

Executive Summary

Easy A's is the latest installment of the National Council on Teacher Quality's *Teacher Prep Review*, a decade-old initiative examining the quality of the preparation of new teachers in the United States.

With this report, we add to NCTQ's growing body of work designed to ensure that teacher preparation programs live up to the awesome responsibility they assume, preparing individuals for teaching. We also seek to provide the consumers of teacher preparation programs, both aspiring teachers and school districts, with much-needed information about program quality. Finally, we hope to educate policy makers and the public about the successes and shortcomings in teacher preparation.

Easy A's looks at two important questions:

- Are teacher candidates graded too easily, misleading them so they believe they are genuinely ready to teach when this may not be the case?
- Is teacher preparation coursework rigorous enough, simulating the complex demands of teaching?

Takeaway Findings

Using evidence from more than 500 higher education institutions that turn out nearly half of the nation's new teachers each year, we find that in a majority of institutions (58 percent), grading standards for teacher candidates are much lower than for students in other majors on the same campus.

Second, we find a strong link between high grades and a lack of rigorous coursework, with the primary cause being assignments that fail to develop the critical skills and knowledge every new teacher needs.

Easy A's

Prospective teachers are almost half again as likely as students in other majors to graduate with grade-based honors. While 30 percent of *all* graduating students at the 509 institutions earn honors, 44 percent of teacher candidates receive this distinction — a substantial 14 point differential. Indeed, that average masks a stunningly large differential of 20 points or more at 141 institutions (28 percent).

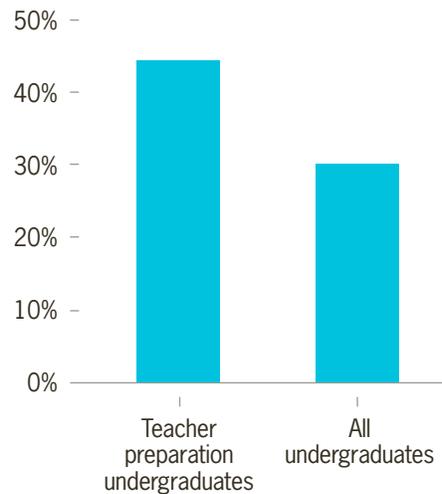
Criterion-referenced example

Design a lesson plan to teach one of the three 3rd grade science objectives given. You are designing this lesson for a class of 25 students, including four ELL students and two gifted students who are already familiar with the material. You need to incorporate the inquiry learning strategy discussed in today's class.

Criterion-deficient example

Design a lesson plan to teach an elementary science objective. Describe the composition and needs of the students in your class. Select one of the learning strategies from the textbook to apply in your lesson.

Who qualifies for honors?



Across the full sample of 509 institutions, teacher candidates were half again as likely to qualify for honors at graduation as other undergraduates.

These results are a wake-up call for higher education and a confirmation of the damaging public perception that, too often, getting an education degree is among the easier college career paths — although it is in preparation for one of the most challenging jobs there is.

It's also notable that at 214 institutions (42 percent), there is *not* a substantial difference between the proportion of prospective teachers and other graduating students earning honors, serving as powerful evidence that teacher preparation programs *can* hold their grading standards in line with those of other majors on the same campus. In fact, 62 universities and colleges (12 percent) in our sample have a *smaller* proportion of teacher candidates than others on their campuses earning honors. Individual ratings for institutions can be found in Appendix A of this report, as well as on [programs' ranking sheets](#).

What's Behind the Easy A's

The second focus of this report is the nature of course assignments that teacher candidates must complete and that serve as the basis of most or all of their course grades. Multiple theories as to why students in education majors might appear to excel so often were also examined (e.g., clinical coursework that lends itself to high grades, too many arts and crafts assignments, too much group work, particularly egregious grade inflation, better quality instruction, more female students who tend to get higher grades, opportunities to revise work, and higher caliber students), but none appears to explain these findings as directly as the nature of the assignments.

We analyzed the course assignments listed on syllabi for 1,161 courses, not just in teacher education but across an array of majors (e.g., business, psychology,



history and nursing). The 7,500 assignments in these courses were then classified as either “**critterion-referenced**” or “**critterion-deficient**.”

Assignments judged to be **critterion-referenced** focus on a clearly circumscribed slice of knowledge and skill-based content, facilitating the instructors’ own ability to provide substantive feedback within a defined area of expertise, as well as enabling comparisons among students as to the relative merit or quality of the completed assignments.

Critterion-deficient assignments, although they may be based in knowledge or skills, cover a broader scope of content, often with an emphasis on student opinion. The expansive content of these assignments makes it more difficult for the instructor, no matter what the subject matter of the course, to offer expert, critical feedback, and to compare the quality of students’ work products.

Criterion-deficient assignments are found to be more common in teacher preparation courses — overwhelmingly so — than in other academic disciplines that we examined. On average, criterion-deficient assignments are used about twice as often in teacher education coursework as in other kinds of coursework on the same campus (71 percent of course grades versus 34 percent).

The prevalence of such assignments could help to explain why new teachers report feeling relatively unprepared for the demands of real teaching, as they have not engaged sufficiently in meaningful simulations of teaching involving specific feedback. When new teachers enter real classrooms, they have to guess at what strategies are likely to be effective, which increases the stress they experience and cause them to lose precious instructional time.

The relationship that emerges between the two types of course assignments and the average course grade is clear and strong. Using a smaller sample of seven institutions (but involving 499 courses) for which the actual average course grade was publicly available, we find a statistically significant relationship. As the percentage of grades based on assignments classified as “critterion-deficient” rises, so does the average course grade — no matter what the course’s subject matter. Courses with *only* criterion-deficient assignments have average grades more than half a letter grade higher than courses with no criterion-deficient assignments. More information on the implications of criterion-deficient assignments can be found in Sections 2 and 3 of this report.

Teacher candidates rely on their preparation programs to prepare them rigorously for the demands of teaching. When programs fail to do so — by providing assignments that give inadequate opportunities to refine their teaching or by awarding grades that give false signals about candidates’ preparedness — these candidates are simply not being prepared. Such programs are, in fact, depriving candidates of essential opportunities to learn and crucial information about their competence. Too often, candidates’ investment in their education — measuring in the tens of thousands of dollars — results in a poor return.

Recommendations

- Teacher educators and the preparation program administrators should work together to identify common standards to define excellence. Work that is merely competent should not be awarded an A.
- Teacher educators and the preparation program should ensure that a greater proportion of assignments are “critterion-referenced,” especially in early teacher-training coursework.

By adopting these practices, teacher preparation programs will deliver on their promise to their students. Serious teacher candidates expect rigorous coursework, authentic training and honest evaluations. That is the only way they can be confident that they are ready to join a profession whose reach is immeasurable and life-changing.

 National Council on Teacher Quality

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The National Council on Teacher Quality advocates for reforms in a broad range of teacher policies at the federal, state and local levels in order to increase the number of effective teachers.

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