

NIET Essay
Arizona State University

Tracking Program Completers: Changing Programs and the Field

Nationally, teacher preparation programs have long seen declining enrollment. Teachers switch careers or retire early. Around the globe, a combination of inconsistent preparation standards, attrition, and poverty reduce the efficacy of educators. The need to create high-performing education systems staffed with a high-performing professional education workforce has never been more critical. To achieve that conceptually is relatively simple but practically, it is an elusive goal, we need to understand what makes teachers succeed and what makes successful teachers persist and advance in the profession. And to do that, we need to think more deeply about how we track graduates of teacher preparation programs.

The field has long acknowledged that Educator Preparation Programs (EPPs) should track their graduates in order to understand how best to improve everything from curriculum to clinical experience and postgraduate professional support. Often driven by accreditation requirements, State guidelines, the guise of continuous improvement, and tradition, the way we have done this usually amounts to a customer satisfaction survey. EPPs ask graduates whether they think they received enough or adequate instruction in specific areas of professional practice (e.g., classroom management, to which the answer is invariably “no, I did not get enough of that.”). We tend to ask a lot of questions about ourselves: our curriculum, our programs, our instruction. This approach illuminates a lot about what graduates think about their experiences in their EPPs. It can yield insight into what they think about their current jobs. It might even generate some insight into whether or not they will remain in the profession: if they are happy, they might; if they are unhappy, they likely won't. But it doesn't tell us much about *why* they might stay in or leave the profession. And it certainly doesn't tell us much about whether they are effective teachers or which professional characteristics correlate with both instructional success and persistence in the profession.

EPPs need to keep tracking graduates. But, if we really want the results we need that point us toward meaningful programmatic and systemic improvements that empower educators and improve education systems, we need to ask better questions. We need to ask questions that reveal more than what graduates think of us (their EPPs). We need to ask questions that reveal what it is like to work as teacher in order to draw meaningful conclusions about the quality of EPPs. It's time to ask graduates about their work, their students, and their working conditions, especially as those pertain early in a teacher's career. It's also important for us to examine not just our content and courses but our systems of clinical practice and the intersections of content and practice how those systems enable structural change in schools as well. There is a need for resources that move EPP's to do more empirical research on substantive and innovative program elements.

We need to move beyond questions about whether graduates have mastered what we thought we were teaching them to questions about whether they can or cannot enact change in the schools and learning environments in which they find themselves. Questions about systems, structural change, and culture. “What if?” questions that provide us with a deeper understanding of what teachers are thinking about and what, if possible, could change so that we can begin to ensure that they have the skills needed to enact that change, ultimately changing the learning environment for all constituents.

Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College

One of the few colleges of education that excel at both educator preparation and scholarly research, the college was ranked No. 13 in the 2021 U.S. News & World Report ranking of graduate colleges of education. ASU's Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College (MLFTC) aligns its activities with the ASU Charter, which asserts a mandate to assume "fundamental responsibility for the economic, social, cultural and overall health of the communities we serve." In Fall 2020, the college enrolled over 7600 students in its campus-based, online and blended programs. In 2020–21, 1,800 MLFTC teacher candidates in undergraduate and graduate degree programs participated in professional clinical experiences in more than 14 school districts across Arizona.

Through strategic initiatives, professional learning and scholarly research, MLFTC seeks to increase the capabilities of individual educators and improve the performance of education systems. Our degree and certification programs include both bachelors and graduate programs that lead to certification. Programs include all major certification areas including elementary, secondary, special education, educating multilingual learners, early childhood education, art, music, visual impairment, etc. We have pathways from our colleges of liberal arts and engineering as well as graduate pathways to certification. Our undergraduate students are 53% White, 31% Hispanic/Latino, 4% Black, 3% Asian, 2% American Indian/Alaska Native, and 7% other. Our graduate students are 54% White, 21% Hispanic/Latino, 9% Black, 5% Asian, 1% American Indian/Alaska Native and 10% Other.

