UNI responds to NCTQ report on teacher prep programs

On Tuesday, June 18, the National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) released a report that is highly critical of teacher preparation programs in the United States, including programs at the University of Northern Iowa. While officials at UNI embrace the opportunity to review feedback in order to ensure our high-quality programs produce high-quality teachers, the processes NCTQ utilized in gathering data, assessing information and reporting results causes some concerns. UNI, like many of the institutions assessed in the report, responded to an open records request from NCTQ by providing all of the information requested. This included class syllabi for certain core curriculum courses and the student teaching manual. According to their own documentation, they gathered additional data from sources such as course catalogs, institutions’ bookstores and websites, websites and reports provided by K-12 school districts or government agencies and institutional demographic data. They did not seek any follow-up information from UNI, nor did they talk with our administrators, faculty, students or the principals and superintendents who employ our graduates. Of the 33 higher education institutions in Iowa with teacher preparation programs, only four are included in this report.

The final report is telling of NCTQ’s methods. While UNI provided information on our undergraduate and graduate programs in elementary and secondary education, NCTQ only ranked our undergraduate special education program. NCTQ reviewed special education as a stand-alone program, but in the state of Iowa it is an endorsement that can be added to an early childhood, elementary or secondary license. It is unclear how NCTQ chose which aspects of teacher preparation programs to review. We are baffled by how the data was collected, as we were not asked to supply NCTQ with information on our special education program at any time. Additionally, the programs they reviewed are not consistent between institutions. This misaligned comparison results in misleading information about all of the programs. It is difficult to accurately interpret information when only certain portions are shared in the report.

For example, the report states UNI’s special education program is deficient in preparing students to teach early reading skills, giving zero stars. They cite that “looking at a full range of course materials, there is little or no evidence of adequate instruction on the components of effective reading instruction.” Because of our program’s status as an endorsement, not a major, this instruction is included elsewhere in the teacher education program. Similarly, the common core content identified as missing by NCTQ is taught within the content specific programs our special education students complete.

While UNI officials are reviewing the report closely to identify any information we can use to benefit our programs and our students, many signs of UNI’s high standards and quality teacher preparation programs can already be found elsewhere.

UNI’s physics education program was recently cited by the American Physical Society as having one of the outstanding physics teacher education programs in the country. Members of the Task Force on Teacher Education in Physics based this recognition on a campus visit.
Our teacher education graduates have a 95 percent placement rate following graduation, with 85 percent employed in the state of Iowa. Another 3 percent immediately attend graduate school. UNI’s special education program regularly sees a 100 percent placement rate of our graduates.

Our teacher graduates are actively recruited not just in Iowa but also throughout the nation and around the world. Each year, UNI hosts the Overseas Recruiting Fair, the oldest and largest international recruiting fair in the United States. UNI graduates are highly desired because of the outstanding preparation they receive and their readiness to lead classrooms.

UNI’s programs are reviewed by the state and have been approved with no conditions. We continually seek information to improve our programs, soliciting input from our advisory council, alumni educators, principals and superintendents. We also regularly seek input from recognized experts in the field. UNI utilizes both time-tested and innovative methods to prepare and assess our students, including an extensive field-based program that includes faculty members stationed in the schools to work collaboratively with our students and practicing teachers to immediately assess teacher candidates’ effectiveness and make changes as needed.

The quality of UNI’s programs is also evidenced by the level of external support they receive. In March, businessman Richard O. Jacobson gave the largest gift in UNI history, $15 million, to build on our legacy of preparing high-quality teachers for Iowa and the nation. Additionally, the Roy J. Carver Charitable Trust awarded UNI’s COE $2 million to establish the Center for Educational Transformation. The special education program has received numerous competitive federal grants to support the preparation of high-quality special education teachers. Such grants are awarded based on evidence of strong existing programs.

Regardless of the results of this report, UNI remains committed to quality programs that prepare effective educators at the undergraduate and graduate levels. For more than 135 years, UNI has been a leader in pre-K through 12 education, and we continuously and consistently improve our programs to meet the needs of our students, their future employers and the young people they will serve. UNI’s Teacher Preparation program remains a strong example of premier teacher preparation.