

An Exploratory Case Study of the Experiences for a Graduate of Call Me MiSTER

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Abstract: The continuing teacher shortage has had a significant impact on recruiting and sustaining teachers particularly those working in South Carolina public schools. This qualitative study aimed to explore the experiences of a Call Me MiSTER scholar. Data was collected through an semi-structured interview who participated in the program at a small southeastern university. Thematic analysis was used to identify common themes in the data: (1) mentoring, (2) financial assistance, and (3) relationships. The results highlight the importance of emotional, social, and monetary aid as key components of the program. Implications and future research will be discussed.

Keywords: Call Me MiSTER, Grow Your Own

Introduction

The lack of a stable and prepared teaching work force in the United States continues to be a concern. According to Tan et al. (2024), more than 400,000 teaching positions nationally were either unstaffed or staffed by teachers who were not certified for those assignments. The impacts of shortages and certification are not benign. Teachers with certification in the area of instruction outperform teachers who lack the appropriate certification (Lindström et al., 2025). Additionally, teachers with appropriate certification are more likely to demonstrate continuity at a school, which is important given that teacher turnover and attrition have been shown to negatively affect student academic performance and incur significant costs (Carver-Thomas & Darling-Hammond, 2017; Ronfeldt et al., 2013). These trends also have a tremendous impact on individual states including South Carolina. In the 2023-24 academic school year, there were almost 1,600 unfilled teacher positions statewide which represents a roughly 10% increase from 2022-23 (Ropp, 2024).

Grow Your Own Programs

Clearly solutions are needed to mitigate the shortages in the state of South Carolina. Grow your own (GYO) programs have been proposed as one of the solutions to address teacher shortages. GYOs represent a broad range of partnerships and program models to build a workforce of teachers from the communities they live and were taught (Irizarry,

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2007). These partnerships represent a range of initiatives from alternative pathways to teaching licensure and secondary public school bridge programs (Gist et al., 2019).

The literature on GYOs reveals several themes regarding the motivation of individuals who join and stay in these programs. Several studies indicate that participants are interested in opportunities to learn about teaching, engage in classroom activities, and start constructing their professional identities as teachers (Chu & Weems, 2024; Myers et al., 2023). Jackson and Wake (2022) reported seminal experiences in the program that nudge participants into the field of education. GYO high school completers described a positive impact which encouraged them to enroll in teacher preparation programs and become teachers. Additionally, practical and contextual applications of teaching were also reported to be an important attraction for participants (Myers et al., 2023).

Another common theme is the participants' desire to provide service to their communities. Studies on GYOs reveal that participants recognize the need for teachers in their areas and wish to make an impact for their local district (Davila, 2025; Gist et al., 2019). For example, Davila (2025) indicated GYO members found it empowering to teach in their communities because they understood the assets and contextual needs of students. This feature of GYOs provided them the confidence to work with students because they could relate to students and share their stories.

A persistent theme in the literature is the importance of mentorship and support. Participants in GYO are typically provided mentorship and support from experienced educators. Mentorship in the literature ranges from structured coursework offered through universities to learning academies sponsored by local school districts (Chu & Weems, 2024; Simieou et al., 2021). Chu and Weems reported the strong influence of program mentors on the development of teacher identity and engagement in teaching. Through observing their mentors' teaching and providing context related to their teaching, members were able to see themselves as future educators and felt confident they could be successful in the profession.

Beyond the support of mentorship, GYO participants consistently communicate the significance of financial assistance to fund membership in programs (Davila 2025; Myers et al., 2023). Simieou et al. (2021) detailed the expense of tuition for a teacher education program as an obstacle from entering the field. Funding for the program provided the opportunity to enroll and complete the coursework to become a licensed teacher.

