



SEFNA

July 7, 2009

Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment

SEFNA Brief: Follow-up of Doctoral Students Supported by OSEP¹ Funded Leadership Preparation Projects Initiated in Fiscal Years 2000 and 2001

Key Findings: *The graduation rate of special education doctoral students supported through OSEP funded leadership (doctoral) preparation projects far exceeds those of students funded through other federal agencies' programs. OSEP funded students' overall graduation rate exceeds 70%, and will likely approach 90%.*

Background: Since 1959 OSEP has held annual competitions to award leadership (doctoral preparation) projects to universities to support doctoral students pursuing careers in special education or in a related service. OSEP's leadership preparation projects are four years in duration and offer a one- or two-year no-cost extension². Beginning with fiscal year (FY) 2000 projects, project directors have submitted annual reports to indicate each student's progress toward graduation. When a project is closed, a *Final Student Report* must be submitted to indicate the status (e.g., graduated, enrolled, transferred, dismissed, dropped out) of each student. However, due to intricacies in the reporting process, data about completion rates are often misleading and inaccurate. To help close this information gap, SEFNA conducted a follow-up study to provide policy makers with a more complete assessment.

OSEP Funded Grantees: For FY 2000 and 2001, OSEP funded 30 leadership preparation projects. A total of 507 doctoral students across a six-year period were supported. By the fall of 2006, each four-year project had completed its work or had used up its allocated funding and each project director had submitted the required *Final Student Report*.

By Fall 2006, when all *Final Student Reports* had been submitted:

Only 30% of all the funded students had graduated.

All 30 project directors reported that at least one doctoral student had not yet graduated, with the highest number being 24 students.

By December 2006, two months after the required filing date for the *Final Student Report*:

The total completion rate had risen to 53% (an additional 23%).

By Fall 2008:

Some 70% of the 507 OSEP-supported students had graduated.

Another 15% of the 507 were actively conducting dissertation research.

An additional 5% were completing doctoral coursework.

Some 1% of these students were on leave.

¹ For the sake of brevity, the abbreviations for federal agencies are used in this brief. They are: National Science Foundation (NSF), Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), and National Institute of Mental Health's (NIMH) Graduate Research Fellowship (GRF) and Minority Graduate Research Fellowship (MGRF).

² A no-cost time extension is allowed by the federal government to allow project directors to complete the scope of work outlined in the original proposal. This extension does not provide additional funding for the project, rather it provides additional time to spend remaining funds and complete the project's work.

Other Funded Grantees: Not all federal agencies with programs similar to OSEP are required to maintain an accountability system to consistently track doctoral degree completions by its funded students. Other agencies are in process of collecting attrition and graduation rate data. Therefore, a full comparison is not possible. Available graduation information includes:

- The National Council of Graduate Education, which does not collect information about doctoral students in education, indicates that 50% of doctoral students drop out and do not complete doctorates. Goldman & Massey (2001) reported that 75% of all science and engineering students never complete their doctoral studies.
- NIMH's GRF program reports a 69% completion rate for engineering students and 55% of those supported through the MGRF program complete doctoral programs within 11 years. An external evaluator considered these graduation rates to be exceptionally high.
- At the six-year mark, between 40% and 45% of NSF fellows complete their degrees, depending upon the program and field of study. After 11 years, between 68% and 73% have completed their degrees. These graduation rates were not deemed problematic.

Conclusion: Although data from all federal agencies supporting doctoral students is not available, it appears that graduation rates for doctoral students supported through OSEP leadership projects far exceed the national average. By December 2008, 70% of special education doctoral students supported through four-year projects initiated in 2000 and 2001 had completed their degrees. Reasonable expectations are that some 90% will eventually do so. By contrast, between 50% and 73% of doctoral students supported by other federal programs complete their degrees within 11 years.

Recommendation: Data collected from the *Annual* and *Final Student Reports* provide inaccurate information about the graduation rates of students supported by OSEP leadership projects, creating misleading perceptions about the OSEP leadership preparation program. OSEP administrators, federal program evaluators, and stakeholders should carefully study, modify, and potentially expand data collection efforts. At a minimum, that effort should include more descriptive data about students who receive funding and also require long-term follow-up by universities that have concluded an OSEP leadership project.

The Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment (SEFNA) is a three-year effort that began its work in November 2007. For project briefs and other information, go to www.cgu.edu/SEFNA.

Directed by Deborah Deutsch Smith and supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, SEFNA brings together scholars from Claremont Graduate University (CGU) and across the nation to evaluate both the supply and demand of special education faculty with a focus on new teacher educators to meet the nation's need for highly qualified special education teachers.

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The contents of this Brief were developed under a grant from the Department of Education. However, those contents do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Education, and you should not assume endorsement by the Federal Government.



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Project # H325UO70001

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