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Ann Gentle
St. Martins College

Steve Siera
St. Martins College

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The Alternate Route to Teacher Certification: Meeting the Challenges Students Face



Ann Gentle
St. Martin's College



Steve Siera
St. Martin's College

ABSTRACT

This study will introduce readers to the Alternate Route to Teacher Certification in Washington State, also known as the "fast track." Participants are able to attain teacher certification through a special curricular program design within six to twelve months. It commences with a summer academy in July and with the participants as student teachers in the classroom with a Mentor Teacher and College Supervisor by September.

The student stories will focus on successes, while including information on the development of the program from the perspective of Saint Martin's College, Lacey, Washington. The program's purpose is to meet teacher staffing requirements in secondary schools for school districts in high needs areas, including Special Education, English Language Learning, Japanese, Math, several areas of Science, and Music.

I'm calling about the Alternate Route to Certification Program. Saint Martin's College is listed on the web site and I'm really interested in being a teacher.

Do you have a Bachelor's degree and five years work experience?

INTRODUCTION

That's usually the beginning of the telephone conversation. The emails, the letters, the referrals are daily, although they are usually most frequent in August, September and December. We are in our third year of the Alternate Route program at Saint Martin's College and the quality of the candidates exceeds the high expectations of the *Recommendations for High-Quality Alternative Routes to Teacher Certification* publi-

cation from the Washington Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (2000).

In the summer of 2003, the legislature determined that funding would be available for continuing the alternate route for teacher certification candidates, which had started in 2002 as an experimental "fast track" program. There was a short window for advertising, recruiting, and registration, and to get the program up and running to develop teachers for high needs areas in secondary education. We had learned a lot from the previous year, which was this institution's first venture into the arena of "fast track," and we were anxious to put in place the pieces of this new and challenging educational program puzzle.

An indication of the success of the program is that of the 31 candidates who completed the

program in the first two years, 24 are teaching in contracted positions. The other seven are substituting, one by choice, one between flights as a crew member with a major airline, and the other five because they declined to pursue positions outside a limited geographical location.

In this article we will share some observations from instructors and students. These observations include the challenges students face. We will illustrate with vignettes from participants in the program, and will share some of the characteristics of successful alternate route programs. Finally some recommendations for alternative route programs will be offered. Corroborating information from the literature will be included.

SCREENING CRITERIA

Four institutions of higher education in Washington State are currently supported in the endeavor to provide an alternate route to teacher certification for high needs teacher shortage areas in secondary schools. The State Legislature, the Professional Educator Standards Board, and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction provide the funding and structure for this effort.

Participants are screened to meet the following established criteria:

- Mid-career professionals not employed in the district at time of application
- Five years experience in the workforce, in a professional type career
- Baccalaureate degree from a regionally accredited institution of higher education
- External validation of qualifications, including demonstrated successful experience with students or children, such as reference letters and/or letters of support from previous employers
- Successful passage of the West-B basic skills test
- Meet the age, good moral character, and personal fitness requirements of the Washington State Administrative Code
- Be available to begin the program with

participation in the summer teaching academy prior to a mentored internship

THE NATURE OF THE PARTICIPANTS

Many of the participants in the program have been successful in a variety of fields, although a few have been displaced from previous careers. The following two stories illustrate the backgrounds that many of the candidates bring to the program.

Loh Seng enters the alternate route picture. Loh Seng had telephoned a couple of times after reading the web site announcement and attending the evening public information meetings. Loh Seng's background includes a Master's degree in Finance from UC Berkley, and a Master's in Civil Engineering from Lehigh University, Pennsylvania, with a BA in Structural Engineering from Quinghua University, Beijing, China. His resume is extensive and impressive; some of his accomplishments include: Co-managed a large U.S. equity index derivatives portfolio, developed in-house computer programs to manage risks of trading positions, served as World Bank consultant in managing complex environmental engineering projects, involved in the design, inspection and construction of more than 30 bridges in different states, etc. His letter requesting consideration for program admission states, in part, "Approaching the big 40 made me more introspective and philosophical about life, career, and children. Up until then, I had had a pretty 'successful' life path—coming to this country on my own and earning an advanced degree in engineering; subsequently landing a job in consulting engineering to become a project manager in three years; switching to an even more lucrative and highly competitive job on Wall Street by obtaining an MBA from a top-tiered school and getting in the frenzied field of option trading and going up through the ranks of investment banking. However, with every goal achieved, I still felt there was a missing piece in my life. Even at the height of pursuing those 'goals', there had always been a need inside me that told me that what I do should be more meaningful than just gaining financial and social status."

