

PROGRAM EVALUATION OF READY, SET, TEACH!

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This exploratory study examined the effectiveness of an innovative Texas Family and Consumer Sciences high school course, Ready, Set, Teach!, in preparing future teachers for the educational field. Researchers sent surveys to Ready, Set, Teach! educators listed through professional development conferences and course codes. In addition to the survey, participants were also encouraged to provide input on strategies for the course's improvement. Data collected indicated a wide variety of educators' methods for teaching this course; many suggested the need for additional resource materials for the course and connections to other educators teaching the course.

The purpose of this paper is to report on an individual research project that was conducted during spring semester 2006 in collaboration with my undergraduate advisor. The focus was to conduct a program evaluation of the Ready, Set, Teach! (RST) curricula.

Ready, Set, Teach! is an innovative program developed for Texas Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS), and is a high school course designed to prepare 10th and 11th grade students for collegiate teacher preparation programs and an educational career in their content area. The goals of RST are to provide students with the knowledge of human and cognitive development, ethical educational practices, and effective instructional strategies, among others. Students are also placed with a cooperating teacher for a more stimulating experience of the classroom and to obtain the view of an educator. With the documented teacher shortage, especially in FCS, the RST program may be an important recruitment tool for FCS teaching and the profession because students have the opportunity for early exposure and exploration of the teaching profession.

In evaluating RST throughout the state of Texas, we established three specific goals. Our first was to determine the effectiveness of the curriculum by the RST educators. Additionally, we would use the information received in the surveys to provide suggestions for improved curriculum content and materials. These improved materials will serve as a tool for maintaining and improving standards in education, which will increase recruitment and retain educators in the field of education. Our final goal for evaluating RST was to seek the impact of the course on the exploration of the teaching profession and recruiting educators in the specific field of Family and Consumer Sciences (FCS). Because FCS educators teach this course, teachers were given the opportunity and encouraged to promote the FCS content area to students in RST.

Related Literature

Previous research found that not only is the field of education faltering in the recruitment of teachers (Recruiting New Teachers, 2000), but districts are also having trouble retaining teachers. Current statistics show that 20% of new teachers are withdrawing from the teaching field within three years and, in urban areas, 50% leaving within five years. Because of this struggle, high demand subjects and rapid growth areas are unable to staff the number of teachers necessary. For new teachers, unclear expectations and the unavailability of strong mentorship have been the cause of teacher withdrawal. A strong mentorship early in their careers appears to

be critical for new teachers to remain in the field. Twice as many new teachers stay in teaching with a strong support network (National Education Association, retrieved 2006).

Several strategies have been proposed to increase recruitment and retention, including the support of pre-collegiate programs like RST. These programs enroll middle school and high school students with an interest in education to develop their future career plans and explore various teaching opportunities. Students are also encouraged to serve as leaders for their peers and for younger children, research the field and educational programs, and prepare a portfolio demonstrating their growth. Additionally, recruitment programs encourage students to concentrate their electives on completing pre-collegiate program requirements and internships at local schools, and using colleges and universities as a path to teaching (Recruiting New Teachers, 2000). In Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), 86% of teachers who completed the pre-collegiate teaching academy remained in the field (Rathi, 2005), showing that students completing these successful pre-collegiate recruitment programs are more likely to stay in the teaching field.

Pre-collegiate programs such as the Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, and Advancement (CERRA) in South Carolina and LAUSD both promote the mission of recruiting and retaining teachers. CERRA begins at the junior high level with a focus on self-discovery, cooperative group work, service learning, goal-setting, career exploration, family involvement, and teaching-like experiences (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement. 2004a). Then in high school, CERRA focuses on the impact of shortages in content areas, various areas of teaching, and instructional experiences with a content area teacher at the secondary level. Students are also given insight into teaching environments, evaluating school problems, and addressing critical issues relating to educational quality. This high school program connects with colleges and universities to provide college credit for completion of the program (Center for Educator Recruitment, Retention, & Advancement. 2004b). Additionally, LAUSD actually offers conditional teaching contracts to selected graduating seniors in the teaching career academies. Of the 1,800 students enrolled in the academies, 78 students received these contracts. The conditions guaranteed a contract in the district, to these top students who began college in the fall 2005 semester with a maintained 2.7 GPA. Students must receive their teaching credentials by July 2011. LAUSD is the first district in the United States to offer teaching contracts to high school students (Rathi, 2005).

