College of Education Alumni Focus Group

Fall 2025

The EPP used a cross-sectional descriptive qualitative focus group design to evaluate how recent graduates perceive their impact on P-12 student learning as well as the effectiveness of their educator preparation. This protocol aligns with **CAEP (Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation) Standard 4 (Program Impact)**, specifically regarding completer satisfaction and relevance of preparation.

1. Research Design & Objectives

The primary objective was to gather "thick, rich descriptive data" (Geertz, 1973) regarding graduates' perceptions of their preparedness for the classroom and impact on student learning.

- **Design:** cross-sectional descriptive study using semi-structured focus group interview
- **Goal:** To understand how recent graduates perceive their impact on P-12 student learning and their educator preparation.
- **Key Themes Explored:**
    - Impact on student learning
    - Instructional preparedness (pedagogy and content knowledge).
    - Use of data and technology
    - Continuous program improvement

2. Participant Selection (Sampling)

Recruitment targets recent graduates (1-4 semesters after commencement) who are currently employed as teachers of record.

- **Sampling Strategy: Stratified Purposeful Sampling**.
    - *Stratification criteria:* Grade band (Elementary, Middle, Secondary), certification area (LBD, STEM, Arts/Humanities), demographics
- **Inclusion Criteria:**
    - Completed the program within the last 1–2 years (to ensure recall of program specifics while having enough in-service experience to reflect).
    - Currently employed in a role requiring the certification obtained.
- **Group Composition:**
    - **Size:** 5–8 participants per group (large enough for diverse views, small enough for individual voices); total n of 11

3. Data Collection Procedure

- **Format:** To respect the time constraints of working teachers but honor the human connection cultivated at our EPP, we offered both a virtual or in-person session.
- **Duration:** 60–90 minutes maximum, though written comments after the discussion were welcomed
- **Facilitator:** A faculty member *not* directly responsible for grading the participants in the past (to reduce social desirability bias).
- **Ethical Considerations:**
    - Informed consent was waived by REC; not considered research. Candidates were told their comments would be aggregated and noting said could impact their certification

4. Instrumentation: The Interview Protocol

Due to time constraints, we jump into key questions after a brief, but warm introduction.

1. Reconnection/Introduction
    a. How is your first year going?
2. Content Questions
    a. How do you impact your students' learning?
    b. How do you know students are learning as a result of your teaching?
    c. What did you learn at Spalding that helped you impact student learning?
    d. How do you work with student data?
    e. How much technology do you use in your teaching? How much technology do your students use?
    f. What do we need to do to better prepare teachers?
3. Thank you and reminder to send written thoughts

5. Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using Saldaña's (2021) cyclical and coding guidelines.

1. **Transcription:** Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim
2. **Coding:**
    - *Deductive Coding:* Mapping responses to pre-existing standards (e.g., InTASC Standards, CAEP components).
    - *Inductive Coding:* Identifying emergent themes that were unexpected (e.g., "struggle with IEPs," "parental communication").
3. **Triangulation:** Focus group themes should be cross-referenced with other data sources to further validate findings.

6. Limitations & Future Ideas

- **Survivor Bias:** The most dissatisfied graduates may have left the profession or refused to participate.
    - *Future plan:* Actively recruit graduates known to be working in "hard-to-staff" schools.
- **Recall Bias:** Participants may misremember specific course content.
    - *Future plan:* Provide a program syllabus or course list during the session as a visual prompt.
- **Social Desirability Bias:** The graduates may always want to please anyone associated with their EPP with perceived "good answers".
    - *Future plan:* Use a Graduate Assistant to collect data for education faculty analysis

References

Geertz, C. (1973). Chapter 1/Thick Description: Toward an interpretive theory of culture. *The interpretation of cultures: Selected essays*, 3-30.

