



Eastern Oregon University
College of Education

Open Letter to EOU Students and Alumni
National Council on Teacher Quality Report and EOU Rating on Student Teaching
July 22, 2011

Dear Students, Alumni and EOU Community:

Recently, the Oregonian reported findings of the National Council on Teacher Quality regarding student teaching practices in the United States. This private organization did an independent study of selected colleges and universities across the nation to determine if their practices matched the Council's ideas on how student teachers should be placed in schools.

The Council invited Eastern to participate, but we declined. The College of Education was focused on reporting to our own Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices Commission and was engaged with the processes required for reaffirmation of our regional accreditation with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Both of those processes found EOU teacher education in compliance with all standards, rules and performance criteria. Most recently, many states, including Oregon, have declined to participate in NCTQ's performance rating system. The time and expense of providing response and documentation is redundant to the oversight of state agencies, regional accreditation and national accreditation groups such as NCATE.

The Council continued its interest in EOU and as a result did an analysis of our programs based on what they could find on our public web site and what documents they solicited through public records laws. The process that NCTQ used in their research failed to represent to us beforehand either the purpose of their study or the specific standards or assumptions about their beliefs.

Based on their review of EOU's methods to place student teachers, we failed in two fairly focused areas:

- 1) NCTQ believes that colleges should hand pick cooperating teachers based on our acquisition of evidence that a teacher has had a "positive impact on student learning." They looked for evidence that we had given our K-12 partners a letter describing the specific requirements of the cooperating teacher. In their analysis of our process they stated that we "do not require that they (the cooperating teacher) demonstrate above-average instructional skills before being chosen as cooperating teachers" because they could find no print documentation to attest to a process.

In Oregon, colleges work with superintendents, HR directors, and principals to determine who should be the mentors of our next generation of teachers. At EOU we develop a tight relationship with school administrators to communicate what kind of professional is needed and who would be the best kind of model for those learning to become teachers. We do not believe a standard request letter alone, as NCTQ recommends, is adequate to truly communicate who we are

looking for. Teaching is a complex social endeavor that requires a number of skill sets. We need mentor teachers that are not only excellent at their craft, but also able to share that knowledge and mentor another. We depend on the professional judgment of the principal--the person who knows and evaluates the teacher, to make recommendations on teacher mentors who have the right mix of those two ingredients.

NCTQ made a determination that EOU failed this criteria based on their analysis of our documents and how we answered a posed question about this area. Absent in their analysis is the intense interpersonal process we have established with schools and school districts over many years to find placements for our students. We have one full-time teacher professional on staff at EOU whose primary responsibility is to establish connections with our over 100 cooperating schools to find the very best opportunities for our students. Absent in the analysis is how our regional faculty and staff work closely with principals to find the best circumstances for all student teaching practica. Absent in this analysis is the understanding that all placements are with highly qualified Oregon teachers who, by virtue of their positive evaluations by their school supervisors are providing meaningful and "positive impact on student learning." Absent in this analysis is the fact that there is no research that proves or even hints that the NCTQ method is superior to EOU's long standing policy.

The NCTQ perspective in this area is certainly one way to look at the issue. It would be more or less like evaluating a medical school based on whether the medical school required that hospitals prove that the doctors could prove that they had a "positive impact on patient health." Like hospitals and doctors that have their own set of quality indicators and accreditation oversight, schools and teachers prove to the Oregon Department of Education that they are both competent and accountable to high standards. As colleges of teacher education in Oregon, we trust the recommendations of administrators to identify highly qualified mentors for our students.

2) The second area of failure is quite narrow and related to the kind of required training that our cooperating teachers must have in order to mentor teachers. NCTQ noted that Oregon and EOU do not have a mandatory rule that requires a certain number of hours of training to be qualified as a cooperating teacher. Based on their analysis, EOU fails because they found no evidence of rule that describes how we work with our partner teachers.