Call Me MiSTER

The Call Me MiSTER (CMM) program is an example of a university-based GYO devised to address the teacher shortage on the regional level. The program began in 2000 at Clemson University and three historically black colleges and universities (HCBUs), Benedict College, Claflin University and Morris College, with the goal to increase the pool of black male teachers in elementary schools. (Jones et al., 2019). Since its inception, CMM has grown to a national project with partnerships across 50 colleges, universities and HCBUs. Additionally, in the last several years, CMM expanded to include all areas for teacher licensure across K-12 public education.

MiSTERS, an acronym for Mentors Instructing Towards Effective Role Models, provides mentoring for participants through experiences (i.e., weekly seminars,

conferences, professional development, internships) with university-based faculty meant to augment the curriculum of traditional teacher education programs. CMMs conceptual framework is based on five tenants: ambassadorship, brother's keeper, teacher efficacy, personal growth, and servant leadership. The tenants form the basis for how cohort members are to comport themselves in their professional and personal lives. MiSTERS receive instruction on the tenants and spend time reflecting and evaluating their individual development in these five areas across their time in the program.

A faculty member at the partnering university is deemed the site coordinator who plans and implements the supplemental experiences and curriculum to further the growth of MiSTERS. In terms of fostering solidarity, CMM uses a cohort model to network and develop close relationships with cohort members across the university experience. The program provides participants funding in exchange for an agreement to teach in public schools for as many years as financial assistance is received. According to Jones et al. (2019), the program has successfully prepared hundreds of fully certified MiSTERS teaching in public schools.

There is a relatively small body of literature that is concerned with CMM. The limited work on the topic has focused on the aspects of the program that make it appealing to participants. In particular, Lennon (2016) identified a combination of structural program factors, such as specific coursework to engage students and financial incentive to enroll and retain membership in CMM. Lennon also found a strong relationship component for the program. For example, MiSTERS reported program satisfaction through the support of cohort peers and mentoring from faculty. These findings suggest intentional features of the CMM project encourage motivation to enroll and stay.

Purpose & Research Questions

As a result of the continued teacher shortage and associated academic impacts on students, clearly GYOs such as CMM play a prominent role in staffing appropriately credentialed teachers. The existing body of research on CMM suggests that features of the organization, peer/faculty relationships, and funding conform with the literature on GYOs (Simieou et al., 2021). However, previous work in this area is not peer-reviewed and limited to local interviews. The next logical step in examining CMM is to begin a systematic study of the experiences, program features, and outcomes. This study represents work in the former to better understand design elements and participant experiences of CMM that encourage enrollment, foster engagement and retention, and, lastly, set MiSTERS on a course of a successful early career teaching. Based on that line of inquiry, the current study wishes to address the following research question: What are a participant's experiences as a CMM scholar?

Method

Participant

The participant was an African-American male in his early twenties. He obtained a Bachelor's degree in Educational Studies and a Master's degree and license in teaching

middle level education in history/social studies. Currently, the participant teaches social studies at a middle school in a rural school district. He attended a small, public university in the southeast and participated in the Call Me MiSTER program for 5 years, including his masters. The participant was also a member of the Teaching Fellows program in the college of education for four years (undergraduate). He was enrolled at the institution before, during and after the period of time associated with the Covid-19 epidemic.

Data Collection and Analysis

The researchers used an exploratory, single case study framework (Gerring, 2004) which consisted of a convenience sample from the first author's CMM program. Data was collected using a single semi-structured interview (see Appendix A) using an online collaboration platform. Transcripts were developed through the recording from the interview. The interview questions were adapted from a protocol used in a previous study that investigated the perceptions of participants in Call Me MiSTER (Lennon, 2016). The questions focused on the experiences of the individual participant. The qualitative data in this study were generated from the responses to the open-ended questions during the interview.

