

QUALITY ASSURANCE INSTITUTE
Case Study

At the Crossroads:
Summit Valley College of Education
*Navigating Quality Assurance in an Era of
Accountability*



BranchED

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How to Use This Case Study

This case study depicts a fictional but realistic Educator Preparation Provider (EPP) navigating interconnected quality assurance challenges: inconsistent evidence collection, candidate performance gaps that surface in district data, and an approaching accreditation review.

Throughout the institute, your group will inhabit the five roles described below. Each persona holds a different vantage point on the same challenges, and a different interpretation of what is happening and why.

As you work through the case, you will be asked to consider:

- What is the **current “weather”** of this system?
- What **patterns** do you observe over time?
- What **conditions and forces** are creating those patterns?

The case unfolds across all three days:

- **Day 1:** What is a QAS, and where does it break?
- **Day 2:** Why does it break, and how do we fix it?
- **Day 3:** What does this mean for our system, and what will we do next?

The goal of the case is not to diagnose individuals, but to understand the system conditions producing the patterns you observe.

Come ready to question your assumptions and change your forecast!

Section 1: The Institution

Summit Valley College of Education

Summit Valley College of Education (SVCU) operates in increasingly unpredictable conditions.

What once felt stable (e.g., enrollment pipelines, district relationships, and program reputation) now shows signs of instability. Some programs appear steady. Others are declining. Some data suggest strength; other data suggest concern.

Faculty and leaders describe the current state differently:

- “We’re doing fine, this is normal fluctuation.”
- “Something is off, but I can’t pinpoint it.”
- “We’re reacting to problems instead of anticipating them.”

There is no shared language for describing what is happening.

Without a shared language, there is no shared system for understanding or improving it over time.

Summit Valley University is a regional comprehensive university in the mid-Atlantic region with approximately 8,400 students. SVCU has prepared teachers and school leaders for nearly 90 years, earning deep roots in the surrounding communities and a reputation as the primary pipeline for educators in its three partner districts.

SVCU offers initial licensure programs in elementary education, early childhood, and special education. Enrollment across all programs currently stands at approximately 125 teacher candidates. The institution serves a large percentage of students of color (44%) and first-generation college students (38%).

The university is accredited by its regional accreditor. The college currently operates under prior approval from the state’s educator preparation oversight body. SVCU is currently under “continued accreditation with monitoring” following a site visit two years ago. Reviewers raised concerns about the coherence of the EPP’s continuous improvement system and the quality of evidence used to inform program decisions. A follow-up review is scheduled in 18 months.

The Landscape

The past five years have been turbulent for SVCU. Enrollment in teacher preparation programs has declined 22% since 2019, driven in part by the rise of alternative certification providers in the region offering lower-cost, faster pathways. State policy shifts have added complexity: a new statewide performance assessment for initial licensure was phased in three years ago and pass rates have become a prominent public accountability metric. SVCU’s pass rates on the new assessment are lower than the state average and lower than two of its regional peers, a fact that has not gone unnoticed by district partners or university leadership.

Internally, the college is navigating a significant transition. A new Dean, Dr. Carmen Reyes, arrived 14 months ago with a mandate from the Provost to “modernize quality assurance practices and demonstrate impact.” She inherited a college with committed faculty, transactional district relationships, and virtually no coherent system for collecting, analyzing, or acting on evidence of candidate or program quality. Each program coordinator maintains their own records. Assessment data is stored inconsistently (sometimes as hard copies, other times in individual spreadsheets) and is rarely shared across programs. The field experience office and the academic programs operate largely in silos. In addition, the college’s continuous improvement efforts, as one longtime faculty member put it, have been “mostly retroactive compliance; we gather evidence after the fact to justify decisions that were already made.”

Program at a Glance

Institution type	Regional comprehensive university, MSI designation
Programs offered	Elementary, Special Education, Early Childhood
Total enrollment (all programs)	~125 teacher candidates
Candidates of color	44%
First-generation candidates	38%
Transfer students	~35% from two regional community colleges
Primary partner district	Meadowbrook Unified
Accreditation status	<i>Continued accreditation with monitoring; follow-up review in 18 months</i>
Years since the new Dean arrived	14 months (Dr. Carmen Reyes)
Pass rate on state licensure assessment	59% (state average: 74%)

Section 2: The Partner Districts

SVCU’s primary partner district, Meadowbrook Unified, spans a range of community contexts and represents the breadth of the regional educator workforce. SVCU graduates account for an estimated 30–40% of new teacher hires over the past decade.

Meadowbrook Unified School District

Meadowbrook Unified serves approximately 18,500 students across 22 schools. The district is ethnically and economically diverse; 61% of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, 28% are English learners, and 18% receive special education services. Meadowbrook has historically been the primary placement site for SVCU student teachers and the most frequent employer of SVCU graduates.

Meadowbrook's HR and Talent Director, Marcus Webb, has been increasingly vocal in district-EPP partnership meetings about what he perceives as a growing gap between how SVCU prepares candidates and what his schools need. He has said, "I'm placing new teachers in classrooms who don't know how to manage behavior, can't differentiate for a range of learners, and freeze when their cooperating teacher is absent. We need practice-ready graduates, not just credentialed ones." The district's teacher evaluation data shows a consistent decline over three years in the Learning Environment domain for teachers in their first two years of practice.

Section 3: The Challenge

Three Interconnected System Conditions

Conditions 1: Fragmented Signals - No Shared Definition of Quality

As a result:

- Evidence is collected inconsistently
- Data is interpreted differently
- No common signals guide decision-making

From a systems perspective, this creates **noise rather than clarity**.

Different parts of the system are responding to different indicators, making it difficult to detect patterns or trends over time.

