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Navigating the Waters of Accreditation: Best Practices, Challenges, and Lessons Learned From One Institution

Tracey Covington Hasbun[1] and Amanda Rudolph[1]

Abstract

In higher education, as many as 50% of educator preparation programs (EPPs) look to a national accreditation agency as one way to provide evidence of the rigor and quality of their programs. Although a large number of EPPs find value in the self-study and external review that come with the national accreditation process, the process itself can be daunting and time-consuming. Many look to the literature or to the accreditation experiences provided by other institutions as a means to assist their own accreditation journey. The purpose of this article is to discuss one regional, comprehensive EPP's experiences with national accreditation, having recently undergone a site visit from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education. In this article, best practices from the literature will be addressed as will the challenges faced and lessons learned by the EPP.

"It is now widely agreed that teachers are among the most, if not the most, significant factors in children's learning and the linchpins in educational reforms of all kinds" (American Educational Research Association [AERA], 2009, p. 1). Although educators and educational stakeholders concur on the importance of teachers and teacher quality, there has been much discourse and disagreement as to the most effective ways to recruit, train, and retain these critical professionals (AERA, 2009). Many hold the position that accreditation programs for educator preparation increase the quality of the programs and assist in teacher recruitment and training. According to AERA (2009), this is demonstrated by the fact that approximately more than half of the 1,300 educator preparation programs (EPPs) in the United States looked to a national accreditation agency as one way to provide evidence of the rigor and quality of their programs.

Although a large number of EPPs find value in the self-study and external review that come with the national accreditation process, the process itself can be daunting and time-consuming (Brigham Young University, 2010; Levine, 2006). Erickson and Wentworth (2010) found that after interviewing faculty members from 15 universities, some of which were public, private, small, large, secular, and religious, results were similar across education programs. Each institution expressed frustration and even anxiety with the accreditation process (Erickson & Wentworth, 2010). However, the same participants also stated that accredited programs have had a positive impact on their

institutions and felt as though the accreditation process helped to make their programs to be more effective (Erickson & Wentworth, 2010).

To meet the national standards of quality that are set forth by accrediting bodies and to lessen the frustration that may come with the accreditation process, many EPPs rely on the information and experiences provided by other programs. These personal experiences can serve as examples of how various institutions navigated their own accreditation journey and can, hopefully, provide support to those currently undergoing or preparing to undergo national accreditation (Erickson & Wentworth, 2010).

The purpose of this article is to discuss one regional, comprehensive EPP's experiences with national accreditation, having recently undergone a site visit from the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE), which is now the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP). These experiences are detailed, from the perspective of the EPP's two NCATE co-coordinators. To begin with, this article will present what the literature states about the history of accreditation, the impact of accreditation,

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and best practices used in the accreditation journey. Then, the authors will detail information about self-study, their personal experiences, particularly the challenges they faced during the accreditation process, as well lessons that were learned through their accreditation work.

Theoretical Framework

This article is situated in views on self-study, which is considered to be grounded in Dewey's theories on experience (Dewey, 1938). Dewey (1938) discussed the value of experience in education and posited that experience comes from the convergence of continuity and interaction. He believed that a person's experience, both past and present, impacts his or her future experiences (continuity) and that there are contextual influences that affect the current experience (interaction; Dewey, 1938). This is relevant in this article as this EPP's recent experience with accreditation was affected by previous experiences with accreditation, as well as current situational factors, which will then affect future experiences with accreditation.

Research Questions

1. What challenges did the EPP face during the NCATE/CAEP accreditation process, as viewed through the lens of the NCATE co-coordinators?
2. What did the EPP learn from the NCATE/CAEP accreditation process, as viewed through the lens of the NCATE co-coordinators?

Review of Research

Accreditation History/Standards

EPPs in the United States are governed by multiple entities, some of which are mandated and some of which are voluntary (AERA, 2009). For example, while all states in the United States require EPPs to gain state approval, no EPP is required to undergo national accreditation (AERA, 2009). There is no federal or governmental agency that approves or accredits EPPs (Feuer, Floden, Chudowsky, & Ahn, 2013). Although national accreditation is not required, it should be examined as it is one of the mechanisms used to monitor teacher quality (Levine, 2006). With more than half of EPPs seeking external review from national accrediting bodies, having a better understanding of national accreditation and the standards that are involved in the process is necessary (AERA, 2009).

