2. Education Professors Assess Their Field

3. Attitudinal Shifts: A Signal of Emergent Pragmatism?

This study repeats many questions from the original Fordham-initiated survey of education professors, conducted in 1997. These trend questions reveal a series of provocative shifts in perceptions, typically in a more "pragmatic" direction.

Although still deeply attached to a romantic concept of learning, more professors take concrete, practical stands than before (see Figure B). For example, the pool of professors who believe it more important for kids to struggle with the process than end up with the right answer has dropped 20 percentage points (66 percent from 86 percent in 1997). Meanwhile, the percentage saying it is absolutely essential to produce teachers well-versed in theories of child development and learning has declined to 35 percent from 46 percent (see Figure 1, p. 15).

Their sensibility toward teaching methods also may be shifting in a more pragmatic direction (see Figure B). For example, only 37 percent of professors believe that early use of calculators will improve children's problem-solving skills, a 20 percentage point drop from 57 percent in 1997. Even the view that schools should avoid competitive events such as spelling bees and honor rolls has declined to 48 percent from 64 percent.

Many professors of education believe their field needs to change (see Figure 5). Sizable majorities point to serious problems with teacher-preparation programs, prospective teachers, and even their colleagues. Yet they are ambivalent about alternatives that recruit teachers through nontraditional paths. Teach For America is one exception.

Although the values and priorities of education professors often render them out of sync with the real-world challenges facing teachers and schools, some professors do examine their programs with a critical eye. Self-reflection and openness to change and reform are no longer uncommon. Calls for change have even come from insiders like Arthur Levine, former president of Columbia University Teachers College, who wrote in a recent report that "a majority of teachers are prepared at the education schools with the lowest admission standards and least accomplished professors."[15] Such self-scrutiny has increased over the past decade, as revealed by dramatic shifts in responses to the 1997 and current surveys (see sidebar "Attitudinal Shifts: A Signal of Emergent Pragmatism?"). Consequently, whereas Chapter 1 depicts how some professors are often out of step with the real world, this chapter illustrates that many among their ranks acutely realize that not all is right with their field.

