP faculty shared program information including course modalities, financial aid opportunities, and clinical teaching pathways. Paraprofessionals interested in learning more shared their contact information and follow-up meetings were scheduled to develop individual continuing education plans. Paraprofessionals were asked to bring college transcripts, if applicable, to begin the creation of an individualized degree plan. Lastly, paraprofessionals received follow up communication in the form of a personalized card, inviting the paraprofessional to reach out for additional information or to enroll in the university.

Data Collection

Data were collected during the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 academic semesters. At paraprofessional meetings, an online survey was administered to collect information on participants' level of education, current job role, desire for teacher certification, and perceived barriers. To measure recruitment effectiveness, new university enrollment from the Fall 2023 semester was cross-referenced with sign-in sheets from the informational sessions.

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics to determine overall percentage of responses were calculated for Level of Education and Current Job Role. Current barriers were determined through an open coding approach that allowed for categorization of comments based on units of information. Patterns in comments were identified and coded as themes. Following the initial coding of open-ended survey responses, a clear pattern of barriers emerged. To organize and interpret these findings in a meaningful way, we applied the framework of adult learning barriers proposed by Ekstrom (1972) and elaborated on by Osam et al, (2017).

The effectiveness of our recruitment efforts were measured by the conversion of paraprofessionals we interacted with into enrolled students in the university with a declared major that included teacher certification. This included calculating frequencies and percentages to determine the number of paraprofessionals contacted, the number who enrolled with degrees seeking teacher certification, and the resulting conversion rate.

Results

During the Fall 2022 and Spring 2023 academic semesters, the recruitment initiative engaged 58 paraprofessionals through informational sessions and direct meetings. Of these, 34 completed the online survey designed to assess their educational background, current roles, and perceived barriers to certification.

Level of Education and Job Role

Table 1 summarizes the educational background and roles of the paraprofessionals.

Table 1. Paraprofessional Level of Education and Job Roles.

Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Highest Level of Education		
High School Diploma/GED	4	12.12
Some College (no degree)	11	33.33
Trade/Technical/Vocational Training	0	0
Associate's Degree	9	27.27
Bachelor's Degree	8	24.24
Master's Degree	1	3.03
Current Job Role		
Teacher of Record	4	12.12
Instructional Aid	22	66.67
Non Instructional Aid	7	21.21
Total		

Perceived Barriers

Analysis of the open-ended survey responses identified three major themes as prominent barriers to pursuing teacher certification: lack of time, lack of finances, and the need for an online option. Less frequently mentioned, but still worth considering, were unique factors such as GPA concerns, a fear of failure, and a lack of information.

Major Themes

Three major themes emerged from the data as prominent reasons for hesitating to pursue a teacher certification: lack of time, lack of finances, and the need for an online option.

Lack of time. Paraprofessionals experience many competing, time intensive responsibilities that act as a deterrent to taking on additional responsibilities. In fact, 47% of the 19 paraprofessionals that provided barriers to seeking a teacher certification mentioned the lack of time as a significant impediment. For example, one paraprofessional simply stated, "Finding the time." Another paraprofessional highlighted shifting family obligations during different seasons of life. "My focus has been more on my family the last few years. My youngest is starting pre-k in

August and feel now is the right time to start.” Other paraprofessionals cited their work schedule as a barrier, explaining that balancing school with work and family felt insurmountable.

Lack of Funds. Of the 19 paraprofessionals that explained barriers to seeking a teacher certification, 21% mentioned the financial constraints as a significant impediment to pursuing teacher certification. While some comments were direct, such as simply stating 'Money' or 'Finances,' others elaborated on the intricate link between their current employment and family support. Participants expressed the necessity of maintaining full-time employment to provide for their families, making any reduction in work hours for schooling financially unfeasible. As one paraprofessional articulated, 'I need to stay employed in order to help provide for my family.'

Need Online Option. The strong desire for flexible, online course options emerged as a critical theme, inherently linked to the time and financial barriers articulated by paraprofessionals. Twenty-one percent of the 19 paraprofessionals that provided barriers emphasized the need for virtual learning modalities to enable their continued education. One paraprofessional succinctly explained the interconnectedness of these primary challenges: 'I am a mom with three boys and a husband. I need to have income coming in to help support my family. Therefore, it would be difficult to take in person classes.'

Spring 2023 Enrollment

To assess the immediate recruitment effectiveness for Spring 2023, the roster of paraprofessionals who participated in informational sessions was cross-referenced with university enrollment data for students declaring a major in teacher certification. This analysis revealed that 10 of the 58 paraprofessionals (representing a 17.2% conversion rate) who attended these sessions matriculated into the university with the intent of seeking a teacher certification. This enrollment figure exclusively represents direct university admissions and does not account for paraprofessionals who may have enrolled in local junior colleges with the intention of transferring to the university in subsequent semesters.

Discussion

This study used Ekstrom's (1972) framework to analyze the perceived barriers paraprofessionals face in pursuing a teacher certification, while also examining the impact of our recruitment efforts on enrollment. Our findings revealed prominent situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers, with lack of time, lack of funds, and the need for an online option emerging as primary challenges. Despite these challenges, a systematic recruitment approach resulted in a 17.2% conversion rate, with 10 of 58 participants enrolling in our university's TPP.

