

Key Design Elements of a High-Quality Paraprofessional Residency Pathway at an Open-Access Hispanic Serving Institution

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Abstract

This article focuses on the design and development of a paraprofessional pathway within a fully scaled residency program at a large, public university that graduates more than 200 teacher candidates per year. Key design elements include: the residency structure and Site Coordinator role; the selection and training of mentor (host) teachers; shared governance with school district and campus partners; and coordinated recruitment efforts with district partners. Findings from this paper are particularly relevant given the current policy context of House Bill 2/PREP Allotment funding for Grow Your Own programs.

Keywords: *teacher preparation, paraprofessionals, teacher residency*

Across the United States, persistent teacher shortages pose a critical challenge to educational equity and instructional quality, especially in high-need subject areas, such as bilingual education and special education, and hard-to-staff schools such as high-poverty and rural campuses. Texas exemplifies this crisis with the largest teacher workforce in the nation. The state employed more than 380,000 teachers in 2023–2024 yet continues to experience significant attrition, with approximately one in nine teachers leaving annually (TEA, 2022; Marder, Reyes, Marshall, Alexander, Martinez, & Maloch, 2022). These shortages have created what researchers call a “leaky pipeline” (Bland, Wojcikiewicz, Darling-Hammond, & Wei, 2023), in which traditional preparation models fail to provide the structure and rigor needed to retain teachers long-term.

In response, state agencies and districts have pursued robust strategies to recruit, prepare, and retain educators while strengthening quality and diversity in the teacher pipeline. One such strategy is “Grow Your Own” (GYO), which emphasizes teacher certification pathways for paraprofessionals and other instructional support personnel in schools. While GYO can also refer to high school pathways that support teacher certification, as well as community-based approaches to recruitment (Gist, Bianco, & Lynn, 2018), for the purposes of this paper we are focused on efforts to create – through university-district partnerships – accessible certification pathways for instructional aides based at PK-12 campuses. These

pathways in Texas have been supported in recent years by grant funding through the Texas COVID Learning Acceleration Supports (TCLAS) from 2021-2024 and more recently through the PREP Allotment as part of House Bill 2 passed in the 89th Legislature in 2025.

In broad terms, GYO programs are commonly viewed as a means of growing and diversifying the teacher workforce, filling high-needs certification areas, and meeting critical staffing needs on PK-12 campuses (Gist, et al, 2018; Lowrance, Johnson, & Thomas, 2023). These programs can also represent a mechanism for maintaining a sustainable paid residency between educator preparation programs (EPPs) and school district partners through “strategic staffing” (Texas Education Agency, 2026). An emerging body of research has examined the value of GYO programs for growing and diversifying the teacher workforce (Burbank, Bates, & Schrum, 2009; Gist et al., 2022; Hedin et al, 2024), while also pinpointing the unique challenges faced by GYO candidates, including (but not limited to) financial barriers, significant familial responsibilities, and racial inequities (Roy, Guest, Baker, Compton-Lilly, Adgeron, & Crooks-Monastra, 2023).

This paper examines the efforts of one university-based educator preparation program to design and develop a GYO paraprofessional pathway as part of our fully-scaled teacher residency program. Drawing on a guiding framework informed by research on paraprofessionals and asset-based

approaches to teaching and learning, we highlight four key interrelated elements of design: the residency structure and Site Coordinator role; the selection and training of mentor (host) teachers; shared governance with school district and campus partners; and coordinated recruitment efforts with district partners. We will present early data findings associated with these design features, and we will situate this work within a larger conceptual framework of access and belonging in higher education, which will be presented in the next section.

Context

This paper provides an overview of a paraprofessional residency pathway developed in an EPP at a large, public, research-intensive Hispanic Serving Institution - The University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP) - that maintains a core mission of access and excellence. UTEP has a long history serving the El Paso region, with a student demographic that is more than 80% Hispanic, more than 50% first-generation college-going, and more than two-thirds Pell-eligible. The university is primarily non-residential, with the majority of students living at home and working off-campus while completing their studies.