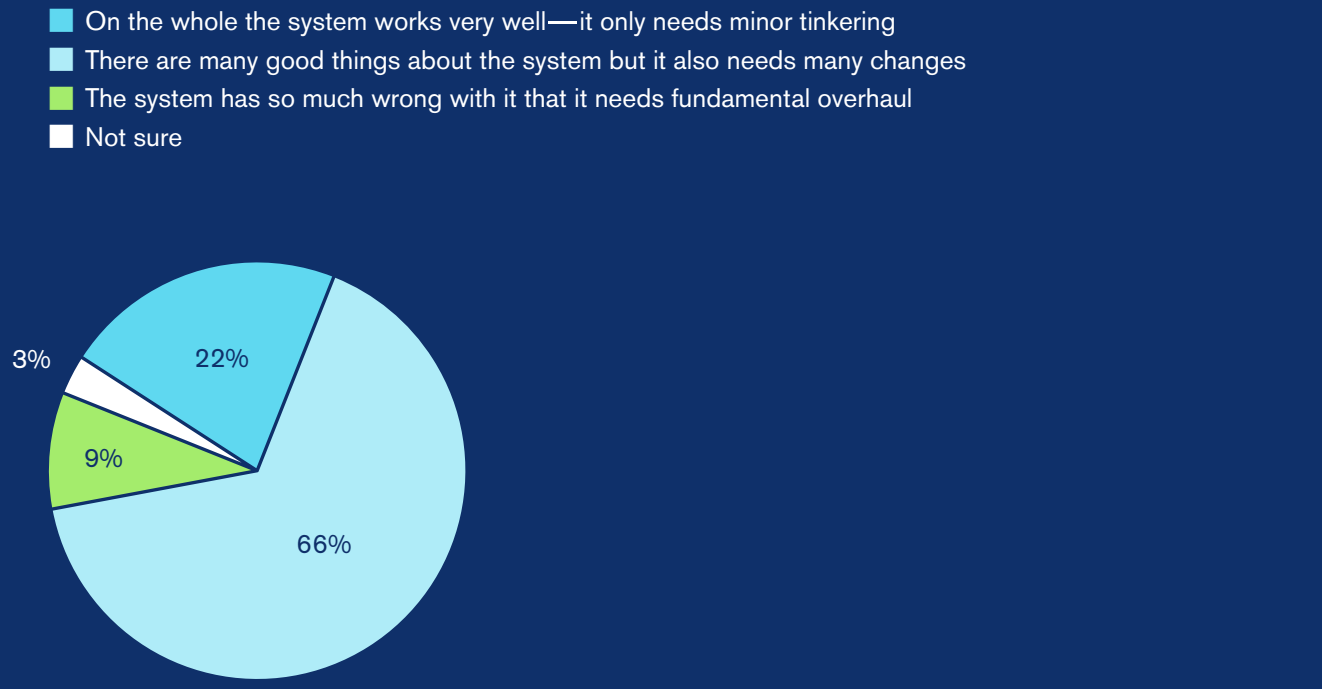
CRITICISM FROM WITHIN

Some education professors themselves have joined the chorus of skeptics and would-be reformers. True, only about one in ten (9 percent) call for "fundamental overhaul" of university-based teacher education, but the majority (66 percent) says that, while there are many good things about the present system, "it also needs many changes." Relatively few (22 percent) report that the system "only needs minor tinkering." In focus groups, they spoke openly about uneven quality in their field. One veteran education professor in Los Angeles remarked, "There's a huge discrepancy between teacher education programs. I've taught at many schools, and there's a huge difference. It's a mixed bag."

15. Levine, Arthur. 2006. *Educating School Teachers*, 26. Washington, D.C.: The Education Schools Project. http://www.edschools.org/pdf/Educating_Teachers_Report.pdf.

Figure 5 QUALITY OF UNIVERSITY-BASED TEACHER EDUCATION

Thinking about the U.S. system of university-based teacher education, which comes closest to your overall view?



Percentages in figures may not equal 100 percent due to rounding or omission of answer categories. Question wording may be edited for space, but full question wording is available in Appendix B. Small discrepancies between percentages in the text and those in the appendix are due to rounding.

3. Attitudinal Shifts: A Signal of Emergent Pragmatism? (continued)

Trends also indicate that professors are finding less to fault when they evaluate education programs—perhaps a signal from insiders that things are improving (see Figure A). For example, 50 percent of professors in this survey say education programs often fail to prepare teachers for teaching in the real world; in 1997, it was 63 percent. And while the proportion reporting that their programs "need to do a better job weeding out students who are unsuitable for the profession" is still high (73 percent), it is significantly lower than it was in 1997 (86 percent). The percentage that indicates "most professors need to spend more time in K–12 classrooms" has declined to 73 percent from 84 percent. Only 43 percent now say teacher education programs "are too often seen as cash cows by university administrators"—down from 54 percent. These shifts are statistically significant, meaningful, and consistently in the "we think things are getting better" direction.

But are things really improving? We can't be sure from these data. The movement toward greater accountability in K–12 education might have shed light on the flaws in teacher-preparation programs, prompting their improvement. Or the barrage of education school criticism might have led to self-reflection and change. Of course it is also possible that today's professors, leery of adding to the cacophony of complaints they already hear, have merely become more reluctant to openly criticize their field.[16]

Another veteran—this one in Ohio—said much the same thing: "I have taught in higher education in four different states, and frankly I think most teacher ed programs do a good job, but some do a pretty bad job."

Many professors acknowledge that future teachers are not getting the practical tools they will need to succeed outside the campus gates. Half (50 percent) say "teacher education programs often fail to prepare teachers for the challenges of teaching in the real world." In the focus groups, professors were very specific about the kinds of things that they think starting teachers lack. "I have talked with people in special ed who go through a four-year program and never wrote an IEP," said an Ohio professor. "I find that appalling. How could you send somebody out who has not done the central piece of paperwork that people have to do?" Others called for education programs to put more focus on substance. A Texas education professor who took part in the survey was outraged by the number of classroom teachers she sees teaching science in the public schools "who don't know science….They didn't have to take real science classes. People who go through ed programs don't have the science right. It's scary."

