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# The Revolving Door of Education: Teacher Turnover and Retention amongst the Graduates of a Liberal Arts Teacher Education Program

## **Abstract**

In the United States, elementary and secondary education teachers comprise 4% of the entire civilian workforce (Ingersoll, 2001). The composition of that 4% is changing because of teacher turnover. According to recent statistics, 46% of teachers leave the classroom within the first five years of teaching and 9.5% of teachers leave the classroom within their first year (Rinke, 2014; Riggs, 2013; Zheng & Zeller, 2016). This study is designed to examine the teaching experiences of graduates of one teacher education program and the potential differences between graduates who stay in teaching and those who leave. Throughout this study, the guiding questions were: How many Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program Alumni, 1985 - 2008, are still teaching in the classroom at a primary or secondary level? Why did some alumni leave the classroom at a primary or secondary level and why did some alumni never teach? How does the data from the Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program alumni correspond with the previous scholarship on teacher turnover and retention? When looked at from the perspective of an individual post-secondary institution, the individual stories of the alumni emerge and so does the complexity of teacher turnover and retention in America, which is not always reflected in studies conducting on a state or national level.

## **Keywords**

Teacher, Turnover, Retention, Teacher Education

## **Disciplines**

Educational Assessment, Evaluation, and Research | Higher Education | Liberal Studies | Secondary Education | Teacher Education and Professional Development

## **Comments**

Research conducted during Summer 2016 as part of the Mellon Summer Scholarship program, and presented at the [Eastern Educational Research Association](#) in Richmond, Virginia on February 23, 2017.

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**The Revolving Door of Education: Teacher Turnover and  
Retention amongst the Graduates of a Liberal Arts Teacher  
Education Program**

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Research Association, Richmond Virginia, February 22 - 25, 2017.*

In the United States, elementary and secondary education teachers comprise 4% of the entire civilian workforce (Ingersoll, 2001). The composition of that 4% is changing because of teacher turnover. According to recent statistics, 46% of teachers leave the classroom within the first five years of teaching and 9.5% of teachers leave the classroom within their first year (Rinke, 2014; Riggs, 2013; Zheng & Zeller, 2016). Of the teachers leaving the classroom, there are different paths which they follow. Some choose to pursue other jobs in the field of education, e.g. textbook publishing, working at the district office, some choose to pursue careers in fields other than education, some move to a different school, and some retire. While retirement does contribute to the rate of teacher turnover, it is an understandable phenomenon in the workforce, so it will not be dealt with in this paper. Mostly, social scientists investigate the issue of why so many teachers are leaving the classroom before retirement age.

Many authors (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Schaefer, 2013; Zheng & Zeller, 2016) have discussed the topic of teacher turnover. Out of the collective research, there are twenty reasons identified as why teachers are changing jobs: specialty field, age, administrative support, collegial support, certification status, marital status, parental status, location of school, poverty rate of school, level of autonomy felt, level of self-efficacy felt, level of student discipline, amount of professional development, feeling of communities and school values and mission, disillusionment with the profession, salary, type of preparation, gender, and initial thoughts of career. All twenty of these reasons are disagreed upon amongst the researchers because all try to find a primary reason(s) for teacher turnover and each study yields different results. For example, many researchers, including Ingersoll & May (2012), state that special education, mathematics, and science teachers have the highest rate of turnover. At the same time, though, Ingersoll & May (2012), in the same article say that “over the past two

decades, rates of mathematics and science teacher turnover have increased but, contrary to conventional wisdom, have not been consistently different than those of other teachers.”

Zheng & Zeller (2016) investigate whether or not traditional or alternative teacher certification contribute to higher rates of teacher turnover, but they found that, in the long run, the results from their study were inconclusive. They did find, though, that teachers who participated in a longer preparation program stayed in teaching for longer periods of time. Not all researchers are supportive of traditional teacher preparation programs. Adam Maier wrote a 2012 article about the popularity of Teach for America (TFA) over other alternative certification programs. Maier states that traditionally earned teaching certificates have little exchange value because they are “bonded to one of the more lowly paid and more ordinary professions” (Labaree, 2004). TFA preparation, Maier (2012) continues, provides participants with practical skills that can be used in other industries after participants leave teaching, while traditional programs provide students with more philosophical preparation that is only useful in the field of education. It is also important to note that approximately 40 percent of teachers who pursue undergraduate degrees in teaching never even enter the classroom at all (Riggs, 2013).