Limitations of these programs included starting students too early and offering contracts to undeveloped students. Starting teaching programs at the junior high level could cause students to become bored with the content or feel pressured to stay in the field. Some early adolescent students are not mentally prepared to begin planning for their careers at such a young age; doing so could cause resentment to the field or increase “burnouts” before the student enters the field professionally. Additionally, an early contract may not be the sole contributor in bringing a student back to their home district.

Procedures

During an undergraduate evaluation and research course in family and consumer sciences education (FCSE) taught in the fall of 2005, the professor introduced the research process by initiating a collaborative program evaluation. The process began with the class reading background information on program evaluation and reviewing the RST curriculum. Grading procedures for project participation were then established collaboratively with the development of a scorecard based on participation of research studied and forming the survey. Then,

discussion of the curriculum and possible survey questions began. Each member created questions, and as a group we edited the list, categorized, and grouped the questions. Our final groupings of questions were general demographics, resources and teaching aides, curriculum, support of the program, learning strategies, program requirements and implementation, application of content, field experience, and program outcomes. By the time the draft of the survey had been completed, the course was over. However, because of my interest in program evaluation and curriculum development, I began an independent study to continue with the research. The outcome of my independent study is the focus of this paper.

My first duty with the independent study was to further edit the list of questions and categories. Once the survey had been limited to a reasonable number of questions, we then added general demographic questions asking about the program and school. The survey was sent out to twenty RST educators for review of content and construct validity. Eleven surveys with comments related to the content and survey construction were returned. Based upon those comments, the final draft of the survey was edited further and completed.

The survey questions were entered into *Select Survey*, software used for online surveys, provided by the university for use by faculty and students conducting research. The survey was sent out electronically to all 212 FCS teachers of RST throughout the state of Texas. The list of teachers and their email addresses was obtained from registration information at previous professional development meetings as well as from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Public Education Information Management Systems (PEIMS), a program assigning the course codes to teachers for data recording purposes. Once the survey was sent electronically, 19 addresses were deemed undeliverable by email. The survey was mailed through United States Postal Services to these 19 individuals.

Results and Discussion

Of the 212 surveys sent electronically and by mail, 106 were returned with responses on their RST programs. It is important to note that the email announcement about the survey generated responses from 27 teachers who indicated that RST was not currently taught in their schools or districts. Therefore, the response rate was 57.30%. The first 14 items consisted of general demographic questions based on their school, themselves as a teacher, and the students. The RST programs enrollment ranged from 2 to 65 students with an average of 20.1 students per recorded class. The RST offering was more prevalent in larger districts (75%). One reason for this difference could be that the larger districts have more teachers to implement the program, whereas smaller districts may only have one teacher with limited time. Additionally, RST educators appeared to be very experienced in FCS, with an average years in the field of 18.8 years and a range of 0 to 38 years of experience. Identified student populations consisted of African American, American Indian, Asian, Caucasian, Hispanic, and Pakistani. The majority of students in RST were Caucasian and Hispanic at 46.89% and 41.29%, respectively. Two of every 25 students in RST were classified as having special needs, and 25.94% were considered “at-risk” students. (See Table 1)

Table 1
Distribution of Sample Demographics

	Range of Enrollment	% Average Enrollment
Ethnicity		
African American	0-35	9.60
American Indian	0-3	0.57
Asian	0-5	1.60
Caucasian	0-143	46.89
Hispanic	0-66	41.29
Pakistani	0-1	0.04
Classification		
Special Needs	0-18	8.66
At-Risk	0-65	25.94

This type of program may benefit to “at-risk” students because RST focuses them on establishing a career goal early and provides career-related preparation. This emphasis could provide the incentive to graduate and enter a teacher preparation program especially if the local program has articulation agreements in place with postsecondary institutions.

