

Preparing Utah's Future Special Education Teachers

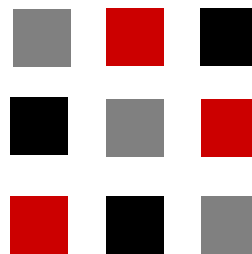
Promising Practices in Teacher Preparation Programs

Prepared by the Utah Education Policy Center



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Overview

A growing body of research recognizes the relationship between teacher preparation and later effectiveness and retention in the profession (e.g., Darling-Hammond et al., 2005; Goldhaber et al., 2013; Goldhaber & Cowan, 2014; Ronfeldt & Campbell, 2016). Factors such as selective admissions policies, rigorous content requirements, strong assessment practices, deeper learning pedagogies, and structured feedback, along with the development of evidence-based practices, student teaching settings, and clinical practice, have been linked to stronger teaching practices among in-service teachers. (Banks et al., 2014; Darling-Hammond et al., 2019; Lubell & Putnam, 2016; Ronfeldt, 2012; Scheeler et al., 2016).

Effective teacher preparation is particularly important for future special education teachers. Special educators often face particularly challenging working conditions and demands in their work, a phenomenon that has been further exacerbated by current policies (e.g., testing, accountability) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Billingsley et al., 2019; Drame & Pugach, 2010; McCray et al., 2014; Sindelar et al., 2019; Williamson et al., 2019). This educational landscape has resulted in high levels of stress and burnout among special education teachers (Brunsting et al., 2014), contributing to teacher turnover and subsequent teacher shortages in special education (McLeskey & Billingsley, 2008). Teacher preparation programs have multiple opportunities to provide future special education teachers with robust training opportunities that set them up for success.

To contribute to the field's understanding of best practices in special education teacher preparation, the Utah Education Policy Center (UEPC) conducted a review of literature and gathered data from all Utah Institutions of Higher Education (IHEs) with programs leading to special education teaching licensure in order to identify promising features in special education teacher preparation. We highlight seven program features in this report, which fall into three broad categories: *Student Experience*, *Program Design*, and *Relationships*.

Importantly, this report does not rank or evaluate Utah IHE programs. Instead, we provide a rich description of how Utah IHEs are preparing future special education teachers to support students, and we identify promising features across these programs.

Purpose

- Provide a high-level description of special education teacher preparation programs across Utah
- Highlight seven promising program features identified through a review of literature and accompanied by examples of implementation at Utah institutions

The UEPC, in collaboration with the Utah State Board of Education (USBE), provides this report as part of a larger portfolio of work on special education teachers in Utah. To date, the UEPC has examined the experiences of recent graduates of special education preparation programs, special education teachers' working conditions, and mobility and retention patterns among special education teachers. Information on these reports is provided below. These reports are located on the UEPC website. The UEPC is currently conducting two additional research studies focused on supports for in-service special education teachers and decision-making around entering the special education teaching professions. Results from these studies will be released in 2023.

Other UEPC Reports on Special Education Teachers

- Auletto, A., Rorrer, A. & Ni, Y. (2022). *Early-Career Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Preparation and Practice: Spring 2022 Special Education Recent Graduate Survey Results*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center.
- Auletto, A., Rorrer, A. & Ni, Y. (2022). *Early-Career Teacher Pathways: A Comparison of Special Education and General Education Teachers*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center.
- Auletto, A., Rorrer, A. & Ni, Y. (2022). *Special Education Teacher Career Trajectories: Predicting Persistence in the Profession*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center.
- Auletto, A., Rorrer, A. & Ni, Y. (2022). *Special Education Teacher Working Conditions in Utah: Results from the UEPC's 2022 Statewide Survey of Utah's Special Education Teacher Workforce*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center.



