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Karen Symms Gallagher: CAEP Chair Shares Insight into Teacher Preparation, Accreditation

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Karen Symms Gallagher



At the heart of teacher preparation, changes are taking place—a push for continued high standards and an effort to determine the impact various programs are having on P-12 student learning. Leading the way is the Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation ([CAEP](#)), which emerged in 2010 from education leaders’ desire for a next generation of accreditation model to improve the preparation of teachers for America’s schools.

Because of this challenging environment, we reached out to Karen Symms Gallagher, the Emery Stoops and Joyce King Stoops Dean of the University of Southern California (USC) Rossier School of Education. Recently selected chair of the CAEP Board of Directors, Gallagher has been a steady presence in the ever changing world of teacher preparation.

Prior to CAEP, teacher-preparation institutions received accreditation through either National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) or the Teacher Education Accreditation Council ([TEAC](#)), non-profit organizations that acted as accrediting bodies. Founded in 1954, NCATE has shared this space with TEAC since 1997. Institutions typically received accreditation from either NCATE or TEAC, depending on the expectations of each state’s department of education.

In 2009, the Boards of Directors of those organizations appointed a panel—a design team—to facilitate a merger of the two groups into CAEP by the following year.

With its implementation of accreditation standards, CAEP has become the recognized organization responsible for accrediting education preparation programs. At a time when teacher preparation programs are in the midst of a shifting educational environment that demands more in a quicker time frame, CAEP finds itself at the center of change as it guides the nation’s training for future teachers.

Yet it may not be alone for long. Another group has splintered off to start an accreditation alternative and is gaining traction. The Association for Advancing Quality in Educator Preparation ([AAQEP](#)), whose leaders include some individuals previously involved in CAEP, began developing its framework principles in fall 2017. Its website notes a goal of January 2018 to have its Expectations and Processes published.

According to the CAEP website, “Gallagher has more than 30 years of experience in working in the field of educator preparation. Since 2000 she has served as the Dean of USC’s Rossier School of Education and was the Dean at the University of Kansas, School of Education from 1994-2000, leading accreditation efforts at both schools. She has been on the faculty at several universities during her career, also serving as Staff

Director and Senior Policy Consultant to the Ohio General Assembly’s Commission on Education Improvement. Gallagher also served on the CAEP presidential search committee.”

In a recent interview, Gallagher shared her background that has led her to her current position at USC and with CAEP.

“I’ve been a student, and I’ve been a teacher,” Gallagher said. “But I’ve always been a learner. I’m one of those people who loved school. I didn’t think I’d be a teacher, but I married a teacher and realized it was something I wanted to do.”

But it wasn’t until she moved from state to state—and needed her teaching license to transfer—that she realized the benefits of a university education program having appropriate NCATE accreditation. After receiving her doctorate, she found herself at Loyola in Chicago, where the college was preparing for an NCATE visit; part of her load that first year involved helping prepare documents for that visit.

“It gave me, as a brand new professor, an opportunity to put the pieces together and figure out why our university was doing this,” she said.

She then went to the University of Cincinnati, where she was involved in the Holmes partnership, which signaled the beginning of professional development schools. The Holmes group was a deans’ organization, she said, with reform driven by deans who had researched options and felt strongly that school education programs should emulate the medical profession with its teaching hospitals. At the time, the shift to professional development schools was an enormous—and controversial—change, partnering only with 10 Professional Development Schools in Cincinnati. It involved a great deal of

collaboration among the university, the Cincinnati Board of Education, and the local union.

“I consider myself fortunate to be able to re-enforce what it takes to be a successful teacher and what’s involved in that.”

Gallagher left the University of Cincinnati as associate dean for academic affairs in its College of Education, becoming the dean of the School of Education at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, where she was involved in its NCATE accreditation and professional development schools, and she values the role those schools play in preparing future teachers.

“Professional development schools help novices become better,” she said.

