

Commentary

A Way Forward Toward Professionalizing Teacher Education: A Response to the AASCU Teacher Education Task Force Survey

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Abstract

Amid countless challenges faced by teacher education, public universities, preparing a large share of the nations' teachers, are called upon to lead the charge of moving the field forward. The American Association of State Colleges and University's Teacher Education Task Force sought to examine current conditions among member institutions. Presidents, provosts and deans of education responded to a survey with their assessment of the current status of teacher education. The results yielded six recommendations for quality teacher education programs. The latter of which stresses professionalizing the field. Further examination of the recommendations reveals gaps between the current landscape and the recommendations. It is through these gaps that a strategic means to advance the professionalization of teacher education is put forth. Advancing the professionalization of teacher education is a collaborative effort of leadership. The process demonstrates and builds momentum from positive impact on communities and the profession itself. It is undergirded by an ethical imperative.

The 2016 American Association of State Colleges and Universities' (AASCU) Teacher Education Task Force undertook a survey of member presidents, provosts, and their deans of education to better understand the state of the profession. All participants represent public institutions of higher learning. The results inform recommendations for university-based, teacher preparation programs. The report recognizes that the national context of teacher education has grown in complexity, alongside an onslaught of scrutiny. Even still, the authors concomitantly suggest that programs are not meeting the mark for transforming the profession. This sentiment is not new. In fact, it has become part and parcel of the critique

ushered by the pantheon of educational reformers. Heeding the critique, a way forward toward professionalizing teacher education is needed. Four of the task force's recommendations:

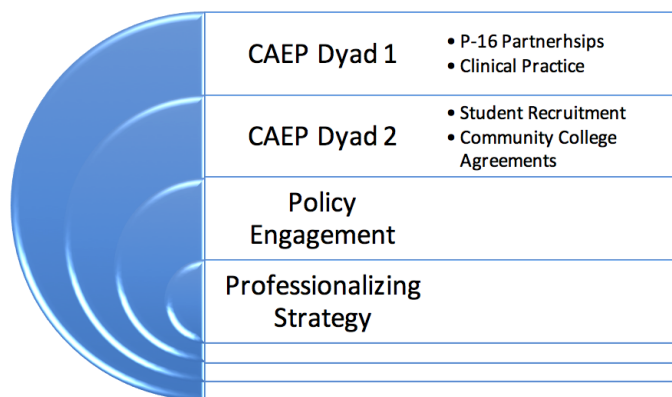
1. bolster clinical experiences,
2. ensure strong university-school partnerships,
3. step up recruitment into preparation programs, and
4. build agreements with community colleges

are not dissimilar from the standards that inform national accreditation by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP).

In fact, the relationship among these recommendations can be easily reduced to dyads, whereby partnerships with school districts and clinical experiences comprise one pair and student recruitment with community colleges constitute another. The components of each dyad function together, though not wholesale, as mechanisms for strong clinical experiences and meeting program recruitment aims.

These dyadic recommendations are significant given that of the 187 deans surveyed, 128 responded to the question regarding national accreditation status. Of these 128, 80.4% indicated that their programs are currently accredited by a national agency, NACTE, TEAC and/or CAEP. Some 25,000 education preparation programs nationwide undergo accreditation or state review for quality assessment (Sawchuk, 2015). Today, nearly half of all programs are nationally accredited (Sawchuk, 2016; AACSCU, n.d). Given that the dyadic recommendations are addressed vis-a-vis the CAEP Standards, it can be easily understood that a great number of teacher education programs are responding accordingly (See Figure 1).

Figure 1. AACSCU Recommendations and Dyadic Relationships with CAEP.



However, the final two recommendations:

5. actively participate in policy discussion about teacher preparation and
6. develop a broad strategy for professionalizing teacher education,

suggest that even the path toward national

accreditation falls short of transformative practice for continuous improvement. This omission also underscores a gap, a critical correspondence (Easley, 2011; Robertson, 1996). Critical correspondence can be understood by the contradiction or flaw in the theory of action guiding a particular reform, that when made explicit, can drive social change.

This paper addresses a means for the professionalization of teacher education by mechanizing these critical correspondences. These are fodder for a way to elevate the profession, structurally, socially, and politically. Advancing the professionalization of teacher education is a collaborative effort of leadership. The process demonstrates and builds momentum from positive impact on communities and the profession itself. It is undergirded by an ethical imperative. Moreover, professionalization is iterative and is an investment in continuous renewal.

Examining accreditation as a critical correspondence, it is assumed that the policies and processes surrounding national accreditation of teacher education will yield a stronger profession. Unfortunately, accreditation is acted out one program at a time. Even when the results are positive and affect the home institution and P-12 partners equally well, these results tend to rest at a local level. It is an unlikely story of a single program's accreditation altering teacher preparation nationwide. The social process for professionalization requires more.