Starting in 2019, the university EPP initiated a transformation process in our teacher preparation program that encompassed the piloting, implementation, and scaling of a year-long teacher residency program, known as the Miner Teacher Residency. With technical assistance from US PREP and in close partnership with school districts and philanthropy, the UTEP EPP started a paid teacher residency in our undergraduate elementary and elementary bilingual pathways, with 19 candidates in the first year of implementation. The core features of our residency model included shared governance with school district partners, where we co-designed key elements of the model; careful selection and training of host teachers; intensive coaching and support from a clinical faculty Site Coordinator based primarily in the field; and stipend support, which initially came from philanthropy and later from school districts as well as the state through its TCLAS funding program (2021-2024). Over a five-year period, the residency model was expanded to all undergraduate certification pathways as well as our post-baccalaureate program, which includes an MA with initial teacher certification. The residency is

now a requirement in all teacher certification degree pathways, with 200 candidates/year on average.

During the early years of residency growth and scaling, instructional aides seeking certification were included in our traditional residency model and were handled on a case-by-case basis. Early in this scaling process, the EPP also received philanthropic funding to provide scholarship support for GYO paraprofessional candidates in completing certification at UTEP. This early funding initiative led to some key lessons that later informed the development of our paraprofessional pathway. One key learning was the need for tailored support for instructional aides (IA) pursuing certification, and the need for close communication with campus leadership related to not only the placement of the IA and selection of the host teacher but also employment arrangements to allow the IA to fulfill program requirements. Based on these early lessons, and with additional funding from a U.S. Department of Education Hawkins grant, we developed a specific paraprofessional strand within our residency program, which was fully implemented in 2024-2025. This paper focuses on the key design elements of that strand and also illuminates some of the key challenges that we have faced in the implementation process.

Data Sources

This paper is part of a larger mixed-methods study of the paraprofessional residency pathway at UTEP. The larger study looks at not only the design of the paraprofessional residency pathway but also the challenges faced by paraprofessional candidates and the outcomes associated with participation in this pathway. For the purposes of this more narrow focus, we examined the following research question: *What are the key design elements of a GYO paraprofessional pathway as part of a residency program?*

Our approach to research design, data collection, and data analysis for this question was steeped in practitioner inquiry (Cochran-Smith & Donnell, 2012). Data collected for this aspect of the study was primarily qualitative and descriptive in nature. Key data sources included an in-house survey, in-depth interviews with select candidates, and our own insider perspectives as a program leader (Author #1) and paraprofessional Site Coordinator (Author

#2). The survey was designed specifically for paraprofessionals, with questions regarding the value of different aspects of the residency program. Two cohorts of paraprofessional candidates (n=32) completed the survey. In-depth interviews were conducted by an outside evaluation researcher with six paraprofessional candidates. All of the data was collected and analyzed with dual purposes: (1) to address our research questions and inform the broader field of practice; and (2) to inform program improvement to better serve our paraprofessional candidates.

Re-Envisioning the Residency Pathway for Paraprofessionals

Building on key lessons from both early philanthropic support as well as the research literature on belonging in higher education, we set out to build a paraprofessional-specific pathway within our scaled residency program. The approach was informed by several guiding assumptions, tied to the research and theoretical literature both on paraprofessionals and on post-traditional students in higher education:

- In their pursuit of certification, paraprofessionals face specific barriers tied to finances, time constraints, caregiving responsibilities, and certification exams (Roy et al., 2023)
- Studies of paraprofessional GYO programs show the value of wrap-around, holistic supports for paraprofessionals seeking certification (Gist et al., 2022; Worthen, Smart, Bowman, Diaz, & Gist, 2022)
- Paraprofessionals bring a wealth of classroom-based knowledge, as well as experiential knowledge, to the certification experience (González & Moll, 2004; Abbate-Vaughn & Paugh, 2009)
- Even with prior classroom experience, paraprofessionals gain benefit from participating in a high-quality, rigorous clinical experience such as a high-quality residency (Guha, Hyler & Darling-Hammond, 2016, 2017)
- Paraprofessionals will likely benefit from programming structures that are asset-based in orientation and that emphasize building a sense of belonging (Author, 2023)

With these assumptions as a backdrop and with federal financial support from the Hawkins program, program leaders at UTEP set out to carve out a paraprofessional-specific pathway within the Miner Teacher Residency. This section will describe three key design elements of the pathway: residency structure and the Site Coordinator role; selection and training of mentor (host) teachers; shared governance with district partners; and coordinated recruitment efforts. Where relevant, data from paraprofessional surveys and interviews will be incorporated to shed greater light on the design elements.

