

Toward Convergence: CAEP's Three Accreditation Pathways and the Future

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The purpose of this paper is to review principal features of the three current “pathways” to accreditation offered to Education Program Providers (EPPs) by the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP) and to highlight the strengths and challenges associated with each. Such a review should enable CAEP to evolve toward greater convergence across pathways by incorporating promising features drawn from each into the others. The paper has six sections: 1) background to the current situation; 2) features that all pathways should share; 3) evaluation of each pathway against these features; 4) recommendations on the development of a single pathway; 5) guidance on the use of evidence and the Standards to make accreditation decisions and; 6) next steps.

Section 1 -- Background

CAEP currently offers three pathways to accreditation, Inquiry Brief (IB), Selective Improvement (SI), and Transformation Initiative (TI). These three approaches to accreditation evolved more or less separately under different organizational auspices and have a number of distinct properties and contents. When the National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and the Teacher Education Accreditation Council (TEAC) merged to create CAEP two years ago, they established a superstructure for these processes but left many of the details of their operation essentially unchanged. At the same time, CAEP created a common set of accreditation Standards which were intended to guide all of the accreditation processes in which the organization engages. Other significant actions to render these processes more coherent include an evolving set of procedural/practice documents (e.g. the *Evidence Guide* and the *CAEP Accreditation Handbook*) that are useful but are not yet widely known among staff or EPPs. CAEP is taking action to abolish the three separate Commissions that governed each pathway. This clears the way for the establishment of a set of common governance arrangements for all of CAEP's accreditation activity. But these actions are recent and have not served to alleviate confusion among EPPs about what is rhetoric and what is real regarding requirements that they will need to meet. As a result, there is a pressing need to clarify what all pathways have in common, to align language across them such that similar activities and components of the accreditation process are described in similar terms, and to identify a limited number of justifiable “areas of distinction” that create opportunities for creative engagement without establishing entirely separate review processes.

Section 2 -- Features that All Pathways Should Share

This section of the paper presents a set of attributes that all CAEP accreditation processes ought to have in common. This “ideal type” can then be applied to the three current pathways to determine areas where each falls short or makes a distinctive contribution. Features of this ideal type include the following:

- Explicit references to the CAEP Standards. The Standards are intended to establish the topical content of any review. As such, every question posed in the course of a review should be anchored in one or more Standards. This applies equally to the bodies of evidence used by EPPs to support their case to become or remain accredited. Each of these bodies of evidence should be tagged or otherwise identified to determine what any evidence presented is supposed to be evidence of.
- Explicit evidence of graduate attainment of identified candidate learning outcomes. Standard 1 provides a basic, though generic, list of the desired attributes of EPP graduates and requires that evidence of the attainment of these outcomes should be provided. It also incorporates, by reference, the ten InTASC learning standards at the appropriate level of progression. Similarly, the Standards incorporate, as appropriate, candidate learning outcomes implied by the Common Core State Standards. EPPs can also create (and presumably assess) candidate learning outcomes of their own choice, provided that these are stated clearly and are measurable. For the future, however, it might be desirable to create a single, easily accessible, standard list of candidate learning outcomes that all EPPs are directed to use.
- Explicit discussion of the Eight Annual Report Measures. Regardless of pathway, all EPPs are required to report annually on eight core measures whose values help inform accreditation decisions or trigger further review processes. As noted in the CAEP Data Task Force report of July 2014, in addition to their use in monitoring EPP condition and performance, the Eight Annual Report Measures should directly enter the accreditation process as Guidelines under particular Standards (e.g. Value Added Measures in Standard 4). Collectively, moreover, these measures address much of the spectrum of EPP performance upon which the accreditation process should be focused, so explicit discussion of the results of these measures, as well as trends in them over time, should be a prominent and common feature of the CAEP accreditation process regardless of pathway. The four measures of program functioning (Graduation Rates, Licensure Passage Rates, Teacher Placement Rates, and Loan Default Rates) are currently broadly available and can probably be used for benchmarking and comparison by most EPPs now. The challenge for the remaining four measures of program impact associated with Standard 4 (Impact on P-12 Student Learning and Development, Indicators of Teaching Effectiveness, Satisfaction of Employers and, Satisfaction of Completers) however, is that some measures have not been sufficiently developed so that they can be calculated consistently to enable peer comparisons to be made across EPPs. Nevertheless, all EPPs should be able to provide some evidence about the four topics that underlie these measures, and to discuss the implications of this evidence. Finally, explicit and visible use of these measures helps establish the validity of accreditation decisions across pathways—in essence assuring that the same decision or judgment will be made about a given EPP regardless of which pathway is used.
- Appropriate references to Diversity and Engagement with Technology. While not enshrined explicitly in Standards, the CAEP accreditation process requires EPPs to address the themes of

