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Distance Delivery of a Course on Family-Centered Services: An Effective Model For Web-Based Instruction and Interactive Television

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This paper addresses two challenges in preparing early intervention personnel for the 21st century: (1) access to thorough coverage of the family-centered services philosophy for trainees and practitioners in special education and related services, and (2) use of Web-based instruction and other distance learning technologies to reach students beyond the college campus community.

This paper has been adapted from Dr. Marvin's presentation at the Ninth Annual CSPD Conference, sponsored by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education and the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, in Alexandria, Virginia, April 29-May 2, 2001.

Although the paper focuses on distance delivery of coursework, it contains many interesting and useful ideas for preparing trainees in any discipline to become sensitive and skilled in working with families of children of any age who have disabilities. Included in the paper is information on a Faculty Development Web Site that you can access.

Introduction

Although understanding of family-centered services is a necessity for all professionals who work with young children who have disabilities, prospective practitioners in early intervention, speech pathology, physical therapy, nursing, psychology, education, and other services may receive only cursory information about this philosophy during their preparation. Few graduate programs have the

liberty of dedicating full courses to the study of children from birth to age 3 and their families. These programs often focus on a life-span perspective. If they include information on working with families at all, this is often relegated to secondary discussions.

Moreover, professional understandings of family perspectives, concerns, and needs are generally lacking in personnel preparation for special education. This paper describes a technology-based approach to personnel preparation in family-centered practices for special educators and related services personnel who work with children and youth from birth through age 21 and their families.

Background: Needs and Issues in Nebraska

Institutions of higher education are the keys to preparing entry-level personnel across disciplines to serve young children with disabilities and their families in school and community settings. Until the late 1990s, however, separate and self-contained programs in early childhood education, special education, and child development were the norm on most Nebraska campuses; early intervention principles were taught on a limited basis in only a few programs; early intervention coursework was restricted almost exclusively to three universities' departments of special education; and allied health and social service graduate programs devoted little, if any, time to early intervention practices and family-centered services in particular. At the same time, the early intervention work force in this rural state was composed almost entirely of educators, and shortages of other early intervention (and special education) personnel persisted in both urban and rural areas for its 1.5 million citizens who may have need for such services.

Stakeholder Involvement in Capacity-Building

Between 1997 and 2000, Nebraska participated in the SCRIPT Outreach Project (Supporting Change and Reform in Interdisciplinary Preservice Training) operated by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. SCRIPT project coordinators in the state represented Chadron State College, the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Wayne State College, and the University of Nebraska campuses in Kearney, Lincoln, and Omaha. A statewide group of 32 stakeholders (including higher education faculty, families, practitioners, administrators, and state agency personnel) identified the following priorities for early intervention/ early childhood (EC/EI) preservice personnel preparation in Nebraska:

1. Increase interdisciplinary planning and teaching of EC/EI content.
2. Increase the quality and diversity of practicum experiences for students.
3. Assist faculty in addressing early intervention philosophies and competencies in all preservice training.
4. Assist training institutions in planning, developing, and implementing the new unified early childhood teaching endorsement for educators of young children from birth through third grade.

Projects Funded by the Nebraska Department of Education

Since 1999, the Nebraska Department of Education has issued annual RFPs for projects that will build these capacities. Funded by the state's IDEA Part B (Section 619) and Part C funds, the resulting projects have focused on:

* Development of unified early childhood teacher certification programs (awarded to Chadron State College and the University of Nebraska at Lincoln, at Kearney, and at Omaha);

* Preparation of allied health personnel in early intervention (awarded to University of Nebraska Medical Center);

* Establishment of collaborative Early Childhood preparation with a State college and a local community college (awarded to Wayne State College); and

* Distance delivery of coursework for interdisciplinary audiences in family-centered services and medically fragile infants (awarded to the University of Nebraska-Lincoln).

This paper describes the project on distance delivery of coursework in family-centered services.