STUDENT QUALITY IS AN ISSUE

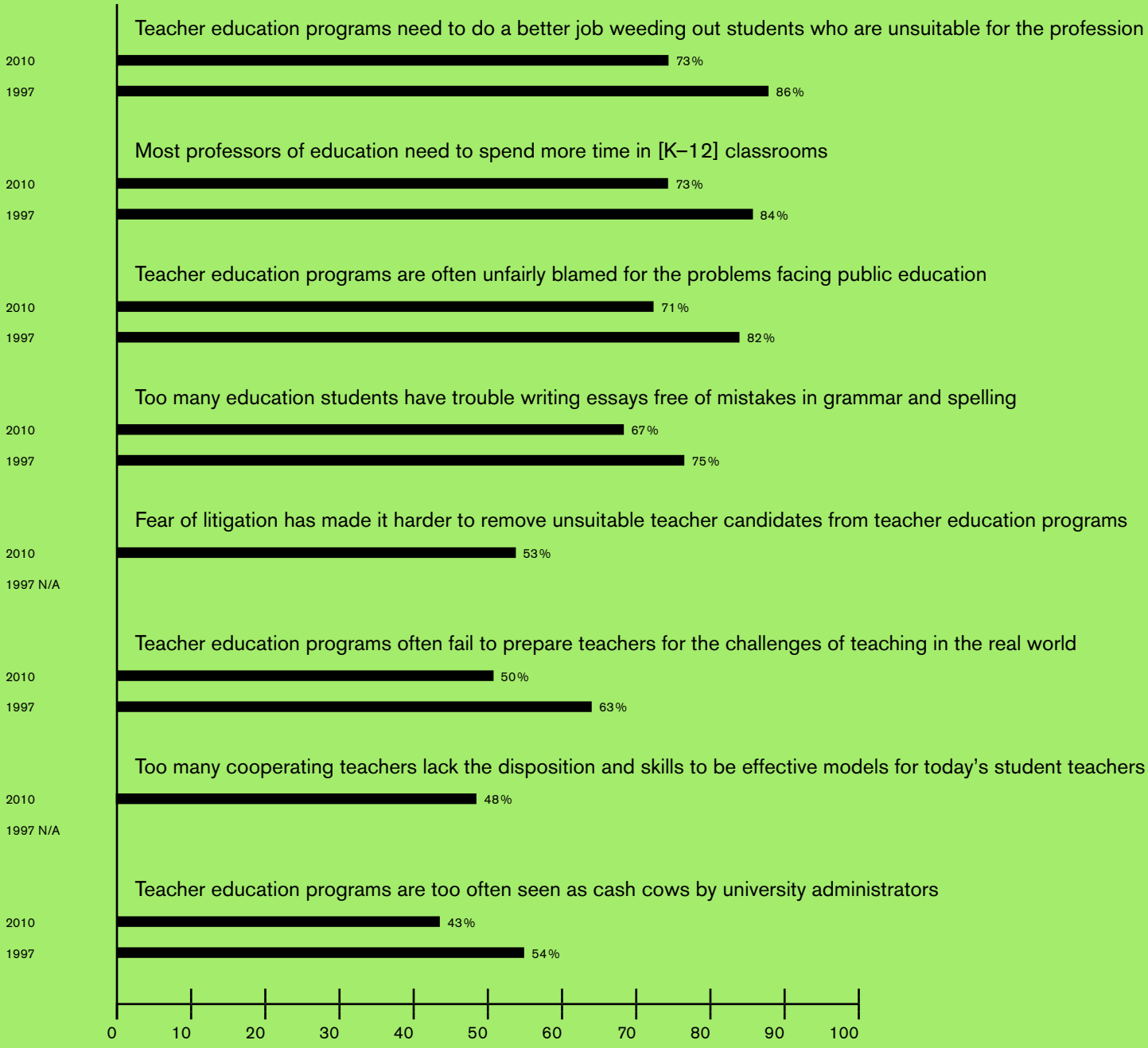
Professors also point to concerns about the quality of students who enter their programs. They say that some are weak candidates for teaching, and more needs to be done either to improve the quality of entering students or to make it easier to remove unsuitable prospects once they are enrolled. More than seven in ten (73 percent) say that teacher education programs "need to do a better job weeding out" less suitable students. Remarked one professor, "There are some schools' teacher education programs that are really big on retention—'We are going to retain these students whether they are capable of doing anything or not.' I have a big problem with that." Most education professors say they "sometimes" (62 percent) or "often" (15 percent) run across students who they seriously doubt have what it takes to be a teacher. One professor commented, "I feel it is vitally important to pre-screen teacher candidates for basic skill competencies before allowing them to enter a teaching preparation program."

