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## **The Dance: Standardization and Small Liberal Arts Colleges**

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While often not recognized, dancing is a form of communication as well as trust. When partners accept an invitation to dance, each agrees to a role and each trusts that the other both understands and agrees to carry out the role. For teacher education programs, particularly for liberal arts programs, communication with various partners as it relates to standardization takes on a different meaning, almost the reverse of dance. Unlike the trust and acceptance of roles of dance partners, these programs recognize the roles of standards, but their trust and understanding are quite different from larger universities.

Because of the very nature of liberal arts colleges, standardization when narrowly defined can be in opposition to or incongruent with these institutions' intended outcomes of producing graduates who are critical thinkers and problem-solvers. Using ballroom dance as a metaphor, this research examines the following areas related to the impact of standards and the standardization process on liberal arts colleges: (a) standardization and its meaning; (b) quick, quick, slow: the standardization movement—ups and downs of standardization; (c) side steps: current status of standardization at liberal arts colleges—discussions, dialogues, and debates; (d) backward steps: benefits, costs, and limitations of standardization; and (e) the swing: alternative discussions to the standardization debate.

### **The Frame: Standardization and Its Meaning**

The frame is the beginning of communication in ballroom dancing. It reveals the level of experience of the dancer, the understanding and accepting of the roles of the partners, and the preparation and/or readiness to begin the dance. In the standardization movement, the frame as a metaphor is instructive because discussions of standardization often do not begin with a proper frame (i.e., with a definition as a foundation and understanding of the roles of the various

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entities such as states, accrediting agencies, and/or schools/programs of education).

Yet, ironically, when discussions of standardization begin, there is the assumption that there is an agreed upon meaning. The next thing that happens in these discussions is the tendency for researchers and practitioners alike to somehow attempt to decouple standardization from standards. With such assumptions and tendencies, there is bound to be miscommunication between research, policy, and practice. In dance, such miscommunication is what happens when partners step on each other's feet.

What is the frame related to standardization (i.e., what is standardization)? Is it possible to have a shared meaning between policymakers, researchers, and practitioners in order to avoid stepping on each other's feet? Without a proper frame, the dance will inevitably be bumpy.

There are several assumptions that can be made about the definition of standardization. First, there is no shared meaning of standardization. Yet, policymakers and researchers (Bullough, Clark, & Patterson, 2003; Baines, Carpenter, & Stanley, 2000) write about standardization as though there is. Next, based on the basic dictionary definition of standardization, it is not possible to decouple standardization from standards. Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary defines standardization as follows: to compare with a standard; to bring into conformity with a standard. That being the case, it is important to define standards. Finally, in order to appropriately discuss the impact of standardization on programs of education (i.e., small liberal arts colleges), at a minimum we must begin with a definition, if for no other reason than to determine points of agreement or departure. In this paper, then, standardization is defined as a basis of comparison and measure of conformity (expected and/or prescribed competencies and outcomes) to a set of standards/outcomes, whether shared or agreed upon. For example, the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) (2006) states the following about their measurement of standards:

The standards measure an institution's effectiveness according to the profession's expectations for high quality teacher preparation as America enters the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The profession of

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teaching has developed and articulated standards for the preparation of those who enter its ranks. (pp. 7-8)

However, what must be taken into account is that standardization is not new. Therefore, it is important to have an appropriate context for the standardization movement. In dance lingo, the standardization movement could be defined as quick, quick, slow because it appears to be a continuous moving cycle, sometimes quick, sometimes slow.

### **Quick, Quick, Slow: The Standardization Movement— Ups and Downs of Standardization**

Although according to Bullough, Clark, and Patterson (2003) the standardization movement had its origin in the 1980s with the publication of *A Nation at Risk* (National Commission on Educational Excellence, 1983), Kraft (2001) indicated that standardization in teacher education has had a long history. The standardization movement has been in existence at least as long as the 1920s when, in 1927, the American Association of Teachers Colleges was established to “develop standards and procedures for accrediting teacher education programs that guaranteed graduates of accredited programs would competently perform services for which they were specifically prepared” (Bullough et al., 2003, p. 3).

