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## COE Responds to New Report

June 20, 2013

“As a College of Education our responsibility in preparing future educators is to continually assess our students’ content understanding and teaching effectiveness before they leave us,” said Thomas R. Koballa, Jr. Ph.D., Dean and Professor of Georgia Southern University’s College of Education. “We do this not just in response to outside reports but as a part of the ongoing assessment we perform of our effectiveness as teacher educators,” he said. The National Council on Teacher Quality (NCTQ) just released its report, “NCTQ Teacher Prep Review.” Findings from the report suggest that the nation’s teacher training programs do not adequately prepare teacher candidates. NCTQ is a Washington, D.C.-based research and policy group that, according to its website, “was founded in 2000 to provide an alternative national voice to existing teacher organizations and to build the case for a comprehensive reform agenda that would challenge the current structure and regulation of the profession.”

The College of Education recently completed the rigorous National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and Georgia Professional Standards Commission (GPSC) accreditation process in spring 2013. The visiting team provided preliminary results indicating the College of Education met all standards for all programs. They were particularly impressed with the field experiences and clinical practice programs. Students spend more than 1,000 hours in the classroom teaching, receiving feedback and refining their skills before earning their degrees.

The NCTQ data used in the report are more than two and a half years old and were limited to a narrow review of such things as course syllabi, textbooks, student-teacher handbooks and how well the different education programs adhered to a set of standards, including guidelines for teaching some content.

K-12 education in general, and teacher preparation programs in particular, are increasingly under scrutiny, Koballa said. But there’s no easy fix. “We live in a time when there is great variability in terms of the students coming to public schools and in how teachers respond to them. The focus should be about flexibility and acting proactively,” Koballa said. A statewide data base is being developed matching where teachers received their degrees and the kinds of students they’re teaching. “That kind of information will be very important to us,” Koballa added.

But Koballa also said that while the NCTQ report provides an incomplete picture of teacher preparation programs — and ultimately how well candidates perform in the classroom — it does give colleges of education an opportunity to look at where improvements can be made. “It’s one of many data points colleges need to consider,” he said. “We may need to look at ways to better document our program practices.”

An integral part of COE’s teacher preparation programs stresses the use of achievement data to develop and implement meaningful learning experiences for their K-12 students. “We stress the use of learning outcomes with our teacher candidates. Our goal – and that of our teacher candidates – is to increase learning for all students,” Koballa added.

The COE is already responding to a new state requirement for 2015 that all preservice teachers pass a performance-based evaluation called edTPA. It is a portfolio-based assessment capstone completed

during student teaching that requires a teacher candidate to demonstrate their teaching effectiveness and ability to positively impact student learning through submission of teaching materials, video clips of their teaching, teaching reflections and assessments of student learning. “Our faculty began piloting edTPA during spring 2013 with students in our Special Education program. We will involve additional students and programs over the next few semesters while also making any needed program changes to ensure the goals of edTPA are fully embedded in all programs,” Koballa explained. Students will be required to pass the edTPA in addition to the GACE (Georgia Assessment for the Certification of Educators) content exam (passing GACE Program Admission Assessment) is a prerequisite to entering the program) before COE can recommend the student for certification.

COE graduates have a high GACE passing rate and are consistently sought by school systems throughout the state. In 2011, the most recent year in which data are available, 93 percent of COE graduates taking the GACE in all areas passed the assessment.

Beginning fall 2013, some COE teacher preparation methods courses will be taught on-site in area public schools. “This gives our students a better opportunity to link pedagogy with real classroom experience,” Koballa said. “It’s a teaching model that closely follows that of medical schools where teaching and learning take place on-site,” he added. “It strengthens our relationship with local schools and gives our students even more time in K-12 classrooms with seasoned educators.” COE is also launching an undergraduate research project that will give students an opportunity to do research tied to individual school improvement plans and help schools make informed decisions on changes.

Not only are COE graduates sought by superintendents and principals throughout the state, graduates have also been recognized by the state for their outstanding teaching and achievements. This year’s Georgia Teacher of the Year for example, a COE graduate, has just five years of teaching experience, yet her level of achievement in the classroom and dedication inside and outside the school environment clearly demonstrates she is an outstanding educator, Koballa said. “We need to keep in mind that a teacher education program is only the beginning in the making of a successful teacher,” Koballa said. Teachers are life-long learners and are continually updating and expanding their knowledge and skills. “In the business world, we don’t expect a recent graduate to perform at the same level as a 10 year veteran of a company,” he continued, “and the same is true for educators,” he added. “We’re continually looking at how we can improve student preparedness and better serve their needs once they’ve graduated,” he said.

COE credits much of its success in preparing future educators to its strong and lasting relationship with the 36 partner schools and 40 additional clinical sites hosting educator candidates. “These institutions are committed to improving their communities and elevating learning for everyone on so many different levels,” Koballa added. “It’s truly a collaboration,” he added, not just between the College of Education and community, but between the entire university and the community as well. It benefits everyone,” he added.

Current and future college students interested in a career in education, and parents of students in K-12 schools, should see the report for what it is, Koballa added. “It’s a narrow snapshot of a very limited part of what we do,” he said. “We’re proud of our programs and our teacher candidates, but we never rest on our laurels. Continuous improvement and assessment is imperative regardless of which report is currently in the news,” he said.