Professors are specifically concerned about students' writing skills. Two out of three (67 percent) report that too many of their students "have trouble writing essays free of mistakes in grammar and spelling." (Ironically, only 23 percent say it is absolutely essential to impart to their college students "the importance of stressing correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation.")

Figure A (Sidebar 3)

TRENDS IN EDUCATION-PROFESSOR OUTLOOK, 1997 TO 2010

How close does each of the following come to your own view?
(Percent responding "very close" or "somewhat close")



Percentages in figures may not equal 100 percent due to rounding or omission of answer categories. Question wording may be edited for space, but full question wording is available in Appendix B. Small discrepancies between percentages in the text and those in the appendix are due to rounding.

Figure B
(Sidebar 3)

EDUCATIONAL APPROACHES, 1997 AND 2010

Which comes closer to your view on the role of teachers?	2010	1997
When teachers assign specific questions in such subjects as math or history, is it more important that:		
The kids end up knowing the right answers to the questions or problems	20	12
The kids struggle with the process of trying to find the right answers	66	86
Not sure	14	3

Which is closer to your view on using calculators?	2010	1997
Early use of calculators in elementary school grades can hamper children from learning basic arithmetic skills	42	38
Early use of calculators will improve children's problem-solving skills and not prevent the learning of arithmetic	37	57
Not sure	21	6

Which is closer to your own view?	2010	1997
Competition for rewards such as spelling bees or honor rolls is a valuable incentive for student learning	35	33
Schools should avoid competition among children and foster cooperation	48	64
Not sure	17	3

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Contributing to the critique of student quality is the haphazard manner in which many preparation programs identify and remove unsuitable students. Fewer than half (46 percent) report that their own program has a formal and systematic process in place for removing weak teacher candidates. Rather, 23 percent report having an "informal process" that relies on professors to "counsel out" students and 11 percent indicate that their program relies on students themselves to drop out. Another 17 percent cannot define the process (see Figure 6).