In recent years, there were two main accrediting bodies at the national level for teacher education, also referred to as educator preparation (Levine, 2006). These organizations were the NCATE and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC). For quite some time, NCATE and TEAC were the only two national accrediting agencies for education as both

had received recognition from the U.S. Department of Education (USDE) and the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA; TEAC, 2014b).

NCATE began in 1954 and has been responsible for a bulk of accreditation work with EPPs at colleges and universities across the nation (Levine, 2006). NCATE (2014b) defines their accreditation system as a "voluntary peer review process that involves a comprehensive evaluation of the professional education unit (the school, college, department, or other administrative body that is primarily responsible for the preparation of teachers and other professional school personnel)" (p. 1). The evaluation takes place on-site and off-site and is based on NCATE's unit standards, which are lauded as research-based standards that were created by various stakeholders in the teaching profession (NCATE, 2014b).

In contrast, TEAC was formed in 2003 and, primarily, has been selected by institutions such as research intensive flagship institutions, independent liberal arts colleges, and institutions that "prefer TEAC's reliance on self-inquiry and continuous improvement" (TEAC, 2014b, p. 1). TEAC's accreditation system placed weight on the program providing evidence of student accomplishment, which can be defined as something the program uses to indicate they are graduating and sending out competent educators into the field (TEAC, 2014b). TEAC noted that universities, colleges, and programs that selected TEAC for accreditation appreciated the audit approach used by TEAC and found it highly supportive (TEAC, 2014b). TEAC was guided by quality principles, as opposed to standards (TEAC, 2014b).

Although both accrediting bodies had the goal of EPPs producing highly qualified educators, there were differences between the two bodies. For example, according to the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE; 2003), NCATE only accredited units, whereas TEAC accredited programs. In addition, there were variances in governance, guidance philosophy, basis of evaluation, nature of standards for content and performance, and methods of assessing teacher candidate learning, just to name a few (AACTE, 2003). Although some differences were not colossal in scope, there were enough differences, and concerns, to warrant a change in the accreditation structure.

In the summer of 2013, NCATE and TEAC joined forces to create one unifying, national accreditation body for teacher education (NCATE, 2014a). The goals of the newly formed body, CAEP, are to "raise the performance of candidates as practitioners in the nation's P-12 schools and to raise standards for the evidence the field relies on to supports its claims of quality" (TEAC, 2014a, p. 1). CAEP's goals are based on five standards which include content and pedagogical knowledge; clinical partnerships and practice; candidate quality, recruitment, and selectivity; program impact; and provider quality assurance and continuous improvement (CAEP, 2013).

Because the newly formed body has been transitioning the former entities into one collective organization, EPPs currently undergoing national accreditation are having to adjust

to a change in standards, along with the expectation for increased rigor (CAEP, 2013). An additional challenge that EPPs are having to navigate is that CAEP's advanced standards will not be ready for distribution until fall 2016 (CAEP, 2015). This leaves some EPPs with questions and uncertainty as how to proceed with work in their advanced programs (CAEP, 2015). Although many agree to the need for having one unified, national accrediting body, the Board of Directors for AACTE stated that there is a "crisis of confidence with respect to CAEP" and noted concerns regarding "accreditation standards, process for accreditation, costs associated with accreditation, the capacity of CAEP to implement the accreditation system and the representativeness of the CAEP governance structure" (AACTE, 2015, p. 1). These concerns leave some to ask, "Is accreditation worth it?"

Impact of Accreditation on Programs

According to Linda Darling-Hammond (2010), the impact that national accreditation has on teacher preparation programs and the quality of educators they graduate has been a controversial topic. Part of the controversy lies in the fact that there is a limited amount of empirical evidence to point to the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of national accreditation. AERA (2009) noted that research in the field is primarily informational and is often found in journal articles where an institution details the process they underwent during national accreditation and where they provide recommendations to other institutions. While some argue there is great value in seeking national accreditation as a means to improve teaching, others voice their concerns about this approach.

Benefits. Gitomer and Latham (1999) found that students who graduated from NCATE-accredited institutions had significantly higher pass rates on state licensure tests, in this case the Praxis, than students who completed teacher education programs from non-NCATE-accredited institutions. This was an interesting finding given that students at NCATE-accredited institutions typically have lower American College Test (ACT) and Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) scores than those attending schools that are not NCATE accredited (Gitomer & Latham, 1999). This finding suggests that obtaining NCATE accreditation could increase the probability that students will pass the state licensure exams (Gitomer & Latham, 1999).