After that start, the next movement came about 25 years later, in 1954, with the establishment of the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE). NCATE’s primary mission was then, as it is now, the development of standards for assessing/evaluating the outcomes of teacher preparation programs. Each of these quick periods of urgency, which include the founding of various agencies to address standards of teacher education programs, has been followed by a slower or longer period in between.

Nearly twenty years after the founding of NCATE in 1954, the 1983 publication of *A Nation at Risk* set the standardization movement into quick steps. As such, according to Kraft (2001),

The end result of that report was the unprecedented standards-setting movement in the late 1980s, first with content standards in the disciplines beginning with mathematics in 1989,

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and then with student performance standards legislated by the federal government in two pieces of legislation, the Goals 2000: Educate America Act and the Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) of 1994. (p. 3)

The outcome of this report created near hysteria around the quality of schooling in America, as indicated by Bullough, Clark, and Patterson (2003), "Americans are demanding new levels of teacher accountability and supporting development and implementation of set and measurable standards of performance that enable comparison across programs, schools, and states" (p. 36).

The next quick step around the standardization movement occurred in 1994 with the National Commission on Teaching and America's Future, comprised of a panel of public officials, business and community leaders, and educators. This panel was supported by the Rockefeller Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation of New York. The findings from this panel indicated that there was dire need for higher student achievement in K-12 and that in order for that to occur there would be a need to restructure the foundation of teacher education. Although accountability of teacher education programs began anew following the recommendations from this report, the standardization movement shifted into its quickest step with the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001.

With this act, accountability has become confused with standards, creating one-size-fits-all models of teacher preparation. Hargreaves (2004), in a speech at the World Bank, best captures what has happened: "Excessive zeal for standards, however, has destroyed high-quality learning at many institutions." This has particularly been the case for small liberal arts colleges.

### **Side Steps: Current Status of Standardization at Liberal Arts Colleges—Discussions, Dialogues, and Debates**

The driving discussions, dialogues, and debates at liberal arts colleges about standardization are that there must be multiple pathways to reach the desired teacher preparation outcomes. As Bullough, Clark, and Patterson (2003) indicated, "What counts as evidence and how evidence is marshaled to make a case for quality have become crucial questions" (p. 39). This process of the homogenization and

standardization of teacher preparation, as Baines, Carpenter, and Stanley (2000) referred to it, is problematic for and unacceptable to liberal arts colleges.

As is currently being debated, standardization makes sweeping assumptions and sidesteps the important differences in teacher education programs. The first assumption, as previously stated, is that there is an agreed upon definition of standards. That assumption is followed by the notion that there is one best format for teacher preparation. Next, it is assumed that standardization has been an inclusive process (i.e., that all institutional types have had equal voice in setting and agreeing on the standards). Kraft (2001) captured more succinctly assumptions about standardization and teacher education programs:

First of all an assumption is made that all Schools of Education endorse the standards, understand what they mean, and how to go about incorporating them into their education programs. But there are multiple meanings surrounding some of the key phrases that are couched in the standards. (p.17)

These assumptions lead to important questions. How can the standardization movement capture a wider range of voices on best practices, including liberal arts colleges? How can a process be developed to define and understand multiple pathways of teacher preparation (i.e., better capturing best practices across institution types)? Given their expertise in educating students who are critical thinkers and problem-solvers, what lessons can other institutional types learn from liberal arts colleges?

These questions would, in fact, tend to make a strong case for the role of liberal arts colleges taking a more active lead in defining standards for teacher education preparation. Linda Darling-Hammond (1997) indicates that inquiry-based classroom teachers who are adept at problem-solving are also most effective at classroom management. Yet, liberal arts colleges have felt left out of the standards' debate and have been in agreement with Baines, Carpenter, and Stanley's (2000) assessment, "The assembly-line approach to teacher preparation will only yield teacher clones who act, think, and teach in prescribed ways. The complex, dynamic, and highly stressful work place of the public school would seem to invite a more sophisticated, more humane response" (p. 39).

