Ed. School Deans Join Forces to Bolster Teacher Preparation

By Stephen Sawchuk

More than a dozen education school deans are banding together, aiming to design a coherent set of teacher-preparation experiences, validate them, and shore up support for them within their own colleges and the field at large.

Deans for Impact, based in Austin, Texas, launches this month with a $1 million grant from the Charles and Lynn Schusterman Family Foundation.

The new group's embrace of data-informed changes to teacher-preparation curricula—even, potentially, based on "value added" information—is likely to generate waves in the insular world of teacher preparation. It's also a testament to teacher-educators' search for an alternative to traditional associations and accreditation bodies.

And, the deans say, it's a chance to move away from talking about which information on teacher preparation to collect to beginning the use of such data.

"This information is necessary but not sufficient," said Jack Gillette, the dean of Lesley University's graduate school of education. "You still need to make sense of it to create knowledge about the scholarship of teacher prep: What are the right sequencing, weighting, and design moves you need to make the best possible teachers?"

The idea of Deans for Impact was generated through informal conversations over a two-year period led by Benjamin Riley, a former director of policy and advocacy at the Oakland, Calif.-based NewSchools Venture Fund; David Andrews, the education dean at Johns Hopkins University; and Tom Stritikus, a former education dean at the University of Washington. (Mr. Stritikus now works for the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.)

Among the group's core principles:
• Using common measures for gauging graduates' classroom performance;

• Collecting, sharing, and using data as a basis for making changes to programs;

• Using research to identify the features of effective teacher-preparation programs; and

• Being transparent about and accountable for results.

"I think it's absolutely important that deans help lead efforts to mobilize ed. schools to take responsibility for what we do and our contributions to public education more broadly, to define those and drive improvements that are identifiable and detectable," said Robert C. Pianta, the dean of the Curry School of Education at the University of Virginia and one of the participating deans.

Diverse Membership

The idea of a partnership among education school deans aimed at improving teacher preparation isn't new. The Holmes Group, a consortium mainly of deans at research universities, issued several reports on teacher education beginning in 1986 and eventually built a research collaborative. But its work petered out in the 1990s.

Deans for Impact's initial crop of 18 members represents a broader variety of institutions than that undertaking. The new group spans public universities supplying hundreds of teachers; small, private programs; and independent nonprofits, such as the Boston Teacher Residency, that partner with colleges and school districts.

That diversity is critical, said Mr. Riley, who will serve as the group's lead staff member. "It is not an elitist movement; we have the full gamut," he said. "We want to have a member dean participating at all times that any other dean at any ed-prep program could look at and say, 'They're leading a program kind of like mine.' "

It will be the deans' job to tackle substantive challenges to the work with their faculty members, as well as operational ones, such as securing more funding for experiments to take root. Not coincidentally, many of the participating deans have already, in one way or another, shaken things up at their respective colleges.

Hunter College's David Steiner helped pioneer the use of videos to critique and hone teacher-candidates' skills. The University of Southern California, under Karen Gallagher,
now offers much of its teacher preparation online. Mari Koerner of Arizona State University has been featured in Education Week and elsewhere for revamping undergraduate education programming and doubling the length of student-teaching.

A shift to more outcomes-oriented, research-based, and nimble programming won’t necessarily be easy, Lesley's Mr. Gillette acknowledged. But, he said, his college's faculty members have been more open to making use of data because of their partnership with the Urban Teacher Center, a nonprofit alternative route that prepares teachers in Baltimore and the District of Columbia.

The partnership has helped open new conversations among the college's faculty about high-quality student-teaching, coursework, and the rapid collection and analysis of data, he said.

"They feel they can model appropriate uses of data and are therefore much more open to alumni data coming back," Mr. Gillette said.

"That doesn't mean there aren't folks who think value-added data is the devil," he added, referring to the controversial technique that uses students' standardized-test scores to estimate teacher quality.