Loh Seng goes on to express that certain things do not seem right even though he has done all the things he was supposed to do; that the careers were not rewarding enough spiritually, and have not given the satisfaction that he has contributed positively to society.

Tamiko called a number of times from Manhattan on her cell phone. She had read about the Alternate Route program on the web site and had many questions. Tamiko had grown up in this locality, moved to the East for her career, and was now thinking of relocating and changing her career. Tamiko wrote: "For almost thirty years, I worked primarily in the commercial sector, focusing most recently on marketing, writing and brand strategy. Over the past year I went through a period of reflection about work. Wanting to make a more direct contribution to my community and to children, I felt drawn to education. I always loved school and did well. My best teachers inspired me to learn how to read, write, find information, analyze facts, and use my imagination. These tools enabled me to continue to learn, succeed in my work, and pursue personal passions. I would like to work with students so they have similar tools to thrive in school and in life."

Tamiko continues, "Though I've never taught in a classroom, I've had plenty of teaching experiences. As a music major at Wesleyan University in Connecticut, I taught piano to fellow students. In my professional life, I mentored junior employees and student interns, instructing them on how to do their jobs and providing insights into the business world. Volunteer experiences include mentoring a 17 year old resident of a foster care facility, helping an Argentine immigrant to improve his English, and working with disabled children in a treatment center."

Tamiko summarizes nicely by saying "I believe that my professional experience, education, passion for learning, and strong desire to help children will help me make a positive impact on my students' learning and achievements." Tamiko is student teaching in an English Language Learning classroom and completing her ESL/Bilingual endorsement.

CHALLENGES CANDIDATES FACE

We anticipated there would be challenges our candidates would face during their experience. Among the descriptions in the literature are six points that Cleveland (2003) gleaned from an analysis of threaded e-discussions among candidates in North Carolina's NCTEACH program. He listed six themes threaded throughout the discussions, each of which represents a candidate and/or program challenge. We use these six themes as a framework for examining the experiences of students in the program.

1. Organization

Because participants in the program generally have high expectations and are seeking an expedited route to certification, **organization** of the program from entry to exit is critical. They want to know what is required, and what they must do to meet expectations. To meet these expectations, it is important to have a Coordinator/Director devoting sufficient time to the program. Recalling Loh Seng's and Tamiko's stories, many details must be addressed to transition the candidates from their former lives into their new lives as students and future teachers.

Stan's story illustrates the importance of attention to organization. Stan's BA degree was in Drama. He worked as a union labor negotiator for many years, but wanted to move from high and constant conflict, to a profession where his work would directly benefit students. Stan himself had problems going through school, and knew the anxiety students can feel when they don't understand a subject, such as math. Prior to becoming an "official" participant, candidates must pass the Washington State West B exam (that includes basic skills in reading, writing and math). Stan didn't want to fail. He hired a tutor to prepare for the math portion of the test. At the same time, Stan was participating in Weight Watchers and lost over 100 pounds ("to feel better and to have the energy to pursue this new career"). Stan was ready to pursue a teaching certificate through evening and weekend courses. He had started seeking information, but in his mind, it would take forever.

It was late May when Stan came into the education office in response to our call about “a different kind of teacher certification” program. He listened patiently as the Dean and the Program Director talked about the intense “fast track” cohort program being offered in high needs areas. Stan was excited. We were describing a program where he could complete all classes and certification requirements in less than one year. It was more than he could initially comprehend, but slowly it began to make sense. Take 15 semester hours in the summer, 15 during the fall term, and 15 during the Spring, be in a middle school or high school classroom in September with a mentor teacher and college supervisor, phase into student teaching when the team felt he was ready, work diligently through six to eight weeks of “solo” teaching, meet the Washington State Performance Based Pedagogy Assessment requirements, produce an in depth portfolio in hard copy and on disk, and he would be ready for teaching in six to twelve months. Stan could hardly take a breath; this was an answer to a dream. But, without the tight organization of the program and having a Program Director dedicated to supporting the program, it is doubtful that Stan would have been able to see himself succeeding. He might never have enrolled.