Another aspect of teacher turnover research that needs to be investigated is teacher retention. While a teacher turnover rate of 13.2% is alarming, that also means, though, that 86.8% of teachers choose to stay in the profession (Ingersoll, 2001). It is common for researchers to use the term teacher retention while addressing the issue of teacher turnover without discussing teacher retention. Additionally, researchers often frame teacher retention, not in terms of teachers deciding to stay in teaching, but as a decision not to leave teaching. Bennett, et al, 2013, found that most teachers stay in teaching because they believe that it is their calling to do so, plus a teacher’s schedule is more conducive to spending time with their family. Besides that

study, there is not really much literature on teacher retention in America in which the research shows teachers making a decision to stay in the profession.

### **Method**

This study is an exploratory study to examine the teaching experiences of graduates of one teacher education program and the potential differences between graduates who stay in teaching and those who leave. Throughout this study, the guiding questions were: How many Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program Alumni, 1985 - 2009, are still teaching in the classroom at a primary or secondary level? Why did some alumni leave the classroom at a primary or secondary level and why did some alumni never teach? How does the data from the Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program alumni correspond with the previous scholarship on teacher turnover and retention?

### **Participants**

For this study, I looked at the alumni of the teacher certification program of a medium-sized, high-selective residential liberal arts college who graduated between 1985 and 2009. At the time these alumni graduated, they had the option of obtaining certification at the elementary or secondary level or a K - 12 certification in Music Education. Of the 264 alumni, from that time period, who completed an interview with the education department and whose interview still exists, I was able to obtain electronic contact information for 180 of them. Of the 180, 59 completed the survey that was sent to them, which gives this study a response rate of 32.78%. Out of the 59 participants, most identified as Caucasian, with the exception of two respondents who identified as Hispanic and Caucasian-Asian. The majority of participants were also female (45 women, 14 men). The demographics of this sample, primarily white and female, are similar to the teaching education graduates at Gettysburg College and to the teaching profession over the

period of 1990-2010 (Feistritzer, 2011). The respondents completed their student teaching and graduated between 1998 and 2009 with the largest numbers graduating between 2003 and 2005. Education students at Gettysburg College major in a content area and complete an additional teacher certification program. Participants in this study would have had the choice of elementary, secondary, or music education certification.

Of the participants who have taught in the primary or secondary classroom, the average length of time a participant spent in the classroom is 9.3 years, with participants staying in one district for an average of 9 years. These participants ranged in teaching experience from 1 to 17 years. There was one outlier in our data. One of our participants, who is still teaching, has taught for 25 years, 23 of those years in the same district.

### **Data Sources**

The survey, on which the number of questions a respondent answered was dependent upon which career path (*stayer, leaver, or never teacher*) alumni followed, was comprised of demographic questions, measures using a Likert-scale, and open-ended questions. The demographic questions included questions such as: are you still teaching and in what states have you taught. Participants who indicated that they had taught following graduation were asked to complete a series of Likert-type item based on a five-point scale. These items measured the respondent's perception of the work climate, administrative and social support, engagement, and job satisfaction work as adapted from Baard, Deci, and Ryan (2004), Dağlı (2012), Morgeson and Humphrey (2006) and Camman, Fichman, Jenkins, and Klesh (1983). The open-ended questions were used to give the researcher more context for some of the demographic questions and allowed the researcher to obtain the respondents' views of education. The open-ended questions included: why did you first want to become a teacher and if you could change anything

about the field of education what would it be and why. The respondents' open-ended responses were uploaded into NVivo 11 Pro for Windows and coded for theoretical codes and themes that were extrapolated from the literature. The respondents' answers to the Likert-scale measures were uploaded into SPSS for quantitative analysis.

### **Findings**

The 59 survey respondents who completed the survey fit into three categories: stayers (n=33), leavers (n=22), and never teachers (n=4). *Stayers* being those who are still teaching at the primary or secondary level, *leavers* being those who have taught since graduating from Gettysburg College, but have subsequently left teaching at the primary or secondary level, and *never teachers* being those who have never taught since graduating from Gettysburg College. The participants were organized into separate categories for the purpose of this study, but many similarities emerged between the 59 participants.

### **Quantitative Data**

All participants who indicated that they had taught since graduation were asked to complete a set of short measures related to autonomy support for teaching, administrative support, social support, teaching job satisfaction, and identification with teaching. Participants who were currently teaching were asked to respond with their current position in mind, while those who had left teaching were asked to respond based on their last teaching position. To examine differences between current and former teachers we compared their responses using independent samples t-tests (see Table 1) comparing the group means for autonomy support, administrative support, social support, teaching job satisfaction, and identification with teaching. No statistically significant differences were observed with this sample. In addition, all means were above the midline, these current and former teachers tended to report a medium to high



level of autonomy support, administrative support, social support, job satisfaction, and identification with teaching.

