NASET

Special Educator e-Journal

March 2021

Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children

Table of Contents

Special Education Legal Alert

By Perry A. Zirkel
© February 2021

This month's update identifies recent court decisions of general significance, specifically addressing (a) FAPE and the remedy of compensatory education, and (b) FAPE and the remedy of tuition reimbursement, along with an added flourish under Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). For related information about these broad issues, see **perryzirkel.com**.

In an unpublished decision in *P.P. v. Northwest Independent School District* (2020), the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals addressed the issues of FAPE and compensatory education in a case of a middle-school child in Texas with various specific learning disabilities including reading (per a dyslexia diagnosis) and math. The parents sought Lindamood Bell programming first in the IEP and ultimately in the form of compensatory education relief. The hearing officer ruled that the district's initial IEP for the last few months of grade 5 and the IEP for grade 6 provided FAPE but the district violated its child find duty for approximately six months starting near the end of grade 4. However, she denied the requested relief of compensatory education. Upon both parties' appeal, the federal district court agreed with the hearing officer's rulings except for the grade 5 IEP. Both sides again appealed, this time to the Fifth Circuit, which encompasses Louisiana, Mississippi, and Texas.	
For FAPE, the Fifth Circuit applied its own multi-factor test, concluding that both the grade 5 and 6 IEP**s** provided FAPE.	Its relevant rulings included that the reading method was within the school district's discretion and that the child was not entitled to an interim IEP prior to the completion of the evaluation.
For compensatory education, the only remaining basis was child find, but Fifth Circuit reviewed and affirmed the denial at the lower level more broadly in terms of the parents' burden to show a supporting (a) balance of equities and (b) foundation of expert testimony.	The Fifth Circuit respectively concluded that (a) the parents had unreasonably refused the district's offers of remedial services and stymied its efforts to correct the deficiencies in the initial IEP, and (b) the parents' expert recommended 240 minutes of dyslexia instruction but she lacked training or expertise specific to dyslexia.

This ruling illustrates not only the rather nuanced differences in the determinations of FAPE and, particularly relevant during the present COVID-19 context, the much more unsettled state of the law with regard to the remedy of compensatory education.

In an officially published decision in *Montgomery County Intermediate Unit No. 23 v. A.F.* (2020), a federal district court in Pennsylvania addressed the tuition reimbursement claim of the parents of a preschool child with autism. When the child reached the age of 3, MCIU, which was the agency responsible for providing early intervention services under the IDEA, evaluated him, confirming the earlier diagnosis of autism. The initially proposed IEP included 90 minutes per week of behavior support in addition to various other services, such as speech/language therapy (SLT) and occupational therapy (OT). The parents disapproved this proposal, insisting that he needed intensive applied behavioral analysis (ABA) and higher levels of OT and SLT. MCIU revised the IEP to include increased OT and SLT but no longer any behavior support. Upon visiting the proposed classroom, the parent asked about ABA, and the MCIU representative mistakenly replied that the only personnel with ABA training were the classroom aides. At two subsequent IEP meetings, the Agency representatives were very general in response to the parents' specific concerns about intensive ABA services, and the IEP remained unchanged. The parent unilaterally placed the child in a private ABA placement and sought tuition reimbursement. The hearing officer ruled that MCIU's proposed IEP was substantively appropriate but the cursory information that MCIU provided to the parent was a fatal procedural violation warranting the requested reimbursement. Both sides appealed to federal court.

For the substantive FAPE claim, the court reversed the hearing officer because in concluding that the proposed IEP met the *Endrew F.* standard he relied on testimony that materially altered, rather than clarified, the IEP.	This qualified "four corners" approach, which excludes evidence not in the IEP unless it clarifies ambiguities in its provisions, overlaps with but is not the same as the "snapshot standard" for evaluating substantive FAPE. In borrowing this approach from the Second Circuit, this court pointed to the testimony about behavior support services, which the IEP completely lacked.
For the procedural FAPE claim, the court agreed with the hearing officer that MCIU's inadequate information about behavior support and ABA in the	The court agreed with the hearing officer that this violation was "fatal" because it significantly impeded the parents' opportunity to participate in the IEP process. Without a

wake of the parents' concerns and the IEP's silence denied them meaningful participation.	reasonable explanation about these critical services, the parents were unable to evaluate or contribute to the appropriateness of the proposed IEP.
For the ADA claim that the parents additionally brought, the court ruled in their favor based on the two-birds-with-one-stone logic of an IDEA denial of FAPE meaning an ADA or § 504 FAPE denial.	The court did not mention the additional hurdle of deliberate indifference, which would clearly apply if they sought attorneys' fees, but the advantage to the parent is the possible entitlement to expert witness fees, which are not available under the IDEA.
Although repeating the frequently visited issues of tuition reimbursement and autism, this case illustrates (a) the importance of reasonably communicating the critical elements of the child's proposed FAPE in the meeting and in the resulting IEP document, and (b) the added wrinkle that § 504 or the ADA may add in litigation after exhausting due process under the IDEA.	

To top

Buzz from the Hub

All articles below can be accessed through the following links:

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-jan2021-issue1/

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-jan2021-issue2/

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-dec2020-issue2/

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-bridging-the-distance/

https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-dec2020-issue1/

Helping Kids Understand the Riots at the Capitol

*(Also available in **Spanish**)*

It's hard to help our children understand what we ourselves have trouble fathoming. Here are suggestions for all of us, from the Child Mind Institute.

Tools to Build Community

Take advantage of the tools and resources of the the Community Tool Box to support peaceful democracy, racial justice, and inclusion. See all the chapters of the toolbox here, many of which are also available in *Spanish*, and explore the ones that speak to you and your community. There's also the *Justice Action Toolkit* and other toolkits.

Youth with Disabilities in Juvenile Corrections (Part 2): Transition and Reentry to School and Community

From the IRIS Center.

Reentry Services Directory

The Reentry Services Directory connects you with a list of organizations and service providers who can address different reentry needs, including housing, employment, and family reunification.

Childhood Trauma and COVID-19 (Video)

Concerned about the impact of social distancing and COVID-19 on children and families? Find answers in this live 40-min PBS News Q&A.

Helping Children Who've Experienced Trauma

Many on-point resources can be found in CPIR's resource collection on trauma-informed care, especially in the section entitled "*How Parents and Caregivers Can Support and Help Children*."

10 Helpful Podcasts About Mental Health

If you're struggling with anxiety or depression, here are 10 podcasts that may help.

60 Digital Resources for Mental Health

Not to make you go shopping through a long list, but we thought this list might be worth it, given the diversity of people with whom Parent Centers work. Here, you can find phone hotlines and websites devoted to mental conditions such as autism, anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and substance abuse, and you can find information and tools specific to the needs of diverse populations, including LGBTQ youth, minorities, women, and veterans.

Help for Mental Illnesses

*(Also available in **Spanish**)*

If you or someone you know has a mental illness, is struggling emotionally, or has concerns about their mental health, these NIMH pages discuss how to get help in a crisis, find a healthcare provider or treatment, decide if a provider is a good fit, and learn more about individual mental disorders.

Shareable Resources

(Also available in Spanish)

NIMH generously offers materials you can readily share, post, use in social messaging, or spread around the community to raise public awareness. Parent Centers can download and utilize multimedia materials on: coping with COVID-19; bipolar disorders; depression; child and adolescent mental health; eating disorders; suicide prevention; and other specific disabilities such as autism and AD/HD. The link above will give you a search results page that lists all of NIMH's "shareable resources." There, you can select the mental health issue most relevant to your concern. If a Spanish-language version of the resource is available, it will be linked next to the resource's title for your easy access.

Gathering and Training en Masse

How *about* that National Parent Center Capacity Building Conference /Conferencia in 2020! What an explosion of participation. Over 700 people attended virtually, and it was simply incredible. Training sessions, materials in Spanish, captured (and captioned) videos for later viewing… all learning sessions, exchanges, and materials will be archived on the new CPIR "**Centers Connect**" site (which is replacing the unpopular Workspaces of olde).

Native American Resource Collection

Did you know that there are nearly 7 million American Indians, Alaska Natives, and Native

Hawaiians living in the United States? The Native American resource library launched by CPIR in 2020 is meant to help Parent Centers learn about the historical and current realities of Native Americans and to address with cultural competence the needs of families with children who have disabilities. Prepare for a fascinating learning multicultural journey.

Talking about Race

There's no denying that 2020 brought violent racial strife in the streets, harrowing images on the news, and the stark recognition that, somehow, we must confront the enormity of our racial divides. The resources in this CPIR suite can help us look within ourselves, listen and learn from others, talk with our children about racial violence, and join forces with those involved in the work that must be done to tackle this most wrenching and deep-seated issue.

Disproportionality in Special Education: Training Modules for Centers

Not surprisingly, racial inequities exist in our schools as well as the streets. Learn about the federal regulations targeted at reducing disproportionality in special education–and inform families, schools, and communities using these two training modules from CPIR. The modules include slideshows, trainer guides, and handouts for participants.

OSEP Fast Facts: IDEA 45th Anniversary

By 1975, Congress had determined that millions of American children with disabilities were still not receiving an appropriate education, "More than half of the handicapped children in the United States do not receive appropriate educational services which would enable them to have full equality of opportunity" (EHA, §3(b)(3)).

Congress enacted the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (Public Law 94-142) (EHA), to support states and localities in protecting the rights of, meeting the individual needs of, and improving the results for infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities and their families. This landmark law, whose 45th Anniversary we celebrate this year, is currently enacted as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).This timeline depicts IDEA from its beginnings as the Education of through the last reauthorization in 2004.

IDEA Presentation Materials at Your Fingertips

Don't forget that the Parent Center Hub has curricula you can use for training families and professionals on both **Part B** and **Part C** of IDEA 2004, including an updated (2020) module on ***Disproportionality and Students with Disabilities***. Each individual module includes: slide decks; Trainer's Guides explaining how the slides work as well as the content of the slides; and handouts for participants (available in English and in Spanish). These foundational resources are easy to adapt to include state-specific information and for presentations in a variety of formats (virtual, video, etc.).

Do you know the History of the Parent Centers?

Which current Parent Center was the first Parent Training and Information Center funded? How did Community Parent Resource Centers get started? Learn the answers to these questions and more when you complete the History of Parent Centers module in the Parent Center eLearning Hub. Got credentials for this *Parent Centers Only* resource?

