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## The Special Education Consultant Professor: Interdisciplinary Collaboration in the Re-Registration of Teacher Education Programs

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This paper is based on a presentation of the same name, which was part of the National Conference on the Comprehensive System of Personnel Development (CSPD) in Alexandria, Virginia, in May 2001, sponsored by the Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education, and The Academy Project of the National Association of State Directors of Special Education. Its purpose is to summarize the process of interdisciplinary collaboration in a large urban institution that blended several disciplines to create new courses to ensure that all preservice teachers are prepared to work with students who have disabilities.

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### THE COLLABORATIVE EXPERIENCE

Cooperation among school professionals is critical to the success of any collaborative experience (Brownell, Yeager, Rennells, & Riley, 1997). It involves commitment by all individuals responsible for the planning and implementing of student programs, as well as time, support, resources, monitoring, and above all, persistence (Ripley, 1997). The potential benefits of teacher collaboration are many. Trump & Hange (1996) and Thousand (1996) consider the experiencing of professional growth as a major benefit of collaboration, while Kemple, Hartle, Correa & Fox, (1994) cite factors such as the broadening of problem conceptualization, correcting inadequacies in service delivery, and improved planning as important outcomes. Cramer (1998) suggests, however, that teachers are often hesitant to work collaboratively, especially if they have received neutral or negative reactions. Teachers may also be accustomed to norms of "non-interference and privacy," and are used to conditions of independence, rather than interdependence ( Bay, Bryan, & O'Connor, 1994). Ultimately, changing the culture of a school to be more collaborative and interdisciplinary requires thoughtful organizational planning and focus. To begin such planning, a school's administration must understand the concept of true collaboration. Ascher (1988) states that there are two aspects of any collaborative that are analytically distinguishable and essential: process and impact. In developing a good process, the guiding principle should be to promote a collaborative's ability to "withstand periods of disturbance, and to generally sustain

itself over time." Without such consideration, there is a diminishing likelihood that collaboration will succeed. Collaboration on areas targeted for improvement or change will be achieved only by thoughtful planning and through an organized process.

The most commonly studied collaboratives in education are between public schools and universities (Ascher, 1988). These collaborations are a natural extension of the need for Schools of Education to provide future teachers and school professionals with field-based experiences prior to their graduation. They also provide the institutional researcher with an opportunity for subject-based research. At the same time, schools are often in need of new and innovative strategies for teaching in content areas, new technologies, and other school-related issues. It is significantly important that institutions of higher education (IHEs) keep up-to-date on the best practices in collaboration and cooperative teaching and maintain an on-going dialogue between all university faculty who contribute to the education and preparation of teacher candidates.

### **Collaboration in Teacher Education**

While much has been written on teacher collaboration in K-12 settings, there has been less reported on collaboration at the university level. However, collaboration among all disciplines in a School of Education is essential in providing teacher candidates with the best possible strategies and knowledge bases for educating an increasingly diverse student population (Blanton, Winn, & Pugach, 1997). Further, State mandates for more inclusive and diverse preparation in teacher education reinforces the need for increased interdisciplinary planning. Given these considerations, in what ways is inter-disciplinary collaboration at the university level different from IHE collaboration with public schools? Are there specific rules, practices or philosophies of an IHE that may influence the success of an interdisciplinary collaborative process?

