Prepared to make a difference

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Research Finding

Teacher educators engage preservice teachers with a comprehensive curriculum and guide them toward the development of a cohesive knowledge base for effective teacher decision making.

“The Hunter College teachers are so well prepared. Teachers from other schools can espouse the philosophy, but it’s the implementation that they have the trouble with.”

~A principal in a New York City public school

Of all the criticisms aimed at reading teacher education, the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation in Reading Instruction believes that concerns about the lack of comprehensive content about reading are mostly deserved.

Professional knowledge is a crucial component of all of the exemplary programs in the Commission study. The Commission examined program content by analyzing course syllabi from each site and comparing them to the Standards for Reading Professionals, published in 1998 by the International Reading Association and revised in 2003. From this analysis, the Commission found that all the sites emphasize specific, research-
based content about reading—and, notably, they give students many opportunities to apply this knowledge. All the sites give prominent, extensive coverage to these key topics:

• early literacy, including oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, and word identification;
• fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension;
• assessing all aspects of literacy learning; and
• organizing and managing literacy instruction across grade levels.

For each of these topics, students participate in field experiences that highlight the different aspects of literacy they are studying. These experiences become more sophisticated and demanding as students move through the program, acquiring more extensive knowledge as they progress. Through this developing range of knowledge and skills, students have opportunities to practice assessing student needs and planning, organizing, and managing lessons for early literacy learning, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension.

“\textbf{My students will understand and be prepared to teach reading and writing. They will have a basic understanding of routines, structure, content, and curriculum. They will be prepared to launch and teach an early reading and writing program.}”

\textit{–A faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin}

\textbf{BEYOND “DELIVERING” INFORMATION}

The Commission programs indicate that excellence goes beyond “delivering” content in courses and evaluating student learning with tests. These programs adopt a pedagogy that engages students in learning how to transform knowledge into action—that is, students must be able to manipulate and make decisions about knowledge to fit the needs of particular students or situations.

To accomplish this, the Commission programs organize “pieces” of knowledge into broad principles that faculty and students revisit again and again throughout the program. These broad principles—such as assessment-driven instruction, responsive adaptive teaching, explicit instruction, and modeling—make real the connections between content knowledge and classroom skills. For example, undergraduates learn about phonemic awareness by developing knowledge and skills in these areas:

• a set of conceptual understandings about the foundations of language development,
• proficiency with a set of formal and informal assessment tools to determine students’ strengths and weaknesses, and
• expertise with materials and instructional strategies that can be used to help different students in different situations.

This kind of principled approach to developing content knowledge calls for revisiting important topics repeatedly and building a depth of knowledge along the way.
Hunter College in New York City does not offer a major in education. Instead, education students declare a collateral major in a liberal arts discipline. The School of Education aligns the curriculum and field experiences for its reading teacher preparation program with the International Reading Association’s Standards for Reading Professionals.

Typical students in the reading preparation program take a four-semester sequence of courses in their junior and senior years, with extensive field experiences related to every course. In the first semester, students are introduced to foundational theories and knowledge about the processes of reading; the interrelation of goals, instruction, and assessment; principles of instruction; and the creation of a literate environment. In the second semester, students learn about children’s literature, reading and writing across the curriculum, and integrating themes for focused study. There is continuing emphasis on the processes of reading and writing and the importance of reading and writing for meaning. In the third semester, students pursue studies in educational psychology and mathematics methodology.

In the fourth semester, students take a second reading course that deepens their understanding of theories and knowledge. They explore issues of assessment, identification of reading difficulties, phonics strategies for word identification, vocabulary, and comprehension development. They also investigate technology, trade books, and basal and packaged reading instruction programs. Throughout this sequence of courses and fieldwork, students continue to take liberal arts courses in their major, plus courses such as technology in education, visual arts, music, and social foundations of education.

The University of Nevada at Reno carefully aligns the curriculum and field experiences for its reading teacher preparation program with the International Reading Association’s Standards for Reading Professionals. Further, the College of Education collaborates with the university’s Colleges of Arts and Sciences—where future teachers are expected to take courses in such content areas as English, math, and science—to help students develop content knowledge in other academic disciplines and connect it to effective reading instruction.
No Commission program works from content descriptions that are “competency-based” or rely heavily on “coverage of content” or “delivery” of content in lectures. These approaches do not promote engagement in any deep sense of learning or prepare students to use, adapt, and transform professional knowledge into the many challenging—and unconventional—situations they will face in classrooms.

Reading teacher preparation programs may need a careful study and coordination of the topics covered by faculty in the course sequence. Several Commission sites had done just that, systematically developing comprehensive matrices that spell out the content covered in each course. Moreover, this kind of study of the program curriculum with standards for reading teacher professionals is not a one-time event but, rather, an ongoing process that involves a continual dialogue among faculty members.

Additionally, to develop a depth of content knowledge, students may need to spend more time in courses dedicated to reading. Indeed, the Commission sites report that student requirements for semester hours in reading courses are above the U.S. average, which is six hours, and the minimum requirements of many state certification programs. Still, although content is critical, the simple solution of mandating more credit hours or courses in reading will not move programs as far as they need to go in preparing excellent reading teachers. Worse, more “seat time” alone may divert attention from all the other critical features essential to an effective program. Excellence in teacher education is not confined to courses taken in random sequence.

