

## Re-Assessing Teacher Education Quality: What NCTQ Isn't Telling Us About the Impact and Value of HBCUs

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*This article argues that rankings and decontextualized criticisms, when applied to HBCUs, are especially damaging and it is worth rethinking our standards for teacher education quality and accountability.*

Scholars have documented the many ways in which the value and contributions of Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) have fallen “under the radar” in national conversations, reports, and rankings. We have personally cited misleading college cost metrics, short-term perspectives on post-college employment, and narrow definitions of institutional performance as some of the major flaws of HBCU reviews (Gasman, 2013; Collins, Jenkins, Strzelecka, 2014).

Many national college ranking reports use generic measures that do not tell the whole story about recruitment, retention, and academic achievement of minority, low-income, and first generation college students. These metrics are based on traditional 18-22 year old students, enrolling for the first time and attending full-time. For example, HBCUs often have a high number of part-time students, students who must take semesters off to work full-time, students who transfer into HBCUs from community colleges, and older students who have large gaps in their educational paths. Likewise, when students come to college from disadvantaged and under-served K-12 schools, there is a high need for developmental education, along with tutoring, mentoring, intrusive advising, and summer bridge programs. HBCUs are uniquely prepared to offer these services to their students, although these programs are rarely counted as metrics in college ranking reports and evaluation systems.

When it comes to the issue of teacher education, HBCUs once again do not receive proper validation for the work they are doing, as most recently evidenced by the National Council on Teacher Quality's (NCTQ's) second Teacher Prep Review Report, published in *U.S. News and World Report* on June 17, 2014.<sup>1</sup> Although 35% of African American teachers are credentialed from HBCUs, only one HBCU (Delaware State University) was rated within the top 100 teacher preparation programs at the elementary and secondary level. Of the 836 institutions NCTQ ranked in total, only three HBCUs ranked in the top 200: Alabama A&M was ranked 127, and Fayetteville State University and Morgan State University were both ranked 157. While NCTQ's ranking methodology has already been widely criticized as flawed on many levels, including grossly inaccurate reporting<sup>2</sup> (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Fuller, 2014; Pearson & Goatley, 2013; Montano, 2013), we believe that these criticisms, when applied to HBCUs, are especially damaging and merit rethinking our standards for teacher education quality and accountability.

### JUST A “PAPER REVIEW”

A major criticism of NCTQ's methods has been its overemphasis on surface inputs—in this case a review of college catalogues, course syllabi, reading lists, and materials related to student teacher placement—rather than observing and evaluating what is actually happening in these classes or the schools in which teachers are placed. Linda Darling-Hammond, one of the most prominent critics of NCTQ, has noted that: “NCTQ's methodology is a paper review of published course requirements and course syllabi against a check list that does not consider the actual quality of instruction that the programs offer, evidence of what their students learn, or whether graduates can actually teach” (2013). According to NCTQ: “It is not the intention of the *Teacher Prep Review* to substitute for high-quality, on-the-ground inspections.... We restrict our evaluation to only program elements that can be reliably and validly assessed by readily obtained program documents” (Addendum to Appendix B, p. 5).

HBCUs are adversely affected by this methodology in several ways. First, as smaller, under-resourced institutions, they often cannot offer the diversity of courses that are found at larger majority institutions. More importantly, however, a written syllabus may not reflect the fact that professors are dedicated to teaching students how to convey core course content in culturally relevant ways, or to use diverse pedagogies for students of differential needs and intelligences. While one of the 19 “standards” that NCTQ uses to evaluate these materials is “Equity,” this standard applied only to elementary education courses, and, paradoxically, NCTQ notes in its explanation of what indicators it uses to define equity: “Programs will not be scored on their performance relative to this standard.” A syllabus for a gateway course on teaching reading, for example, may not reflect an individual teacher's commitment to adapting these measures for bilingual students. Likewise, a written syllabus may or may not include the quality of critical self-reflection involved in a course, or the opportunities available for students to apply what they are learning to real classrooms and educational inequities.

### LACK OF OUTCOME MEASURES

In line with Darling-Hammond, Fuller (2014) agrees that the NCTQ report focuses almost exclusively on program inputs, and ignores important outcome measures such as teacher placement rates and teacher longevity in the profession. While Fuller acknowledges that this kind of data would be “costly” and “difficult” to obtain (p. 65), he nonetheless suggests that a more methodologically sound review would consider program effectiveness based on outcomes such as placement and retention rates of graduates, performance and portfolio assessments, observations by cooperating and supervising teachers, and evidence of impact on student outcomes (p. 74).

Fuller suggests that: “NCTQ could have invested resources to conduct high-quality studies examining the association between inputs and processes with outcomes” (p. 75).