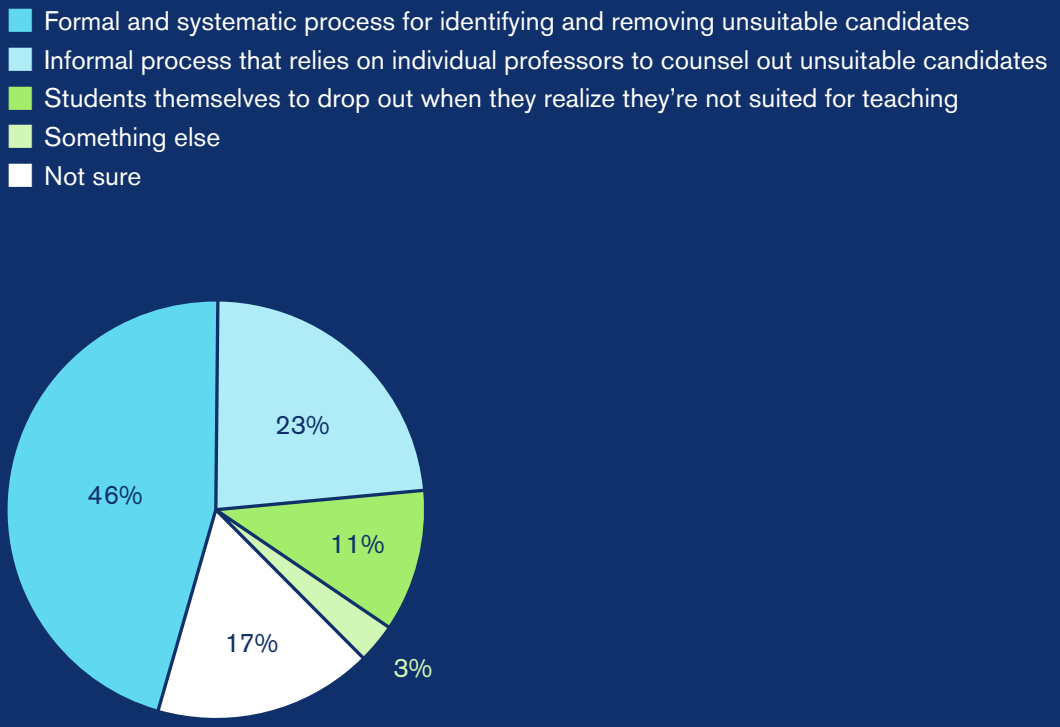
One Ohio professor described her personal aversion to ejecting students: "There [are] always students that you really don't think can do the job, but it's really hard to have someone not finish. It's really hard to kick them out of the program." But another described how the standard operating procedure in her program makes collective self-regulation possible: "We police our own…. We have 'candidate concerns' forms. Anybody who has a student in a class or a field setting can fill out one of these….There's a person in charge who sees that there is a pattern. And then each semester the leadership team of the department reviews the concerns that have been submitted."

Additional external forces may discourage program selectivity. More than half (53 percent) of education professors say that "fear of litigation makes it harder to remove unsuitable teacher candidates." Concerns that unsuccessful students might sue first came up spontaneously in a focus group with North Carolina professors. One participant described it this way: "You also have to think about legal issues. How do you document that and be able to prove to the university that you have done everything….It's not widespread, but it's enough to be a pain in the posterior." Another Los Angeles professor shared her own experience: "I had a student who plagiarized. She said the reason she plagiarized was because I didn't tell her that she couldn't. They wanted to retain her in the program and said I had to change her grade….They just wanted it to go away, because she threatened to sue them. The schools don't want the bad publicity. Because it will get out. If someone sues you, even if you win, it's going to be very expensive."

16. One data point argues against this notion of reflexive self-defense: The percentage of professors saying teacher education programs are unfairly blamed has declined by 11 percentage points, to 71 percent from 82 percent.

Figure 6 REMOVAL OF UNSUITABLE TEACHER CANDIDATES

When it comes to removing unsuitable teacher candidates, does your program mostly rely on:



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4. Professors Fresh from Working in K–12 Classrooms Are More Critical

Education professors who have taught in K–12 classrooms within the past five years tend to be more critical of education schools than those who have been away from the classroom for more than twenty years and those who have no classroom teaching experience. Professors with recent experience in the classroom are more likely to say:

- The system of university-based teacher education in the U.S. "needs many changes" (79 percent of those who have been out of the classroom for five years or less, versus 61 percent of those who have been out for more than 20 years, versus 63 percent of those with no classroom experience).
- "Most professors need to spend more time in K–12 classrooms" (87 percent versus 68 percent versus 62 percent, respectively).
- "Teacher education programs need to do a better job weeding out students who are unsuitable to the profession" (82 percent versus 73 percent versus 68 percent, respectively).

"HAVEN'T SEEN THE INSIDE OF A PRACTICAL CLASSROOM FOR 20 YEARS"

Many education professors are willing to critically assess their colleagues as well as their students. A strong majority (73 percent) believes that "most professors of education need to spend more time in K–12 classrooms." One instructor in the Los Angeles area simply said, "Most of the teachers in teacher education have not been in the classroom for a long time." Another in the same group—a relatively new teacher educator—said that some of his colleagues "haven't seen the inside of a practical classroom for 20 years." The survey data buttress these sentiments: More than four in ten (42 percent) say either that they have never been a classroom teacher or that they haven't been one in more than twenty years.

