Accrediting Teacher Colleges

By Vaishali Honawar

A panel of teacher education stakeholders wants the two national teacher-college accreditors to work together on creating a unified system of accreditation in the interest of boosting the status of the profession. But it also wants colleges to have a choice within that system in how they get accredited.

The report, written by a task force convened by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), a Washington-based membership group, calls on the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) to work closely with one another over the next two years to effect a transition into a unified entity.

An AACTE resolution that has been on the books for many years has long demanded a “single, national” accreditor for teacher programs.

AACTE officials acknowledge they have a vested interest in NCATE, which was founded in 1954 and which now accredits 650 teacher-preparation programs—more than 10 times the number the smaller TEAC, founded in 1997, does. AACTE contributes financially to NCATE and is a constituent member of the larger accreditor.

But in recent years, some of AACTE’s members have increasingly supported the existence of the younger TEAC, which accredits 59 teacher education programs, chiefly because those members see the availability of choice as a positive factor.

Worried that the presence of two accreditors is damaging the image of the profession, AACTE set up the task force in February to investigate the subject with two representatives each from NCATE, TEAC, and AACTE.

Carol E. Smith, AACTE’s vice president for professional issues and partnerships, said the task force was an attempt by her group to bring together the three organizations on teacher accreditation. But whether that will essentially mean a merger of the two accreditors, or a system of common standards in which both exist in some form, is yet to be worked out.

“We said here is language everyone could agree on,” Ms. Smith said, “and we cut off our responsibility.”

‘Multiple Approaches’

The language of the report, released last month, is sparse at this point, however, with task force members outlining a shared vision and an implementation plan, but leaving the details to be worked out by a transition committee made up of representatives of the two accreditors and other stakeholders over the next two years.

The report calls for a common set of standards that is focused on both inputs and outcomes, or on what candidates need to learn and know. But while meeting standards is essential, the report adds, the accrediting body should also provide institutions with a choice on the review process.

“Multiple approaches authored by the accreditation system should be honored for meeting standards along with multiple pathways for displaying and demonstrating compliance with standards,” it says.

Education school officials said they were pleased task force members acknowledged the needs of different teacher programs.

“I think we recognize that the colleges of education are very different from one another,” said Kay Schallenkamp, the president of Black Hills State University in Spearfish, S.D., and the chairwoman of AACTE’s board of directors.

“Having some flexibility on how institutions reflect on common standards is a good way to go about this,” said Mary Diez, the dean of graduate studies at Alverno College in Milwaukee. NCATE and TEAC have different elements in their systems, which should be scrutinized, she said. “It would be a good thing to look at a range of those.”
The report calls on NCATE and TEAC to work together to draft a statement of accreditation ethics, clarify similarities and dissimilarities, and come up with common definitions, among other aspects.

In the final phase, the report calls on both accreditors to complete plans on a governance structure, shared leadership, and funding.

The recommendations are not binding on either NCATE or TEAC, and both are free to pull out of the process at any time.

But Frank B. Murray, the president of TEAC, said his organization believes “it’s in our interest and in the interest of the field to not have the public perceive teacher education in a disarray.”

Arthur E. Wise, the president of NCATE, said in an e-mail that a unified system would better serve the profession, teacher education programs, and children.

He declined, however, to comment on the report any further for now, saying the leadership of his organization, which was the sole accreditor for 54 years, is now studying it.

James G. Cibulka, the dean of the college of education at the University of Kentucky who will take over in July as the president of NCATE, called the report a “very positive step for our profession,” adding that he hoped to work with Mr. Murray “to make this happen.”

**Credibility Boost?**

Teacher education experts say a unified accreditor would help boost the credibility of teaching as a profession. Few states now require all teacher education programs to acquire national accreditation, and more than a third are not nationally accredited.

NCATE and TEAC offer different processes for accreditation: NCATE requires schools to provide evidence that their graduates have the knowledge and skills to teach successfully, although some colleges have complained that the process is tedious, expensive, and time-consuming.

TEAC, meanwhile, allows institutions to set their own standards for teacher proficiency within what it describes as “a framework of continuous assessment and improvement,” but critics say the group lacks a set of national standards.

Blake West, the president of the Kansas National Education Association and a member of the task force, said the presence of two accreditors for the profession could have deterred some programs from seeking national accreditation.

“As long as there are two organizations that give the outward appearance that they are divergent, it conveys to some extent the impression there is not agreement on what it takes to prepare teachers,” he said.

The task force, Mr. West added, hopes that a unified system with a choice of pathways for different types of programs would help distinguish which institutions are really committed to teaching as a profession.

Mr. Murray interpreted the report as showing a shift in AACTE’s long-term support for a single accreditor. “They have endorsed a system that has choice. That wasn’t what they were saying a year ago,” he said.

Task force members, though, refrained from drawing such a conclusion.

“We set out some possibilities, but the hard work is ahead of us, where the interested parties need to come together and hammer out what may or may not be possible. We were not in a position to say here is what you have to do,” said Rick Ginsberg, the dean of the school of education at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, who represented AACTE.

**‘More Alike Than Different’**

Calvin Johnson, who also represented AACTE on the task force, said there is some room for interpretation in the task force report on how a unified system would ultimately look.

Mr. Johnson, the dean of the school of education at the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff, and other task force members said that after having sat at the table with representatives from both accrediting bodies, they hope such a system is possible.

“I found that they are more alike than different,” Mr. Johnson said, referring to NCATE and TEAC.