Creating Effective Partnerships to Improve Early Intervention | Webinar

Identifying young children as early as possible requires developing nurturing partnerships with families, communities, and programs. This interactive webinar discusses how IDEA early intervention programs can partner with the ambassadors of the Act Early Ambassador program. The webinar provides an overview of the purposes of Part C early intervention services for infants and toddlers and their families and Part B, 619 services for preschool special education. Viewers can learn about Rhode Island's partnership with their Act Early Ambassador. The Ambassador trains professionals in home visiting programs (e.g., the Maternal, Infant and Early Childhood Home Visiting program; and Parents as Teachers) on how to use "Learn The Signs. Act Early" developmental milestone resources to support earlier identification.

It's Official: National Test Is Postponed Due to COVID-19 Concerns

Heard of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP)? It's the national test of reading and math given since the 1970s to representative samples of students in all 50 states. Well, it's been postponed for 2021 by the U.S. Department of Education. See you in 2022!

GAO Report: Challenges Providing Services to K-12 English Learners and Students with Disabilities during COVID-19

COVID-19 forced schools to rapidly shift to distance learning. GAO (the Government Accounting Office) investigated the impact of this shift and found that it presented logistical and instructional challenges, especially for English learners and students with disabilities—both of whom have persistent achievement gaps compared to other student subgroups. Find out what those challenges were for each group.

Map: Where Are Schools Closed?

Want to know where school buildings are open or closed? Consult this state-by-state map.

Why School Board Diversity Matters

The racial and ethnic makeup of school boards rarely matches that of the students in the schools they are responsible for. Yet a growing body of research suggests having more diverse school boards can make concrete differences in how schools operate. In fact, having just *one* minority member on a board increases a school district's financial investment in high-minority schools and even some measures of student achievement and student climate.

Playtime's Guide to Activities Families Can Do Together

(Available in English and Spanish) | The Homeless Children's Playtime Project offers creative tip sheets for parents looking for fun activities to do with their children during the pandemic. Tip Sheets 1-4 are available in English. Tip Sheets 5 and 6 are available in both English and Spanish. There are also fun videos for children on the project's YouTube channel.

Self-Care in the Time of Coronavirus

*(Also available in **Spanish**)*

For parents, prioritizing your own well-being benefits your whole family.

Holidays During the Pandemic

*(Also available in **Spanish**)*

Tips for reducing stress, helping kids cope, and making new traditions.

To top

Practice Makes Progress: Utilizing a Simulated IEP Meeting in Teacher Preparation

By Courtney Toledo

Abstract

This paper proposes that a simulated Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting is an effective way for pre-service teachers to gain an understanding of the IEP process. Heinrich (2017) supports the use of role-play activities in order to achieve long term objectives and engage the students in collaborative work. In addition, using the work of Coulson & Harvey (2013), this paper explains how reflection supports the meaning-making process for students. By combining the research behind engaging students in role play and reflection, a simulated IEP meeting activity is described in detail with suggestions and materials for immediate implementation. Based on the author's experience of conducting this activity within an undergraduate setting, the author proposes that this activity helps to not only support comprehension, but also alleviate the stress that novice special education teachers often feel in regards to IEP documentation and meetings.

Keywords: teacher preparation, role play, simulation, collaboration

Memoirs of a Special Ed Teacher

It was my first year as a special education teacher, and I will never forget the way I felt during my first Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting. Taking a less traditional track into special education, my undergraduate degree was in Elementary Education and I took the state certification assessment in order to be certified in special education. No one told me what an IEP meeting would be like. No one told me about the steps and procedures involved. I didn't even have a chance to practice. I sat down in this meeting that I was supposed to lead with three colleagues, one of them was my immediate supervisor; the others included a school psychologist and fellow teacher, along with the two parents of my student. I was 23 years old and had never been in charge of a meeting, especially one that included five adults who all had experience with IEP meetings. My heart raced as I welcomed the IEP team members and thanked them for their time and attendance. As I reviewed the IEP out loud, the sections were foreign to me. I didn't know which section would come next and I stumbled over my words as I tried to explain each part of the IEP the best I could. A wave of concerns flooded my mind as my voice quivered trying to appear as if I had it all figured out. What came after I reviewed the present levels of performance? Am I going too fast? How do I explain to the parent

some of the negative behaviors that her son was exhibiting in my classroom without sounding offensive? How do I end this meeting? *When* will this meeting be over? I needed help, but I couldn't ask for help in this professional setting. How would that make me look? My heart is racing now just thinking about it.

The thoughts and feelings I experienced that day are not unique. Many new special education teachers approach their first IEP meeting with minimal - if any - experience leading these meetings. It is uncharted territory. Each IEP meeting brings with it new challenges and many unknowns about what could happen. I've had parents argue with me about the goals I proposed. I've had general education teachers leave early or fail to show up at all. I've had to excuse a team member because I forgot to put them on the meeting notice. I've had to reschedule the last half of an IEP meeting because the first half went on for four hours! There is so much that teacher preparation programs cannot prepare new teachers for, but attending and participating in an IEP meeting does not have to be one of them. Throughout this paper, I propose role play as a way to prepare pre-service teachers (PST) for leading and participating in their first IEP meeting.

As an elementary and special education teacher educator, I teach a course entitled Special Education Procedures, which covers legislation and litigation in special education along with the development of eligibility reports, IEPs, and transition plans for students with disabilities. One of my course objectives states: "Students will develop an eligibility report and comprehensive Individualized Education Plan (case-study)." For the first two semesters I taught this course, I did no more than what was expected of the course outcomes. I taught the students *how* to write an IEP. However, reflecting on my own personal experience with conducting IEP meetings, I was inspired to consider how to help PSTs learn to facilitate an IEP meeting and avoid some of the uneasy feelings that come with leading your first IEP meeting. Okay, let's be honest. They will *still* be terrified of the first meeting no matter how much preparation I can offer. However, giving some additional support and experience can help tremendously. The voices of my PSTs in class resonated with me as they made comments about their field placements, which sometimes provided the opportunity for PSTs to observe an IEP meeting and other times did not. PSTs need to experience what it is like to participate in an IEP meeting in order to learn about these meetings. Requiring local schools to allow our PSTs to participate in such personal and confidential experiences is not something that we can do. As a result, I developed the Mock IEP assignment as a way for PSTs to experience the IEP meeting first hand through role play. Throughout this paper, I will share the literature behind my reasoning for developing this task, the basics of how the Mock IEP assignment was developed, how I implement this assignment within the classroom, and what I have experienced in the classroom as a result of conducting this activity.

Why role play?

Mathews et al. (2017) explain that beginning special education teachers have unique needs that cause additional stressors on top of the typical pressure faced by first year teachers. Included in

these stressors are both the primary functions of all educators (instruction) and the additional functions that special educators face such as paperwork and meetings (Mathews et al., 2017). Role play and reflection are impactful practices in teacher education that could mediate the impact of these additional stressors that special educators experience. Role play activities are an active learning strategy that supports long term learning of objectives. Heinrich (2017) suggests that role-play creates an experience that allows participants to reach beyond one's previously held, and possibly limiting, beliefs about one's abilities. When engaging in a role-play activity, individuals tend to immerse themselves fully into their roles and discover new understandings about what that role means and their successes within that role. In addition, Heinrich (2017) explains that by engaging in these types of performances, "it is as if we draw a circle in the midst of that everyday life and step into it" (p. 5). While the students know and understand that the simulation is not reality, the act of performance allows it to feel as such for that moment. Essentially, role play has the ability to feel *as if* it were reality, but with the safety of a controlled environment (Heinrich, 2017). Within this controlled environment, students feel safe and are more willing to take risks in order to build up their confidence for when they engage in the actual experience sometime in their future. Ceballos et al. (2020) supports this idea as well, as the students within their study indicated that their confidence in communicating with parents and teachers from a simulated experience increased as a result. In addition, the students within this study were provided with immediate feedback on their performance, which also enhanced their confidence (Ceballos et al., 2020).

Kilgour et al. (2015) explain that "the use of role-plays also has the potential to facilitate a more comprehensive learning experience for teacher education students compared to the more traditional cognitive focused approach" (p.9). When we stop and think about the lessons that stand out to us from elementary, middle, or high school, it is likely that at least one of these memories included a role play or active learning experience. This suggests that being an engaged learner rather than being a passive learner is a more effective way to support comprehension. Stevens (2015) agrees, sharing the words of a student who engaged in a role-play activity explaining that the activity made it "easier to understand … compared to just reading from a textbook" (p.488). However, teachers should know that creating this type of learning experience for students requires structure and a high degree of planning in order for it to be effective (Coulson & Harvey, 2015). Not only does the teacher need to consider the event that will take place, but they also have to consider the individual roles of each learner and figure out how to create a positive and safe learning environment for students to practice within (Coulson & Harvey, 2015). Some of the factors to consider include determining how each student will be informed of their role in the active learning experience, how each student will know what to do within that role, and if and how the teacher will intervene or interact with the students during the experience.

When engaging in role play, it is equally as important to consider the role of the educator. Stevens (2015) projects that role play facilitates collaborative learning in that the students work together during their learning experience "while the teacher adopts a facilitative role." (p.482). As

the facilitator, educators provide the experience for students, but are not center stage in the learning. However, Goodyear & Dudley (2015) warn educators to not take this as a suggestion to take the back seat to learning. When the teacher is the facilitator, they run the risk of intervening too much and taking over the experience or, on the contrary, being *too* passive. Instead, the teacher should facilitate learning by providing opportunities for the students to make decisions and think independently (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015). One way to do this is by asking questions or prompting students. By posing questions or prompts for the students to consider, students are able to think critically in order to solve problems (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015). Finally, another key characteristic of the teacher's role as the facilitator is that they provide feedback to students. This could be individualized and for the whole group, but should highlight individual student strengths and areas for growth (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015). Providing feedback in this way allows students to learn from their experience in order to improve in the future.

The Role of Reflection

While feedback is critical to student learning, it is equally important that students are able to reflect on their performance and the feedback that they have received. Reflection provides students with an opportunity to be self-critical while they continue to learn from their experience. Coulson & Harvey (2013) explain that reflection supports the meaning-making process for students, while also providing a space for students to "navigate the inherent complexities of learning through experience" (p.403). As students think back on their experiences and the feedback received from their teacher and possibly from peers, they are able to make sense of the experience through discourse. It is important that the teacher supports the students in learning how to be reflective as well (Coulson & Harvey, 2013). Teachers could do this through guided questions or even modeling those reflective skills. Through the process of engaging the students in an active learning experience, followed by teacher feedback and reflection, PSTs have the potential to gain more enduring understandings than if they had learned the same skill through direct instruction.