Absent in their analysis, again, is the interpersonal process we use to assist the cooperating teacher with the requirements and methods of supervising our students in the classroom. We prepare a comprehensive manual for all cooperating teachers that details the student teaching process giving time lines, requirements and strategies for mentoring. Our university supervisors review this material with the cooperating teacher and work with them on an ongoing basis in the field to help them understand how to interact with the student. The university supervisor explains how the work samples are to be created and taught, how the EOU assessment system is implemented, and what criteria we expect of all teacher candidates. NCTQ did not incorporate these processes into their analysis.

NCTQ has a particular set of beliefs about how teacher education should be conducted. While many of the perspectives they bring to attention are consistent with best practices, some specific indicators they have chosen are leveraged in such a way as to characterize most teacher education programs in poor light. EOU is in interesting company in having scored in the "poor" ranking. Boise State, Alaska Southeast, University of Maine, University of Nevada-Las Vegas,

University of Vermont, Arkansas State, University of Northern Colorado, Columbus State, Chicago State, Valparaiso, Iowa State, Missouri State, Montana State, University of Nebraska, and many others also scored “poor” in this report. About three quarters of all colleges were rated as weak or poor.

The Oregon Association of Colleges of Teacher Education in association with the Oregon Coalition for Quality Teaching and Learning is drafting a general response to the rating system. A few of the preliminary points they bring to the process are listed below:

- NCTQ uses self-derived standards and methodologies to make simplistic assumptions about student teaching, which is a complex, dynamic and evolving component of educator preparation.
- NCTQ has made clear its disregard for the importance of clinical preparation. In August 2009, NCTQ’s Kate Walsh wrote a letter to U.S. Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, commending Race to the Top’s emphasis on alternate teacher certification routes but citing concern with the requirement that alternate routes “provide a clinical/student teaching experience.” The letter went on to encourage the U.S. Department of Education to amend the definition to one that “ensures new alternate route teachers are provided with the support they need, but that does not explicitly require a clinical or student teaching experience.”
- We believe that NCTQ missed a major issue which is to create more collaborative models for clinical experiences that lead to seamless preparation and professional development systems and which are mutually beneficial for teacher preparation programs and school districts. Several Oregon universities are engaged with their school district partners to create better recruitment, preparation, and ongoing professional development for professional educators.
- The review consisted only of looking at documents with little discussion with university officials, students, or professionals in partner schools. No onsite review was conducted.
- According to Sharon Robinson, president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, "A school can lose points for not having absolute control over the selection of the cooperating teacher," she said. "But we think these clinical experiences should be crafted in partnership with the schools, not dictated by either the principal or the education school."
- Three of the five standards deal with the qualifications of cooperating teachers selected within schools to serve as mentors to student teachers. All programs in Oregon must meet the standards outlined by Teacher Standards and Practices Commission (TSPC) which requires a minimum of 2 years of experience prior to serving as a cooperating teacher. A more detailed analysis would show that the vast majority of cooperating teachers far exceed the two years required by TSPC and the three years recommended by NCTQ. Furthermore, although not required by NCTQ, TSPC requires that cooperating teachers must: a) hold a valid license for the area in which the student teacher is assigned and b) agree to assist the program in evaluating work samples or portfolios and the success of candidates

The manner in which NCTQ has planned, implemented, conducted and reported this study creates a climate of concern over issues that have no merit. Yet, because the report is backed by significant funding and underwritten by US News and World Report, it will receive wide

attention. EOU believes that although sizzle sells newspapers and magazines, the core truth is that we can demonstrate through years of data that our teacher education programs are strong. We have high standards set for those who would become teachers, a balanced curriculum, a fine faculty, and excellent mentors in the field. Our program is fully accredited with Oregon Teacher Standards and Practices and with the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. Most importantly, the schools that hire our graduates have a high satisfaction with the professional competency of our teacher educators. Despite this “poor” rating, EOU is proud and confident that our students are well poised to be the next generation classroom leaders in Oregon.

If you have any questions about the report or EOU’s teacher education programs, feel free to contact me directly.

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