

# Preparing Culturally Diverse Special Education Faculty: Challenges And Solutions

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## ABSTRACT

*This paper describes why more bilingual culturally responsive special education faculty are needed to meet the needs of the increasing number of culturally and linguistically diverse students with disabilities in the United States. In addition, the paper presents the successes and challenges in the journey to prepare university faculty leaders in bilingual multicultural special education. The NAU Faculty for Inclusive Rural-multicultural Special Educators (FIRST) program is a bilingual/multicultural special education program which prepares doctoral students from Latino and Indigenous backgrounds to become highly qualified university faculty in the areas of teaching, research, technology, and cultural/linguistic diversity.*

**Keywords:** Culturally Diverse, Special Education, Faculty, Doctoral Program

## NEED FOR SPECIAL EDUCATION FACULTY

There is currently a critical shortage of special education faculty in U.S. universities who are available to meet the demands of preparing special education teachers, implementing research which leads to improved practice, and developing 21st century policymakers and administrators (Dil, Geiger, Hoover, & Sindelar, 1993; Pierce, Smith, & Clark, 1992; Sindelar, Buck, Carpenter, & Watanabe, 1993; Smith, Pion, Tyler, Sindelar, & Rosenberg, 2001; Smith & Salzberg, 1994). The demand for faculty in special education in the United States is greater than the current supply of doctoral level persons available, and 30% of the university faculty position vacancies in special education go unfilled (Smith et al., 2001). In addition, Smith et al. (2001) report that since 1992, although the number of faculty vacancies has not changed, the pool of applicants to fill these vacancies is much smaller today. In special education, 255 doctorates are conferred annually, but over 50% (130) of these doctoral graduates do not become employed as faculty members or are only in faculty positions for a short time (Smith et al., 2001). While special education faculty vacancies are increasing due to enlarging programs and faculty retirements, the annual number of new special education doctorates is decreasing. This causes an insufficient number of doctoral level persons available to fill the faculty positions. Smith et al. (2001) conclude that the severe lack of special education faculty has a direct impact on the ability of teachers to provide high quality services to students with disabilities.

## CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE (CLD) FACULTY NEED

By the end of this decade, the number of culturally diverse children ages 6 – 16 will have increased to 20% Hispanic, 17% African American, 5% Asian, and 2% Native American (Futrell, Gomez, & Bedden, 2003). In contrast, Futrell et al. cite the percentage of culturally diverse university faculty as only 5%. Focusing on the need for more Hispanic and Native American faculty, the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports in 2001 that there were only 3.3% Hispanic and .7% Native American full-time instructional faculty and staff at U.S. colleges and universities. The Digest of Education Statistics (NCES, 2000) also reports a lack of doctorates conferred for CLD persons with only 3.2% of all doctoral degrees in 1998 for Hispanics and .5% for Native Americans. Clearly more CLD doctoral students and faculty are needed to increase the diversity in higher education

compared with the growing numbers of diverse students in the school-age population. Related to the field of special education, comparatively few Hispanic and Native American students are receiving doctoral degrees. For example, in Spring 1998, Smith and Tyler (1998) report only 8 Hispanics received a doctorate in special education. Out of 1,015 students enrolled in special education doctoral programs, only 46 were of Hispanic background (Smith & Tyler, 1998). As of 2003, less than 20 Native Americans hold doctorates in special education (R. Gilmore, personal communication, January 20, 2003). It is important to increase the numbers of Hispanic and Native American faculty in special education so that they can effectively address diversity issues as well as provide mentorship to Hispanic and Native American future teachers who will in turn teach students with disabilities from Hispanic and Native American backgrounds (Dieker, Voltz & Epanchin, 2002; McSwain, 2002; Obiakor, 2001).