“I found that when I started out, the research that I was taught was very current. Other people who graduated at the same time as me from other schools—they weren’t learning that current research.”

—A beginning teacher who is a graduate of the University of Sioux Falls
early every research study that examines teacher preparation emphasizes the importance of student teaching and other field-based experiences. The assumed value of field teaching is that it gives undergraduates practical experience using their newly acquired knowledge and skills. The reality, however, is far different. The research literature finds that placing students with ineffective models often leads students to ignore the content and strategies presented in their teacher preparation program—substituting instead the practices they observe.

The exemplary programs in the study by the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction seem to take this contradiction between the

Teacher educators engage their preservice teachers in a variety of course-related field experiences in which they have opportunities to interact with excellent models and mentors.

“The fieldwork is so important. You can learn it, you can hear it, you can read it, but if you aren’t experiencing it, it’s not going to be the same.... You have to really be doing it to understand it and really get it.”

—A beginning teacher who is a graduate of Hunter College
perceived value and the reality of field experiences as a cautionary tale. The leaders of these programs clearly believe that field experiences with excellent models and mentors are absolutely critical to developing expertise in their future teachers—so they don’t leave them to chance.

Instead, these programs carefully arrange not just student teaching, but a wide range of hands-on field experiences in literacy, including tutoring, diagnostic assessments, and small-group and whole-class instruction. Moreover, while student teaching is the capstone experience in all the Commission programs, it is never the first field experience. At one site, for example, undergraduates experienced more than 400 hours of supervised field work before their student teaching semester. At another site, every reading course has a required field component.

The Commission discovered that the exemplary programs use four strategies to make sure that field experiences contribute to developing effective reading teachers. The strategies outlined here for excellent models and mentors, careful links between program content and practical experience, and a variety of experiences demonstrate why the Commission labels them “apprenticeships.”

Field experiences place undergraduates in contact with classroom teachers who serve as excellent models of the vision and teaching philosophy of the reading teacher education program. For this to happen, the Commission programs are actively involved in placing students in their field experiences. They view it as too risky simply to turn over this responsibility to a placement office or a school district official. The teacher educators responsible for the program must be involved to make sure that classroom teachers share the program’s vision and teaching philosophy—and can model effective teaching practices for undergraduates.

There is no single formula for solving the challenge of placements and clinical experiences. Indeed, each Commission site seems to address this challenge in a different way; some are more successful than others. All sites, however, recognize that placement should be deliberate, not haphazard.

In some sites, teacher educators take an active role in placing students with teachers they know are excellent mentors and models. Some teacher educators work actively with field or institutional faculty to develop their expertise as models and mentors. Other sites actively recruit teachers who are program graduates.

“One of the biggest turnarounds for our program came when I started taking personal responsibility for choosing the cooperating teachers carefully—I knew what we wanted our students to see, and now I don’t leave it up to chance. I choose their teacher, and we follow the teacher.”

–A faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin
Apprenticeship in Action

At Indiana University in Bloomington, undergraduates conduct reading and writing conferences with children at three different local schools (a K–2 school, a K–6 school, and a 3–6 school) as part of an inquiry-based learning approach. With modeling and mentoring assistance, students are encouraged to “see what’s there” with each child and reflect on what the child is able to do. Then students determine “best next steps” for each child.

At Florida International University, undergraduates learn about a writing process in class and then take a group of children through the process in a field experience. Part of this includes writing conferences at which student teachers and children meet with parents to discuss the writing process and share written work. The cooperating teacher sits in on the conferences and provides feedback. This field experience helps undergraduates build an understanding of family and school literacy.

All field experiences incorporate active mentoring and supervision. No matter how good they are at teaching, not all classroom teachers are excellent mentors. Effective mentoring entails careful observation, honest critiquing, sustained support, clear communications, and meaningful guidance. Clearly, mentoring by classroom teachers is critical to undergraduates’ growth and development as reading teachers. Many Commission programs work actively to develop the mentoring skills of cooperating teachers.

Moreover, many college- or university-based teacher educators at the Commission sites serve as mentors themselves. They believe effective mentoring during field experiences comes from many sources. Sometimes, such as when undergraduates are tutoring individual students in reading, teacher educators serve as the primary mentors.
The specific teaching activities expected in field experiences match up well with the content of the courses. In the Commission programs, field experiences are crafted and supervised carefully so that undergraduates can experience course content as it happens in classrooms. This means more than handing out assignments for which students are required to go out into classrooms and report back on what happened. For example, students taking a course in comprehension instruction will tutor children to improve their reading comprehension using strategies they have just learned. Their teacher educator will comment on their practical experiences as they reflect course content.

Apprenticeship experiences vary the contexts and roles in which undergraduates learn. The Commission programs offer extensive field experiences, a finding that honors the call in teacher education literature for more and earlier field experiences. The most prominent context for field experiences—and the one most valued by students and teacher educators alike—is the classroom. Some Commission programs stress extended placements (a full year in the same classroom), while others offer a variety of field experiences at many grade levels. Some Commission sites rely on professional development schools for placing students with good models. The second prominent context for field experiences is tutoring elementary students; almost all sites offered some significant and carefully supervised tutorials in public schools or university clinics. Some programs required literacy tutoring for adults in community programs.

