

# A Small College Education Program Collaborates with Teach for America and Works to Overcome Challenges

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## *Abstract*

*Teach for America (TFA) collaborates primarily with universities in most of its 53 regions throughout the United States, yet there is little research that examines these partnerships. This qualitative interview study explored how TFA Corps Members (CMs) perceived their learning in a small college's graduate teacher education program and how college administrators, instructors, and mentors viewed the partnership between the college and TFA. The author found that coursework, mentoring, and collaboration between the college and TFA needed to be revised, restructured, and strengthened. The author described how college faculty and administrators worked to make modifications despite challenges that still exist. The changes made to strengthen the college's TFA program also assisted faculty in revising coursework for traditionally prepared preservice teachers. The findings of this study inform the national conversation about university partnerships with alternative certification programs and other university/TFA partnerships.*

*Keywords: alternative certification programs, preservice teacher education, Teach for America, university partnerships*

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Federal and state governments have encouraged and incentivized universities and nonprofits to engage in partnerships to recruit, support, and retain quality teachers (Heineke, Carter, Desimone, & Cameron, 2010; Koerner, Lynch, & Martin, 2008; Meyers, Fisher, Alicea, & Bloxson, 2014). Teach for America (TFA), a nonprofit alternative teacher preparation program that aims to place teachers in high needs classrooms, collaborates primarily with universities in most of its 53 regions throughout the United States. Yet, there is little research that examines partnerships between TFA and universities, especially the content, processes, and collaboration between the two different institutions (Costelloe, 2008; Heineke et al., 2010; Meyers et al., 2014).

In 2013, a teacher education program at Catholic College (a pseudonym), which is a small, private college in New York, partnered with TFA to meet the needs of alternatively certified teachers in urban schools. Similar to studies about other universities who collaborated with TFA (Mungal, 2015), Catholic College entered the partnership to gain more students for the college's education programs during a period of low enrollment and to further the college's mission of serving the urban community surrounding the college. Because the partnership decision was made three weeks before the 2013 TFA cohort began classes, the curriculum that the first two TFA cohorts experienced was almost identical to that taken by the college's preservice graduate students.

In addition to her duties as a full-time faculty member in the Teacher Education Department, the author became the TFA program coordinator for the college in 2015. She decided that before she could make substantive changes to the existing graduate program, she needed to study the partnership by interviewing all of the people involved; administrators, program instructors, mentors, and Corps Members (CMs). Additionally, she began reading the small body of existing literature about universities who had collaborated with TFA to modify their education programs. Thus, this study is participatory in nature in that it details findings about what was learned from the research and how it was attempted to change the graduate program for CMs, to serve their needs and the needs of the students they teach. Through this research, the author and colleagues have begun to reflect about how the college can enhance and strengthen the preparation of TFA teachers as well as teachers who are traditionally prepared in the education programs.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Preparing Alternatively Certified Teachers in Urban Settings**

Most alternatively certified teachers in the United States work in urban schools with high poverty rates in critical shortage areas (Partee, 2014). As a result, when university teacher education programs collaborate with alternative certification programs, like TFA, they must ensure their curriculum and experiences prepare teachers for state certification and teaching in urban schools (Heineke et al., 2010; Carter, Amrein-Beardsley, & Hansen, 2011).

Each state determines the requirements for alternative certification, which differ from state to state. In New York, Richard Mills, the Commissioner of Education from 1995-2009, supported legislation that tied alternative teacher programs to education schools, leading TFA to collaborate with different university-based education schools that teach TFA CMs for a two-year

period while they are the teacher of record in New York state PK-12 public schools (Mungal, 2012). Most of the CMs trained at universities leave with a master's degree after their two-year commitment to TFA.