Table 1: Comparison between Current and Former Teachers

	Still teaching?	N	Mean	t (sig.)
Autonomy Support	Yes	30	3.52 (1.18)	.429 (.8)
	No	22	3.38 (1.09)	
Administrative Support	Yes	30	3.40 (.89)	-.245 (.7)
	No	22	3.46 (.92)	
Social Support	Yes	30	4.21 (.52)	.079 (.93)
	No	22	4.20 (.69)	
Teaching Job Satisfaction	Yes	30	4.12 (.91)	1.376 (.18)
	No	22	3.74 (1.07)	
Identification with Teaching	Yes	30	4.73 (.47)	1.23 (.22)
	No	22	4.56 (.51)	

### Qualitative Data

One of the questions all participants were asked were why they initially wanted to become a teacher. The participants' answers do fit into five categories: desire to work with children, inspired by a teacher, love of subject matter, familial connection to teaching, and teaching is my passion. The breakdown of participants' answers into the five categories are not indicative of what career path the participants took.

All survey respondents were also asked if they could change anything about the teaching profession, what would it be and why. Most of the respondents did indicate that there is at least one thing they would like to change about the teaching profession, with several respondents

citing similar answers, such as standardized testing, increasing fiscal resources, and giving teachers more respect. One respondent said, “Interesting that you used the word ‘profession’ in the question, because that is something that feels attacked both inside and outside of schools.” There is one respondent, who is currently not in the classroom, who advocated for the elimination of tenure.

Part of the survey involved all respondents reflecting on their beliefs about education and how and if their beliefs changed since graduating from Gettysburg College. There were some respondents who said that their answers have not changed at all. For those who indicated a change to their views the majority said that either their views have not changed, they just have changed the practical application of their views or their views have become disillusioned over the years with their perception of the deterioration of the American public education system.

### **Graduates who are Still Teaching at the Primary or Secondary Level**

The survey respondents who have taught since graduating from Gettysburg College and are still teaching at the primary or secondary level stayed in the classroom, for the most part, for one of three reasons. They stay for a love for their students, a feeling that being a teacher is what they are meant to do in life, or because of money and employment opportunities. Some of the respondents who indicated that money is the reason they stayed in teaching did say that their current position does provide them with a good salary due to what salary step they fall on in that district, but other indicated that they stayed because their family needs that source of income and the respondent does not have the opportunity to find alternative sources of employment. Several of the respondents who are still teaching at the primary or secondary level have left the classroom for a year or more to earn an advanced degree, raise their children, or left a teaching job and could not find another one for an extended period of time or experimented with other

career paths before returning to teaching. Even though the majority of survey respondents have stayed in teaching, many of them still expressed levels of dissatisfaction with the current state of primary and secondary education.

Those who expressed dissatisfaction with the current state of primary and secondary education largely felt that teachers need more autonomy, support, respect, salary, and resources, while bureaucracy, politics, and paperwork need to leave the classroom. One of the larger differences I observed in the survey answers is the use of individualized education with respondents expressing a desire for schools to focus more on individualized education and that procedural education is too quickly on the rise. Other respondents, though, argue that standardization is needed in education now more than ever because so many parents are requesting that their children receive Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), and similar forms of documentation, for anything that could possibly hinder learning, no matter how minor it is and the level of paperwork involved detracts of the amount of time teachers can spend on building lessons that incorporate all of their students. Several survey respondents were so dissatisfied that they noted that they have lost their love of teaching and/or a desire to find alternative forms of employment, but for reasons choose to remain in the primary or secondary classroom.

### **Graduates who have Left Teaching at the Primary or Secondary Level**

The survey respondents who have taught since graduating from Gettysburg College, but have subsequently left teaching at the primary or secondary level, seem to fall into two categories. If the respondent left due to outside circumstances, such as inability to find a job or moving, they are more likely to return to teaching at the primary or secondary level than respondents who left due to circumstances within the classroom, such as not enough support or feeling that the education process is too bureaucratic. The respondents who left the classroom at

the primary or secondary level to further career advancement in administrative jobs or seek additional education, with one exception, do not want to return to the classroom. There are a couple of answers that while not unique and are not outliers are still intriguing. A small number of respondents expressed umbridge against teachers unions, with one expressing the belief that unions put the needs of teachers before the needs of students. The differences presented above regarding the amount of standardization in education in opposition to the amount of individualization in education were again noticed amongst this group of survey participants. There is a subset of alumni who have left teaching in a primary or secondary setting, but still teach at a post-secondary institution. Multiple studies, including this one, would count this group of alumni as having left the classroom, even though many still consider themselves as teachers. Additionally, studies (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Schaefer, 2013; Zheng & Zeller, 2016) have listed amount of perceived collegial, autonomous, and administrative support, initial thoughts of the career, disillusionment with the profession, type of preparation, and specialty field as reasons why teachers leave. While this study is not diminishing the fact that these factors may be at play, it is also worth noting that participants who are still teaching and who have left teaching indicated similar levels of perceived collegial, autonomous, and administrative support, similar themes with regards to initial thoughts of the career and disillusionment with the profession, many of the respondents share the same specialty field, and all respondents experienced the same type of preparation.

