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Jennie Whitcomb, Ph.D.

Associate Dean for Teacher Education
University of Colorado Boulder

University of Colorado Boulder Using edTPA To Improve on Candidate Assessment Process

The process of developing a nationally available performance assessment for teacher candidates has been lengthy and continues to generate faculty discussion at universities around the country. But for Professor Jennie Whitcomb, it was the reaction of students that convinced her it was the right direction.

Whitcomb is the associate dean for teacher education at the University of Colorado Boulder (UCB) and under her leadership, UCB has become the first of the state's institutions of higher learning to embrace edTPA™ as a powerful way to satisfy a state mandate to include performance assessment as part of the teacher licensure process.

"There are many reasons why I think universities should consider adopting edTPA," says Whitcomb. "One I find compelling is our students value it. The students are reporting to us that this tool helped them think about their teaching; it made them reflect on their approach to the classroom and what was working with their students. They're telling us, 'I really learned while going through this process.'"

edTPA, a research- and standards-based tool to independently measure a teacher candidate's readiness to teach, was developed with the participation of dozens of teachers and teacher educators from 24 states and the District of Columbia. The process was led by faculty and staff at the Stanford Center for Assessment, Learning and Equity (SCALE), who have more than 25 years of experience developing performance-based assessments of teaching.

The edTPA assessment process requires candidates to submit a portfolio that documents teaching and learning in a 3-to-5-day learning segment with a class of students. That portfolio includes an unedited video of the candidate engaging students in learning as well as examples of teaching materials that address planning, instruction, assessment, analyzing teaching and academic language.

Whitcomb, a native of California who moved to Colorado in 1997, was first exposed to performance assessments when Stanford and other California universities began developing the Performance Assessment for California Teachers, or PACT. That work began in 2001, the same year the state of Colorado revised its state licensure requirements and specified that teacher work samples be produced and reviewed in every teacher preparation program.

Without any special coordination, each college and university in Colorado developed and put in place its own teacher work sample requirement, complying with state law but simultaneously creating a number of problems.

"I knew our teacher work sample was not what we wanted for the long haul," says Whitcomb. "At my institution there was no real faculty buy-in. It was not integrated well with our curriculum. The faculty was not involved with scoring our candidates' teacher work samples and there was not a sound system for validity and reliability."

Those concerns led Whitcomb to immerse herself in the development of edTPA, committing UCB to participation in some initial tryouts, followed by a broader pilot test and then a full-blown field test last spring. Given the generally positive experiences thus far, Whitcomb notes: "We are proceeding forward with edTPA. No question."

"This assessment is valued by us as an institution," she continued. "It's a much better tool than a teacher work sample, which was tipped too much toward planning and had no direct observation of classroom teaching. And it's important to be part of a national education community, to know the official scoring is reliable and valid. We're finding our students want that national score, too; they're proud of it."

According to Whitcomb, UCB's faculty has generally supported the shift to edTPA and has begun the work of "backward design" to better integrate the tool into the school's curriculum. Faculty members are exploring ways to integrate elements of edTPA tasks and rubrics into course assignments. Seven faculty members now have gone through training to be national scorers in order to better understand the tool's application. And the schedules for student teaching now set aside three Fridays so that instead of going to the classroom teacher candidates have time to construct edTPA portfolios. The university's video lab is mobilized to provide support them.

And, she says, it's already contributing to ongoing efforts to ensure coherence in UCB's teacher education program.

"It creates a framework to develop a shared language about practice as we work to develop our students into effective teachers," concludes Whitcomb. "Though our faculty members continue to evaluate edTPA, we see its potential to help us focus our candidates to be better initial teachers in ways that also are consistent with our vision of the teacher we seek to prepare."

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