Walsh and Jacobs (2007) have criticized alternative teacher certification programs in universities for being too similar to traditional certification programs and failing to recognize that alternatively certified teachers are learning while in the classroom as assistants or full-time teachers. Additionally, research by Berry, Montgomery, and Snyder (2008) highlighted challenges alternative teacher preparation programs encounter, such as a prescriptive curriculum, a lack of clinical support, and inadequate preparation to teach diverse learners.

Yet, some universities have collaborated with TFA and modified or restructured their curriculum and experiences to meet the needs of alternatively certified teachers (Heineke et al., 2010; Koerner, Lynch, & Martin, 2008). Instead of simply reducing certification requirements, these teacher preparation programs have revised courses and experiences to meet the needs of full-time first-year teachers. These universities have also restructured the mentoring and supervision of CMs to ensure they are fully supported. This study builds on these accounts by exploring a small college's attempt to modify its traditional graduate certification program to meet the needs of TFA teachers in urban schools.

### **Partnerships between TFA and University Education Programs**

Heineke et al. (2010) described how the College of Teacher Education and Leadership at Arizona State University (ASU) collaborated with TFA, and, over a three-year period, changed its teacher preparation programs to better prepare and support CMs. One of the many supports the researchers discussed was that full-time clinical instructors from the university observed and provided feedback to individual CMs in their classrooms, and then refined their coursework to meet the immediate needs of the CMs. Additionally, the clinical instructors held workshops for CMs on relevant topics such as culturally responsive classroom practices. College faculty worked closely with TFA program directors to ensure first and second-year CMs were adequately supported in their classrooms.

Heineke et al. (2010) described how university faculty designed a hybrid course model to meet the needs of the CMs. This coursework, which occurred on campus, online, and in the schools where CMs taught, focused on goal setting and planning, modifying curriculum for diverse learners, classroom management, and legal expectations. Instructors from the university assisted CMs in drawing on their teaching experiences, connecting theory and practice, and applying their learning in their own classrooms.

In a second study about university/TFA partnerships, Meyers et al. (2014), a research team consisting of faculty from Georgia State University and TFA administrators, explored data from their five-year partnership to understand what happens when two institutions with two different missions come together to train urban teachers. Meyers et al. (2014) found the partnership experienced challenges in several areas such as contract negotiation, communication, and creating a sustainable partnership. For example, when examining communication between TFA and the university, the researchers found that some common education terms, such as “measuring

student learning and growth,” were defined differently by TFA and university faculty (Myers et al., 2014, para. 42). While TFA asked CMs to use a formal assessment tracking system to quantify students’ progress, university faculty required CMs to consider student growth over time, and focused on the “instructional and relational characteristics of teachers” (Myers et al., 2014, para. 44).

Based on their research, Myers et al. (2014) outlined several recommendations to guide other university/TFA partnerships. They argued that individuals who would be part of the contract (i.e., CMs, university faculty, TFA leaders) should have a voice in the contract negotiations or memorandum of understanding (MOU). They also discussed the importance of having long-term stakeholders in the partnership because long-term memory was important in building trust and a sustainable relationship. Additionally, the research team explained that “mutual respect and commitment” from partners is integral because it “nurtures a deeper understanding of the other and fosters regard for the efforts and work of the other” (Myers et al., 2014, para. 71).

In a third study involving university/alternative teacher preparation program partnerships, Mungal (2012, 2015, 2016) interviewed faculty and administrators from six different universities in New York City to gain stronger understandings of their views of “forced” partnerships with alternative teacher preparation programs, including TFA (Mungal, 2015, para. 1). The author used the term “forced” to describe the New York state requirement that alternative teacher preparation programs collaborate with a university education program to train teachers between 1999 and 2012. One of Mungal’s (2015) many findings was that while university-based teacher preparation programs initially resisted partnerships with alternative certification programs, the partnerships encouraged these universities to reflect on and strengthen their coursework and practices for all students. Mungal (2015) also found that the interviewees thought that the alternatively certified teachers’ learning was enhanced because of the foundational and pedagogical coursework they took, which encouraged their learning about issues of social justice and differentiated instruction.