Data Sources and Methods

The results included in this report were informed by four data sources:

1. Preparation program websites
2. UEPC Initiative for Systemic Program Improvement through Research in Educational Leadership (INSPIRE) Special Education Program Survey
3. Interviews with preparation program administrators
4. A subset of results from the UEPC's Spring 2022 Special Education Recent Graduate Survey*

We began by reviewing Utah IHE websites (listed below) to gather general information on the special education preparation program offerings at each college or university in the state. Website materials also assisted us in identifying program administrators at each institution to recruit for this study.

Once program administrators were identified at each institution, we invited these individuals to complete the UEPC INSPIRE Special Education Program Survey in order to better understand program features and offerings. The IHE participation rate was 100% (8 of 8 responses received).

Following the survey, we invited program administrators to a follow-up interview to learn more about their programs. Seven of eight institutions participated (88%).

The UEPC INSPIRE Special Education Program Survey and interview protocols were informed by findings from prior literature on key features of preparation programs. Specific topics addressed in questionnaires and interviews are summarized to the right. References to supporting research are provided throughout this report.

Topics Addressed in Questionnaires and Interviews

- Accreditation
- Program focus (e.g., licensure, endorsements)
- Admissions requirements
- Program costs and financial support
- Program Requirements (e.g., credit hours, length of program)
- Program characteristics (e.g., cohort model, course offerings, clinical teaching experiences)
- Content focus (i.e., alignment with Council for Exceptional Children standards)
- Learning experiences
- Assessment and evaluation
- Program staffing
- Post-program support and tracking
- Demographics of graduates

Data were triangulated across sources to identify seven promising program features across the state. These seven program features are highlighted on pages 5-11 of this report. To illustrate each program feature, one of the seven IHEs that participated in an interview is presented as an example in the section titled "Feature in Practice." We highlight one institution per feature to illustrate diverse preparation opportunities across the state. The highlighted institution was informed by the multiple data sources and does not necessarily reflect the only promising program feature of each IHE.

Institution	Completed Questionnaire	Participated in Interview
Brigham Young University	Yes	Yes
Southern Utah University	Yes	Yes
University of Utah	Yes	Yes
Utah State University	Yes	Yes
Utah Valley University	Yes	Yes
Weber State University	Yes	Yes
Western Governors University	Yes	No
Westminster College	Yes	Yes

*Throughout this report, we feature select findings from a survey administered to recent graduates of special education preparation programs in Utah.

For more information, please see the full report: Auletto, A., Rorrer, A. & Ni, Y. (2022). *Early-Career Special Education Teachers' Experiences with Preparation and Practice: Spring 2022 Special Education Recent Graduate Survey Results*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Education Policy Center.



Description of Programs

There are eight IHEs in Utah that offer preparation programs leading to special education teaching licensure. The *Table of Utah Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs* on page 4 provides details about each institution's programs, including the format (i.e., face-to-face, online, hybrid), previous degree/licensure and employment requirements, and license area(s) and endorsement(s) offered by each program.

Seven of the eight institutions offer Bachelor's of Arts (BA) and/or Bachelor's of Science (BS) degrees in Special Education, and the eighth institution offers an option for dual licensure in special education with a general education degree (elementary or secondary). Half of the institutions offer Master's-level Special Education programs, including Master's of Science (MS), Master's of Education (MEd), or Master's of Arts in Teaching (MAT). Three institutions offer alternative pathways for practicing teachers and/or paraprofessionals to earn special education teaching licensure. Across institutions and programs, there is a range of formats for courses, including only face-to-face, only online, and hybrid. Hybrid programs involve some courses being face-to-face and others being online, either based on student preference (e.g., choosing to register for either the in-person or online section of a given course) or intentional program design (e.g., some required courses being offered only on campus and others being offered only online). Many program administrators shared that face-to-face programs were disrupted during the COVID-19 pandemic and were transferred online temporarily. For several institutions, hybrid offerings were a permanent outcome of the shift online during the pandemic and have pushed programs in the direction of creating even more online options for students.