Data analysis consisted of narrative thematic analysis. This method is a common practice in case study research used to discover and analyze themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2006). The first and second author completed an initial reading of the interview transcript and developed initial codes describing ideas from the reading. As indicated by methods of narrative thematic analysis, patterns were identified in the data and relationships were identified between ideas or concepts (Krueger & Casey, 2009). Multiple methods of triangulation were undertaken by the authors. Qualitative coding was conducted by all of the researchers coding independently to verify the patterns and themes that emerged and to establish inter-rater reliability. The researchers then conferred to reach agreement for each code, concept, and category using percentage agreement. The researchers analyzed the qualitative data using open and axial coding. Initial open codes were generated independently and secondarily grouped conceptually into categories. Participant validation (member checking) of the identified themes provided additional validation.

Findings

Mentoring

The participant commented that the site coordinator provided him with individual feedback that helped him in his life. He commented how the site coordinator mentored him how to act in professional settings and when to demonstrate business-like assertiveness. For example:

He always told us to establish a "presence" instead of simply "being present" in a room and that's so true when it comes to education you need to show up as your full self and be authentic and you know bring all your skills to the table. Don't sit in the back and be quiet; be present, have a presence when you're in a room and don't just sit back so that was a big thing that really helped me stay in the program with just him being that really big on accountability and responsibility and things like that and mentorship and you know he

would take us out to eat and we would just go hang out and talk and catch up different things like that.

Later in the conversation, the participant reflected on the impact of mentoring from speakers and working together with another GYO at the university. To illustrate: The main benefits too because you know we had a lot of guest speakers come in talking to us about different things, collaborating with other organizations like Teaching Fellows that was a lot of the strengths of MiSTER”

Financial Assistance

A strong theme that emerged from the interview was the enticement and impact of the funding provided by the program. The participant commented how important the financial assistance was to attend the intended institution or even higher education. For example, he commented, “of course goes back to the financial piece without funding. I promise I probably would not be at University or any school at all.” He elaborated that: Financial assistance was the biggest piece for me for joining MiSTER as the first generation college student you know we no one knows anything and no one has pretty much the funds to do it to get you through school so it was pretty much having that financial piece and being willing to work towards getting more financial assistance through the passing of the Praxis

Relationships

During several times in the interview, the participant mentioned topics related to developing relationships among and across cohorts of MiSTERs. In terms of within cohort relationships, he said:

The cohort built a lot of our friendships off of you know just being a MiSTER and just having rooming together. The rooming assignments were a main benefit. You know, you came in with somebody you didn't know and then you leave with a really good friend, so that was a really good one.

At another point in the conversation, the participant discussed how interacting with upperclassman and alumni provided support to MiSTERs near the beginning of their higher education:

Just networking throughout my with the older MiSTERs having them come back and share their experiences about teaching once they've gotten there, you seen them go off you seen them go throughout the program it's like oh now they're finally there and so it's kind of giving you hope that you'll be there one day and that you'll be strongest just like they are and you'll make it

Discussion

This study set out with the aim of illustrating the experiences of a member of a cohort in the CMM program at a medium sized university. Part of the research was investigating how episodes of participation helped shape a participant's view of the program on their progress as a teacher.

Financial assistance

Attending higher education is expensive and that cost may present a barrier for individuals who wish to pursue a college degree (Hanson, 2024). The theme of financial assistance is consistent with the existing literature on why GYO's are viewed favorably by participants (Myers et al., 2023; Simieou et al., 2021). Davila (2025) participants reported that financial support was probably the most important part of the program. This finding was also consistent with the limited literature on the CMM program (Jones et al., 2019). Lennon (2016) indicated the funding offered by the program was a strong incentive to recruit and retain cohort members.

A strong and regular theme that emerged from the present study was the enticement and impact of the funding provided by the program. The participant expressed how important the financial assistance was as a first generation college student and that without that incentive, it would have been difficult to attend. The participant further commented that enhanced funding due to adequate licensure test scores was beneficial. The original CMM funding model encouraged cohort members to take and pass the Praxis CORE tests of reading, writing, and math early in their college career to remove that barrier from being admitted to the teacher education program and advancing to internship. In sum, the current study reiterated the importance of financial assistance to engage and maintain future educators through a GYO.

