

Matchmaker, Matchmaker: A Student Teaching Fair to Establish Teacher Candidate and Cooperating Teacher Relationships

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Introduction

Teacher preparation programs view the time spent during the student teaching experience as the pinnacle (Miller & Wilson, 2010). To better prepare teacher candidates (TCs) for their next career step and support this vital experience, School-Based Agricultural Education (SBAE) researchers frequently conduct studies on best practices to place TCs with cooperating teachers (CT) in agricultural education (Edgar et al., 2011; Kasperbauer & Roberts, 2007a; Kasperbauer & Roberts, 2007b; Kitchel & Torres, 2007; Sweet Moore et al., 2023). The two primary components of this discussion are the relationship between TCs and CTs and the fit of the student teaching center. Norris et al. (1990, p. 58) found “the student teaching center and the supervising teacher are the most important ingredients in the student teaching experience.”

A compatible relationship between TCs and CTs and the balance between the TC’s needs and student teaching center amenities continues to challenge and test the matchmaking abilities of teacher educators. To help this process, we created an experience that let TCs at the [university] connect with CTs across [State]. The Student Teaching Fair allowed TCs to establish relationships with 36 different CTs and learn more about their student teaching centers in an informal networking environment.

We designed the Student Teaching Fair to build relationships between TCs and CTs and to help TCs decide on the best CT and student teaching center that fits their goals and personalities. We believe providing an informal opportunity for these two groups to connect was the best approach, as Jones et al. (2014) suggested.

How It Works

We held the inaugural Student Teaching Fair during the [State] Career Education Conference on June 7, 2023. We invited all cooperating teachers representing approved student teaching centers and introduced the Student Teaching Fair six weeks before the event. We informed teachers the concept was to provide preservice teachers the opportunity to interact with as many cooperating teachers as possible so they would have the opportunities available for them to grow as young professionals. We invited teachers to bring visual aids and/or printed material describing their agricultural education program, communities, facilities, and program strengths. We also assured them students were still expected to visit SBAE programs during the fall of their junior year as they determined their priority schools for potential student teaching placement. We asked teachers to RSVP to the Student Teaching Fair to help facilitate the planning and logistics needed during the conference and to indicate their availability and capacity to host a student teacher during the 2024-2025 academic year. During the Student Teaching Fair, [Department] Faculty and a CT who helped organize the event shared brief greetings. We spent the remainder of the time with CTs moving to posters describing their program (e.g., two-teacher program, animal lab, greenhouse, etc.). The Student Teaching Fair lasted 45 minutes and consisted of nine five-minute rotations. TCs visited with two CTs during each rotation before the CTs would move to a different poster, and the process would start again.

Results and Implications

The Student Teaching Fair included 13 preservice teachers, all enrolled in the [University’s] [Department] Teacher Preparation Program, Agricultural Education option.

Additionally, 36 potential cooperating teachers and student teaching centers were represented at the event. A record number of preservice teachers attended the [State] Career Education Conference, largely because of the Student Teaching Fair.

We sent a questionnaire to all preservice teachers ($N = 13$) who attended the event to gauge the Student Teaching Fair's impact on the attendees. A response rate of 54% ($n = 7$) was achieved. Key findings from this survey suggested the Student Teaching Fair was successful. Participants responded to the statement, "*The Student Teaching Fair helped narrow my choices for student teaching center locations,*" using a 6-point Likert scale (1 = *Completely False*, 2 = *Largely False*, 3 = *Somewhat False*, 4 = *Somewhat True*, 5 = *Largely True*, 6 = *Completely True*). The majority (57%, $n = 4$) indicated this was *Somewhat True*, and 29%, ($n = 2$) stated this was *Largely True*, while 14% ($n = 1$) responded *Largely False*. Additionally, all respondents (100%, $n = 7$) agreed the Student Teaching Fair provided opportunities to develop relationships with potential cooperating teachers. We asked participants to rank nine concerns related to considering a student teaching center; the concerns listed aligned with student concerns voiced in previous classes and conversations with [Department] faculty. The top concerns were potential cooperating teachers' approach to mentoring student teachers and student teaching center class topics. However, the greatest concern was the potential cooperating teacher's personality. We believe this result communicates the importance of providing opportunities for TCs to connect with CTs, showing support for our Student Teaching Fair and other informal networking events.

Future Plans and Advice to Others

We plan to facilitate and host the Student Teaching Fair annually, based on the responses we received and the success our event achieved. Our Student Teaching Fair and replications of the event can be improved based on the following recommendations. First, we recommend requesting participating potential CTs to create and then display visual advertising to share a glimpse of their student teaching center. Survey respondents noted videos or photos of student teaching centers would have given them a better idea of what the student teaching center was like and enabled them to ask more specific questions, gaining more valuable information. Secondly, we advocate for holding events like this in conjunction with a state teacher conference, just as ours did. This collaboration ensured potential CTs could conveniently participate while also providing numerous networking and professional development opportunities for TCs. However, options for funding TCs' attendance must be explored. We believe the high attendance at our Student Teaching Fair resulted from the sponsorship and funding our TCs received.

Costs and Resources Needed

We required preservice teachers to attend the [Organization] conference to participate in the Student Teaching Fair. Before planning this event, we recognized funding the cost of attendance was essential to maximize preservice teacher participation in the event. Therefore, we secured funding by partnering with the [State] Department of Education, which covered conference registration fees (\$300/person); the State Teach Ag Results (STAR) Program, which covered the combined hotel and conference banquet costs (approximately \$900); and our [University] [Department] department, which covered the remaining \$80. The other resources needed for the Student Teaching Fair included hours spent planning and organizing the event and participation from the 36 cooperating teachers. We estimate that [Department] faculty spent five hours planning, organizing, and participating in the Student Teaching Fair.

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