There are two license areas available for special education teachers: Preschool Special Education and Special Education (K-12). The Preschool Special Education license is offered at two institutions (University of Utah and Utah State University). The Special Education (K-12) license with the Mild/Moderate Disabilities endorsement is offered at all eight institutions. Half of the institutions also offer the Severe Disabilities endorsement. The Deaf and Hard of Hearing endorsement is offered at two institutions, and the Visual Impairment and Deafblind endorsements are offered at one institution.



Following the *Table of Utah Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs*, the seven promising program features related to *Student Experience*, *Program Design*, and *Relationships* (listed in the box to the right) are presented in a series of one-page briefs. For each feature, we provide an overview that draws from relevant literature, followed by an example of how the feature is implemented in one of the Utah IHEs. The "Feature in Practice" examples also include the perspectives of recent graduates from each institution's Special Education program(s).

Promising Program Features

Student Experience

- Alternative Pathways for Practicing Special Educators
- Practical Program Structure

Program Design

- Strategic Cooperating Teacher/Student Matching
- Connections Between Coursework and Practice
- Faculty Expertise to Support Endorsement Areas

Relationships

- Relationships with Program Faculty
- Relationships with Peers

Table of Utah Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs

Institution Name	Program/Degree Leading to Special Education Licensure	Program Format	Previous Degree/Licensure and Employment Requirements	License Area(s) Offered	Endorsement(s) Offered
Brigham Young University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BS in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For initial bachelor's degree	Special Education (K-12)	Mild/Moderate & Severe
Southern Utah University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BA or BS in Elementary Education with Dual Licensure in Special Education BS in Secondary Education with Dual Licensure in Special Education 	Hybrid	For initial bachelor's degree	Special Education (K-12)	Mild/Moderate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MEd with Special Education Emphasis 	Hybrid	For practicing educators and those with initial education degree but no current employment in a Utah LEA		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Alternate Pathway to Educator Licensure in Special Education (APPEL-SpEd) (in partnership with USBE) 	Online	For practicing educators working as special education teachers or paraprofessionals in Utah		
University of Utah	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BS in Special Education 	Hybrid	For initial teaching licensure	Special Education (K-12) & Preschool Special Education	Mild/Moderate, Severe, Visual Impairments, & Deaf and Heard of Hearing; Adapted Physical Education & Deafblind (only for MEd/MS)
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MEd in Special Education MS in Special Education 	Hybrid	Can be done as initial or second teaching licensure (the Adapted Physical Education endorsement is for individuals who already have a Physical Education Teacher License)		
Utah State University*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BA in Special Education BS in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For initial bachelor's degree	Special Education (K-12) & Preschool Special Education	Mild/Moderate & Severe
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online Practical Teacher Training (OPTT) Certificate in Special Education 	Online	For practicing educators working as special education teachers or paraprofessionals in Utah, can be done as initial or second bachelor's degree		
Utah Valley University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BS in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For initial teaching licensure	Special Education (K-12)	Mild/Moderate & Severe
Weber State University	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BS in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For initial bachelor's degree	Special Education (K-12)	Mild/Moderate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special Education Teaching Graduate Certificate <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Special Education Teacher Expedited Pathway for Utah Professional Licensure (STEP UP) 	Online	For initial teaching licensure for individuals who already have a bachelor's degree (STEP UP is for practicing educators working as special education teachers or paraprofessionals in Utah)		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher Assistant Pathway to Teaching (TAPT) 	Face-to-face	For initial teaching licensure for paraprofessionals who are employed in a Utah LEA and do not have a bachelor's degree		
Western Governors University**	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BA in Special Education 	Online	For initial teaching licensure	Special Education (K-12)	Mild/Moderate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MAT in Special Education 	Online	Can be done as initial or second teaching licensure		
Westminster College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> BA in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For initial bachelor's degree	Special Education (K-12)	Mild/Moderate
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MAT in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For initial teaching licensure		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MEd in Special Education 	Face-to-face	For second teaching licensure for individuals who already have an elementary or secondary license		

*Utah State University also offers a MEd in Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education with a Deaf and Hard of Hearing Endorsement. This program is housed in the Communicative Disorders & Deaf Education Department and was not a focus of this study.