A Way Forward

To be fair, national accreditation is one strategy to convey program quality to future candidates, policy makers, and the community at large. Yet, the limited one program at a time approach offers a new critical correspondence. Through the recognition of its limitations, a new way forward may be offered. To advance the latter two recommendations of the AACSCU task force, we must embrace the interconnectivity of the first

four to achieve greater professionalization of teacher education.

Similarly, engagement in policy discussion is inherently required for maximum professionalization. Teacher educators and even teachers themselves must accept the charge of advocacy and become agents of change to shape policy for the cause of professionalization. Yet, the development of strategies for ongoing engagement in policy work is complex and requires systemic and networked action. Educator preparers will need to leverage the merits of their programs for micro level policy within their individual institutions and their collective networks across programs for shaping state and national policies. As a way forward, educator preparers have at their disposal the vantage of networked leadership for policy work and program development, the ability to leverage institutional research, and the moral imperative of equity work. Taken together, the development of these levers extends the mechanisms of standards and accountability that define program approval and accreditation acted out one program at a time for broad range professionalization of teacher preparation.

Networked Leadership

Network leadership, as defined by Easley & Tulowitzi (2017), encompasses the practice of convening leader stakeholders at all levels to work collaboratively and democratically. Within these networks educational leaders are tasked with fashioning systems of educational effectiveness and continuous improvement that inform professionalization through the auspices of policy, research, and practice. Though leadership itself engenders a hierarchical structure, the democratizing effect of networks levels hierarchy for shared learning and decision making. According to the authors, the positionality of influence is shifted within networks, which includes state leaders, “to leverage responsive and equity policy for practice” (p.16).

According to the AASCU survey, 40% of deans indicate that state departments of education do not regularly consult their peers across the state on policy issues. The same group reports that when consulted, feedback is infrequently used to shape state policy. This is particularly telling given that state policy guides teacher licensure and an inordinate number of program elements. Though varying across states, state policy drives program approval processes, accountability, credit hours, curriculum content, and much more.

Networked leadership is a means for addressing the uneven relationships across programs with state departments of education. In fact, the New England Board of Higher Education’s Commission on Higher Education and Employability (2017) recommends that higher education intuitions, employers, data providers, and other stakeholders launch collaborations to address common concerns. Though their agenda rests with the employability of college graduates, their proposal engenders the value of networked leadership. Within the same region of the nation, the Connecticut Association of Public Schools and Superintendents (CAPPS) advances a 2018 public policy agenda for fostering equity, excellence, and innovation. Not all agenda items are commutable to teacher education. Yet, networked leadership is largely possible when institutions coalesce on common ground. One priority of CAPPS is to address state government’s unfunded mandates and the resulting, unintended consequences. This is one priority familiar to teacher preparation programs within the state. The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE) state chapter of deans and directors has begun to develop networked leadership with CAPPS and the Connecticut State Department of Education to address policy in a coordinated manner, thereby advancing a way forward through networked leadership.

Leverage Program Impact for Public Good

We must be honest. There are mixed feelings

among the public about the value of a college degree. Entangled within the debate is another line of argumentation that questions the quality of traditional, university-based teacher preparation programs. Lynn Pasquerella (2016), President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, penned a Washington Post opinion asserting by title that “higher education should be a public good, not a private commodity.” Debates like these challenge the professionalization of teacher preparation, calling for a meaningful and inspirational response—one that is deemed merit worthy both for the public and profession. Pasquarella urges, “It is important, now more than ever, to respond to accusation from politicians that college education— . . . —has become irrelevant and illegitimate.”

Similar to networked leadership that is applied via a systems approach, teacher preparation programs are in need of data armor. It is vital that programs systematically collect and report on sound and convincing data that demonstrate positive impact in the public sector. Much of the evidence for national accreditation focuses on operational quality, internal to the functions of preparation itself. A strategic focus on parallel evidence of the program’s contribution to the public by way of its design is called to task as a way forward. For example, programs that are able to articulate the immediate and ongoing transformative value of their programs on partnering schools and the profession are better suited to guide professionalization.

Drawing from the tenets of social entrepreneurship, Martin and Osberg (2015) address the value-enhancing approach of any enterprise seeking to drive social change. They refer to the approach as an enabling “methodology” that allows programs with an existing asset to generate even more meaningful value from said asset to disrupt existing equilibrium. Such is the aim of continuous improvement. Moreover, networked leadership that brings programs together in collaborative work stands the chance of adding value

exponentially. One example of an enhancing methodology developed from networked leadership through practice and policy advocacy is the Professional Development School (PDS) model. This model grew out of efforts beginning in the 1980s to reform teacher education and to restructure schools. The Holmes Group, a network of education deans from research institutions, proposed a methodology for coherent and long-term clinical experiences. Through this methodology, “practicing teachers and [P-12 school] administrators would work collaboratively with university faculty to improve teaching and learning for their respective students” (Easley, Ankrum, McConnell, & Girard, 2017, p. 47) .