Residency Structure and the Site Coordinator Role

The overriding goal of the year-long GYO paraprofessional residency program is to prepare “day 1-ready” teachers for diverse classrooms through a blend of mentorship, academic support, reflective seminars, and individualized coaching and assessment. Designed to offer equitable, inclusive pathways, the program emphasizes hands-on, job-embedded learning that builds both theoretical and practical skills. Residents are supported and coached at the sites where they work as paraprofessionals. Individualized coaching occurs through eight informal walkthroughs and four formal observations (POP Cycles) throughout the year. The POP Cycles are intensive and include detailed, data-driven lesson planning on the part of the resident, combined with pre/post conferences grounded in video-based self-analysis. Coaching, assessment, and support during POP cycles is tied to the university’s teaching rubric, the Miner Assessment Tool (MAT), which is aligned with the Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS).

Coaching and support of candidates is conducted by a university Site Coordinator (SC). The SC is a full-time clinical faculty member who serves as a field supervisor to candidates across the region, bridging the university with schools. For the paraprofessional pathway at UTEP, one key design element of the paraprofessional pathways was to hire a designated Site Coordinator for paraprofessionals (Author #2), in order to form a unique cohort and to provide the tailored support needed. In addition to conducting eight walkthroughs and four formal observations, the SC leads mandatory weekly seminar courses. These seminars are designed to support residents’ growth in instructional skills, lesson planning, and

professional conduct. Support is grounded in both field observations and weekly feedback from residents. Each seminar, lasting approximately 90 minutes, is designed to foster a sense of community through structured activities that encourage peer connection and collaboration.

In reference to her Site Coordinator, one paraprofessional resident shared, “She was always available and easy to reach. If anyone was confused, we could always go to her, and she’d be there to help.” Another resident shared, “At first, I was a little afraid I wouldn’t be able to talk to my peers, just because it felt separate – like there were residents and then there were aides. But when we met as paraprofessionals, we got to connect with each other. Our coordinator gave us time during each seminar to talk, and we also had a separate group chat where we could all communicate. That was really helpful. We’d meet during seminar and also have time to talk as a group about our experiences.” These seminar sessions are intentionally crafted to promote reflective practice, shared learning, and ongoing professional development, helping residents grow both individually and collectively. As one resident noted, “My site coordinator was amazing. Her support was huge... she made sure we had time to share our thoughts and experiences... especially things related to teaching.”

Selection and Training of Mentor Teachers

Another key design element of the paraprofessional residency pathway is the selection and training of mentor (host) teachers by the university-based EPP. EPP leadership works closely with campus leadership to identify mentor teachers who meet selection criteria co-designed as part of the residency. Mentor teacher selection for paraprofessional residents involves additional factors tied to the employment status of the candidates; each case is handled on an individual basis, involving communication among EPP administrators and the campus principal. Once selected, mentor teachers – including those of paraprofessional residents – undergo more than 18 hours of training throughout the residency year, starting with a full-day pre-residency orientation where they learn alongside their residents the expectations of residency, co-teaching strategies, and coaching strategies. Throughout the residency year, mentors receive quarterly trainings in different coaching topics as well as continuous communication and support from the SC.

The Mentor Teacher's duties are comprehensive, covering various aspects of classroom and professional practice including guidance and support, coaching and development, co-planning and teaching, assessment and reporting, as well as integration into the school. Another paraprofessional shared, “There was never a moment when I felt unsupported or confused. Anytime I wasn’t sure about something, I could ask her for help or advice.” Aligned placements and co-teaching promote early instructional involvement. Residents collaborate closely with their trained Mentor Teachers through co-teaching, planning, assessment, and reflection, gradually assuming more responsibility. One paraprofessional shared, “I developed a lot of good skills because my mentor focused on the areas I wasn’t strong in and helped me grow.”

