Teachers’ Colleges Upset by Plan to Grade Them

By TRIP GABRIEL

Grades are the currency of education — teachers give them to students, administrators grade teachers and states often assign grades to schools.

Now U.S. News & World Report is planning to give A through F grades to more than 1,000 teachers’ colleges, and many of the schools are unhappy, marching to the principal’s office to complain the system is unfair.

Numerous education school deans have protested that the ratings program’s methodology is flawed since the program was announced last month. In a letter last week, officials from 35 leading education colleges and graduate schools — including Columbia, Harvard, Michigan State and Vanderbilt — denounced an “implied coercion” if they do not cooperate with the ratings.

U.S. News and its partner in the ratings, the National Council on Teacher Quality, an independent advocacy group, originally told schools that if they did not voluntarily supply data and documents, the teacher quality group would seek the information under open-records laws. If that did not work, the raters planned to give the schools an F.

That got the attention of educators.

Brian Kelly, the editor of U.S. News, said the push-back from education schools was evidence of “an industry that doesn’t want to be examined.”
“These teacher-education programs are hugely important and not very well scrutinized,” Mr. Kelly added. “This is coming at a time when you have this tremendous national push for improvements in teacher quality: Who’s teaching the teachers?”

But in response to the criticism and to many schools’ refusal so far to cooperate, Mr. Kelly rescinded the plan to flunk schools for which data could not be obtained.

“We regret that language,” he said Tuesday. “It’s really not the way we want to be doing business.”

Education schools have faced criticism frequently over the years. They are faulted by a recent wave of education advocates as emphasizing education theory over hands-on classroom training, and as graduating teachers with weak academic skills.

The federal education secretary, Arne Duncan, has said that many, if not most, teacher-training programs are mediocre. “It is time to start holding teacher-preparation programs more accountable for the impact of their graduates on student learning,” Mr. Duncan said in a speech in November.

Kate Walsh, the president of the National Council on Teacher Quality, said that school principals were “deeply dissatisfied with the quality of candidates coming through their doors.” Ms. Walsh said that rating education schools would be valuable in teacher recruitment.

The project, which will cost $3.6 million and be completed next year, is being underwritten by education foundations including the Carnegie Corporation and the Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation.
The education deans who have voiced objections do not echo the familiar complaint of college presidents about U.S. News rankings — that they have turned undergraduate admissions into an arms race.

Rather, the deans object that the teacher quality council’s methods for arriving at ratings are not transparent enough and are not supported by research. To arrive at its ratings, for example, the group has requested detailed information about courses, textbooks and admissions selectivity.

“Nobody’s against being evaluated or having good reliable information available to the public about how we can prepare better teachers,” said Mary Brabeck, dean of New York University’s school of education. “But what will we know if everybody uses the same textbook? What will that tell us about how you prepare highly effective teachers?”

Sharon P. Robinson, president of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education, said the ratings were focusing on superficial “inputs” rather than “outcomes,” like how well teacher graduates perform in the classroom.

“We have serious skepticism that their methodology will produce enough evidence to support the inferences they will make,” said Dr. Robinson, who has advised her 800 member schools that the U.S. News project is “not worthy of your involvement.”

Ada Beth Cutler, dean of the education college of Montclair State University, said she would not cooperate, based on her earlier negative experience with a National Council of Teacher Quality survey. That convinced her that the group “has little interest in making responsible and evidence-based judgments,” Dr. Cutler said.
“There are a significant number of teacher-preparation programs in the country doing an outstanding job,” she added. “A large number are doing an O.K. job, and a smaller number ought to be shut down. But given the current climate, which is extremely critical of university-based teacher preparation, it would be terrible to put out results that are not valid and reliable and based on un-vetted criteria.”

Ms. Walsh, whose group was founded “to provide an alternative national voice to existing teacher organizations,” according to its Web site, said that short of sitting in on a college’s classes for a year, her evaluation methods are sound.

She called the colleges’ critique of her focus on course content “a bit of a red herring.”

“What they want us to do is hold off until a perfect assessment is in place,” Ms. Walsh said.

In response to the criticism, her group has scheduled a Webinar on Wednesday to explain its methodology, for which 450 educators are signed up.

The ratings system, which will employ 17 standards, was field-tested in smaller studies the teacher quality group did in Texas and Illinois.

The Illinois ratings, which gave high marks to only a handful of 53 schools in the state, were criticized on release last year even by some schools that earned good grades.

An alliance of organizations representing education schools said in a statement at the time that grading them based on textbooks and course descriptions was like “evaluating the quality of restaurants by only requesting that menus be mailed to the evaluator — without sampling the food or visiting the site.”
Penelope L. Peterson, dean of the education school at Northwestern, whose school got an A minus, the highest grade in the state, said she would participate in the national ratings, despite some misgivings.

Dr. Peterson learned last year that it was better to ensure that Ms. Walsh’s group got the information it sought than to have it rely on what is publicly available on a Web site. Had Northwestern not provided extra information, Dr. Peterson said, it would have received a zero on four of the evaluation standards.

But Deborah Curtis, dean of the education college at Illinois State University, took away the opposite lesson from her efforts to communicate directly with Ms. Walsh’s research staff.

“They did not want facts,” Dr. Curtis said. “They had their own preconceived notions.” She said the teacher quality group, whose advisory board includes advocates for charter schools and alternative-teacher training programs like Teach for America, is biased against traditional teacher colleges.

It did not listen to Illinois State’s efforts to clarify its data, Dr. Curtis said, and so the education school, the largest in state with 5,000 students, stopped cooperating.

Its grade was an F.