**Western Governors University was not included as a "Feature in Practice" example in this report because they did not participate in an interview and, therefore, there was limited data about their programs.

Overview

Alternative pathways into teaching are becoming increasingly prevalent. In 2015-16, 18% of public school teachers had entered teaching through an alternative route, up from 12% in 2009-10 (National Center for Education Statistics, 2022). Opportunities to enter teaching through non-traditional routes are especially important in special education given substantial shortages in special education teachers nationally (U.S. Department of Education, 2022). Furthermore, the recruitment of paraprofessionals into alternative teaching programs geared toward working educators represents a promising opportunity to encourage educator diversity (Ocasio, 2014) and retention (Murray, 2012).



Allowing individuals to support themselves financially while attending school offers pathways for individuals to become teachers who might otherwise have to take on substantial debt or not attend at all. For almost half of individuals attending a post-secondary program or considering doing so, cost is the greatest barrier (Centage Group, 2021). These financial barriers can be mitigated, at least in part, through opportunities that allow for full-time employment while completing teacher preparation programs.

Feature in Practice: Utah State University



Utah State University (USU), located in Logan, UT, offers a [Bachelor of Arts](#) and a [Bachelor of Science](#) in Special Education. In addition to these traditional on-campus undergraduate programs, USU focuses on serving individuals who are already working as special education teachers or paraprofessionals in Utah. The [Online Practical Teacher Training \(OPTT\) Certificate in Special Education](#) is a fully-online program that also leads to a Bachelor's degree in Special Education and teaching licensure in either Preschool or K-12 (Mild/Moderate or Severe Disabilities) Special Education. The program can be completed as either a first or second Bachelor degree. OPTT students must be employed at least part-time in a district that agrees to collaborate with USU and keep candidates employed for the duration of their program.

66%

of recently graduated USU survey respondents reported that they worked as special education teachers or paraprofessionals while they completed their teacher preparation programs.

"Because I had the opportunity to work in my school while I was going to school myself, I was able to collaborate with other teachers in my school. It was not very easy to work and go to school at the same time, but it did provide an opportunity to put into practice the things I was learning while I was learning them."
- USU Graduate

USU helps OPTT students set up sites for online coursework if their home or school setting is not desirable. They have worked with over 60% of districts in Utah, and they are willing to work with any district where a student is employed. Participating districts partner with USU by identifying a mentor who is responsible for conducting observations of teaching and providing feedback to OPTT students. OPTT students continue working while earning their degree and engage in clinical experiences in their day-to-day teaching context. USU reports that the program increases district retention of strong educators, especially paraprofessionals, and supports professional growth within their district.

Overview

Providing an accommodating program structure is a well-documented strategy for engaging post-secondary students and setting them up for success. Decisions around program structure may attend to course pacing, dual licensure programs, and online learning opportunities:



Short courses: Scholars have studied the benefits of shorter coursework timelines in post-secondary settings and found numerous benefits. Students who completed 8-week courses rather than 16-week courses had similar or greater learning outcomes and were also more satisfied with scheduling (Deichert et al., 2015; Shaw et al., 2013). Furthermore, Wlodkowski and Westover (1999) found that accelerated course timelines were especially beneficial for adult learners over traditionally college-aged students.



Dual licensure with elementary or secondary education: Teacher preparation programs that combine special education training with elementary or secondary licensure provide teachers with the expertise they need to teach in a range of settings. For example, Sheppard and Wieman (2020) found that content knowledge is important for special education teachers and their students. Teacher preparation that offers well-rounded training across both special education and general education, including in specific content areas (e.g., math) can better prepare teachers to support students with a range of academic content.