The result is a patchwork: some programs use a shared observation rubric for student teaching; others use faculty-designed instruments that vary widely in rigor and focus. Some programs collect exit survey data consistently; others collect nothing. Program completers' data (e.g., surveys, employer feedback, licensure pass rates) is collected at the EPP level but rarely disaggregated by program or shared with the faculty who could act on it.

Condition 2: Recurring Patterns - Candidate Performance Without Explanation

Across multiple data sources, a pattern is emerging:

- Lower pass rates on the state assessment
- Persistent weaknesses in learning environment and differentiation
- Similar concerns from district partners

These patterns are:

- **Consistent over time**
- **Visible across contexts**
- **Not fully understood**

Despite this, responses remain:

- Isolated
- Program-specific
- Reactive

The system is experiencing recurring "conditions" but cannot explain or interrupt them.

SVCU's pass rate on the state licensure performance assessment is 59%, significantly below the state average of 74%. Within that aggregate, there is significant variation: pass rates range from 54% in the elementary program to 79% in the special education program. Candidates who do not pass on the first attempt take an average of 1.8 additional attempts before passing or exiting the program.

More troubling to Dr. Reyes is that no one can explain the pattern. When she asks which aspects of the performance assessment candidates struggle with most, program coordinators cite different data points. When she asks what the EPP is doing differently for candidates at risk of not passing, answers range from "we tutor them" to "we refer them to the writing center." No systematic intervention exists, and no data connect candidate performance on the assessment to specific program experiences or learning opportunities.

District-side data compounds the concern. Meadowbrook conducts formal teacher evaluations using a state-aligned framework. Teachers in their first two years of practice who are SVCU graduates show a consistent pattern: relative strength in professional responsibilities and relationship-building, and consistent weakness in learning environment management and differentiated instruction, the same domains flagged in SVCU's performance assessment data.

Condition 3: Reactive Responses — No Coherent Improvement System

With an accreditation review approaching, SVCU cannot clearly demonstrate:

- What evidence it values
- How that evidence is used
- What changes have been made—and why

Improvement efforts are described as "Retroactive Compliance."

From a systems perspective, this means:

- Evidence follows decisions
- Patterns are not tracked over time
- There is no sustained cycle of inquiry

The system is responding to events but not learning from them.

Reviewers have already signaled their priorities for the follow-up visit: the coherence of SVCU's continuous improvement system and the quality of evidence used to support program decisions.

Dr. Reyes has commissioned a readiness assessment, and the results are sobering. The EPP cannot currently demonstrate:

- (1) a shared set of candidate outcome expectations across programs,
- (2) a consistent process for collecting and reviewing evidence,
- (3) a clear link between data analysis and program decisions, or
- (4) evidence that improvement efforts are sustained over time rather than episodic.

"If the reviewers asked us to show our continuous improvement system," the accreditation liaison told Dr. Reyes, "we would have to show them a folder of one-off reports and hope they don't ask follow-up questions."

Section 4: The Charge

Faced with an 18-month clock and a readiness assessment she cannot defend, Dr. Reyes made a decision: rather than commission another internal report, she would convene a cross-institutional working group, one that included voices she knew would not agree.

She asked Meadowbrook Superintendent Dr. Williams to co-sponsor the effort. Together, they assembled a group of five: an assessment coordinator, a district HR director, a veteran faculty member, a mentor teacher, and the director of clinical practice. Dr. Reyes gave the group a single charge at their first meeting: *'Don't tell me what's wrong. I already know what's wrong. Tell me what a coherent system would look like and help me build it.'*

That charge translates into five concrete responsibilities for your working group:

1. Define what quality means for candidates at key points in the program
2. Identify a small set of aligned measures that provide meaningful evidence of that quality
3. Determine how data will be used to drive continuous improvement
4. Propose a governance approach to support this work
5. Prepare a brief response to the question: "How does your QAS ensure candidate quality and continuous improvement?"

Section 5: Your Roles

Your group of five has been assembled by Dean Reyes and Meadowbrook Superintendent, Dr. Williams, as a Quality Assurance Working Group. You have been tasked with examining the evidence, identifying root causes, and building the foundation of a coherent QA system, one that is sustainable, credible to accreditors, and genuinely useful to the people doing the work.

Each person in your group will inhabit one of the five roles below. Read your persona carefully. Each of you experiences the system differently. You see different signals. You trust different forms of evidence. You prioritize different outcomes.

Your task is not to agree quickly. Your task is to make the system visible by surfacing your differences.

Key Framing for Personas

As you engage the case, consider:

- What "weather" does your role experience most directly?
- What data do you trust—and what do you question?
- What part of the system do you believe most needs to change?
- What evidence is missing from your perspective?

AC

Dr. Priya Nair

Assessment Coordinator, SVCU

"I've been working to build a common assessment system for two years. The data exists; what we don't have is the will to use it consistently. I need allies, not more working groups."

DP

Marcus Webb

Director of HR & Talent, Meadowbrook Unified School District

"I respect what SVCU does. But I'm watching new teachers struggle in my classrooms every year with the same issues. At some point, good intentions aren't enough; I need to see it change."

FM

Dr. Sandra Okonkwo

Associate Professor of Education, Elementary Program

"I have 24 years in this field. I believe in evidence, but I've also seen 'data-driven' used as a lever against faculty autonomy. Who defines quality? And who gets to decide?"

MT

Javier Montoya

Mentor Teacher

"I see these candidates every day in real classrooms. The data you're collecting back at the university...I want to know: does it actually reflect what I'm watching? Because if the system isn't capturing what matters in practice, we're not assuring quality. We're just assuring paperwork."

CS

Leila Hassan

Director of Clinical Practice & Field Experiences

"Field experience is where preparation becomes practice. But we're operating completely separately from the academic programs. We see things no one else does, and nobody's asking us."