Although not a rigorous study, Linda Darling-Hammond (1999) conducted an investigation that included evidence from several national databases. The findings indicated that there could be value in national accreditation (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Statistically significant correlations were found between the percentage of teachers in a state who were qualified, having both a major and full certification in their field, and the percentage of NCATE-accredited colleges in that particular state (Darling-Hammond, 1999). Statistically significant positive correlations were also shown in the percentage of

teachers who were well qualified ($p \leq .42$), who were well qualified to teach English ($p \leq .49$), and who were well qualified to teach math ($p \leq .36$) (Darling-Hammond, 1999). In addition, statistically positive negative correlations were found in the percentage of teachers who teach "out of field" in the content areas of English ($p \leq .37$) and math ($p \leq .37$) (Darling-Hammond, 1999). According to Darling-Hammond, these findings could be due to NCATE-accredited institutions requiring evidence of foundational content and pedagogical knowledge in their students, as well as less variability in the setting of high standards.

Other proponents of national accreditation point to the value that comes through self-study and review. Berliner and Schmelkin, 2010 write that "Accreditation can provide invaluable feedback on how a program or a school is doing" (p. 3). Deans of several colleges agree. In data collected from deans at 16 NCATE-accredited institutions, Levine (2006) found the leaders to be generally positive about the process, indicating the usefulness of external review, internal analysis, and the positive programmatic changes that came from accreditation. A chair at one institution welcomed the chance to deeply examine what they did and what they believed and noted another benefit of the TEAC accreditation process is that they could state their "claims and then develop a valid and reliable assessment system that supports these claims" (Monroe-Baillargeon, 2010, p. 16). However, there are those that believe there are inherent concerns in national accreditation.

Concerns. To begin with, many claim that, due to the limited amount of empirical research in the field, the findings of what is available should be viewed with caution (Levine, 2006; Tamir & Wilson, 2005). Tamir and Wilson (2005) more emphatically stated, "The lack of substantial research on accreditation makes it impossible to make empirically based claims about the value-added of such processes, including how accreditation processes enhance the professionalism of teacher education" (p. 332). Tamir and Wilson also directly addressed the results of Gitomer and Latham's (1999) study and stated that it does not provide evidence of the effectiveness of accreditation in ensuring EPP's graduate well-qualified teachers. Allen (2003) concurred and stated that the results are inconclusive.

Levine (2006) argued that NCATE accreditation does not guarantee program quality. He referred to data compiled by the Northwest Evaluation Association (NWEA), where the correlation between student classroom achievement and accreditation status of the EPP was investigated (Levine, 2006). After controlling for teacher longevity, results indicated no statistically significant difference in student reading or math achievement, regardless if the teacher graduated from an NCATE-accredited institution or not (Levine, 2006).

Goodlad (1990) provided other concerns regarding national accreditation. He found national accreditation to be stifling in its conformity, lacking in innovation, and to be more of value to regional institutions, as opposed to flagship

research institutions, major private institutions, and major public institutions (Goodlad, 1990). Levine (2006) echoed similar findings when he referred to information provided by "U.S. News and World Report." After examining the rankings of 100 U.S. graduate schools of education, of those in the highest decile, only 30% were accredited, whereas 80% in the lowest decile were accredited (U.S. News and World Report, 2004). Similarly, in undergraduate teacher education programs, 44% of the most selective schools were accredited, whereas 65% of the least selective schools were accredited (U.S. News and World Report, 2004).

Additional concerns have also been mentioned. Some believe that the cost of accreditation is too high, that the endeavor can be confusing or overwhelming, and that the requirements or standards, in the past, have been too low (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010; Feuer et al., 2013; Levine, 2006). While the newer CAEP standards have increased requirements, others feel that the standards are controversial (Feuer et al., 2013). According to Feuer et al. (2013), groups such as the Council of Chief State School Officers and the American Federation of Teachers agree with the need for selectivity in attracting quality applicants to teacher education programs, but some worry that this will create a lack of diversity in the profession.

Although there are positives and negatives in regard to national accreditation, there is no doubt that it is one measure being used to monitor teacher quality (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010). There is also no doubt that there are large number of EPPs that look to accreditation as a way to ensure rigor and effectiveness of their programs and that many find the process confusing and frustrating (AERA, 2009; Erickson & Wentworth, 2010). For this reason, it is beneficial to know what the literature states are best practices in the accreditation journey.

Best Practices Used in the Accreditation Process

Looking to individual EPPs for best practices and for what they have to found to be successful during their accreditation process can be extremely valuable. However, because it is expected that institutions are to focus on intensely preparing candidates in the areas of pedagogy, content, and field and clinical experiences, and because each EPP can differ in a multitude of ways, the suggestions listed will provide a general framework of practices to consider when undergoing the accreditation overall process.