Online learning opportunities: Online post-secondary learning opportunities provide students with flexibility. When students have online course options, they are better able to pursue teacher preparation while also managing other work and family responsibilities (Castro & Tumibay, 2021). Exposure to blended learning environments in preparation programs provides both technological confidence and competence for teachers and increases the likelihood that they will integrate technology into their own teaching (Moore-Adams et al., 2016).



Feature in Practice: Southern Utah University

Southern Utah University (SUU), located in Cedar City, UT, offers a range of degree programs leading to special education (K-12) licensure in mild/moderate disabilities. At the Bachelor level, they have dual licensure options with Special Education and either [Elementary Education \(BA or BS\)](#) or [Secondary Education \(BS\)](#). They also have a [Master of Education with a Special Education Emphasis](#), and they partner with USBE to offer an online [Alternate Pathway to Educator Licensure in Special Education](#) for practicing teachers or paraprofessionals employed in Utah.

SUU's Special Education programs are intentionally structured to accommodate a range of student needs and preferences. For example, their Master's program is accelerated such that each course lasts for seven weeks, except for research courses which are full semesters. This allows most students to complete the program in 18 months, which reduces the costs that students incur. Their undergraduate programs combine training in special education with a foundation in elementary or secondary education. Given the comprehensive instruction that students receive in their general education degree, they only need seven additional courses for special education licensure. Their student teaching involves 10 weeks in a general education classroom (either elementary or secondary) and 6 weeks in a special education placement. The dual licensure education increases students' versatility when applying for teaching positions after graduation and ensures broader knowledge of special education learners regardless of setting. Finally, SUU's Special Education programs provide flexible online options. All courses include both in-person and online sections, and the Alternate Pathway program is entirely online to meet the needs of practicing educators.

93%

of recently graduated SUU survey respondents reported that classes and activities were offered at convenient times and days.

Overview

Student teaching and clinical practice have been identified as the most important aspects of teacher preparation (Boyd et al., 2009; Ronfeldt et al., 2014). Student teaching experiences, including teacher collaboration at field placement sites, have been linked to later efficacy of in-service teachers (Ronfeldt et al., 2014; Ronfeldt, 2015).



“Cooperating teachers,” also called “mentors” or “associate teachers,” are in-service teachers who guide and support pre-service teachers during clinical experiences (Clark et al., 2014). For each clinical experience, such as student teaching, pre-service teachers are typically assigned to one cooperating teacher who models effective teaching practices and provides opportunities for engagement in the setting(s) where they work (e.g., in their own classroom or with special education students in general education classrooms).



Pre-service teachers thrive when they work with cooperating teachers who are honest and respectful (Heeralal, 2017). Furthermore, cooperating teachers are most effective when they have knowledge in mentoring, model strong instructional skills, help pre-service teachers nurture a teacher-identity, and can relate learning to teacher professional standards (Ellis et al., 2020). Finally, one of the most important qualities of an effective cooperating teacher is their ability to develop collegial, trusting, and reciprocal relationships with pre-service teachers (Ellis et al., 2020).

Feature in Practice: Brigham Young University **BYU**

Brigham Young University (BYU), located in Provo, UT, offers a [Bachelor of Science in Special Education](#) program. Courses are held on campus in face-to-face meetings. Students enter a Special Education cohort at the beginning of their junior year, and most students complete their student teaching in the fall of senior year, though some students finish their general education requirements in the fall and then student teach during the winter semester of senior year.

BYU’s Special Education program prioritizes student teaching placements and opportunities for strong relationships between students and their cooperating teachers. Placement decisions are a collaborative effort among representatives from BYU and partnering Utah school districts, including BYU faculty and district special education directors. In particular, the Special Education program administrator is highly familiar with the cooperating teachers in each district’s special education department. Factors such as the student’s grade level and district preferences are considered as part of the placement decisions. However, the placement matching approach prioritizes a strong fit between each student and cooperating teacher over a particular grade level, school, or district assignment. The success of BYU’s student teaching placements was noted by the program administrator and is supported by evidence that shows recent graduates’ positive perceptions of their cooperating teachers’ feedback, supervision, and expertise.