These studies investigated what happens when large research universities with resources collaborate with TFA. In contrast, this study examined a partnership between TFA and a small college with few resources.

### **Catholic College/TFA Partnership**

TFA came to a large city in New York State where this study was conducted in 2013 with a starting cohort of 12 CMs. By September 2017, there were 55 CMs teaching in the city’s charter and public schools. In the large public school district, there were teacher shortages in secondary special education classrooms and limited-English-proficiency classrooms. Many of the CMs were placed in classrooms as Bilingual or English as Second Language (ESL) teachers.

After completing a required five-week TFA Summer Institute in another city on the East Coast, CMs came the city several weeks before their teaching job began. Most CMs were required to interview for their teaching position, but all were guaranteed a job in the city’s public or charter schools. Almost all CMs did not have certification to teach in New York State and were enrolled in a two-year Master’s degree program at Catholic College for either Students with Disabilities

(SWD) or Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) at the childhood or adolescent levels. CMs took approximately two courses per semester in these programs while teaching full-time. As long as CMs passed their required teacher certification exams and were in good academic standing at the college, they were permitted to be the teacher of record in their classroom through a Transitional B New York State license, which expired after a three-year period or when the CM was endorsed for permanent state certification by the college.

As outlined in the MOU between Catholic College and TFA, TFA would provide the first layer of mentoring for CMs. The TFA administrator and one other individual, called a Manager of Teacher Leadership Development (MTLD), would visit CMs regularly in their schools to ensure they were supported. The next layer of mentoring would come from the school where the CM was placed. Finally, the third layer of mentoring would come from clinical faculty hired by the college to support CMs in their classrooms. These college mentors would visit CMs' classrooms monthly to observe and provide mentoring.

The TFA mentoring structures at the college changed dramatically between the second and third year of the program. The first and second years, the college hired nine mentors (all clinical faculty) to supervise the CMs. The third year (when this study was conducted), the TFA administrator asked that the college cut the number of mentors to three clinical instructors who were respected by the CMs, because she was hearing from CMs and principals that many of the college's mentors were not effective. The three selected college mentors were special education and early childhood instructors who had taught different grade levels in urban schools and would be able to teach courses as well as mentor CMs. This structure presented some challenges for the mentors since there were six CMs who were adolescent content teachers, and the mentors did not have expertise teaching in these content areas. The TFA administrator asked the three mentors to meet with CMs once a month or when CMs asked for support, since TFA administrators were providing additional, ongoing mentoring. She did not want the CMs to feel overwhelmed by required observations and mentoring.

During the second and third year of the TFA graduate program, college administrators and faculty developed a TFA CM Program Handbook with information about advising, certification requirements, program coursework, and mentoring. The TFA administrator read drafts of the handbook to ensure it included all the necessary information for CMs in the program. TFA also had its own CM Handbook.

It is important to note that there were only two TFA administrators (from TFA – not college administrators) who worked with the first four groups of CMs, leaving the local TFA office understaffed. The TFA administrator who was consistent throughout the three years explained that the city's TFA group was underfunded compared to other TFA regions throughout the United States.

## **Methods**

The author of this study conducted a year-long qualitative interview study from September 2016 to May 2017 in which the following questions were investigated: (a) How do TFA CMs perceive their learning in Catholic College's graduate teacher education program?, (b) How do

Catholic College administrators, mentors, and course instructors view the partnership with TFA?, and (c) How can Catholic College modify its graduate teacher education program to best support TFA CMs? A multiple interview study design was used because the purpose was to gain a deeper understanding of the perspectives of college administrators, mentors, and CMs.

