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From Tutor to Teacher:

For Some Peer Tutors, the Experience Can Lead to a Teaching Career

"When I was 16 I volunteered in a special education class. It was a bit intimidating at first until I settled in. Then I loved it. I knew then that I wanted to be a special education teacher."

"I worked as a peer tutor for a girl with Autism Spectrum Disorder for two years in high school. I became fascinated with autism and special education."

"I really enjoyed peer tutoring in high school in the special education program. When I learned there was a shortage of special education teachers, I knew I wanted to be one. I would hate to think these students go unhelped or get taught by someone unqualified. They need great teachers."

"I had absolutely no interest in special education until I spent some time in a high school special education classroom. I didn't want to, but just by circumstances, I had to help out. I was immediately hooked."

"I always wanted to be an elementary teacher, but when I saw the potential of students with disabilities, the new research, and the passion of special ed teachers, I changed my mind. This is definitely what I want to do for my whole career."

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

These are the stories of a few peer tutors who became special education teachers. They are stories of watching one's agemates struggle but desperately strive to get a chance to contribute as valued students in their schools. Some peer tutors initially approach the task with apprehension and uncertainty. Perhaps it is finding their way as peer tutors that convinces them that students with disabilities must have the opportunity to do the same.

Each year, 25-40% of special education teacher trainees admitted to the on-campus portion of preservice education at Utah State University (USU) indicate they began as peer tutors in high school. Most accompanied students to general education activities or worked in individual skill development lessons. The majority of these special education teacher trainees reported that the peer tutor experience was the tipping point in the decision to pursue a career in teaching.

Concurrent Enrollment Course for Peer Tutors

At USU, the faculty have established a USOE-approved course in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation entitled *Special Education 1000, Principles of Effective Peer Tutoring*. This two-credit concurrent enrollment course is available to selected peer tutoring classrooms in Utah. High schools with supervising teachers who collaborate with Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation faculty are eligible. The requirements include (1) working with recruitment project staff, (2) presenting information on teaching careers to the peer tutors, (3) teaching lessons on "how to be an effective peer tutor," (4) setting high standards for tutors as role models of academic achievement and scholarly behavior, (5) establishing and implementing evaluation procedures for peer tutors, (6) assigning grades, and (7) accompanying the peer tutors to USU for a tour and lunch with the faculty. All concurrent enrollment courses must be pre-approved by school districts.

What Supports and Opportunities are Available?

USU project staff will provide samples of syllabi and course materials to supervising teachers who teach peer tutors. Project staff are developing a website for sharing of curriculum materials for teaching peer tutoring strategies, examining sample syllabi and tutor evaluations, etc. The Department of Special Education advisor at USU provides information to interested students on special education careers. Given that schedules and transportation can be arranged, supervising teachers and peer tutors are invited to the USU campus to meet faculty, tour facilities (including the ASSERT preschool and PROJECT PEER post-high school program on campus), eat lunch with staff, and ask questions. The Project Coordinator (Melanie Rees) assists interested high school teachers in planning and developing course sections; tailoring content to the specific needs of the teacher, peer tutors, and high school students with disabilities; and sharing materials used by other teachers with similar courses.

What Is The Track Record?

The course started in 2002 at Mountain Crest high school in Cache School District. Peer tutors assisted students with Mild/Moderate disabilities in special and general education classes. The Special Education 1000 course was approved by the school district and students received two credits leading towards teaching support credits and/or electives at Utah State. The supervising teacher worked with USU faculty to develop and refine the course content based on feedback from peer tutors and data on student skill acquisition. In 2003 and 2005, new sections of the course were added at Sky View and Logan High Schools, respectively. The new sections involved peer tutors working with students in life skills classrooms and community transition settings. Each high school trimester, students were invited to USU for tours and lunch with faculty. Numbers of tutors taking concurrent enrollment credit increased from 20 per year to 60 per year based on the Mountain Crest, Sky View, and Logan sections of the course.

Does Peer Tutoring Link to Future Special Education Teacher Training?

Given that the course was first offered in 2002 to high school seniors, the first year that students would have been eligible to apply to the special education teacher licensure program at USU (their junior year) was 2005. While no former peer tutor entered the program that year, one former tutor entered in 2006 and three tutors entered in 2007. The former peer tutor who entered in 2006 is graduating soon and planning on teaching special education in Washington County. With heightened recruitment activities (e.g., tutors who become teachers, increased numbers of Special Education 1000 courses), USU faculty are encouraged about the prospect of additional "tutors turned teachers." Project staff will expand the program and evaluate its effectiveness in producing future teachers in special education.

If interested, please contact Melanie Rees at melanie.rees@usu.edu. Leave a message stating "I supervise peer tutors and I'm interested in Special Education 1000 as a concurrent enrollment class." Leave your contact information and your school district. Our project staff will be in touch. ■