78% of recently graduated BYU survey respondents reported that cooperating teachers provided effective supervision.



Overview

Coursework alone does not provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to experience the full range of tasks and responsibilities they will encounter as in-service teachers. Thoughtfully designed learning experiences that provide pre-service teachers with opportunities to receive feedback on their instruction and collaborate with other educators, however, create authentic opportunities to bridge coursework and practice.



Feedback: Formative feedback in higher education is critical for student success (McCarthy, 2017). For pre-service teachers in particular, feedback on instruction is an important aspect of their development and training (Hammerness et al., 2005; Tripp & Rich, 2012). Quality feedback from university instructors is associated with higher levels of self-efficacy among pre-service teachers (Rots et al., 2007). Regular opportunities to practice instructional skills, receive feedback, and act upon this feedback improves the performance of pre-service teachers (Carless et al., 2011).



Collaboration: Special education teachers often collaborate directly with general education teachers to ensure that their students' learning needs are met. Given the importance of this collaboration among in-service teachers, pre-service special education teachers need structured opportunities to practice working with general education teachers to support students (Arthaud et al., 2007). Special education teachers with strong collaboration skills and opportunities to collaborate are more likely to remain in the profession, making collaboration a critical aspect of special education teacher preparation (Billingsley, 2004).



Feature in Practice: Weber State University

Weber State University (WSU), located in Ogden, UT, offers a [Bachelor of Science in Special Education](#) program, as well as a [Special Education Teaching Graduate Certificate](#) for individuals who already have a Bachelor degree. WSU also has a [Teacher Assistant Pathway to Teaching](#) program for paraprofessionals who do not have a Bachelor degree. WSU's programs are intentionally designed to bridge coursework and practice through regular opportunities for feedback and collaboration in applied settings. For example, WSU instructors evaluate the content and pedagogical aspects of practicums separately to ensure that students are competent in both areas before advancing in the program. Furthermore, special education students take courses and complete clinical experiences alongside general education students to learn and practice how to work together in inclusive classroom settings and co-teaching contexts.

Bridging Coursework and Practice at WSU

- Practicum component to every class, which involves formative feedback and helps WSU staff assess readiness for student teaching
- Student teaching as the final capstone of the program
- Personalized goals set each semester using the Utah Effective Teaching Standards professional growth assessment
- Structured opportunities to collaborate with elementary and secondary teaching students

80%

of recently graduated WSU survey respondents reported that they received regular feedback from clinical supervisors and faculty/instructors.

Overview

The learning needs of students with disabilities are diverse. Students receiving special education services have disabilities that fall into one or more of 13 categories (Utah State Board of Education, 2022). To meet the varying needs of Utah's students, prospective teachers seeking licensure in K-12 Special Education must become endorsed in at least one of the following areas:

- Adapted Physical Education
- Deaf and Hard of Hearing
- Deafblind
- Mild/Moderate Disabilities
- Secondary Special Education Mathematics
- Severe Disabilities
- Visual Impairments

Despite the range of endorsements available to Utah educators, most institutions only offer endorsements in Mild/Moderate Disabilities, and in some cases, Severe Disabilities (see the *Table of Utah Special Education Teacher Preparation Programs* on page 4). As a result, students with other types of disabilities may not always be taught by educators with specialized training to address their unique learning needs. In order for IHEs to offer a wider range of endorsement areas, they must also have instructors with varying areas of expertise. This can be accomplished through the expansion of faculty to include non-tenure-track faculty with diverse experience, expertise, and skillsets in special education. Non-tenure-track faculty often have rich practitioner knowledge in addition to content expertise, lending an applied perspective on their area of specialization that may differ from and complement the experience and skillsets of tenure-track faculty (Kezar & Maxey, 2014).