Distance Delivery of Coursework In Family-Centered Services

Need for the Project

Prior to 2000, the availability of preparation in family-centered services was limited to one course at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, offered only once a year, typically for 9 to 15 students majoring in early childhood special education. The other preservice programs for disciplines typically associated with early intervention are based at four state campuses, at a distance of 60 miles to more than 120 miles from Lincoln. Students in these programs had few or no opportunities to establish an understanding of family needs, experiences, and services before or during their practicum experiences with young children. Their interactions with families were often limited to their presence at meetings to develop Individual Family Service Plans; at assessment intake meetings; and through occasional conversations, instructions, and exchange of information at the practicum site. Clearly, however, family-centered services require a deeper appreciation of the challenges families face in gaining access to professional services for their children and the skills needed for optimal inclusion of parents as partners in early intervention and special education programs.

State Funding, Recruitment, and Tuition Waivers

For these reasons, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln responded to the State Department of Education's RFP by proposing to redesign and deliver its existing course on family-centered services via distance learning technologies to a larger community of learners. Twelve graduate-level programs at the four University of Nebraska campuses have recruited trainees for the class over the past two years. These programs represented psychology (3), speech-language pathology (3), nursing (1), physical therapy (1), social work (1), early childhood special education (2) and educational administration (1). State funds were provided for tuition waivers and for the costs of five interactive TV broadcasts that reinforce weekly Web-based class sessions.

Employed practitioners, as well as full-time and part-time college students, register for this course (although grant-supported tuition waivers are available only to full-time graduate students).

The Interactive Course

The 3-credit graduate course is not confined to early intervention. Rather, *Family-Centered Services in Special Education (SpEd 960)* covers the range of children and youth with disabilities from birth through age 21. This is because Nebraska, a largely rural state, requires services and teacher licensure for the 0-21 age range, and family-centered services are believed to be applicable to all ages of children served in Nebraska's communities.

Course content covers family systems, helping models, teaming and communication skills, and implementing services. A greater emphasis is placed on attitudes and sensitivity training than on methodology. The syllabus describes the course as follows:

This graduate course will describe normal and stressed family systems and the impact of having a child with special needs in the family. Particular attention will be given to understanding the normal family life cycle, family roles and functions, and the family's need for and use of support systems within and outside of the immediate family structure. Attention will be given to understanding current and proposed models of parent-professional relationships in the public schools, with a focus on special education programs and personnel. Practical information regarding family-focused interviews and development of Individualized Family Service Plans will be presented. Strategies for interacting effectively with families as child advocates, interventionists, and service coordination managers will be discussed. Communication skills necessary for effective consultation/collaboration with parents and other community team members will be presented and practiced.

Two technologies are used: the Internet and television. The distance learning format allows the instructors to act as facilitators. Course development, production, and delivery are based on seven principles of good practice in higher education (Chickering & Gamson, 1987):

1. Encourage contacts between students and faculty;
2. Develop reciprocity and cooperation among students;
3. Use active learning techniques;
4. Give prompt feedback;
5. Emphasize time on task;
6. Communicate high expectations; and
7. Respect diverse talents and ways of learning.

Instructors. The course is conducted jointly by a university professor and a parent of a child with disabilities. The professor takes the lead in posting content. The parent co-instructor joins the professor in evaluating assignments and exams, responding to online interactions and journals, and leading discussions and activities during the televised sessions. In Year 1, the parent co-instructor was compensated with free tuition for this 3-credit-hour course; in Year 2, the parent co-instructor opted for a \$750 stipend. Finances were supplied by the grant. The parent from Year 1 is expected to repeat her role as co-instructor for January-May 2002.

Delivery formats. The course is delivered online one evening per week for 15 weeks. Students use *Blackboard Version 5* software, which is easy to learn and is user-password protected. During the semester, there are also five interactive TV sessions. TV reception is available on each NU campus across the state. Although web access to course materials is boundless, TV sessions are currently limited to in-state sites, due to costs and available technologies .

Online components of the course are as follows:

* Instead of lectures, *ClassNotes* are posted on-line each Friday morning. Written in conversational style, the *ClassNotes* are a series of paragraphs that define terms, provide examples, and stimulate students to think, seek information, and write thoughtful responses. Web links to many sources of information on each topic are included in each edition of the *ClassNotes*. The entire weekly package is generally about three pages in length.

Students participate in *Weekly Class Discussions*. For this, the instructors post a topical paragraph or case scenario on-line, and students respond with comments in an asynchronous, threaded discussion. Four major assignments have kept the students actively involved over the semester.