Twenty-one individual interviews, which lasted 30 to 45 minutes each, were conducted with the following participants: (a) three administrators from the college's school of education, (b) eight of the 12 second-year TFA CMs, (c) six of the 27 first-year TFA CMs, (d) two mentors from the college, and (e) two instructors from the college. Administrators were asked about the benefits and challenges of the college/TFA partnership and their views about how the college's graduate education program could be improved. First and second-year CMs were asked about their experiences in the TFA program (including the summer institute), their experiences in the college's graduate education program, and their views about how the college's graduate education program could be improved. Interviewees who mentored or taught CMs were asked about the benefits and challenges of working with the CMs and how the college could better prepare CMs to teach full-time in urban settings (see Appendix A). During interviews, member checks were included by summarizing what was heard from interviewees, and asking for elaboration or correction (Sandelowski, 2008). The author analyzed the MOU between the college and TFA, college syllabi and program handbooks, and email correspondence between TFA and college administrators.

The author interviewed all of the college administrators involved in the partnership and two of the three mentors from the college. All of the CMs were emailed and asked if they wanted to participate in an individual interview to help understand their experiences in TFA and their graduate education program. The only incentive to participate in an interview was that the author would come to their school site so they did not have to drive to the college's campus. Fourteen CMs, or one-third of the total number of CMs, agreed to be interviewed before or after school. The TFA administrator declined to be interviewed for the study although she regularly discussed coursework and mentoring challenges with college administrators.

Data analysis began immediately and continued throughout the research process. All names of participants were changed to pseudonyms. The author read through interview transcripts several times to understand the various perspectives on the TFA graduate education program. The transcripts were coded based on initial themes and patterns. Subsequently, themes that emerged, such as the need to reorder first semester courses, were all related to program challenges such as areas of coursework, mentoring, and collaboration between the college and TFA. Axial coding (Creswell, 2013) was then used to categorize similarities among the interviewees' responses. For example, all eight of the second year CMs discussed that their classroom management course, which they took the summer before they began full-time teaching, was not helpful because most had not received their teaching assignment.

Interviewees' responses revealed that coursework, mentoring, and collaboration between the college and TFA needed to be revised, restructured, and strengthened. The analysis of the transcripts by member checking with participants continued, and checking for confirming and disconfirming evidence was completed (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006). While the author received

responses from all of the administrators, mentors, and instructors, only seven of the 14 CMs responded to emails about their interview.

The limitation of this study is it is one study of one TFA program in which the researcher served as program advisor to the CMs. Findings can provide information and insights for other university/TFA partnerships, partnerships between universities and other alternative certification programs, and alternative certification programs in general.

## Findings

### Coursework

The original coursework the first and second cohorts of TFA CMs took was similar to the coursework the college's preservice teachers took – only one course on classroom management had been revised and frontloaded during the summer for the second cohort so that CMs would not be overwhelmed with two courses and first year teaching and would be more prepared to teach on their first day of school. After the first semester, CMs began to take different courses depending on their program (i.e., Childhood Special Education, Childhood TESOL). Some of the courses, especially the TESOL courses, were completely online.

Interviews with CMs, instructors, and mentors revealed there were several problems with the scope, sequence, and content of the coursework. All interviewees but one thought there should be a literacy course in the first semester since CMs did not get enough information about teaching literacy at their Summer Institute. One instructor and mentor, Kathleen (a pseudonym), told a story about how she met a first-year CM after school for coffee, and, as they were leaving the coffee shop, the CM said, "So, I have a quick question - how do you teach reading?" Kathleen said, "My mouth hit the floor! I went home and began pulling resources about phonemic awareness and development for her."

Interviewees agreed that the inclusive strategies course should be offered in the first semester of the program. Celia (a pseudonym), who was a mentor, explained, "There is this academic language they don't have instilled in them...they don't know the difference between an accommodation, an application, and an intervention." Celia also expressed that CMs in early grades needed a child development course in their first semester. Additionally, many of the CMs who were placed in bilingual classrooms explained they needed some of the TESOL coursework in their first semester.