College of Education Alumni Focus

Group Fall 2025

Results

Participants:

Eleven graduates

3 Elementary, 2 P-12 Art, 2 LBD, 1 Middle School Science, 1 Secondary Math, 2 Secondary English

9 White, 2 Black

8 Female, 2 Male, 1 Nonbinary

1. How do you impact your students' learning?
    a. Four alums cite "building relationships with students"
        i. "Being the school big sis when you aren't much older than students in a caring way"
        ii. "Students respond to consistency. They check in with me first thing in the morning during small group and then I'm the last person to see them before they leave. To say I love you, I hate you, I had a bad day because of you, whatever. They just need me there."
        iii. "Teachers will comment when I remember things about students and ask them about it like the birthday party at the zoo over the weekend. They see me building that relationship with students and I think that's why I got my job. They saw me develop relationships with students and wanted to hire me."
        iv. "For me it starts with having a welcoming classroom. They want to be there. I have pillows everywhere, flexible seating. I make them feel safe and loved."
    b. Several make comments about "rough home life" in context of care and respect
        i. "I really think it's about having high expectations for all my students, even with our large refugee population, and my ELLs with their tough backgrounds, I have high expectations."
        ii. "My students need to know that I care about and respect them before they will respect me. I think that's related to the homes they come from and how things happen there."
        iii. "Having these students with unimaginable home lives and they police themselves, saying things like, 'Man, she respects us, we've got to be cool.'"

2. How do you know students are learning as a result of your teaching?
        i. "When I hear conversations between my students about things I've taught them, or strategies to use, like, 'Remember, Ms. D said to look in the book for evidence,' I know they are learning and what I'm doing is having an impact."
        ii. "When my students are really learning, having that AHA moment, they can't wait to tell you and the whole class about it. They let you know. Which is good."
        iii. "I have three RTI classes where I'm doing math interventions to help them move past novice and apprentice. We took the MAP test three weeks ago and students who scored points to move them closer to our goal asked their teachers if they could come and show me their scores. They definitely want you to know."

3. What did you learn at Spalding that helped you impact student learning?
    a. "It's everything. A combination of what we were taught and practiced, like lesson planning and management strategies, but trying them in our settings and see what works, or what we still need to work on."

b. “One thing that was really helpful for me was taking the ESL methods course in the M. Ed. Program when I was still in my MAT. That course showed me how to make lessons and assessments that were equal in content level but language friendly. And now that I’m working with so many ELLs, I need that.”
c. “I was really prepared for the teacher evaluations and my first year because of the huge electronic portfolio we had to do. I still go to it some days and review what I was doing then to remind myself about the domains.”
d. “We had such a variety of coursework, from literacy classes, to classroom management and assessment, to classes about special education that I felt like I knew about everything.”
e. “As a career-changer, the program really laid the foundation for me in terms of understanding what education really is from the teacher’s perspective and why we do what we do.”
f. “Two years ago, I was an Instructional Assistant that wanted to be a teacher. I was in my early 40's and unsure if I could even accomplish something like that. The teachers at Spalding were amazing and made me feel like I was a natural teacher. They gave me both the confidence and the tools I needed to accomplish my dream. I would not be where I am now without their help, guidance, and support; which I am truly grateful for.”

4. How do you work with student data?
    a. “I work with data all day every day. As an ECE resource teacher it is really my job, though a lot of regular ed teachers don’t seem to understand why I collect all the data I do.”
    b. “As a regular ed teacher, I got these pink sheets to track student data and didn’t know how to do it or if what I was recording was right. It was about time on task by minutes, and I didn’t know to do it by minute based on the IEP.”
    c. “In subjects that aren’t tested or don’t even have curriculum maps [referring to Art], you have to do the data yourself if you do it at all.”
    d. I do my own pre and post test and comparisons to see if students improve.”
    e. “In elementary, we use the MAP to create tier groups and workshop groups. So the whole group looks at data to know how to work with students as a team.”
    f. “Even though I do RTI math, the first time we did MAP testing, I had to have a support teacher come in and show me how to set up the students in the computer and do it.”

5. How much technology do you use in your teaching? How much technology do your students use?
    a. Everything is online since COVID
        i. “When I took the ed tech class here, I hated it because I thought it was too hard to use technology in math. But all students have Chromebooks. And now I have a ton of online resources to help with teaching math and math interventions.”
        ii. “All the work is in Google now, which I’ve see the transition to over time as an Instructional Assistant to now being a teacher. We really needed the Google Classroom training we got in the multimedia class here.”
        iii. “As a special area teacher, I know the students spend a lot of their day on computers, so I don’t do all that much with students in art on the computer. But I use my basic tech like the touchscreen and projection all the time.”
    b. Concerns about AI
        i. “My students want to ChatGPT everything! I have had to get really creative about how to keep them from using that stuff when everything we do is on Chromebooks.”
        ii. “Our PLC is even learning about how to use AI for teaching and I’m conflicted because it seems wrong to me since we don’t want students to use it so they learn to think. But aren’t we learning to think about teaching too?”