### **Graduates who Never Taught**

Most of the survey participants who have not taught since graduating from Gettysburg College did so because the realities of teaching in the classroom that they experienced during their time in the Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program did not correspond with their

expectations of what classroom teaching would be like. One participant wrote, “Despite my love for the kids, the structure and demands of the teacher were different than I expected.” In some instances, our alumni had an intention of becoming teachers a few years out from graduation, but they found the jobs they acquired in the meantime, so enjoyable they have stayed in those positions. One of the respondents who wanted to take some time away from the classroom wrote, “I very much enjoyed my experience in the teacher education program, but was also able to discover that I did not want to go into the classroom immediately. I always thought I would go back to it after several years, but have enjoyed my time in higher education (admissions) - where I still get to work with students every day - very much.” Half of those who have never taught since leaving Gettysburg College noted in their survey responses that they are open to becoming teachers at later points in their lives. They instead chose to pursue careers in the general field of education, while not necessarily becoming teachers, such as campus ministers and admissions counselors. Out of the four survey respondents who have never taught since graduating from Gettysburg College, two said that their experience in the teacher education program influenced their decision not to teach. Both respondents’ answers who cited their experience in the Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program as being influential in their decision to not further pursue teaching are quoted above.

### **Conclusions**

When looked at from the perspective of an individual post-secondary institution, the individual stories of the alumni emerge and so does the complexity of teacher turnover and retention in America, which is not always reflected in studies conducting on a state or national level. From this study, several important themes emerge. When a comparison is made amongst the three groups of survey respondents, a group of similarities emerge. First, there are

respondents who have left the classroom or who have never taught who expressed an openness to return to the classroom and there are respondents who are still teaching who left the classroom for an extended period of time of a year or more. Teacher turnover is not just a one-way exit door but a fluid spectrum of coming and leaving, which is dependent on people's situations. Second, based on the quantitative data, all of our respondents who responded to the Likert-scale questions, said that being a teacher is an integral part of their identity. It would be interesting to investigate the 40% of teachers who begin to pursue a degree in education, but never finish it, and see whether or not being a teacher is an integral part of their identity, but it does seem that students who actually finish a teacher education program did so because they cared strongly about and identified deeply with the profession they were trying to pursue (Riggs, 2013). That being said, because the respondents identify so strongly with being a teacher, it only makes sense that they have strong feelings about the current state of education in this country and what should be changed to improve the education system. Based on the qualitative data collected, for multiple questions, most respondents felt that the top three things that need improvement are increased fiscal resources, more respect for teachers, and less bureaucratic oversight.

Multiple respondents said in the survey that they feel that teachers do not earn the respect that they should because many, especially the general public, underestimate the amount of training teachers receive in a traditional teacher certification program and the amount of time and commitment teachers put into their jobs outside of school hours. The data from this study, though, has shown that teachers become teachers because they strongly identify with the profession. There is not a simple solution to getting the public to understand the strong affiliation teachers have with their profession, but it is critical to understand the important role teachers play in students' lives and it has taken years for them to get to this point. The qualitative

feedback received from the survey, for the most part, supports the idea that the Gettysburg College Teacher Education Program gave our alumni a strong basis on which they could construct their views of education and their pedagogical practices, even if they perceived that platform to be somewhat idealistic or romanticized.

Many researchers want to frame teacher turnover as a great crisis and while it is concerning, these findings suggest that it may not be as dire as it is depicted. New teachers and experienced teachers are going in and out of the primary and secondary classroom. If a solution is to be found to slow down the revolving door of education, the first question that needs to be answered is why people are leaving. This study has shown that there is no such thing as a definitive reason for why teachers stay or leave, in contrast to previous studies (Borman & Dowling, 2008; Ingersoll, 2001; Ingersoll & May, 2012; Schaefer, 2013; Zheng & Zeller, 2016). Going forward, the next steps in the research process would be to continue analyzing pre-existing interviews and conduct interviews to give respondents the opportunity to elucidate the qualitative data. Over the years, the importance of recognizing students as individuals with diverse needs and preferred learning styles have come more to the forefront. It is time that teachers are seen as individuals with diverse perspectives and stories and if the power of the individual is honed in on then maybe more teachers will stay in the classroom, where they belong.

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