

**A Delphi Study of Cooperating Teacher Needs**

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### **Introduction**

The very first item identified as part of the mission of the National Council for Agricultural Education Strategic Plan in 2012-2015 states, “the preparation, retention, and advancement of high-quality agricultural educators” (The Council, 2018). Further reflecting the need for retention of agriscience teachers, research priorities three and five of the American Association for Agricultural Education (AAAE) identify the need for high quality programs, as well as the recruitment and success of agricultural educators in all stages of their career (Roberts, Harder & Brashears, 2016). Some suggested approaches to retaining those who are already in the field have included the design of professional development workshops for new and incoming teachers, modification to teacher preparation programs, and the implementation of teacher mentor programs, as well as dialogue on the current status of this trend (Lemons, Brashear, Burris, Meyers, & Morrison, 2017; Boone, 2010).

A substantial amount of research has focused on the importance of cooperating teachers and their influence on the careers of pre-service and early career teachers. The student teaching experience is a culminating experience that allows the student teacher to apply the theory and knowledge that was gained in the teacher education program and put it into practice. This capstone experience allows student teachers to gain valuable knowledge and skills that will be applied in their early teaching career (Smalley, Retallick & Paulsen, 2015). It is important to prepare and train cooperating teachers who will play such a vital role in the development of future agricultural educators (Foster, Lawver & Smith, 2015). To determine the preparation and support needs of cooperating teachers in Florida, a Delphi study was conducted in 2018.

### **Conceptual Framework**

The Delphi technique consists of a research-based method to obtain group consensus (Warner, 2015). This process is utilized when information about an area is not readily available but is beneficial for gaining perspective from stakeholders, without any geographical limitations (Brodeur, C.W., Higgins, C., Galindo-Gonzalez, S., Craig, D.D., & Haile, T., 2011). The Delphi is an iterative process that obtains anonymous feedback from experts by a series of data collection and evaluation procedures, mixed with the opportunity for expert panelist input (Skulmoski, Hartmann & Krahn, 2007). This study followed recommended Delphi panelist numbers of 15-20 respondents, with most studies typically under 50 (Ludwig, 1997; Witkin & Altschuld, 1995).

### **Methodology**

In this study, the input from the expert panel in the Delphi study was utilized to inform training and support components for a Preparation and Assistance for Cooperating Teachers (PACT) Program that was developed and tested by the researcher. Participants who partnered with the AEC Department in supervising a student teacher between the years 2016-2018 were sought for their expertise and utilized for input in a Delphi study.

In the first round of the Delphi study, panelists were asked to reflect on any and all experiences they had supervising a student teacher, and to list all possible responses to the

question, “Based on your experiences as a cooperating teacher, what kinds of support and/or preparation would have benefitted your experience with the student teacher(s)/intern(s) that you have previously hosted?” After gaining input from panelists in the initial round, the second round of the survey asked for responses using a five-point, Likert-type scale, while also leaving the option to add any additional commentary in an open-ended format. After analysis, consensus was found, and the statements were retained for the third and final round of the Delphi survey.

### **Findings**

After combining responses that overlapped in their context and meaning, there were twenty types of preparation and support needs that were identified. Consensus was achieved on 7 items, while the other 13 did not reach the two-thirds agreement requirement and were removed for the third iteration. The researcher utilized the standards of at least two-thirds of the respondents selecting a strongly agree or agree a priori as the required level of consensus and for the inclusion into the third round of the survey (Conner, Roberts & Harder, 2013). In the third round of the Delphi, consensus was achieved on 6 of the 7 items that were within the set definition of consensus, based on responses from round two of the study. The items that reached consensus included the desire to have examples of student teaching handbook components, lesson plan templates from University/AEC courses, the hosting of a cooperating teacher workshop, attending a meeting with the intern before the start of the internship to get to know them better and plan for the semester, being able to learn about the intern’s strengths and abilities prior to the internship beginning, and strategies put in place for establishing early communication with the cooperating teacher from the student teaching intern.

### **Conclusions**

The Delphi study uncovered several recommended items for knowledge, skills, and support needed by cooperating teachers before and during the student teaching experience. The consensus of the expert panel of cooperating teachers revealed six specific items relating to preparation and support needs. The items that reached consensus were shared with the AEC Teacher Education faculty in the planning of a cooperating teacher workshop.

### **Implications**

The expert panel revealed that there is a need for further preparation and support beyond what was currently being provided to cooperating teachers. Teacher preparation programs should establish early training for cooperating teachers, as well as communication with their prospective student teacher. Cooperating teacher workshops offer the opportunity not only to connect with mentors within the university’s teacher preparation program, but also begin to develop a relationship and rapport with the student teacher that will spend most of a semester working with the cooperating teacher. This information could be utilized to put specific practices in place where they might be needed, or where they were weakly supported. The results of this study signify a need for regular and constant communication with the cooperating teacher during the student teaching internship.

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