In focusing on the actual curriculum, teachers were asked how often they considered the student’s philosophy of education when guiding the student to specific content areas or age groups. Most RST educators frequently or sometimes used the student’s philosophy of education, while 28% of RST educators rarely or never considered the students’ philosophy. This seems like a very high percentage when considering the program is trying to recruit students into the field of education. Emphasis on individual perspectives and philosophies may promote creativity and motivation. Teachers were also asked how accurately the curriculum portrays what teachers need to know and be able to do. Most educators (85%) felt the curriculum succeeds in this factor.

The next area was the support and known benefits of the program throughout the school and community. Among students, other teachers, administrators, parents, and the community, RST educators generally felt nearly everyone understood the benefits of the program and fully supported the program. Few teachers disagreed that others understood the benefits of RST and supported the program; over 90% felt most audiences supported RST. (See Table 2)

Table 2
Support and Know Benefits of RST by School and Community

	% RST Student	% Field Teachers	% Teachers and Administrators	% Parents and Community
Agree	96.40	95.24	96.43	91.67
Unsure	2.38	3.57	3.57	7.14
Disagree	1.19	1.19	0.0	1.19

Additionally, 76.2% of RST programs incorporated, or were working to incorporate articulation agreements with local community colleges and 4-year institutions. These are agreements made to transfer the students’ earned high school credits to the collegiate level as credits in their undergraduate major.

Program requirements were the next area of focus in considering the success and identifying improvements for RST. Students (93.60%) were usually required to present their own lesson plans to the field-based classrooms, and occasionally to fellow RST students. (See Table 3)

Table 3
Presentation of Lesson Plans

Time Period	% Average Response
RST Class	
Weekly	3.80
Monthly	22.78
Once per Instructional Unit	27.85
Once per Semester	40.51
Never	5.06
Field-Based Class	
Weekly	24.05
Monthly	25.32
Once per Instructional Unit	22.78
Once per Semester	21.52
Never	6.33

In consideration of field experience, a variety of grade levels from preschool through high school and special education classes at all levels were available through certain RST programs, but a majority of RST programs utilized elementary classrooms: Preschool (60%); Kindergarten (99%); Grades 1-3 (97%); Grades 4-5 (84%); Grades 6-8 (62%); High School (44%); Special Education (4%). Additionally, sufficient time was devoted to the field-based classroom and providing students with hands on learning skills. Only 5% of RST educators had students visit the field-based classrooms less than one week in each month. The majority (37.5%) required students visit classrooms in the schools 11-15 days each month. (see Table 4)

Table 4
Monthly Field-Based Classroom Experience

Days in Field Classroom	% Average Time
3-5 Days (>1 week)	6.90
6-10 Days (>2 week)	30.60
11-15 Days (>3 week)	37.50
16-20 Days (>4 week)	25.0

Field experience is a critical component of RST for understanding the demands of the classroom. As a student completing all teaching requirements at the undergraduate level, I understand the importance of hands-on experience in the classroom. A student is unable to learn without doing and experiencing, and therefore, does not understand the operations of the classroom fully without the availability of everyday classroom interactions.