Integration of Paraprofessional Data into Shared Governance with District Partners

The third key design element of the paraprofessional residency pathway, as part of the larger Miner Teacher Residency, is a shared governance structure between the EPP and school district partners. The goal of shared governance meetings is to create a space for communication, collaboration, and shared decision-making, all informed by data. Organized and facilitated by the Site Coordinators, university-district shared governance meetings take place at school sites on a quarterly basis, and typically include three core sets of activities:

- joint review (principals, district leaders, Site Coordinators, and EPP leaders) of candidate performance data tied to their walkthroughs and POP cycles, which open up opportunities to hear feedback from campus leaders about the residency and resident progression on their campuses;
- joint review of programmatic data from both the district and the EPP; and
- Learning Walks to observe residents and residency-prepared new teachers in classrooms.

At the heart of the joint data review process is a comprehensive data packet compiled by UTEP Site Coordinators. The data packet is electronic and typically contains between 15-50 pages of data and visualizations related to candidate performance and feedback, host teacher feedback, and feedback/surveys tied to key programmatic

initiatives. The joint review process takes place in small group formations, often in the form of data stations, allowing for a high level of interaction among governance team members.

Since the implementation of a full-fledged paraprofessional residency pathway with a dedicated Site Coordinator starting in fall 2024, paraprofessional data as a stand-alone category has become an integral part of the shared governance structure. Including paraprofessional data and program information creates opportunities for campus principals without current paraprofessional residents to become more familiar with the pathway, and opportunities for principals with paraprofessionals to share feedback on the experience. It also opens the possibility for problem-solving in the moment, where the paraprofessional Site Coordinator can share immediate challenges and strategize with the relevant principal on how to address challenges.

One illustrative example of this problem-solving took place at one shared governance meeting, where the paraprofessional Site Coordinator communicated time constraints experienced by paraprofessionals on one campus that were preventing the paraprofessionals from participating in important teaching activities as part of their professional learning. As a result of this interaction, the principals in this district began scheduling release time for their paraprofessionals to be able to participate in key activities such as Professional Learning Communities, parent meetings, and Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) meetings. These program improvements emerged both within and because of the shared governance structure with school district partners.

Coordinated Recruitment Efforts with Partners

Shared governance meetings also open the way to initiate GYO recruitment efforts with district and campus leaders. From the early pilot years of the paraprofessional pathway, recruitment efforts have occurred in close coordination with district partners. Recruitment activities range from communication and circulation of information about the program to on-site information sessions for instructional aides. Since the more recent launch of the paraprofessional pathway with a dedicated Site Coordinator, virtual information sessions are typically held on a quarterly basis

for prospective applicants to learn more about program admissions, advising, testing, coursework, and the residency pathway; information about financial aid and scholarships is also provided. As part of these sessions, the paraprofessional SC invites and includes current paraprofessional residents to share their lived experiences in order to make the experience more real to prospective applicants.

In addition to monthly virtual information sessions and on-site information sessions provided on-demand, the university EPP also integrates paraprofessional recruitment into our joint EPP co-advisement sessions held with our community college partner, El Paso Community College (EPCC), which have been held virtually every semester since 2021. These sessions, which are a required course assignment for all students enrolled in education classes, explain the transfer process from community college to UTEP and provide details on the requirements for teacher certification, including licensure exams and the residency experience. Since 2024, the paraprofessional Site Coordinator at UTEP has also presented on the paraprofessional pathway as part of these joint sessions, reaching 150-200 participants each semester.

Discussion & Conclusion

This article outlines the key design elements of a paraprofessional residency pathway that is part of a larger, high-quality residency program based at a university that graduates more than 200 teacher candidates per year. These design elements reflect a larger programmatic structure that emphasizes rigorous, high-quality preparation combined with individualized and cohort-based sources of support for candidates. Data and continuous improvement – including structures for data-sharing and feedback loops – are foundational to the program and to our partnerships. In fact, the emergence of the paraprofessional residency pathway stemmed in part from feedback provided by partners about the need for specialized support for this group of prospective teachers.

Programmatic implications of this study include the need for continued communication and partnership-driven efforts to ensure that paraprofessionals have sufficient support – financial, academic, and professional – both in

the workplace and outside of work. This includes awareness about the double-duty nature of their roles as both paraprofessionals and residents and, in particular, the need for protected time to participate in critical learning activities that contribute to their development as teachers. What this points to is the need for mindfulness about the complexity of the paraprofessional role and intentionality in designing clinical experiences that meet the needs both of the campus and the paraprofessional as learner.

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