## **RURAL NEED**

The national shortage of special education teachers and general education teachers with training in special education is especially critical in rural areas (Westling & Whitten, 1996). Two major factors exacerbate this problem. First, most of the teachers who re-locate to teach in these areas are unfamiliar/uncomfortable with the challenges of the rural multicultural classroom and rarely stay long. Second, many of the individuals familiar with these types of classrooms (individuals from the community) lack the resources and accessibility to courses needed to obtain their special education teaching certificate. The recruitment and retention of rural educators, especially special educators prepared to serve CLD students, is particularly difficult. Indeed, Izzo (1999) reported that 1/5 of all rural special education teachers will leave their jobs annually to pursue employment in larger districts and communities.

Contributing to the problem is the fact that few teacher education programs focus on the preparation of teachers for rural and remote areas (Eigenberger, Sealander, Peterson, Shellady, & Prater, 2001; Helge, 1984; Helge, 1991; Heimbecker, Medina, Peterson, Redsteer, & Prater, 2002; Peterson, Medina, Gilmer, Prater, & Stemmler, 2002). According to Solop and Hagen (1999), while 42% of special education administrators felt recruitment/retention of special education teachers was a significant problem, rural school district administrators were more likely to cite this as the primary problem than were urban administrators. Over 60% of special education administrators indicated universities were not producing enough certified teachers to meet the demand for existing and new special education teaching positions. With predictions of even more serious teacher shortages in the next several years, there is critical need for additional special education teachers for CLDE students in rural areas (Medina, Peterson, Showalter, & Gilmore, 2003; USDE, 2007). In order to meet this need, more special education faculty must be trained in doctoral programs, so that they in turn can increase the supply of highly qualified rural special education teachers who can serve CLDE students in rural and remote areas.

## **FACULTY FOR INCLUSIVE RURAL/MULTICULTURAL SPECIAL-EDUCATOR TRAINING PROGRAM DESCRIPTION**

The U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) has well documented the need for preparing more faculty in the area of Special Education, particularly to prepare teachers to serve rural students from Hispanic and Native American backgrounds. The Faculty for Inclusive Rural/multicultural Special-educator Training (FIRST) program is designed to assist doctoral students, especially those from Hispanic and Native American backgrounds, in overcoming some of the well documented barriers students face in obtaining the doctoral degree. Currently there are very few doctoral students and faculty in special education who are from these two culturally diverse groups. Many potential Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CLD) doctoral students in the Southwest live in rural and remote areas where there is no university doctoral program available. NAU has a decade of history of providing rural multicultural special education degree programs to Native American and Hispanic students. Many of these programs have utilized distance education to deliver the coursework. One of the primary barriers to doctoral study is the difficulty in giving up jobs and relocating into a full-time doctoral program at a reduced student stipend. Most students have family responsibilities which preclude their participation because of the relocation necessary to attend full-time programs combined with their ongoing financial obligations. The FIRST program provides a unique combination of distance education courses during the academic year and on-site courses during the summer to overcome these traditional doctoral program barriers.

Goals of the FIRST doctoral program are to:

1. Increase capacity to conduct and integrate Research to Practice skills to improve academic, linguistic, and social outcomes for Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Exceptional (CLDE) students.
2. Prepare faculty to offer strategies to future teachers of CLDE students focusing on collaborative methods in inclusive settings.
3. Prepare highly qualified culturally diverse Special Education faculty.
4. Prepare faculty who will be able to effectively utilize technology, distance education, and web-based instruction.

The FIRST program, funded by the U.S. Department of Education – Office of Special Education Programs, provides funding for tuition, books, travel to Flagstaff, Arizona, and family campus housing in the summer, and nominal research stipends. FIRST also funds faculty research mentors, doctoral student mentors, and enrichment seminars with nationally known researchers in bilingual special education. This innovative program allows the Native American and Hispanic doctoral students to keep their positions in local school districts or universities during the school year while taking courses through distance education. During the summers the students come to the Flagstaff NAU campus for intensive doctoral studies.

## **RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION**

### **Challenges**

One of the main difficulties for recruitment is the extremely rural nature of the Southwest area of the United States. Simply identifying regions and schools to target recruitment efforts is difficult. Many of the schools do not have secretaries, so it is difficult to establish an ongoing contact person.

