

Five Ways to Improve Teacher Education, Without Spending More Money (IP-3-2000)

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Issue Paper

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Introduction:

A variety of solutions, including, but not limited to, reducing class size, requiring merit pay for teachers, increasing professional requirements, changing the calendar to accommodate year-round schools, and a host of other changes have been advocated as avenues to improving the performance of public school pupils. Even the undergraduate curriculum for teacher-education students has been modified in the hope that improved public school teaching would result in increased achievement of public school pupils. One possible solution that has not received much attention, however, is the re-examination and revision of policies in teacher-education programs.

Changes in teacher education policies rather than in teacher-certification requirements could result in significantly improved performance on the part of public school pupils.

Five simple steps inexpensive, easily understood, and readily-implemented by any institution of higher education are suggested and explained in this Issue Paper. These changes are:

- Step One. Change the way university teaching is evaluated, by eliminating or reducing student evaluations of teachers.
- Step Two: Modernize the course delivery process by creating a multimedia package covering all fundamentals.
- Step Three: Stop playing Big University. Don't force professors who are great teachers to divert time into writing for journals, or attending professional conferences.
- Step Four: Get rid of redundancies by eliminating outside accreditation.
- Step Five: Restructure the hiring process, by eliminating the barrier on hiring the best graduates to teach at the school from which they graduated. Eliminated

merit pay.

Step One: Change the Way University Teaching is Evaluated

Why are teacher education students required to take classes on how to teach? Does that sound like the proverbial stupid question? Obviously, students take such classes to learn how to teach. The classes are required because, presumably, students don't know what constitutes good teaching.

Now, if that is the case, why do we ask neophytes even at the end of their first course in a series of courses on how to teach to decide whether their professor is a good teacher? And why are professors then rated on the basis of what their students think they know about the professors teaching?

Not surprisingly, student evaluations can have the opposite effect they are intended to have. What pleases students is not always what is best for them. Popular professors are not always effective professors. Demanding assignments are not always exciting assignments. The value of required activities is not always immediately apparent or appreciated. Stringent grading requirements are rarely met with student approval. Honest criticism of student work, candid observations on students' efforts, and insistence upon quality performance are not the stuff that popularity is made of.

So what, in the eyes of a college student, makes a good professor? i.e., an effective teacher? The limitations of student evaluations were pointed out by Dr. Bruce Broderius, an education department chairman, who had studied the literature on student evaluations. He reported an interesting but not surprising finding to his teacher education colleagues: faculty effectiveness was directly related to students' perceptions of the degree of "with-it-ness" of faculty! In other words, if students perceived a faculty member to be "with-it" (read cool, tuned into the now generation, or otherwise not out-of-it) the faculty member received good student evaluations.

Almost every one of us has had a teacher who was not particularly a favorite of ours at the time we were in class, but whose influence became apparent only years later, and whose excellence, also, was appreciated only after the refining influence of life experiences came to bear upon what we learned. Nevertheless, that teacher, who might have been the most effective teacher we ever had, might not have received a good evaluation from us.

Now what does all this have to do with improving teacher education without spending additional money? The answer readily suggests itself, and it's easy to apply. Untie professors' hands. Do not require them to submit to student evaluations. Do not consider student evaluations as a part of a teaching effectiveness assessment. Do not use student evaluations in determining merit pay allocation. At the very least, if student evaluations of professors are employed, limit student responses to a checklist which assesses something students are qualified to assess; namely, did the instructor practice what the

instructor preached? (E.g., if the instructor taught, Always apprise students of specific evaluative criteria for assignments, did the instructor apprise students of such criteria? If the instructor taught, Begin a lesson with a review of related foundational concepts, did the instructor adhere to that principle?) Further, allow instructors, themselves, to document that they practiced the principles they taught, just in case students lacked the perception to see that the instructor was subtly doing exactly what the instructor was advocating.

If instructors are freed from any repercussions tied to student evaluations, there will be several highly probable outcomes. Requirements will become more demanding. Grading will become more stringent. Academic quality will significantly increase. Instructors will not be held hostage to student comments such as, The instructor did not value my opinions. Instructors will not have to contend with conflicting perceptions, by different students in the same course, such as, There was not enough opportunity for discussion, side-by-side with, There was too much student discussion. Nor will professors who are demanding be penalized by written evaluations such as, There was too much work for a two-credit class, all of which negative observations, under the current system, can detrimentally affect faculty members ratings, and, hence, their paychecks.

