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Examining current issues in education that highlight the ongoing work of the faculty of the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University.

# Letter

## An Unprecedented Shortage of Special Education Faculty is Looming: Findings from SEFNA

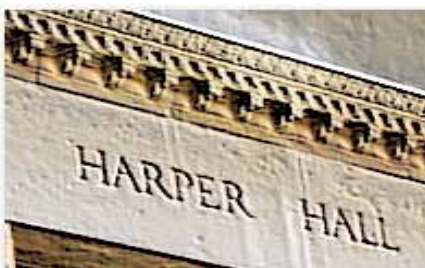
Deborah Deutsch Smith  
Professor

*The impending shortage of special education faculty, which will be of unprecedented magnitude, threatens improved outcomes of struggling learners, particularly those with disabilities.*

We just completed a four-year long project that was funded by the federal government. The project focused on the nation's capacity to prepare a sufficient supply of general and special education professionals to provide a quality education to students with disabilities and others who struggle becoming proficient learning the general education curriculum. One key finding of our work is that an impending and accelerating attrition rate of special education (SE) faculty will make staffing teacher education programs with faculty who have new expertise extremely challenging. Across the next five years, special education teacher training programs will experience an annual faculty turnover rate of 21% due to retirements, and doctoral granting

programs will lose between ½ and 2/3 of their faculty.

The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) supported The Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment (SEFNA) project. The project began in November of 2007 and concluded in November of 2011. The data we collected are the most comprehensive information available today about the supply and demand of special education faculty members working in college and university programs across the nation. More complete reports, as well as various briefs, about the results of the SEFNA project are available from [www.cgu.edu/sefna](http://www.cgu.edu/sefna). Before summarizing our findings, I will first provide some background for the



### School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University

For more than 80 years, the School of Educational Studies (SES) at Claremont Graduate University (CGU) has been a leader in providing graduate education. Many of our more than 5,700 alumni have held positions as college presidents, superintendents, principals, award-winning teachers, and tenured professors at colleges and universities around the world.

study and explain why a shortage of special education faculty is important.

### **The 2001 Faculty Shortage Study**

Over ten years ago, I was funded by OSEP to study the special education professoriate. That study is now referred to as The 2001 Faculty Shortage Study (Pion, Smith, & Tyler, 2003; Sindelar & Rosenberg, 2003; Smith, 2003; Smith, Pion, Tyler, & Gilmore, 2003; Smith, Pion, Tyler, Sindelar, & Rosenberg, 2001; Tyler, Smith, & Pion, 2003). Our team of researchers found that at that time there was a national shortage of special education faculty who prepare the next generation of teachers. We were also able to make the link between a shortage of faculty and a shortage of qualified teachers available to provide an appropriate and high quality education to students with disabilities. After the release of the study's findings, policy-makers, college and university administrators, and other stakeholders came together and implemented actions intended to increase the supply of new doctoral graduates who would assume positions in higher education to prepare new teachers. Some ten years later, federal government officials and university administrators wanted to know if their actions abated the faculty shortage, whether their actions to increase the supply of new doctoral graduates had been effective, and whether a shortage still existed. Therefore, I proposed and received funding to put teams of researchers together to answer questions related to the supply and demand of the special education professoriate and other leadership personnel.

### **Improved Results of Individuals with Disabilities**

OSEP funded this work because it is now universally acknowledged that it is important to have well-prepared education professionals working with students in U.S. schools. Both teachers and school leaders must be able to improve results for all students who struggle when accessing the general education curriculum.

As a group, young adults with disabilities demonstrate that new knowledge about effective instructional practices and the availability of teachers who implement these strategies with fidelity contribute to the greatly improved outcomes seen today. It is also clear that while these individuals'

outcomes and accomplishments surpass those of previous generations, they only hint at what can be achieved. When the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was initially passed in 1975, over a million students with disabilities were denied an education in the public schools. This law was the foundation for a sea change of attitudes, research and development, educational practices, inclusion, and teacher preparation. With each reauthorization, IDEA set a course for higher expectations, raised standards for schools and teachers, and resulted in less segregation of students with disabilities.

Data show that IDEA and the services it has fostered have made a difference in the lives of students with disabilities and their families. Because of high quality early intervention services, the impact of life-long disabilities have been prevented or reduced; 16% fewer children continue to require special services during their school years (U.S. Department of Education, 2010). Some 95% of all students with disabilities attend their neighborhood schools (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), and some 60% of these students access the general education curriculum for more than 80% of the school day (U.S. Department of Education 2011a). Across the past 10 years, levels of reading proficiency have increased by 15 points, 16% more of these students graduate with a standard high school diploma, 21% fewer drop out of school, and more than a third of them attend post-secondary education with some 11% of all college students now reporting that they have a disability (U.S. Department of Education, 2010, 2011b).