Before the process. Before the accreditation process even begins, there are several critical elements that must be considered and addressed. Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) offered valid suggestions for how to approach the task, and with 30+ years in higher education and much experience in the accreditation process, their views are worthy of consideration.

To begin with, they stated that the first item to be considered is who will be in charge of overseeing the process? (Berliner &

Schmelkin, 2010). While institutions have a multitude of scholarly, educated, and talented people from which to choose, some may be a better fit to lead the daunting task of accreditation than others. Having a capable person in charge is necessary, but Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) argued it is more important that the person be a "detail" person and that he or she be passionate about and a champion for accreditation. Furthermore, they stated, "Accreditation is all about details. It will not happen without myriad details coming together" (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010, p. 3). While they did not offer suggestions on the rank of the person in charge of the process, it would make sense that the key leader be a tenured faculty member who has institutional memory, an understanding of the multiple programs at the university, and competency in data analysis (Southern Connecticut State University, 2014). It would also be important that the leader have strong interpersonal skills because, as in the case of the authors in this article, questions and answers from within the EPP are often handled by the person in charge of accreditation, whether that be through email, faculty forums, or committees (Southern Connecticut State University, 2014).

Second, they discussed the importance of making a plan. Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) stated that resources and time should be a part of the plan. Before the accreditation process begins, an EPP should consider the financial costs involved. They argued that it makes little to no sense to move forward with accreditation without having a firm grasp on the entire cost of the process and without knowing from where the monies will come (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010). In addition, timetables are critical. It is important that ample time is allotted for each element in the process, and as Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) noted, "The later an institution starts the process . . . the more likely the process will not work smoothly" (p. 4). Brabek and Worrell (2014) agreed and stated that, for accurate and high-quality assessment data to be collected and for programs and teacher quality to improve, which should be the ultimate goal for accreditation, universities must allocate personnel, time, funding, and technical capacity, and must have a strong infrastructure in place. This should be addressed before the accreditation process begins.

During the process. Once the accreditation leader has been secured, the timeline has been drafted, and the budget has been created, the accreditation process can be tackled. Again, Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) offered practical suggestions for best practices that can be used during the process.

Regardless as to which pathway to accreditation an EPP takes, all will have to submit a report of some form. Once a draft of the report is created, it is suggested that a standing group of administrators review the draft (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010). Feedback on their programs and the data that are presented in the report is important to have before is submitted. Once the institution has received feedback from the accreditation team on the submitted report, Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) advised EPPs to pay close attention to the feedback.

They cautioned that the accreditation team is providing "valuable information on areas or factors that will be scrutinized and the school or program involved should also be scrutinizing these same areas to make sure that everything possible has been done to be in compliance" (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010, p. 4).

It is also highly recommended that, once the draft has been completed and has been through the process of review, the EPP host a mock visit (Berliner & Schmelkin, 2010). While particularly important for an EPP that is pursuing initial accreditation, Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) noted,

> Even the best prepared accreditation effort can benefit from a dry run. Having participated on both sides of a simulated visit—as a member of the visiting team and as a program being visited—we know firsthand the insights that can be transmitted and received as part of this exercise. (p. 4)

Suggestions for the accreditation process can also be derived from a study of 20 diverse colleges and universities that had high graduation rates and appear to foster success with students of differing aspirations and abilities, as measured by the National Survey of Student Engagement (Griego, 2005). The schools involved in the study are referred to as DEEP schools as they provided evidence of Documenting Effective Educational Practices, and evidence of effectiveness is something institutions will want to provide to accreditation teams (Griego, 2005).

First, Griego (2005) wrote that DEEP schools are unique in that they have cohesive mission statements and goals that are enacted. This is important as

> accreditation teams can look for evidence of how the mission shapes institutional policies and processes by determining to what extent faculty, staff, and administration have a shared vision of how to promote student success and the ways that vision is promulgated. (Griego, 2005, p. 2)

Keeping the mission at the forefront is key during the accreditation process.

Second, Griego (2005) discussed the importance of educational design, how the assessment of learning should be comprehensive and systematic, and how all policies, procedures, and processes should support students. She stated that DEEP schools provide clear and instructive illustrations of how they address these elements and that this is what "accreditation teams should look for when determining whether institutional policies, programs, and practices are educationally effective" (Griego, 2005, p. 2).

