Standards Pose Teacher-Prep Challenge

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Like so much else in the world of teacher preparation, progress at readying new teachers for vastly different K-12 content expectations can probably best be described by one adjective: inconsistent.

There are those faculty members committed to revising courses and syllabuses to reflect the Common Core State Standards, those still sorting through what the standards mean for training, and those who resist the call to orient preparation around them.

Even for the early adopters, the standards pose some vexing questions: What does "alignment"—a vague concept to begin with—mean for educator preparation? How will the common core change the teaching of both content and "methods" classes in which prospective teachers learn pedagogical techniques? Does student-teaching, generally cited by teacher-candidates as the most important element in preparation, offer enough opportunities to practice teaching to the standards?

Add to those questions the decentralized structure of higher education, and the scope of the challenge becomes apparent.

"The control that faculty members have over their content makes it harder to get everyone to agree to move in the same direction," said Rick Melmer, a former dean of the University of South Dakota's education school. "There are more filters that change has to go through."

Volatile Mix

Teacher education has been under many pressures of late, including calls to improve student-teaching, classroom-management coursework, instruction, and program outcomes.

The addition of the common core into that mix promises to be especially volatile, because it stands to reshape teacher education curricula to a greater degree than the other efforts. And that fuels concerns about academic freedom, as well as long-standing debates about whether programs' main duty is to prepare teachers capable of carrying out specific, state-approved courses of study—or, as others argue, to prepare teachers to be knowledgeable about competing theories and to be critical actors in education policy.

Compare the comments of two education deans on the standards.

"We can teach awareness of the common core, but prepping kids to teach it moves into job-specific training, which is unrelated to teaching and learning in an academic sense," said Timothy Slekar, the dean of the education school at Edgewood College, a private Catholic liberal arts institution in Madison, Wis. "If we stop doing that as teacher-educators, we're no longer a profession."
The dean of the education school at Lipscomb University in Nashville, Tenn., Candice McQueen, offers a different perspective.

When districts are demanding talent well versed in the common core, "it's frankly unethical to put out teachers that don't know the standards," Ms. McQueen said. "Yes, we're teaching candidates theory, and to be thoughtful about understanding policy, but honestly, our job is to prepare the very best teachers that go out into the field. We do hold that very practical philosophy."

Frequently, faculty members within an institution are divided on the standards, as Nancy S. Grasmick, formerly a long-serving state schools superintendent in Maryland, recently discovered.

Ms. Grasmick, under whose watch the standards were adopted in Maryland in 2010, was brought on as a distinguished presidential scholar at Towson University, near Baltimore, to help the college's education programs transition to the common core. (Towson produces the most teachers of any Maryland college.) In the 2012-13 academic year, Ms. Grasmick organized a yearlong series of meetings introducing faculty members to the new expectations and the major shifts in practice.

Obliquely, she said, those forums illuminated faculty members' conflicting views on the initiative.

"When people stood up and said, 'This is an attempt by big business to take over education,' I knew we had challenges ahead," Ms. Grasmick said.

**Trump Card**

States approve which preparation programs can recommend candidates for a teaching certificate, so in theory, they hold the trump card where teacher preparation is concerned. Some, Colorado and Florida among them, have passed laws or promulgated rules explicitly requiring educator preparation to address their state's K-12 academic-content standards, according to the Denver-based Education Commission of the States.

In practice, such requirements are difficult to enforce, especially if the state audits programs only every few years. The diffuse nature of the nation's 1,400 schools of education in terms of program size, institutional type, and delivery methods also complicates matters.

When attitudes toward the standards vary so much, it's no surprise that colleges are taking different tacks in approaching the standards. In some education schools, the strongest push for the standards comes from teacher-educators who believe they offer an opportunity to improve teaching.

Patricia Swanson, an associate professor of elementary education at San Jose State University in California, is one such leader. She believes the common-core mathematics standards reinforce a deeper approach to learning that teacher education programs value but that has been at odds with the pressure in districts to cover test material.
"In some ways, common core takes us back to the way we think math ought to be taught," said Ms. Swanson, who teaches both preservice teachers and a professional-development course for practicing teachers.

Her revamped methods courses focus on the set of eight standards for mathematical practice—such as making sense of problems and modeling with mathematics—that undergird the content expectations in the common core.