That academic quality will improve when faculty are freed from student evaluations is not an idle hypothesis. The assertion is based upon years of observation and discussion with a significant number of good college teachers whose knowledge and communication abilities are respected by their colleagues. Many of them have incurred negative repercussions as a result of questionable criticism by disgruntled students. And theres something else that has not even been discussed here, but which could certainly be thrown into the mix. It is totally indefensible to use student evaluations in comparing one faculty member with another when one person teaches a required course, and the other an elective course, or when one has a class of sixty students, and the other a class of fifteen. Nevertheless, for years, in one teacher education program, a student evaluation form included a question, Compared to other classes and other professors, I would rate this professor . . .

The solution: Put an end to student evaluations. Tie this recommendation to the suggestions in step #3,below. What is outlined in that step has to do with letting faculty members identify the areas in which they are most talented, and on which they want to focus, such as, say, research, or grant-writing. Professors who choose teaching as their major responsibility will, in all likelihood, be good teachers. In addition, if they are free of the threat of negative repercussions which might ensue from their refusal to pander to students, improvement in teacher education will occur within one semester. And it wont take the bludgeoning of an accrediting agency or the blatant bribery of merit pay to make it happen.

Step Two: Modernize the Course Delivery Process

The reading wars which characterized public schools in the late eighties and early nineties brought to the public's attention the conflict between advocates of so-called whole-language and phonic approaches. A teacher education student, depending upon which professor taught a basic reading methods course, might complete a teacher preparation program steeped in Whole Language philosophy. The student's roommate, who took the same course from a different professor, might matriculate clutching a box of Alpha-bits and mouthing the virtues of a synthetic phonics approach. It's possible, under the current system, that course content can mirror the predilections of a professor. What a catalog course description says, and what an accrediting agency demands, are of little influence once the classroom door is closed. Consider the example of courses in teaching reading. Currently, it's possible for a student to graduate from a teacher education program which requires courses in how to teach reading, without ever having been presented with information about how to teach phonics. Indeed, the student might not only be ignorant of how to teach phonics; the student might have been indoctrinated with a strong aversion to systematic phonics instruction. And the problem of variegated content is not restricted to teacher education courses, as any college graduate is well aware. One takes a professor, rather than a course.

Now, what does all this have to do with improving teacher education without spending more money? Variation in content of a course, even one in Fundamentals of . . . is a problem which cannot be corrected under the current system without a highly negative result. For example, certain content could be absolutely mandated, and penalties could be imposed on non-compliant faculty. But academic freedom would be lost. Such a Draconian incursion into a scholar's freedom to pursue truth which is what academic freedom is all about would be too high a price to pay. But that does not mean that standardization of content is unattainable. Let's take a course, for example, that is a part of every teacher-education candidate's program, under one title or another, in every teacher-education institution in the country. It is often called Foundations of Education. Fundamental concepts could be electronically packaged into auto-instructional formats. Likewise concepts in courses in pedagogy—how to teach. Same thing for courses in reading instruction: all facets of analytic and synthetic phonic approaches, whole language philosophy, augmented alphabet systems, linguistic approaches, basal readers, and other emphases could be presented to teacher education candidates.

The benefits:

- First, taxpayers would know that all teacher education candidates were exposed to content deemed to be important; all students would be ensured of exposure to the basics.
- Second, instead of having a professor lecture with the aid of a chalkboard, an

overhead projector, or a computer, sophisticated production values could be used in videotapes or CD-ROMs.

- Third, highly effective communicators not necessarily drawn from the ranks of faculty could be used to present scripted content selected and written by a faculty academic team.
- Fourth, there would be a one-time outlay of cash to produce and package the content.
- Fifth, innovative instructors with paradigm-busting ideas would be able to pursue creative thinking and interactive instruction in their classes without having their academic freedom impinged upon, since the basics would be presented elsewhere.
- Sixth, teacher education students could proceed as rapidly as their individual initiative and abilities allowed them to; the number of students requiring more than four years to complete a program would significantly diminish.
- Seventh, course content in the fundamentals would be easy to monitor and easy to update, and would provide a way to guarantee academic integrity without using the services of an accrediting agency.
- Eighth, the number of personnel required for delivery of content would be significantly reduced. Ninth, physical plant demands, and concomitant custodial services, utility costs, and instructional accoutrements could be significantly reduced.

How these things can be brought about: Incentives can be offered to institutions willing to replace traditional modes of instruction with innovative strategies. Departments that have not historically worked together, such as Performing Arts, Educational Technology, and Elementary Education can be provided with incentives to work together to create innovative delivery systems for basic content in teacher education programs.