Griego (2005) also noted the importance of creating supportive environments which ensures that educational quality is a shared responsibility and the importance of strong systems for gathering evidence and making data-driven decisions. She stated,

> Accreditation teams look for evidence of respect, collaboration, and partnership among governing board members, faculty, academic administrators, student affairs staff, and student leaders. Too often, accreditors observe units functioning as stand-alone silos where competing interests dilute the quality of the undergraduate experience. (Griego, 2005, p. 3)

Working as a unit is important.

She also discussed the value in the DEEP schools consciously aligning all priorities of the institution with all decisions that are made, whether they be curricular, budgetary, or other. "Evidence is collected systematically, analyzed with comparative cohorts, benchmarked when possible, discussed collaboratively and, ultimately, used to guide policy and practice" (Griego, 2005, p. 3). Again, having a strong system for gathering evidence and making decisions based on that evidence is important to highlight in the accreditation process (Griego, 2005). However, that is not always easy.

When an institution begins their accreditation journey, it is important to know best practices in the field. However, it can be equally helpful to understand the hurdles other EPPs encountered during their accreditation process, as well as the lessons they learned, when trying to use those best practices. The following are what the NCATE co-coordinators at one institution found to be challenges and points of learning before and during their accreditation cycle.

Self-Study Research

In this article, a self-study research method was used. To begin with, Hamilton and Pinnegar (1998) defined self-study as "the study of one's self, one's actions, one's ideas, as well as the 'not self'" (p. 236). They also noted that self-study research is "autobiographical, historical, cultural, and political and takes a thoughtful look at texts read, experiences had, people known and ideas considered" (Hamilton & Pinnegar, 1998, p. 236). Feldman, Paugh, and Mills (2004) distinguished self-study from other forms of research by noting the emphasis on the word *self*. The individual *self* or, for the sake of this article, the organizational *self*, as viewed only through the lens of the two NCATE co-coordinators, is the focus of the research (Feldman et al., 2004). As was done in this study, Samaras and Freese (2009) stated that researchers engaging in self-study rely on personal experiences as the basis for their research.

Many EPPs rely on the self-study and accreditation experiences provided by other institutions because they can serve as examples of how units can successfully navigate their own accreditation journey (Erickson & Wentworth, 2010). Being an actual part of the experience also lends itself to the research. The two authors of this article were highly involved in the accreditation process of their EPP; one served as an interim associate dean for accountability, accreditation, and assessment, while also serving as a co-coordinator for the NCATE, and the other author served as half-time NCATE co-coordinator and half-time faculty member. This narrative will explore the experiences of these authors through one accreditation cycle at a regional

comprehensive university in East Texas. The narrative will first provide the unit's recent history with accreditation and then will detail the challenges they faced, as well as the lessons learned, before and during their accreditation process.

Visit History

The university in this narrative has an enrollment just below 13,000 students with the College of Education (COE) having a typical enrollment of approximately 4,000 students per year. The university was established in 1923 as a teacher's college, and now, the college is the largest college on campus. The COE has had outside accreditation with NCATE since 1956.

In 2007, the COE completed a successful site visit with NCATE. Prior to this visit, the COE had successful visits that were mainly completed by administration and with minimal input from faculty. The 2007 visit reflected a change in the accreditation process with more rigorous standards (NCATE, 2008). In preparation for this visit, the dean of the COE invited every faculty member in the unit to serve on an NCATE standard committee in the fall of 2004. The visit, held in April 2007, resulted in only two areas for improvement (AFIs). Two years after the visit, the dean of the COE moved to another institution, and a permanent dean was not named until 2010. In preparation for the upcoming 2014 visit, the COE dean named a coordinator in 2011 and in the same fall that became two co-coordinators. As the NCATE and TEAC were transitioning to the CAEP, institutions were still able to hold legacy visits for both NCATE and TEAC. New CAEP standards were not available until 2013 (CAEP website), so the COE held an NCATE legacy visit in April 2014.

The timeline of the visit shows two important issues. First, the momentum gained in 2007 was lost during the transition in leadership. This proved to be a significant challenge to the leaders of the accreditation process. Second, the delayed appointment of new NCATE coordinators led to a shorter time frame for work to be completed. The unit began with two serious issues to overcome (Table 1).

Table 1. Critical Dates.

Year	Action
Spring 2007	NCATE re-accreditation
Summer 2009	Dean resigns; interim dean begins
Fall 2010	Permanent dean begins
Fall 2011	Associate dean begins with NCATE co-coordinator
Spring 2014	NCATE site visit

Note. NCATE = National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education.

