Purpose

The adaptive special education faculty conducted a focus group assessment of their program in June 2009. The purpose of the assessment was to gather information regarding the program from recent graduates and their supervisors. Specifically, the focus group assessment resulted in identification of program strengths and areas for improvement. In addition, focus group members identified current trends in special education.

Process

Program faculty identified five recent graduates (i.e., completed program within past five years) and their supervisors who agreed to participate. The graduates comprised one focus group, the supervisors the other. One member from each group agreed to serve as the recorder/compiler.

Each participant received a set of interview questions, directions, and contact information for the group recorder/compiler. (Please see both groups’ interview questions below.) They sent their responses to their recorder/compiler. The recorders/compilers synthesized this information into a report. They sent these reports to a program faculty member. The faculty member synthesized these into one report to share with program faculty and the department chairperson.

Graduates’ Focus Group Questions

1. Looking back at your graduate program, what courses and program experiences did you find most helpful and why?

2. Which courses and program experiences did you find least helpful and why?

3. If you could go back and change any aspect of your training, what would you want to do differently and why?

4. What trends and new practices are you seeing in your job that faculty need to be mindful or observant of as they prepare future adaptive special educators?

5. What additional recommendations do you have for the faculty to continue producing outstanding adaptive special educators?

Employers’ Focus Group Questions

1. What strengths do you see in the training and dispositions of our graduate?

2. What weaknesses do you see in the training and dispositions of our graduate?
3. What new and emerging trends do you see in the field that faculty need to be mindful or observant of as they prepare future adaptive special educators?

4. What recommendations do you have for training outstanding adaptive special educators in the future?

**Focus Group Members**

*Graduates’ Focus Group*

Trenton Giffin  
Vicki Icenhower  
Kendy Johnson  
Angela Lowe  
Katherine Reimer

*Supervisors’ Focus Group*

Luis Hinojosa, Principal  
Matt Jellison, Principal  
Rob Leis, Principal  
Elizabeth McCoy, SPED Director  
Mary Schilling, SPED Director

**Results**

*Graduates’ Focus Group*

1. Looking back at your graduate program, what courses and program experiences did you find most helpful and why?
   - Seminar in Behavior Management – many useful strategies (two people made this same basic comment, a third commented on the benefit of classes requiring development of behavior plans as this is relevant to her school’s implementation of MTSS)
   - Characteristics and collaboration/consultation classes – background working with students with various disabilities, staff members and parents
   - Strategies for Individuals with Mild/Moderate Disabilities – scenarios of classroom problems and ways to handle them
   - Seminar in Current Issues in Special Education – caused me to re-evaluate my philosophy of education
   - Classes that addressed reading disabilities and great interventions
   - Individual assessment class – relevant to my job (resource room teacher)

2. Which courses and program experiences did you find least helpful and why?
   - Collaboration/Consultation – not realistic and repetitive of undergraduate course (two responses)
• Individual Assessment – outdated assessments taught; graduate student taught most of the course; would have liked to learn how to administer, score, interpret results and use this information to formulate direct instruction (two responses)
• Analysis of Research – very little relevance to my job (two responses)
• Reading classes – worst experience in both undergraduate and graduate programs; graduate course took place during summer for a few days but the actual work was to be done over the fall semester; created a case study and turned it in; received an “A” but had absolutely no feedback on my work
• Characteristics of Students with Mild/Moderate Disabilities – repetitive of undergraduate course

3. If you could go back and change any aspect of your training, what would you want to do differently and why?
   • Have some face-to-face classes – Blackboard discussions do not replace live discussions & sometimes could start “quite a ruckus amongst the students in the class” (three responses)
   • Contact with professors – needs to be quicker primarily during summer classes
   • A new course addressing MTSS/RTI interventions
   • Nothing – online classes were great and worked with my job and home schedules

4. What trends and new practices are you seeing in your job that faculty need to be mindful or observant of as they prepare future adaptive special educators?
   • Include alternate state assessment content in course work
   • Prepare special educators to work with a greater variety of students with special needs (e.g., students with behavior disorders, students with more severe academic difficulties)
   • More training on types of interventions used for different content areas
   • More training in MTSS (RtI), e.g., a course with general and special educators together focusing on inclusion, differentiated instruction
   • Faculty convey to special educators that their jobs include nurturing the child as well as teaching academics