A second prong of the group's work involves building public and policy support for its goals. Among the group's first actions to that end will be issuing comments supporting the U.S. Department of Education's proposed regulations for teacher preparation.

Those rules, unveiled last month, seek to strengthen existing accountability provisions in the federal Higher Education Act by requiring states to rate programs on such factors as graduates' hiring rates, surveys of districts, and whether each program's teachers go on to boost student learning. The rules have already generated more than 1,700 public comments, nearly all of them critical.

Deans for Impact says the data generated from the rules will be necessary to build the systems the group envisions.

In its forthcoming comments, the group also encourages the Education Department to phase in the rules by 2018, two years earlier than the agency outlined in its plan.
"While some transition time is appropriate, delaying the consequences until 2020 runs the very real risk that these regulations will not be taken seriously by the field," the deans say in the letter.

Such comments already represent a perspective different from that of other groups in the field, especially the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education.

That organization, along with most other higher education lobbying groups, contends that the rules would extend punitive sanctions to colleges and set a dangerous financial-aid precedent, because poorly rated programs would not be permitted to offer federal TEACH grants to support teacher preparation.

**Challenges Ahead**

One potential liability for the Deans for Impact concerns its connections to the NewSchools Venture Fund, a group that provides seed funding to various K-12 ventures and that has been critical of traditional teacher preparation in the past.

While at the fund, Mr. Riley helped draft federal legislation to support the creation of "teacher-preparation academies," potentially circumventing university-based programs. His then-colleague, Julie Mikuta, is now the senior director of education at the Schusterman Foundation, and his former boss, Ted Mitchell, became the undersecretary at the Education Department in 2014 and is overseeing the federal regulations.

At least one critic of Mr. Riley’s said he will maintain an open mind about Deans for Impact.

"I don't see any problem with a group of deans working together on issues they don't think are being met elsewhere," said Kenneth Zeichner, a professor of teacher education at the University of Washington, in Seattle. "I think there's a lack of good research to support practices. Strengthening that is a good idea."

Mr. Zeichner added, though, that he favors alternatives to value-added measures of program quality and hopes that the project will also address the need for more investments in teacher education.

Deans for Impact's long-term success is not secured, given the limited shelf life of the Holmes Group effort and other attempts to make teacher preparation a more scientific, less haphazard enterprise.
"You have to change practice in a way that's not dependent on particular people," Mr. Zeichner argued. "All those deans are going to be gone in a few years."

The group will be incorporated as an independent nonprofit. For now, the Washington-based consulting group Bellwether Education Partners is serving as its fiscal sponsor.

Benjamin Riley is helping to launch a group led by deans of education schools that will support revisions to teacher-preparation programs.

—Molly Landreth for Education Week

**The Members**

The 18 founding members of Deans for Impact represent a diverse mix of education schools, including public, private, regional, research, and alternative institutions.

**Gregory Anderson**
Temple University
Philadelphia
David Andrews  
Johns Hopkins University  
Baltimore

Carole Besile  
University of Missouri–St Louis

David Chard  
Southern Methodist University  
Dallas

Karen Gallagher  
University of Southern California  
Los Angeles

Jack Gillette  
Lesley University  
Cambridge, Mass.

Frank Hernandez  
University of Texas of the Permian Basin  
Odessa, Texas

Mayme Hostetter  
Relay Graduate School of Education  
New York City

Mari Koerner  
Arizona State University  
Tempe, Ariz.

Corinne Mantle-Bromley  
University of Idaho  
Moscow, Idaho

Shane Martin  
Loyola Marymount University  
Los Angeles
Bill McDiarmid
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Linda Patriarca
East Carolina University
Greenville, N.C.

Robert Pianta
University of Virginia
Charlottesville, Va.

Scott Ridley
Texas Tech University
Lubbock, Texas

Tom Smith
University of Arkansas
Fayetteville, Ark.

Jesse Solomon
Boston Teacher Residency

David Steiner
Hunter College, City University of New York

SOURCE: Deans for Impact