Miller and Stayton (1999) state that successful interdisciplinary collaboration in a college or university is dependent on the current climate of the institution -- its customary patterns of behavior, rules and norms, reward structures, and values regarding collaborative teacher education efforts. Barriers to successful cross-disciplinary or interdisciplinary collaboration in teacher education have been identified by several researchers ( Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris & Watson, 1998, Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997, Hargreaves, 1992, Miller & Stayton, 1999). Many barriers are administrative in nature, such as funding patterns in Schools of Education, and the institutional reward system's failure to recognize interdisciplinary planning as valuable for tenure or promotion (Boyer, 1990; Fullan, Galluzzo, Morris & Watson, 1998). Barriers or roadblocks may also revolve around the concepts of individualism, balkanization, and contrived congeniality (Hargreaves, 1994). *Individualism*, or working in isolation, may occur in IHEs with small departments or one-person programs. The professors in these departments are accustomed to making decisions without consulting others outside their immediate domain, and may either resent or be unfamiliar with the shared decision-making process. *Balkanization*, or the development of relationships with subgroups of colleagues in one's academic discipline, has been a university norm. It involves a banding together of faculty in the same discipline, with little movement towards collaboration outside the specialization. *Contrived congeniality* -- working together not by choice but by a set of formal, specific mandates and requirements -- may result when a State education department requires mandated studies (such as inclusion of students with disabilities into general education curriculum) and leaves the faculty feeling powerless to determine their curriculum. Other barriers may include: (a) lack of incentives in faculty reward systems; (b) additional time demands for already burdened faculty schedules; (c) lack of institutional resources; (d) differing faculty philosophies or missions; (e) rigid thinking; and (f) general lack of respect across departments (Glassick, Huber & Maeroff, 1997; Miller & Stayton, 1999; Tom, 1997). Minimization of these barriers, or better yet, elimination of them, will need the

direction of a good leader who supports the concept and practice of interdisciplinary collaboration in curriculum and program planning and a healthy mutual respect other among the faculty.

In promoting collaboration among departments and faculty, the administration of a School of Education will need to place a value on "inter-disciplinary community building" (Boyer, 1990). It must provide an incentive for faculty members who participate, and positive emphasis on being a team player. Faculty should not be viewed as less capable if they choose to conduct research and write with a colleague as a result of collaboration. In creating programs that cover all elements of curriculum that will best prepare teachers for today's student population, interdisciplinary collaboration should be recognized as a primary vehicle for achieving this goal.

An area of teacher preparation that is perhaps in the greatest need of collaborative curriculum and program planning by faculty in Schools of Education is that of providing all teachers with preparation in working with students with disabilities in general education classrooms. Many State education departments have mandated that teacher preparation programs show that training in working with students with disabilities has been demonstrated in course sequences and requirements. The remainder of this article discusses the impact of this mandate on teacher certification in New York State. It highlights a process of interdisciplinary collaboration within a School of Education at a large, urban institution that blended the needs of several disciplines to create new courses addressing the needs of students with disabilities. To illustrate this process, this paper focuses on just a few of the programs at Hunter College.

### **ONE EXAMPLE OF SUCCESSFUL INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION:**

In 1999, the New York State the Board of Regents mandated the re-registration of all programs in teacher education leading to teaching certificates in the State of New York. These programs were required to provide evidence that courses include information on the skills and strategies for teaching students with disabilities, including students with severe disabilities. Specific guidelines and mandated requirements were outlined, and IHEs began the process of reviewing their existing teacher education preparation programs and adding to, modifying, or creating programs which satisfied the mandates. It was clear that collaboration among disciplines would need to take place if appropriate changes were to be made to provide adequate preparation in working with students who have disabilities.

According to Subdivision 52.21(b) of the *Regulations of the Commissioner of Education*, all preservice programs needed to provide all teacher education students with the knowledge base to teach students on "the nature of students within the full range of disabilities and special health-care needs, and the effect of those disabilities and needs on learning and behavior -- and skill in identifying strengths, individualizing instruction, and collaborating with others to prepare students with disabilities and special needs to their highest levels of academic achievement and independence."

In addition, the State required that all teacher preparation programs include a minimum of 6 credits in literacy, as well as coverage of multicultural education; instructional uses of technology; and prevention of substance abuse, violence, and child abuse.

