

Minimum GPA Requirements for Admission to Teacher Education: Influences, Indicators, or Variables of Teacher Quality?

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Abstract

In this article, the researchers examine the use of minimum grade point average (GPA) stipulations as requirements for admission to teacher education programs. The authors cite prior research and recommend action steps for using, applying, and/or following GPA rules to address accreditation bodies and guidelines of state departments of education.

Keywords: teacher education, teacher quality, admissions requirements, grade point averages

Most state departments of education in the United States require teacher education programs to adhere to a set of guidelines on admissions to programs, yet the guidelines vary across different states. Each state is responsible for establishing the requirements for certification and credentialing (Wang, Coleman, Coley, Phelps, & the Educational Testing Service, 2003). Other countries have national education and certifications systems except for Australia whose structure is similar to the United States. In countries such as England, multiple national agencies impact the credentialing of teachers. Although guidelines vary in the United States, the requirements are similar across states due to national accreditation programs (Wang et al., 2003).

Currently, the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) serves as the primary accreditation body and professional association for the national accreditation of colleges and schools of education in the United States. Effective July 1, 2013, CAEP became the sole accreditation agency for educator preparation providers (EPPs) and programs (CAEP, 2016a; 2016b). In 2010, the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) agreed to form a new body for national accreditation of educator preparation programs, i.e. CAEP and legacy accreditation, under these original entities, ended in 2016.

In addition to updates, revisions, enhancements, and changes to the prior NCATE standards and TEAC quality principles, on August 29, 2013, CAEP adopted a set of standards for teacher education programs to obtain accreditation (CAEP, 2016b). With these standards, CAEP designated minimum requirements for *Candidate Quality, Recruitment and Selectivity* referred to as *CAEP Standard 3*. CAEP has touted all standards as “rigorous” and designed to “raise the bar for the quality of evidence” (CAEP, 2013, p. 10). Those standards include grade point average (GPA) and college readiness testing as requirements (as documented in the 2013 handbook and the 2016 version of the CAEP handbook). With Standard 3.2, CAEP (2016a) provided a target GPA of 3.00 as a required component for the average of the respective cohort of teacher candidates for an evaluation cycle:

The provider sets admissions requirements, including CAEP minimum criteria or the state’s minimum criteria, whichever are higher, and gathers data to monitor applicants and the selected pool of candidates. The provider ensures that the average grade point average of its accepted cohort of candidates meets or exceeds the CAEP minimum of 3.0, and the group average performance on nationally normed ability/achievement assessments such as ACT, SAT, or GRE:

- *is in the top 50 percent from 2016-2017;*
- *is in the top 40 percent of the distribution from 2018-2019; and*
- *is in the top 33 percent of the distribution by 2020. (p. 37)*

Furthermore, CAEP requires the EPP to report the percentage of individual students whose GPA falls below 3.0. “In addition to the mean cohort GPA, providers should report the range/standard deviation, and percentage of students below 3.0” (CAEP, 2016a, p. 38).

The Usage of GPA as a Requirement for Admission to Teacher Education

The use of GPA has been a standard requirement for teacher education program

admission varies from state-to-state. Points of entry i.e. admission to education programs vary across the country, however, there are some commonalities. Most states require the use of a minimum GPA for admission to teacher education (Wang et al., 2003).

In one state with a high population of linguistically and culturally diverse learners that includes three of the largest, public school districts in the nation, Texas has mandated a cumulative minimum GPA 3.00 overall for the entire unit cohort of an admissions cycle (Texas Secretary of State, 2016b), but currently the minimum required GPA for candidates to be admitted to teacher education is 2.50 in the state of Texas (Texas Secretary of State, 2016a). Briefly, in 2014, Texas proposed changing the undergraduate GPA for admission to teacher education to 2.75 which would have become effective September 1, 2014, but the legislature maintained the 2.50 GPA for individual teacher education candidates. For the largest and most diverse states in the nation, the admission to teacher education requirements vary greatly. Currently, this state allows exceptions below the minimum 2.50 GPA, up to 10% of the incoming class (Texas Secretary of State, 2016a). In this respect, the state of Texas allows for provider flexibility to ensure inclusion and access. However, if a program accepts too many applicants with GPAs below the 2.50 designation, they may not meet the 3.00 GPA requirement. The EPP must take proactive steps to ensure compliance.

In other states such as California, most teacher education programs admit students at the post-baccalaureate level. There is no state law requiring a minimum GPA for admission to teacher education or overall GPA cohort minimum in California. In New York, the state requires an overall average cohort GPA of 3.00, however there is no minimum admission to teacher education GPA. In Florida, this state does not have a minimum cohort average, but requires a minimum of 2.5 for admission to teacher education. On the other hand, Mississippi, one of the smaller states and one with the lowest student performance in the nation, requires a minimum GPA of 2.75 for admission to teacher education (Partlow, Spong, Brown, & Johnson, 2017).