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What most often is sidestepped in the discussions and debates on standardization and liberal arts colleges is the important roles that liberal arts colleges play in teacher education (i.e., what other institution types can learn from liberal arts colleges). Allen Berger (2003), one of the few persons to write specifically about liberal arts education and teacher preparation, summarized lessons for other institutions to learn:

While institutions of this type [liberal arts colleges] typically provide an education that is personalized and mentored, they also tend to value demanding coursework, coherent curricula, and meaningful participation in a campus community. Most importantly, they tend to recognize that content knowledge and technical skills by themselves are inadequate, especially if undergraduate education is to prepare students to lead personally meaningful lives and engaged lives as citizens and leaders. To achieve these goals, education must also develop habits of analysis, criticism, curiosity, intercultural sensitivity, and civic participation. (p. 3)

What Berger's assessment demonstrates is that liberal arts colleges suffer from their own silence. Rarely have scholars at liberal arts colleges researched or written about their value in teacher preparation that could benefit the wider community. Consequently, the importance of the role of these institutions in teacher preparation is woefully overlooked and not captured in the standards that define what new teachers need to know and be able to do.

Although Scannell (1999) indicated "there is no one best format for teacher education programs" (p. 12), liberal arts colleges have not had an active voice in the standardization process, of defining some of the important outcomes of best practices of teacher education preparation. Even though these institutions have been sidestepped in these discussions, dialogues, and debates, the costs to their institutions have been and continue to be high.

### **Backward Steps: Benefits, Costs, and Limitations of Standardization**

No one would argue the value of standards for assessing the outcomes of teacher education programs. In any field, having standards

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to define professionalism, provide a sense of direction, and provide priorities upon which to place energy, resources, and effort is not only highly important, but necessary (Kraft, 2001). However, everyone would agree that standardization, as it is currently construed, has severe limitations and enormous costs for institutions, especially liberal arts colleges. For liberal arts colleges, there are institutional costs, programmatic costs, and human costs.

### *Institutional Costs*

The institutional cost for the standardization process on liberal arts colleges can be captured in at least two ways: (a) the impact on their institutional identity; and (b) the financial obligations.

Institutional Identity. Institutional identity refers to the purpose, history, and culture of an institution. Berger (2003) indicated that liberal arts colleges, by virtue of their primary focus on teaching, their size, and their residential nature, are the best places to prepare teachers. However, because standards are typically based on the majority and the institutions that are the largest preparers of teachers, standardization requires liberal arts colleges to subordinate the purpose, history, and culture of their institutions to a single path of teacher preparation. This process certainly has institutional costs because it requires liberal arts colleges to fit into a mold of all teacher education programs, thereby diluting the character and purpose of these institutions.

Rather than benefit from liberal arts education, then, the standardization process for teacher preparation often overlooks the purpose, history, and culture of these institutions. Although this is often the process, it flies in the face of the findings of Baines, Carpenter, and Stanley (2000) who stated, "The teacher must be a perennialist one minute and a social reconstructionist the next ... The teacher might have to be a reading diagnostician one period, and a Shakespearean scholar the next" (p. 39). This is an example of how liberal arts colleges prepare their students. Yet, liberal arts colleges incur a cost to their institutional identity in preparing teachers. Aside from the institutional cost of lost identity and absent history, institutions also incur tremendous financial costs in the standardization process.



