

How Do We Judge the Quality of Professional Educator Preparation?

The quality of teacher education matters in North Carolina. Western Carolina University and other University of North Carolina System teacher preparation programs account for a third of our state's nearly 100,000 public school teachers. Residents of our state are concerned with the quality of our schools but may not know how our universities prepare our public school educators to be effective teachers.

Western Carolina University's professional education programs prepare teachers for all grade levels, as well as school administrators, counselors, speech-language therapists, social workers, and psychologists. Quality is our constant goal. We strive to prepare the best educators possible and we measure our success against rigorous, state-of-the-art standards often referred to as "*outcome measures*."

In the past, we evaluated the quality of college and university teacher education programs by mostly using measures such as the degrees and publications of faculty, number and kinds of books in the library, number and names of required courses, faculty-student ratios in courses, topics and assignments listed in course syllabi, and the overall grades of students in the programs. Such measures, referred to as "input measures," are now just one part of the equation. We are increasingly focused on the performance of our graduates.

When WCU won the 2007 Christa McAuliffe Excellence in Teacher Education Award along with two other institutions presented by the American Association of State Colleges and Universities, it was because our students demonstrated in their student teaching experiences that the students they were teaching made positive gains in the subjects being taught.

Every year, we report our licensure exam pass rates and the number of graduates in each program. Our programs enjoy state approval and national accreditation for the program as a whole (National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education) and for several specialty areas where accreditation is rigorous and meaningful (i.e., Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Education Programs, American Speech-Language-Hearing Association, National Association of School Psychology). These organizations look closely at the outcomes of our programs including licensure pass rates, quality of experiences, and perceptions of graduates and their employers. They meet directly with current students, faculty, graduates and employers. They directly observe our students in K-12 schools.

For the last few years, the University of North Carolina system has been conducting a series of teacher quality studies that looks at the success of our graduates to positively impact student learning in schools in North Carolina. Specifically, how do the students of teacher education graduates perform on statewide tests? Even more specifically, how do students of the graduates of Western Carolina

University perform in public schools on statewide tests? Those studies have shown, including the latest report of February 2013, that high school English teachers from WCU outperformed students of teachers from other institutions in the state, as well as lateral entry teachers. Our elementary, middle grade, and high school teachers in math, science, and social studies performed at about the same level as those from other UNC teacher preparation programs for the last few years.

The University of North Carolina also has been looking at the retention rates of our graduates in North Carolina public schools. This is an important measure because research shows that experienced teachers are usually more effective than novice teachers. The good news is that more than 70 percent of our UNC system graduates are still teaching after five years, in contrast to the 50 percent national average and the much lower rate of persistence for alternative entry teachers. North Carolina has more teachers with National Board Certification by far than any other state, and Western Carolina University is one of eight UNC teacher preparation programs in the top 50 alma maters for the latest group (2012).

At Western Carolina, we are continuing to work to improve our professional educator programs by collecting and analyzing outcome data that show the performance of our graduates on meaningful and relevant measures. While it is important to have the independent validation of the quality of our teacher education programs that come with prestigious awards, state approval and national accreditation, what is more important is the impact that our graduates are having in classrooms across the region and the state each and every day of the school year.

Dale Carpenter is Interim Dean of the College of Education and Allied Professions at Western Carolina University.