Overall, for the past few decades, there have been many debates about the need for increasing educator preparation requirements and admission to teacher education GPA requirements based on policy, research, best practices, and or political influences. From the discussions emanating after the findings espoused in the *Murphy Report* that examined the preparation of school leaders to goals under the former presidential administration of the United States through President Obama's focus on improving teacher preparation through directives to the United States Department of Education (The White House Office of the Press Secretary, 2014), stakeholders continue to focus on defining standards and expectations for educator preparation.

Relevance and Applicability of the 3.00 GPA Rule for Teaching in 2k16 and Beyond

Greenburg, McKee, and Walsh (2013) advocate for increasing the standards for admission to teacher education and only admitting college students who graduated in the top half of their respective class. As a policy recommendation to the National Council on Teacher Quality, these authors advocate making it “tougher” for candidates to enter teacher education programs (p. 63). Greenburg et al. also emphasize the need to have higher GPA requirements, but to allow for options at the program level:

Perhaps the optimal approach—and one that NCTQ could not apply in the Teacher Prep Review because institutions could not or would not supply us with such evidence—is to

set a relatively high bar for an average GPA (3.2) and SAT/ACT score (1120/24) that the program, not the individual teacher candidates, would have to meet. (p.63)

In their analysis and compilation of teacher education research about the predictive value of admissions criteria including the use of GPA, Casey and Childs (2007b) found a weak relationship between GPA and content knowledge and GPA and readiness to learn pedagogical knowledge and skills (p. 24). Greenburg et al. (2013, p. 63) wrote, “Stronger performance on an advanced degree often compensates for low undergraduate GPAs.”

At this iteration, CAEP Standard 3.2, which includes the 3.0 GPA rule provides little to no room for individuality of the special missions or foci of the diverse teacher education entities or meeting needs of individual learners. Some institutions prepare underrepresented populations as documented in their missions or foci (United States Department of Education, 2016).

Teacher educators who are actively working to innovate, change, and/or improve teacher education, understand the needs of different learners and recognize all learning cannot be adequately measured through a GPA. Some applicants for admission to teacher education may not have reached the 3.00 (the overall minimum cohort amount), however colleges/schools of education do not teach the bulk of the courses that primarily comprise the admission to teacher education GPA, yet *we* are held responsible. Policy and lawmakers must acknowledge the content preparation for many areas of the teacher preparation tests and the courses that produce the required GPA typically occur in colleges of Arts and Sciences who teach the core curriculum (i.e. the courses in sciences, mathematics, social studies/history, English, and the arts). In reality, the whole university contributes to the quality of teacher candidates’ preparation (AACTE, 2013), yet the benchmark is placed at the admission to teacher education stage and shifted to the aegis of the colleges and schools of education with the subsequent responsibilities to manage the requirements.

Although Greenburg et al. (2013) also recommend increasing the GPA to 3.20 which is higher than the CAEP specified minimum of 3.00, these authors state:

The average needs to be high enough to provide assurance that programs are not routinely admitting candidates of low caliber, but leaves them with room for more flexibility. Going with a high average also requires regular inspection on the part of state officials to ensure that programs are not routinely dipping below the average. (p. 63)

Some EPPs that are smaller will have more difficulty in meeting the overall 3.00 GPA requirement due to enrollment numbers. Regarding pre-service teachers who will apply for admission for certification in the science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) areas, increasing the GPA may further limit candidates’ interest where there is a critical shortage. In many states, there is a critical shortage of STEM teachers (National Science + Math Initiative, 2016).

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE, 2012) has questioned the value as well as validity of test scores and GPAs as measures of teacher quality. AACTE stated:

1. The validity of high teacher selectivity is unproven (p. 1).
2. High grades and test scores do not automatically make someone a good teacher (p. 1).

3. The highest level of selective scrutiny should occur at the *completion* of the preparation program (2012, pp. 1-2).

AACTE (2012) acknowledged the greater importance of teachers being able to developmentally engage learners in content areas, whereas grades, GPAs, and college exam tests are not substantive predictors of the skill set required of teachers. Additionally, Darling-Hammond (2010) critiqued the focus on test scores and addressed the need for a “high-quality, nationally available teacher performance assessment” that actually *measures* the requisite teaching skills needed by novice teachers (p. 44). Furthermore, Darling-Hammond eloquently stated, “most are multiple choice tests of basic skills or subject matter knowledge that measure little of what candidates learn in teacher education and provide no evidence of whether they can actually teach” (p. 44). It’s necessary to move beyond basic skills tests and GPAs which only provide a snapshot of the respective student’s performance at that time. Pre-service teachers may not meet the required 3.00 GPA, but possess excellent potential for becoming great teacher education candidates and subsequently, great teachers.

