Indiana Dean Questions NCTQ Research Standards

To the Editor:

I was pleased to see "An Open Letter to the NCTQ (Dec. 11, 2013)" by Michigan State University education school Dean Donald Heller and his colleagues Avner Segall and Corey Drake. The Commentary laid out why Michigan State decided not to participate in the second round of the National Council on Teacher Quality's teacher-preparation study.

The reasons given explain why: The NCTQ study is based on what many have described as a "fatally flawed" methodology. For that reason alone, we at Indiana University decided not to voluntarily participate in NCTQ studies. A flawed methodology always produces invalid results.

But there's another reason why Indiana will not participate: We feel that the NCTQ is engaged in unethical research practices. They have threatened institutions that decline to participate with low ratings, use of previous low ratings, and acquisition of documents through paid student informants and other deceptive means.

With the support of our faculty and as dean of the Indiana University School of Education, I have taken the position that unless the NCTQ submits its methodology for credible institutional-review-board approval and seeks informed consent from potential institutional participants, IU will not participate. Coercion or the threat of sanctions for nonparticipation in a study, whether overt or implied, have no place in research, no matter the goal.

From our perspective, voluntary participation in a study known to engage in unethical practices undermines the very essence of the values we seek to impart to graduate students and others we prepare as researchers.

I believe institutions of higher education have a fundamental responsibility to speak freely and forcefully on controversial ideas and practices that undermine our core values, even when our positions are not especially popular.

As Kate Walsh's response to the Michigan State Commentary shows, the NCTQ will try to build public support for its flawed studies by lauding their goals and characterizing critiques of their methodology as a red herring ("NCTQ Responds to Critics of Its Teacher-Prep Ratings," edweek.org, Dec. 12, 2013). But in this case, as in so many other facets of life, the ends do not justify the means. The end result of the NCTQ methodology is unethical and invalid research.

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