2. Need for Support

Providing organizational structure and resources is one aspect that blends into the second challenge that Cleveland (2003) described the **need for support**. Having a Director allows all the details to be anticipated and addressed, from the consideration and processing of applications, to soliciting classroom placements with qualified mentors, to ensuring all program requirements are met. However, there is another aspect of support that is critical, that of peer support.

Here we go; it's June 30th. Stan enters the college classroom for orientation and becomes acquainted with thirteen others who have joined this path to becoming middle school and high school teachers. These are colleagues who will become close associates, helpmates, supporters, and good friends over the next several months.

Introductions included the diverse backgrounds of the participants; an opera singer who has toured the world and speaks five languages, a community corrections officer, a Lutheran minister, a chemist from a local brewery, a nutritionist employed to provide hemodialysis, a social worker, a case manager for Jewish Family and Children's Services, a flight attendant, homemakers, and emergency substitute teachers. The average age of the participants is 45. Four of the 14 already possess Master's Degrees in a discipline. The common element is the passion to do whatever is required to join the ranks of “professional educators.” Each was impressed with the vast amount of knowledge gathered for this endeavor. They realized they were making financial and family sacrifices to reach “the carrot at the end of the stick,” and they could not yet see the carrot. A sense of being valued and validated was created by knowing that because of anticipated shortages in certain curricular areas, the State of Washington was willing to provide a \$5,000 grant toward their tuition with an additional \$3,000 to come to them when they signed a contract to teach in a Washington State public school the next year. After a day's orientation, the cohort was ready, or not, to begin classes.

It's a hot July day. The two professors, one teaching Curriculum and Instruction and the other, Classroom Assessment, start right out with multi-page syllabi, and awe grips the room. There is so much information from the two instructors; it feels like they are both talking at once sometimes. How will the students survive? Stan and his classmates decide to exchange email and telephone numbers. They also pass around a sign up sheet for snacks. It's going to take a lot of energy and consulting to accomplish all of this.

Stan and the other candidates each quickly settled into a 9 A.M to 4 P.M regimen of classroom activities and several hours of homework each afternoon and evening. Weekends were extended homework preparation marathons and free time became virtually non-existent. Because most of these people were not grounded in education, this was genuinely a new career venture. With the difference only maturity can bring, they

put forth the extensive efforts needed to discover the boundaries of this new profession. Not only were they paying hefty tuition, but they were investing quantities of their valuable time and energy into this previously unknown arena. In this arena, they would develop into facilitators for the inquisitive and knowledge thirsty minds of 12 to 18 year olds.

A routine evolves for this six weeks of intensive coursework. The casual attire and volumes of research-based paperwork begin. The whiteboard becomes an idea mirror, PowerPoint presentations become the norm, and overhead transparencies with vis-a-vis pens turn out to be commonly utilized devices. Praise and polish, i.e. positive and constructive feedback, both verbal and written, are provided to students from their classmates and instructors.

3. Coursework

It is this shared experience that constitutes Cleveland's (2003) third challenge, to have high quality, meaningful **coursework**, and to be able to access and complete that work successfully. By immersing the candidates in intensive coursework in the pedagogical core during the summer prior to the beginning of their work in the classroom, the candidates are remarkably well prepared to fully engage in the field experience and immediately begin the integration of concepts into practice.

Summer classes and the intense academic rigors continued through August. Students participated in the Content Area Reading course, Technology in the Classroom, and Classroom Management, receiving the full dose of instruction in capsule form. (And little do they realize at the time that the capsules are time released – a concept of theory learned now that will take full effect later as classroom experiences activate an integration that is personally meaningful and professionally enriching.) An intense loyalty and interest in the success of each student in the program develops within the group as a result of several factors that bond them together. As they will care for the students they nurture, they also act as a troupe laughing, and crying, encouraging, prodding, assisting and celebrating their achievements. Although sup-

port from program faculty is important, it is this collegial support that forms the foundation for becoming independent yet collaborative teachers.