For minority-serving institutions (MSIs), the new rule may impact these institutions who accept higher numbers of first generation college students and students of color who come from K-12 schools where they may have been underprepared. According to American College Testing (2012), most students of color do not meet college readiness benchmarks for all four subject areas (English, reading, mathematics, and science).

Teacher researchers recognize the value of diverse teachers of color enrolled in their programs, yet also advocate for more selectivity in selecting pre-service teachers (Partlow, et al., 2017). These authors argue that teachers of color have better perceptions of students of colors’ academic performance and behavior yet acknowledge there is no causal relationship between the teacher’s academic record and the learning growth students will need to excel. On the other hand, they also cite studies showing a positive correlation between high GPAs and teacher effectiveness. Casey and Childs (2017a) addressed the fallacy of using GPA as a requirement due to the problems with the design of the sampling population of research studies showing high GPAs teacher candidates. Typically, these programs already have a higher restricted range of GPAs related to the types students they attract which makes it harder to isolate GPA as the variable of impact.

Even the larger national and alternative programs for educator preparation programs emphasize the importance of having diverse interns/fellows and inclusivity. Both, Teach for America and The New Teacher Project (TNTP), have relatively high GPA averages for their candidates with the overall averages as 3.6 and 3.3 respectively, but TNTP admits students with a GPA as low as 2.50 (Greenburg et al., 2013).

Furthermore, the value of multilingual teacher candidates is well documented. Additionally, some researchers contend the state of Texas teacher certification process may be biased against bilingual preservice teachers because of the usage of standardized tests as certification requirements (Valdés & Figuerora, 1994). In a study comparing preservice teacher reading scores on the Gates-MacGinitie Reading Test and performance on the Texas Examination of Educator Standards® Series Pedagogy and Professional Responsibilities for Early Childhood – Grade 12 (PPR; the current teaching ability licensure exam required for all teachers certified in Texas), Ward (2005) found native English-speaking preservice teachers’ average TExES PPR scores was higher than the average score of bilingual preservice teachers whose first language was Spanish. Preservice teachers’ ethnicity and first language significantly

impacted the relationship of preservice teachers' reading abilities and teacher certification with the GMRT test scores as indicators of how Spanish first language preservice teachers perform on the PPR (Ward, 2005). Ward and Lucido (2012) document the teacher certification examination low performance as correlated with the under-development of the native language of bilingual teacher candidates.

Recommendations, Considerations, and Action Steps

Namely, as a catalyst or point of initiation for action steps, teacher educators vested and invested with ensuring quality preparation and development of future teachers) must ask rhetorically (meaning we know the answer) and literally (what should we be doing about it) -- *what is the role of the teacher preparation program to ensure pre-education majors have content knowledge, but more importantly are effective teachers?* In a state with some of the largest school districts in the nation, Swain, Horn, and Burrige (2015), acknowledge the diverse student population in Texas and recognizes the state deserves quality teachers, however they underscore the remaining work to transform the overall teacher education and preparation entity. Swain et al. wrote, "As one considers the importance of well-prepared educators in Texas, the research articulating features of exemplary teacher education programs must be correlated with educator preparation requirements for Texas" (p. 2). This message is relevant for Texas as well as the other states with diverse student learners.

Again, colleges of education do not teach the core courses and students may be transfer students who completed core courses at community colleges. With financial aid limitations and caps on the number of required degree hours set by states, students are not able to take as many refresher courses or retake courses. Some students are changing to other majors such as general studies or they may obtain a straight content degree without the certification.

The most important consideration for reconsidering CAEP Standard 3.2 with the 3.0 GPA rule relates to those individuals and EPPs who prepared current teacher candidates and pre-education majors *themselves*. The teachers who are currently employed, particularly any teacher graduating from an EPP from the inception of NCATE in 1954 and TEAC in 1997(CAEP, 2016), are the same teachers who taught current teacher education candidates and pre-education majors. Current education candidates are the former k-12 students of educators prepared in former NCATE and TEAC accredited programs. Both current teacher candidates as well as some educators currently teaching and leading in schools are the products of programs that prepared their teachers in accredited programs previously. In consideration of this piece, failure to acknowledge other options beyond GPA does not affirm the foci behind the current CAEP (2013) standards that emphasize the following premises:

- "advance the learning of all students" (pp. 14, 15, & 16);
- "provide effective instruction for all students (differentiation of instruction)" (p. 22);
- "positive impact on all students' learning" (pp. 24, 27, & 32); and
- "the development of all students" (p. 149).

