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## Research Article

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# Defining and Measuring Excellence in the Changing World of Higher Education: Case Stories from Five Colleges of Education

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### Abstract

This paper presents a collection of case stories from five Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) within colleges of education, four from institutions in Texas and one from California, to present a micro cross-sectional narrative interpretation of what constitutes excellence in educator preparation. The broad framework utilized in this interpretation focuses on the individual approaches used by each institution for creating and sustaining positive cultures of data-informed decision-making, with the ultimate objective of continuous program improvement, while also meeting the accreditation expectations of each institution.

Teacher preparation is integral to most public institutions' missions, as an educated society is dependent upon quality teachers. However, defining and measuring the quality of educator preparation programs has grown more complex and challenging as the context in which these programs operate have encountered increased scrutiny and shifting expectations (AASCU, 2017). How are quality and excellence defined in the changing world of higher education? This collection of case stories from five Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) within colleges of education, four from institutions in Texas and one

from California, presents a micro cross-sectional narrative interpretation of what constitutes excellence. More specifically, individual approaches used by each institution for creating and sustaining positive cultures of data-informed decision-making with the ultimate objective of continuous program improvement is the broad framework utilized in this interpretation.

In this paper, the authors have adopted the term "data-informed" rather than "data-driven," not to de-emphasize the importance of collecting and utilizing meaningful data to inform decisions, but rather to recognize the importance of valuing the

expertise and input of stakeholders in analyzing and deriving usable information from the data. The institutions represented recognize the importance of institutionally-defined excellence, rather than accreditor-defined excellence. While there are state and national expectations for excellence defined by accrediting agencies, not all programs elect to pursue these accreditations. The variation in these stances are explored, as the authors detail how and why each approach and definition of excellence was adopted, utilized, and measured, and how each invests stakeholders, faculty, and staff in the process of achieving their defined excellence. Additionally, continuously raising expectations and implementing self-assessment, and the empowerment of faculty, staff, and students in the process are discussed.

### **Sam Houston State University**

Sam Houston State University is a comprehensive regional university located in Huntsville, Texas. The university is uniquely situated, located within an hour's drive to Houston, but also surrounded by smaller rural districts. The College of Education produces approximately 500 Texas teachers each academic year, and candidates receiving their teacher preparation at SHSU have the opportunity to gain field experience in rural, suburban, and urban school settings. The college embarked on a strategic planning process in the fall of 2016, and central to this process was defining college excellence and the belief statements that support that. The plan expresses the college's core values, with individualization by units.

The college arrived at a definition of excellence focused on preparing teacher leaders who are prepared to impact a diverse and evolving world, and supported by the following belief statements:

- What we all do matters;
- Innovation fosters creativity, critical thinking, and passion;

- Relevant experiences promote growth and inspire change;
- Strength is found in valuing diversity;
- Positive relationships influence success.

This definition of excellence was further supported by the following goals for the college:

- Thinking critically about the current educational system, especially regarding curriculum standards, instruction practice, and student assessment;
- Serving as leaders of other educators, communities, and students;
- Serving as agents of positive change in the current educational system;
- Exhibiting creativity and innovation;
- Collaborating across communities and other systems to build a common purpose;
- Aligning experiences across departments to enhance the student experience;
- Partnering with future-minded organizations to enhance impact;
- Valuing diversity and a variety of viewpoints;
- Seeking alternative solutions to the dilemmas faced in PK-12 education.

The SHSU College of Education employs the following strategies to fulfill the mission set forth in the strategic plan to measure self-defined excellence:

- Annual Data Day / Program Review;
- NCATE / CAEP Accreditation;
- Signature Assessments (e.g. Capstone Portfolio for Initial Certification Candidates);
- SACS Accreditation;
- Texas Education Agency Accreditation;
- State Reporting (ASEP, Title II).

The SHSU College of Education employs the following strategies to fulfill the mission set forth in the strategic plan to invest stakeholders:

- SHIPS (Sam Houston Invested Partner Schools);
- EPAC (Education Partners Advisory Committee);
- Inclusion in Strategic Planning.