Although she covered many of those practices before, she now teaches them more explicitly, with assignments requiring candidates to analyze a task they might perform with students and how it relates to one or more of the practices.

For a lesson on functions and mathematical modeling, for instance, Ms. Swanson has aspiring teachers use windup toys to measure the distance traveled over time, and then to represent those journeys in different ways—as a series of ratios, points on a graph, and ultimately, as an equation.

"We are trying to have kids see math as something we can use to describe our world," Ms. Swanson said.

There are cases in which educators themselves need more time simply practicing the mathematics and learning different ways of conceiving of it, she added. Fractions, which under the common core are introduced in 3rd grade, tops that list.

It's a point reiterated by Katherine K. Merseth, a senior lecturer and the director of teacher education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, who believes the shifts will require more programs to improve their content preparation.

"Kids can learn to invert and multiply in order to divide fractions, but then they look at the teacher and ask, 'Why?" Ms. Merseth said. "We have to make sure that our students and our graduates can answer exactly that question."

Achieving Consistency

Trying to get all institutions to share a consistent level of fluency with the standards is one of Ms. McQueen's goals in Tennessee. Lipscomb University received a grant through the state's federal Race to the Top award to craft resources for teacher-preparation programs in the state, such as video exemplars of common-core-aligned teaching.

Early feedback from statewide training institutes for faculty indicated that colleges needed more specific help. So Lipscomb, with assistance from the Washington-based Aspen Institute, has produced a self-assessment meant to guide faculty members as they rework their courses.
Some of the ideas Tennessee institutions are working on include using the standards as a required course reading; requiring teacher-candidates' "capstone projects" to align to the standards; and incorporating text-dependent writing, a core feature of the English/language arts expectations, into the portfolios candidates must submit.

Lipscomb faculty last fall submitted revised course syllabi with their self-assessments.

"Now, we're going back to areas they didn't feel as confident in and trying to give some individual attention by pairing them up with faculty who were strong in those areas," Ms. McQueen said.

Some progress is dependent on factors outside a college's control. Tennessee, like other states, this year is administering exams aligned to the state's old standards. That means prospective educators currently doing their student-teaching aren't necessarily seeing the common core enacted in classrooms in the way it should be once the new exams are in place, Ms. McQueen said.

Debate about the standards within colleges seems to be especially fierce with respect to the ELA expectations' focus on nonfiction and grade-level reading.

In fact, some of those standards' most vocal critics are teacher-educators, such as Nancy Carlsson-Paige, a professor at Lesley University, in Cambridge, Mass., and Joanne Yatvin, formerly an adjunct professor at Portland State University in Oregon.

Mr. Slekar of Edgewood College, though a critic of the common core, acknowledges that districts are likely to seek new teachers with knowledge of the standards. That puts his institution in an uncomfortable situation.

While Edgewood faculty members will make sure teacher-candidates are "fully aware" of the common core's ELA expectations, they won't be trained specifically on how to implement its principles, he said.

"All three of my literacy faculty said they wouldn't advocate it as the curricula of choice because it would violate their academic integrity," Mr. Slekar said. "It's the same way I wouldn't endorse direct instruction and I wouldn't endorse whole language," he said, referring to two reading methodologies.

**Ripples in a Pond**

Ms. Grasmick said she's changed gears to working with the most receptive faculty members at Towson University. Many are participating in work groups to address main common-core themes, such as the changing nature of assessment.

Another lever, Ms. Grasmick said, has been building up support among the districts that take many of the colleges' students. Towson University is beginning a partnership with the 108,000-student Baltimore County public schools to create an entirely new program, with lots of student-teaching, that supplies teachers with all the competencies the district wants to see.
"It gives us an opportunity to shape the next generation of classroom teachers and make sure it's competitive with what's going on with the teaching of common core," said S. Dallas Dance, the Baltimore County superintendent.

The ultimate goal is for the district to offer Towson graduates who complete the program "advanced contracts," in which they could be guaranteed a teaching slot in the spring. And that's a powerful lever for change, Ms. Grasmick said, now that education schools are being pressed by accreditors, and potentially by the U.S. Department of Education, to show that their graduates can find jobs.

Towson's gradual approach to the standards may be less dramatic than a mandate, but in the end, perhaps more effective.

"I think it's unrealistic to think we're going to have 100 percent of faculty on board, or even 90 percent," Ms. Grasmick said. "But I think if we can get a core group, it's going to make a difference."