With the literature in mind, I considered how to help my PSTs develop a greater understanding of IEP's and IEP meetings, as this is something that these PSTs will engage in for the rest of their careers. I had to consider roles that PSTs would take on, how students would develop the IEP, and how I could create an environment that is similar to an actual IEP meeting. In addition, I had to consider how much and what kind of role I, as the instructor of the course, would take in this learning experience. In the description, I will illustrate how I facilitate learning through role-play, allowing the students to take the lead and learn through experience.

What is the Mock IEP Assignment?

In my class, the Mock IEP activity is the PSTs' first experience writing an IEP. Prior to incorporating the Mock IEP assignment, the students in my class would learn about IEP's and were then immediately asked to write their own complete IEP in pairs. At the end of my first year

implementing this approach to teaching IEP's, student feedback indicated that this jump right into IEPs was too great of a challenge for them, so I decided to use the Mock IEP as a scaffold to learning how to write a complete IEP later in the semester. By providing students with a partially completed IEP, the students were able to experience greater success with this smaller task before being asked to write one from scratch.

For the Mock IEP assignment, PSTs are placed in groups and are then asked to select the role that they would like to enact within their group (Appendix A). PSTs are given the option to choose from five identified roles: general education co-teacher, special education co-teacher, special education resource teacher, school psychologist, and parent. As you can see in Appendix A, these roles are accompanied by a brief description of the expectations of those roles. It is important that students understand why each IEP team member is important and what impact each role has on the planning and implementation of the IEP. By understanding the importance of each team member, specifically their role, PSTs will be better able to empathize with all participants in a typical IEP meeting and in doing so, will facilitate a more effective meeting (Stevens, 2015). After each PST has selected a role of their choice, PSTs receive a partially completed IEP and are asked to complete the document as an IEP team based on the information provided. The IEP's provided to students include the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance, which serves as the basis for the development of the IEP. From there, PSTs must develop parental concerns, annual goals, and short term objectives. In addition, PSTs must determine what student supports are necessary for their case student, make state and standardized assessment determinations, and identify appropriate services.

Once PSTs have finished drafting their IEP, they begin rehearsing for their IEP meeting. I support the students in preparing for their meeting in a few ways. One way I prepare PSTs for their IEP meeting is by showing a video of an IEP meeting, during which we pause and reflect on the different parts of the meeting as well as reflect on the roles of the different team members. PSTs are given the opportunity to relate the video to any personal experience that they have with IEP meetings and also point out anything that they found particularly interesting and ask any questions they might have. Providing a symbolic model for students to learn from and later recreate supports students in understanding what is expected of them (Banda et al., 2007). In addition to the model, I also help prepare PSTs for their meeting by providing them with an agenda to follow. This supports PSTs understanding of the order of events that should take place (Appendix B). In my experience, PSTs often take it upon themselves to utilize the agenda as a place for notes as well as to identify who will speak during specific parts of the meeting as a means to stay organized. Finally, in preparation for their meeting, I also explain to PSTs the parental rights in Special Education and how to review them with the parents. Parental rights are procedural safeguards offered at every IEP meeting to parents in order to ensure parents understand their rights to participate in and be part of the decision making for their child with a disability (Katsiyannis & Ward, 1992). Providing instruction on the importance of parental rights and how to offer to review them with parents at meetings allows PSTs to see the

importance of informing the parents of their rights. This review also supports PSTs understanding of the rights that parents have in the IEP process. PSTs rehearse for the IEP meeting outside of class time and focus the quality time in class on preparing the IEP document, obtaining feedback from me on the IEP process, and asking questions.

After three weeks of preparation, PSTs engage in the mock IEP meeting. The students are given a 25 minute time frame to conduct their meeting within a small group setting. I chose to have the meetings conducted within a small group setting without other peers present in order to create an environment in which the students feel safe and without peer judgement. As the students host the meeting, I take notes on their behaviors and actions in order to provide feedback at the end of the meeting. In addition, I present some additional obstacles during the meeting, which I call, "Unexpected Occurrences" (Appendix C). In my experience, there are many curve balls that can occur during an IEP meeting that one cannot anticipate. In this light, I developed a series of conditions that I challenge the PSTs with during the meeting by handing them one of the Unexpected Occurrence cards, created for their diverse roles. For example, during the IEP meeting, I always present the "Gotta Go!" card to the general education teacher who is tasked with the challenge of excusing themselves from the IEP meeting in a polite manner (Appendix C). While I inform the PSTs that some kind of challenge card will be presented to them during the meeting, they are provided no details about what the challenges might be. Since the PSTs do not know what to expect, these unexpected occurrences put a wrench in their plans and the team has to think on their feet. While the challenge cards are handed to one participant, they impact the team by requiring other participants to respond to the problem posed through the challenge, while remaining in their role. This exemplifies how I scaffold PSTs' development of problem solving skills as they are required to think on their feet, an effective strategy for role-play situations (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015). It is evident through their facial expressions that PSTs demonstrate concern and internal struggle as they decide what to do and how to proceed. In my experience, PSTs suggest that these unexpected occurrences made them feel more aware of some of the challenges that they might encounter during a real IEP meeting.

Once the meeting is over, the IEP team and I debrief. I allow the PSTs to share their thoughts on the experience first and then I go around the table to provide individualized feedback to each IEP team member and to the group as a whole. By providing feedback in this way, the PSTs are able to see what the team as a whole did well on as well as where they could improve. Feedback to individuals and groups allows PSTs to come to collective understandings while also reinforcing the goals of the activity (Goodyear & Dudley, 2015). In addition, by capitalizing on each individual's strengths and growth areas with the group, each team member is able to understand how they could proceed more effectively in the future.

The final part of this assignment is for the PSTs to write a reflection of their experiences. Reflection is a natural and necessary part of being an educator. "Reflection serves as a vehicle for

change in education" (Catalana, 2019). By reflecting on one's practice, an educator is able to make adjustments in the future in order to improve. Likewise, reflection offers educators an opportunity to see situations from multiple perspectives (Catalana, 2019). However, PSTs at the undergraduate level often experience difficulty in knowing exactly how to reflect. Reflection involves critical thinking skills and abstract thinking that can be quite a challenge. Coulson & Harvey (2013) suggest that scaffolding reflection supports students in understanding the process in order to gain a deeper meaning from it. In order to scaffold reflection for PSTs for this activity, I provide them with reflection prompts to guide their thinking (Appendix D). PSTs are prompted to write about the development and purpose of the IEP, their perception of the IEP meeting, some major events that took place during the meeting, and an overall reflection of what they would do differently or similarly in the future. Based on my experience with the Mock IEP role play, PSTs gain a lot from this activity and demonstrate more awareness about the IEP meeting experience.

Final Thoughts

Based on my experience of observing the IEP meetings in action, the PSTs consistently do an excellent job of participating in the meeting by demonstrating professionalism and preparedness. In addition, the unexpected occurrences often throw the students for a loop and it is interesting to see how the various groups respond to the differing events, a conversation that we usually have the next class period. PSTs later recall a great deal of growth and enjoyment from this activity. They share their experiences and have meaningful dialogue over what they could do differently in the future. Reading their Mock IEP reflections is what inspired me to write this piece and share about the ways in which the Mock IEP meeting deepens students' knowledge of the IEP process. The Mock IEP meetings have enriched my course by offering an interactive experience that PSTs will hold onto moving forward. Following this activity, many of my PSTs have attended IEP meetings in the field and been able to make numerous connections to their experiences with the simulated meeting. They often are enlightened and surprised to find how similar our simulation was to the one in 'real life.' I believe making these connections builds their confidence and allows the students to feel more prepared for both the expected and unexpected when they lead their own meeting for the very first time.

When students work collaboratively through role play, student learning is enriched through active engagement and students are more likely to be highly motivated by the experience (Stevens, 2015). The Mock IEP role play that I developed for my students creates an experience where PSTs are involved in the entire IEP process from writing the IEP, engaging in the IEP meeting, and reflecting on the experience, just as practicing teachers would. In addition, students are offered opportunities to take on roles with diverse perspectives in order to widen their understanding of each member of the IEP team, developing empathy in the process. An experience like the Mock IEP role play will not fully relieve the anxiety and stress novice special educators face as they plan to lead their first IEP meeting. It can, however, mitigate some of the stress and anxiety by offering PSTs the

opportunity to experience an IEP meeting in a safe, low stress context. An opportunity that I could only have hoped for when reflecting on my first IEP meeting. As a result, PSTs develop a clearer picture of the entire IEP process and develop insights that can better help them serve their students.

References

Banda, D. R., Matuszny, R. M., & Turkan, S. (2007). Video modeling strategies to enhance appropriate behaviors in children with autism spectrum disorders. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 39*(6), 47-52.

Catalana, S. M. (2020). Indicators of impactful reflection in pre-service teachers: A case for creativity, honesty and unfamiliar experiences. *International Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 14*(1), 14.

Ceballos, M., Buckridge, H., & Taylor, R. T. (2020). Educational leadership students and mixed reality experiences: Building student confidence to communicate with parents and teachers. *International Journal of Educational Leadership Preparation, 15*(1), 58-71.

Coulson, D., & Harvey, M. (2013). Scaffolding student reflection for experience-based learning: A framework. *Teaching in Higher Education, 18*(4), 401-413.

Goodyear, V & Dudley, D. (2015). '"I'm a facilitator of learning!" Understanding what teachers and students do within student-centered physical education models'. *Quest, 67*(3), 274-289.

Heinrich, P. (2017). *When role-play comes alive: A theory and practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Katsiyannis, A., & Ward, T. J. (1992). Parent participation in special education: Compliance issues as reported by parent surveys and state compliance reports. *Remedial and Special Education, 13*(5), 50-55.

Kilgour, P., Reynaud, D., Northcote, M. & Shields, M. (2015). Role-Playing as a Tool to Facilitate Learning, Self Reflection and Social Awareness in Teacher Education. *International Journal of Innovative Interdisciplinary Research, 2*(14), 8-20.

Mathews, H. M., Rodgers, W. J., & Youngs, P. (2017). Sense-making for beginning special educators: A systematic mixed studies review. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 67,* 23-36.

Stevens, R. (2015). Role-play and student engagement: reflections from the classroom. *Teaching in Higher Education, 20* (5), 481-492.