The approach is cost effective, educationally sound, and readily implemented. Indeed, the emergence of a student-initiated trend toward elements of such an approach was documented in the Denver Post, in a front-page story on January 23, 2000, under the headline Web sites taking class notes. Students in a number of Colorado universities were busily engaged in posting course content on the internet, evoking responses from their professors ranging from admiration, to exclamations of consternation on the part of some professors who perceived that their course content had been electronically purloined. Student-initiated cyber-learning attests to the fact that the current generation of students is already predisposed and amenable to electronic instruction.

Teacher-education institutions can package required courses and deliver them more effectively than they are currently being delivered, and they can do so with considerable savings, utilizing currently available faculty expertise. One additional benefit is that teacher-education students taught by this method will be more likely to utilize such instructional methods with their future pupils and students.¹ (Journal of Technology and Teacher Education, Using

Telecommunications in Teacher Education, Bishop-Clarke and Huston, Vol. 1, #3, 1993.)

Step Three: Stop Playing Big University

A major shift in emphasis occurred during the eighties in state after state in many universities whose major emphasis was teacher education. What had precipitated the shift in focus seemed to be the notion that a faculty focused on teaching lacked prestige. University status was what was desired. The supposed trappings of a university were foisted off on an unready teacher education faculty and on academic faculty respected for their teaching skills. A new definition of quality performance was imposed on professors. No longer could they devote total energy and commitment to quality teaching. Overnight, faculty promotion, tenure, and pay allocation were closely tied to the new definition. University faculty were expected to publish. They were expected to do research, and to pursue grants. They were to be members and office holders in professional organizations. Securing grant monies was the chief virtue. Writing articles in juried publications ran a close second, beating out, by a neck, presentations at professional conferences. Even attendance at professional conferences paid for by the taxpayers, no less became a criterion of satisfactory performance.

Practical, down-to-earth university teaching, which, for many years, had been the primary responsibility of faculty, was relegated to a 1/3 index of performance. Faculty were directed to document their professional activities in the areas of Research and Publications, Service, and Teaching, with all three areas given equal weight. Personalized faculty-student interaction was given lip service, but woe to the teacher educator who focused on student needs, who gave time and expertise outside of class to students, and as a result failed to publish or provide evidence of other professional activity!

As can be anticipated in any organization, employee behaviors which are rewarded will increase. Behaviors which are not rewarded will be abandoned or de-emphasized. To use teacher-education alone, if an institution rewards publications, presentations at professional conferences, membership in professional organizations, service to professional associations, state or national office-holding, or other so-called professional activities, faculty will pursue those activities. If teaching excellence is given one-third weight in a professional evaluation, it isn't difficult to ascertain the proportion of time faculty will allocate to it. The same thing happened in academic disciplines. Faculty in the arts and sciences, who were also teachers of future teachers, were forced away from students into research. Instead of devoting time to preparation for modeling good teaching, they filled libraries and journals with tidbits of questionably relevant research results.

The same rule for the lion and the ox is oppression. The adage fits most teacher education institutions. Except that the oppressees became the

students, and, subsequently, public school pupils, because all faculty are forced to perform in all activities—even those in which they may have no interest, or worse, no talent. Good teachers are forced to publish. Good writers are forced to teach. Those who are gifted in both areas are forced to be professionally affiliated, again, often at the expense of the taxpayer, with no documentable benefit to students or to public schools. After all, those things are what go on in a university.

The Solution: Institutions that prepare teachers should be held accountable to practice what they preach: individualization. Plans for differentiated staffing should be immediately drawn up. Faculty who are gifted teachers should teach. Their contact hours could legitimately be increased if their required Publications expectations were decreased. Faculty who are good at securing grant monies, and who are talented and interested in research and publications should have their teaching and advising hours reduced, and be freed to do what they do best. Those who are multiply-talented should have their multiple talents utilized to maximize what they have to offer to the taxpayers who support them.

Under the current system, in many institutions, all faculty must perform in all areas: the lame are required to run, the halt are required to jump, and the blind are required to sight-read. The result is instruction which is not what it could be, programs that are not what they should be, and public school performance which is not what it can be.

As an aside, it should be pointed out that Colorado Governor Bill Owens has taken one step which, by result, if not by intent, addresses a part of the lock-step performance criteria described above. He has placed limits on conference attendance and travel by state employees. One employee, rather than a group of employees, is now expected to attend a conference and bring back vital information. In the same vein, the whole concept of conference attendance and conference presentations by teacher education faculty should be re-evaluated in terms of one criterion; namely, how can the activities be demonstrated with documentable results to positively impact teacher education, and, hence, public school instruction? Not, How can the inference be drawn that there might be a positive impact as a result of, say, publishing an article in an obscure journal? Rather, What practical benefits ensue from the whole array of activities festooning the university pretensions of institutions whose major focus is undergraduate education in the preparation of teachers? This question has never seriously been asked.