Interactions Between Situational and Institutional Barriers

The most prominent barriers identified were situational, directly reflecting the life demands of adult learners. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2024) reports that most teacher assistants are over 25, an age group often with family and financial obligations—a condition Wladis et al. (2023) term "Time Poverty." Our data, which revealed a lack of time and funds as primary themes, reflects these same life demands. The need for online courses, in fact, can be categorized as an institutional barrier, since many programs lack these options, thereby preventing students with less financial support and discretionary time from continuing their education. Online courses, for instance, offer a partial solution to the themes of time and funds by providing the flexibility to work and care for families (Gambrell & Bennett, 2023). Prior research has quantified non-traditional students' need

for online courses due to being time poor. Wladis, et al. (2023) determined that students enrolled in online courses experienced 11.8 more hours per week of non-discretionary time (consisting of childcare, work, and housework), were significantly older, and had roughly twice as many children than students enrolled in face-to-face courses. Yet, these same students were more likely to successfully complete their online courses.

While not as prevalent in the data, additional institutional barriers worth considering include GPA and the lack of information. GPA admission requirements are a continuing debate within educator preparation circles, some calling for higher GPA requirements and others identifying the lack of research to support such policies. A study by Van Overschelde and Lopez (2019) demonstrated that policies that would increase GPA requirements for admission would promote exclusion of minority and male students from TPP admittance, and showed mixed results on teacher performance. Therefore, researchers have argued for alternate criteria for admittance such as letters of recommendation, interviews, teaching experience, residency in the community, and skills in a second language which would support inclusion of paraprofessionals (Villegas and Clewell, 1998).

Finally, our program had made many adjustments in previous years to remove barriers for admittance and program completion, namely lowering the GPA requirement from 2.8 to 2.7, scheduling all courses to online or evening timeslots, and gaining access to a significant teacher candidate scholarship. However, during sessions with district and campus administrators and with paraprofessionals, we consistently found our district partners were unaware of program pathways and structures, as well as financial support we offered. Research shows that a lack of accurate information causes traditional students to misjudge the viability of college (De la Rosa and Tierney, 2023). This study extends that finding to non-traditional students, further confirming that a lack of information is a significant barrier to their continuing education (Page and Scott-Clayton, 2015). Initiating conversations with district and campus administrators empowered key leaders to share accurate information and provide us access to paraprofessionals interested in pursuing a teacher certification. During initial meetings with paraprofessionals we were able to directly address perceived barriers and open the door for one-on-one consultations where we could further build relationships, assuage fears, and navigate situational, institutional, and dispositional barriers by creating concrete and individualized plans toward program completion and teacher certification. Our efforts to dismantle this barrier underscore the importance of targeted communication in promoting equitable educational opportunities for this population.

Dispositional Barriers

Also, fear of failure has been categorized as a dispositional barrier by Ekstrom (1972) and Osam et al. (2017). Personal characteristics, such as a person's self efficacy, can cause a potential student pause when considering enrolling in school or applying for program admittance. One-on-one consultations, as previously discussed, can help address this barrier by promoting relationship building and individualized planning.

Implications for Practice

Ekstrom's (1972) framework can serve as a systematic guide for Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) to categorize and address barriers for paraprofessionals. To mitigate **situational**

barriers, EPPs can offer evening and online courses, seek scholarship funds, and develop clinical teaching pathways like paid residencies. These efforts, supported by strong district partnerships, can also provide flexible work schedules.

To address institutional barriers, EPPs can create resources and systems such as FAQ documents and processes for faculty advising to assist students who struggle to navigate institutional processes such as financial aid and course registration. EPPs can also consider alternate admission requirements for paraprofessionals, especially those transferring from community colleges, such as writing samples, letters of recommendation, experience teaching, and skills in a second language (Villegas and Clewell, 1998).

Lastly, a number of dispositional barriers may be particularly common amongst paraprofessionals such as self-efficacy, sense of autonomy, and self-concept as a learner. While dispositional barriers must be resolved by the individual, Osam et al. (2017) suggested that one-on-one interactions with students can assuage fears and promote relationship building, in effect, providing reassurance in light of extant dispositional barriers.

Finally, EPPs can use established frameworks to guide partnership building with districts for recruitment. For example, the four levers of the Torre Gibney et al. (2020) model—creating a shared vision, identifying key roles, ensuring time for collaboration, and sharing data—can be applied, alongside resources from organizations like Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (2022) and the Texas Education Agency (2024), to guide the development of quality district partnerships.

Limitations

Our study consisted of a small sample size of 58 participants of which only 34 completed the survey. In addition only 19 of the participants provided barriers to continuing education. While the data provided valuable insights to our program and recruitment plans, it cannot be generalized to perceptions of paraprofessionals beyond the current sample. Similarly, TPPs should consider how the findings relate to their unique program structures and needs rather than a strict application of the processes presented. Lastly, the aim of action research is not to make causal claims, but to understand how specific actions within a problem of practice may or may not result in desired outcomes followed by reflection and further action.

Future Research Questions

This study prompts several questions for future research. A key area for inquiry is to track the enrollment of paraprofessionals who interact with TPP recruitment efforts at local community colleges, as well as their subsequent transfer to the university. This would help answer the question of how TPP recruitment influences enrollment in the broader teacher pipeline.

Second, the initial success of our informal collaboration raises questions about the impact of a more formalized plan. Future research could explore the effect of a formalized, cohort-based program—where courses are held on K-12 campuses—on the enrollment, retention, and academic success of paraprofessionals from rural districts. Such an inquiry could further reduce time and location barriers and allow researchers to investigate the effectiveness of faculty connecting theory and practice within the K-12 context.

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