About the Author

Courtney Toledo is a Clinical Instructor of Dual Certification (Elementary and Special Education) at Georgia Southern University in southeast Georgia. Having spent the first 7 years of her career as a special education teacher, she has embraced the change in career path the past four years as an instructor for pre-service teachers. The teacher preparation program allows Courtney to teach a variety of elementary and special education courses while also supervising preservice teachers in the field. Courtney also finds herself balancing the position of clinical instructor alongside her continuing education as she is pursuing her doctoral degree in Curriculum Studies. She is eager to continue to share her work with Pre-Service teachers in the field of Elementary and Special Education with others who work in these fields.

Appendix A

IEP Team Member Roles

Mock IEP Roles	
Special Education Co-Teacher	The Special Education Co-Teacher is responsible for communicating how the student performs during their time in the co-taught class. · What is the student doing well? · What is an area the student needs to work on? Be prepared to discuss how these strengths/needs will impact the student in continuing in the co-taught setting.
General Education Co-Teacher	The General Education Co-Teacher is responsible for communicating how the student performs during their time in the co-taught class. · What is the student doing well? · What is an area the student needs to work on? · Where should students at this grade level be? Be prepared to discuss how these strengths/needs will impact the student in continuing in the co-taught setting.
Parent	You are the parent of a child with a disability. · What are your concerns? (Identify at least two) · During the development of the IEP, address your two concerns during the meeting to ensure that they are acknowledged.
School Psychologist	The school psychologist is responsible for explaining the results of the most recent psychological evaluation and eligibility. · Provide an overview of the assessment data collected during the psychological evaluation. Be prepared to answer questions about the evaluations/tests conducted.

Special Education Resource Teacher	The Special Education Resource Teacher is responsible for communicating how the student performs during their time in the resource class. · What is the student doing well? · What is an area the student needs to work on? Be prepared to discuss how these strengths/needs will impact the student in continuing in the resource setting.

Appendix B

IEP Meeting Agenda

IEP Meeting Agenda

1. IEP Participants
2. Parental Rights
    a. Explain or waive if parents do not need them reviewed
3. Present Levels
    a. Parent concerns
    b. Psychological testing
    c. Strengths and needs
4. Special Factors
    a. Behavior, English Proficiency, Communication needs, etc.
5. Transition Plan (if applicable)
6. Goals and Objectives
    a. Must be skill based and match functional needs
7. Classroom Supports
    a. Instructional and classroom testing accommodations
    b. Supplemental aids and services; supports for school personnel
8. Statewide Testing
    a. Select each test for that grade level and accommodations as needed
9. Placement Options
    a. All areas should have a reason for being rejected or accepted
10. Services Page (which services are being suggested?)
11. Extended School Year (as needed)

12. Participation

    a. Gather signatures from IEP team members that were in attendance

13. Excusal Form (list persons excused if applicable)

14. Minutes

Appendix C

Sample Unexpected Occurrence Cards

Unexpected Occurrence Cards
Gotta Go! You have to go pick your students up from specials. Politely excuse yourself from the meeting. (For General Education Teacher)
Parent Concern Start going "on and on" about how worried you are about your child's money skills. Start complaining about how you think last years' teacher didn't teach him about money and he continues to fall further behind. Just keep talking until someone is able to redirect your concerns. (For Parent)
Argue Take a stance on one of the goals and disagree with what is in the plans. (Ex. Rather than the comprehension goal being a fourth grade level text, you might suggest that fifth grade would be more suitable). Tell the team [politely] that you disagree and then propose that you'd like the team to develop or modify the goal. (From General Education or Special Education Teacher for Special Education Teacher)
Gotta Go! The meeting has gone on for far too long and you need to table the meeting for another day. Politely end the meeting and schedule a new day/time. (For Special Education Teacher)
Ask the Psychologist Ask the school psychologist to explain what "personal skills" refer to from the Vineland II assessment findings. (From Teacher/parent for Psychologist)

Appendix D

Assignment Instructions and Reflection Prompts

For this assignment, you will be completing an Individualized Education Plan, conducting a Mock IEP meeting, and reflecting on your experience. Please read through each of the following descriptors below for what to include and/or prepare for, for each component.

IEP Plan

You and your group members will be provided with a partially completed Individualized Education Plan. You will work together to complete the remaining components of the IEP based on the information that you have been provided. You should go back and review your previous IEP for feedback for improvement as you work on the new IEP document.

Mock IEP Meeting (Participation, Collaboration, Professionalism)

You will work with your peers to conduct a mock IEP meeting. You and each of your group members will be assigned a specific role for the IEP meeting. These roles include: parent, psychologist, special education teacher (resource or co-taught), and general education teacher. You will be given a "profile" to follow as you conduct the IEP meeting. During this meeting, you or your partners might be given an unexpected occurrence (i.e. general education teacher has to leave, argument over one of the decisions). When given an unexpected occurrence, you should work together as a group to try and mediate or move forward despite the disturbance. If you are given an unexpected occurrence, you should be the one to bring it up or perform the activity to the group. For example, if you are given a card that says, "You have to go pick your students up from specials. Please leave the IEP meeting," then you should find a professional way to explain that to the fellow IEP team members and excuse yourself.

Reflection

You will write a 4 paragraph reflection (1-2 pages) based on your experience during the Mock IEP meeting. The reflection should include the following:

- Provide the definition and an explanation of what an Individualized Education Plan is. You will also include an explanation regarding the importance of an IEP.
- Describe your overall perception of the Mock IEP experience. Include what your role was for the meeting and your feelings towards how the meeting went.
- Provide an explanation of what occurred during the meeting. You should provide explicit examples of 2-3 decisions that were made as well as any major events that occurred.

- You will end your reflection with a description of what you would do the same and differently if you were given the opportunity to conduct this IEP meeting again. Additionally, share any major takeaways that you gained from this experience.

To top

Fostering Self-Advocacy Skills Across All Grade-Levels: Defining Self-Determination for Students with Disabilities

By Marissa Desiree Pardo

Abstract

Self-Advocacy is the action of representing or defending oneself, especially considering one's views, interests, or goals ("Topics - Self-Advocacy.," n.d.). Throughout elementary school, middle school, and high school, students are provided with age-appropriate opportunities to self-advocate for themselves (Morin, 2019). These opportunities and skills culminate until the transition period begins during high school and into adulthood.

Defining Self-Advocacy

Self-Advocacy is the action of representing or defending oneself, especially considering one's views, interests, or goals. In terms of SWD or children and adolescents with special needs, self-advocacy requires the individual to learn how to speak up for oneself to communicate wants and needs, make decisions about their life, find other people who will support their needs, learn about their rights, and understanding the concept of self-determination ("Topics - Self-Advocacy.," n.d.). While this concept is important for any child to learn throughout the stages of their life, it is far more rigorous for SWD who struggle with effectively communicating their wants and needs as an effect of their disability. Self-Advocacy is critical for an individual to be properly equipped with the knowledge needed to succeed in making or participating in decisions that affect that person's life ("Topics - Self-Advocacy.," n.d.).

How Self-Advocacy Affects Student Transition

According to Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), public schools are required to include transition services in every Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for students with disabilities that are aged 16 or older. This serves to assist students in their transition from school to a post-school environment. Students. A student that is self-aware and able to advocate for themselves has a better chance at having a stake in the decision-making process for their future (Martin, Marshall, & Maxson, 1993).

Helping Grade-School Learners Self-Advocate

At the grade-school or elementary school level, promoting self-advocacy can begin with helping the child understand their unique abilities and teaching them to communicate their needs and wants. For a child that has been diagnosed with a disability, discussing learning and thinking

differences in terms they understand can provide that child with opportunities to safely talk about their diagnosis. A part of this discussion includes issues that may arise and affect the child. Allow them to practice different ways in which to express what difficulties they face as a result of their own learning and thinking differences to their family, friends, peers, or authority figures. Aside from the areas where a child may struggle as an effect of a diagnosis, focusing on the child's strengths is also important. Identifying areas in which a child requires assistance alongside their personal strengths gives them an opportunity for them to discuss what they're good at. When the need to self-advocate arises, particularly in a school setting, teaching a child when and how to ask for teacher assistance can help them request any accommodations they may need to access their learning environment. In the end, the child must be the decision maker, because they are part of a team. While many adults are working towards being effective advocates for the children and students, offering them ample opportunities to make decisions for themself will ensure that their voice is also heard (Morin, 2020).

Helping Middle-School Learners Self-Advocate

Middle school can be a more difficult time in a child's life. While the child may be accustomed to an adult helping them advocate for their wants and needs, at this stage students can begin to learn how to be their own advocate when someone isn't there to give them the support they may need. Middle school is quite different from elementary school, in that a child may have several more teachers than they did in grade school. Each teacher may have unique teaching styles and different methods. Finding an easy way to let teachers know more about the child and what their strengths, difficulties, goals, and interests are can be helpful during this transition (Morin, 2020). A student can use an index card with this basic information or a communication passport to take with them into middle school. A communication passport is a method of supporting a person with disabilities between transitions. This document is person-centered and it includes the person's views, interests, and needs to the furthest extent. This can help the teacher get to know the student better, especially if the student experience's communication difficulties ("Communication Passports, n.d.).

Letting the student know that you are on their team can also provide them with a safe space to advocate for themselves. Continuing to speak up for them is just as important, since both the student and the interested stakeholders are both still learning how to be effective advocates. You can assist a student in speaking up for themselves by helping them find what their strengths are. What are they good at? What do they love? Strengths-based approaches to addressing self-advocacy can help the child build self-esteem and socialize with individuals who share common interests, such as sports, extracurricular activities, or shared hobbies. A child feels more confident speaking up for themselves when they can identify their personal strengths and their interests. By talking openly about learning and thinking differences, a child can feel more empowered when expressing their difficulties as well as what support they need (Morin, 2020).

Helping High-School Learners Self-Advocate

Socially and academically, students with learning and thinking differences are faced with challenges when they begin to attend high school. Their ability to practice self-advocacy will be important during this period and beyond high school through adulthood. Throughout elementary and middle school, faculty members and parents can be effective advocates for the child; however at the high school level it becomes more of the child's responsibility to participate in advocating for themselves. This can be done through dialog and discussing different scenarios where a child may need to self-advocate for themselves in the case that an adult may not be nearby to assist them. As a team, solutions to potential issues can be brainstormed to enable the child to feel more confident in discussing their wants and needs independently (Morin, 2019).

Part of this process includes transitioning to life outside of high school. This includes having a job or volunteering in activities that foster opportunities for the high-schooler to self-advocate. When exploring different options, the high-schooler would have several opportunities to self-advocate by explaining their learning differences to employers and understanding their rights in school and outside of school. The student can learn how to communicate with their employers by practicing conversation with a parent or teacher. The student should also begin to plan for the future. When considering future prospects, the students and transition team must discuss the possibility of college, trade school, or a career in the workforce upon graduating high school (Morin, 2019).