“I value the practicum that I had with [two teachers] because they were using the strategies I was learning, and that was very helpful. Just being able to observe how the strategies were being used and also having the opportunity to try them….I probably wouldn’t have used some of them otherwise.”

—A beginning teacher who is a graduate of the University of Sioux Falls
Teacher educators center their program around a vision of literacy, quality teaching, and quality teacher education.

“We want teachers to be skilled, strategic, purposeful, reflective, creative, responsive, innovative—all of these are what we envision good teaching is....”

—A faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin

Good reading teacher education programs take on a character of their own—a conscious, underlying vision of the purpose, goals, and philosophy of literacy; quality teaching; and quality teacher education. The educators in these programs know what they are about. They actively contemplate and plan for what they will become.

The vision infuses the content, pedagogy, and decisions of the program. It is embedded in the thinking, actions, and expectations of the program’s administrators, faculty, and students—and often extends beyond them into the community.
Each of the exemplary programs in the study by the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction reflects a set of values that provides not only direction, but also passion and energy to help educators maintain their focus in the face of many pressures. In on-site interviews with program faculty, their vision of literacy, quality teaching, and quality teacher education was a palpable, driving force.

A COHERENT UNDERSTANDING OF LITERACY AND QUALITY TEACHING

No single vision guided all the programs. Nor is there any “right” vision. The point is that exemplary programs actually have a vision of literacy, quality teaching, and quality teacher preparation. Although many of the programs share some common curricular features and operate from similar sources of professional knowledge, their vision is highly idiosyncratic. For example, several of the programs emphasize their vision as an inquiry-based approach to curriculum, instruction, and professional development. In at least two programs, the vision focuses on teaching as a cultural practice in which there is a coherent effort to build on the child's culture, language, and heritage to connect with the community. Another program’s vision centers on the view of the teacher as a “servant leader,” with service to students, families, and the community represented in every course, activity, and discussion about teaching. Often, program educators describe their vision in terms of:

• themes, such as “teaching against the grain”;
• principles, such as “building on success” or “valuing the learner”; or
• metaphors, such as “the servant leader” or “the caring classroom.”

These phrases capture not only the vision of an “ideal” classroom, but also the message that the entire program should embody and communicate. In fact, there is an astonishing consistency of vision and message in the exemplary programs that is inherent in every course, shared among the faculty, and built into teaching and learning experiences throughout the program. Undergraduate students are not left to “make sense” of competing visions. Instead, they develop a coherent understanding of literacy and quality literacy teaching that they take with them into the workplace.

Further, while vision clearly focuses on achieving noble goals, it is not lofty or esoteric. Each of the Commission sites is driven by a strong concept of the nature of literacy and good literacy instruction that springs from research and reality. Students don’t say, “You’re up there in your ivory tower telling us about stuff that has
Vision in Action

The University of Texas at Austin envisions program graduates who will teach “against the grain.” “We teach our students that the best way to teach reading is the way that promotes the greatest growth,” a program leader states. This entails a continual quest for knowledge and skills about reading and teaching—and the ability to use them despite the challenges teachers face in schools and classrooms.

Indiana University at Bloomington and Indianapolis holds a vision of creating a child-centered learning environment in which “children can pursue their own interests” with “countless options and choices as to what they feel is important and necessary to learn.” This vision emphasizes the social and personal nature of learning. Teachers are expected to develop the knowledge and skills they need to be advocates and leaders in promoting students’ opportunities to learn.

Norfolk State University in Virginia prepares teachers to teach in schools characterized by poverty and cultural change. The children in these schools often struggle to learn. Norfolk State’s reading teacher preparation program is driven by a “no excuses” vision. That is, teachers will not use students’ poverty, family background, or cultural heritage as an excuse for not teaching them to read. To the contrary, these conditions are seen as the very reasons why a qualified reading teacher is essential.
nothing to do with the real world of classrooms.” Quite the contrary. They see the vision as a framework for dealing successfully with the reading challenges they are certain to face in classrooms. Indeed, new teachers who are graduates of exemplary programs seem to draw strength and confidence from the vision they have come to believe in.

There are two ways that vision seems to develop in quality reading teacher preparation programs. In about half the Commission programs, a critical mass of faculty collectively and collaboratively worked to shape a program vision. In the other half of the Commission programs, a single individual assumed a leadership role, infusing a personal vision of literacy, teaching, and teacher education into the program. People who work closely with these programs entered the program with a vision similar to the leader's vision, bought into the vision over time, or joined the program with an understanding that their perspectives ultimately would contribute to the vision as it evolved.

Finally, one of the qualities of an effective program vision is that it evolves and changes. Vision is, by nature, dynamic, responding to new insights from self-examination, research, and experiences—and to bolder dreams of what could be.
Virtually every large institution or organization has a mission statement. In the corporate world, mission statements may be displayed publicly so that both employees and clients understand the business focus. A mission is a statement of purpose that not only directly shapes policies but also guides resource allocation.

While it may seem obvious that mission should guide resources, this is far from the reality in many teacher education programs in the United States. More often than not, colleges of education are underfunded for the number of students they serve. For this reason, they have long been regarded as the “cash cows” of higher education. In other words, the tuition, state funding, and special fees typically generate income for the institution that exceeds the funds budgeted to support its teacher preparation programs. The excess funds are redirected to other programs and away from teacher preparation.

Research Finding

The teacher education program has sufficient resources (intellectual, financial, and professional) to support the mission for quality teacher preparation.

