

Building Community for Cooperating Teachers

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Introduction

One of the most powerful influences in the student teacher's internship experience is their cooperating teacher (Norris et al., 1990). Cooperating teachers can work to develop and strengthen their mentorship skills through professional development and mentorship programming (He, 2010; Young & MacPhail, 2005). Positive internship experiences can help student teachers improve their self-efficacy and potentially remain successful in their teaching career (Edgar et al., 2011; Hamman, et al., 2006; Rocca, 2005; Swan et al., 2011).

Beyond the preparation and support of cooperating teachers, efforts are also being made to help cooperating teachers feel valued and appreciated for their important contributions. The Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida has been working to build community amongst their partnering school based agricultural education (SBAE) cooperating teachers. This camaraderie allows teachers emotional and psychological support as they embrace their extensive cooperating teacher role and responsibilities (Erickson, et al., 2006; Kram, 1988). The use of building community has been found to be an effective pedagogy (Kraus & Sears, 2008). Lieberman and Miller (2008) support the use of work communities to aide in teachers' want to apply and embrace new skills learned in professional trainings. To build this community, Brown's (2001) three-stage process of community building was utilized with the 2022 cohort of cooperating teachers. These steps include: (1) building friendly relationships and (2) "community conferment" through pre-internship professional development and (3) "camaraderie" through monthly zoom meetings and a cooperating teacher recognition program.

How it Works

This program was designed to support SBAE teachers in their role as cooperating teachers and has grown to foster a community of SBAE cooperating teachers within the state of Florida. Prior to the spring internship, the cooperating teachers are brought together for an onboarding meeting via zoom. This is the first time they can connect with one another and begin to connect with others taking on this same professional responsibility. The onboarding meetings also introduce them to their mentor role as cooperating teachers, the expectations in this role, and provide guidance through a mentorship manual. Next, the cooperating teachers are brought together face-to-face to participate in mentoring professional development and are provided time to work closely with their student teacher to plan for the spring internship. Experienced cooperating teachers and student teachers share their insight on what worked best for them in their internship. Once the spring internship begins, the cooperating teachers utilize a cooperating teacher website as a support tool for the mentoring of their student teacher. Additionally, they are given the opportunity to participate in monthly zoom sessions with their fellow cooperating teachers. In these zoom sessions, their conversations revolve around celebrating their growth as a mentor, as well as some of their challenges and ways to approach them with their student teachers.

To continue to build the community of cooperating teachers, the SBAE mentors are recognized and celebrated by the university, their students, their student teacher, and the Florida FFA association. The teachers are highlighted on the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida's Teach Ag website. The cooperating teachers are also recognized on stage at the Florida FFA association convention with their student teacher and presented with their agricultural education family tree. This family tree showcases their former agriculture teacher and cooperating teacher, as well as their current and past student teachers and

past students who have become teachers. Finally, the cooperating teachers are given a tuition waiver by the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida that is good for one graduate course for every student teacher that they have supervised.

Results to Date

The program originated in 2018 to support school based agricultural education teachers in their role as cooperating teachers and mentors. Since then, a community of SBAE cooperating teachers has grown with the addition of professional developments, zoom meetings, and recognition. In 2022, 15 cooperating teachers participated in the Department of Agricultural Education and Communication at the University of Florida's cooperating teacher program. On a scale of 1 = extremely useful, 2 = very useful, 3 = moderately useful, 4 = slightly useful, and 5 = not at all useful, cooperating teachers rated resources and support that were provided during the internship. Cooperating teachers reported that the most useful resources were reminders for upcoming forms and assignments ($M = 1.33$, $SD = .49$), reminders for upcoming student teacher seminars and topics ($M = 1.47$, $SD = .52$), and mentoring tips ($M = 1.67$, $SD = .72$). Additionally, cooperating teachers participated in interviews where they expressed their appreciation for the support program, as well as how the monthly zoom meetings allowed them space to build a "family" of teachers willing to support each other.

Future Plans/Advice to Others

Future plans for this program involve the continuation of the cooperating teacher support program and the building of community amongst cooperating teachers. We are currently partnering with teacher preparation program in other states around the country in implementing cooperating teacher support programs of this kind. We have found this program to be effective in Florida and hope that this multi-state view will provide a broader perspective.

As we look to the future, funding opportunities for expanded support are being pursued. The funding would be utilized to provide substitutes teachers for cooperating teachers during professional development, as well as travel expenses for a two-day cooperating teacher training. Expanding from the current one-day training to a two-day training would allow for expansion of the mentorship training, time with their student teachers, and more time to build relationships with one another. Our hope is that additional funding would be utilized to supplement cooperating teachers with an honorarium for the time invested in this important role.

Our advice to teacher preparation programs is to identify a faculty member that is interested in spearheading this program and who is committed to its development. This faculty member should also work closely with the student teaching coordinator. We also recommend implementing this program in stages, potentially beginning with onboarding and professional development, a mentor manual, and then the addition of an online support platform, bi-weekly communication, monthly zoom sessions, and cooperating teacher recognition.

Resources Needed

The main resources needed to build a community of effective cooperating teachers include time for a faculty member, a budget for program implementation (~\$500) and cooperating teacher recognition expenses (~\$150), a collaboration with the state's FFA organization to coordinate cooperating teacher recognition on stage at convention, and the development of an online platform to house the website-based resource tools (~\$200). Estimates total about \$850 for the program. Graduate assistantship support is highly recommended to help with all aspects of this program.

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