5. What additional recommendations do you have for the faculty to continue producing outstanding adaptive special educators?
   • Faculty – be more available for distance learning students and more helpful as advisors
   • Practicum – provide hands-on experience with students with all types of disabilities not just learning disabilities
   • Include information about medications in course work
   • Include more information about assistive/adaptive technology (e.g., Smart boards) in course work
• More emphasis on content area interventions (e.g., reading, written language, and mathematics)
• Continue to focus on current trends from the field

*Supervisors’ Focus Group*

1. What strengths do you see in the training and dispositions of our graduate?
   • Strength of knowledge about effective best practices,
   • Knowledge of scientifically research based strategies
   • Knowledge of learning styles and learning rates
   • Knowledge of how to create a classroom learning environment that establishes a culture for learning
   • Knowledge of how to manage student behaviors
   • Communication skills
   • Level of professionalism
   • Organization of class and IEPs
   • Knowledge of content areas

2. What weaknesses do you see in the training and dispositions of our graduate?
   • Ability to interpret test data from individualized assessments including item analysis
   • Ability to write IEPs with a minimum of administrative supervision
   • Knowledge of Functional Behavior Assessments
   • Knowledge of Positive Behavior Supports
   • Management skills in working with para-educators and regular education teachers
   • Effective research-based strategies for teaching reading and math

3. What new and emerging trends do you see in the field that faculty need to be mindful or observant of as they prepare future adaptive special educators?
   • MTSS
   • Positive Behavior Supports
   • Training of working with students on the autism spectrum
   • Math, effective programs to teach students with disabilities math

4. What recommendations do you have for training outstanding adaptive special educators in the future?
   • Input from Directors of Special Education from around the state
   • On site observations
   • More training on effective math and reading strategies
Appendix

The actual recorder/compiler reports for the Graduates’ and Supervisors’ Focus Groups follow.

Graduates’ Focus Group Responses:

1. **Looking back on your graduate program, what courses and program experiences did you find most helpful and why?**
   - Characteristics classes and Collaboration/Consultation because they best provided background in working with students with various disabilities and preparing to work with staff members and parents.
   - SD 702 Strategies for Individuals with Mild/Moderate Disabilities because it provided scenarios of possible classroom problems and possible ways to handle those problems. I also found the Seminar in Behavior Management helpful as I work in a behavioral room. This course provided many useful strategies.
   - Classes dealing with behavior assessment and behavior management and interventions proved to be most helpful in providing guidance and resources for my current position.
   - I especially enjoyed classes that addressed reading disabilities and gave great interventions to incorporate in the classroom. I also benefited from courses requiring me to develop behavior plans especially as I am currently working at a school beginning the MTSS/RTI process.
   - I believe the Seminar for current issues in Special Education to be a good experience. Investigating issues, journals, and reflecting on practices and what the research says helped me to re-evaluate my philosophy and pedagogical practices. I also found the course taught by Jim Persinger (Individual Assessment?) to be relevant to the job expectations of a resource teacher.

2. **Which courses and program experiences did you find least helpful and why?**
   - Consultation/Collaboration because this is not real-life. While I work with a great bunch of educators, they like to control and have their own way of doing things. Schedules do not allow for time to collaborate which is frustrating for both special Ed and regular Ed teachers.
   - Consultation/Collaboration and Characteristics of Students with Mild/Moderate Disabilities were least helpful. I say this as the information was simply a repeat of the undergraduate classes. Most everything was repetitive and I felt very little new knowledge was gained by taking these classes.
   - PY 812 Individual Assessment did the least for me. The assessment tools taught were outdated and a grad assistant taught most of the class.
   - The class on Individual Assessment would have been better had I been able to administered, score, and learn to take the data to formulate direct instruction. I also do not feel I gained from the Analysis of Research as it is not practical to what I use or do in my classroom.
   - Analysis of Research has had the least impact on my responsibilities as a resource teacher. Many districts have a selection process in place for materials and assessment tools and we are told what is to be used. However, the worst class experience for both my
undergraduate and graduate programs were my reading classes. The graduate course took place during the summer for a few days but the actual work was to be done over the fall semester. Basically we were told to take some materials, perform a case study, and turn it in. I received an “A” but had absolutely no feedback on my work.

