

Reach University - Our nation's first and only accredited, nonprofit university fully dedicated to advancing job-embedded apprenticeship degrees.

By Kristen McCaw | June 6, 2023



Nancy Mondragon, a Reach candidate and paraprofessional, working with 4th grade students in her district.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY | Reach University's program is diversifying the teacher pipeline by offering apprenticeship-based learning that prepares candidates for work in K-12 schools. The program is fully online, flexible, and affordable so that candidates can work full-time and meet all other personal obligations. Reach University has developed a number of critical innovations in its program design: using homework as a means for valuing on-the-job learning while maintaining Regular and Substantive Interactions with professors; structuring courses and credits using pathway years, stackable degrees, and thematic semesters; and upskilling employers' current employees in order to end teacher shortages.

Goals

The program aims to diversify the teacher pipeline through apprenticeship-based learning. With a student body that is 60% BIPOC, 90% low-income, working parents, and/or first-generation college-goers, and 100% coming from the communities they serve, Reach University is committed to matching teacher demographics with K-12 student populations. By offering apprenticeship-based degrees, Reach University elevates teaching as a profession, refines professional practice, prepares candidates for work in the school environment, and attracts more diverse candidates.

Apprenticeship-based learning allows candidates to practice, receive feedback, and reflect in an integrated way, while also observing teaching daily and being part of a school community while learning their trade. Ultimately, the Reach University program aims to produce highly skilled and diverse educators who are equipped to meet the needs of all students in their classrooms.

Basics

The Reach University program serves approximately 900 students, offering apprenticeship-based learning that lasts between 1 to 4 years depending on how many

credits students have (Reach seeks to accept as many credits as possible, though students may only enter at the start of the 1st, 2nd, 3rd, or 4th year). The program is fully online, which means that apprentices don't have to travel or make child-care arrangements to participate. This format allows students to access the program from anywhere with an internet connection, and courses are offered in the evening and on weekends so that apprentices can continue working full-time. The cost of the program is \$75 per month or less, making it an affordable option for individuals who may not have access to traditional college programs.

Eligibility

To be eligible for the program, individuals must have graduated from high school and be at least 18 years old. They must hold a citizenship status that allows them to work in their local state. They must be fluent in English. Additionally, candidates must pass a background check to obtain legal permission to work with children. Successful applicants must also be willing to work with children for 10-15 hours per week in an academic setting. They must be employed by one of Reach University's partner school systems, which includes districts, parishes, and charter management organizations. Finally, candidates must be eligible for federal student financial aid.

Courses & Credits

Reach University has innovated in its approach to courses and credits in several ways that reflect its commitment to providing apprenticeship-based learning that is both flexible and rigorous.

The first innovation is in maintaining Regular & Substantive Interactions (RSI) while operating an apprenticeship-based program. Typically, Carnegie credits assume a combination of classroom seat time plus homework, which is usually papers and reading assignments. At Reach, in order to leverage apprentices' on-the-job experience, some of their homework is work they complete on the job, with feedback from their workplace mentor. Because the Reach University professor assigns the homework and reviews it, the professor maintains Regular and Substantive Interaction (RSI) with the student. Additionally, because this experience is integrated into existing coursework and not a new course, this requires merely a syllabus change - not a substantive change with the university's accreditor.

The second innovation the program uses is pathway years, which involves a clear and structured focus for each year of the program. The foundational year focuses on

developing professional skills and learning about classroom culture, while the intermediate and advanced years focus on content and pedagogy, and the clinical year involves teaching in the classroom. This approach ensures that students are well-prepared for their future careers as educators, with a strong foundation in both theory and practice.

The third innovation used by Reach University is stackable degrees, which allows courses to be used in a modular way. Courses for a certificate might be embedded into an associate's degree program, which leads to a bachelor's degree program. This approach requires careful titling and numbering of courses to ensure that they can be used flexibly and aren't limited to one degree or program. By offering stackable degrees, Reach University provides students with the opportunity to progress through multiple levels of education at their own pace, while also gaining valuable skills and credentials along the way.

The fourth innovation is thematic semesters, which involves offering thematically-related courses together during one term. This approach allows students to focus on one subject and make connections between different courses, while also enabling a single instructor to teach multiple courses. Thematic semesters provide students with a more immersive and integrated learning experience, helping them to become more knowledgeable and effective educators.

Hands-On Experience

Typically, universities work with students to find residency placements in their final year. Reach University flips that approach by starting with employers and their current employees. Reach's employer-driven approach aims to address teacher shortages by focusing on upskilling current employees. This strategy not only helps alleviate the shortage of qualified teachers but also ensures that apprentices' learning experiences are consistently relevant and immediately applicable.

To this end, apprentices are expected to have a job with one of Reach University's partners prior to starting the program. Reach has a searchable directory of partners on its website for candidates who are not yet employed. Apprentices are expected to work with children in an academic setting for at least 10 hours per week, though most work full-time. Most are in paraprofessional or similar roles. Work experience offers an opportunity to demonstrate competencies, is tracked in the [Craft Tracker](#), and counts for academic credit by serving as a component of course homework.

Getting a Teaching Credential

Certification is a vital aspect of Reach University's program, with Reach directly providing certification or partnering with certification providers depending on the state. Coursework is designed to align with the Praxis, which ensures that students are well-prepared to pass their teaching exams.

Mentorship

Employers are responsible for assigning a mentor to their apprentices to provide guidance, coaching, feedback, and support. The [Craft Tracker](#) facilitates this process by giving mentors visibility into the apprentice's work, course expectations, and progress.

Continuous Improvement

Reach University is in the process of getting approval to begin drawing WIOA funding in multiple states in order to drive the program cost down even further. Reach University is also committed to learning from peers and sharing what it is learning with other institutions of higher education.

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