The Americans with Disabilities Act and Employment beyond High School

The American's With Disabilities Act, or the ADA, outlines several conditions that define what a disability is. By definition, the ADA states that a disability is "a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities" (ada.gov). These disabilities can be visible or invisible as well as physical, mental or both. These disabilities may also be related to learning and thinking differences and could either be lifelong or temporary. The ADA can protect workers and employees from discrimination or harassment in the workplace as a result of a disability. While the ADA does not necessarily offer an employee "special treatment" or lower work standards, it does allow reasonable workplace accommodations, confidentiality agreements, and equal opportunities (Drinks, 2020).

Upon transition from high school to adult life, this is important for an adult with disabilities to consider when applying for employment. By knowing their rights, the employee can self-advocate by requesting accommodations so that they can do their job effectively. With the knowledge acquired during the implementation of the transition plan from high school, the student acquires employment skills and the tools necessary to self -advocate for the rights they have in the workplace. This is a crucial final step in the process of fostering self-advocacy skills across a child's school life and into adulthood during their post-high school career.

References

Communication Passports. (n.d.). Retrieved May 13, 2020, from https://communicationmatters.org.uk/types-of-aac/communication-passports/

Drinks, T. (2020, October 14). FAQ: The Americans with Disabilities Act at work. Retrieved February 01, 2021, from https://www.understood.org/en/workplace/rights-at-work/faq-ada-at-work?_ul=1%2Ahqd72%2Adomain_userid%2AYW1wLUZwMTRlSHJpclJNX1VoMGczQnB6cVE.

Martin, J. E., Marshall, L. H., & Maxson, L. L. (1993). Transition Policy: Infusing Self-Determination and Self-Advocacy into Transition Programs. *Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 16*(1), 53-61. doi:10.1177/088572889301600105

Morin, A. (2020, April 17). 6 Tips for Helping Your Grade-Schooler Learn to Self-Advocate. Retrieved April 30, 2020, from https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-advocacy/6-ips-for-helping-your-grade-schooler-learn-to-self-advocate

Morin, A. (2020, April 17). 4 Tips for Helping Middle-Schoolers Learn to Speak Up for Themselves. Retrieved April 30, 2020, from https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-advocacy/5-ips-for-helping-your-middle-schooler-learn-to-self-advocate

Morin, A. (2019, October 17). 6 Tips for Helping Your High-Schooler Learn to Self-Advocate. Retrieved May 13, 2020, from https://www.understood.org/en/friends-feelings/empowering-your-child/self-advocacy/6-ips-for-helping-your-high-schooler-learn-to-self-advocate

New on ADA.gov. (n.d.). Retrieved February 01, 2021, from https://www.ada.gov/

Topics - Self-Advocacy. (n.d.). Retrieved April 29, 2020, from https://www.wrightslaw.com/info/self.advocacy.htm

To top

Retaining Special Education Graduate Students in Times of Transition

By
Karen M. Potter, Ph.D.
Randa G. Keeley, Ph.D.
Breanna L. Sherrow, Ph.D.

Note: Article retriened from the Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals, Winter 2021 edition

Abstract

This paper examines special education graduate program retention data in connection with issues identified as affecting retention in higher education. We reviewed archival data for a three-year period to evaluate retention during a time of continual institutional and programmatic change. Descriptive data for four specific graduate strands in the participating program were examined through the consideration of student involvement, student interactions with faculty, and the disruption of established traditions. Through this examination, we found that retention rates remained stable over the three-year period, which may have been the result of several factors shown in retention literature to decrease student attrition.

Keywords: retention, attrition, graduate students, programmatic change, special education, higher education, student completion, student persistence

Retaining Special Education Graduate Students in Times of Transition

In alignment with a longstanding line of research on retention, institutions of higher education continue to focus on the retention and eventual graduation of students (Tinto, 2006). Many research teams have attempted and have been unsuccessful in capturing the specific reasons why students stay or leave institutions, but some researchers have uncovered characteristics of institutions of higher education that contribute to student retention (Davidson & Wilson, 2013; Golde, 2000; Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Vaquera, 2007). Of the several factors that may affect student retention, we consider three factors that may be visible using special education graduate program data. These institutional factors include: a) student contact and involvement, b) student and faculty interaction, and c) long-standing, established institutional traditions (Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Vaquera, 2007).

Students who are retained in higher education tend to have increased contact with other students and increased social involvement within their institution (Tinto, 2006). This social engagement

includes a sense of belonging for a student and can be understood in terms of the opportunity for interaction with peers, time spent in the classroom, and inclusion in clubs or organizations (Gardner 2008; Gardner & Barnes, 2007; Hurtado & Carter, 1997; Vaquera, 2007). Social engagement has been critically affected by both establishing and strengthening new relationships in the higher education setting and by maintaining previously established relationships with families and communities of origin (Thompson, Johnson-Jennings, & Nitzarim, 2013; Tinto, 2006). If an institution does not make the effort to create and maintain engagement as expressed by the feeling of community among students, students may be less likely to continue their education. Retention may be further impacted if institutional changes occur that cause a disruption in established programs that were designed to build a sense of community among students.

A second institutional characteristic that fosters student retention has been the positive interaction between students and faculty. Students hope to develop deep relationships with faculty members (Carpi, Ronan, Falconer, Boyd, & Lents, 2013; Cox, McIntosh, Terenzini, Reason, & Lutovsky Quaye, 2010; Thomas, 2002). Specifically, retention has been facilitated by student-faculty relationships that are encouraging, supportive, and directed to helping students meet their own personal goals (Golde, 2000; Merrill, 2015). Positive student-faculty interaction during times of transition may be especially important in helping a student decide to stay in or leave a program (Tinto, 2006), while disruption of previously established student-faculty relationships may also affect a student's decision to stay or leave. In an effort to prevent student attrition, faculty should attempt to make contact with students, know students' names, and show signs of friendship (Thomas, 2002). Further addressing positive interactions, Vaquera (2007) summarized student attrition as a longitudinal process that is directly related to student interactions with the educational environment. Because relationships with faculty have been an important part of the educational environment, the quality of student-faculty relationships is essential to retention (as demonstrated by student perceptions of faculty competence in supporting students to achieve personal goals).

Finally, student retention has been affected by a student's level of confidence in an institution as informed by the institution's long-standing, established traditions (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Braxton, 2008). Students hope that a degree from an institution will eventually lead to the desired type and level of employment they wish to obtain. Students want to know that the institution is well respected among potential employers or other graduate programs and that a degree from that institution will help to elevate their current standing. Unfortunately, a student's confidence in the ability of an institution to assist in meeting individual goals may be affected by continual changes. As changes occur new traditions are established that may affect student confidence in an institution's ability to help students achieve personal goals.

Institutional change can have an impact on all of the three identified characteristics that could lead to student retention. The removal, maintenance, or addition of programs designed to facilitate

community among students, maintain faculty interactions with students, and instill institutional confidence in students, are all areas that would benefit from further investigation. The purpose of this specific study was to examine special education program archival student retention data to evaluate the overall graduate student retention over a three-year period of continual change affecting student contact and involvement, student to faculty interactions, and long-standing, established institutional traditions.

Method

To determine retention levels, Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was obtained to review archival program retention data for all New Mexico State University special education graduate program students from Fall 2014 to Summer 2017. Archival data sources included the university enrollment data system, the departmental database, and the former program director's regularly-kept program records. We used the archival data to complete a comprehensive spreadsheet titled Special Education Graduate Program Admissions, Exits, and Retention from Fall 2014 to Summer 2017. This spreadsheet was used to create five summary tables: new student admissions tracked to exit, completion, or continuation (Table 1), enrollment by program strand (Table 2), retention by semester (Table 3), exit reasons (Table 4), and exits by program strand (Table 5).

Setting

The program was located in a southwestern borderlands U.S. research-intensive university that was also designated as a land-grant institution and Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The university's research-intensive status required that graduate students engage with faculty in research activities to a higher degree than for other locally available institutions, while the role as a land-grant institution requires that faculty also focus on practical career preparation goals for students. University-wide demographic information from the Office of Institutional Analysis (New Mexico State University, 2016) shows that approximately 52% of the student population were identified as Hispanic. Further, many graduate students in the special education program (at least 50%, based on enrollment in the alternative licensure strand) taught full-time within public school classrooms in the community and pursued graduate coursework part-time. Over time the program has maintained 80% or greater graduate student enrollment with lower undergraduate enrollment, leading to a focus on graduate student retention.

Participating Program Description

The graduate program in special education includes PhD, EdD, and MA degree plans. The MA program has five possible pathways or "strands," three of which are represented in this study: traditional licensure, alternative licensure, and scholarly/non-licensure. The remaining two pathways or strands (i.e., visual impairment preparation and the autism spectrum certificate) are offered separately from these degree plans/strands and therefore are not included in this study. The

traditional licensure strand includes practicum and student teaching field experience components. The alternative licensure strand includes field experience structured as concurrent employment as a special education teacher while taking courses. The scholarly/non-licensure strand includes coursework without required field experience for students not seeking licensure either because they already have a license in special education, or they are seeking a career that will not require licensure. We considered retention for these three strands of the MA program and for the doctoral program.

Research Design, Data Collection, and Analysis

After receiving IRB approval to use the archival dataset, the data were transferred into a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet for easy mode and percentage calculations. We used the term "strands" to encompass Alternative MA, Traditional MA, Scholarly MA, and Doctoral pathways. Descriptive statistics were used to examine student retention and exit data over a three-year period (i.e., Fall 2014 to Summer 2017). Data presented over the three-year period included totals, modes, and percentages for students.

Results

Table 1 contains data for newly admitted graduate students across multiple semesters and considers whether these newly admitted students graduated, continued their studies, or exited the program. Students who exited were non-continuing students who did not complete a program strand (i.e., Alternative MA, Traditional MA, Scholarly MA, or Doctoral) as indicated by graduation. The retention of newly admitted special education graduate students ranged from 60% to 100% over the three-year period (Fall 2014 to Summer 2017). The lowest retention percentage (60%) was in Spring 2015. As reflected in Table 1, there were multiple semesters in which 100% of newly admitted students either graduated or were retained through Summer 2017, with the majority of new student 100% retention happening in summer semesters (Summer 2015, 2016, and 2017) and one instance in a spring semester (Spring 2017). The majority of students entered the program in the Fall semesters (Fall 2014, 2015, and 2016). When considering all newly admitted students, there was an overall retention rate of 83% for the 65 students admitted over the three-year period.