The School of Education at Hunter College, a senior college of the City University of New York, was presented with this challenge. Hunter has an enrollment of approximately 2150 students, 60 full-time faculty, and more than 22 programs, all of which conducted a review in response to the State's mandate. The process led to changes in the names and substance of some

programs and, in some cases, to entirely new programs. For example, Elementary Education has become Childhood Education, Grades 1-6, and Secondary Education has become Adolescent Education. A new program in Literacy was developed, which is more highly defined and specific than the former reading specialization within Elementary Education. Whereas earlier there was only an Early Childhood specialization, now there is a program in Early Childhood Education and another in Early Childhood Special Education. Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) did revisions of its school-aged track. Special Education and Bilingual Education also went through the process. All of these are master's degree programs.

### **Planning Process: The Special Education Consultant Professor**

The State's mandate was the major incentive, which many faculty members regarded as an opportunity to make revisions they believed in. Another incentive was the fact the additional certification titles established by the State Department of Education in Early Childhood, Early Childhood Special Education, and Literacy enabled the development of stand-alone programs in which faculty members had longstanding interest.

The Dean and Chairpersons of the three major departments (Curriculum and Teaching, Educational Foundations and Programs in Counseling, and Special Education) discussed the interdepartmental collaboration process. At an initial faculty-wide meeting, organization of the process was designed, work groups were formed, and meeting times were assigned for the early stages of the process. Subsequently, work groups became autonomous in deciding when meetings would occur. Open time for working together was available in the weekly Dean's Hours. Groups or pairs of colleagues representing disciplines within the School of Education were assigned to work in designing a free-standing course or infusing the requirements for disability teaching preparation in each major program area. Because change of this type depends heavily on prior positive relationships among the faculty, we were fortunate that these relationships had already been developed. To facilitate the process, a member of the Department of Special Education served as a consultant to each program group, and these individuals became Special Education Consultant Professors during this period. Review and revision of programs began in January 1999, and the process was completed by the State's deadline in April 2001.

### **Outcomes**

Our largest program to be re-registered was the (then) Elementary Education Program. Its work group had membership of at least one Educational Foundations faculty member, several content (Curriculum) area specialists (i.e., language arts, science, math, health education), as well as the Special Education Consultant Professor. They discussed the new requirements and reviewed existing and proposed courses in which instruction on students with disabilities could be included. After much deliberation, this group decided to infuse the information on disabilities instruction into existing and newly proposed coursework, rather than create a separate course. The Special Education Consultant Professor did not play a facilitating role during the drafting of the document, but was called in after an initial State review identified the need for more clarity on the implementation of the special needs mandate. Ultimately, the Elementary Education Program became the Childhood Education Master's Degree Program, Grades 1-6. Excerpts from several of the revised courses are shown in Chart 1, as examples.

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Chart 1  
Excerpts from Selected Course Syllabi  
Childhood Education Master's Degree Program, Grades 1-6

EDCF 700: The Art and Science of Effective Teaching

Includes: Understanding the nature of special learners; understanding the law and rights of special learners; setting goals for working with students with disabilities; exploring the inclusive classroom.

EDC 704: Teaching Developmental Reading

Includes: Identification of the needs and strategies for literacy development of students; with special needs; strategies for reading and writing for students with disabilities.

EDF 716: Evaluation and Assessment of Children

Includes: The empirical and theoretical relationships between performance on different types of assessments and student diversity on a range of criteria, including ethnicity, income, gender, language, and disability status.

QSTB 413: Psychology of Teaching and Learning

Includes: The identification of children with special needs. Curricular adaptations and Instructional approaches, support services and parental involvement.

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The faculty in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages ( TESOL), the faculty who created the new Literacy Program, and the faculty who created the new Early Childhood and Early Childhood Special Education programs chose to develop a separate course on teaching students with disabilities in their discipline areas, rather than infuse it. In order to do this, members from these program areas and a Special Education Consulting Professor worked closely to plan appropriately for addressing the needs of students with disabilities in each discipline. There was an ongoing dialogue as the course curricula and syllabi were developed, and faculty communicated face-to-face and electronically during this process. For example, when designing the courses on disabilities for the new Literacy program, the focus was on special-needs Issues in literacies within the discipline. (See Chart 2 for further details). In the TESOL program, the key goal was to emphasize the distinction between English language learners and children with disabilities or those learning English despite disabilities (Chart 2). The title of the resulting course offered to TESOL students is "Teaching ESL Students with Disabilities: K-12." At every step, the Special Education Consultant Professor conferred with the discipline expert. Chart 2 provides a college catalogue description of the new courses in the Literacy Master's Degree Program and TESOL designed to meet the requirements for instruction on working with students with disabilities within the discipline.