Mentoring

Jones et al. (2019) emphasized the significant role of mentoring in the success of CMM. For example, the authors stated "the program creates a safe environment that serves as an ongoing laboratory for CMM men to learn how to improve upon developing interpersonal relationships and to grapple with and resolve personal struggles without fear of not recovering from making mistakes" (p. 61). In other words, the program provides members the opportunities, through a low-stakes environment, to be vulnerable and take risks in the idea to improve their personal and professional selves under the close mentorship of program staff. The participant reported the site coordinator mentored him through instruction and feedback to enhance his dispositions in professional settings. The site coordinator also met with him frequently for lunch and conversations. The comments show the mentoring provided by the site coordinator clearly played a critical role in retaining the participant through those activities. Further, the participants commented the importance of individuals who spoke at seminars was key in his development in being introduced to a breadth of topics.

Prior studies that have noted the importance of mentoring in GYO's (Chu & Weems, 2024; Simieou et al., 2021). Simieou et al. (2021) reported the program coordinator proved essential through mentoring and support provided to candidates passing of licensure exams. This was accomplished with the candidates working closely with the coordinator through seminars and workshops to provide them the knowledge, skills, and most importantly the confidence to be successful on the tests. Relatedly, Mensah et al. (2024) discussed the significance of mentoring as program members transitioned from preparation to the classroom. The participants in their study commented that mentoring

during that phase of the development helped them be successful in their early career to keep them in teaching.

Relationships

In a review of key components to successful GYO, Muñiz (2020) indicated effective programs provide various forms of support, including academic, emotional, and social to candidates. Jones and colleagues (2019) included a core tenant of CMM, the concept of Brother's Keeper. This is defined as "an awareness of intra- and interpersonal dynamics that allows the participant to respect and empower individuals, while galvanizing the collective strength of the entire team for the purpose of advancing individual, group, and organizational objectives" (p. 59).

This is consistent with the literature on the experiences of GYO members who found support through strong social bonds as important. Kamler and Goubeaud (2018) found the intentional development of relationships among cohort members represented a seminal feature of the evaluated program.

Implications

These findings suggest that funding for teacher education programs remains an important issue for students. On several instances, the participant in the current study remarked on the financial assistance offered by CMM as a driving force for membership. Based on this finding, GYO programs should continue to explore funding streams to support members. Costs for teacher education programs for a four-year program continue to rise and place the burden of expenses on students that exceed one-hundred thousand dollars cumulatively (Hanson, 2024). The assistance provided through GYOs, such as CMM, does not cover all of the costs for a teacher education program, but clearly the financial assistance helped to recruit and retain him in the program. Another possibility for GYO programs include applying for tuition credits from partnering institutions to increase affordability for teacher candidates.

Limitations & Future Directions

The exploratory nature of the study represents the perspective of a single program participant. It would be interesting to collect data from additional MiSTERS at different university programs. This would allow future investigations to further explore the MiSTER experience and analyze key themes. Several contextual limitations constrain the generalization on the experiences of the participant in the study. First, the participant in the current study experienced serious disruptions in his university experience: COVID and the CMM site coordinator was replaced midway through his program of academic study. It would be interesting to see if program completers provide the same responses who did not have these same disturbances. The participant's program of study was different from other graduates in his cohort: he graduated with teaching licensure as part of his Masters. Additionally, he was a part of two GYOs, the South Carolina Teaching Fellows and CMM. It may be insightful to analyze the experiences of MiSTERS and MiSTERS plus Teaching Fellows to see how their experiences helped shape their progress.

An issue of importance that may benefit from a deeper investigation is the theme of mentoring identified in current study. In other words, how meaningful were the experiences of being mentored in the program. Perhaps additional research in this area will illuminate experiences and identify other key experiences that are most valued by graduates.

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