During the school year even though they are in their individual classrooms during the day, they come together to take classes in Introduction to Exceptionality, Issues of Abuse/Teacher as Counselor, Secondary Methods, Living and Learning in the Middle School, Education Law, all **while continuing their classroom experiences in observation and student teaching**. Student Teaching Seminar is the culminating experience where they complete their portfolio, and transfer their ten documents and performance indicators to create the electronic portfolio for storage in their academic file at the college.

The challenge of coursework is intensified for some students who need to complete endorsement area requirements. Angela is one of those. Now, 45 and single, with a law degree from an institution in another state, and two teenage sons, Angela knew what she wanted to do – work with young adults as a teacher. This matter-of-fact person with a strong, purposeful, sense of direction was ready for “fast tracking” into education. With an outgoing personality and extraordinary sense of humor, plus her proven academic background, success seemed assured. Angela qualified for several endorsements, but to qualify for the program, she needed an endorsement in at least one of the “qualifying high needs areas.” Angela wanted to teach high school math. Period. She had only five of the ten math classes required for the Grades 5-12 endorsement, and met only some of the pre-professional course requirements.

During the spring, prior to beginning the program, Angela attended a nearby community college, taking four courses. Over the summer and fall, she continued to build her repertoire of the needed classes. Then she decided to take the Praxis (or West E) exam. If she could pass that exam in math, all requirements for the needed endorsement would be fulfilled. In addition to student teaching and college classes, she embarked on the review necessary to pass the exam. If she does not pass the Praxis the first

time, it can be scheduled a second time for an additional fee. In the meantime, her high school math students continue to enjoy a quality presentation daily from a person who demonstrates by example how to get where you want to go.

4. Mentoring

Week after week classes continue. Anxiety and anticipation grow as summer draws to a close and as students realize they will soon have a school location and the name of a mentor teacher. Placements are full-time at the middle or high school level. School districts agree to “partner” with the individual institutions of higher learning and to provide a classroom mentor teacher in a middle or high school. This mentor has had prior “Mentor” training either through their district or through the State of Washington, Office of Public Instruction, Mentoring Academy. Cleveland (2003) cites **mentoring** as the fourth area of challenge for the alternate route candidate. We agree that mentoring is crucial to the success of the candidates in the program, so a concerted effort is made to ensure the mentors will be strong contributors to the candidates’ acculturation into the teaching profession.

Stan is especially worried about whether he can be placed with an appropriate mentor because his “high needs area” will have to be defined by the school district determining if they have teacher shortages in his area of expertise, and are willing to write a substantiating letter about drama, which is a different subject area from most of the candidates. Areas of shortages listed by the State of Washington identify math, several science areas, special education, English Language Learning, Japanese, and music, as the qualifiers. Any exceptions require a separate letter from the accepting district. Finding him a placement is complicated by the need to find a school with a need for drama and a suitable mentor. All participants are required to have two endorsement areas as determined by reviewing transcripts and assessing individual academic strengths prior to entering the program. Students have known since the initial interviews if they needed to take additional classes to meet endorsement requirements. Stan’s endorsement

areas include middle level humanities (English and social studies) and drama.

On an individual basis, students are notified of their placement with a mentor. Excitement permeates the summer classes as different members report back about going to the schools, meeting with their “Mentors-to-Be,” and sharing stories of the locations, districts, buildings, grade level, subject area, and whatever else they have been able to ascertain at this point. Camaraderie is escalating. An exciting new phase of the program is about to begin.

Stan got accepted into a middle school to participate in English and drama. He was ecstatic with the assignment. Whether it was a good day or not so good, he would always close class with “You know I love you,” as students went out the door. There was always that magical environment with the clear statement—this is a safe place where we are learning. —Stan had an excellent student teaching experience, which included auditioning students and directing a play that he adapted from a Shakespeare classic. He also taught English classes.

Although we would like to report that every placement was successful, this was not to be in Christina’s case. Because a teacher has received mentor training does not always guarantee that person will serve as an appropriate mentor for all student teachers. In this instance the mentor had received training and the class was a middle level math/science combination. Christina was a rather petite 47 year old with teenagers in her family. She had strong beliefs about students’ self-worth, self-image, and the importance of dealing with classroom management in a “professional manner.” When the mentor would use deprecating terms toward students, Christina would inwardly cringe. Finally she came to us and said she was going to “drop out” of the program; this just wasn’t what she expected.