The Next Education Workforce and the Implications for Tracking Graduates

MLFTC is working with districts and schools to co-design and pilot innovative team-based classroom models that simultaneously (1) capitalize on teacher strengths and expertise by distributing the workload (i.e., roles) traditionally assumed by a single teacher among teams of educators; (2) create working conditions that will enable teachers to feel efficacious as they take on these specialized roles; (3) establish, within the specialized role structure, a career ladder for teachers; (4) support the development of MLFTC students studying to be teachers; and (5) create induction and ongoing professional development to support teachers' continuously changing needs during the implementation of the models. We are focused on creating what we call the Next Education Workforce--providing our teachers with new ways of working, thinking, and teaching. These new models break down the one teacher-one classroom model and provide teachers with a different kind of experience and level of skill (i.e. teaming, delegating, distributing expertise, high tech-high touch uses of technology, personalized learning, etc.). While we continue to provide the instructional strategies and practices that research tells us work, we are also trying to change the structure and working environment that is conducive to actually practicing them.

This fundamental shift in our teacher preparation program allows us to explore new models of teaching and learning and how these new skills prepare teacher candidates to work in these new environments. In this case, asking the same questions about practice doesn't tell us as much as actually asking questions about the learning environment and whether what we believe about changing the environment is true. Tracking our students will be imperative in order to determine if these skills and new team-based models make a difference for long term retention and engagement and whether graduates can replicate the model in learning environments in which they are ultimately hired. Only then will we know if we have been successful. In our case, want

to track our graduates because we want to know whether they can sustain the new skills they have learned; create new working conditions for themselves; thereby, change the structure of schooling in ways that create more personalized and deeper learning environments for students.

In the end, we want better tracking to validate our theory of action. In our case, accomplishing two things: (1) provide all students with deeper and personalized learning by building teams of educators with distributed expertise; and 2) empower educators by developing new opportunities for role-based specialization and advancement.

Tracking Program Completers

ASU has a unique partnership with the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) to track teacher-preparation program completers. Graduates are tracked using a teacher certification number assigned when they graduate from the university and receive institutional recommendation. Tracking of teachers in the State began as the way to fulfill the requirement of verifying highly qualified status under the No Child Left Behind Act. Coordinated state efforts to collect teacher employment data and highly qualified status began in 2007.

ADE maintains a database of information related to public schools and districts, including: name, school information, employment information, content area taught, certificate description, approved area description, endorsement description, principal information. This data is limited to in-state public schools, including public charter schools. The process is dependent on what data districts provide. For us at MLFTC, it is useful as it allows us to survey the majority of our graduates and their employers. MLFTC receives the graduate's email address, the name and address of the school in which they are teaching, their position in the school, and the name and email of the principal of the school. MLFTC has an established an MOU for data sharing which states the following:

“MLFTC seeks to better understand the quality of the educator preparation that is provided through its multiple programs. We want to know where our teacher graduates are teaching, their perceptions of the instruction they received from MLFTC now that they are professional teachers, the quality of the instruction they provide, and ultimately, the impact of our graduates on the successful learning of their students. As a first step in this longer research agenda, we are examining the retention and migration pattern of our teacher graduates within Arizona to determine the extent to which there are patterns that might provide information to improve programming in MLFTC. We survey teachers from our programs who graduated across the academic year in early childhood, elementary, special education, and secondary.”

The Beginning Teacher survey was identified as a robust instrument in the Deans for Impact Common Indicator System and is being used at multiple Educator Preparation Programs across the nation. This survey asks about: (1) how well the teacher preparation program prepared them across multiple dimensions; (2) the value of various aspects of the teacher preparation program; (3) ranking of what more they would have wanted; (4) how much opportunity they have to actually practice what they learned; (5) feedback on their school mentor teacher and university site lead; (6) job satisfaction; and (7) questions about what would improve their job satisfaction. Surveys are sent to graduates and their employers in Years 1, 3, and 5 as a link to a Qualtrics form in an email typically

targeted between spring break and the admission of the Arizona standardized tests in English Language Arts, Mathematics and Science. The Employer survey, also from the Deans for Impact Common Indicator System work is sent to principals at the same time the Beginning Teacher survey is sent to teachers. This survey asks parallel questions to the teachers' survey, querying the principal about the extent to which the teacher was prepared to address multiple teaching practices, an identification of any systematic weaknesses in teacher preparation, and asks the principal to rank the MLFTC graduate relative to other beginning teachers they have hired. When the school has hired multiple graduates from MLFTC, a teacher at the level of years of teaching (1, 3 and 5) is randomly assigned to be the focus of the principal's evaluation.