Some survey participants did note in their written comments that they make efforts to visit schools and classrooms as guest teachers or volunteers, or that they are frequently in the schools observing their student teachers. "Although I have not been a classroom teacher for many years," wrote one professor, "I make sure I teach a class of students at the elementary level in music every year so that I do not lose touch with the children or with the public school system."

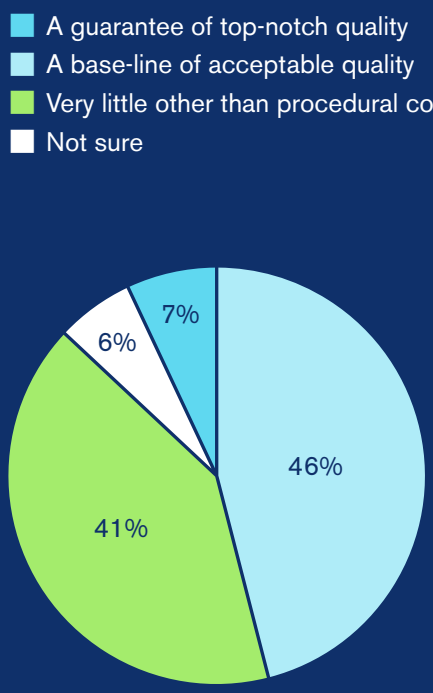
ACCOUNTABILITY FOR EDUCATION PROGRAMS

The current system for evaluating and accrediting schools of education is no bulwark of excellence, according to education professors (see Figure 7). Only 7 percent say that accreditation means the program is top-notch; they are far more likely to say it assures just a base-line of acceptable quality (46 percent) or procedural compliance (41 percent). An education dean interviewed in preparation for this study had just completed an exhaustive process for re-accreditation but described it as little more than paperwork and compliance. In the focus groups, many professors expressed concern about the time it took to complete accreditation. "I donate a lot of my time not just here but nationally to the accreditation process," said an Ohio professor. "But the amount of time that it takes to do this definitely takes away from my ability to prepare for the classes that I teach."

In Ohio, a focus group participant noticed a recent change in what the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) required his university to provide for certification—namely data—and he viewed this as an improvement. "The numbers have to be there this time. It's like they want

Figure 7 VALUE OF EDUCATION PROGRAM ACCREDITATION

From what you know or have heard about the process of professional accreditation of education programs —for example, through organizations like NCATE or TEAC—is it your sense that receiving accreditation means:



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to know what the failure rate is. And they want to know the percentages. I feel like it's a good thing. There's a certain level of accountability that I think we all need. I am perfectly in favor of us policing our own rather than some politician out there deciding what is better for education."

Ultimately, suspicion that things are not quite right on multiple fronts leads professors to suggest that their programs should be held more accountable for the professionals they produce. In fact, more than seven in ten (73 percent) favor "holding teacher education programs more accountable for the quality of the teachers they graduate."

AMBIVALENCE ABOUT ALTERNATIVES

While many teacher educators critique their own programs, the outside world has been busy fashioning alternative paths to teaching (and school leadership) that sidestep traditional education schools altogether. How do professors regard these alternatives? Their responses are surprisingly varied, suggesting openness in the minds of at least some professors toward a new way of doing things (see Figure 8).

Nearly half (47 percent) say that alternative certification programs not run by traditional schools of education "threaten to compromise the quality of the teaching force in the public schools." But the lack of a clear majority is notable, and nearly one-third (32 percent) call such alternative routes "a good way to attract unconventional talent to the public schools." (Another 21 percent say they are unsure.) The survey also asks education professors for their take on "recruiting people for school leadership who have proven track records of success from other fields such as business, law, and the military." Here again, professors are divided—although more say it's a bad rather than good idea by a 42 percent to 33 percent margin. An additional 24 percent are in the "not sure" category.