In large part these gains are due to well-prepared teachers and school leaders. For example, students of certified teachers make 20% more academic growth annually than those who have uncertified teachers (Darling-Hammond, 2005, 2006; Laczko-Kerr & Berliner, 2003; Montrosse, 2009; West & Whitby, 2008). However, teacher education programs cannot produce enough well prepared teachers to help struggling learners meet the demands of the standards of today's curriculum (National Research Council, 2010). It is now a well-established fact that a shortage of faculty is directly related to a shortage of teachers (Smith et al., 2001; Smith, Robb, West, & Tyler, 2010). This information led us to develop the SEFNA project.

**ENGAGEMENT**

**SOCIAL JUSTICE**

**ACCOUNTABILITY**



**“The faculty of the School of Educational Studies believes a socially just nation educates all its diverse citizenry through networks of effective and accountable organizations that interact responsibly with families and communities...”**

From our vision statement

## The Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment (SEFNA) Project

SEFNA brought scholars from Claremont Graduate University together with others from across the country to evaluate the nation's capacity to produce a sufficient supply of new doctoral graduates who in turn would prepare teachers and school leaders armed with newly developed, research-based strategies. Our goal was to determine whether actions of the government, which supported more doctoral students with stipends and fellowship packages to allow them to pursue their studies full-time and become faculty members, and university officials who enrolled more students and created new doctoral programs, increased the supply. It also was set to determine whether more doctoral graduates assumed careers as researchers and teacher educators and whether the supply and demand equilibrium was coming into balance. What we found was surprising.

**Key findings about doctoral programs, the suppliers.** Some 100 doctoral granting universities supply new teacher educators to the approximately 1,100 special education teacher preparation programs. These programs, in turn, prepare general and special education teachers to work in inclusive settings. The roles of special education faculty are extending to the preparation of general education teachers and school leaders, which is increasing the demand for more special education faculty members. What we did not understand previously is that doctoral granting universities are a unique subset of special education preparation programs. While these programs represent only 9% of all university based special education programs, they prepare almost all teachers specializing in low incidence disabilities, produce almost all new special education teacher educators and researchers, hold the vast majority of training and research funding from the federal government, and will experience a disproportionate level of attrition due to the retirement of faculty. Last year, 33% of all job searches for special education faculty came from doctoral granting universities.

These programs are particularly at risk of losing their capacity to produce new teacher educators and researchers. They also will lose the capacity to conduct important research that will continue the

development of strategies and practices that will be responsible for continued improvement in the outcomes of students with disabilities.

It is important to recognize that not all doctoral students pursue an academic career. Before the work of the SEFNA project, less than half of all special education doctoral graduates sought a career in higher education. The majority became school-based leaders, advocates, policy makers, or professional development providers. Today, the percentage of new graduates working in higher education has increased to 63% of graduates. To abate faculty shortages, that percentage must be maintained or increased. SEFNA

*“to meet predicted demand, each doctoral program would need to produce an additional 7.5 graduates per year that pursue academic positions”*

findings also identified key predictors of doctoral students who become university faculty that include: intent to pursue a faculty career, financial support (e.g., TA, RA, traineeship or fellowship), age when enrolling in a doctoral program, reduced time to complete the doctoral degree, and willingness to relocate after graduation for employment. These markers should assist with targeted student recruitment.

**Key findings about supply.** We found that the supply of doctoral graduates has improved since the release of information from The Faculty Shortage Study ten years ago.

The supply of new faculty has increased:

- There are 16% more doctoral programs in 2009 (n=97) than there were in 1999 (n=82).
- There are 7% more enrollments in 2009 (n=1,779) than there were in 1999 (n=1,659).
- There were 28% more graduates in 2007 (n=296) than in 2002 (n=213).
- There was a 12% increase in those seeking a career as special education faculty in 2009 (n=775) over 1999 (n=558).

- Doctoral programs increased their enrollment and production capacity by more than 20%.

**Key findings about demand.** While the supply of new doctoral graduates has increased, the demand for new faculty will also increase:

- Across the next five years, special education teacher training programs will experience an annual faculty turnover rate of 21% due to retirements, and doctoral granting programs will lose between ½ and 2/3 of their faculty. Doctoral programs will lose between 388 and 582 doctoral faculty in the coming years.
- The impending shortage of special education faculty will be at unprecedented levels, outstripping substantial, recent improvements in the supply.
- Special education teacher preparation programs are expanding, not closing. New programs are being developed in the areas of early intervention/early childhood education and blended special and general education teacher preparation. Special education faculty members are also assisting with the preparation of general education teachers and school leaders about multi-tiered instruction and school-wide behavioral interventions and supports.
- Despite the economic downturn, searches for new special education faculty remain robust.