Challenges and Lessons Learned

By the fall of 2011, the leadership team was in place. Next, the preparation began for the spring 2014 on-site visit. The unit had an institutional report that was due in the fall of 2013 and Specialized Professional Association (SPA) reports began being submitted in the fall of 2012. In essence, the unit had 2 years to get ready for a full on-site visit. Three major areas were the focus of the initial work for the accreditation team. First, the assessment system had to be evaluated and revised. Second, the unit needed to gain faculty buy-in, which is addressed in the culture of accountability portion. Finally, relationships needed to be cultivated or strengthened to fully address the standard that was chosen to move to target, which was Standard 3: field experience and clinical practice.

Assessment system. For the NCATE visit in 2007, the COE developed an in-house assessment system using FileMaker Pro. This system was used to store assessment data related to accreditation. The system worked for the 2007 visit but, shortly, proved ineffective to maintain the amount and detail of data needed for future accreditation. Soon after the 2007 COE NCATE visit, the entire university went through accreditation with the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). At the beginning of the SACS accreditation process, there was little to no connection to the other accreditation systems on campus. In the following years, the COE worked to align the program learning outcomes for SACS to the program standards for accreditation for the NCATE and other associations. For the SACS process, the university adopted TracDat to house the results of data collection. Because FileMaker Pro no longer met the needs of the COE in regard to NCATE accreditation and the aggregation and disaggregation of data for all programs, and because NCATE required an electronic data management system, the COE adopted LiveText as its data management system. The university followed in 2014. This decision was made with limited input from faculty. In the end, the college had a system that included the following:

- five departments and schools
- 27 undergraduate and graduate programs
- two doctoral programs
- 46 educator certification programs
- 20+ sets of professional standards
- 82+ sets of programs learning objectives for SACS

To facilitate the collection and analysis of data, the COE implemented a Data Day that supported all programs in their use of data for accreditation and for programmatic decisions. Data Day was developed in response to several outside factors. First, the leadership at the college level had changed twice in 2 years. The new dean was a permanent appointment and wanted to provide equal access to data. Second, the recent SACS visit had pushed the university into an annual data cycle that was new for the programs and the departments. Programs could, as a group, review data and make recommendations for change. Finally, there was the upcoming legacy NCATE visit for which preparations needed to be made and program data needed to be examined.

In relation to the assessment system, Data Day became a step in the assessment cycle. The programs were expected to aggregate and disaggregate data that were meaningful and part of their assessment systems. Data Day will be discussed in more detail in relation to the culture of accountability.

Assessment system challenges and lessons learned. To begin with, the authors were in agreement with what was stated in the literature regarding what should take place before the accreditation process begins. In particular, the authors found that Berliner and Schmelkin (2010) were correct when they noted that "the later an institution starts the process . . . the more likely the process will not work smoothly" (p. 4). That could have not been more true in this case and was a point of learning and challenge for the authors and the institution. Having a leadership team in place, many years ahead of a scheduled visit, is, in these authors' opinions, critical. Had this been done, more time could have been allotted to creating a feasible timeline, more time could have been dedicated to securing the needed resources, and more time could have been spent on major and minor elements and details. One of those major elements was the assessment system.

Once challenge and learning point was working to establish and maintain a comprehensive assessment system for the unit. During the process, the authors gained insight into how to make the process work more effectively. Those ideas include gaining faculty buy-in on the system, creating an assessment team or person to manage the assessment system, planning implementation, and providing training.

To begin with, the most important idea is to gain faculty buy-in early in the process. The authors found that the late start date for work, and the limited input of faculty in the system that was chosen, increased the need for good salesmanship on the parts of the leadership team. One way to have buy-in is to solicit faculty input in the selection of data management systems and assessments. Previously, the unit had relied on an in-house system that the programs had outgrown. Under the interim dean, a system had been identified to replace the old one, but with the appointment of a permanent dean, another system was ultimately chosen. Basically, the decision to use LiveText was chosen by upper leadership, and this became one "sticking" point for faculty members as they did not respond well to a top-down decision.

Next, to maintain a system, there needs to be an assessment team or person that leads the process and ensures consistency. In this institution's case, the unit hired a full-time staff position to maintain consistency with assessments and with faculty. However, again, this person was not hired until very late in the process which made things difficult and uneven in the beginning. Prior to her hiring, as many as three different people have been responsible for the LiveText system, many of whom already had full-time positions and could not dedicate the necessary time to making it optimal for faculty, programs, or the unit. Through this, the authors learned how important it was important to have one person fully trained before meeting with faculty. It was also learned how critical it is to have the person cross-train with another person to administer the data management system. This would help in the event that the person left the position or was out on leave.