The survey queries education professors further on this issue by framing a question in the context of an Obama administration initiative to "open up every avenue possible to recruit new teachers." The result is a split decision, with 40 percent agreeing because "we need to do whatever it takes to draw qualified people to the teaching profession from nontraditional sources," and 39 percent dissenting because "only university-based education programs provide

Figure 8 ALTERNATIVE ROUTES TO THE EDUCATION FIELD

How do education professors view alternative routes to teaching and administration?

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the theory, pedagogy, and clinical experiences necessary to produce the highest quality teachers." Again, a relatively large number are unsure (22 percent).

Focus group discussions illustrated these equivocal sentiments. A professor in an Ohio education school was convinced that alternative routes to licensure were a bad idea, saying that they "require minimal preparation…especially for school districts of poverty, [which] tend to get a very large percentage of people who come through those alternative paths…helping to exacerbate the problems. They just don't have as deep a knowledge base on which to draw to make those teaching decisions." But a North Carolina professor thought that the two parallel systems could learn from each other: "There are some components to alternative certification programs that actually we could incorporate that might be useful. But I also think there are things that we do that could be incorporated into alternative certification programs."

Professors of education appear especially concerned about teacher preparation programs run "by school districts or charter management organizations that certify their own teachers." They are far more likely to say such programs are generally a bad idea (51 percent) than a good one (17 percent). One-third of professors (33 percent) say they don't know enough about them to offer an opinion (see Figure 8). One focus group participant pulled no punches in discussing her local school district's alternative teacher-preparation program: "I think it's horrible. It's kind of a joke….Most of the teachers…are not getting their credential through the university now; they are getting it through the school district….[The district] is taking money from the state and the federal government to run this program, and it's a joke."

ACCOLADES FOR TEACH FOR AMERICA

In sharp contrast to the skeptical attitudes regarding most alternative approaches to teacher preparation, a majority of education professors have a high opinion of Teach For America. Fully 63 percent characterize as a good idea "programs like Teach For America that recruit and place high-achieving college graduates in struggling public schools." Only 20 percent say they are a bad idea. In Los Angeles, one educator with direct experience with Teach For America called it "such an incredible model. They take people who are really passionate about it, who really want to do something. They probably have the best training program in that 12 weeks….It is residential. You don't get to leave. You have to stay there. It's 24/7. It is so well-thought-out. It is so well-developed. It's a way

to get the best." Still, several professors in the focus groups and in individual interviews expressed concerns about Teach For America. It is a stopgap measure, they say, that churns out young people who are not necessarily interested in teaching careers and who may leave after just two years in the classroom.

OF MULTIPLE MINDS

The array of responses to alternative teacher preparation reveals that, as with many topics in this report, professors are not of one mind. Many of them feel that an investment of several years in traditional teacher training is the best and correct approach. But many also acknowledge that the traditional path to classroom teaching is no guarantee of excellence. While it is easy for them to dismiss some alternative programs as thoughtless and ineffective, many accept that alternatives can create new entry points for fresh talent, especially for potential educators who would not ordinarily consider traditional education schools.

It is important to note that these survey questions ask professors to generalize about programs that are exceptionally varied, and that differ from district to district, state to state, and campus to campus. The difficulty of rendering across-the-board judgment helps to explain why this particular set of questions has unusually high "not sure" responses. In this realm of teacher training, change and uncertainty prevail.

FEELING UNDER SIEGE

Results in this chapter suggest that education professors are self-reflective and may have become more practical in recent years. Even opinions regarding alternative paths to classroom teaching—which directly challenge the heart of their profession—are more muted than shrill. Still, most education professors, perhaps understandably, respond defensively to external criticism. More than seven in ten (71 percent) believe their programs are under siege, and "often unfairly blamed for the problems facing public education." As one professor put it: "…education schools are blamed for any failure within society. It's always accountability—'Why aren't our students scoring better? Why aren't they doing better? It must be because we don't have effective teachers in the classroom'—when the problems are much more comprehensive and often can't be addressed within a six-and-a-half hour school day."