Diversity and Engagement with Technology, as appropriate, wherever these topics come up in the accreditation process. These references will not always be the same, nor should they necessarily occur in designated places within each Standard. But there should be enough of them to provide consistent information about EPP attention to these topics to inform a judgment regardless of which pathway is used.

- Appropriate and Accessible Mechanisms for Reporting the Results of Accreditation to the Public. For a number of reasons, all accreditors will be under increasing pressure to communicate the results of accreditation to the public in coming years. However current CAEP documents including self-study reports, team reports, and accreditation action reports are not intended and are not suited for this purpose. CAEP already has a common format for action reports which organizes actions by Standard and this could be used as the basis for a more accessible public report on the results of accreditation, made available annually. Such reports, moreover, should not differ in format or substance across the three pathways.
- Explicit Application of Evidence to Continuous Improvement. Standard 5 on the application of evidence gathered in the course of accreditation also applies to all three pathways. As such, EPPs should visibly present their case for continuous improvement in readily understandable ways regardless of which pathway is chosen.

Establishing these features as an “ideal type” for the CAEP accreditation process provides a baseline for examining the current state of the three pathways with respect to each feature, and thus provides guidance in how they might be appropriately modified to ensure alignment and equivalency.

Section 3 -- How do the Pathways Currently Measure Up Against these Features?

This section of the paper reviews the pathways against the features that all CAEP accreditation processes should contain as described in the previous section. For these purposes, the SI and the TI pathways are largely equivalent because both require a self-study constructed around the Standards and should contain features that appropriately address Diversity, Technology, and a commitment to continuous improvement.

IB Pathway. A review of the IB Pathway as described in the *CAEP Accreditation Handbook* and other materials suggests the following conclusions:

- There are no explicit references to the Standards. By implication, the self-study report (the “Inquiry Brief”) incorporates learning outcomes as contained in Standard 1 as “claims” made by the EPP and contains elements of “evidence of impact” as contained in Standard 4. Also by implication, the required Internal Audit Report provides evidence that the EPP meets Standards 2 and 3, as well as evidence of efforts at continuous improvement. There are also indirect references to the content of the Standards in the *Evidence Guide*. Instead of emphasizing the Standards themselves, material on the IB Pathway requires EPPs to “satisfy a common standard

of evidence.” This is not the same thing as providing evidence that the EPP meets the Standards.

- There is explicit and extensive treatment of candidate learning outcomes. As noted, these are treated as “claims” made by the EPP. But there is no common list of candidate learning outcomes as suggested by Standard 1 and EPPs are free to establish their own, so long as they can marshal convincing evidence that these outcomes are being achieved. And again, there is no explicit requirement that this evidence be linked to Standard 1 or any other Standard.
- There is no explicit reference to the Eight Annual Report Measures in text describing the IB Pathway such that EPPs are required to discuss them as part of the accreditation submission. EPPs choosing this Pathway, however, are subject to them as a matter of required reporting.
- Similarly, there is no explicit reference to Diversity or Engagement with Technology in text describing the IB Pathway.
- The format used for the presentation of results in the IB Pathway is modeled on a scholarly research report. This is an intentional choice and the report was never intended to be accessible to external audiences. The overall posture of the IB Pathway, moreover, is purposely oriented away from “yes/no” certification of the worthiness of an EPP; instead it is premised on all EPPs beginning where they are and getting continuously better. External audiences, viewing a process that calls itself “accreditation,” may look for a more definitive result. On the other hand, the organization of the Inquiry Brief, based on clearly stated “claims” followed by evidence that supports or does not support these propositions, can be easily followed if it is well executed.
- The IB Pathway is largely oriented toward continuous improvement. Indeed a commitment to continuous improvement is taken as a condition of engaging in Inquiry in the first place. The internal audit of EPP operations and processes is intended to provide evidence of this commitment.