Third, it was learned that implementation also needs to be carefully planned. Establishing priorities as to which programs, departments, or assessments need to come online, and the order of those, is important. Implementation should be phased in, gradually. The unit implemented the system with one or two programs at a time to ensure that all questions could be answered and that the needs of the candidates and faculty members could be met.

The final component of the unit's assessment system implementation and development was to provide on-going training to existing faculty, program coordinators, and leaders, as well as new personnel. Until the full-time LiveText coordinator was hired, faculty received training from various people, who may or may not have supplied the same information. In addition, before the LiveText coordinator was hired, the full-time faculty that had previously served in the role had limited time to provide additional training. For example, offering training for students, such as brown-bag lunches to describe the ways that LiveText can be useful to them, would have been helpful.

In regard to the assessment system, again, the authors found best practices in the literature to be true. The process reinforced to them the critical importance of having strong systems in place to collect quality evidence and of making decisions based on that evidence (Griego, 2005). Although having a leadership team in place early would have helped alleviate some challenges with the assessment system, the authors also noted the importance of faculty buy-in on the system, creating an assessment team or person to manage the assessment system, planning implementation, and providing training.

Culture of accountability. Creating and fostering a culture of accountability in the COE was critical for accreditation purposes. As mentioned before, institutions of higher education, as well as EPPs, are under intense scrutiny in the current political climate. This need then for accountability trickles down to the individual professor or instructor in a class. If there is no buy-in from the individual, then there will be no valid and reliable evidence to prove effectiveness. To establish a sense of accountability, the COE implemented Data Day, among other strategies.

As the faculty of the COE gathered together, the conversation began with five main ideas. First, the idea of professional responsibility was discussed. Faculty talked about their roles as members of the academy and what professional responsibilities they had to assist in providing evidence of effectiveness. Issues related to the direct connections between policy and funding were also discussed. The faculty also discussed the future in relation to their discipline and

their roles as change agents in higher education, as well as in their fields. Finally, a main tenet in forming a culture of accountability was introduced; faculty members have a moral and ethical obligation to their students to do what is most effective and beneficial to learning.

Creating and maintaining a culture of accountability proved to be a daunting task. Data Day was a 1-day mandatory meeting, held each semester, with the entire college faculty. Typically, the morning was dedicated to college data and analysis and the afternoon to program data and analysis. The purpose of Data Day was to ensure equal access to data and to have the all faculty involved in college and programmatic decisions. Analysis and recommendations were completed by each faculty member. Data Day became an event that was held twice a year and then, finally, just once a year. However, instead of bringing faculty together in a spirit of collaboration, some faculty have felt the day is another bureaucratic checkbox on the ever-growing to-do list of faculty members. Sustaining positivity in the face of more intense accountability has proven difficult at best.

Culture of accountability challenges and lessons learned. Although faculty members were mostly open to Data Day, there were some issues that were learned from trying to move people toward a culture of accountability. First, more than any other idea, the quality of the data is critical. During our 2 years of Data Days, the focus was on demographic data for the COE and its departments, as well as unit data from unit assessments. Having data that relate to all or most faculty members is sometimes challenging but is also vital to building that culture of accountability.

To continue an assessment day, it was learned that leadership should come from faculty members. As more voices from faculty members were included, the days began to become more meaningful. For example, during informal communication with faculty, they indicated that when they have had more time to meet with their programs to analyze data and make programmatic decisions, the more useful they believed the day to be. In addition, some suggested providing input as to what should be addressed on those days. Having a voice is clearly an important piece to faculty and seems to increase buy-in and assist in creating a more readily acceptable culture of accountability.

Finally, it was learned that the continuum of experience among faculty members and the activities and discussions on Data Day need to be considered. On the day issues were shared related to policy and advocacy, some of the evaluation comments showed that some faculty members felt insulted with such a basic presentation, whereas others were happy with the information. As educators constantly differentiate for students, the authors were reminded that differentiation for ability, knowledge, and interest also needs to take place with faculty, in regard to Data Day.

Relationships and Standard 3. Interestingly, the authors felt that the most important component for success in the accreditation process was relationships. Many individuals work together to complete the accreditation process, and a large number of those were not people employed by the COE. Throughout the process, many individuals added much helpful and needed insight or product to the work, and the authors are most grateful for their work. However, there was a special focus on the relationships with the unit's school partners. For the legacy visit, the COE was required to choose a standard to move toward target. Standard 3, which is field experience and clinical practice, was the area chosen by the COE to move toward target but was only targeted at the initial level. To show growth in the effectiveness of the field experiences and clinical practice experiences, the COE needed support and buy-in from many school district personnel.