* Through the *Virtual Family Weekly Journal*, the instructors convey a new episode in family life each week, and students respond as to how they would feel in such a situation. Students “give birth” to a child at the start of the semester. Each week as the semester progresses, they weigh the decisions associated with having multiple providers, Individual Family Service Plans (IFSPs), and Individual Education Programs (IEPs) -- up through the child’s first years in primary school. The *Family Journal* episodes attempt to tie issues to weekly course content and are changed each semester on the basis of the dynamics of the class (e.g. appropriate for early intervention or for the primary level, secondary level, etc).

*Early in the term, students are required to audiotape themselves conducting an interview with a parent or colleague, analyze the interview, write an *Action Plan* on changes they should make, and later write a subsequent progress report on whether and how they have changed their actions.

*In addition, students have opportunities to interact with and *Interview Adoptive Families* -- parents and other family members across the state who are willing to be available for interviews via phone, in-person, or e-mail.

* In *Ask a Professional*, students request a professional who works with families of children with special needs to complete a "Brass Tacks" survey. Students summarize survey results and their implications in a small discussion group with campus classmates. Each campus posts a summary of their collective findings on the classwide *Discussion Board*.

* Discretionary extra credit *projects* (one per student, worth 10 extra points per semester) include the following, although students can propose their own special projects:

* *Marvin’s Movie Minute*: Review a movie or video from the family systems perspective.

* *Family Tales Revisited*: Write a book report that highlights family systems in a work of fiction or non-fiction.

* *Critique a Colleague’s Communication Skills*: Write up and share feedback.

* *Community Resources*: Develop a list of your community's resources for families of children who have disabilities.

* *Review Parent Training/Support Programs*: Participate in and describe a parent program in your community.

Other aspects of the web-based course include electronic forums for *Questions and Answers* and the parent co-instructor's *Parent Perspective* on issues and course topics.

Five televised class sessions are designed to provide "high-touch" to the high-tech course. Guest speakers (such as parents, administrators, and social workers) often join students in discussion or role-playing activities on the two-way video system. The TV program may include a short video, followed by an interactive conversation about the video's content that includes the guests' viewpoints and contexts. Lecture is avoided during TV broadcasts, and students are directed to the posted *Class Notes* for a foundation for each broadcast topic.

Grades are based on students' participation in *Weekly Class Discussions*, journal entries, reports, interviews, and exams. Students also conduct pre- and post-test self-assessments of knowledge and skill development.

Web site. The course syllabus, reading lists, sample in-class activities, announcements, and other information are available on-line at <http://www.unl.edu/ECSE/facdev/family>. This Faculty Development Web site presents information (including the *Virtual Family Weekly Journal* episodes) for preservice trainers' and district professional development providers' consideration.

Outcomes and Evidence of Effectiveness

The course was delivered by distance learning technologies for the first time from January to May 2000 for 28 trainees. In the second year, 34 trainees participated during the first semester of 2001. For the first two years, participants represented physical therapy, speech-language pathology, psychology, nursing, education, and educational administration. Thirty students are anticipated to register for the course when it is offered again from January to May 2002.

Students' evaluations, submitted online at any time and required at the end of the course, revealed nearly identical data over the past two years. Results from the spring 2000 course are summarized as follows, on a 5-point scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent). Detailed evaluation data are included in the Appendix.

	<u>Mean</u>
* Instructor/professor:	4.83
* Parent co-instructor:	4.74
* Organization and management of course:	4.78
* Web-based organization:	4.89
* Discussion boards	4.20
* TV sessions	4.53

Students' pre/post self-assessments resulted in the following mean scores on a 4-point scale (1 = no knowledge/skill to 4 = very knowledgeable/skilled):

	<u>Pre-Test</u>	<u>Post-Test</u>
* Knowledge	M = 2.6	M = 3.6
* Skills	M = 1.7	M = 3.0

Average time students spent on the course was reported as follows:

* Class Notes:	1.5 hours per week
* Discussion Boards:	1.0 hour per week
* Reading texts	3.5 hours per week
* Assignments	1.0 hour per week
* TV sessions	1.5 hours per week
* Total	8.5 hours per week

Parent involvement is demonstrated as follows, in addition to the weekly interactions between students and the parent co-instructor online or via TV:

- * Eighteen parents across Nebraska acted as guest speakers in the course.
- * Forty-three parents in Nebraska acted as *Adoptive Families* for students.