6. What do we need to do to better prepare teachers?

a. Multiple comments about creating and interpreting IEPS.
    i. “As an LBD teacher, I needed more help to understand all the paperwork of the job. I had never written an IEP by myself before I got hired, and I had 18 students on my caseload. So, I saw you need to teach students about IEPS and paperwork, even to understand how much data you have to collect and how the PLEP and goals and everything relate.”
    ii. “As a regular teacher I didn’t understand enough about IEPs to know how to read them at first, so it would be good to teach that all of us.”
    iii. “I had [another professor] for Inclusive and we learned all about IEPs. She brought in examples with all identifying data marked out and we analyzed them and presented on them. I’m glad I had her for that class.”
    iv. “When I got hired all new teachers had to go to a bootcamp where they trained us on IEPs and gave us a one page sheet to create from IEPs to keep track of the modifications and goals. Having something like that in education classes would be good.”
b. How to manage the daily challenge of planning, teaching, assessing
    i. “In terms of lesson planning, we did one or two KTIP lessons per class and they were very in depth, but I could have used more emphasis on how to make broad plans for a week or so at a time, and how to think about lesson planning in a more realistic way. It’s impossible to do a college type lesson for every subject every day.”
    ii. “Yeah, I had to learn how to create shorter plans of my goals and the steps to get there. And I had to learn how to grade more efficiently with check mark grades and things so that I didn’t spend hours after school grading.”
c. Other thoughts:
    i. “You could also help LBD students understand all the possible jobs like self-contained versus resource teaching. I thought I didn’t want self-contained, and now I love it.”
    ii. “For secondary teachers, we need subject specific methods courses like the elementary or LBD people have. I had to learn about specific strategies and things on my own.”
    iii. “As an elementary teacher, I wanted more content out of some of my subject methods courses because it’s been awhile since I’ve taken science and social studies classes, but I didn’t get that from social studies at the University.”
    iv. “I think we needed practice and instruction in how to communicate with parents. I was so intimidated to make my first phone call home. I also think we could learn how to email appropriately with etiquette and ethics and even instruction in laws about how to refer to students in email with initials.”
    v. “We talked earlier about the importance of establishing a culture of respect and I could have used more practical examples about how to actually do that because I struggle with Domain 2A.”
    vi. “More practical examples of differentiation would be good too. We talked about differentiation in every class and put it into lesson plans, but sometimes I felt like I was making it up and it wouldn’t actually work, so it would have been good to see more examples.”
    vii. “Yeah, I had to create ILPs for every RTI student and I wasn’t sure what those were or how to do that.”
d. Field Experience/Co-Teaching Specific Ideas (from Traditional Candidates only
    i. “Field experience placements need to be more considerate of the students. For example, having a list of schools to choose from might help, especially if there are transportation issues.”
    ii. “My Co-Teaching placement was a bit unrealistic because I had magnet students who loved math and wanted to learn and didn’t have behavior issues, and I have the opposite of that now, so it would have been good for me to have two placements maybe to see something other than the best of the best.”

iii. “I wish we would have been observed more before co-teaching, because I was so nervous to teach in front of a supervisor. I’m glad I subbed before I got hired, because that helped me overcome my shyness and nervousness even more.”

Analysis:

- Comments were mostly positive. Students expressed satisfaction with the program and their preparation in terms of the variety of coursework, practical skills learned, and confidence building.
- The most prominent theme was the critical role of relationships in student learning. Alums repeatedly cited building rapport with students as their primary way of impacting learning. This goes beyond simple friendliness; it's about creating a safe, consistent, and welcoming classroom environment where students feel seen and heard. Alums also identified several ways they know students are learning, moving beyond traditional test scores. They value observable student behaviors that demonstrate genuine understanding and engagement.
- Areas for improvement mentioned that align with COE faculty conversation were:
    - Data and Documentation: Many teachers, particularly in general education, feel unprepared to work with student data, including reading and implementing IEPs. There's a clear need for more practical, hands-on training on how to collect, interpret, and apply various forms of data.
    - Lesson Planning: While they appreciated in-depth lesson planning, alums noted a need for training on more realistic, shorter-term planning for daily use.
    - Communication Skills: They requested more instruction on professional communication with parents and colleagues, including phone calls and emails.
    - Differentiation: Teachers want more practical, real-world examples of differentiation and classroom management strategies that go beyond theoretical concepts.