Feature in Practice: University of Utah



The University of Utah (U of U), located in Salt Lake City, UT, offers three different degree programs in special education: a [Bachelor of Science](#), a [Master of Education](#), and a [Master of Science](#). The MEd is a professional degree that is project-based and includes a final comprehensive exam, while the MS is an academic degree that is research-based and requires a thesis as a capstone. While the special education programs have traditionally been held in-person on campus, with separate online offerings through the U of U's distance education program, they are moving towards an integrated hybrid model with both face-to-face and online options for all courses. Across their three programs, the U of U provides training in both special education license areas (K-12 and Preschool) and in every endorsement offered by the state.

The U of U ensures that they are able to offer multiple endorsements through the expansion of their non-tenure-track faculty. Approximately 40% of the special education courses (both undergraduate and graduate) are taught by career-line faculty. These faculty members have specific content expertise and practical experience in each endorsement area, and many of them are former special educators themselves. In the second year of each U of U program, known as the "licensing year," students take the courses that are required for their specific license and endorsement areas with faculty who specialize in those areas. Students also have a primary faculty advisor in their endorsement area. The range of endorsement offerings at the U of U, coupled with specialized guidance and instruction from faculty in those content areas, provides students with a variety of career pathways and may help the next generation of special education teachers better meet the diverse needs of Utah students.

94%
of recently graduated
U of U survey
respondents agreed that
faculty and instructors
were knowledgeable and
instructionally competent.

Overview



When students in higher education have supportive and engaging relationships with faculty and staff, they experience benefits such as higher retention rates (Wilcox et al., 2005), greater sense of commitment (Strauss & Volkwein, 2004), increased motivation (Zepke & Leach, 2010), satisfaction (Calvo et al., 2010), and increased learning (Halawah, 2006). Students benefit from caring relationships with instructors and learning that takes place in a nonthreatening environment (Anderson et al., 2002; Goldstein, 1999).



Strong relationships between students and faculty members are facilitated by both informal out-of-class interactions as well as active and engaging learning activities in coursework. For example, Braxton and colleagues (2000) found that interactive classroom activities such as discussion and group work lead to positive relationships among students and their instructors. In addition to interactive learning opportunities, students also benefit from instructors who demonstrate respect and compassion (Helterbran, 2008).



WESTMINSTER
COLLEGE

Feature in Practice: Westminster College

Westminster College, located in Salt Lake City, UT, offers a [Bachelor of Arts in Special Education](#) for undergraduates, a [Master of Arts in Teaching in Special Education](#) for those with a Bachelor's degree seeking initial teaching licensure, and a [Master of Education in Special Education](#) for those who are already teaching and pursuing a second teaching licensure. The MAT program is the largest of the three programs, with approximately 16-17 students per cohort. There are six full-time faculty members who support Westminster's Special Education programs. Courses for all programs are held on campus in a face-to-face setting. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, some students chose to attend meetings for in-person courses virtually.

90%

of recently graduated Westminster survey respondents agreed that faculty and instructors were responsive, were respectful of diversity, and valued and supported them.

Westminster program administrators reported that Special Education faculty are highly committed to their students through all phases of their programs, from coursework to student teaching. In courses, faculty work closely with students to engage them in applied, hands-on activities. Small cohort and class sizes in the Special Education programs allow for more frequent interactions between faculty and students and more collaborative classroom environments. Faculty instruction focuses on evidence-based, high-leverage practices informed by the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) [Initial and Advanced K-12 Practice-Based Professional Preparation Standards for Special Educators](#). The academically engaging relationships that students develop with program faculty likely contribute to increased learning and enhanced confidence. For example, according to program administrators, data collected from Westminster special education students show that they feel well prepared to provide instruction based on the CEC standards. Relationships between program faculty and students extend beyond coursework, with faculty also acting as supervisors for student teaching experiences. In this role, together with cooperating teachers, faculty provide regular coaching and feedback to students and supporting them through the transition into the special education classroom setting.

