

## Towards a Unified Accreditation System for Educator Preparation<sup>1</sup> Frank B. Murray and Arthur E. Wise<sup>2</sup>

Most professions have a single recognized accrediting agency for the institutions that prepare their practitioners and in these professions nearly all the institutions that prepare these practitioners are accredited. Teaching is different. It is among the few professional fields that has more than one accreditor, but even with two accreditors, most of its teacher education programs and units remain unaccredited. The National Council for Teacher Education (NCATE) has been an accreditor in this field since 1954, and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) has been one since 1997 and both organizations are eager to make accreditation in teacher education more meaningful, attractive, and beneficial to the profession. For this reason, and others, the governing boards of the two agencies have recently accepted in principle a shared vision and transition plan for a unified system of accreditation for educator preparation. To implement this vision and plan, the boards have appointed of a joint design team to develop a specific proposal for their approval and authorized staff collaboration on a number of joint activities in the meantime. We are pleased to co-author this article as one of the first of these activities.

Although both agencies practice standards-based accreditation, TEAC was founded to give greater weight to evidence of student accomplishment and program improvement than had been the norm in accreditation until the time of its founding. Those objectives, however, still needed to be accomplished in the context of the states' comprehensive role in education.

More than in any other profession, states and their local governments not only regulate practice but are also its primary employers and funders. The states have promulgated their own standards and processes for licensure of educators and for approval of educator-preparation programs. The need to coordinate multiple standards both within states and across state lines in a mobile profession has increasingly led to a procedure called alignment. A similar need to coordinate accreditation by NCATE and TEAC with state program approval has led to partnerships between each of them and the states. Moreover, as is particularly appropriate in the field of education, both agencies have learned from each other's experience. The standards and the processes used by the two accreditors have now converged to a much greater extent than was originally anticipated when TEAC was founded. The unified system that our two agencies envision would both realize potential efficiencies where no substantial differences remain and preserve institutional choice where alternatives are desirable.

The need to coordinate accreditation with state program approval has had perhaps the greatest influence on our collaboration. Unlike law or medicine, in which the states license general practitioners, and the profession credentials specialists, in the

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Murray has been President of the Teacher Accreditation Council since its founding. Dr. Wise is President Emeritus of the National Council of Teacher Education, where he was its President from 1990 until recently. Dr. James Cibulka, the newly appointed president of NCATE, has read and supports this paper.

field of education, the states themselves license specialists. Input-based evaluation by the states of each specialty program at each institution that prepared educators for the specialty predated the current licensure process. The states would then accept for licensure the recommendations of approved programs that their completers had been properly prepared for practice of their specialties. Even after knowledge-based tests had been added to the licensure process, the continued requirement of program recommendations for those taking the tests also continued the importance of state program approval.<sup>3</sup> Accreditation in teacher education has been constructed on this pre-existing foundation and has had to conform to it.

NCATE has long attempted to integrate program approval into its accreditation process. An important component of its membership is the group of 23 Specialized Professional Associations that have developed sets of national program standards for their own specialties. Once approved by NCATE, these standards are used by it to review individual programs in the units it accredits. To avoid duplication of effort between voluntary program review by NCATE and mandatory program approval by the states and to achieve consistency across state lines, nearly every state has either accepted the national standards as its own or closely aligned the two. Thus, the NCATE national standards are also, perhaps paradoxically, used to approve programs in TEAC accredited institutions. Twenty-nine states use the findings of the NCATE program review for their own program approval in NCATE institutions. In the others, NCATE similarly uses the findings of state program approval.

TEAC accreditation, on the other hand, was based on the assumption that program approval by the states was a wholly independent process that had already taken place. TEAC simply required that the program's graduates be eligible for a license as an eligibility criterion for the program's candidate accreditation status. In addition, TEAC considered the programs it accredited to be somewhat independent of the licenses the state was willing to give to the program's graduates, so that the "programs" TEAC accredited (such as "secondary education") often encompass multiple specialties, each subject to separate approval by the states, but considered by TEAC to be a single program provided it satisfied TEAC's criterion for a *program*.<sup>4</sup> As TEAC has expanded the number of states in which it functions, it has found many of them desire a more active role by TEAC in their program approval processes and greater assurances that the state's program standards were also considered in TEAC's accreditation decisions. It is still too early to predict how this interplay will ultimately turn out. It is clear, however, that not only will the evaluation of individual specialties at TEAC schools be accomplished by TEAC with the language of NCATE standards, but there will inevitably be some convergence of specialty-evaluation processes at the two accreditors.

NCATE's Unit Standards and TEAC's Program Quality Principles and Standards are more generic than standards at the specialty level, but both point in the same direction: Does the TEAC program or NCATE unit deliver on its promises to candidates? Both sets of standards focus on evidence of candidate knowledge, skills

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<sup>3</sup> This traditional landscape has become somewhat more complex as licensure has become available in some situations to educator candidates who have not been prepared for their specialties in schools under state jurisdiction.