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**Financial Obligations.** The financial costs of standardization to an institution are extremely high. They are particularly high for small liberal arts colleges. In many states (i.e., the State of Louisiana), institutions have no choice but to pay the expenses associated with standardization. One means of determining whether an institution meets standards is an assessment by accreditation agencies such as NCATE. For a small liberal arts college, the cost of such accreditation can border on exorbitant. For example, the application and membership fees alone run into thousands of dollars. When those costs are assessed per capita, the financial costs of standardization for small colleges far exceed the costs for larger teacher education programs that produce more graduates. In other words, the return on investment for small liberal arts colleges to demonstrate their ability to meet standards is minimal given the contributions that these institutions have made programmatically for the production of knowledge to teacher education. Yet, interestingly, although liberal arts colleges have endured costs to their programs, rarely are they included in the decision-making regarding standards.

### ***Programmatic Costs***

While often not considered, standardization has had tremendous costs programmatically for liberal arts colleges. When standards confine teacher education programs to a particular model, they narrow the curriculum and learning outcomes that run counter to the purpose of these institutions. As such, standards can restrict the course and direction of the curriculum and knowledge. Interestingly, such restriction of knowledge of graduates is incongruent with necessary knowledge in technological and global societies.

As Hutton (1992) described, “Liberal arts colleges work to ensure that students gain a solid general foundation of knowledge as well as communication and analytical skills that can serve them in whatever career they choose” (p. 2). This very purpose of liberal arts colleges supports the belief of those who suggest that “all that is needed to be a teacher is a good liberal education” (Baines, Carpenter, & Stanley, 2000, citing Hutchins, p. 36).

Although there is no right “cookie cutter” formula for being a successful teacher according to researchers such as Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2005), they agree that beginning teachers “need to have a command of critical ideas and skills and, equally important,

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the capacity to reflect on, evaluate, and learn from their teaching so that it continually improves” (p. 5). Instead of a more restricted curriculum and knowledge that are particularly intrusive and costly to liberal arts colleges, the characteristics of these institutions are important in the preparation of teachers “because the characteristics of a liberal arts college experiences that are related to high-quality teacher preparation may be at least partially replicable in other settings” (Berger, 2003, p. 1). In addition to programmatic costs of standardization on liberal arts colleges, there have also been human costs.

### ***Human Costs***

Scannell (1999) indicated that higher education policies regarding faculty load and reward systems have an impact on the quality of teacher preparation programs. This is particularly intense for liberal arts colleges that are more often smaller in size and have fewer faculty. Yet, faculty at these institutions are assessed by the same standards as the largest producers of teachers. The work of faculty at liberal arts colleges is all the more demanding because, at these institutions, content courses are taught by faculty in the arts and sciences. Therefore, in addition to working with students with the development of their pedagogical knowledge and skills, faculty must work with faculty across campuses and also coordinate and monitor students’ growth and development in their pedagogical content knowledge.

Aside from the tremendous stretch on faculty productivity at liberal arts colleges to fit into a standardization mold, such single-minded models can hamper faculty creativity. Arey (2002), in *Education Week*, described a teacher who feels she is being held in a straightjacket of outcomes. Arey further stated that we have taken standards and the idea of rigorous education and turned them into a rigid formula. Although Arey was describing practicing classroom teachers, the same can be said for faculty, particularly at liberal arts colleges. As Berger (2003) indicated, “These institutions are most likely to produce teachers who value and recognize the importance of their dualistic role—as engineers of social reproduction and as agents of needed social change” (p. 5). No one would argue that it requires faculty who are creative, who constantly challenge themselves to present ideas in new and inventive ways, and who marry the boundaries between theory and

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practice to prepare teachers who are adept at working with children from multiple backgrounds. This would be in keeping with the recommendations of Shulman (2002) who, in discussing the importance of marrying theory and practice, suggested, “the development of an identity that integrates one’s capacities and dispositions to create a more generalized orientation to practice” (p. 38). Yet standardization, by design, stifles faculty creativity, which leads to the underutilization of human potential, which is a high cost for liberal arts colleges that generally already have so few faculty.