## Impact

Retirements across all special education programs (doctoral and teacher education combined) are predicted to increase by 21% annually between 2011 and 2017. Based upon our best estimates, to replenish the supply of faculty leaving both doctoral programs and teacher education programs over the next several years, 856 graduates per year or nine graduates per doctoral program per year who pursue an academic career will need to be produced. As of 2007, the average yearly production of SE doctoral degrees across the 97 programs was three per year. Typically across the last five years, an average of slightly more than half (55.6%) of recent graduates pursued an academic career.

Therefore, to meet predicted demand, each doctoral program would need to produce an additional 7.5 graduates per year that pursue academic positions. To maintain current levels of those pursuing academic and non-academic careers, each doctoral program would need to produce an additional 15 graduates per year (7.5 graduates per year that pursue academic positions and 7.5 graduates per year that pursue non-academic positions). Such increases in the supply are not feasible.

As depicted in the accompanying figure, the real-world implications of a substantial faculty shortage are alarming. Based on SEFNA data, 776 faculty members are currently preparing the 1,779 doctoral students. Typically, each faculty member is producing 2 doctoral graduates. Assuming that the faculty at doctoral granting universities is reduced by half during the next five years, we hypothesize that the number of doctoral students produced will also be reduced by half. This will trigger a domino effect, whereby at a first level, the percentage of doctoral graduates entering teacher education will be reduced by 50%.

however, there is great variability state to state (range 1:9 to 1:35). Assuming caseloads remain stable over the next five years and that the number of special educators is reduced by half, approximately 300 students with disabilities will be underserved for each missing faculty member at the doctoral programs.

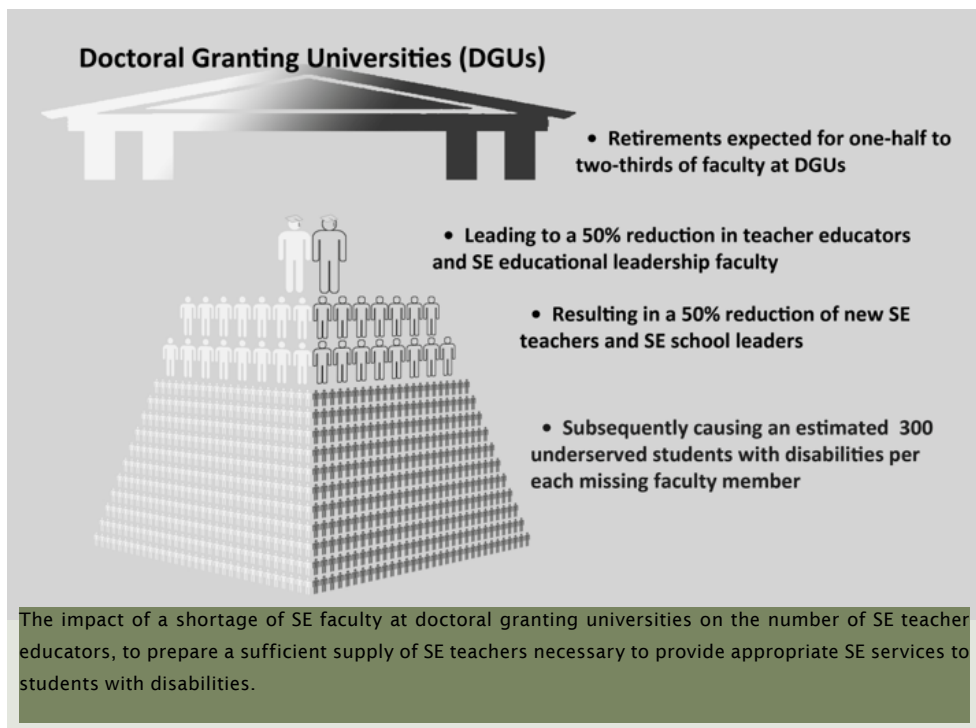
### Next Steps

The data we collected clearly show that supply variables can change; in other words, the supply or number of new doctoral graduates is not intractable. Rather, due to concerted efforts of university officials and faculty working at doctoral granting universities, the number of special education doctoral graduates seeking and assuming jobs as faculty members has increased. We believe that with federal and university intervention, more doctoral programs can be initiated, the enrollment and production capacity of current programs increased, and more students supported through university and federal funding so they can study on a full-time basis.

number of doctoral programs in the nation has increased over the last ten years, the ratio of doctoral programs to teacher preparation programs has decreased since federal funding supporting doctoral student preparation in special education began in 1959. In 1963, 18% of all special education personnel preparation programs offered doctoral degrees. Today, that percentage has dropped to 9%. Although not a process that can be quick enough to solve the impending shortage of new doctorates, states and universities should begin to develop new doctoral programs at universities that have existing special education teacher preparation programs. Programs with greater faculty size should be targeted.