After an in-depth discussion, Christina was asked if she would consider being transferred to another mentor. Christina expressed genuine pangs of guilt, because she could not change the situation where she was the “guest.” Although hesitant to go to another placement, she said yes. Another mentor in a nearby school accepted Christina. This story has a happy ending. The

two worked well together because they both had similar approaches to maintaining high expectations and dealing with classroom management in a positive manner.

In the summer when professors tell the students, "Not only will you like student teaching, you will feel sadness when it's time to leave the classroom and move on," students say they can't imagine there is any validity to that statement. When the time comes, student teachers have bonded closely with their students and are truly reluctant to leave.

5. Finding and Managing Time

The program experience is so intense, it is easy to see Cleveland's (2003) fifth area of challenge, **finding time and managing the time that exists**. From the first days in July, with the intensity of the coursework, this challenge is at the forefront. In the first two weeks, a common refrain was "I was up until 2:00 A.M. working on this. How will I ever be able to make it through?" The instructors smile warmly and reply, "You are doing just fine. We know it is demanding, but you will make it through." These reassurances may be important, but the real action is the mutual support that the students provide. A few of the strategies that help the cohort not just to survive, but to thrive, are study groups, collaborative efforts, hints at more efficient ways to do something, or an impromptu potluck lunch so they can keep on working. Not only do the students do the work required and do it well, they also balance those demands with the demands of families, and often active community lives. One participant apologized for missing a class to go on a family trip that had been planned since before she had even heard about the program. But, she proclaimed, "I'm taking my work with me and I will be doing it so that I am not behind when I come back." The demands of the program become preparation for the busy life of the beginning teacher.

6. Dealing with Frustration

The final challenge Cleveland (2003) identified was **dealing with many sources of frustration**. We have been fortunate that frustrations have been fewer than anticipated. Some

students experience frustration in dealing with new concepts in the coursework, but those frustrations have been relatively minor, and the support systems have worked. One of the larger frustrations has been the amount of time it takes to solidify placements with a mentor. The partner school districts have been very conscientious, but they have been the victim of uncertain funding which has introduced flux in teaching assignments as districts have been required to hold positions open until teachers who have been displaced are finally placed and final assignments are made. Finally, there are the situations like Christina's that we discussed earlier. Dealing with the mentor who was negative toward students, and sometimes toward her, was a major frustration. Fortunately, through organizational support we were able to address the situation, and at the same time, the peer support helped her through some really frustrating times.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL ALTERNATE ROUTE PROGRAMS

There are several points of guidance for successful alternate route programs that may be drawn from the experiences related above, as well as from the growing body of literature. Among those are the following:

- *Provide for administrative support.* Granted, this may seem obvious, but it also may be tempting to economize by limiting administrative support. The Director needs to be selected who can provide coordination and meet students' needs. Depending on the size and complexity of the program, a full-time Director is recommended (Cleveland, 2003), although we have been successful with a half-time Director for a program with 15 to 20 participants. The Director needs to be highly involved in providing information about the program to prospective participants, selecting participants, and then paving the way to success once students are in the program. One of the things that has increased our

success following the first year is that we now provide detailed information about the program and previous students' experiences. Anecdotal evidence credits this with being a strong element in the self-selection process for prospective participants. Better informed candidates make better decisions. It also leads to faster, better acclimation to the program. During the program the Director needs to provide leadership in ensuring that a myriad of details are completed. This individual is also instrumental in securing placements for the internship and problem solving when something does not go as expected, either in the internship or any area related to the program.