Looked at overall, the central area of good practice that the IB Pathway embodies that should be emulated in some way by all CAEP accreditation practices is the establishment of explicit “claims” about candidate knowledge and skills established by the EPP, disciplined by a site visit by individuals trained for the purpose.

SI Pathway. A review of the SI Pathway as described in the *CAEP Accreditation Handbook* and other materials suggests the following conclusions:

- An EPP choosing the SI Pathway must document in its self-study that it meets all the Standards, one by one. This is to be accomplished not only in the narrative but through evidence that is

“tagged” to the Standards—that is, labelled appropriately as to which Standard the evidence is supposed to address.

- There is no explicit reference to candidate learning outcomes. To meet Standard 1, however, the EPP will have to document that it has established learning outcomes consistent with the Standard. As noted earlier, Standard 1 incorporates by reference the ten InTASC outcomes and outcomes associated with the Common Core State Standards, so meeting Standard 1 implies knowledge of and the provision of evidence about candidate learning outcomes.
- Discussion of the Eight Annual Reporting Measures is an integral part of Standard 4 and of component 5.4. It should therefore be addressed by EPPs on the SI Pathway in the regular self-study narrative keyed to each Standard.
- Engagement with technology is an explicit component of the rubric associated with component 1.5 of Standard 1. At the same time, components 1.1 and 1.4 require EPPs to provide evidence that their graduates are prepared to teach diverse P-12 students effectively. There are additional explicit references to diversity in Standard 3, which deals with recruitment and selectivity.
- The format used for presentation follows the Standards. While not explicitly intended for public communication to stakeholders, it is accessible to a wide potential audience because of this format, but it is not explicitly designed for public communication. The level of performance on the Standards needed to remain accredited, assessed by associated rubrics, is also clear under this Pathway and this may help in communicating results to the public.
- Commitment to continuous improvement is embodied in the Selective Improvement Plan that accompanies the Standards-based self-study. Indeed, such commitment is the driving impetus behind the creation of this Pathway in the first place.

Looked at overall, the central area of good practice that the SI Pathway embodies that should be emulated in some way by all CAEP accreditation practices is explicit and systematic reference to the Standards and a particular focus area that allows the EPP to demonstrate its effectiveness in relation to a distinctive mission or purpose.

TI Pathway. The TI Pathway is equivalent to the SI Pathway in its requirement for the EPP to prepare a narrative that addresses all CAEP Standards individually, so the same comments as those made above about the SI Pathway also apply. The distinctive component that characterizes the TI Pathway is a narrative describing the EPP’s Transformation Initiative, which is a rigorous research effort into an area of substantive interest to the field of teacher preparation that will contribute to research-based knowledge in the field. These characteristics do not as directly embody the kind of commitment to continuous improvement that the Selective Improvement Plan does for EPPs in the SI Pathway. But a case can be made that the results of any TI research could be used to ground continuous improvement

activities and to support innovation. Finally, the TI narrative is less likely than its SI counterpart to be easily accessible and informative to the public.

Section 4 -- Developing an Integrated Approach

The review of the three current Pathways presented in the previous section suggests that they currently operate without much reference to one another and each falls short of the “ideal” CAEP review process presented in Section 2. Moving forward, therefore, should involve taking steps to integrate the three pathways by addressing areas where each falls short of the ideal and harnessing identified areas of good practice from each to incorporate into a common process. Some steps in this direction have already been taken, for example eliminating separate accrediting Commissions and merging their functions in an Accreditation Council. Additional steps, most of which can be taken incrementally as the process evolves, include at least the following:

1. Create a single core accreditation process that includes the following:
 - a. A structured body of evidence (similar to the current “Evidence Room” in the AIMS system) that packages and “tags” pieces of evidence related to EPP performance on each component of each Standard. The unit of analysis for this Portfolio would be a discrete study, result, or piece of evidence with a brief text indicating what it says about fulfillment of the component and Standard. This would correspond to what is already required for the SI and TI Pathways. For the IB Pathway, this would represent a new requirement to briefly identify and tag at least one piece of evidence related to each component of each Standard.
 - b. A discussion of “quality of evidence” consistent with component 5.2 that evidence provided be “relevant, verifiable, cumulative, and actionable and produces empirical evidence that interpretations of evidence are valid and consistent.”
 - c. A specially-constructed narrative that describes how the EPP demonstrates a “commitment to continuous improvement” per Standard 5. This might include elements of the Selective Improvement Plan formerly associated with the SI Pathway, the research plan formerly associated with the TI Pathway, or the internal audit of EPP operations and processes formerly associated with the IB Pathway (see below).
2. Create a set of options for the EPP to report on a focused investigation on a topic that the EPP chooses related to Standard 5. Examples of such focused investigation include:
 - a. A Selective Improvement Plan undertaken by the EPP similar to that formerly associated with the SI Pathway.
 - b. An area of substantive research on a topic likely to benefit teacher education generally undertaken by an EPP similar to that formerly associated with the TI Pathway.

- c. An internal audit of the EPP's operations and internal processes similar to that formerly associated with the IB Pathway.
- d. Any other proposed project or activity undertaken by an EPP demonstrably related to Standard 5 and the EPP's quality assurance and continuous improvement efforts.

Engaging in one such focused investigation would be an integral part of the accreditation process for an EPP and would consequently be required. Engaging in two or more in an exemplary manner, together with exceptional performance in meeting more than one Standard and in meeting the Eight Annual Report Measures would be grounds for CAEP recognition as "exemplary."

3. Create a set of explicit decision rules for Council action given the values of particular measures defined under 1.a. above. This is addressed in the following section.

Section 5 -- Using Evidence and the Standards to Make Accreditation Decisions

It is the responsibility of the Initial Panels of three to five Councilors, the Joint Review Panels led by co-Chairs at least one of whom was not involved in the initial review, and the Accreditation Council to examine the evidence provided by the EPP through its submission under one of the three accreditation Pathways, and the responses of site visitors, to render a judgment of accredited status. How this is to be accomplished, however, is not yet addressed by the *CAEP Accreditation Handbook*. The decisions to be made through this process are a) initial accreditation for seven years (with stipulations possible, which must normally be removed within two years), b) reaccreditation, c) reaccreditation as "exemplary," d) denial, and e) revocation of previously accredited status.

To achieve the first three of these, an EPP must be judged as substantially meeting all (or most) of the requirements embedded in the five Standards. To provide a basis for this, these requirements should be identified and enumerated for each Standard. For example, Standard 1 requires that a case be made that:

- Candidates have the content knowledge needed to teach effectively
- Candidates have knowledge of associated pedagogies
- Candidates have knowledge of how to combine these in different instructional situations
- Conclusions from one of three program review options
- Evidence that the measures included reflect candidate understanding of problem solving, critical thinking, and use of assessments and data that characterize college and career readiness
- Candidates are prepared to teach diverse P-12 students effectively
- Candidates are prepared to employ technology in designing and implementing learning experiences.

After these components are identified for each Standard, rubrics should be constructed that operationalize these components. This has already largely been accomplished. In the most recent draft

of the *Handbook*, “Evaluation Rubrics” defining “CAEP Sufficient Levels” are set out for a number of dimensions of performance in terms of three levels—below sufficient level, at sufficient level, and above sufficient level. The resulting three-point rubrics, once they are cleaned up and regularized, are probably adequate for now to inform accreditation decisions. But a major challenge is the fact that so many dimensions of performance are listed; for example, five dimensions characterize component 1.1, five more characterize component 1.2, and so on. This means, at minimum, that rated performances must be aggregated within component and, ultimately, across components. At the same time, the EPP must be judged as performing satisfactorily on the Eight Annual Report Measures. Finally, this judgment should not be reduced to a mechanical process of calculation and ranking, although the procedures outlined below are useful in describing the process needed to come to decision. The calculation or aggregation procedures suggested, therefore, should always be used to inform, not dictate, an accreditation decision.