Immediate improvement can be achieved in teacher education by inviting faculty to apply for Teaching Faculty status in such institutions, by honoring that status, and by rewarding excellence in that endeavor. No new resources need be expended; current resources can be reallocated, and numerous existing expenditures e.g., travel can be eliminated almost entirely. Teaching Faculty status won't preclude faculty from pursuing writing, research or other

activities if they are genuinely interested in them; what it will do, however, is ensure that such activities will genuinely not cosmetically positively impact achievement in the public schools.

Step Four: Get Rid of Redundancies

Here's a common situation: Your university, after carefully screening faculty candidates on a number of criteria to validate their competencies, hires a team of professionals. There is no doubt about their qualifications or abilities. They set up a program that is absolutely the best program they can design. The program is in place. There's a built-in evaluation process so that any weaknesses can be addressed. Students who have completed the program are pleased with how readily they can apply what they've learned. The public schools that have hired your university's graduates are happy with their preparation. But then, some interlopers arrive on the scene. They are representatives of the dreaded accreditation team.

They are faculty from other institutions who belong to the same voluntary association as you belong to. They wander about your campus, with lists of criteria, deciding whether your program has enough academic integrity to be accredited. They determine that, perhaps, you need more of this or that content in a particular course, or more books in your library, or more representatives of such-and-such academic area on your administrative board. They tell you that you are not in compliance with some of their criteria, and what you have to do to correct your weaknesses if they are to bestow accreditation upon your institution.

You scurry to fall into line, fearful that, if you do not address these alleged deficiencies by the deadline imposed by the accrediting agency, your institution will receive bad publicity. If you do not acquiesce to the directives you receive, you will not be accredited. You were satisfied that you had an exemplary program, and, in fact, you had allocated all of your available resources toward putting it into action. But now, you are out of lock-step. So you revise your program, and you even assign personnel and financial resources to things that your own group of experts did not identify as being important. Many of the changes you make will be cosmetic. Others, however, might be elaborate, and significantly alter your program.

What's wrong with this picture? Consider this. Your own hand-picked faculty experts, paid for with state resources, and applying themselves diligently to creating the best teacher education program possible, were highly pleased with your program. Further, within your university, there exists a system of checks and balances to ensure academic integrity. In addition, state officials have the legal responsibility of monitoring academic program quality, and public school officials constantly provide feedback. Nevertheless, your university spends time, diverts money, expends faculty talent, and may even

stifle genuine innovation, all in the name of accreditation.

The solution? Eliminate external accreditation. It consumes time and money better spent elsewhere. It is redundant. Various state agencies in Colorado, the Colorado Commission on Higher Education already possess oversight functions. There is no persuasive evidence that accreditation has any significant effect upon the achievement of public school pupils taught by graduates of accredited teacher education programs.

External accreditation can stifle genuine innovation. Let's say, for example, that radical innovation results in an institution failing to meet certain accreditation criteria. A safe bet is that the innovation will be scuttled in favor of adherence to criteria. Being accredited is what counts. After all, the voluntary association has reached consensus on what strong programs should look like. Hence, true creativity and paradigm-busting are smothered in a morass of anachronistic indices of quality. Imaginative thinkers in teacher education are bound by entrenched notions of quality.

The benefits of dumping external accreditation? Greater freedom on the part of teacher education faculty to innovate. Greater freedom on the part of teacher education administrators to allocate resources. Less paperwork. Fewer cosmetic revisions. Better stewardship of financial resources in effecting real program improvement, rather than in meeting consensus criteria. (For example, current dues for NCATE membership are about \$3000.00 per year for institutions such as the University of Northern Colorado. In addition, Colorado taxpayers have to foot the bill for air travel, hotel accommodations, meals, and incidental expenses for every site visitation team during each assessment visit.)

It makes no sense to overrule your own panel of experts, with whose skills and knowledge you are intimately acquainted, by acquiescing to the opinions of a paper-laden accreditation team who have lumbered about your campus in the blinders of the rules and regulations of the voluntary association.