Following KU’s successful accreditation through NCATE, she then went to USC Rossier in 2000, a program that had not kept up its accreditation for its small teacher preparation undergraduate program. The USC program makes use of the university’s own Academic Program Reviews (APRs) overseen by its provost, much like an accreditation program and held every seven to 10 years. “We review ourselves,” she said. “APRs involve talking a look at ourselves and making changes.” Out of that process, the school eliminate its undergraduate teacher education program and moved to a Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) degree. They then sought and achieved NCATE accreditation for the new program, which expanded with an online option in 2009 and has grown to include students from all 50 states in the online program.

With the movement from NCATE to CAEP, Gallagher was asked to join the CAEP team and was then on the search committee for a new president, selecting Christopher A. Koch.

“I have been impressed with him,” she said. “He has really supported preparation of teachers.”

A few months ago, she was asked to consider serving as chair. She is also involved in Deans for Impact, a founding member and represents one of several participating educator-preparation programs seeking to develop a Common Indicators System as a way to collect data regarding the impact of such programs. Among other universities involved in Deans for Impact are Temple University, Arizona State University, Texas Tech University, University of Wyoming, and Louisiana Tech University.

Like parents doing their part to ensure quality education for their children, Gallagher and others are instrumental in implementing changes that shift to the front of the classroom. While many see today as a period of major transformation for education, Gallagher said the profession is continually shifting.

“There has always been change—sometimes it’s more obvious than others,” she said. “Change is rapid...but as soon as it feels meaningful, it starts to slow down. Sometimes we pay more attention to other things.

“And that’s why CAEP is important to me,” she said. “The initial couple of years were challenging, but I’ve been impressed with Chris Koch’s leadership as president.”

Gallagher said CAEP has had approximately 100 programs that have successfully completed the CAEP accreditation process, with fewer than 5 percent not receiving accreditation in the three rounds of CAEP accreditation. That points to the positives of the CAEP process, she said.

A key development in CAEP’s efforts to improve teacher preparation programs, according to Gallagher, are the [five standards](#) that schools have to meet:

Standard 1. Content and Pedagogical Knowledge

Standard 2. Clinical Partnerships and Practice

Standard 3. Candidate Quality, Recruitment, and Selectivity

Standard 4. Program Impact

Standard 5. Provider Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement

“We’ve gotten better with being more specific about that,” she said. “The process of accreditation is more than just showing inputs—things we can easily count that don’t say anything about what people know or are able to do when they graduate.”

For example, she said, Standard 4: Program Impact states: “The provider demonstrates the impact of its completers on P-12 student learning and development, classroom instruction, and schools, and the satisfaction of its completers with the relevance and effectiveness of their preparation.”

To know the impact, though, universities must rely on reporting from other entities, such as the various school districts involved. It’s important to get that information in a timely fashion so programs can measure their success and make changes as needed.

“How does any program know [its impact]?” she asked. “In the Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, we want to know how many of our alums have been hired. What happened to them? We want to know what differences our graduates are making.”

Because change is continual in education, Gallagher said determining ways to accurately assess programs' and, in turn teachers', impact is especially important. But there needs to be some consistency among universities' teacher preparation programs.

[“Deans for Impact](#) is developing five instruments—dispositions, class observations methodology, survey of principals, and year-after report,” she said. “We’re trying to develop common instruments; since everyone does these things differently, it’s hard to make comparisons. Twenty-four of us are sharing data to see if we can’t use common instruments.

“For me, I’m not interested in teacher education looking exactly the same, but we ought to be able to demonstrate what teachers believe—their dispositions,” she said. “We are committed to making some common observations about people going into education. That’s the future—three to four common instruments for improvement—not for evaluation.”

Gallagher doesn’t lose sight of the fact that each school has its own challenges. USC Rossier has focused historically on serving the needs of students from urban areas, but following USC’s most recent Academic Program Review, the school revised its mission to emphasize equity no matter the location of a school.

“When I came here, our big strategic planning was Excellence in Urban Education—learning locally, nationally, and globally,” she said. “But we had to confront the fact that we weren’t being clear on what we meant by urban education.”

The school mission is now more succinctly about advancing educational equity. “We have prepared teachers all over the country to meet the needs of ELL, kids in

poverty, the affluent, the gifted. Rural and urban schools are each facing challenges when it comes to resources and services.

“We work with schools for all kids—not just rural or urban,” she said. “It isn’t where they are; it’s what they need.”