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Recruiting the Next Generation of Special Education Teachers

Robert L. Morgan
Utah State University

M. Rees

J. Lyman

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Bob Morgan, Melanie Rees, and Julia Lyman, Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation, Utah State University

"I would go back and get my teaching degree but I'm concerned about the math requirements and the general academic environment. I've been away from that kind of routine for 15 years!"

"I would love to be a teacher but I've got family responsibilities. My kids would disown me!"

"I think I could be a good teacher but there are so many hoops you have to jump through. It's not worth the trouble."

These are statements we hear frequently as we recruit paraeducators and others to become special education teachers. Interestingly, all of these individuals became successful special education teachers. While the statements are true and each potential teacher brings a different mix of concerns, many interested individuals can become successful teachers given a few essential ingredients: advisement, support, and a positive, goal-directed program of study.

A previous article in *The Utah Special Educator* described the rationale for teacher recruitment (Morgan, Peterson, & Horrocks, 2007). In this article we describe the recruitment activities that are applied in different ways to the Utah State University (USU) teacher preparation programs. These programs include on-campus (Mild/Moderate, Severe, Early Childhood, and combined special and general education), and Mild/Moderate Distance (broadcast to

multiple sites throughout Utah). General recruitment activities can be divided into three types: (a) paraeducator recognition events, (b) recruitment by teacher graduates who encourage their paraeducators towards teacher education, and (c) concurrent enrollment of high school students through Special Education 1000, a course designed to present teaching careers and teach basic instructional skills. The thread that ties these recruitment activities together is relationship building, i.e., sustained interactions between the recruit and a friend or USU advisor who remains available for support. Recruitment activities are described below.

Paraeducator Recognition

In Fall 2008, USU recruitment staff contacted local district representatives to request co-hosting of a "paraeducator recognition event" inviting paraeducators to receive a much deserved "thanks" and information on teaching careers. The results were impressive. At the combined Logan/Cache Districts event, 21 paraeducators attended. At the Box Elder District event, 27 attended. At the combined Weber/Ogden Districts event, 29 attended. At the Davis District event, 150 attended. The Davis event was developed differently; it offered a series of individual awards to paraeducators for their hard work and invited paraeducators along with their teachers (about 50 teachers attended). About 12 of the Davis paraeducators

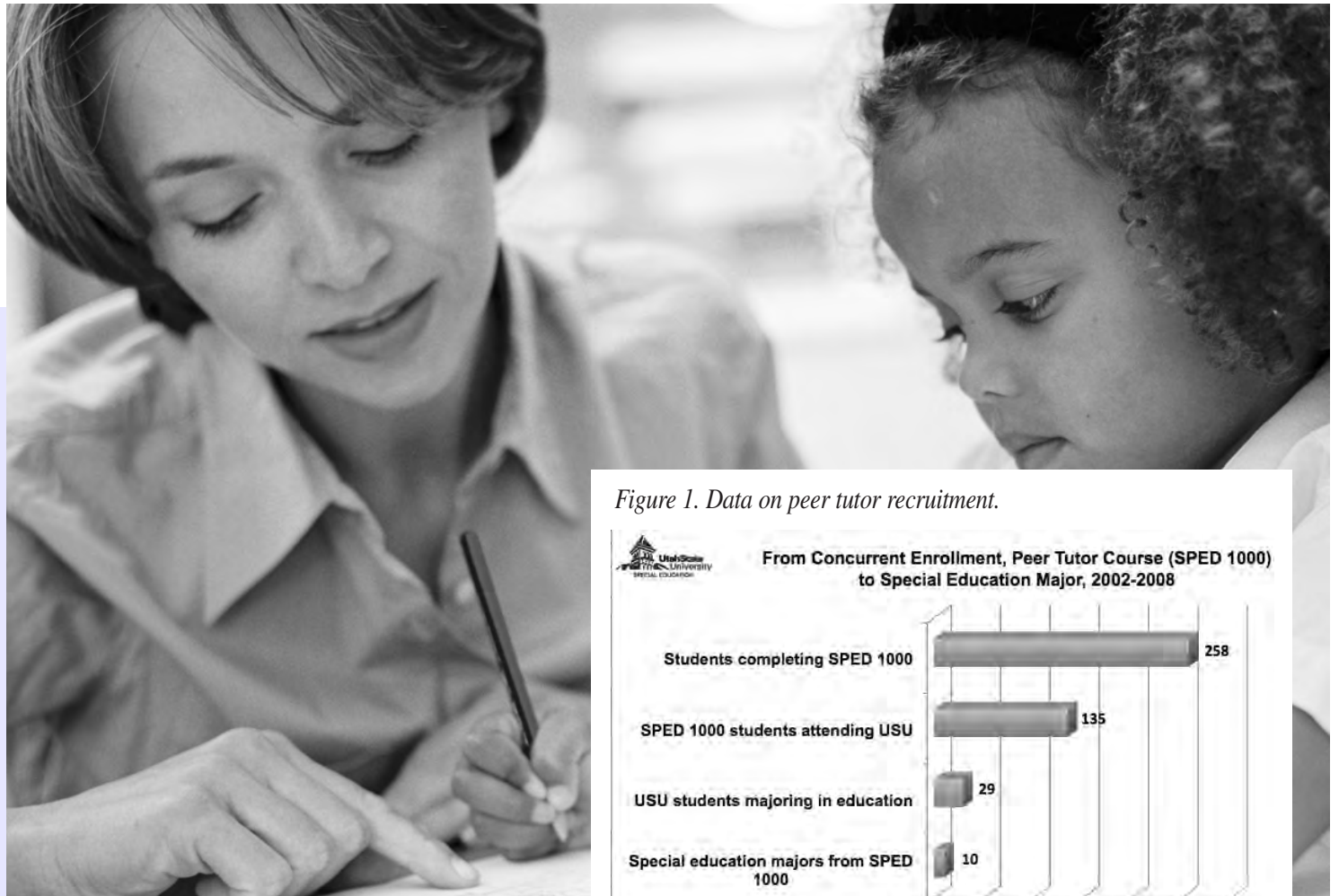
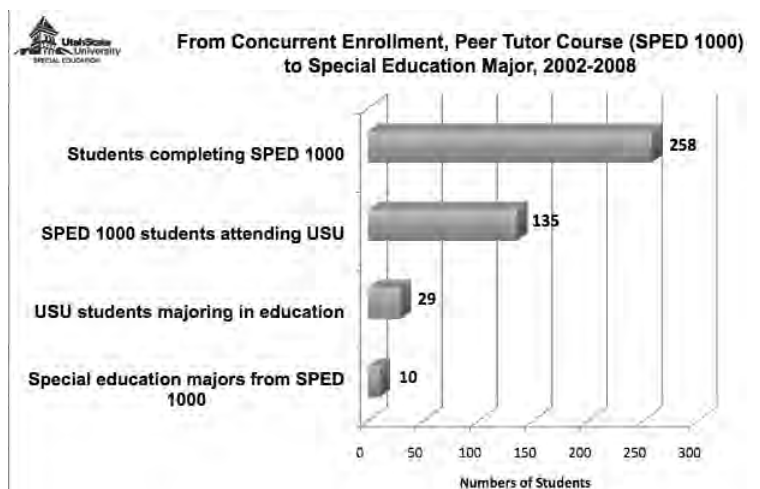