There can be only three reasons motivating the Colorado Commission on Higher Education to mandate outside accreditation:

1. Faculty at state institutions cannot be trusted to maintain academic integrity, because they cannot act ethically without outside policing.
2. Faculty lack the professional qualifications necessary to design a quality program, and faculty professional expertise must be supplemented by bringing in outside experts.
3. Graduates want a piece of paper which ostensibly proves that items 1 and 2, above, were not true of their alma mater.

Neither of the first two conditions exists in Colorado's teacher education programs; faculty are interested in producing quality programs, and they are eminently qualified to do so. As for the third condition, when graduates perform at a quality level in teaching public school pupils, public school administrators will not need certification of accreditation to document the legitimacy of the training of potential faculty. (For example, several institutions, including UNC, experimented with a money-back guarantee to public school teachers, promising free courses for any teachers who perceived that they were not appropriately trained, and whose supervisors would agree to participate in the retraining process. Over the course of several years, UNC had no takers.)

It's time to loose the shackles of outside accreditation, pocket the money spent on dues, site visitation expenses, and compliance, free our administrators to act as professional educators rather than as paper shufflers, and get on with the business of achieving real innovation in teacher education.

Step Five: Restructure the Hiring Process

What would you say would be likely to happen if you instituted a merit pay plan, and then put your employees in charge of hiring the people they were going to compete with?

In many institutions of higher education, faculty selection committees review the qualifications of applicants for faculty positions. Such selection committees choose the people with whom they are going to be in competition for a limited number of merit salary allocations. They then recommend their selections to hiring officials. Hiring officials generally follow the recommendations of selection committees. The hiring officials, to be sure, do not want to be evaluated by faculty as autocratic, should they ignore the selection committees recommendations.

If individuals have the power to select the people will be competing with, it is not illogical to assume that so-called peer selection committees will hire down. This is likely to happen even in universities without merit pay programs. If there is no differentiated staffing plan in place in which faculty can work in their areas of greatest expertise, there exists a significant possibility that hiring down will occur. Even the most ethical selection committee members will unconsciously avoid hiring people who clearly excel them.

The solution? Allow those responsible for monitoring program integrity to review credentials and hire faculty. Better yet, abolish merit pay programs, institute differentiated staffing plans, and totally do away with faculty-to-faculty comparisons. Create departmental, rather than individual, incentives, so that even if departmental selection committees do the hiring, faculty members will have incentives, rather than disincentives, to select the highest

quality applicants available.

Besides the questionable effectiveness of faculty selection committees, one other element detracts from the hiring of quality faculty: the so-called inbreeding problem. At about the time institutions engaged in the Playing Big University illusion, many were prohibited from hiring their own graduates. Various reasons were advanced about the presumed virtue of such a proscription, but the main reason seemed to be that inbreeding was not as desirable as diversity. Inbreeding, it was asserted, would merely perpetuate any given departments built-in biases. Diversity would preclude it. New ideas would be infused. (In imposing this restriction on universities, boards of trustees or other agencies seemed to have forgotten another of their theses: that if faculty were required to attend conferences, they would bring home new ideas.)

A significant problem connected with the inbreeding prohibition is that a university cannot hire its own outstanding graduates including, even, those who have demonstrated that they are far more qualified than other applicants from other institutions. Graduates whose talents have been proven, and whose ability to work with others is a known commodity, are not even considered for faculty positions, except on a temporary basis. A valuable asset to the strengthening of teacher education programs is lost under such conditions. To make matters worse, what frequently happens is that when candidates are hired from other institutions, they bring with them diametrically conflicting points of view, with the result that faculty harmony and ability to work together are sacrificed to diversity.

The solution to this secondary problem? Remove the proscription against hiring ones own graduates. After all, if a program is the best as every institution hopes its programs are its graduates should be the best. And the perspectives they promulgate, in turn, should also be the best. Removal of the proscription still allows for the hiring of applicants from other institutions if their qualifications are clearly superior, but it does not mandate that hiring be limited to such applicants. And the best part of removing this proscription is that it often can be done at the level of the institutions board of trustee the level where it originated in the first place.

Summary

Many of the policies currently in place in teacher education programs have not been subjected to close scrutiny. They have historical precedent, but there is a lack of empirical evidence that they translate into public school teaching that leads to real achievement. Some of them are, in fact, counterproductive; it can be reasonably inferred that they detract from quality instruction for prospective teachers, which, in turn, diminishes the possibility that improvement in the public schools will occur.

Improvement in teacher-education programs is readily attainable. It requires no increased expenditure of public monies, and in fact, the net result will be financial savings to Colorado institutions. All that is required is the courage to replace time-honored paradigms with common-sense practices.

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