- *Provide for flexible yet strong academic and pedagogical coursework.* Participants in our program participate in all of the pedagogical classes required in our regular program. However, because of the intense internship, many of those classes are modified in format and content to capitalize on the learning in the internship and to provide integration. For some classes, seat time is significantly reduced. Academic coursework in content areas has usually been met prior to enrollment in the program, but for those students who need it, a great deal of flexibility exists for alternate ways of meeting the requirements. Angela's story gave one example of that. We feel it is critical for all participants to have the pedagogical and subject knowledge necessary to help their students meet the standards embedded in the Essential Academic Learning Requirements. This is consistent with Berry's (2001) recommendation for a strong grounding in content and pedagogy.
- *Employ an extensive field experience/ internship into the program.* Our

candidates are engaged in a year-long internship as recommended by Berry (2001) and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (2000). That provides a significant opportunity for students to see classroom management and instructional strategies modeled by the mentor teacher, to allow them to integrate concepts learned through courses, and for them to have the opportunity to reflect on what works and does not work, both for themselves and for their respective mentors. However, flexibility needs to be included. By January of 2004, two of the male participants were selected for contracted positions because of vacancies in the schools where they were student teaching. They had met all the program requirements, and in addition, they had met all the conditions for seven subject area endorsements. That was exciting and inspiring for everyone in the program. Even though they were now teaching and the mentoring relationship was altered, they continued to participate in program seminars and the informal peer support network.

- *Create opportunities for strong peer support mechanisms.* As students traverse such an intense program, they must contend with a variety of challenges. Our students demonstrate great resiliency in coping with the challenges, in large part because of the supportive environment developed in the cohort. Many times the students refer to the cohort as their second family. They credit the "family" with having made dealing with the intense work manageable and even pleasant. The awesome power of the cohort is activated in wrestling with the application of concepts in the classroom and the opportunity to share a situation, generate alternative ways to handle the situation and project the likely results

of the alternatives. Although a cohort approach may not be necessary for peer support, it definitely promotes the establishment of a strong peer support culture. The provision of peer support, especially through a cohort is recommended by a number of sources, including Berry (2001), Cleveland (2003), Jorissen (2002), and Xu, Gelfer and Filler (2003).

- *Ensure candidates have a strong preparation in subject matter and pedagogy to meet teaching standards.* Candidates completing the program want to be assured they can compete favorably with traditionally prepared teachers. Also, employing schools want the assurance that alternative route prepared teachers will be strong both in content and pedagogy. In the words of a recent completer, “Although entering any new profession comes with a steep learning curve, my education has fully prepared me to deal with all of the various challenges head-on, with competence and confidence. You, and the entire St. Martin’s Education Department consistently delivered curriculum and pedagogy that has held me in good stead teaching in the ‘real world’.” To ensure that strong background, careful monitoring in the admissions process allows us to verify a strong content background upon entry into the program, or to provide experiences to develop the content strength prior to or during the program. By way of illustration, Loh Seng represented a candidate who had a very strong background, while Angela enrolled in courses to develop a background in an area unrelated to her previous professional life.

In our case, we have designed and implemented the program to ensure that pedagogical skills are well devel-

oped; both the coursework and the internship stress development and refinement of these skills. Further, the extensive internship experience ensures application to the real world of the classroom occurs. This combination approach creates the kind of candidates who exhibit content and pedagogical strength as called for in recommendations from Berry (2001) and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (2000).

- *Make sure completers meet all of the teacher quality standards required of regularly certified teachers.* This is one of the primary concerns expressed both by Berry (2001) and the Office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction (2000). Our graduates meet the same standards as any other teacher. They must meet the same entry standards including basic skills test scores (West B), they must provide the same documentation of competencies, and be assessed using the same performance instrument. In the end, they do meet all the standards. In addition, they have completed a process that probably has even better prepared them socially for the day-to-day life as a teacher, and to deal with the isolation of teaching by seeking out peers for support as necessary.

This last understanding looms large. They meet high standards for content and pedagogical knowledge and skill. Additionally, when we scan the list of dispositions we are developing for future candidates entering our teaching certification program, these individuals exceed expectations. They are positively engaged; they accept professional responsibility; they value lifelong reflective learning; they are caring/sensitive nurturers; and they serve as ethical character models. We have indeed met the goals set by the State of Washington and our professional community!

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Dr. Ann Gentle is Assistant Professor of Education and Director of the Secondary Teacher Alternate Route (STAR) Program at Saint Martin's College in Lacey. She has worked five years at the college and 25 years as a high school and district administrator. agentle@stmartin.edu

Dr. Steve Siera is Associate Professor of Education and Director of the Master of Education Program at Saint Martin's College in Lacey, having worked more than 30 years in K-12 and Higher Education. ssiera@stmartin.edu