Table 1

Retention of Newly Admitted Special Education Graduate Students Fall 2014-Summer 2017

Admittance Semester	Admitted	Exited	Graduated	Continuing Summer 2017	Percent Retained
Fa 14	13	3	6	4	77
Sp 15	5	2	1	2	60
Su 15	4	0	3	1	100
Fa 15	12	1	1	10	92
Sp 16	8	2	1	5	75
Su 16	4	0	0	4	100
Fa 16	14	3	0	11	79
Sp 17	3	0	0	3	100
Su 17	2	0	0	2	100
Totals	65	11	12	42	83

Note. Fa = Fall. Sp = Spring. Su = Summer. 14,15,16, and 17 refer to 2014, 2015, 2016, and 2017. Admitted = admitted and registered for courses. Exited = withdrew or became inactive. Percent Retained = (Graduated + Continuing) / Admitted. All data refers only to students admitted for the semester indicated.

Table 2 includes the total enrollment across the three MA strands and the doctoral program. Approximately 50% of the total 98 students were enrolled in the alternative licensure strand. Over four semesters, program enrollment numbers ranged from 58 to 63 students, with the lowest student enrollment in the Spring 2017 semester. Using the total enrollment across strands from Table 2, data in Table 3 includes retention numbers for students across all graduate program strands in special education over a two-year period. Retention for each semester was high (86 – 98%), but was much lower (77%) when considering retention for individual students rather than students as cohort members in multiple semesters. When comparing the overall retention of all students in the program (77%) to the retention rates of newly admitted students, a slightly higher percentage of retention (83%) was present (compare Table 1 and Table 3). The most frequent reason for exiting (n=7) was that students in the alternative licensure strand finished the seven courses and supervision requirements to obtain a teaching license and chose not to continue with their MA degrees (Table 4). The second most frequent reason for exiting (n=6) was "unknown," which was a category that

included students who stopped taking coursework and became inactive without discussion with their advisors.

Table 2

Special Education Graduate Program Total Enrollment in Four Strands

	MA			PhD / EdD	
Semester	Alternative	Traditional	Scholarly	Doctoral	Total
Fa 15	32	6	16	9	63
Sp 16	32	7	16	8	63
Fa 16	31	8	16	8	63
Sp 17	30	8	13	7	58
Distinct	50	13	24	11	98

Note. Fa = Fall. Sp = Spring. 15,16, and 17 refer to 2015, 2016, and 2017. Alternative = earning an MA while pursuing alternative teaching licensure. Traditional = earning an MA while pursuing traditional teaching licensure. Scholarly = earning an MA while not pursuing teaching licensure. Distinct = total non-repeated individuals pursuing the strand indicated across all semesters.

Table 3

Special Education Graduate Program Retention Fall 2015 – Spring 2017

Semester	Enrolled	Exited	Graduated	Continuing	Percent Retained
Fa 15	63	1	8	54	98
Sp 16	63	7	5	51	89
Fa 16	63	7	3	53	89
Sp 17	58	8	11	39	86
Distinct	98	23	27	48	77

Note. Fa = Fall. Sp = Spring. 15,16, and 17 refer to 2015, 2016, and 2017. Enrolled = current active student. Exited = withdrew or became inactive. Percent Retained = (Graduated + Continuing) / Enrolled. Distinct = total non-repeated individuals enrolled across semesters. Summer semester numbers are included with the preceding spring semester.

Table 4

Exit Reasons Fall 2015 – Spring 2017 (n=23)

Semester	Moved	Negative SS	Changed Dept	Completed Alt Prog	Changed Alt Prog	Unknown
Fa 15	1	-	-	-	-	-
Sp 16	1	1	-	1	-	-
Su 16	-	-	-	2	-	2
Fa 16	-	1	-	2	1	3
Sp 17	1	1	2	2	1	1
Totals	3	3	2	7	2	6

Note. Fa = Fall. Sp = Spring. 15,16, and 17 refer to 2015, 2016, and 2017. Negative SS = Self-Selected to leave after faculty advice regarding low grades or dispositional concerns. Changed Dept = Changed Department. Completed Alt Prog = completed those parts of the program required to earn alternative licensure and thus continue teaching but did not complete a degree. Changed Alt Prog = enrolled in another state approved alternative process or preparation program. No exit data was available for Fall 2014-Summer 2015 or Summer 2017.

The data in Table 5 included the number of students who exited based on the program strand. Percentages of students exiting were fairly consistent across strands, ranging from 0 – 25% and with a strong mode of 13% (6 of 11, 54% of non-zero data).

Table 5

Exits by Program Strand Fall 2015 – Spring 2017 (n=23)

	MA						PhD / EdD	
	Alternative		Traditional		Scholarly		Doctoral	
Semester	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Fa 15	1	3	-	-	-	-	-	-
Sp 16	4	13	-	-	2	13	1	13
Fa 16	3	10	2	25	1	6	1	13
Sp 17	4	13	1	13	3	23	-	-

Note. Fa = Fall. Sp = Spring. Su = Summer. 15,16, and 17 refer to 2015, 2016, and 2017. N = number of students exited, % = exit percent of students enrolled in that strand for that semester. No exit data was available for Fall 2014-Summer 2015 or Summer 2017. Summer data is included with the preceding spring semester to enable comparison with strand totals in Table 2.

Discussion

Program Changes

The graduate program in special education underwent significant changes from Fall 2014 to Summer 2017. These changes affected graduation timelines and were relevant in student retention. The changes set the context for reviewing retention data collected from Fall 2014 to Summer 2017. Many of the changes occurred concurrently, but will be discussed separately for clarity. The discussion of these changes does not include the reasons for the changes, evaluation of the changes, or comments on the change process beyond consideration of graduate student retention.

Changes experienced in the time of the archival dataset included changes of faculty and staff in the program and department, changes to program strands, and changes in department and college leadership. Changes will be discussed in relation to their effect on student contact or involvement,

their effect on student-faculty interaction, and their impact on existing, established traditions (Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Vaquera, 2007).

Retention and Student Contact and Involvement

As reflected in Table 1, newly admitted students in the Spring 2015 semester experienced a greater degree of exiting and lower retention than newly admitted students in any other semester. This result may have been connected to the changes that were occurring immediately prior to and during the admission semester. During the academic year in which these students were admitted (2014 - 2015), the college and department had undergone multiple changes in leadership. The dean of the college had announced retirement in Fall 2014 and a search for a new dean was underway. Additionally, in the immediately prior academic year, the department had four special education faculty member resignations. Two new faculty members were hired over the summer of 2014 to assist in filling the prior resignations. Finally, the department experienced three different department heads during the three year data period with varied levels of experience in special education, from very little knowledge of special education to expertise in the field. Two of those department leaders served as interim department heads, which is by definition a transitional role. Students newly admitted in Spring 2015 would have experienced these changes in their immediate academic community as they engaged in their programs. The decline in retention for students newly admitted in Spring 2015 could be related to a student sense of loss of the former community of leaders and faculty members. Tinto (2006) suggested that focusing on student contact and involvement in the academic community has been critical to student retention; unfortunately, students may have felt that the pre-established community with the previous dean, department head(s), and faculty members could no longer exist and, therefore, chose to exit the program.

In the newly established academic community in Spring 2015, student contact and involvement in the program declined, which is consistent with the Tinto (2006) explanation of declining retention. This occurred partially because of fewer opportunities for student engagement as time was needed for newer faculty to become acclimated as proactive agents in building the community experience. Part of this included the diminished number of faculty available and lack of experience of new faculty in community building activities that would have increased student contact, such as sponsoring the multiple organizations, clubs, and fundraisers that were previously offered to students in the program.

Additionally, due to having fewer faculty members, many of the initial courses for the program were assigned to adjuncts, doctoral students, and newly appointed faculty rather than to more experienced faculty. Coursework that is introductory for entering students has been a critical juncture in which students choose to stay or leave a university (Tinto, 2006), but many times the department's least experienced faculty were assigned to teach these courses due to a lack of experienced faculty.

Further, beginning in Fall 2015, the new dean's office established a new vision for the college. This shift away from the vision of the previous dean may have further disrupted students' feeling of community. In the Spring of 2016, as this shift progressed and in response to a university-wide push for reorganization of colleges, the dean's office began to discuss the relocation of the special education program from a departmentalized system into a new school structure. Students were faced with the cumulative results of changes that included losing and acquiring faculty members, losing and acquiring departmental and college leaders, aligning with a new college mission, and managing uncertainty related to restructuring the program. This led to persistent, ongoing change from a known academic community to an unknown, inconsistently defined, and developing community. Fortunately, as the new community became more established within the department and college, retention rates continued an upward, stable trend, finally reflecting 100% retention of students newly admitted in Spring 2017. The increased retention rates were indicative of some success in student retention despite the intensity of programmatic changes that affected student contact and involvement.

Retention and Student and Faculty Interactions

The quality of student and faculty relationships tends to be an indicator of strong academic integration for students (Golde, 2000, 2005). As Thomas (2002) explained, a relationship of caring and investment between students and faculty can be established by faculty who express sentiments of encouragement and engage in assisting students to reach their personal goals. Quality student-faculty interaction has been developed by building strong academic, advising, and mentoring relationships. As noted in Tables 2 and 3, the number of students enrolled in each of the graduate strands remained consistent from Fall 2015 to Spring 2017 (i.e., 58 - 63 students, respectively), but the total number and experience level of the faculty did not remain consistent during that time. Starting in the Fall 2013 semester, the department experienced the loss of four special education faculty. The exit of a large number of faculty, each with a significant amount of experience, meant that many functional, yet unwritten procedures and policies left with those faculty members, including expectations and methods for developing quality student-faculty interactions. Also, an additional faculty member resigned in 2016. Due to university budget constraints, only three of the five vacated positions were filled. Advising for all graduate level students was reallocated across the existing faculty and new faculty, which temporarily made building and maintaining strong student-faculty relationships a largely impossible goal. Adding to this challenge in building consistent and strong relationships with students, staff changes since Fall 2014 included reassignment of two long-term administrative assistants and hiring and resignation of three new administrative assistants.