“If we want field-based courses to be effective, we have to keep the number of students enrolled in them small, and they’re just going to have to give us more support for that.”

–A faculty member at the University of Texas at San Antonio
Whether this reallocation is divisive and conscious or just the result of tradition, the result is the same. Teacher education programs are left to act on the mission of quality teacher preparation with limited financial resources. They must cut corners—and the quality of the program often is compromised. Educational facilities often are poor compared to other colleges and departments. Facilities that offer direct access to students (such as laboratory schools or clinics) have practically disappeared. Facilities and resources in public schools are used instead—but rarely does the institution compensate these schools. Class sizes in teacher preparation programs typically are larger than those in most other professional programs. Salaries of teacher education faculty are low, and teaching loads are high, compared to other colleges and departments. And finally, adjuncts, part-time faculty, or even graduate students, rather than tenure-track faculty, teach a substantial number of teacher education courses. It is not unusual to find teacher education programs in which adjunct faculty or graduate students teach 70 percent or more of the courses. In what other college or department within a university would adjunct faculty be allowed to teach so many upper-level courses? The answer is none. But this has become acceptable in teacher education programs.

It doesn’t have to be this way, the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction discovered. While there is great variety in the exemplary programs in the Commission study, all eight have reasonable support to accomplish their mission. Indeed, adequate resources likely are a significant reason for the programs’ solid achievement in preparing future reading teachers effectively. Moreover, every program assumes an active role in deciding how to make the best use of its funding and other resources. This is true in flagship state universities with large endowments, in smaller programs with moderate resources, and in programs that have a special focus, such as preparing teachers for urban schools or for language minority teaching.

**Three Principles for Connecting Resources to Mission**

Resources are scarce. Reading teacher education programs in the United States need resources to be effective. The programs—and their colleges and universities—need a focused strategy for connecting...
Mission and Resources in Action

The University of Sioux Falls in South Dakota is a Christian liberal arts college that has a mission of “culture for service.” The department of education takes that mission further with its specific mission of “servant leadership,” which embraces the concept of affecting society by serving and leading people. The university supports this mission by evaluating, promoting, and awarding tenure to faculty members based primarily on their teaching and service to the community. While research is valued and reviewed, there is no “publish or perish” mindset in this university. The department of education recognizes faculty service to students; to others in the university; and to local, state, regional, and national professional organizations.

Norfolk State University runs a Reading Partners’ Clinic for K–6 children. Undergraduates can screen and test children and observe tutoring by graduate students at the university. Undergraduates also can participate in special reading programs sponsored by the clinic, such as Read Across America and parent workshops. Students participate in the America Reads Challenge Project and the Reading Is Fundamental Free Book Distribution Project, projects sponsored by the university because they support the reading teacher preparation program.

Hunter College limits class size to reflect the resources available to the teacher education program.

the institutional mission of preparing quality teachers to resource allocation.

Three principles seem to work together to enable the Commission sites to ensure program quality:

1. Reading teacher preparation programs advocate for fair funding and a fair share of the tuition, state funding, and special fees that their students generate.

2. The faculty leaders of reading teacher preparation programs take an active role in modifying the programs to match allocations, leveraging additional needed resources from the funding source, and making creative use of the resources available to maintain program quality.

3. The faculty leaders specifically target resources to support the enhancement of the critical features of exemplary reading teacher preparation programs highlighted in this publication.
Here are specific ways that resources reflect the mission in various Commission sites:

**Faculty resources and support.** Tenure-track faculty members assume the primary responsibility for teaching program courses and supervising field teaching experiences in most Commission sites. Salaries for these faculty members are commensurate with the salaries of other faculty in the college or university. Teaching loads take into account that teaching courses in the field and working with undergraduates in classrooms is time-consuming. The program also supports professional development, such as attending conferences, for faculty members.

**Preparation and experience.** The majority of faculty members hold doctoral degrees in reading, language arts, or a closely related field. They also have classroom teaching experience as well as specific experience in teaching reading, such as working as reading specialists or curriculum supervisors.

**Promotion and tenure.** Expectations for faculty research and publications are realistic and supported. Tenure and promotion criteria take into account the work of teaching educators in the field.

**Leadership.** Faculty leaders are recognized, valued, and supported. They are responsible for program innovation, monitoring, and evaluation—and they have discretionary control over at least a portion of the budget so they can respond to needs and opportunities.

**Clinical faculty.** Classroom teachers are recognized, valued, and supported in tangible ways for their contributions to the program. In some Commission sites, this support takes the form of direct financial stipends to classroom teachers. Other programs offer free tuition or tuition reimbursement to classroom teachers.

**Class size.** The faculty-to-student ratios are realistic for the demands of the program, especially in courses with heavy field-based experiences that require direct observation and meaningful feedback for students.

**Program size.** The funding for the program reflects both fixed and variable costs. In some Commission sites, the number of students admitted to the program is limited to reflect the resources available.

**Physical space and materials.** Resources that support student learning—such as space for clinics for supervised teaching experiences and technology, trade books, and assessment materials—are provided. The program has the resources to lease or use space in public schools for teacher education courses.
Educators recognize that U.S. classrooms are becoming increasingly diverse, and demographic projections anticipate accelerating diversity for the foreseeable future. Classroom teachers see student differences in academic skill levels, English and native language competence, learning styles, and background and cultural experiences. In schools today, these differences are the norm, not the exception. Effective teachers must respect and respond to these differences to help children learn to read and write well in English, which remains the language of opportunity and commerce in the United States.

