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In Idaho, a College Connects With Teachers

By Beth McMurtrie APRIL 02, 2017

Strong partnerships between high schools and the colleges they work with are critical to successful dual-enrollment programs. At Boise State University, those ties are forged through faculty members like Tiffany Watkins.

For the past five years, Ms. Watkins, a physics lecturer and departmental adviser, has been the liaison between Boise State and area high schools offering college-level introductory physics. She screens applicants, shares her curriculum with teachers, and provides professional development. In any given year she oversees between eight and 15 teachers.

Because Boise State's service area includes rural communities, it makes more sense to help high schools provide the coursework rather than to send professors out to teach or bring students to campus, says Fabiola Juarez-Coca, director of concurrent-enrollment programs. The university has about 200 teachers in its network, whose work is overseen by 50 liaisons, including Ms. Watkins.

At least once a year Ms. Watkins visits each of her teachers, sitting in on a class and explaining Boise State's physics program to students. It takes a lot of time, she notes, but helping build strong programs is important. To connect students and teachers to campus, Ms. Watkins and other liaisons schedule field trips, where students get IDs, visit libraries and labs, and meet professors. At Boise State, participation in the state's [Fast Forward program](#), which provides more than \$4,000 to each student in Grades 7 through 12 for advanced coursework, has grown from 375 students 12 years ago to close to 5,000 this year. About one-third of those students end up enrolling at the university. "It's a good recruitment tool for our department," says Ms. Watkins.

Ms. Watkins says the students who take Boise State's introductory physics course in their high schools are often better prepared than their college-age counterparts because they tend to be high achievers. She'd like to figure out a way to open up the class to students who might be more inclined to major in English than in a STEM field.

She also notes a larger challenge for her field: Fewer than half of high-school physics classes nationally are taught by teachers with a degree in the subject. And Ms.

Watkins has had to turn down many teacher applicants for the dual-enrollment program because they lack the right credentials.

Through Fast Forward and the campus teaching-and-learning center, Boise State has been working to help strengthen high-school STEM teaching. And the university is also working to turn out future STEM teachers: A recent Boise State graduate is now teaching in a rural high school, Ms. Watkins says, and has perhaps the largest dual-credit class in all of the schools she advises this year.

Beth McMurtrie writes about campus culture, among other things. Follow her on Twitter [@bethmcmurtrie](#), or email her at beth.mcmurtrie@chronicle.com.