Figure 1. Data on peer tutor recruitment.



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stayed afterwards for advisement on entry into teacher education. The events were structured uniquely in each district: some emphasized teacher education, some emphasized paraeducators' dedication and hard work, some offered awards, all were informal and fun! After each event, paraeducators felt deservedly commended for a job well done. The USU Department Advisor, who attended each event, later commented that about half of paraeducators who expressed interest in teacher education had already followed up by contacting her office. Efforts will be made by USU to establish and maintain a relationship with each interested recruit. Districts interested in collaborating to develop a paraeducator recognition event should contact Bob Morgan at bob.morgan@usu.edu

Recruitment by Teacher Graduates

USU recruitment staff initiated a pilot project in Spring 2006. In three years, project staff contacted 26 recent graduates of the USU special education programs for assistance with recruitment. Of the 26 contacted graduates, 21 (81%) indicated they worked in school settings with paraeducators who were interested in teaching careers. Those paraeducators interested in attending other universities in Utah were provided names and contact information of advisors. Based on contacts generated by 21 teachers, 60 potential recruits were contacted. The effort is paying dividends: today, two special education teachers have graduated from USU and are working in Utah school districts. An additional 12 recruits are working towards special education teaching degrees at USU. Teachers interested in participating in this recruitment effort by encouraging their paraeducators should contact Bob Morgan at bob.morgan@usu.edu

Concurrent Enrollment Course

Special Education 1000 is a two-credit USU course offered to students in selected high schools providing exposure to teaching careers and information on effective instructional procedures. The course allows students to practice instructional procedures in the context of peer tutoring. The course was first implemented in Cache Valley high schools in 2002. After six years of pilot testing, the refined course was offered to select Wasatch Front schools in fall 2008. We currently have 11 sections of the course in seven districts. In the 2008-09 academic year, 131 high school students participated as peer tutors. Thirty-five of those students travelled to USU to tour facilities related to special education and to meet faculty. Finally, 105 tutors participated in presentations in their high school classrooms delivered by a USU special education recruitment specialist.

Special Education 1000 offers high school special education teachers the opportunity to initiate or strengthen a peer-tutoring component. The course can be tailored to the scope and format of

the classroom; resource, inclusive, and self-contained classroom teachers participate. Offering college credit helps teachers attract serious and responsible students who may not have signed up for the course otherwise. Amy Young, a concurrent enrollment teacher at Syracuse High School, is impressed with the heightened academic level her SPED 1000 students attain. She states, "The students learn many of the same skills I learned when I went through my teacher education courses."