The challenge was that CMs, instructors, and mentors all said there should be four different courses, on topics such as classroom management, inclusive strategies, literacy, and an introductory TESOL course frontloaded or in the first semester of the program. Yet, how could a first-year teacher who was working full-time handle that many courses? Natalie (a pseudonym), who was an instructor, explained,

The biggest challenge is dealing with their [CMs] exhaustion and the illnesses that come with the stress and grueling schedules that most of them have. How can I make my course rigorous and worthwhile to them without overly taxing them?

Similar to what Bialka and Andrus (2017) and Carter et al. (2011) had found, CMs reported there should be fewer theoretical courses and more practical courses that apply to teaching in urban settings. Neal (a pseudonym), who was a CM, commented, “I’m dying here every day and I’m learning about Vygotsky but this doesn’t help me keep the kid from throwing stuff at me...how do I apply that?” Likewise, Adam (a pseudonym), who was also a CM, explained,

Often times there is an assignment [in the course] that applies to a suburban school but not an urban school...like what do you do when a special education teacher pulls out a student – in reality that person does not exist at my school.

Another finding from the interviews was that CMs, instructors, and mentors reported that clinical instructors should teach courses and mentor CMs in their classrooms. As Natalie, who was an instructor, relayed, “Since I am not in the schools with them, I was often at a loss to provide them with anything but the most generic of advice and guidance.” This finding provides further evidence that ensuring clinical faculty are teaching courses and mentoring CMs in the field is important for their growth as teachers (Heineke et al., 2010).

CMs, instructors, and mentors also reported that completely online classes were not as helpful as face-to-face or hybrid classes. CMs said their course assignments were often done thoughtlessly and at the last minute for their online classes. Adam, who was a CM, commented, “It was pretty easy to do work last minute and coast through it...it just felt like one more hoop to jump through as opposed to being a beneficial thing...I didn’t get anything out of it.” Another CM, David (a pseudonym), said he was required to take an assessment class online.

I was looking forward to that class until I found out it was online. I am doing the work, but I am not really understanding the material...I am not actually practicing it within my classroom. You need to see how it is done and it should be modeled to you in class.

Kathleen, a mentor and instructor, relayed that the online classes were not as helpful as hybrid or face-to-face classes. “The pro [of online coursework] is convenience, but the con is that they don’t have the background knowledge...anytime we have gotten together, there are a ton of questions and they feed each other’s questions.” She thought that more “open conversations about teaching” in a classroom setting would be beneficial for CMs.

## **Mentoring**

TFA administrators were always open to Catholic College’s mentors doing more professional development, but neither TFA nor the college had financial resources to support more mentoring and professional development workshops for TFA CMs. Additionally, the urban charter and public schools CMs were placed in were supposed to provide the new teachers with a mentor or mentoring program (in order to be the second layer of mentoring), yet many CMs said they did not have a mentor at their school site. As a result, all CMs interviewed discussed their need for enhanced mentoring.

All but one CM interviewed said her or his assigned Catholic College mentor was “invaluable.” James (a pseudonym) said his mentor always checked in with him and sent him helpful resources. Another CM, Bethany (a pseudonym), said her college mentor “always gives very

thorough, very specific, and very helpful feedback” after observing her teach. A third CM, Diana (a pseudonym), relayed that her college mentor,

...has been one of the biggest support systems I have had throughout my time as a TFA CM. She is quick to respond, professional, and knowledgeable. She offers constructive feedback and goes out of her way to share helpful resources. I truly credit her with much of my growth as an educator.

The CMs interviewed said their college mentor was supportive and helpful, although they wished their mentor visited their school site more often. From the mentors’ perspectives, the mentoring model needed to be revised. When asked what she did to mentor CMs, Kathleen explained as follows.