The SHSU College of Education employs the following strategies to fulfill the mission set forth in the strategic plan to invest faculty and staff in the continuous improvement process:

- Enhanced Communication: Monday Message;
- Committee Structure;
- Professional Development: Data Day;
- Additional Resources.

At Sam Houston State University, defining excellence is not taken lightly. As an institution whose teacher production is consistently in the top quartile of Texas educator preparation programs, it is critical that those graduates are well-prepared to impact the future. This underscores the multi-dimensional meaning in the adopted belief statement “What we all do matters.” Every faculty and staff member in the SHSU College of Education is a component of the quality of education received by SHSU teacher candidates, who in turn impact every Texas schoolchild that passes through their classrooms. These school children, respectively, can impact the future of the state, the nation, and the world.

### **Stephen F. Austin State University**

SFASU is a comprehensive university with a breathtaking campus nestled among the tall pines of deep East Texas in historic Nacogdoches. The university provides transformational learning experiences as means to prepare students for the challenges of living in a global community.

The Perkins College of Education (PCOE) prepares approximately 400 teachers each academic year offering graduates field experience opportunities across the state of TX. Through collaborative strategic planning that included faculty, students, and administrators PCOE defines excellence as competent, successful, caring and enthusiastic professionals from diverse backgrounds dedicated to responsible service, leadership, social justice and continued professional and intellectual development.

In addition to a clear but unique definition of excellence, PCOE is committed to the following core values:

- Academic excellence through critical, reflective, and creative thinking;
- Life-long learning;
- Collaboration and shared decision-making;
- Openness to new ideas, to culturally diverse people, and to innovation and change;
- Integrity, responsibility, diligence, and ethical behavior;
- Service that enriches the community.

PCOE measures and supports a culture of excellence in the following ways:

- Evidence Informed Improvement;
  - Planning, collecting, and analyzing evidence that promotes meaningful changes in programs and processes;
  - 21st Century data management utilizing the LiveText product.
- Effectiveness;
  - Collection of meaningful data that have a target goal of informing actions to produce improvement;
  - Annual Data Day and Program Review;

- Current Accreditations : NCATE / CAEP, SACS, TEA.
- Invests Stakeholders;
  - Partner Schools across TX;
  - Educator Preparation Advisory Council/Program Advisory Boards.
- Invests Faculty and Staff in the Process;
  - Movement away compliance and toward a focus on effectiveness;
  - Faculty and staff central to the work of specific initiatives drive those processes and practices;
  - Efficiency--Simple, manageable, flexible processes.

### CalStateTEACH

CalStateTEACH (CST), is a school-based statewide online teacher education program, that prepares teachers to use innovation, reflection, and technology for effective teaching and learning to meet the needs of all learners (Mishra, Koehler, & Henrikson, 2011). Established in 1999 by California State University (CSU), CST focuses on teacher candidates in rural, remote, and urban areas of California where other programs are not easily accessible. Teacher candidates have local field experience with CST faculty supervision and an onsite mentor in addition to online peer and faculty interactions through asynchronous online learning.

The program administrative team has a Statewide Director in the Office of the Chancellor, Regional Directors at two host CSU campus, and specialists in curriculum, technology, and systems programming. In fall 2017, CST had more than one thousand teacher candidates enrolled and faculty to serve all 58 California counties.

The goal of excellence, “Teachers who are prepared to be creative, collaborative and

reflective for California's future” is achieved by:

- Integrating technology into daily classroom routines and lessons;
- Using technology to complete academic coursework;
- Considering Brain Rules (Medina, 2014) in lesson planning;
- Providing explicit examples of Universal Design for Learning in lesson planning and teaching;
- Demonstrating reflective practice in academic work and field placement.

CST is accredited by the California Commission for Teacher Credentialing (CCTC) and gathers data for continuous improvement similar to all CSU teacher education programs. Data collected include digital candidate work artifacts with faculty comments, customized data retrieval from the program learning management system, feedback from school site partners, advisory board input, statewide credential program surveys of candidates and employers, program research studies, Teacher Performance Assessment, other CCTC required assessments, and candidate evaluation of faculty.