The National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction found that exemplary programs are preparing future reading teachers for the differences and diversity they will encounter in classrooms. They do this by modeling the values and behaviors they expect their students to learn, both on campus and in classroom field experiences.

**Research Finding**

*Teacher educators value diversity and are prepared to offer their preservice students responsive teaching and an adapted curriculum.*

“We treat our students as we expect them to treat their children—as individuals with needs and expectations.”

—A faculty member at the University of Sioux Falls
Of all the features of excellent reading teacher preparation programs, the Commission found that this one was the most difficult to label. For a time, “cultural diversity” seemed to fit, since the exemplary programs strive to promote a positive stance toward diversity in their undergraduate student bodies and toward the students in their cooperating schools. But this commitment to diversity is broader than cultural diversity: It’s actually a celebration of individual differences. Consequently, the Commission considered this feature for a while in terms of “responsive teaching,” for program faculty and graduates alike stress that their programs adapt and respond to the needs of students as individuals. But that label suggests that the programs simply react to student circumstances. It fails to capture the active strategies the Commission sites employ to value diversity and differences—and to build stronger programs because of this explicit viewpoint.

In the end, then, the Commission settled on “personalized teaching” to describe these qualities in exemplary programs:

- **recognizing student differences and diversity as strengths.** Teacher educators at the Commission sites value what each individual brings to the learning context. Just as they expect classroom teachers to find and build upon the strengths in each young reader, they work actively to find the strengths in each of their undergraduate students. They are sensitive to cultural differences. This sensitivity plays out in field placements as well, where undergraduates often work in schools that serve diverse populations.

- **adapting the program to meet students’ needs.** Teacher educators in the Commission programs are willing to make changes to “business as usual” to enable their students to succeed. They model the same wide range of strategies they expect undergraduates to call on to be effective with individual students with diverse needs. In some cases, this flexibility may seem like a small thing, as in scheduling classes to accommodate nontraditional students who need to work their way through college or care for families. But to students, these kinds of changes make a major difference and allow them to persist in the program.

- **involving students in decision making.** Teacher educators in the Commission programs give students the opportunity to make significant choices about their options. For example, students in some programs help to identify schools for their field experiences,

“We have a lot of diverse students with unique experiences—coming to the United States and the community as foreigners. They know that immigrant experience, and they are successful. I want them to feel that they have something very valuable to pass on to their children. They can serve to inspire others.”

—A faculty member at Florida International University
Florida International University is located in urban, multicultural Miami. Its College of Education, like the university as a whole, prepares reading teachers to succeed in this environment. The core curriculum for the first two years at the university includes a comparative culture course. All education majors are required to take a course in teaching diverse populations. The elementary education program incorporates the teaching competencies developed by Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages. The program includes two specific classes in methods of teaching second language learners—in addition to regular literacy classes—and a class in teaching exceptional students. In these classes, undergraduates learn to modify literacy lessons for second language learners and exceptional students. Field experiences support future teachers in mastering these strategies.

Because many undergraduates themselves are nontraditional students from diverse backgrounds, the university schedules classes with morning, afternoon, and evening tracks to accommodate family and work demands. The university has the option of waiving standardized tests as an admission requirement for some students. To help students succeed, the university offers academic and personal support.

The University of Texas at San Antonio responds to student and community needs at its downtown campus and literacy center. There, the reading teacher preparation program is directly linked to schools and the predominantly Mexican American population.

The program’s vision of preparing teachers to work with a diverse population is realized in careful placement of students in field experiences, outreach to surrounding schools, and courses that address issues and topics of diversity. Faculty members work collaboratively with local schools—helping them, for example, to obtain literacy funding; conduct staff development; and design, implement, and evaluate literacy programs.
based on their own interests or convenience. In other programs, they are involved in shaping seminars around specific topics of interest. In still others, students are encouraged to engage in periodic self-evaluations, which teacher educators use to adapt the program.

By involving undergraduates, the Commission programs create a shared sense of purpose, ownership, and responsibility—the same qualities these future teachers will want to build into reader’s workshop or writer’s workshop or an inquiry-based curriculum in classrooms. The program faculties do not turn over control of the program to students, but they do encourage students to collaborate with them in shaping a program that meets students’ needs.

These qualities of personalized teaching pay off over the long term by enriching the pool of qualified reading teachers in the United States.
Teacher educators are active in adapting and negotiating with their institutions to make sure their students receive the most effective preparation possible.

“Schools say we’re not doing the things that we want them to do. We want our teachers to be instructional leaders and decision makers who are modeling good practices—beyond the script of their reading program. It is a constant tension and battle with the Department of Education.”