### ***The Swing: Alternative Discussions to the Standardization Debate***

Other institutions of higher education can learn important lessons from liberal arts colleges. That is, there are alternatives to the current discussions of standardization. First, there has to be a broader, more inclusive definition of standards. For example, if as defined in this paper, standardization is a basis of comparison and measure of conformity (expected and/or prescribed competencies and outcomes) to a set of standards/outcomes, whether shared or agreed upon, policymakers and researchers alike would agree that there has never been an agreement of any one best way to prepare a teacher, particularly teachers who are able to teach to diverse students. Even though researchers such as Ladson-Billings (1994) and Irvine (1990) have consistently discussed in their work the importance of teacher expectation and culturally relevant pedagogy, nowhere are these captured in the standards. Further, research has not captured what liberal arts colleges can add to their graduates’ knowledge and skills in this area that might advance the field.

Another step that is sorely missing from the current standardization process is the appropriate evaluative measures. That is, without an agreed upon best approach for preparing new teachers, it really is difficult to devise a training process for evaluators of teacher education programs. Scannell (1999) indicated, “There is no one best format for teacher education programs. Conversely, programs regarded to be outstanding vary in structural and conceptual formats” (p. 12). As such, it is difficult to advance the field if appropriate measures for the standards of preparing teachers are unclear or ill-defined. If

appropriate measures cannot be defined, then it is difficult to train evaluators. Consequently, it is understandable that all programs have been evaluated based on conformity regardless of their size and their contributions because evaluators are trained to look for the same things regardless of the institution type.

Finally, the question must be asked, "What, if any, value do standards have in advancing the field?" Put differently, are teacher education programs better off given the current state of standardization? Kraft (2001) responded in this way: "(a) a one size fits all mentality seems to exist concerning standards; and (b) standards often become ends in and of themselves, rather than the means to achieve the ends" (p. 17). Since, as indicated, standardization has existed since the 1920s, standards are not likely to go away.

However, in order to advance the field's understanding and preparation of teachers, policymakers and researchers have to "swing" to a new beat. That is, if as Scannell (1999) indicated, "increasing standards will have an effect on teacher supply" (p. 13), then all teacher education programs need to address such a shortage. As such, the field has to include multiple institution types and voices in both the development and evaluation of standards of teacher education programs, because there are lessons from all institution types and multiple ways to prepare the necessary new teachers.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

There is no question that standardization has had an impact on all teacher education preparation programs, almost to the point of hysteria. As Baines, Carpenter, and Stanley (2000) indicated, "One problem with becoming fanatical about standards is that everything tends to get standardized. Standardization is for widgets, not human beings" (p. 6). What has not been understood is the impact of standardization on different programs. This research suggests, however, that there is tremendous cost to and on liberal arts colleges, which tend to be smaller and provide a more general foundation of knowledge and analytical thought (Hutton, 1992).

These findings are not suggesting the lack of importance of guidelines for preparing teachers who are effective in teaching all children. Rather, this research suggests that there are multiple pathways

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to preparing teachers. Arey (2002) stated, "Effective teachers are creative problem-solvers, analytical thinkers, strong communicators, people capable of nurturing those same qualities in their students" (p. 33). These findings also are supported by Bransford, Darling-Hammond, and LePage (2004) in their latest book on what new teachers need to know and be able to do.

Another outcome of this research suggests that the preparation process of liberal arts colleges has been greatly undervalued, underestimated, and under-researched. In the process, at a time when there is the greatest need for the preparation of larger numbers of teachers, the cost to liberal arts colleges has challenged these institutions to produce new teachers.

Finally, this research calls for a national study on liberal arts colleges and teacher preparation. As this research demonstrates, there is little research on teacher preparation at liberal arts colleges. Such a study will greatly address the gap in the literature and provide a better understanding of multiple pathways to teacher preparation. As Berger (2003) indicated, the liberal arts college "is the ideal place to prepare future teachers who will find meaning in their work, who will see their work as a piece of a larger communal endeavor, and who will have the habits and commitments to sustain them and keep them fresh over the long haul" (p. 12). However, without such a national study, such assumptions cannot be tested.

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