Over one semester, students gain an in-depth understanding of certain disabilities as they work one-on-one with students in life skills or general education classes. They employ a variety of data-collection measures to assess their tutees' progress towards target skills. Juliana Woodbury, a concurrent enrollment teacher at Weber High School, explains that students "read excerpts of college-level texts on topics such as special education history, behavior analysis, instruction, and specific disabilities...[They] strengthen their tutoring and teaching skills through academic assignments followed by classroom implementation."

This training lays the foundation for further coursework and a future career in special education, and initial data show positive impact on teacher recruitment. The concurrent enrollment course has produced nine special education majors and one graduate plus 19 additional education majors at USU out of 135 course enrollees who later attended USU (i.e., 21.5%). (See Figure 1. left)

Special Education 1000 has offered us the opportunity to facilitate a network of relationships among concurrent enrollment teachers across the state. When teachers raise questions, we refer them to other concurrent enrollment teachers who tackled similar issues in the classroom. We also have an active website (<http://sped.usu.edu/peertutoring>) that teachers use as a resource for course materials or as a way to contact one another. Through these efforts we are creating a network of relationships to improve teacher effectiveness and student learning.

Special Education 1000 allows us to develop relationships with students as well as district leaders and classroom teachers. We become a resource to high-school students as they consider potential career paths. We help them recognize their potential as a special educator, and present the career as a real option for their future. Karen Van Orden, a concurrent enrollment teacher at Springville High School, sums it up by saying, "The best thing that has happened [as a result of Special Education 1000] is that students are now considering special education as a possible career when it was not on their radar before."

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Building and Sustaining Relationships

Linda is a paraprofessional who has worked in a special education classroom for the last 10 years. She loves her duties and the students she works with and would like the challenge of being the classroom teacher; not to mention the increase in pay and benefits. But she wonders if she is too old to go back to school. Is it too late for her?

Susan is a recent high school graduate who worked as a peer tutor. She enjoyed working with the students and seeing their success and progress. She considered pursuing a special education degree but heard it was hard work and is hesitant to move forward. Is it too much for her?

These are typical questions we receive when talking to paraprofessionals and peer tutors. Many are people whose educational pursuits are placed on hold to raise a family or to work in other occupations. They have now discovered their desire for special education and want to pursue a degree but are hesitant to start. At this stage, a relationship with an advisor is crucial. There are many options available as one enters college. Building a relationship with the department advisor, peer advisors who are in the process of getting the same degree, or a local recruitment specialist allows them to feel comfortable to ask their questions and to have someone support them along the way. Earning a college degree is a daunting task to conceptualize as a whole but, with the help of an advisor, the process of getting started can be broken into smaller and more manageable steps. Figure 2 presents six steps to obtaining a degree in special education from USU.

Earning a special education degree may seem a difficult task until the student realizes it is one class at a time, one semester at a time. It becomes achievable with support and guidance. It's all about building a relationship with someone who is going to be there for you.

For information on special education teaching programs at USU, contact the USU Special Education Department Advisor, Ms. Darcie Peterson, at darcie.peterson@usu.edu.

Contact Information for Those Who Are Interested in Careers Related to Special Education

- To receive a packet of information about special education teaching programs at USU, email recruit.sped@gmail.com
- To assist in recruitment of individuals representing diversity into teacher education at USU, email Bob Morgan at bob.morgan@usu.edu
- To find out about special education teacher education programs in general, order the book entitled "Do You Want to Make a Difference in the Lives of Students with Special Needs? Careers in Special Education and Related Services" from the National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education, www.ccc.sped.org/ncpse.htm ■



Figure 2. Six steps towards a degree in special education at Utah State University.

- 1. Apply to Utah State University**
 - a. <http://www.usu.edu/admissions/>
 - b. Apply as an undeclared major
- 2. Meet with an Advisor**
 - a. The Special Education Advisor is Darcie Peterson (Darcie.peterson@usu.edu, Office Phone: 435 797-3252)
- 3. Apply for Financial Aid**
 - a. <http://www.usu.edu/finaid/>
- 4. Attend Soar or Connections Orientations**
 - a. Soar: <http://www.usu.edu/soar/>
 - b. Required for incoming freshmen students.
 - c. Connections: <http://www.usu.edu/connections/>
 - d. (Connections is optional; not required. However, please speak with Darcie Peterson to see if this course would be beneficial.)
- 5. Complete the prerequisite requirements for your specific Special Education Program.**
 - a. http://sper.usu.edu/undergrad/admission_req.html
 - b. For a checklist, see left hand side and click on, "Checklist of requirements".
- 6. Apply and complete the Special Education Program.**
 - a. <http://sper.usu.edu/admission/login.php>
 - b. Apply by October 1st for the following year. For the Distance Mild/Moderate Program, check with the advisor (becky.morgan@usu.edu) for start dates.