

Fact Sheet

Training Our Future Teachers: Easy A's and What's Behind Them

How most assignments in teacher prep raise grades but weaken training

The latest report from the National Council on Teacher Quality (www.nctq.org) begins with a new dataset built from commencement brochures of more than 500 colleges and universities to confirm a widely held suspicion: Teacher candidates really do earn higher grades than other students on their campuses.

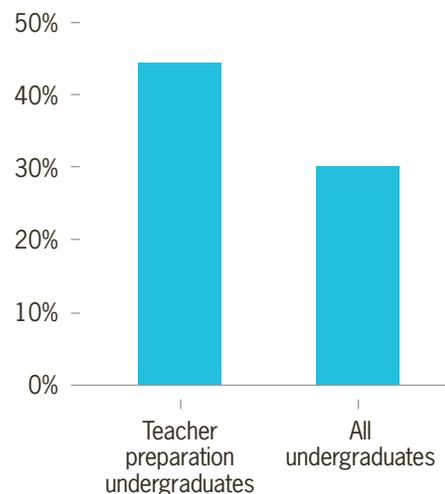
But *Easy A's and What's Behind Them* digs deeper to learn what may be driving grading practices. NCTQ's analysis of nearly 7,500 assignments at nearly three dozen colleges and universities suggests that those high grades are linked to a common flaw in teacher prep assignments: They are generally not designed to increase mastery of the knowledge and skills that could equip candidates for the challenges of the classroom.

Finding 1.

At a majority of institutions (58 percent), teacher preparation programs are much more likely to confer high grades than are other majors on the same campus.

This is not just a matter of grade inflation. Among all undergraduate students across all 509 institutions in our sample, the average proportion of honors at graduation (e.g., “cum laude”) is 30 percent. By contrast, in teacher preparation far more students — 44 percent — qualify for honors. In a few institutions, the gap between the average proportion of honors for all students and the higher proportion of honors for teacher candidates is as large as 40 percentage points.

Fig. 1 Who qualifies for honors?



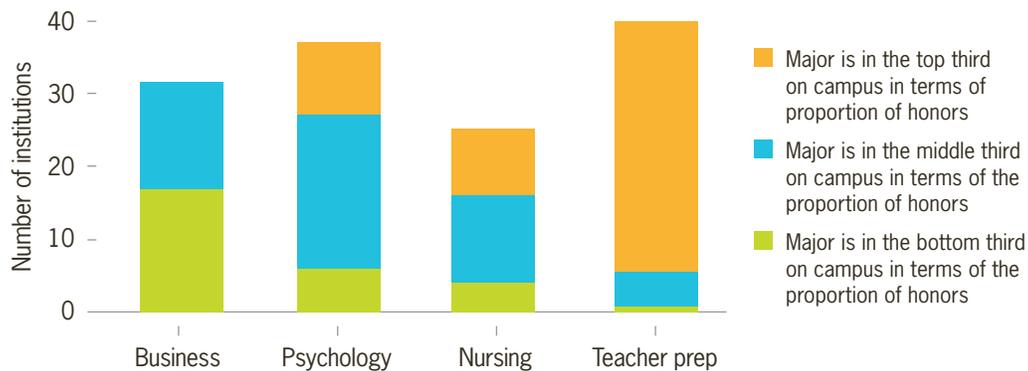
Across the full sample of 509 institutions, teacher candidates are half again as likely to qualify for honors at graduation as other undergraduates.

Finding 2.

Teacher preparation's propensity for awarding high grades is unmatched by other popular majors. 

When an institution's majors are sorted by the proportion of students earning honors, teacher preparation consistently lands near the top. At 34 of the 40 institutions (85 percent) sampled, the proportion of honors in teacher preparation places teacher preparation in the top third of all majors. This is not true of the three most popular majors, business, psychology and nursing. The proportion of graduating students with honors in these majors is much less often found in the top third of all majors.

Fig. 2 Where teacher prep and other popular majors rank in the proportion of graduating students earning academic honors



At all but six of the 40 institutions we examined, teacher prep is more likely to award honors than most other majors on campus.

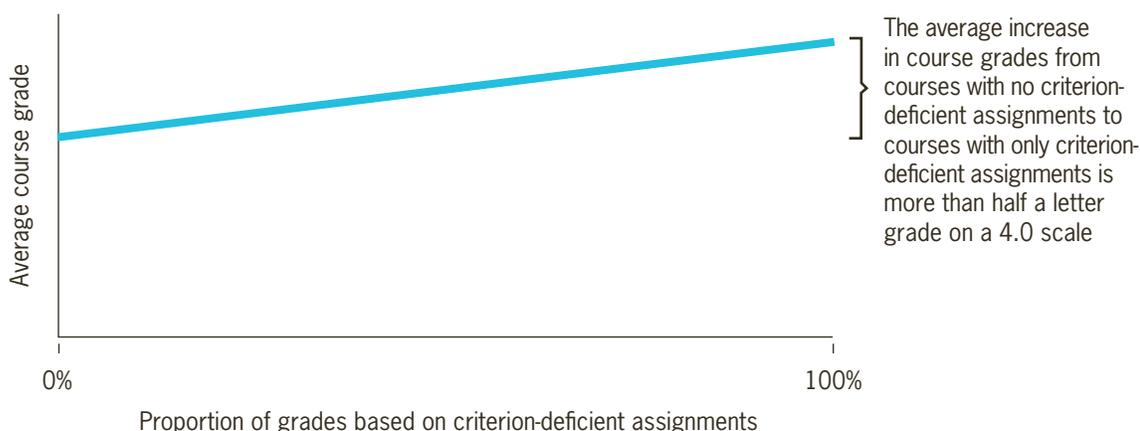
Finding 3.