-A faculty member at Hunter College

In his classic study Life in Classrooms, Philip Jackson discovered that excellent classroom teachers cite autonomy as one of their most valued working principles. Outstanding teachers constantly work to adapt instruction to the needs, interests, and strengths of their students—even when school constraints push them in other directions. With creativity, flexibility, and a degree of subversion, in the positive sense of challenging their schools’ unwieldy bureaucratic rules, these teachers focus on what’s best for students. At a time when accountability measures make it tempting for teachers to conform to the system (as in, “I teach to the test because that’s what I’m required to do”), outstanding teachers act on the belief that the needs of students, not the system, come first.
The National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction discovered that autonomy is equally valued—and necessary—among faculty members at exemplary programs of reading teacher preparation. Certainly, the institutional requirements and culture in higher education may be more complex than those in K–12 schools. But teacher educators can empower themselves to act autonomously, effectively bending the rules to meet the needs of prospective teachers. The Commission sites do this in two ways:

1. **Adapting institutional constraints.** Teacher educators exercise autonomy within their college or university communities in a variety of ways, chiefly by questioning the status quo and being willing to examine alternatives that make more sense for their students. One simple but powerful example is the University of Texas at Austin program, which aligns its schedule not with the university’s, but with the local public schools’. Undergraduates in the program start their fall semester in early August, a full three weeks before the university’s fall schedule begins, because that’s when it starts at K–12 schools. Students do their field teaching full time until their university courses begin.

A subtler example of a Commission program that goes against the grain of university culture is the Indiana University at Indianapolis program, which disregards the traditional course structure. Instead, several professors teach their courses together—and give students a single grade for their work in all the courses. Their goal is to encourage students to think holistically about their learning rather than to think of courses in isolation.

The faculty members in Commission sites have a good deal of latitude and academic freedom to adjust their teaching to fit the needs of their undergraduates.

"Universities are institutions and have traditions and a culture that does not always fit well with best practices in teacher preparation. We have to be creative in the ways in which we work around university requirements in order to better meet the needs of our students. I have come to believe that most of the ‘problems’ we encounter in the university setting can be solved with a little creativity.”

—A faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin

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When the state legislature in Florida determined that a teacher education program should incorporate 120 credit hours, teacher educators at Florida International University took action. Recognizing that a 120-hour mandate would not allow them to provide a high-quality program, they successfully petitioned the legislature for a waiver that allowed them to increase their program to 125 credit hours.

When the teaching faculty at the University of Texas at San Antonio decided to create a reading center for poor children in the community around the downtown campus, they had to negotiate with public and private officials all over the city.

First, the teacher educators convinced university administrators that the plan would serve as a valuable vehicle for training prospective reading teachers. The university offered support—but no space or funding. Next, a faculty member in the reading program identified a space at the downtown campus and persuaded administrators to make it available for the reading center. Still, the space came with no funding.

Now, armed with a plan and a space, the reading faculty petitioned the administration to give a faculty member a one-semester release to implement the plan. This faculty member worked with local educators and influential people in the community to build the political will that would support the reading center—and also began soliciting reading materials from publishers. Soon, university administrators earmarked end-of-the-year budget funds to the project. Today, the reading center is an important resource for the reading teacher education program. Teacher educators keep it running by raising outside funding.
Maintaining their focus despite divergent local and state expectations. Another dimension of autonomy plays out in the ways that Commission programs hold their ground in the face of local and, sometimes, state expectations and requirements. Most of these programs are located in places where school districts and state education agencies create a myriad of specific requirements that directly affect the curriculum—from scripted reading programs to textbook selections, classroom grouping plans, and daily schedules. These kinds of decisions are to be expected in public schools.

But the programs in the Commission study resist any notion that they are responsible for training prospective students to teach only with these specific approaches, methods, or materials. They see their focus as providing undergraduates with a well-rounded education that will give them the opportunity to teach reading effectively anywhere, not just in a particular program, school district, or even state.

This autonomous stance can lead to very real tensions between reading teacher preparation programs and their communities. The Commission sites seem to understand this. They work respectfully and responsively with outside institutions to negotiate their shared goals. Their aim is not to draw lines in the sand or protect their turf, but to reach agreements that benefit both parties.

With Autonomy Comes Accountability

Autonomy is not a trivial feature of exemplary reading teacher preparation programs. Nor is it a license that means “anything goes.” Instead, teacher educators must use their autonomy to make decisions and take actions that will help their undergraduate students, much as doctors and lawyers use their professional expertise to represent the best interests of patients and clients. Indeed, autonomy is a signal of teaching professionalism. With this power, however, also come responsibility and accountability. Teacher educators must be held accountable for meeting students’ needs, focusing on the content and instructional practices that support effective teaching, and applying strict standards for evaluating the knowledge and performance of students who are about to enter the teaching profession.

Finally, autonomy does not imply dictatorship or a “closed-door” mentality. Both within and outside the institutional setting, teacher educators must work collaboratively with colleagues, administrators, and local and state educators to negotiate the changes they believe in.
Teacher educators work to create an active learning community that includes the faculty, their students, and mentor teachers.

“I think the way our program was set up, with a cohort for collaboration as a learning community, was something I’ve found of huge value now that I’ve become a teacher. I’m in constant contact with them, and we still talk and plan and share and commiserate.”

—A beginning teacher who is a graduate of Indiana University

Quality reading teacher preparation requires more than a program that is the sum of its courses, with teacher educators merely delivering course content. The faculties in the exemplary programs in the study of the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction work purposefully to create communities of learners for students, professors, and, in some cases, program graduates, cooperating classroom teachers, and other educators in community schools. In fact, faculty members and program graduates alike value the learning communities because they enhance the development of content knowledge.
In its study, the Commission discovered six properties that define an effective community of learners at the participating programs:

- small in size, usually consisting of 20 to 30 students and the faculty members who work with that group;
- long term, in that the group stays together throughout the reading teacher preparation program;
- charged with the pursuit of intellectual goals, with social benefits as a secondary function;
- collaborative, not competitive;
- democratic, with everyone participating on an equal footing; and
- collective, in that the community works together over time, rather than working in isolation from one semester to the next.

