

# EDUCATION WEEK

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## COMMENTARY

# Evaluating the Evaluators

## The Evaluation of Teacher Education Programs Needs to Be Rigorous

By Les Sternberg

Not a day seems to go by without yet another announcement of an attempt to fix what is ostensibly wrong with education. Recently, *U.S. News & World Report* **indicated**  that it is now going to get into the business of evaluating teacher education programs offered by institutions of higher education. On the surface, this seems to mirror what the publication has been doing for years: providing rankings of colleges and universities and many degree programs. These rankings continue to produce spirited debate, especially regarding the criteria that are used to judge institutions. What *U.S. News & World Report* is now going to embark on is pure folly. ("**Teacher-Quality Group to Revamp Education School Review**," February 9, 2011.)

The publication has decided to adopt the evaluation process used by the National Council on Teacher Quality, or NCTQ. With an entity having a name such as this, one would think that its goals are well-intentioned. But the way the NCTQ evaluates programs suggests its mission is to portray teacher education offered by institutions of higher education in as negative a light as possible.

That process is simple—and simplistic: Collect all course syllabi that describe teacher education courses in a specific program, establish some standards with accompanying evaluative criteria used to judge the veracity and level of quality of what is described in the syllabi, hire a panel of evaluators who will use the criteria to determine whether and to what degree the standards are being met, and then give an overall grade (A through F) for that program.

Even if these standards were rigorous and research-based—which, for the most part, they are not—this exercise becomes nothing more than an input-based, paper-and-pencil exercise.

It involves limited, if any, evidence-based verification as revealed by data collected from faculty and student participants and related to what teacher-candidates ought to know and be able to demonstrate in

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the classroom through observation or documentation of practices and interviews.

Even worse are the inappropriate NCTQ evaluation practices that have been documented by teacher-preparation programs that have either gone through this process or refused to participate based on the NCTQ's lack of evidence-based evaluation standards. For example, it is not uncommon for the NCTQ to threaten, in effect, institutions who choose not to participate by indicating that the organization will simply use other means to get the information it wants. Although the NCTQ permits institutions to provide additional information that might be used to rebut its low or failing grade for a program, its past practices related to whether that information is truly considered cast doubt on whether such clarifying information really matters.

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There is no doubt that teacher education programs, like other professional programs in business, nursing, law, and medicine, should be held accountable for their practices. In fact, probably no other area of professional preparation has come under such intense scrutiny over the past 20 years or more as teacher education. And teacher education has responded vigorously and positively. Various national groups, such as the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, the National Association for Professional Development Schools, and the Center for Teaching Quality, have taken on noteworthy initiatives that focus on ensuring high-quality and effective teacher education practices.

No longer are programs judged, as the NCTQ does, by what content or practices teacher-candidates are exposed to, but rather by what knowledge and skills those candidates are able to demonstrate. No longer are programs judged by in-seat work and grades on examinations, but by how effective candidates are in clinical settings, working with students and enhancing students' learning and achievement.

Teacher education programs have not shied away from being evaluated. However, the evaluation processes should pass professional muster. The NCTQ evaluation system should be seen for what it is: a quick and dirty process with very little if any validity. *U.S. News & World Report* should be ashamed of itself for buying into a slipshod process whose motives remain highly questionable.

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*Les Sternberg is the dean of the college of education at the University of South Carolina. He serves on the board of the [American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education](#).*

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