Several effects of faculty and staff changes were relevant in considering graduate student retention. One effect of these changes was that new faculty were in positions where they must provide mentorship to students before having acquired detailed systemic knowledge of programs and degree

options. The newer faculty's lack of knowledge in reference to degree planning may have led to a longer time to degree which is correlated with a higher attrition rate for students (Bowen & Rudenstine, 1992). Student advisees who were assigned to new faculty, formerly advised by faculty who had left, may or may not have had a clearly defined program of study for their chosen strand as this was not a required action for previous advisors. Additionally, course listings for strand options were not clearly defined at that time and were not consistently offered. Therefore, the lack of knowledge of newer faculty as well as no clearly defined degree plan for some inherited student advisees may have led to a longer time to degree. Contrastingly, it is not likely that newly admitted students exited the program for these reasons. As new faculty began organizing course offerings, requiring the presence of a degree plan on file for all graduate students, and defining degree plans explicitly, newly admitted students would often graduate at a quicker rate (Table 1).

Additional challenges in retention connected to student-faculty interaction occurred. For example, due to the abundance of newer faculty, a team-oriented approach had yet to be established due to new relationships forming among faculty and this may have affected student retention (Vaquera, 2007). Further, the mentorship relationship between faculty members and graduate students was disrupted (for some students multiple times) because students had a number of different advisors throughout this time period. Doctoral students were affected because they had to change the members of their committees a number of times. Moreover, faculty and staff changes may have affected retention in relation to the ability of new faculty and staff to respond knowledgeably to student procedural questions.

Multiple strategies were used to aid in retention during this time of change. First, newer faculty focused on communication with new advisees in an attempt to build strong relationships between new students and faculty. For example, newer faculty increased communication efforts and allowed for multiple methods for advisement meetings (i.e., in person, via phone, via video conference) in an effort to improve student and faculty interactions. In alignment with Tinto (2006), new faculty members focused on making contact with students, especially outside of the classroom, in an effort to improve retention.

Second, in consideration of the role of both mentor and advisor, three local emeritus faculty were contacted to teach additional classes to reduce the teaching load of new faculty so that more time could be spent on mentoring and advising students. Students often greatly value faculty that are focused on their roles as mentors and advisors (Bair, Haworth, & Sandfort, 2004) and increased focus on student advising could have possibly affected the overall retention of students as noted in Tables 1 and 2. Furthermore, the emeritus faculty were able to serve as new faculty mentors regarding teaching and advising and served as committee members for doctoral students whose committee members or chairs left the university. In this time of need, Emeritus faculty filled a gap that directly contributed to students completing their programs. Faculty from two other departments

in the college also agreed to provide new faculty mentorship and doctoral committee support. Support from these faculty members made it possible for graduate students who lost their committees to re-form committees and complete their studies and for new faculty to gain knowledge and confidence in advising and mentoring, which was essential in improving student retention.

Many faculty believe that the issue of student retention would be solved if more qualified applicants were admitted (Tinto, 2006). Student-faculty interactions were likely affected by this perception, with the possibility that a greater degree of support or a stronger student-faculty relationship was inadvertently built for students with higher entry qualifications. Regardless of the truth of this belief, in response to accreditation concerns, in Summer 2015 the grade point average (GPA) standard for the special education graduate program admittance changed from a minimum 2.5 provisional admittance (3.0 regular admittance) to a minimum 2.8 provisional admittance (3.0 regular admittance). This was a matter of more closely following existing procedures rather than creating new procedures and particularly affected those seeking admittance to the alternative licensure strand as applicants to this program typically had lower GPA's than applicants to the other strands. Additionally, in Summer 2015, the program stopped provisionally admitting international students with English Language testing (TOEFL and IELTS) scores that were below university graduate school admittance cut-off scores. Finally, the program stopped admitting international students with sponsoring agency restrictions to no more than nine credits of online coursework for their entire program. These changes had the effect of decreasing admission of doctoral students and alternative licensure students. These changes may have contributed to a lower number of students admitted to the Spring 2017 semester and could likely affect future retention more than the retention of graduate students currently in the program (Table 3).

Retention and Changes to Established Traditions

Student retention can be attributed to institutions with long standing traditions that allow students to secure a job upon graduation (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Thomas, 2002); however, long standing traditions are difficult to maintain when multiple departmental and leadership changes have disrupted established traditions. From Fall 2014 to Fall 2017 the department and program leadership changed multiple times, for a total of three department heads and three program directors. The first and second department heads had specializations in areas other than special education and the second and third department heads were hired as interim department heads. A program director was hired beginning Fall 2015, after a year in which program director functions were completed primarily by the department head with no specialization in the field of special education. After two years, the program director role and functions were returned to a different (interim) department head with a doctorate in special education. Students want to know that an institution will help them realize their goals (Berger & Braxton, 1998), but multiple changes in leadership can create difficulties in maintaining traditions. Leadership changes were noticed and discussed by graduate students. These changes potentially affected student retention and could be a

contributing factor for the students that exited without citing a reason (N=6), as well as those students changing departments (N=2) (Table 4). Berger and Braxton (1998) also suggested that the fit between a student and institution has been a factor in retention. Exiting students may have felt that the fit between themselves and the department no longer existed in relationship to leadership changes. In addition to changes in leadership, the department experienced multiple changes to the special education program strands as well.

Between Fall 2014 and Fall 2017 three MA program specializations were ended (i.e., multicultural/bilingual special education, early childhood special education, and a special education reading emphasis). Students who may have initially chosen the institution for one of these specific degree options may have exited the program because their individual goals could no longer be realized due to the removal of their chosen strands (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Thomas, 2002); however, a new group of students may have been attracted because a graduate certificate program in autism had started. Student exits, as represented in Table 5 and Table 6, could possibly be attributed to the loss of these particular specializations. On the other hand, enrollment from Fall 2015 to Spring 2017 remained stable (Table 3) and could have been a result of the new certificate program in autism. The removal of specializations and the creation of the new certificate were in direct response to the specific areas of expertise of the newer faculty members. Further, the deletion of these specializations likely affected current students who were enrolled in each of these strands as students either had to pursue a different specialization or discontinue their graduate studies.

Finally, as part of these strand changes, the program also increased online offerings. Even though online courses provide a level of convenience for students, the change may have had an impact on retention depending on graduate student preference for online or traditional course offerings. Vaquera (2007) explained that longitudinal changes that affect student interaction with the educational environment can result in a slow attrition of students. As noted in Table 3, even with the shifts in course offerings to include method of instruction (i.e., online versus face-to-face) and actual courses being offered, student enrollment still remained stable.

Student retention for the program could be attributed to many factors, but in response to the multiple changes taking place, faculty attempted to honor agreements from prior faculty advisors and administrators while still meeting new program requirements. Many of the actions by faculty effectively built relationships with students in alignment with Tinto (2006), Golde (2000, 2005) and Thomas (2002). Additionally, faculty revised documents, materials, and assessments to match the new program requirements. This was particularly necessary for those students who sought to resolve advising concerns by using program documents rather than seeking the support of their advisor(s). One challenge continually faced by some students was the push to come to campus for advising because of their daytime roles as public school teachers and afternoon and evening family and coursework commitments. For this set of students, retention may have depended on “their own

individual resourcefulness and determination" (Moriarty et al., 2009, p. 374) as they interpreted the available information rather than using personal connections with faculty as an initial step in resolving concerns. Updating materials additionally provided stability in moving forward which is essential in developing increased student confidence and in allowing students to focus on scholarly activity rather than uncertain procedural matters. Faculty actions, (i.e., honoring previous agreements, revising program materials, assessments, and documents) made in efforts to establish effective relationships with students, could have contributed to the overall 83% average retention rate for newly admitted students (Table 1) and the overall 77% average for graduate program retention (Table 3).

Finally, a less immediate but relevant visible program component that may have affected retention was the change in assessment practices. The volume of assessment-related changes across a short time span additionally may have limited faculty availability for mentorship and engagement in new research projects, which may have also affected retention (Tinto, 2006). The assessment changes that took place had an effect on the established expectations for students and may have affected overall retention. Between Fall 2014 and Fall 2017 multiple changes in college and program assessment occurred. The staff member responsible for data collection related to assessment for the college changed three times, which required three sets of procedural changes, some of which affected uploading requirements for MA students pursuing licensure. In addition, over the academic year of Fall 2014 to Spring 2015 the university implemented a new writing-to-learn departmental expectation and data collection goal as part of university Higher Education Learning Commission (HLC) assessment, which affected some components of course content. This change affected how students were scored as writers in special education coursework because a detailed rubric was now used to evaluate written assignments by students. The rubric may not have been in alignment with what students had previously experienced in producing written work in the department. Although this change may have been subtle, a shift in student expectations was present and may have had an effect on retention. This change may have compromised the fit between the student and the institution in that a new focus on student writing did not previously exist and could have had an impact on retention (Berger & Braxton, 1998; Tinto, 2006). Much of the development for the writing assessments took place during the Spring 2015 semester; therefore, students entering in the Fall 2015 semester experienced the greatest impact from the writing assessment initiative. Yet, as noted in Table 1, the retention rate for newly admitted students in Fall 2015 remained at 92%. This could suggest that while the impact of the writing assessment was great for faculty who worked to reformat assignments and develop the assessment rubric, this specific change may have had little-to-no effect on student retention.

In an additional assessment change, the regional accrediting body changed from National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) to Council for the Accreditation of Educator Preparation (CAEP), requiring new procedures and content for data collection and reporting for

accreditation review and resulting in changed evaluation documents for licensure students. Further, the state department of public education redesigned its system for evaluating teacher education programs while at the same time implementing these changes in reviewing college programs. Students may or may not have had knowledge of these changes as they occurred; however, data collection standards changed for faculty and become more rigorous as evidenced in data in Tables 2-5 beginning in Fall 2015. This change may have been difficult for faculty, but also fortuitous as we are now able to more closely examine trends among students enrolled throughout special education strands. Because faculty can consider student data more closely, mentoring, advisement, and the overall student experience can be positively affected to increase student retention (Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2002; Vaquera, 2007). As noted in Table 1, there was an upward trend for overall student retention beginning for students newly admitted in Spring 2015 and continuing into Spring 2017.

Further assessment change occurred which was perhaps more critical to the retention of students. This change involved the movement of the state teacher assessment for licensure to a new, more rigorous, computer-based exam in Spring 2016. The state department of education raised the cut score for the new exam in the Spring 2017 semester. This was a troubling reality for students in that some graduate students were having difficulty passing the exam even before cut scores were raised. In addition to the few direct effects described, all of these changes (HLC, CAEP, state) may have resulted in program evaluations that would positively or negatively influence graduate student decisions to stay in their programs. As evidenced in Table 4, there were students (N=3) who exited the program due to poor performance and this could have been related to the new licensure exam cut scores.