I help them understand all of the different aspects of teaching...encouragement also because they have a lot of stress with their coursework and being a new teacher. So, encouraging, finding the positive things they are doing, providing support with the things they are struggling with... and teaching them where to find the resources that are out there. Someone told me last year that there is so much online and we don’t know what is good and not good... so, showing them what a good resource is and how to figure that out is key.

Kathleen added that she often took CMs to coffee shops near their school sites to meet with them one on one, away from the interruptions at their school. Yet, she and the other two mentors were not compensated for buying food or spending additional time with CMs, illustrating their commitment to assisting the CMs as much as possible.

In order to help CMs make connections between their coursework and teaching, the mentors expressed that they wanted to teach the CMs more of their graduate classes and professional development seminars and become familiar with all program syllabi. The mentors also said they needed more time each month to meet one on one with their CMs. One mentor, Celia (a pseudonym), commented, “Well you know that phrase you don’t know what you don’t know until you know it? I think they just don’t know what we can provide for them.” Kathleen echoed her sentiments and explained that individual meeting time needed to be built into the mentoring structure.

### **Collaboration between Catholic College and TFA**

As discussed in other studies (e.g., Heineke et al., 2010; Meyers et al., 2014), it is often difficult for institutions with different missions to work together. Interviews revealed the difference in program philosophies and goals between the college and TFA. One administrator, Joseph (a pseudonym), said, “We want TFA candidates to be successful, but they are put in difficult situations where kids who need the strongest teachers often get the new, untrained teachers.” He and other administrators and instructors commented that students in the college’s other education programs would not be put in similar situations for field experiences without a strong cooperating teacher to mentor them. Additionally, as Mungal (2015) found, tenured faculty and instructors discussed that they were not consulted when the college partnered with TFA. Two administrators commented that it was common to hear faculty make negative remarks about CMs lack of preparation before teaching. In contrast to the partnership Meyers et al. (2014) describes,

Catholic College did not want to align its philosophy, vision, and practices with TFA. Administrators said they thought it would be better to keep the School of Education's mission unchanged, since, according to an administrator named Greg, TFA had "a different perspective on how to prepare teachers."

The partnership was also unique from partnerships in other studies (i.e., Heineke et al., 2010; Meyers et al., 2014) in that there was only one consistent TFA leader throughout the first three years, and there were only three people from the college who were involved in collaborating with TFA. In other university/TFA partnerships at larger universities, there were more people collaborating from each institution. The lack of people on both sides of the partnership made communication easy in some ways, but, as two college administrators pointed out, it also made collaboration difficult when the lone TFA administrator would not return calls or emails. Annette (pseudonym), who was a college administrator, explained that the local TFA office was "understaffed and overwhelmed...sometimes they communicate with us and sometimes they do not." Yet, despite the lack of communication, college administrators and the TFA administrator worked together to solve issues that came up, especially around certification and mentoring.

CMs also brought up a lack of communication and collaboration between the college and TFA. Four CMs discussed issues where college administrators gave them mixed messages or seemed unclear about how to handle specific concerns. For example, payment for a two-credit required course that was not clearly stated in the program handbook. Another CM, Kathy (a pseudonym), brought up the difficulties she encountered in changing her certification area when her school placement changed mid-year, "I think the expectations of being ready for the right program were not clearly articulated." Diana, summed up several CMs views about the lack of collaboration by explaining,

I do not think TFA and Catholic College have a collaborative relationship... the leadership at TFA is stretched too thin. There are almost 50 CMs and four members total on staff. Only one individual is responsible for coaching 50 new teachers, many of whom are without backgrounds in education. It is extremely difficult to get a straightforward, timely answer from anyone at TFA.

Diana was clearly critical of TFA, but her comments spoke to the larger issue of how the lack of TFA staff influenced not only collaboration but also many CMs experiences in TFA.

### **Implications**

Outlined below are the changes we made to address the challenges encountered in coursework, mentoring, and collaboration.