Considerations here include:

- Priority Setting. A first decision that must be made is whether or not all measures are accorded equal priority. If certain measures are to count for more, they must be weighted or otherwise adjusted so they count more in any calculation of an overall score. This decision remains to be made. Another way to approach this matter which avoids the complexity of numerical weighting is to declare certain levels of performance on selected dimensions within Component to be direct triggers for action. For example, Emerson Elliott’s Concept Paper *Guidelines for CAEP Accreditation Decisions* states, for example, that “Standard 1 is NOT met when data are not disaggregated by field.” Similar performance-based statements are advanced to trigger other actions, including when stipulations should be applied or areas for improvement designated.
- Aggregation. To inform a decision, the weighted values represented by each measure must be aggregated in some way. One approach is simply to take the mean of a given set of measures (for example, the Eight Annual Report Measures, the measures under Standard One, under Standard Two, etc.). This method is compensatory, in that high performance on one measure can make up for low performance on another. The alternative is to adopt a method under which *each* measure in a given set of measures must exceed a given level. This alternative is more rigorous with respect to quality assurance because it guarantees that the program meets minimum standards in all aspects of its operation. This choice of aggregation method must be applied to each cluster of measures adopted and can be done in combination. For example, CAEP could use a mean score for the Eight Annual Report Measures taken collectively and for each cluster of measures included under each Standard taken collectively, then set a minimum level of performance to be achieved for each of these clusters. Consistent with the language that each program must meet or exceed a designated “threshold” on each standard, using this method would ensure that the program is performing above a minimum level for all five Standards and on the Eight Annual Report Measures.

- Decision Points. A related choice for each set of measures used (however defined, given the choices above) is to determine a numeric cut score, range of performance levels, or description of a condition (if the measure is a non-numeric attribute) which are deemed “satisfactory.” This is usually a single point on the scale above which the program is given “credit” on the measure or a given attribute or condition (e.g. “measures are disaggregated by field” in the Elliott concept paper) which triggers a particular accreditation action. For the Eight Annual Report Measures, “trigger points” for these measures can alert the Commission of potential areas of concern to instigate further investigation. Doing this would also require the establishment of specific cut scores on each of these measures. In parallel, additional and higher cut score levels would need to be established to award “exemplary” status. Cut scores for numeric measures may be determined by many methods, but standard practice is to use a modified Angoff or similar procedure. “Satisfactory performance” on non-numeric attributes must be specified verbally for each condition identified (e.g. failure to provide “measures disaggregated by field” under Standard 1 above as grounds to conclude that the EPP does not meet the Standard).
- Flexible Application of Decision Points. The rules governing Decision Points in the sub-section above should not be applied too rigidly. These procedures signal the conditions under which an EPP’s performance should be more carefully examined using additional evidence and dialogue between CAEP and the EPP. They should not automatically or formulaically make the decision.

After preliminary decisions are made on the above matters, the method(s) chosen should be thoroughly piloted for at least a year before formal adoption and should be tested and adjusted based on historical data, if this is available. Alternatively, CAEP could tentatively adopt two or more different approaches and pilot these on a sample of volunteer programs. In no case should proposed methods be immediately deployed to make a high-stakes decision about accredited status. Ultimately, moreover, accreditation is based on peer judgments of the entire body of assembled evidence about the condition and performance of a given program.

Section 6 -- Next Steps

The ideas and proposals presented in this paper are preliminary and have not been discussed by CAEP staff or any of its stakeholders. As a result, CAEP should do the following in order to move forward:

1. Convene an internal staff group to discuss this paper. This discussion should focus especially on the proposal for an aligned process in section 4 and the proposed decision criteria contained in section 5.
2. Re-draft these proposals as needed or drop consideration of these ideas.
3. If a version of some or all of these proposals and ideas are deemed worthy of moving forward, convene a meeting of the Board to consider them. Designated CAEP senior staff should present each component for consideration by the Board by presenting the essence of the proposal and a short set of reasons for and against adoption.

4. Again, re-draft these proposals as needed or drop consideration.
5. If the Board decides to move forward on one or more of these ideas, a short discussion paper should be drafted and circulated to EPPs, soliciting reactions. These could also be made the topic of a set of open hearings or reaction sessions held at regularly scheduled CAEP meetings and/or specially convened regional hearings.
6. If a decision is made to go forward, these ideas and proposed processes should be thoroughly pilot tested as described in the previous section.

To summarize, CAEP has reached a point at which it cannot continue with business as usual. Operating three separate pathways toward accreditation that evolved independently and that are not aligned with one another or with a newly-crafted and formally adopted set of accreditation Standards is not a tenable course of action. The ideas and proposals contained in this paper are simply that—a place to start a discussion; they will probably not represent any of the positions that such discussion will yield. The only given at this point is that the discussion itself is imperative.