The more assignments are “criterion-deficient,” the higher the grades in a course. 

“Criterion-deficient” assignments are based on candidates’ opinion or are overly broad in scope, making it difficult for the instructor to evaluate based on mastery of knowledge and skills. Such assignments might include requiring that candidates articulate their own philosophies on how to teach children to read, critique the classroom management techniques observed only by the candidate in a field placement, or write a lesson plan for any topic found in elementary math. By the very nature of their design, these types of assignments make it difficult for instructors to do anything more than award A’s for completion. (See sections 2 and 4 of the report for examples of criterion-deficient assignments.)



Fig. 3 Average course grades rise as the proportion of grades based on criterion-deficient assignments increases

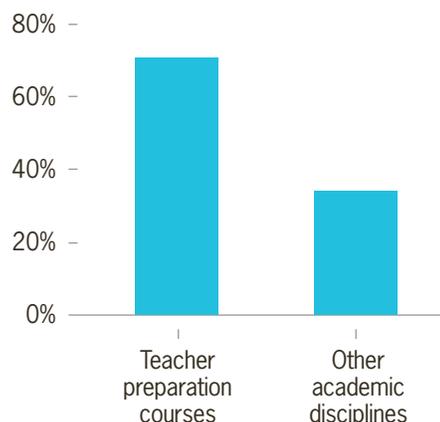


Finding 4.

Assignments that lead to higher grades overwhelmingly dominate in the field of teacher preparation, far more than in other academic disciplines.

In the other disciplines we examined (nursing, management, biology, psychology, history, and economics), only 34 percent of course grades on average were based on assignments that could be categorized as criterion-deficient assignments. But in teacher preparation courses, 71 percent of course grades on average are based on criterion-deficient assignments — more than double the rate found in other coursework.

Fig. 4 Proportion of grades based on criterion-deficient assignments



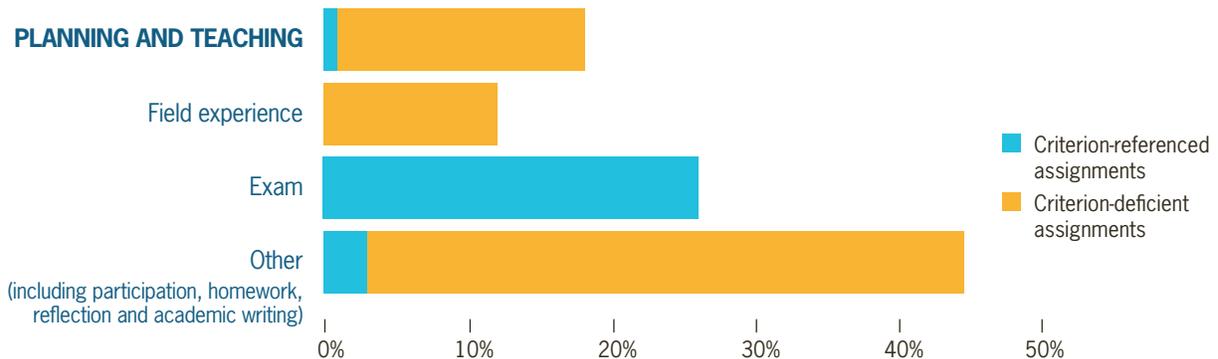
The proportion of grades based on criterion-deficient assignments in teacher prep (71 percent) is more than double the proportion found in other academic disciplines (34 percent).

Finding 5.

Assignments are filled with missed opportunities, particularly in planning and delivering instruction.

We call assignments that allow the instructor to evaluate student responses using objective criteria “criterion-referenced.” Only about 1 percent of all grades in teacher prep courses are based on assignments that go to the heart of teaching (designing lesson plans, evaluating student work, and so on) and are criterion-referenced. Exams and other assessment comprise the bulk of criterion-referenced assignments in teacher prep, but these alone create few opportunities for teacher candidates to practice lesson planning and delivering instruction.

Fig. 5 Average proportion of course grades allocated to either criterion-referenced or criterion-deficient assignments, across 862 teacher prep courses



Only a small fraction of course grades are attributable to the types of criterion-referenced assignments that would facilitate practice that gets to the heart of tasks teachers will do in the classroom.

Only criterion-referenced assignments can afford instructors the opportunity to provide candidates with concrete feedback on how well they have mastered important techniques. With such a low incidence of criterion-referenced assignments in their training, new teachers end up relying on trial and error in the classroom to hone their craft.

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 a greater proportion of assignments are “criterion-referenced,” especially in early teacher-training coursework.

By adopting these practices, teacher preparation programs will deliver on their promise to their candidates. 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.

Implications for the NCTQ Teacher Prep Review

The research into teacher preparation programs’ grading practices described in this report has generated the first component of a new standard for the *Teacher Prep Review*, Standard 19: Rigor. Individual ratings for the 509 institutions assessed on the first component of the Rigor Standard are available in [Appendix A](#) and on the program ranking sheets found at <http://www.nctq.org/teacherPrep/review2014.do>.

While *Easy A's* reports on institutions’ use of criterion-referenced coursework in the aggregate, future iterations of the Rigor Standard will incorporate a second component that will directly examine the proportion of criterion-referenced assignments in a selection of individual institutions’ teacher preparation courses.