Overview

Peer relationships are critical to student success in post-secondary education. Attachment to peers is a strong predictor of a student’s sense of institutional belonging (Maunder, 2016). Students with strong emotional-social wellbeing, including trusting relationships and shared interests with peers, have greater persistence in college (Goguen et al., 2010; van der Zanden et al., 2018). In teacher preparation in particular, learning is enhanced when students feel a sense of community (Koeppen et al., 2000). Furthermore, research has found that pre-service teachers are able to reduce stress and isolation by supporting one another through their programs (Nguyen, 2013).



Cohort models, which have become increasingly common in recent years (Seed, 2008), are one promising strategy for fostering strong peer relationships. The benefits of cohort models are well documented. For example, Ferguson and Brown (2019) found that pre-service teachers who were assigned to a cohort model had a greater sense of community than those who were not. Furthermore, cohort models allow students to engage in both formal and informal learning opportunities, including study groups (Maher, 2005; Wesson et al., 1996).



Feature in Practice: Utah Valley University

Utah Valley University (UVU), located in Orem, UT, offers a [Bachelor of Science in Special Education](#) program. Courses are typically held on campus, with students taking classes together in person. Some classes bring together students from the general education and special education programs, such as the introductory course called “Exceptional Students” which is a requirement for all students pursuing education degrees. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the university temporarily transitioned all courses to be fully online. Since then, four of the special education courses have continued to be offered in online sections along with face-to-face sections, and the program is working towards creating more online options.

89%

of recently graduated UVU survey respondents reported that they developed close relationships with other students.

UVU’s Full-Cohort Model

- UVU utilizes a full-cohort model where students who begin the program together stay together throughout the entire program.
- UVU’s most recent cohort was 25 students. The program expects at least 35 students in the coming year.
- Students are together in the program for two years.
- Collaborative assignments and small group activities are used regularly in coursework.

UVU’s Special Education program fosters peer relationships through a full-cohort model. Students are asked to work and interact together regularly, and there is a strong sense of belonging in each cohort, according to program administrators. Students share successes and concerns as a group, and they informally recruit peers with undeclared majors to join the program. One of the courses in the program also focuses on collaboration and teamwork in the special education profession. Feedback from UVU graduates suggests that their relationships with peers in the Special Education program positively influence their personal and professional growth.

Summary of Promising Practices in Special Education Teacher Preparation

Alternative Pathways for Practicing Special Educators

- Provide non-traditional routes into special education to address educator shortages
- Recruit paraprofessionals to support diversity and retention

Practical Program Structure

- Provide shorter course length options
- Offer dual licensure in elementary or secondary education
- Give students online course options

Strategic Cooperating Teacher/Student Matching

- Work closely with schools and districts to ensure strong matches between pre-service teachers and cooperating teachers
- Provide cooperating teachers with the resources necessary to support pre-service teachers

Connections Between Coursework and Practice

- Design learning experiences that allow students to receive and reflect upon feedback
- Create opportunities for collaboration among special education and general education pre-service teachers

Faculty Expertise to Support Endorsement Areas

- Ensure that students can pursue a range of special education endorsement areas to meet all students' learning needs
- Utilize instructors' real-world expertise to provide robust learning opportunities

Relationships with Program Faculty

- Encourage instructors to develop rapport with students
- Provide engaging and interactive learning opportunities as a part of coursework

Relationships with Peers

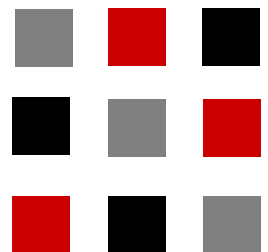
- Create opportunities for students to develop trusting relationships with one another to encourage persistence
- Consider a full-cohort model as a strategy for ensuring a strong sense of belonging among students

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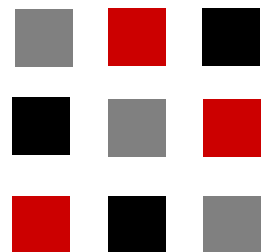
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