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Severe Disability Teacher Preparation Program at Utah State University Broadens Its Scope

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In Utah, the need for teachers to support students with severe disabilities is critical. The highest ranked shortage for all teaching fields in 2001 and 2002 was special education, severe disabilities. For teachers of students with severe disabilities, critical shortage ratings exceeded levels for Preschool Special Education and Mild/Moderate Disabilities. Given that nearly 150,000 new students are expected to enter public schools in the next 10 years, the teacher shortage is likely to persist. Moreover, No Child Left Behind places a high premium on strengthening the knowledge and skills of teachers. The pressure is increasing to train highly qualified teachers for students with severe disabilities.

Program Formats

In an effort to address the need, the Utah State University Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Program in severe disabilities has been revamped in recent years. Both on- and off-campus formats are available.

Program Activities

In both on-campus and ATP programs, several focal points and areas of emphasis have emerged, including the following:

- **Educational and behavioral interventions for students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD)**

As the number of students with ASD entering public schools continues to grow, the need for special educators equipped with the skills to work with this unique population also increases. In an attempt to meet this growing need for specialized training, the Autism Support Services: Education, Research, and Training (ASSERT) program was formed. The ASSERT program began in May of 2002 with a goal of providing pre-service and inservice training to future and current Utah special educators. The ASSERT program consists of a twenty hour per week preschool program, housed in the Center for Persons with Disabilities (CPD) at USU, where

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- **On campus**

Each year, 20 applicants are accepted into the two-year, 45-credit program. Students fulfilling course requirements qualify for a BS or BA degree eligible for endorsement in severe disabilities, kindergarten—12th grade. Students may arrange “dual” teaching majors with Secondary or Elementary Education. Students participate in academic courses and school-based practicum and student teaching experiences under supervision of a fully staffed faculty. Many students are “dual majors”, i.e., they seek degrees in special education and another field of education (such as elementary education). In all courses and applied experiences, activities are guided by performance objectives consistent with teacher accreditation standards.

- **Off campus: Alternative Teacher Preparation (ATP)**

Now in its third year, the Severe ATP program consists of a two-year, 26-credit ATP program for individuals with bachelors degrees in other fields who work in school-based professional positions (see Utah Special Educator, November 2003, for a description). Currently, 30 teachers are working toward licensure. Courses are taught during evening hours in Salt Lake City to teachers representing Jordan, Granite, Tooele, Salt Lake, Davis, Weber, and Ogden school districts. The program is overseen by an Advisory Board consisting of representatives from participating districts, the State Improvement (SIGNAL) Project, and the Utah State Office of Education.



students receive intensive behavioral intervention based on current research-based best practices. As students participating in the ASSERT program also participate in their local school district programs, ASSERT staff meet regularly with local school district personnel to share information and participate in collaborative educational planning for students in the program.

Pre-service teachers in the on-campus program in severe disabilities have the opportunity to receive advanced training in research-based interventions for students with ASD through the ASSERT program. Interested students can spend time observing in the ASSERT classroom and receiving training from ASSERT staff. Additionally, some pre-service special educators are employed by the ASSERT program and have the opportunity to receive in-depth training and coaching as they work directly with students with ASD.

• **Research-based reading and math instruction.**

No longer is reading and math instruction reserved for other learners. The on-campus and ATP programs stress developing strong teacher competence in basic academic instruction, particularly reading and math. Preservice teachers learn to (a) conduct curriculum-based assessment in reading and math, (b) set high expectations for academic skills achievement, (c) participate in two semester-length seminars (coupled with school experiences) to provide intensive teaching of reading and math, and (d) make data-based decisions according to student performance. To date, the results have been very positive. Teachers and parents remark about significantly increased reading levels. Some students with severe disabilities participate in general education classroom reading activities.

• **Functional behavior assessment and behavior intervention.**

Both the on-campus and ATP programs emphasize teaching applied skills in conducting functional behavior assessment (FBA) and implementing interventions based on FBA results. Prior to graduation, each preservice teacher implements multiple FBA-based behavioral interventions with children in preschool, elementary, and/or secondary settings. Some preservice teachers work with local school district behavior specialists, assisting in carrying out FBAs with referred students.

• **Research opportunities.**

With the advent of the ASSERT program and an increased emphasis on FBA-based behavioral interventions, preservice teachers have readily available opportunities to participate in experimental research, publications, and conference poster presentations. In the past year, 50 on-campus and 65 ATP trainees presented posters on behavioral intervention at USU-sponsored events. Eight trainees presented posters at a national conference, three of whom submitted presentations to the Posters-on-the-Hill competition in Washington, D.C. Two students co-authored a refereed journal article under review. Also in the past year, graduate students emphasizing severe disabilities have presented research data at both regional and international research conferences. Further research is currently underway and will continue to be emphasized for preservice teachers in all formats of the severe disabilities program.

Although the on-campus and ATP programs may not significantly impact the shortage of special education teachers in Utah, they should continue to provide school districts with qualified trainees prepared to support students with severe disabilities. For more information about the on-campus program, contact Bob Morgan (bmorgan@cc.usu.edu). For more information about the ATP program, contact Cindy Myers at cindy.myers@slc.k12.ut.us. ■

For most of us, summer is a time to relax, unwind from the rigors of the previous school year, and re-energize ourselves for next year. What better way to get excited for next year than to learn more about a topic you are interested in, learn some new strategies to try out in your classroom, or keep up on the newest developments in research-based practices? To meet these needs, the University of Utah is offering several graduate courses and a training institute. We hope at least one of them sounds exciting and geared toward your needs. If you have additional questions about the University of Utah Department of Special Education programs or courses, please contact **Patty Davis at 801-581-4764 or pdavis@ed.utah.edu**.

Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) Courses

Are you currently working with individuals who are unable to communicate by speaking? Are you struggling to identify ways for these individuals to interact with family members, friends, and caregivers in meaningful and understandable ways? Are you having difficulty developing, programming, or teaching the use of an AAC system? If you answered “yes” to any of these questions, consider enrolling in one or more of the following courses.



AAC Recommended Practices - Literacy and AAC (SPED 6611):

This course will share practical strategies that help teachers and therapists use supported reading to build literacy skills with children and young adults. The methods discussed will be appropriate for individuals at an emergent literacy level through the beginning conventional stages of literacy development who use AAC support systems. **Dates/Times: June 21-24, 8:30am-4:30pm**

Electronic Communication Aids (SPED 6612):

Electronic Communication aids can be a powerful tool for opening the doors of communication. However, like all tools, their effectiveness depends on our understanding of how to use them. This course will include information regarding features available in electronic communication aids and hands-on experiences in programming and troubleshooting communication aids. **Dates/Times: July 6-9, 8:30am-4:30pm**

Augmentative and Alternative Communication Instructional Strategies (SPED 6613):

Too often, AAC systems remain unused because of difficulties encountered when teaching students and their communication partner to use the systems. This course will focus on research validated strategies for teaching the functional use of AAC. Emphasis will be placed on teaching individuals with disabilities and their communication partners to use AAC in ways that result in meaningful interactions. **Dates/Times: July 12-15, 8:30am-4:30pm**

For More Information:

If you are not currently seeking a degree at the University of Utah, you can enroll in any of the above courses through Continuing Education by calling **Pat Cox at 801-581-4479**. If you are currently seeking a degree at the University of Utah, you can obtain information regarding how to register for any of the AAC courses by calling **Patty Davis at 801-581-4764**. Questions regarding AAC course content should be directed to **Susan Johnston at 801-581-5187**.