The AASCU survey reveals that 88.5% of responding deans do not believe teaching is viewed more positively than 10 years ago. These results cry for a value-enhancing approach. One aim of PDS methodology is to apply learning sciences to improve the skills of future teachers and practicing teachers alike, while simultaneously increasing student learning. Programs, like PDSs, that embrace systematic methodologies focused on transforming the profession during teacher preparation exemplify a value-enhancing way forward to professionalization.

Focus on Equity Work

The racial achievement gap in the U.S., while showing some shrinkage in recent years, persists. The core purpose of teacher preparation is to ensure that program completers entering classrooms have developed the requisite knowledge, skills, and commitment to meet the academic and socio-affective needs of all students in their classrooms. Unfortunately, state policies for meeting this aim are uneven. For example, despite the growing population of English Language Learners (ELLs), there is no generally accepted approach for preparing teachers to work with this particular group of students (Berdecía & Kosec, 2011). Making matters more challenging, there are notable inconsistencies across states for the knowledge and skills regarding ELLs during

teacher preparation (Ballantyne, Sanderman, & Levy, 2008). While some states make general reference to the special needs of ELLs for initial teacher licensure, others make no mention at all.

The number of non-White and ELL students attending public schools continues to grow. In fact, minority students represented 30 percent of this population in the 1980s, but is now half (Putman, Hansen, Walsh, & Quintero, 2016). A recent report by McFarland et al. (2017) indicates the percentage of multi-racial and non-White public school students will surpass that of the White population by 2026. These shifts in demographics challenge teacher preparation in pursuit of the aforementioned aim.

The racialized teacher gap and the Black-White achievement gap, are tip of the iceberg issues of equity. Issues of rural education and the intersectionality of the socioeconomic conditions of the many student populations that have been minoritized and marginalized, also shape the need for programs to fashion their work based on equity. Additionally, the national shortage areas such as special education, foreign language, science and mathematics (U.S. Department of Education, 2016) further compound the importance for equity-based programming in teacher education. This is particularly telling, as trends for many of the shortage areas disproportionality reflect equity-based needs of particular student groups that are systematically placed at risk by ableism, sexism, racism, xenophobia, funding inequities, and other social and political constraints.

Moving the dial on professionalization is largely dependent upon dismantling inequities for P-12 student achievement and wellbeing. Deans responding to the AASCU survey highly favor performance assessment to a tune of 92.6% as the most valid mechanism for measuring student achievement. Only 36.9% view current standardized testing as a valid measure. Though the debates churn, suggesting that standardized testing overwhelms schools and question testing's value to the teaching and learning process, it is

incumbent upon teacher preparation programs to demonstrate positive impact on schools. Both conventional and novel means to explicitly bespeak equitable outcomes across groups of students resulting from teacher education are needed. Collective and impactful actions by preparation programs to foster equitable learning experiences for P-12 students and learning outcomes reflect a way forward in pursuit of professionalization.

Advancing Professionalization

Progress has indeed been made in the field of teacher education, yielding standards, roadmaps, and commission reports to guide accreditation, clinical practice, and more. The findings of the AASCU task force on teacher education unearth certain critical correspondences. In turn, these represent opportunities for furthering the professionalization of teacher education.

Networked leadership engenders democratic practice. It requires leaders to be empathetic to the needs of other entities, to find common ground, and to commit to collaborative learning for policy and practice. Networked leadership is perhaps the greatest lever for professionalization, as it is the conductor for scaling innovation, agency, and capacity. Networked leadership can also serve as the catalyst for institutionalizing effectiveness and improvement in teacher education more broadly. Yet, in the absence of focusing on the right issues, network leadership may benefit some while disenfranchising others, thereby hindering the potential for professionalization that is just.

Methodology for value-enhancing change is a means for social impact via teacher education. By virtue of its design, teacher education is a community practice. Clinical practice alone is community based, generating a footprint on student learning and development. While noble, such impact is not enough. The core purpose of programmatic teacher preparation should ultimately be to improve systems for overall

educational effectiveness at all levels across the P-16 continuum. This includes improving the social and political conditions that inform educational effectiveness.

The hardest part yet, is equity work, as it pertains to the professionalization of teacher education. It is necessary that programs collectively address the equity imperative to ensure that all student populations and their communities benefit masterfully from teacher preparation. While networked leadership might dismantle existing systems, value-enhancing change might dismantle the siloed benefits of educational improvement, a focus on equity dismantles implicit biases and core status quo practices that advantage some over others.

This outlined way forward aimed to advance the professionalization of teacher education, is by no means exhaustive. Nor are these three suppositions, born out of critical correspondences, intended as a panacea individually. This way forward is not without its challenges operationally, conceptually, and politically. Nonetheless, these suppositions, as a collective way forward, has its merits for furthering the institutionalization and systemization of professionalism in teacher education.

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