Together, these properties result in communities characterized by a distinct cohesiveness at the Commission sites. Prospective teachers and their teacher educators exhibit an identity from which they construct a shared standard of excellence for reading teacher professionals.

In the short term, learning communities enrich students' understanding of literacy, give students support, and create a forum for faculty members to interact with students. But there are substantial long-term benefits as well. Research shows that collaboration is one of the most powerful forms of professional development for teachers. The Commission programs incorporate this research into their programs by creating communities designed to model professional inquiry, collaboration, and collegiality for undergraduates. These programs take the view that collaboration is a skill that students must develop before they enter the teaching profession. In so doing, these programs are helping to banish the unfortunate stereotype of lone teachers holed up in their classrooms—having no interaction with other professionals to fortify their instructional practices.

Undergraduates develop their sense of identity as teachers in communities of learners as well. They learn the social norms, customs, values, and dispositions that characterize this identity through active participation in a community of teachers and learners. This identity cannot be “transmitted” in a course or through a diploma or even through a teaching contract or certificate. In Commission programs, participating in a learning community moves undergraduates along a continuum toward developing their identity—from student of teaching to teacher of students.

“We attempt to create a virtual community that breaks down distance and time, where students are constantly interacting even though they are physically distant...constructing meaning out of multiple content...where there is constant access to faculty and graduate assistants, where they know they can always find each other.”

—A faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin

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Community in Action

The University of Texas at Austin and Indiana University at Indianapolis employ a cohort model in which groups of students progress with the same faculty director or team throughout the program. Cohorts are not new to education, of course. But Commission programs group students purposefully, not simply to accommodate schedules. Some programs arrange their cohorts by theme, such as a cohort focused on principles of multicultural education. Others arrange cohorts focused on teaching for early childhood or middle school learners. The idea is to group together students with common professional goals.

A second strategy for developing community is to center it at the local school or professional development site where undergraduates have their field experiences. Indiana University at Bloomington and Indianapolis and the University of Texas at Austin extend the community to include not only students and faculty members, but also cooperating teachers and other educators at the school. Norfolk State University extends the community further to include work with families and the broader social institutions of the neighborhood. At Florida International University and Indiana University at Bloomington, the program director works with classroom mentor teachers on inquiry projects focused on their own classrooms and teaching.

The University of Texas at Austin employs a third strategy for building community—technology. This program uses a sophisticated electronic system for messaging, posting, and real-time conversations. Undergraduates receive laptop computers (on a free loaner basis) to encourage them to participate in this community—a lively medium also used by faculty members, mentor teachers, and program graduates. Students learn to use technology that can directly support their future teaching, and they build connections to others who share their goals and purposes.

Finally, Indiana University at Indianapolis builds community with an ambitious strategy—basing the teacher development program at a local school. The program faculty takes responsibility for both undergraduate teacher preparation and the entire professional development program within the school. The director of the teacher education program takes a central and active role in managing the school. This school is reminiscent of a university “lab school,” but it is in fact a neighborhood school that serves students from economically distressed families.
Creating Communities That Fit the Program

Creating small communities of learners can be a major challenge in teacher education—but the Commission programs manage the work admirably, tailoring their communities to their particular situations. For example, at the University of Sioux Falls, a small, religiously affiliated program where everyone is on a first-name basis, community “happens” because of the size and shared beliefs and values of the institution. Still, this site works actively to build a learning community focused on teaching. Larger programs must work harder to build community. (For examples of their strategies, see Community in Action.)

The path to teaching can be a lonely one, replete with intense demands, enlightening discoveries, buoyant successes, and dismal failures. Having a thoughtful community of like-minded peers and mentors with whom to share these experiences keeps undergraduates in exemplary programs on track.
Teacher educators continually assess their students, their program, their graduates, and themselves to guide instructional decision making and program development.

“Our program is changing constantly based on what we are learning from our experience with teacher preparation. Participation in the Commission study has made us even more active in changing our program. We have become open to a lot more data sources, and we have become a lot more systematic about studying ourselves.”

—A faculty member at the University of Texas at San Antonio

The focus on improving student achievement in the United States has resulted in deserved calls to improve teacher quality as well. This is a positive development that the International Reading Association and the National Commission on Excellence in Elementary Teacher Preparation for Reading Instruction wholeheartedly support. Unfortunately, many teacher preparation programs and states are assessing teacher candidates in ways that ultimately fall short of their potential to dramatically affect teacher quality.
For example, some colleges and universities are instituting tougher entry requirements for candidates of teacher preparation programs. This is not a bad idea, but its execution typically is uninspired. Usually, tougher requirements are expressed only in terms of higher GPAs or higher scores on basic skills tests. Likewise, some states require prospective teachers to pass state-controlled certification tests before they are awarded a license to teach.