These current teacher candidates and pre-education majors are the same former *all students* who would have been prepared and/or underprepared by prior teachers. Good and great teachers, at all levels, find ways to engage learners and sometimes, adjustments must be made to

teach all students through proactive steps to *reach all students*. We assert the critical dynamic/link/focus of *all CAEP standards* should focus on encouraging teacher candidates to engage and reach all students. As these educators cannot arbitrarily limit K-12 students with *one-size-fits-all* standards and models, we cannot apply this same *one-size-fits-all* premise to the teacher candidates *themselves*. From our assessment, a dichotomy exists in what is expected for today's current *all students* who are taught/will be taught by *yesterday's* former all students (today's teachers and teacher candidates) and these two expectations seem to contradict each other.

To address the question of the role of EPPs in ensuring future teachers have the requisite content knowledge on the one hand and those actions to take in the absence of effective teacher readiness on the other hand, we recommend allowing the entity to have phase programs to nurture and support those individuals interested in becoming teachers who are below the 3.00 GPA so the preparation program can help assist students who want to become teachers, improve students' study skills, and improve these students' skill sets, within a defined cycle (such as a semester). This approach requires the EPP to have a greater role in communicating with the other content area colleges (such as Arts and Sciences/ Letters and Sciences) and working with professional education student associations to have a strong system in place to cultivate effective future teachers and future teacher pipeline. EPPs are already required to monitor the percentages of candidates admitted.

During this semester of assisting with admission to teacher education readiness, the EPP can assist the students in analyzing: (a) their own cognitive processes for how they think and process information, utilizing critical thinking and learning strategies (metacognition and dynamic knowledge), (b) how they approach assignments, (c) how they reach a level of greater productivity, and (d) how they can feasibly work to meet the desired GPA entry level of 3.00. Some students require learning tools to master academic content yet did not acquire those strategies in primary or secondary education. The EPP would have to have a two stage application system for teacher education with one that students can readily enter the program if they already possess a higher 3.00 GPA, but more importantly, the constructs that align with effective teachers and a second option where students self-identify they want to become teachers at a semester or two prior to the admission to teacher education phase where they participate in what we refer to as an *admissions-readiness* phase which would address not only GPA, but *fitness for teaching* i.e. facilitating teacher readiness and effectiveness skills. The University of Texas at San Antonio (UTSA) College of Education and Human Development created and implemented a detailed and structured "Fitness to Teach Policy" designed to guide program matriculation and candidates' development as future teachers (2015). The guidelines also provide provisions, forms, and resources to address candidate difficulty and remediation. The EPP can hire effective *master teachers* from successful k-12 schools who can serve as mentors for the students and coordinators to oversee these programs.

In the *admissions-readiness* phase, candidates should complete a portfolio project to show they can write, think, have the maturity necessary to become a teacher, and the initiative and readiness to do the work to become a teacher committed to quality and helping all students learn. Currently, teacher preparation agencies use portfolios and videos including the national certification entity, the National Board of Professional Teaching Standards (NBPTS, 2016). There are additional options for verifying whether teacher candidates have the content knowledge and/or willingness to become effective teachers.

Falkenberg (2010) documented the paucity of recent literature on teacher education

admissions issues in North America. For teachers obtaining employment in the different types of school districts (rural, urban, and suburban), *have educational leaders and curriculum directors consistently noted or even examined a higher quality of teaching effectiveness related to GPA and the ability of those teachers to effectively transmit and facilitate content knowledge with the students?* As a recommendation based on our examination of the literature and understanding of the current conditions, traditional and alternative preparation program stakeholders and state departments of education should communicate and conduct action research with school district leaders and human resources directors to determine if these school leaders have assessed and observed a connection between high GPAs and effective teachers of *all* students in their respective districts (rural, urban, and/or suburban).

Whether approaching the teacher preparation piece from the research perspective or the policy perspective, and whether approaching the issues from the in-service side, university preparation program side, or the state department of education side, examining GPA, predictors of quality teaching, indicators of the ability to engage student learners, and other proven admissions criteria will benefit the pre-service teachers and K12 students. Practitioner-scholars and scholar practitioners should conduct additional correlation studies that examine the respective populations of teachers they teach and the populations they serve and the impact of GPA. EPPs need access to sources of data (about their graduates once they enter the teaching profession pertaining) to use in responsible and meaningful manners (AACTE, 2013).

After students are admitted to the teacher education program, the EPP has the best opportunity to prepare quality future teachers through practices proven to promote effective teaching. Programs with year-long clinical internship residencies significantly impact teacher effectiveness (AACTE, 2013). Darling-Hammond (2010) recommends: (a) strong university school partnerships with university faculty and school stakeholders developing quality curricula and exploring important issues impacting schools, (b) expanded field experiences which allow pre-service teachers to explore and experience diverse operations within the school context, and (c) substantive, sufficient and expanded investment (funding and supports) for teacher preparation programs (p. 40). In closing, all requirements should be synonymous with documented research and best practices based on what we are establishing and labeling in this article as *teacher quality influencers* and *indicators* to ensure the “positive impact,” “development,” “learning” and “instruction” of *all students*.

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