The CST program invests stakeholders by remaining in contact with alumni for several years after program completion, faculty collaborations with school districts, statewide CalStateTEACH advisory board meetings, conference presentations, faculty outreach sessions in all areas of the state, and administrative team contact with local school leaders. Faculty and staff are directly involved in the program improvement process through annual two-day statewide faculty development meetings, regional face to face faculty meetings, and regularly scheduled video conference meetings. The curriculum is designed by faculty committee and updated based on

current research and input from candidates, site mentors, and faculty. Data-informed decision making is critical to maintaining this effective teacher education program (Chiero, R., Tracz, S., Marshall, J., Torgerson, C. & Beare, P., 2012).

### **Texas A&M University – Commerce**

Texas A&M University-Commerce (TAMUC) began as East Texas Normal College in 1889. In 1996, the university joined the Texas A&M System and became TAMUC. This regional, state university serves over 12,000 students with its main campus in Commerce, Texas and satellite campuses in Dallas, Corsicana, Mesquite, and McKinney. Each year the College of Education and Human Services (COEHS) produces approximately 500 new teachers and 300 other educational professionals. COEHS employs its mission statement as a method to strive for high quality and to define excellence. The statement reads: COEHS “provides excellence driven programs that prepare student-scholars to become scientists, teachers, administrators, and practitioners who proactively address the transformational challenges of a complex digital environment and global society. We promote instructional engagement, responsive research, quality service, and active partnerships with external constituencies.”

The push for excellence stems, in part, from the legacy of TAMUC’s beginnings as a “normal” school. The university’s reputation of quality and success as a producer of teachers and administrators for public education still resonates significantly with the public. The mission statement also points to the need for graduates to address transformational challenges. The administration at TAMUC recently noted that it would be ideal if every employee of the university when asked what they do, would reply, “I transform the lives of students.”

Two significant facts point to excellence for COEHS.

There are currently 21 local school districts with teaching staffs comprised of more than 50% TAMUC graduates. All of those districts have recently had successful ratings from the state. Also notable, eighty-six percent of teachers produced by TAMUC are still teaching after the first five years.

COEHS invests in their stakeholders in multiple ways. The state education agency requires school district representatives meet regularly with teacher preparation faculty and staff. This serves as a venue for communication and collaboration. In addition, COEHS has recently increased collaboration with the local school district, Commerce Independent School District (CISD). This initiative is called ASPIRE (A School Partnership for Innovative, Recreation, and Education). In the first year of the ASPIRE implementation, the university and CISD have collaborated on a summer camp, ASPIRE Summer Experience, that brings elementary age students to campus for encounters with educational activities such as robots, the university radio station, and more. ASPIRE’s early efforts have also included collaboration with the local Boys and Girls Club for an after-school program, and the introduction of an AVID program at the middle school.

COEHS recognizes the need to invest in faculty and staff. The yearly planning and assessment cycle provides a platform for faculty to address program weaknesses through data collection and analysis. The college recently implemented an online database platform to enhance data collection for certification programs. Finally, the college has been conducting a pilot of several platforms for storing video of student teachers that allows collaboration with university and public school mentors.

### **Texas Woman’s University**

Texas Woman’s University is a co-educational

university in Denton, Texas, with two health science center branches in Dallas and Houston. It is one of only four other public universities that is not affiliated with any of Texas' public university systems. While males are accepted into every course of study offered at TWU, it is known as the nation's largest public university primarily for women. Denton is located at the top of the "Golden Triangle" with the Oklahoma state line 35 miles to the north, Fort Worth 35 miles to the southwest and Dallas 40 miles to the southeast. TWU's College of Professional Education (COPE) Educator Preparation Program (EPP) produces approximately 360 teachers each academic year, and these teachers predominantly serve schools in Denton, Dallas, and Fort Worth ISDs.