Challenges

There are still multiple challenges in tracking our graduates and eliciting powerful and useful perceptions of teacher preparation and their current working conditions. We are very fortunate to have a willing State agency partner. However, we can only track our graduates who take positions in public district and charter schools in Arizona. We cannot track our graduates who are working in private schools in Arizona or those who move out of state. We know that over the past eight years, an average of 65% of our graduates take their first teaching positions in Arizona within a year of graduating. That means that roughly a third of our graduates are taking positions outside of the state or are not entering the teaching workforce at all. The retention rates of teachers in Arizona is reflective of national rates, with a steady decline to roughly 33% of our graduates who completed their preparation in 2012 remaining in the teaching workforce in their 8th year of teaching. We don't know where these graduates have gone or what they are doing.

Our survey captures the satisfaction level of respondents. It tells us how they view their jobs and, potentially, whether or not they think they are teaching effectively. But it does not capture more objective data about whether or not they are teaching effectively. In addition, response rates to surveys have been low, and responses tend to cluster at either the low or high end of the spectrum, typical of who replies to surveys like this. We also don't have a good way to track graduates who have left teaching or who never entered teaching at all. We don't know why our graduates are leaving their positions or what sort of work and careers they take up next. We work with our alumni association as best we can but people are mobile, changing names and emails often, all of which makes tracking difficult.

The greatest challenge, however, is knowing whether we are collecting the right data, the data that will tell us not only what those who choose to respond think of their preparation experience but the data that will give us insight into how we can make our teacher-preparation programs serve our students – and ultimately their students. It will require greater resources to build the systems we need to track students across the country. We will also need to find resources for research about new models and the approaches we are hoping the next generation of educators will take. If we can't track them, we will never know and never be able to do the robust kinds of research needed to find out.

Benefits of Tracking

EPPs have always recognized the benefit of tracking our graduates. We have tried to do this for many years and those with strong State department partnerships and teacher identification systems have certainly had an advantage. We would hope that tracking would help us strengthen our

programs to a certain extent, but we also realize that in practice, a teacher's life is often very different from the one we tried to prepare them for. We need to understand what our teachers are experiencing and the wicked problems they are facing. If we want our programs to be learner centered, then we need to understand the learners, the disparities, and the struggles.

As colleges of education, we should be responsible for preparing our teacher candidates for the technical elements of their job but we also need to be responsible for how they approach problems, make decisions, work on teams, collaborate and all the other systems elements of the work. We need to follow our students to understand where the system is breaking down and how thought leadership and research can help teacher candidates navigate and change those systems. Otherwise, no matter how many courses we have in our programs, what books we use, what assignments we give, or what our clinical practice looks like, it won't matter and it won't change the teaching and learning conditions that need to change. Context matters and a one size fits all program and tweaking around the edges won't make a difference today. A teacher satisfaction survey doesn't really help us change our programs in ways that are meaningful.

Summary/Recommendation of Best Tracking Practices

Practices today need to move from impersonal to personal. Each individual has a story to tell and it will be the collection of those stories across demographics and contexts that will actually tell the real story about how teacher preparation (and leadership) programs need to change. Colleges of education with school partners need to find ways to leverage resources to change systems not just individual courses or programs. The focus needs to shift from whether teachers feel like they have all the skills to finding out which are the most important and which are missing for today's learning environments.

At the Mary Lou Fulton Teachers College, we believe that the job of an educator, as currently configured, is largely untenable. We believe there is a different way. Through deep partnerships with districts, we work toward systems-level change to create learning environments where teams of educators come together around groups of students. Ask questions about how teachers could be working together, how they can distribute expertise, how they could think differently about space, the use of substitutes, engage paraeducators and aides in new ways, and the list goes on.

We don't have the answers to these questions, it's time to rethink why we are tracking, what we are tracking, and what we need to do about it, and what is the responsibility of EPPs to inform not only their practice but the field.