I come from a university setting. Following a career as a teacher, school principal, and local district superintendent, I was a university professor of education. I’ve been serving as Illinois’s state superintendent of education and will soon be shifting gears once again to go back to the academy, this time as a university president. So though I may lack in some of the more scholarly background in this area, I have been privy to much of the conversation that’s taken place around this topic.

Where are we going with departments, schools, and colleges of education in the future? Those who follow administrator preparation may know about Arthur Levine’s 2005 report on how educational administration is the weakest program our graduate schools offer. Levine’s findings led to a commission study in Illinois, amid much wailing and gnashing of teeth. Teacher education is now going through a similar process, given Levine’s latest study—taken to be the seminal work in this area (2006). Levine painted teacher preparation as a troubled field, one in which a majority of aspiring teachers are educated in low-quality programs that do not sufficiently prepare them for the classroom. He used the terms “unruly” and “chaotic,” referring to our programs as “wild west towns,” with no standard approach to preparing educators. According to Levine, universities that produce a majority of teacher graduates have lower admission standards, professors with lesser credentials, and fewer resources, and produce graduates who are less effective in the classroom. It’s not my purpose to dissect these findings or to give more or less credence to Levine than the report deserves, but I want to use it as a stepping-off point to share some of my thinking about where teacher education and schools of education are going in the future. Let me start out by saying that I do believe that what we’ll have in the future for teacher preparation is going to look very different from what the traditional models of university-based teacher preparation look like.

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Current Challenges

We’re currently facing a very contradictory set of pressures, one of which is the ratcheting up of traditional teacher preparation: more requirements, more demands, more “help” by state legislators and others about what teacher preparation should look like; it’s becoming almost overly prescriptive. The other pressure has to do with deregulation and claims that anyone can get in the game of teacher preparation, that the notion of a set of providers for educator preparation should be wide and expansive and open to anyone who chooses to be part of this business. This really comes down to the notion of teaching as a profession, something that embodies a set of learned skills, a body of knowledge—something that defines us as a profession rather than a craft. I’ve had the opportunity to meet with a lot of university presidents around the country, many of whom didn’t come out of colleges of education, so they have a very colored view about what their schools and colleges of education contribute to their campus as a whole. From my view as a university professor and state superintendent, it’s not so much the model that we end up following for our colleges and schools of education that’s important but how much these administrators can anchor themselves to this professional view of education, because if we abandon that, we open the door to the idea that anybody can be a teacher, and thus the idea that if anyone can be a teacher, then anyone can get in the game of preparation.

Harold Hodgkinson—a great demographer who has done some writing in this area for the Institute for Educational Leadership—talked about how accountability moves down the food chain. We’ve seen this press for accountability across the states move to K–12 education, and to define accountability, we now need a score, a test, and we’ve responded to those demands. Whether we like it or not, accountability has been translated into a test score, and that’s how we’re having to address it and deal with it. So the push for accountability at K–12 is going to move up the food chain, causing those of us in teacher education to be tied to the same set of scores, and then the question is going to be, How do the teachers coming out of our programs move the needle on these K–12 scores? And as accountability has become the coin of the realm for K–12 education, it will likely move to the coin of the realm for judging how our schools of education in the future do. I think that’s unfortunate, but I believe it’s here. What does this mean, then, when we talk about how to reengineer teacher education? What can we do now to respond to this demand that is not going away?
Revamping Educator Preparation

While I reject a great deal of Levine’s recommendations, part of his role as education gadfly is to paint a more critical picture than actually exists to create a clarion call for change. That’s clearly what he did in the administrator’s study. By pushing the conversation a bit further than it needed to go, he ensured that it would get people talking. But what does this mean in terms of what we should do in our schools of education? I do think there is help in Levine’s recommendations in that they open the door for things that we should be thinking about on our campuses. One recommendation that he makes is for education schools to be transformed from ivory towers into professional schools focused on classroom practice. I wholly support this. There is a professional body of knowledge in teacher education about what works on the utilitarian side, based on the notion of what classroom transactions make a difference for student learning. My sense is that we’re pulling away from this. We have classroom practices that are as proven as many current medical treatments. The research is there and we keep wanting to move away from that to talk about the social context of schooling, to talk about a whole set of issues focused around such things as race, class, and gender; while these things are important, they cannot take the place of what we know works in the preparation of educators.

Another of Levine’s recommendations is the focus on student achievement as a primary measure of teacher education. I agree that looking at student outcomes has to be part of it, but we need to find the perfect mix of inputs and outputs to help us measure the efficacy of our programs. Only having that one student outcome measure turns education into nothing more than training, and we know that education is so much more than that in developing our students, in preparing them for what life has in store—not just the next academic task.

Levine talks about rebuilding teacher education programs around the skills and knowledge that promote classroom learning. We need to look at the knowledge base of the field. Among the disciplines, we take a hit in the research that we do in education. I find myself gritting my teeth when I read some of the things coming out of the United States Department of Education and the Institute of Education Sciences. We are constantly hearing about the scientifically based methods that we have to use, but some of what passes for research in our field is astounding. We need to look at relevance in terms of finding the things that work in our classrooms and then making sure that these things are infused in our teacher education curriculum. We’re being more responsive to this, but to the extent that we rely too much on just one set of general dispositions to define teaching, we do ourselves a disservice. If we define teaching by one set of dispositions, then
indeed anybody can be a teacher—we’d just need to gather up those folks and put them in classrooms. There has to be more extensive research into the science of teaching to ensure that we are giving it its due and attracting those who really belong in the profession.

Levine talks about establishing effective mechanisms for teacher education quality control. As tough as it is, there needs to be a culling out of some of the weak programs in the state. In Illinois, state teacher certification board members would be coming out of the woodwork if we started to question whether all of our programs should be in business, but we really need to do this: to look at admissions, to look at transitions in teacher preparation, to look at exit points. By comparison, let’s look for a moment at physician’s-assistant education. Education for physician’s assistants covers nursing education, medical education, and other fields, and there are various points along the way for faculty members to make a decision about candidates—Should this person stay in this program?—and that’s after a very rigorous selection process. We need to start doing something similar in teacher education because my fellow presidents are using these programs as cash cows and letting everyone sign up. Of course there’s a great demand to have these people in the pipeline, but rather than just collecting bodies, we need to look at making these programs about the business of training teaching professionals.

I don’t look to NCATE or TEAC or any accreditation organization to help us get there. They can be a good lever for change, but we need to do a lot of this work ourselves. Teaching is a profession, which means that it embraces a body of content knowledge that is above and beyond just one set of dispositions. As we build on that, we’re going to see all kinds of innovations, including online teacher preparation. Store-front organizations will get into the act, as will professional organizations over time. I’m not as worried about the model of delivery, but to the extent that we start to abandon the professional skill base that we have—the content, the technical knowledge, that tells us what effective teaching is—I think we go down a path that allows anyone to call him- or herself a teacher, and when that happens, it will mirror the array of delivery services that we now see in K–12 and not get us where we need to be.

References