An additional consideration which could impact the expectations of new teachers, is that many RST programs did not provide the opportunity to attend professional meetings, conferences (84.15%), or teacher in-service experiences (75.61%). One possible reason for the

lack of professional development opportunities is the lack of financing available for travel. Most schools have travel limitations for their teachers and it would be impossible for them to support students. Two possible solutions for this issue would be to rely on local speakers/trainers to the classroom and to promote involvement in Family, Career, Community Leaders of America (FCCLA) or the state affiliated teacher preparation organization. In Texas, this group is the Texas Association of Future Teachers (TAFE). The majority of respondents indicated that they either strongly agreed (41%, n=31) or agreed (21%, n=16) that FCCLA was important for student participation. Fifty (60%) of the respondents for this item indicated that their students were members of FCCLA and 37 (49%) indicated that their students joined TAFE. Further, there was strong support (98.78%) for student interaction with other teachers various teaching strategies in lessons.

The respondents reported that 3,949 students have successfully completed the RST program, an average of 54 students per program. Of the students completing the program, 1,288 students (33%) were enrolled in a collegiate education program divided among Early Childhood Education, Elementary Education, Special Education, Family and Consumer Sciences, and Secondary Education. (see Table 5)

Table 5
Enrollment Rates at the Collegiate Level

Education Major	Range of Enrollment	% Average Enrollment
Early Childhood	0-100	52.42
Elementary	0-50	30.57
Family and Consumer Sciences	0-20	1.93
Other Secondary	0-90	13.16
Special Education	0-20	1.93

Furthermore, 218 students (6%) were currently employed in the teaching field. The RST program was only approved in 2001 as an innovative course offering; therefore, students may not have graduated from high school and completed a postsecondary education program.

Suggestions were made for the RST curriculum. One was to improve the course text, *Reaching to Teach*. Teachers commented that the text does not correspond appropriately with the curriculum guide and is difficult to understand. Additionally, teachers felt the text needs to be reorganized and must include more teaching strategies. In consideration of available resources, RST educators want more reading materials for students, suggestions for more projects and activities for the students, and suggestions for community connections. Teachers also would like to feel more connected to other RST educators to share ideas. RST would be an excellent topic for professional development conferences.

Summary and Future Recommendations

Results from the survey indicated that the RST program is successful. Several students have completed the program and enrolled in teacher preparation programs at the postsecondary level. However, some recommendations were directed toward the curriculum materials, including strengthening the connection between the curriculum guide and *Reaching to Teach*. The program, even with guidelines of minimum grade requirements, recommendation letters, and interviews, enrolls many “at-risk” students. This could help these students consider

postsecondary education. Overall, teachers and administrators support and see the full benefits of the course and promote it to those students interested in the field of education.

For future research, it would be wise to conduct a program evaluation of RST from the student perspective and to follow-up longitudinally with those who enter a teacher preparation program. Data could be collected at future intervals to follow students through college, into the workforce, and further to determine the success rate of RST in helping students complete college, enter the teaching field, and stay in a teaching career. From this survey, we also determined that electronic surveys were very cost effective. However, there were delivery issues such as spam blocker programs and firewalls at the local district that can render the electronic survey undeliverable.

A recommendation for researchers using electronic surveys is to run delivery tests of the survey system before actual distribution because of delays with servers. Had we run a test email with emails outside of the university system, we would have discovered that the emails were not being delivered as anticipated. Another consideration should be for several individuals to assist with the creation as done with this survey, which allows for various perspectives to be offered in developing the focus of the survey, i.e. what is the importance of the question in relation to the final outcome?

Future research studies could include comparing RST outcomes to other pre-collegiate teacher recruitment programs such as CERRA, and evaluating the successes of each. This might lead to the development of an even more efficient program in the recruitment of teachers. Additionally, the variances in collegiate and pre-collegiate programs and the differing expectations required of the actual field could be examined.

From this experience, I have learned about the research process including survey development, basic descriptive analysis of survey responses, and writing a manuscript. I have also learned that the education is having trouble retaining teachers, and pre-collegiate programs are the first step in helping a student become a future teacher. Finally, I have learned that delivery of an innovative course such as RST requires guidelines for the program, evaluation of the course, creation of a textbook, and development of additional resource materials.

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