

Driving Innovation to Address the Teacher Shortage

By Robert Goodman, Ed.D.
Executive Director, NJ Center for Teaching and Learning

The critical [shortage of teachers](#) has reached crises level. That, along with the recent announcement that hundreds of billions of dollars of student debt will be forgiven have become hot education topics.

Both crises share a common cause: a system that has allowed colleges, universities, and graduate schools (known as “institutions of higher education” or IHEs) to raise tuition to astronomical levels, even while their effectiveness has declined.

The common element driving these twin crises is the system for accrediting IHEs.

While accreditation is intended to protect students from unscrupulous degree mills, it has the unintended consequence of stifling innovation by making the development of new IHEs long, expensive, and difficult.

The lack of new IHEs, with new approaches, has left the older traditional IHEs without the dynamic competition to drive their own improvement.

Stagnant approaches have led to higher costs and reduced effectiveness. Tuition is out of the reach of many Americans and just [45% of students](#) in four-year universities graduate in four years.

In 1970, the [average annual tuition](#) for a four-year college was \$1,562; in 2020 it reached \$32,769. Adjusting for inflation, the 2020 cost should have been one-third of that: \$10,636. That’s the difference between paying \$42,500 versus \$131,000 for a bachelor’s degree.

Some of the impact of this was deferred through student loans. But as potential college students see those who preceded them struggle with student debt, they are justifiably wary of following in their footsteps. [Forbes reports](#) there are now 45 million Americans owing \$1.7 trillion in student loan debt.

This has contributed to [2020 enrollment](#) in U.S. colleges and universities declining 9.6% from its 2010 peak.

Because teachers need a bachelor’s degree, that decline directly reduces the pool of potential teachers. Within this pool, the number choosing to become teachers is further reduced because teaching salaries have not kept pace with rising tuition costs.

A [2021 survey](#) by the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education found that 19 percent of undergraduate-level and 11 percent of graduate-level teaching programs saw a significant drop in enrollment last year alone.

Falling enrollments have harmed colleges and universities. [By 2019](#), 10 of the state's 14 private traditional colleges were rated as financially unhealthy. Since then, their situation has only worsened, as has the financial health of many public institutions. For example, [New Jersey City University](#) posted a deficit of \$67 million last year and now has \$156 million in debt.

The U.S. Department of Education has helped in recent years by eliminating "regional accreditation," which required IHEs to get approval from regional accreditors whose membership included the new IHE's direct competitors. Now, IHEs can work with accreditors from anywhere in the country.

That's a big step forward, as it makes the path to accreditation more likely to prove successful, but there are still major barriers facing new institutions, including the graduate schools of education which create new teachers and provide advanced degrees to current teachers.

That path to becoming a graduate school of education in New Jersey which is typical of other states, requires a new educational program to be approved by the state Department of Education (DOE). Then, after about five (or more) years of good results, it may be licensed by the Office of the Secretary of Higher Education. At that point it can begin to issue graduate credits and degrees. Only then, is it allowed to apply for accreditation, which can take an additional five years if all goes well.

During that roughly 10-year period, the IHE's credits are not accepted by the DOE for teachers to earn certification to teach a new subject, such as in shortage areas like mathematics or science. Nor are its degrees and credits accepted by many school districts for teachers to advance on the salary guide or be reimbursed for their coursework.

That severely limits the value of the credits and degrees of a licensed, but not yet accredited, IHE, even if they offer better courses and degrees at a lower price.

Without outside funding, a fledgling IHE cannot survive long enough to become accredited, eliminating that source of innovation before it takes root.

In an era when school districts cannot find teachers, this makes no sense.

The DOE and school districts should accept the credits and degrees of licensed IHEs as they work towards accreditation. And, the DOE should recruit and encourage new organizations to launch innovative programs and begin the path towards licensure and accreditation.

This would support innovative IHEs and attract others to begin the journey toward accreditation while pushing traditional IHEs to become more innovative.

This will lower tuition costs for all students and reduce future student debt. It will also create affordable pathways for aspiring teachers, reducing the teacher shortage.