To begin the creation of working partnerships, several groups were invited to the table. These included faculty members, department chairs, staff members, deans, program coordinators, school leaders, and university supervisors. Luckily, the COE had some capital to begin the collaborative relationships. Previously, the COE had worked with school partners to develop a Professional Development School (PDS) model, create field-based programs, implement grants, and assess needs for the preservice teachers.

The process to bring these stakeholders together was deliberate. A large committee was created and was named the Standard 3 Committee. The purpose and main responsibility of the committee was to have members from different programs within the EPP work with school partners and university supervisors to strengthen or "design, implement, and evaluate field experiences and clinical practice so that teacher candidates and other school professionals develop and demonstrate the knowledge, skills, and professional dispositions to help all students learn" (NCATE, 2008, p. 1). The committee reviewed the Standard 3 elements and reviewed data related to student teaching, supervision, and partnerships. After discussion of data and standards, four areas of need were identified and subcommittees were created to further investigate those areas, and each committee member was involved in a subcommittee. Eventually, all these parts came together and identified six areas to address with pilot innovations. The responsibility of the large committee was to oversee the work of the innovations throughout the process, which led to a culminating presentation at the on-site visit.

Relationship and Standard 3 challenges and lessons learned. Although relationships were probably the unit's major strength, the authors, and the institution, still learned ways to work with partners to ensure relationships did not deteriorate or become damaged through the accreditation process. The most important idea is one that was noted with faculty; buy-in needs to be continually fostered. The ever revolving door of school personnel required that the Standard 3 Committee continually talk about the importance of the

relationship and regularly reiterate how the relationship is mutually beneficial to the school partners and to the unit.

Connected to buy-in is the idea that each partner needs to see the benefit. The approach the unit took was to showcase what the unit was doing and where it hoped to be going, and then to emphasize the importance of each school, district, and teacher in the process of reaching the goal. In addition, the unit wanted to be sure that each voice was listened to with respect as each offered valuable information, had goals of its own, and was a valuable and viable part of the team. The unit's partners came from small districts and large districts and included both teachers and administrators. However, extra care was taken to make sure that all voices were heard equally as all were important.

Fostering buy-in and making sure partners see the benefit are two ideas that are connected. First, each partner needs assurances that changes will actually happen. Many times, professionals have meetings where decisions are made, but no follow-through occurs. The authors and the leadership team made it a priority to periodically reassure the partners that the unit was indeed moving forward with the suggested changes of the committee. The second idea is really a caution for other institutions. Do move forward quickly, but take the time needed to implement changes. To ensure that innovations are successful, take the time to listen, reflect, and discuss. A rushed decision can take more time in the long run if mistakes are made and changes must happen.

These ideas proved to be most helpful to the institution as they were commended on Standard 3 in its final report from the NCATE site visit. In particular, the Board of Examiners commented that the unit presented convincing evidence in regard to Standard 3. Much of the success in this area was due to the relationships and collaboration with school partners and the work of the Standard 3 Committee.

In sum, in this institution's experience, three major areas needed for accreditation success were an effective, well-maintained assessment system; a move toward a culture of accountability; and buy-in from invested and supported relationships. In each of these areas, the authors and the institution learned how to better lead and facilitate the accreditation process.

Final Thoughts

While discourse continues regarding the value on national accreditation on the effectiveness of preparing educators for the field, it is clearly documented that accreditation is a key element at many institutions. With more than 50% of EPPs seeking national accreditation, it is vital to have a better understanding of what is involved in the accreditation process (AERA, 2009). Although each unit's process of accreditation will vary, there are resources that the unit can use to better assist them on their journey, such as best practices that are noted in the literature and experiences provided by other institutions.

In future studies, including the voices of faculty members or public school partners could be helpful. While self-study is an important and critical part of learning about effective practices in accreditation, self-study, using a narrative inquiry, could provide useful information and should be considered. Regardless as to which research method is used, it is imperative for the leaders and the participants in the accreditation journey to be reflective and critical of the process. Ultimately, the process should be an opportunity for growth and recognition of success. To ensure the accreditation system is always beneficial for the participants, the participant must study the process and give feedback on how to make it work best for all. This unit hopes to incorporate what was learned and researched during their accreditation visit and hopes their experiences will assist other EPPs in more effectively navigating the sometimes murky, choppy waters of accreditation.

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