### **Solutions**

Recruitment for the FIRST doctoral program was started in fall 2003. Over two hundred and fifty schools were contacted by email and fax. These included public, private, charter, and Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) schools as well as all colleges/universities in the four corner states of New Mexico, Utah, Colorado and Arizona. Since many schools did not have a secretary for special education, contact had to be made through a series of messages. Individuals from nine tribal education departments were sent information and over 175 FAXes were sent to various schools. All application/recruitment information was also placed on two national listserves and all print and e-mailed information included the nau.edu/ci-doc website which had all FIRST recruitment and application materials. Nine recruitment meetings were held throughout the Four Corners area states. The cities for these meetings were: Flagstaff, Tuba City, Kykostmovi, Yuma, Phoenix, and Nogales in Arizona, Monument Valley in Utah, Albuquerque in New Mexico, and Durango in Colorado. There were over one hundred individual calls of inquiry regarding the FIRST program. Inquiries were from as far as the East Coast, and a great deal of information dissemination was done by the Advisory Committees and Special Education Directors throughout many of the states involved. Twenty eight persons submitted complete application portfolios which were reviewed by the Curriculum and Instruction Doctoral Committee, and twelve were selected for admission into the FIRST program.

During the beginning stages of the program, one individual wanted many of her past professional experiences to count for the courses in the FIRST Cohort program. In addition, this student was unwilling to participate in any professional development opportunities such as national conferences and wanted to count work hours as the Internship (which is against university policy). After numerous discussions and after being given many options which would meet university requirements, the student withdrew believing an individually designed program rather than a cohort program would better suit her goals.

Within the first weeks of the FIRST program course, ESE 520, two students found that they were unable to handle the high demands of doctoral coursework as well as juggle family and work. They were contacted by faculty, mentors, and grant personnel to discuss various options. Additional assistance was offered, and they also

were given numerous options for continuing in the program. They both choose to withdraw from the program within the first month. As a result, after 12 students were initially accepted into the FIRST program, only 10 decided to continue with the doctoral program.

Many supports are provided for the students to facilitate retention in the doctoral program. Program staff do all the registration, schedule the courses, and mail the textbooks to the students. In some semesters, it is possible to schedule one course at a time for eight weeks so that students can focus on just one content area. Program staff are always available to answer student questions, brainstorm solutions to problems, and provide encouragement throughout the program. In the Summer Session on campus in Flagstaff, program staff arrange all the housing, secure study carrels at the university library, and arrange for computer use in the College of Education. In addition, the FIRST program holds several group functions to help students develop community and networking such as an opening picnic, dinners, orientation breakfast, and farewell social. Initially, the FIRST program brought the students together in Yuma, Arizona for a three day orientation and CLDE conference. This enabled students from diverse communities and states to meet each other and faculty members as they embarked on their doctoral program studies.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND DISTANCE EDUCATION**

### **Challenges**

Many potential doctoral students cannot afford to give up their full time jobs and relocate to a university in a different area. In addition, many students are not comfortable and proficient in taking Web-based courses even if they were made available to them.

### **Solutions**

FIRST students can continue in their full time jobs while taking Web-based courses during the academic year. FIRST students take two Web-based courses each academic year semester and then come to the Flagstaff campus for four on-site courses in the summer. A WebCT tutorial was developed for the students and delivered the first day of web classes during the orientation meeting. During this orientation, all students also had the opportunity to meet with the head of distance learning for the Cline Library to discuss web-based research procedures, interlibrary loans, electronic data, and other subjects pertinent to their coursework and research topics. In addition, all students received the Endnotes computer software program as well as training on its use to facilitate their scholarship and research.