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## College Catalogue Descriptions from TESOL and Literacy Courses

### EDESL 794: Teaching ESL Students with Disabilities: Pre-K-12

This course is a brief overview of the history of special education, including law and educational practice. It includes a description of disability categories, with emphasis on the implications for instruction, management of students' attention to task, and interpersonal behaviors. Also important in this course is the distinction between English language learners from those with disabilities or those learning English despite disabilities. In both cases, this course aims to produce an appreciation of the interactions of these learners with their disabilities

### EDLIT 739.01: Delays in Early Language And Literacy Development in Young children with Special Needs

Historical, theoretical, and research-based teaching practices related to literacy and language instruction for children with special needs, ages birth through second grade. The teacher candidates will expand their knowledge of atypical learning needs and styles. The focus of the course is across all disabilities for children from birth through age 5. Includes 5 hours observation and analysis in an inclusive early childhood setting.

### EDLIT 739.02: Special Needs Issues in Literacies Within the Disciplines

Adaptation, modification and management of instruction, curriculum, the learning environment, materials, and technology across the curriculum for children with special learning needs.

### EDLIT 739.03: Adaptations and Modification in Approaches to Literacy for Students with Special Needs

Adaptation and modification of instructional strategies, technology and curriculum in literacy for full inclusion of children with disabilities.

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## **What We Learned as Consultant Professors**

It appears that the skills of the Special Education Consultant Professor, as an active facilitator, were most successfully utilized by those programs that were smaller, more focused, and involved fewer faculty. These new, smaller programs also had more flexibility in deciding how many courses or credits to offer their prospective students. Further, these programs (the Literacy master's, TESOL, and Early Childhood) are more focused and concentrate on a distinct specialization. Faculty in these programs wanted the addition of a freestanding course addressing skill training in working with students who have disabilities. The development of these courses took into consideration the needs of their specialized population of school-aged children and youth. The courses were designed collaboratively by the discipline-specific professor and the Special Education Consultant Professor.

Larger programs such as Childhood Education, Grades 1-6, and Adolescent Education, had a different task in that they were constructing a new program out of an existing program and had to look carefully at the credit base. It was the decision of this group to continue to infuse curriculum on disability into pre-existing courses, since many of them (particularly in Educational Foundations), already contained information on the teaching students with disabilities in the

general education classroom. As mentioned earlier, special education faculty did not play a major role in the re-registration of the Childhood Education program until later on in the process. It also appears, as an observation, that some "balkanization" took place in the larger programs (Hargreaves, 1994). There was a "banding together of same-discipline faculty" in the planning process and some evidence of a "protective turf model" (Miller & Slayton, 1999). The Special Education Consultant Professor" did not provide input to these work groups after the initial meeting. However, special education faculty continue to be called upon to serve as consultants on a professor-to-professor basis, adding information about teaching students with disabilities to discussions of various seminars and courses when approached by general education faculty or clinical staff.

## Conclusion

Working collaboratively under mandated circumstances can often bring additional stress to faculty members in an IHE. The process of program re-registration is a major additional task during the regular semester when faculty must attend to current students and courses, while still pursuing the scholarship needed for tenure and promotion. The support of the dean and chairpersons is essential to the success of this endeavor, and time must be assigned to move the process along. Helpful to the task is the encouragement of collegiality between faculty members and a common commitment to the vision and mission of the School of Education. It appears that the good relationships between Hunter College faculty in special education and the other disciplines assisted in ensuring that knowledge of students with the full range of disabilities was most important in course development. The success of the process also highlights the need for more opportunities for interdisciplinary discussion and exploration.

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