We found that the capacity of current doctoral programs has increased; the number enrolled, students graduated, and percentage seeking and assuming faculty positions has increased. Although the federal role was significant in this regard, increases in federal appropriations were not the only contributing factor. Less than half of all doctoral programs have federally funded projects that support doctoral students with stipends and tuition awards. However, almost all doctoral programs support students through teaching and research assistantships. If the supply is to increase, this funding base must be increased.

After the findings of The 2001 Faculty Shortage Study, the Higher Education Consortium for Special Education – the organization of the nation’s doctoral programs in special education – and the federal government brought stakeholders together to develop solutions to address the shortage of ten years ago. This group, referred to as The Blue Ribbon Task Force, not only developed strategies to address the shortage problem, but also set criteria for the evaluation of program quality. The time is right for another task force to develop innovative and collaborative strategies to resolve, or at least lessen, the impending faculty shortage and the upcoming infrastructure crisis. Of this there is no doubt: the nation does not now nor will it in the short-term have the capacity to produce a sufficient supply of highly effective general and special education teachers and school leaders able to continue to raise the results of individuals with disabilities.



This, in turn, will reduce the percentage of new SE teachers by half. However, the number of students requiring the expertise of special educators will not diminish. Current caseload estimates indicate that each special education teacher carries a caseload of 20 students with disabilities;

The nation has an insufficient number of doctoral programs to meet the demand for new faculty. Many states and regions have no programs available to produce new faculty for the many teacher preparation programs in their areas (e.g., North Dakota, South Dakota, Idaho, Wyoming). While the



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## School of Educational Studies

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# SEFNA

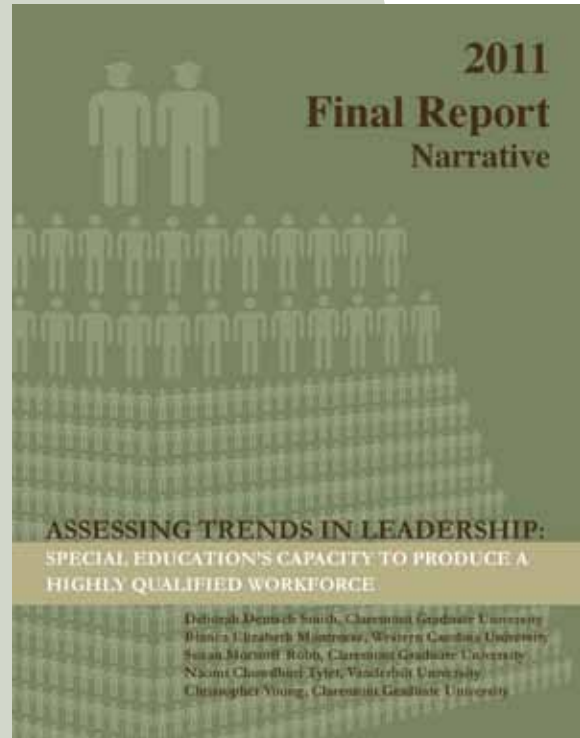
SPECIAL EDUCATION FACULTY NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The SEFNA (Special Education Faculty Needs Assessment) project aimed to determine if the nation has the capacity to produce a sufficient supply of highly-effective general and special education teachers who can meet the needs of students with disabilities. This national evaluation effort included a survey of all doctoral special education programs, special education doctoral students enrolled at the time of the study, 10 years of special education doctoral graduates, and samples of special education teacher education programs across the nation.

*Visit the SEFNA website to learn more about the project and access all SEFNA publications.*

*Visit the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) for an overview of their mission, programs, and research publications and statistics.*

*Download SEFNA's final report by clicking on the image. You can also download it from the SEFNA website resources page.*



- Deb Smith is a Professor of Special Education in the School of Educational Studies at Claremont Graduate University. She serves as the co-Principal Investigator of the IRIS Center for Training Enhancements. The IRIS Center, funded by the U.S. Department of Education, is charged with providing the nation with interactive modules and other training materials that focus on the education of students with disabilities. These resources are designed for use by education faculty in college courses and by professional development providers seeking to upgrade the knowledge and skills of practicing education professionals. Dr. Smith has directed many federal, state, and local projects and has received over \$30 million in funding to support those efforts. Dr. Smith has authored over 11 major textbooks, including a best-selling introduction to special education text, Introduction to Special Education: Making a Difference, which is in its 7th edition, and is available in Spanish, Polish, Portuguese, Mandarin Chinese, and is being translated into Hebrew. She has written over 31 chapters and book supplements, 50 refereed articles, and many instructional materials for children. Since 1984, Deb has served on the Board of Trustees for Pitzer College, Claremont Colleges, and was recognized as a Life Trustee in 2003.*