The FIRST program coursework began in Spring of 2004 on the web. Two Doctoral level web-based CLDE courses ESE 520 and ESE 650 were developed, designed, and taught during Spring 2004. All the students received a Technology Handbook as well as the in person tutorial training for the WebCT. In this way, the students could ask any questions to be sure they were comfortable working within the electronic medium and also have a guidebook to refer to as other questions came up. In addition, the Technology Facilitator is available 24/7 to assist students with any distance education and technology issues. During the summer, the Technology Facilitator delivers in-person seminars on topics such as Constructivism and Technology, Utilizing Web-based Resources, and Teaching Web-based Courses.

## **SCHOLARSHIP AND RESEARCH COMPONENTS**

### **Challenges**

It is often difficult to provide on-going opportunities for professional development, scholarship, and research throughout the doctoral program. The focus in many doctoral programs is simply on completion of coursework until the students reach the dissertation stage when they are expected to conduct and write about their original research. In many cases, students do not have the advantage of participating in research projects, grant writing, proposals for professional conferences, and developing manuscripts for publication during their doctoral program coursework. These are all scholarly activities which they will be expected to successfully undertake once they are hired as special education faculty members at the university level upon completion of the doctoral degree.

## **Solutions**

The FIRST program was designed to include all of these scholarly activities within the courses and enhanced professional development components of the doctoral program. In this way, the FIRST students will have support and practice in these areas before they even reach the dissertation stage of their doctoral program.

During the orientation, all students attended a Trainer of Trainers conference which had 20 presentations on CLDE issues. They heard Dr. Patricia Medeiros Landurand give a Keynote session on Needs and Services for CLDE Students and an afternoon lecture on Literacy and the CLDE Student.

Each of the students has been assigned a Faculty Research Mentor and a Doctoral Student Mentor. Interactive Instructional Television times were used for students to meet their research mentors and will be secured for future meetings. Students are provided Faculty Research Mentors so that each participant is involved in a directed research project from inception to dissemination/presentation/publication. All mentors have made contact with mentees and are currently in the beginning stages of their research projects. Doctoral Student Mentors who are doctoral students near the end of their doctoral program are also provided to monitor the progress of the FIRST doctoral students and assist them with any difficulties or questions.

All of the FIRST students have been accepted to present papers at national conferences such as Council for Exceptional Children, National Association for Bilingual Education, Learning Disabilities Association, and National Indian Education Association. In courses in the program, there are assignments to submit a conference proposal on their research projects, develop a grant proposal for external funding, and write a manuscript for submission to a peer-refereed journal. In this way, scholarly activities which will be required of new faculty members are already integrated into the FIRST program coursework to provide the doctoral students with experience in these types of products before they become faculty members. In addition, during the on-site program in Flagstaff in the summers, FIRST provides the doctoral students with enrichment seminars on current topics conducted by internationally known scholars in the CLDE field such as Lily Wong Fillmore, Ernesto Bernal, Vivian Correa, Brenda Williams, Fred Spooner, Patricia Medeiros Landurand, Jozi De Leon, and Maria Amelia Almeida.

## **AUTHOR INFORMATION**

**Patricia Peterson** is a Professor of Special Education at Northern Arizona University. She received her Ph.D. in Special Education with a minor in Bilingual Education from the University of Florida. Her work centers on improving services for culturally and linguistically diverse exceptional (CLDE) students. She has directed bilingual special education teacher training projects including doctoral programs with a focus on CLDE students. She has developed rural programs in special education on the Navajo Reservation and border areas of the Southwest and provided technical assistance and training in this field to school districts and state departments of education.

**Stephen Showalter** is an Instructor in the Department of Teaching and Learning at Northern Arizona University where he teaches Web-based courses in Curriculum and Instruction and Secondary Education. His doctorate is in Curriculum and Instruction from Northern Arizona University. His dissertation was titled “Student Assessment in Web-based Instruction”. His research focus is in the area of development and assessment of Web-based courses. He is also Webmaster, Web Curriculum Developer, and Technology Facilitator for federally funded personnel preparation grants. He taught Biology and Earth Science on the Navajo Reservation where he worked with Native American high school students.

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