Finally, and directly relevant to the graduate student experience of the program, in Spring 2016 the master's level comprehensive exam content and procedures were changed from an individually scheduled oral defense to a written multiple choice and essay assessment completed in a group setting. Students were now faced with a rigorous exam that could prevent graduation. As students transitioned into the new expectations for the exam, graduation rates experienced a slump (i.e., Spring 2016 N=5 and Fall 2016 N=3). Fortunately, with faculty support as well as students becoming accustomed to the new exam requirements and expectations, graduation rates improved (N=11) in the Spring 2017 semester (Table 3).

All of these programmatic changes caused a large shift in previously established institutional traditions and expectations for students, such that student retention was affected. Yet, student retention and graduation rates remained relatively stable over the three year period as adjustments were made.

Limitations

Limitations of this study were inherent in the current data collection systems for the program as data was provided as an archival dataset. For example, using this dataset, we were unable to determine if students were retained in specific strands or chose to change strands within the program. This was the result of the prior data collection methods that preserved the semester entry date but relocated the student's data to the new strand without additional comments. Therefore, new program data collection policies are needed to adequately collect data on student retention when a student changes from one strand to another strand in the same program. This is worthwhile because analyses of data for students who changed strands could assist in determining areas of programmatic appeal and concern that could later affect retention. Additionally, the data does not include students who were newly admitted or who were labeled non-completers if they were "admitted but did not attend" as evidenced by registration in courses. Understanding this very early program attrition would be useful in adjusting recruitment strategies to target greater enrollment for students who may be more likely to stay. Finally, the level of detail in the dataset available for the Fall 2014 and Spring 2015 semesters was more limited than the other data due to faculty, staff, and program changes, making it impossible to include these semesters for Tables 2-5.

Conclusion and Implications

We cannot apply a definitive causal relationship between the changes that occurred and the faculty responses; however, a trend in a fluctuating retention of students is evident in the data. Any number of additional reasons could have contributed to the decision for students to complete or exit their strands, including multiple matters that were not connected to faculty actions. These other matters may have been based on student actions or characteristics or other systemic considerations. Examples may include a student's individual level of motivation, academic skills, financial aid, family support, family responsibility, and time commitments.

In reviewing the archival dataset in conjunction with current research in the area of retention, we found that institutional change affecting student contact and involvement, student to faculty interactions, and the long-standing, established institutional traditions (Tinto, 2006; Thomas, 2002) appear to have affected student retention. Fortunately, the average overall retention and enrollment over the four-year period remained stable (excluding retention for students newly admitted in Spring 2015). Further, the retention literature describes the clear role of faculty in promoting retention (Tinto 2006) and we continue to consider this role in determining appropriate actions to support students while existing in a continually changing system.

References

Bair, C. R., Haworth, J. G., & Sandfort, M. (2004). Doctoral student learning and development: A shared responsibility. *NASPA Journal, 41*, 709-727. doi:10.2202/0027-6014.1395

Berger, J. B., & Braxton, J.M. (1998) Revising Tinto's interactionalist theory of student departure through theory elaboration: Examining the role of organizational attributes in the persistence process. *Research in Higher Education, 39*(2), 103-119. doi:0361-0365/98/0400-0103515.0040

Braxton, J. M. (2008). Toward a scholarship of practice centered on college student retention. *New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 115*, 101-112. doi:10.1002/tl

Bowen, W. G., & Rudenstine, N. L. (1992). In pursuit of the Ph.D. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Carpi, A., Ronan, D. M., Falconer, H. M., Boyd, H. H., & Lents, N.H. (2013). Development and implementation of targeted STEM retention strategies at a Hispanic-Serving institution. *Journal of Hispanic Higher Education, 12*(3), 280-299. doi:10.1177/1538192713486279

Cox, B. E., McIntosh, K. L., Terenzini, P. T., Reason, R. D., & Lutovsky Quaye, B. R. (2010). Pedagogical signals of faculty approachability: Factors shaping faculty-student interaction outside the classroom. *Research in Higher Education, 51*, 767-788. doi:10.1007/s11162-010-9178-z

Davidson, C., & Wilson, K. (2013). Reassessing Tinto's concepts of social and academic integration in student retention. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 15*(3), 329-346. doi:10.2190/CS.15.3.b

Gardner, S. K. (2008). Fitting the mold of graduate school: A qualitative study of socialization in doctoral education. *Innovative Higher Education*, 33, 125-138. doi:10.1007/s10755-008-9068-x

Gardner, S. K., & Barnes, B. J. (2007). Graduate student involvement: Socialization for the professional role. *Journal of College Student Development, 48*(4), 369-387. doi:10.2190/CS.15.3.b

Golde, C. M. (2000). Should I stay or should I go? Student descriptions of the doctoral attrition process. *The Review of Higher Education, 23*(2), 199-227.

Golde, C. M. (2005). The role of the department and discipline in doctoral student attrition: Lessons from four departments. *The Journal of Higher Education, 76*, 669-700. doi:10.1080/00221546.2005.11772304

Hurtado, S., & Carter, D.F. (1997). Effects of college transition and perceptions of the campus racial climate on Latino college students' sense of belonging. *Sociology of Education, 70*, 324-345. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/2673270

Merrill, B. (2015). Determined to stay or determined to leave? A tale of learner identities, biographies and adult students in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education, 40*, 1859–1871. doi:10.1080/03075079.2014.914918

Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Chauhan, B., Jones, G., Wenman, H., & Hussein, S. (2009). 'Hanging on a little thin line': Barriers to progression and retention in social work education. *Social Work Education, 28*, 363-379. doi:10.1080/02615470802109890

Office of Institutional Analysis of New Mexico State University. (2016). Quick facts: 2016-2017. Las Cruces, NM: Author.

Thomas, L. (2002). Student retention in higher education: The role of institutional habitus. *Journal of Education Policy, 17*(4), 423-442. doi:10.1080/02680930210140257

Thompson, M. N., Johnson-Jennings, M., & Nitzarim, R. S. (2013). Native American undergraduate students' persistence intentions: A psychosociocultural perspective. *Cultural Diversity and Ethnic Minority Psychology, 19*(2), 218 – 228. doi:10.1037/a0031546

Tinto, V. (2006). Research and practice of student retention: What next? *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 8*(1), 1-19. doi:10.2190/4YNU-4TMB-22DJ-AN4W

Vaquera, G. (2007). Testing theories of doctoral student persistence at a Hispanic Serving Institution. *Journal of College Student Retention: Research, Theory & Practice, 9*(3), 283-305. doi:10.2190/CS.9.3.c

About the Authors

Dr. Karen Potter is an Assistant Professor of Education at Upper Iowa University, Fayette, IA. She earned a Ph.D. from the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque, New Mexico, and was an Assistant Professor of Special Education at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, NM, until 2018. Her primary area of research is teacher education for the purpose of preparing general educators to work inclusively with students with complex support needs.

Dr. Randa Keeley is an Assistant Professor at Texas Woman's University with a research concentration in classroom interventions that promote inclusive learning environments for students with special educational needs and disabilities. Her research interests include the application of quantitative and qualitative measures to analyze the effects of inclusive practices, culturally responsive teaching, and co-teaching as they relate to the teacher and student. Dr. Keeley received her doctoral degree from New Mexico State University in 2014.

Dr. Breanna Sherrow is a Senior Learning Specialist within the Office of Graduate Medical Education at the University of Arizona for the College of Medicine. Prior to working with fellows, residents, and medical students, she served as an Assistant Professor of Special Education at New Mexico State University in Las Cruces, NM. Dr. Sherrow's research interests include help-seeking behaviors, academic learning strategies/methods, and academic coaching.

To top

Latest Employment Opportunities Posted on NASET

* **Intermediate School District 917 is seeking an exceptional leader to serve as Superintendent** - ISD 917 is one of four intermediate school districts in Minnesota created by the Minnesota Legislature in the late 1960s. The ISD 917 School Board was organized in March 1970, and is comprised of one board member from each of the nine member school districts. Currently, member districts include Bloomington, Burnsville-Eagan-Savage, Farmington Area, Hastings, Inver Grove Heights, Lakeville Area, Randolph, South St. Paul, and West St. Paul-Mendota Heights-Eagan Area. To learn more - Click here

* **[2021-2022] Middle School Science Teacher** - Through our commitment to rigorous academics, social-emotional learning, deep family and community engagement, and health and wellness, we create lifelong learners who are equipped to fulfill their vision of success in and out of the classroom. We dream big, as well, with an aggressive five-year plan to expand to serve 3,500 students across seven schools—growing our organization's impact and leveling the playing field for all children. To learn more - Click here

* **SETSS (Special Education Teacher Support Services) Teacher** - At Zeta, we pursue an unprecedented combination of high academic achievement and social-emotional development. We insist that every child receives a world-class education while fostering a love for learning. We are changing the public education landscape for all of New York City's children, and we are uncompromising in our mission. To learn more - Click here

* **Special Education Teacher** - $60,000/school year (185 days), summers off with year-round pay and year round appreciation. Special Education Teachers needed in Arizona (Phoenix and surrounding cities). Needs are in the self-contained and resource settings serving students with emotional disabilities (ED), Autism (A), Severe/Profound (S/P), and Intellectual Disabilities (ID). STARS is the largest school contract agency in AZ. You will be an employee and receive full benefits. To learn more - Click here

* **Special Education Director** - 15,000 student school district is looking for special education leader. 27J Schools is one of the fastest growing school districts in Colorado and located in the North Denver Metro Area - 30 minutes from Denver and Boulder and adjacent to Denver International Airport. The Director of Special Education is responsible for the leadership, supervision, guidance and support for all school support staff providing services to students with disabilities across special populations, including preschool. To learn more - Click here

* **Special Education Teachers - All areas** - We are looking for highly motivated and skilled talent to join our team at District of Columbia Public Schools (DCPS). We seek individuals who are passionate about transforming the DC school system and making a significant difference in the lives of public school students, parents, principals, teachers, and central office employees. To learn more - Click here

To top

Acknowledgements

Portions of this or previous month's ***NASET's Special Educator e-Journal*** were excerpted from:

- Center for Parent Information and Resources
- Committee on Education and the Workforce
- FirstGov.gov-The Official U.S. Government Web Portal
- Journal of the American Academy of Special Education Professionals (JAASEP)
- National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth
- National Institute of Health
- National Organization on Disability
- Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
- U.S. Department of Education
- U.S. Department of Education-The Achiever
- U.S. Department of Education-The Education Innovator
- U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- U.S. Department of Labor
- U.S. Food and Drug Administration
- U.S. Office of Special Education

The **National Association of Special Education Teachers** (NASET) thanks all of the above for the information provided for this or prior editions of the Special Educator e-Journal

To top