While we strongly agree that these kinds of outcome measures are critical to any college ranking system, they can be especially important when looking at HBCUs because inherent in many of their teacher education programs is the expectation that graduates will commit to teaching in the local community, or communities that are similarly under-served. This ethos of community service and social activism is a key component of many teacher education programs at HBCUs.<sup>3</sup>

#### NO MENTION OF STUDENT SUPPORT SERVICES

Fuller (2014) likewise draws attention to the fact that NCTQ completely dismisses the impact of non-course related services that can be critical to student retention and engagement, such as “the provision of student support services; mentoring and induction provided by the program” (p. 67). Support services do not show up on course syllabi, but neither are they simply “add-ons,” which would make little difference to the quality of programs at these institutions. For first generation college students, who make up the majority of HBCUs, these kinds of services can be critical to student academic success and retention.

#### WHAT ABOUT THE QUALITY AND QUANTITY OF CLINICAL EXPERIENCE?

Fuller (2014) also mentions that NCTQ’s ranking does not account for the length of the clinical experience required of students. As HBCUs are deeply rooted in the welfare and cultures of the communities they serve, they recognize the importance of having prospective teachers spend time in and become intimately familiar with these communities. We would add here that our concern should not just be about the *length* of clinical experience, but about the content and quality of this experience. HBCUs, along with other Minority Serving Institutions, are actively experimenting with university-school-community partnerships, which not only increase the number of hours that teacher candidates spend in the classroom, but also expand the activities they do in the classroom. In addition to the more traditional student teaching requirement (which generally comes at the end of a teacher education program), many HBCUs are having teacher education students go into the classroom from the outset, involving them in activities such as literacy coaching, individual tutoring, mentoring, lesson planning, participating in parental conferences, and organizing adult learning workshops, etc. Equally importantly, HBCUs are expanding the levels of observation, feedback, and mentorship pre-service teachers receive while doing this work.

#### LACK OF ATTENTION TO STUDENT DIVERSITY

In their official response to the NCTQ Review, Dooley, et al. (2013) call attention to the fact that NCTQ does not measure or value the need to prepare teachers for diverse classrooms. They note: “Any report that talks of students as though they’re all alike—as the NCTQ review does—neglects the reality of today’s diverse classrooms.” The authors emphasize that teachers must be able to effectively work with students from disadvantaged backgrounds, and call for research that examines “how to teach teachers to meet the needs of students who may not have had a meal before coming to the classroom; the needs of students who have learning disabilities; the needs of students who are multilingual.” Again, a syllabus will likely not include a section on “how to teach hungry kids” but if our teacher preparation programs are not addressing the impact of these kinds of problems on student learning and achievement, we are missing a key factor in what makes teachers effective. As Pearson and Goatley (2013), responding to the NCTQ report on behalf of the International Reading Association Literacy Research Panel, ask: “Have we learned nothing about the central role of diversity in education in the last 20 years such that it deserves to make it into these standards? Have we not an inkling of the marginalization that such an omission represents?” (para 10). The authors continue:

At the secondary school level, if there are no standards for either language or diversity, what does this say about our commitment to underrepresented students and their families and histories? What does it say about our commitment to promoting multicultural understanding and respect? What does it say about any serious attempt to address the achievement gap in the United States? (Pearson & Goatley, 2013, para 10)

Because many of the professors and teacher candidates at HBCUs come from impoverished communities, these kinds of issues are much more likely to be addressed in their programs. It is important that HBCUs are preparing teachers to work more constructively and cooperatively with families, community organizations, and community leaders—understanding that education is one strand in a larger social system that these communities depend upon.

#### ATTRITION: DO TEACHERS STAY IN THE PROFESSION?

Dooley et. al. also note that: “The nation’s teacher work force loses 15% of teachers every year, effectively meaning that half of the workforce is replaced every three years. Given that experienced teachers are most often better teachers, evaluations of teacher education programs should attend to the need to attract good teachers who stay in the profession.” Again, we argue that graduates of HBCU teacher education programs are more likely to work in under-served school districts, and to commit to *staying* in these districts.

The so-called “best” teacher education programs in the country are of little use if their graduates do not stay in teaching and/or stay in the schools where they are most needed. Teachers who are committed to working in these communities for the long haul are committed to long-term systemic social change, which is something that does not necessarily show up on a syllabus, but is a fundamental part of the history, culture, and mission of HBCUs.

#### Notes

1. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ), founded in 2000 with assistance from the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, remains a highly controversial organization that has been critiqued widely by educational scholars and policymakers (Darling-Hammond, 2013; Fuller, 2014; Montano, 2013, Pearson & Goatley, 2013, etc.). At the heart of this controversy is NCTQ’s Teacher Prep Review Report, an internally designed ranking system that evaluates teacher preparation programs nationally.

2. According to Darling-Hammond (2013), NCTQ reports and ranks programs that “don’t even exist.”
3. We would caution, however, that statistics comparing retention and employment rates at HBCUs to majority institutions must consider the differential financial situation of HBCU students.

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