#### **Coursework**

As discussed in the findings section above, it was difficult to choose the sequence of courses since interviewees expressed that at least four courses should be taken in the first semester. Ultimately, program faculty looked at the data from interviews and decided two courses, one on classroom management and one on inclusive strategies, would be frontloaded in summer, but then taught once a week during the fall semester. The two courses would be taught by two of the

three mentors so there would be consistency for the CMs. The CMs would travel as a cohort for their first year in the program, and coursework would be tailored for practicing teachers in urban schools. The second semester, CMs in the childhood programs would have one instructor, a full-time professor, who would teach them two courses – Literacy and the Arts and Elementary Math – on the same afternoon. CMs in the adolescent programs would take an adolescent development course, taught by a full-time instructor, and a methods course (in their content area), taught by clinical faculty, often full-time teachers in urban schools, to ensure course content was relevant and meaningful. The methods courses for adolescent CMs were hybrid, so that CMs would not have classes two times every week of the semester.

During the college's first summer session, when the K-12 schools were still in session, CMs took a hybrid action research methods class (half online and half face-to-face) as well as a hybrid assessment class. The following academic year, CMs joined other graduate students at the college for special education or TESOL program coursework. While the special education program courses were face-to-face, the TESOL program remained online because the college did not have local faculty to teach the courses and the program was marketed as completely online to appeal to students who did not live in the area. The final semester of the two-year program, CMs took a seminar course, taught by their mentors, to assist them in reflecting on their two-year experience in TFA and Catholic College's graduate program.

### **Mentoring**

As the TFA administrator requested, program faculty changed the college's mentoring model to include three (more involved) mentors. The college mentors checked in with their assigned CMs once a month and assisted more often in classrooms where CMs were struggling. Two of the three mentors taught the first two frontloaded courses on classroom management and inclusive strategies to incoming CMs. A college mentor also taught the final seminar course. Additionally, mentors were provided with copies of all of the syllabi of the courses their assigned CMs took so they could help CMs make connections between coursework and practice.

Mentoring remains an area of weakness in the college's graduate program. College administrators, mentors, and instructors interviewed for this study said more mentoring of CMs was needed, but the college dean explained he did not have the budget to pay the mentors to spend more time in schools or to provide professional development on campus.

To date, TFA leaders have implemented a new mentoring CM model, focused on leadership development. Eventually it will become apparent if CMs feel supported in this new model or not, and this is an area for future research.

### **Collaboration between Catholic College and TFA**

Because TFA was understaffed until the time of this writing, there was a limited amount that Catholic College could do to encourage collaboration. Through the progression of the program, administrators and the TFA administrator began to build trust and develop a more collaborative relationship. For example, college administrators agreed to include the TFA administrator on any emails about CMs who were in danger of failing their classes. After the second year, the TFA

administrator began inviting college administrators to TFA headquarters for meetings every two months. It seemed that communication became more consistent by the third year, which encouraged a more collaborative relationship.

Additionally, college administrators have been open with the TFA administrator about the challenges with coursework and mentoring discussed in the findings. College administrators and the TFA administrator had worked together each year to revise the handbook for TFA CMs at the college. The collaborative work on the handbook has also strengthened the collaboration, yet, like the coursework and mentoring, it is a work in progress.

### **Conclusion**

This study is timely and adds to the national conversation about university partnerships with alternative certification programs (Heineke et al., 2010; Koerner et al., 2008; Meyers et al., 2014). It informs other partnerships between alternative certification programs and colleges and universities. This research highlights the challenges encountered when a small college with few resources collaborates with an alternative certification program, in this case, TFA. As program coordinator, the author learned what the college needed to do to strengthen coursework and mentoring for CMs, as well as collaboration between two different institutions. There is still much work to do to support these first and second-year teachers who work daily in some of the city's high needs schools. While there is a stronger scope and sequence for coursework, college instructors (both tenured and clinical) must continue to develop professionally to ensure their courses are relevant and meaningful for full-time teachers.