The absence of any evidence that these paper-and-pencil tests alone predict success in teacher preparation programs or classroom teaching has not deterred their use. One unintended consequence of using high-stakes tests to winnow the pool of prospective teachers has been to create more barriers—particularly for minorities—to entering the teaching profession. This is unfortunate, especially since minority candidates are less likely than other students to be prepared with the rigorous high school coursework they need to succeed on tests.

The exemplary programs in the Commission study are thoughtful and creative in using assessments to improve the quality of prospective students, current undergraduates, and future reading teachers. These programs pay systematic attention to assessments, using them in nontraditional ways to improve the quality of their teaching faculties and programs as well. Assessments are not used simply as barriers to hold people back, but rather as diagnostic tools to help undergraduates and their teachers get better at teaching and learning. The Commission programs typically use assessments at four critical stages:

1. **Admitting prospective students.** In keeping with the push for higher academic standards for future teachers, all the Commission sites have minimum GPAs for prospective students. Beyond this requirement, however, many of the programs rely on extensive application processes, including essays and personal interviews. These forms of assessment serve two purposes—to uncover qualities of excellence that may not be revealed in GPAs alone and to help shape programs to be responsive to student needs.

2. **Monitoring undergraduates during the program.** Like most teacher preparation programs, the Commission sites use tests and grades to assess undergraduates’ knowledge and skills in specific courses. But that’s not all. They also review their students’ progress from a more holistic point of view at critical stages, such as at the end of each semester of a two-year program, to judge their readiness for the next stage of the program. Again, these assessments serve two purposes—to screen the prospective teachers as they move toward the teaching profession and also to make adjustments and direct resources to meet particular student needs.

“I don’t think there is a perfect screen or test for program entry. We need a combination of multiple measures and a plan for continuous assessment throughout the program.”

—A faculty member at the University of Texas at Austin
Florida International University uses a continuum of assessments to ensure academic accountability—and to give students like Hortense every opportunity to succeed as a reading teacher. Hortense, a Hispanic student whose native language is Spanish, entered the reading teacher preparation program after spending three years working and earning an associate’s degree in arts at Miami-Dade Community College. Strictly by the numbers, her prospects were less than stellar. She had a GPA of 2.8, which she earned after taking the remedial reading and math classes she needed—high enough to meet the university’s GPA minimum of 2.5, but hardly extraordinary. Although she easily had passed all parts of the College Level Academic Skills Test required for students to transfer to state universities in Florida, her SAT score of 940 and ACT score of 17 put her below the university’s requirements.

Still, Hortense was determined—and FIU and the College of Education gave her assessment options that enabled her to enter the program. Among them was an essay in which she wrote, “I have set out to accomplish this goal of becoming a teacher. In order to do this, I have enrolled in several elementary education classes at FIU….I have recently applied for a substitute and teacher-aide position in order to gain more experience and knowledge.” Further, Hortense wrote movingly about her commitment to teaching and her volunteer work with children in the community.

Once admitted to FIU on a waiver, Hortense did well. Assessments helped her improve over time. Among them was a portfolio in which she collected samples to demonstrate that she had met the outcomes for each stage of her program as well as the Florida Department of Education’s 12 Education Accomplished Practices at the Preprofessional Level. These samples included lesson plans, written papers for assignments, written reflections from classroom experiences, photographs, student work samples with reflections, and audio- and videotapes of her own teaching.

Later, Hortense was paired with a mentor in FIU’s master’s program in reading education and attended graduate classes in reading instruction. She excelled in her student teaching and met state and national licensing standards.
Benchmarking undergraduate accomplishments at the end of the program. All the Commission sites use the end of the program as a critical assessment period. In some ways, these assessments serve to prepare students for demands they will face in the education job market. For example, several Commission programs require students to prepare final portfolios of their projects—a performance-based assessment that can be used for final evaluations of progress and accomplishments within the program as well as for job searches. Formal reviews at the end of student teaching also are used as a benchmark for graduation.

Evaluating recent graduates after they enter the teaching profession. Several Commission programs collect data, typically through questionnaires or telephone interviews, to evaluate their programs in light of the teaching experiences of recent graduates. Before the Commission study, though, this form of assessment clearly was underutilized. As part of the study, recent graduates at all the sites were followed carefully, using multiple interviews and observations. The power of these assessments became clear to faculty members, who used the data to reflect on their own programs. In fact, one of the sites, the University of Texas at San Antonio, is revising its elementary teacher preparation program based on this data.

Finally, research is a critical component of exemplary programs. Faculty members are conducting research on educating reading teachers. They share their research publications and conference presentations with undergraduates. Together, this research and the variety of assessments instill in faculty and students a habit of inquiry: What is working? What isn’t? Why? What can we do about it? Assessment-based inquiry becomes a theme that carries forward into classroom teaching and the professional life of a teacher.

Multiple Measures of Quality

Several of the Commission programs are located in states where the teacher certification process amounts to a single, high-stakes test. Teachers who fail the test cannot earn a license to teach. Moreover, teacher preparation programs may be shut down if the passing rate for their program graduates is too low. As a result, teacher preparation programs may feel pressured to narrow their curriculum and teach to the test—just as many K–12 schools are doing to respond to high-stakes testing of their students.

The Commission programs are taking a different approach, relying on comprehensive, multiple measures to assess their students and their programs even if they must use mandated external tests. By taking this stance, these programs model for teachers the positive ways in which multiple forms of assessment, used on a continual basis, can inform program decisions and enhance teaching effectiveness.