<sup>4</sup> These were that the license options within the TEAC accredited program share a common philosophical framework and quality control system and had comparable evidence of student accomplishment.

and performance. Both place emphasis on assessment to answer that question. Although TEAC was founded, in part, to give greater emphasis to institutions' own goals, the process of alignment, the need for both agencies to accommodate both a common core of professional expectations and a broad range of difference in subsidiary philosophies and the major role of practitioners in both agencies have led to a remarkable similarity in wording between the two sets of standards (see the appendix for a summary of the standards and principles of the two agencies).

The greatest remaining difference between TEAC and NCATE lies in their accreditation processes. NCATE's are said to be very investigative in nature, as could be more appropriate in evaluating compliance with specific externally imposed requirements. TEAC's are said to be more collaborative, as could be more appropriate in assisting an institution in improving the achievement of its own goals. But, as we have said, the two sets of accreditation standards are much more similar in wording than competitive rhetoric might characterize them. From its perspective, NCATE believes that the model of TEAC's audit approach has helped to improve its own balance between public accountability and institutional assistance and improvement. From its perspective, TEAC recognizes that the interplay of its accreditation process with the very specific standards for state program review will affect its process.

There is no need, however, to debate the current or future extent of the differences between the two accreditation processes. Whatever that extent of those differences, both agencies agree that one size does not fit all. Both North Central Higher Learning Commission and Western Accrediting Commission allow their institutions a choice of process for regional accreditation with a common set of standards. Institutional choice as to process and multiple pathways to accreditation is a key element of the shared vision that our two boards have accepted in principle.

Our society has long debated the pluses and minuses of competition in the performance of functions that are at least largely regulatory. This debate will likely never be settled, and there may indeed be no one right answer. Each approach seems to have its moment. Our two agencies believe that the high degree of convergence between their two approaches, the ability to preserve institutional choice among desirable alternatives, the need to achieve greater unity within the profession and the requirement of greater operating efficiencies in an era of likely scarcity make this the moment for the creation of a unified accrediting system for educator preparation. We intend to devote our efforts over the next two years to achieve this important objective for the profession.

## Appendix

### The Current Similarity of NCATE's Unit Standards and TEAC's Program Quality Principles and Standards

**NCATE Unit Conceptual Framework Requirement:** shared vision, coherence, professional commitments and dispositions, commitment to diversity, commitment to technology, and candidate proficiencies aligned with professional and state standards.

**NCATE Unit Standard 1. Candidate Knowledge, Skills, and Dispositions:** Candidates preparing to work in schools as teachers or other professional school personnel know and demonstrate the content, pedagogical, and professional knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. Assessments indicate that candidates meet professional, state, and institutional standards.

**NCATE Unit Standard 2. Assessment System and Unit Evaluation:** The unit has an assessment system that collects and analyzes data on applicant qualifications, candidate and graduate performance, and unit operations to evaluate and improve the unit and its programs.

**NCATE Unit Standard 3. Field Experiences and Clinical Practice:** The unit and its school partners design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice so that teacher candidates and other school personnel develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn.

**NCATE Unit Standard 4. Diversity:** The unit designs, implements, and evaluates curriculum and experiences for candidates to acquire and apply the knowledge, skills, and dispositions necessary to help all students learn. These experiences include working with diverse higher education and school faculty, diverse candidates, and diverse students in P-12 schools.

**NCATE Unit Standard 5. Faculty Qualifications, Performance, and Development:** Faculty are qualified and model best professional practices in scholarship, service, and teaching, including the assessment of their own effectiveness as related to candidate performance; they also collaborate with colleagues in the disciplines and schools. The unit systematically evaluates faculty performance and facilitates professional development.

**NCATE Unit Standard 6. Unit Governance and Resources:** The unit has the leadership, authority, budget, personnel, facilities, and resources, including information technology resources, for the preparation of candidates to meet professional, state, and institutional standards.

**TEAC Eligibility requirements:** To be eligible for TEAC candidate status for initial and continuing accreditation the program must document that the program is committed to TEAC's goal and quality principles, understands that TEAC may disclose the member's

accreditation status, will provide any information that TEAC may require, that the institution giving the program has regional accreditation or its equivalent, and finally that the program's graduates are eligible for the state's professional teaching license.

**TEAC Quality Principle I. Evidence of Student Learning.** The program must provide evidence, which satisfies a scholarly standard of reliability and validity, that the program's graduates understand their teaching subject matter, the pedagogical literature, and can teach in a caring and effective manner. The program must further show evidence the graduates understand and can use appropriate technology, are multi-culturally literate and sensitive and can teach the full range of student diversity found in contemporary classrooms, are critically reflective about their practice and can learn on their own.

**TEAC Quality Principle II. Evidence of Institutional Learning.** The program has a system for monitoring quality that yields reliable and valid evidence that influences policies and decision-making, including plans for inquiry into the program's effectiveness. The program needs to have a credible rationale for the assessments it uses and a record of decision-making and planning based on evidence of student learning.

**TEAC Quality Principle III. Commitment and Capacity for Quality.** The program must have evidence that the institution is committed to the program and that the program has the capacity for quality with regard to its curriculum, faculty, students, facilities, resources, administration, student support services, policies and practices.