This study has revealed that CMs need more consistent mentoring with skilled, clinical instructors in their certification areas. College administrators must find a way to have difficult conversations with TFA and local school leaders about how the three institutions can combine financial resources to support these new teachers in a comprehensive way. All CMs deserve to have at least one consistent, qualified mentor. TFA has chosen to increase their mentoring support with leadership training. This is an area for continued research. Additionally, research on how local school leaders view our program as well as research on CMs teaching and student learning would assist in strengthening coursework and mentoring structures.

It is hoped that collaboration between Catholic College and TFA will continue to improve, especially as TFA administrators are added to the local office. Although there is not a plan to align the college's vision and mission with TFA at this point, this may be a goal for the future and an additional area to investigate.

As Carter et al. (2011) said, "Only through self-reflection and the willingness to consider honest feedback can an organization improve" (p. 887). The process of interviewing administrators, instructors, mentors, and CMs has certainly provoked feedback and self-reflection for program faculty charged with enacting the college's TFA graduate program. The changes made have strengthened the TFA graduate program and helped the college think differently about the traditional education programs. For example, substantive changes were made to the Childhood Education program, infusing it with special education coursework and ensuring it is clinically rich. Additionally, a teacher residency program is being planned, which will be a two-year

graduate program where students become full-time assistant teachers or teacher aides in local urban schools during their second year of the program.

At Catholic College, there are no plans to end the partnership with TFA – the college wants to continue studying and strengthening it. It is encouraging that approximately half of the first and second cohorts of CMs chose to continue teaching in local urban schools. It is hoped that as time passes, more CMs will remain in urban classrooms. As Natalie, an instructor, pointed out, many of the CMs are a pleasure to have in class.

I love their empathy and interest in helping children from groups that have been marginalized. In addition, many of them are excellent readers and writers. Because they are in the classroom every day and so hungry for answers to pedagogical questions, most are very invested in the work of the course they are taking and eager to try to apply what they are learning.

All involved at Catholic College want the graduate program to provide these new teachers with the coursework and mentoring they need to become ambitious teachers who are dedicated to working in high needs schools.

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## **Appendix A**

### **Interview Questions for Corps Members in College Graduate Program**

1. Why did you join TFA?
2. How long have you been teaching in TFA?
3. What has the TFA experience been like for you?
4. What do you like about being in TFA?
5. What do you feel could be improved by TFA?
6. What has your experience in Catholic College's graduate education program been like?
7. What courses and instructors have been helpful to your learning?
8. What improvements could Catholic College make to the graduate education program that you are enrolled in?
9. Is your Catholic College mentor helpful? Please explain your relationship with her or him.
10. What do you think of the TFA/Catholic College partnership? Do you think it is a collaborative relationship?

### **Interview Questions for College Administrators**

1. Describe your background in education.
2. What is your role as a Catholic College Administrator to TFA Candidates?
3. What do you like about working with TFA?
4. What challenges do you encounter working TFA?
5. Do you see Catholic College continuing its relationship with TFA in the future? If you do see the relationship continuing in the future, then what would you like to see enhanced or changed?
6. What improvements could Catholic College implement to help the TFA CMs?

### **Interview Questions for College Mentors**

1. Describe your background in education.
2. What is your role as a Catholic College Mentor to TFA CMs?
3. What do you like about working with TFA CMs?
4. What challenges do you encounter working with TFA CMs?
5. What improvements could Catholic College implement to help you in mentoring TFA Candidates?
6. What improvements could Catholic College implement to help the TFA CMs?

### **Interview Questions for College Instructors**

1. Describe your background in education.
2. What course(s) do you teach to TFA Candidates?
3. What do you like about teaching TFA Candidates?
4. What challenges do you encounter teaching TFA Candidates?
5. What improvements could Catholic College implement to help you in teaching TFA Candidates?
6. What improvements could Catholic College implement to help the TFA Candidates?