3. If you could go back and change any aspect of your training, what would you want to do differently and why?
-I would have liked to have taken a few of my classes on campus or over a video monitor so that when there were questions they could be answered quickly. Also, with the discussion board it was great to hear what everyone thought on certain subject but it was everyone’s opinion and sometimes it could start quite a ruckus amongst the students in the class. I think the only thing that I would change about my training was the ability to contact the professors more quickly. I understand they have other classes as well, but most of my problems were in the classes I took in the summer.
-I wouldn’t do anything differently. The online classes were great and worked with my job and home schedules albeit some peer interaction was sacrificed.
-I would have liked to have had face-to-face classes in the areas of behaviors. Blackboard discussions do not replace a live discussion.
-I would like to see a class that emphasizes MTSS/RTI interventions. The SIT (Student Intervention Team) is a source of frustrations at our school because there is a lack of training and implementing the process correctly. It would be neat if I could go to a meeting with a list of interventions that team members could design a plan – many regular education teachers are lost in this process as well.
-While I understand and appreciate the online course model, I would have opted to take some courses on the campus had that choice been available. Discussion boards cannot replace the interaction of instructor and students in a classroom setting.

4. What trends and new practices are you seeing to your job that faculty need to be mindful or observant of as they prepare future adaptive special educators?
-The one thing I think that could really help is for the professors to teach the new teachers how to do alternate state assessments. This was something that I had never had to do before and I had no idea what I was doing. I eventually got them figured out, but they took a lot of time because I was learning on the go. Also, there seems to be more kids being “labeled” as some sort of special education problem so the teachers need to be prepared for anything. Our district is lucky that we have a room for the students with behavioral problems but a lot of districts don’t and the teachers need to be prepared on how to cope with those students in their room as well as the other students that have more academic difficulties.
-I think it is important for the faculty to accurately convey to special educators, especially new teachers, that nurturing and a certain amount of “parenting” are requirements of our jobs as special educators. It took me a very emotionally draining year before I could
rationalize letting the academics “slide” for a period of time until a student could work through and deal with a very emotionally abusive situation at home with a mother who was a meth addict. How incorrect I was in thinking that academics are the most important thing at all times.

In my school district teachers don’t like to refer because they feel they have already done everything they can and they want to know if a student has a disability now. They don’t want to wait another 9 weeks to see if a kid can be tested. I realize this is more of a regular education problem than a special education one, but if we have the information on how to incorporate this (RTI) effectively it might make things go smoother for the whole district.

- I wish I had more training in types of interventions used for various subject areas. My school uses DIBELS, WIAT, WWJ3 and progress monitor student who score below the 50th percentile.
- With NCLB we should be seeing more inclusionary practices but this seems to be an area of struggle for small and large school communities. I would like to see some type of course that meshes regular educators and special educators in groups or partnerships that addresses differentiated instructional practices and what that looks like in a regular education setting.

5. What additional recommendations do you have for the faculty to continue producing outstanding adaptive special educators?
- The only real recommendation that I have for the faculty is to be more available for the distance learning students and to be more helpful as an advisor.
- I would require hands-on interaction with students with all types of disabilities. My student teaching prepared me to work with students with learning disabilities but not for the students that walked through my classroom door during my first year of teaching. By being better prepared and having experiences with various types of disabilities, we can be prepared to help our students be as successful as they can be.
- With the growing rate of students on medication, it would have been nice to have some background in this area. Additionally, with the trend continuing toward technology and the devices used in a classroom (Smart boards, etc) a course in using technology and programs would also be beneficial.
- I believe ESU keeps up with current trends and information so I would emphasize a continuation of keeping current with what is happening in the “trenches”.
- I would like to see the program have certification emphasis areas, specifically in reading, written language and math as these are the areas of weakness most often targeted for special education direct instruction. A concentration of adaptive does not really offer any practical application while adaptive math and so forth would be met with at least a perceived greater benefit to educational communities.

Employers’ Focus Group Responses:

1. What strengths do you see in the training and disposition of our graduate?
   - Strength of knowledge about effective best practices,
   - Knowledge of scientifically research based strategies
2. What weaknesses do you see in the training a dispositions of our graduate?
   - Ability to interpret test data from individualized assessments including item analysis
   - Ability to write IEPs with a minimum of administrative supervision
   - Knowledge of Functional Behavior Assessments
   - Knowledge of Positive Behavior Supports
   - Management skills in working with para-educators and regular education teachers
   - Effective research-based strategies for teaching reading and math

3. What new and emerging trends do you see in the field that faculty need to be mindful or observant of as they prepare future adaptive special educators?
   - MTSS
   - Positive Behavior Supports
   - Training of working with students on the autism spectrum
   - Math, effective programs to teach students with disabilities math

4. What recommendations do you have for training outstanding adaptive special educators in the future?
   - Input from Directors of Special Education from around the state
   - On site observations
   - More training on effective math and reading strategies