TWU's newly developed Strategic Plan and purpose, mission, vision, core values, and principles inform the college's definition of excellence. Moreover, TWU's COPE mission and vision instills a common understanding of excellence for the college:

- Vision: We change lives. COPE programs are the foundation on which TWU was built and form the basis for all professions. We develop leaders who advance knowledge through teaching, research, and service. Our collective work fosters thriving families, schools, and communities.
- Mission: The College of Professional Education at Texas Woman's University is committed to increasing and affirming the prestige and value of all professionals in our disciplines. Our graduates are pioneers in the fields of Teacher Education, Reading Education, Family Sciences, and Library and Information Studies who shape the future of a global society.
- We inspire a quest for life-long learning;
- We improve the quality of life for individuals in a variety of settings;

- We prepare reflective leaders and advocates for children, families, and communities. through the use of evidence-based practices and experiential learning;
- We advance knowledge through conducting and disseminating research;
- We connect diverse populations with information in accessible ways;
- We collaborate in civic engagement and service to support and strengthen communities.

Further, COPE's EPP refers to the standards and framework as outlined by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and the Association for Advancing Quality Educator Preparation (AAQEP), as a goal is to pursue national accreditation for the educator preparation program in the future. High standards and continuous improvement underscore the objectives of enhancing the quality and reputation of the college. Other programs in TWU's COPE with national accreditation include Counseling & Development, Family Therapy, and Library and Information Studies.

Currently, the COPE's EPP employs the following strategies to fulfill the university's and college's mission and to measure excellence:

- Annual Institutional Effectiveness Reports;
- Periodic Program Reviews;
- SACS Accreditation;
- TEA (State of TX) Accreditation, including associated accountability measures;
- State Reporting (ASEP, Title II);
- Performance Analysis for Colleges of Education (PACE) data;
- Course Evaluations;
- Performance Review Process.

Further, the COPE's EPP at TWU employs the following strategies to invest stakeholders:

- Advisory Councils (Internal and External);
- 40+ active Partnerships & Initiatives;
- Grants, including 4.3 million from the U.S. Department of Education.

Finally, The TWU COPE EPP employs the following strategies to invest faculty, students, and staff in the continuous improvement process:

- Enhanced Communication: Dean's Wednesday's Words Weekly Newsletter;
- Support for Advocacy Participation;
- Internal Advisory Council;
- Recognition via Awards, Grants, and Release Time;
- Student Course Evaluations;
- Peer Review within Performance Review Process.

When all is considered, excellence and quality at TWU's COPE are exemplified through the unique history and mission, underscored by the value of the EPP, and evidenced by the depth and breadth of stakeholder investment. TWU has a long history of preparing women who are leaders in the field. Teachers who complete their educator preparation at TWU have the highest retention rate in the Dallas/Fort Worth metroplex, and this legacy continues because of the investment of faculty, staff, and students as well as authentic relationships developed with community partners.

### **Conclusion and Implications**

Some commonalities as well as notable differences emerged as we examined each system's approach. Clearly, the strategies for creating and sustaining positive cultures of data-informed decision-making for continuous program improvement used by the five Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) varied,

with each taking a unique approach.

The most visible commonalities were the use of a college strategic plan to define and guide the pursuit of excellence. Additionally, each program was fully engaged in supporting faculty and staff in the process, and in exploring, creating, and utilizing mechanisms to build capacity and increase investment in the process.

Standing out as a critical difference was the variance of approaches regarding national accreditation. While all EPPs are beholden to state agencies, the necessity and value of national accreditation by agencies such as the now defunct National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (<http://ncate.org>), the Council for the Accreditation (<http://caepnet.org>), or the newly formed Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation (<https://www.aaqep.org>) is questioned by some.

Implications from examining the similarities and differences in these case studies are:

- It is critical to involve faculty and staff in defining our own excellence at the program and college levels, rather than allow accrediting bodies to do that for us;
- We can use the accreditation process as an opportunity to showcase institutionally-defined excellence;
- Defining, employing, and showcasing excellence centers on a culture that implements continuous self-assessment, motivated by improvement, not meeting accreditation demands;
- It is critical to continuously seek to empower and build capacity for faculty, students, and staff in the continuous improvement process;
- We can learn from each other new and improved ways to do this.

In summary, this examination of institutionally



defined excellence by five educator preparation programs underscores the importance of considering program faculty, staff, students, partner schools and community stakeholders in defining, creating, and sustaining excellence in educator preparation programs. If we are to have ownership as institutions over our own definition of excellence, advocacy participation is an urgent cause to consider.

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