



# SEFNA

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Revised

## Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment

### SEFNA Brief: The Federal Role in the Preparation of Special Education Doctorates

**Key Findings:** *OSEP<sup>1</sup> is the primary source of federal support for preparing researchers and teacher educators whose focus is students with disabilities. The OSEP Leadership Training Grant Program awards projects to more universities than any other federal agency, but to do so it provides smaller awards to universities for fewer years of funding and less financial assistance for each doctoral student.*

**Federal Support Across Agencies:** Since 1953 the federal government has invested in the preparation of doctoral-level personnel who assume careers that focus on students with disabilities. Three federal agencies currently offer assistance to such doctoral students: NICHD, OSEP, and IES. Each program awards projects to universities, which, in turn, fund tuition, stipends, and other educational expenses to doctoral students.

- The oldest federal training grant program began in 1953 and is now funded through NICHD's MRDD Branch. This multi- and transdisciplinary training program awards fellowships both directly to individuals and through university training projects. The program specifically prepares bio-medical and bio-behavioral researchers studying intellectual and developmental disabilities. Although each year about ten MRDD training projects are awarded to investigators at one of its sixteen national centers, typically only three of these projects focus on preparing behavioral scientists. MRDD funding follows the pattern of NIMH another branch of NIH. The typical annual five-year package totals \$41,972 per doctoral student and provides pre-set stipend levels of \$20,772, in addition to tuition and other costs (e.g., health insurance, travel, research expenditures).
- Initiated in 1959 the training program now managed by OSEP is the only one that funds doctoral preparation in all disability areas for a wide range of careers. Moreover, it is the only program that addresses the need for special education teacher educators. As Smith et al. noted in their 2001 supply-and-demand study of special education leadership personnel, the shortage of new doctorates to fill faculty positions negatively affects both the quantity and quality of teachers and services provided to students with disabilities and their families. In 2009 OSEP funded a total of eighty-five four-year projects supporting 507 special education doctoral students<sup>2</sup> at forty-five universities. Some of these supported both doctoral and post-doctoral students. These projects had an annual award level near or at the maximum allowable \$200,000. Across OSEP projects, financial aid packages are highly variable and low. The typical annual stipend level is \$16,000, and the total financial assistance package is about \$26,000, less than two-thirds of that provided by other agencies.
- IES initiated a doctoral training grant program soon after the agency opened in 2003. IES funds fifteen doctoral preparation projects. Each five-year project has annual funding of one million dollars, which includes stipends at a pre-set level of \$30,000, tuition, and other support, adding up to a total annual package of \$41,150. Only one of these projects' abstracts indicates that the education of students with disabilities is an *optional* area of emphasis. Post-doctoral training projects are awarded through a separate competition.

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<sup>1</sup> For brevity, abbreviations for federal agencies were used: National Institutes of Health (NIH), National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH); National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD), Mental Retardation Development Disabilities Branch (MRDD); and the U.S. Department of Education's Institute for Education Sciences (IES), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP).

<sup>2</sup> OSEP also supported additional leadership preparation projects: one exclusively for post-doctoral students, two master's degree projects preparing special education administrators, and five doctoral programs in related services (e.g., speech/language pathology).

**OSEP Leadership Projects:** In spring 2009, OSEP awarded 77 special education leadership preparation projects specifically to 42 universities, about half of the nation's doctoral programs. The majority of funded universities had only one four-year project, but 17 universities were awarded more than one project: nine had two, six had three, one had four, and one had seven. Some were in their first year of funding, while others were in the second, third, and last or fourth year. (No projects included in this analysis were in a no-cost extension period, a time when remaining funds can be used to complete work outlined in the original proposal.)

Unlike MRDD and IES, OSEP does not pre-set stipend levels or amounts for other educational costs. Instead individual OSEP project directors determine the amount of financial assistance for their projects. Their challenge is to balance costs for each student, the number of students funded, and the \$200,000 annual limit for these OSEP projects. The results are that 1) OSEP-supported doctoral students receive the lowest amount of financial assistance, and 2) student support varies greatly from project to project, both within and across universities. Project directors report that these situations present problems both for management and recruitment.

Despite these challenges, project directors report that OSEP funding does indeed create the infrastructure necessary to maintain a student body sufficient to offer a rich and broad doctoral program. Without this funding, the number of full-time students and doctoral-level seminars diminishes. Partially in recognition of the importance of federal support for doctoral preparation, universities often contribute considerable resources to these projects. For example, when there is a lack of sufficient funds to provide full funding for tuition, universities often contribute the difference. Many provide students with health insurance when OSEP projects do not. (Only 30% of OSEP projects directly provide health insurance to their supported students.)

**Dilemmas:** Any change to the current structure must be conducted with considerable deliberation. The equilibrium that has evolved over the years creates a delicate balance. Without major accompanying increases in appropriations, any alteration will significantly alter the leadership preparation program's intrinsic nature. The consequences would be substantial.

To increase the yearly amount of financial assistance to individual students, lengthen the duration of each award, or standardize the package provided to OSEP funded doctoral students would require some or all of the following actions:

- A dramatic increase in appropriations for the overall funding of the agency's program
- An increase in the overall amount of funding for individual OSEP projects
- A reduction in the number of projects or universities funded
- A decrease in the number of students funded

**Recommendations:** Clearly, OSEP's role in preparing the next generation of leaders, researchers, and teacher educators is important to students with disabilities and their families. It is also important to the universities the agency funds, allowing these programs to maintain breadth and depth. However, the SEFNA Study Team strongly urges policymakers and leaders to carefully reconsider the current program. Compared to those offered by other federal programs, the size of each leadership project is small, the amount of support provided to students is low, the variability of funding arrangements is great, and the number of projects supported is high. It is also possible for OSEP to fund more worthy projects and thus improve the nation's doctoral production capacity. However, the dilemmas created by any changes to current funding practices will greatly impact universities and doctoral students. Ultimately, any changes to these programs will affect the next generation of special education professionals and the students they serve. Therefore, it is our recommendation that OSEP establish a national task force to guide it as it charts the future direction of its leadership preparation initiative.

*The Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment (SEFNA) began its work November 2007. Directed by Deborah Deutsch Smith, SEFNA brings together scholars from Claremont Graduate University and the nation to evaluate the supply and demand of special education faculty. For project briefs and other information, go to [www.cgu.edu/SEFNA](http://www.cgu.edu/SEFNA). Deborah Deutsch Smith prepared this brief. Thanks are extended to Melissa Hartley and Anthony Truong for their efforts with data collection; Jason Miller; Roxanne Watson, Susan Mortorff Robb, Lou Danielson, Ben Lignugaris-Kraft, Herb Rieth, Naomi Tyler, and Jane West for their assistance with the final preparation of this document.*

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