Statewide payoffs have included: inter-campus collaboration; networking among interdisciplinary professionals, trainees, and parents; faculty development; preservice capacity-building; and an increased number of qualified personnel. For example, the dean of Teachers College at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln has agreed to financially support the continuation of this distance-delivered course once state grant funding has been exhausted. Faculty on the four University of Nebraska campuses are exploring means for continued student involvement/education in family-centered services once the tuition waivers are no longer available. To date, 62 students/practitioners in this rural state have completed training in family-centered services due to the availability of this distance course.

Reference

Chickering, A. & Gamson, Z. (1987, March). Seven principles of good practice in undergraduate education. *AAHE Bulletin*.

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Appendix Detailed Student Evaluation Data

The composite **Student Evaluation** ratings were as follows on a 5-point scale from 1 (poor) to 5 (excellent):

<u>Usefulness of contributions provided by instructors/guest speakers</u>	<u>Mean</u>
* Parent co-instructor	4.74
* Associate professor	4.83
* Technology assistant	3.93
* Families	4.74
* Guest service coordinator/social worker	4.74
* Parent-teacher-administrator teams	4.74
 <u>Organization and management of the course</u>	 <u>Mean</u>
* Use of <i>Announcements Page</i> on web	4.91
* Use of Web for exam distribution	4.91
* Timing of exams	4.80
* Use of electronic grade book	4.73
* Use of <i>Student Pages</i> for getting to know classmates	3.20
* Organization of <i>Course Information Folders</i>	4.65
* Syllabus/course outline information	4.65
* Organization of <i>Assignments Folders</i> and contents	4.32
* Contents of external links section	4.36
* Technology support	4.65
 <u>Use of email</u>	 <u>Mean</u>
* Use of email for student-instructor communication	4.91
* Use of email for student-student communication	4.33
* Use of email for parent-student interviews/contacts	4.43
* Quality and timeliness of instructors' responses to email	4.58
* Procedures for submission of exams and assignments	4.83
 <u>Use of the Discussion Board</u>	 <u>Mean</u>
* Use of course organizer (<i>Blackboard</i>)	4.89
* Use of <i>Discussion Board</i> for:	
* Small campus group discussions	4.19
* <i>Question and Answer</i> sessions	4.30
* Weekly class discussions	4.10
* <i>Pat's Issues Discussion</i> (parent-led)	4.00
* <i>Marvin's Movie Minute</i> /Book review	3.63
* FCS video reviews/comments	3.74
* Instructors' comments on discussions	4.52
* Instructors' comments on Journal entries	4.53

<u>Class Assignments</u>	<u>Mean</u>
* <i>Ask a Professional</i>	3.71
* <i>Virtual Family Journal</i> entries	4.68
* <i>Action Plan</i> for communication skills and final report	3.67
* <i>Interview a Family</i> and family report	4.24
* Extra credit	4.47
<u>Weekly Class Notes/Folders</u>	<u>Mean</u>
* Documents folder organization	
* <i>ClassNotes</i> organization/ease of reading	4.90
* <i>ClassNotes</i> content	4.71
* Use of links within <i>ClassNotes</i>	4.57
* Use of <i>Discussion Board</i> links within <i>ClassNotes</i>	4.55
* Content of <i>Class Discussion</i> topics	4.50
* Use of space in <i>ClassNotes</i> for making mental/pencil notations	4.38
* Short activities within <i>ClassNotes</i> for your own use	
* Listing of readings and assignments in <i>Weekly Class Folders</i>	4.57
* Amount of reading each week	3.15
* <i>Parent Perspective</i> in <i>Weekly Class Folders</i>	4.24
<u>Interactive TV Sessions</u>	<u>Mean</u>
* Topics/focus of interactive TV sessions	4.75
* Organization/flow of interactive TV sessions	4.30
* Student involvement/participation during interactive TV sessions	4.00

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