

Doctoral Program Completers from the Exceptional Student Education Program at FAU: Who Are They and What Are They Doing?

The FAU doctoral program in Exceptional Student Education (ESE) started with two students in 1987 as a joint program with Florida International University. Over the next decade, the program separated from the dual university designation, developed a coherent curricular focus, and graduated a small number of strong leaders in the field. With a critical mass of program completers, the Department conducted the first program review in 2012, initiating an exit survey for graduating students and an alumni survey for previous program completers. As a result of the alumni survey, we were able to collect both demographic and performance data which demonstrates FAU's ability to prepare and graduate highly effective special education leaders.

Alumni Demographics

At the time of the administration of the doctoral alumni survey, 25 students had completed the ESE doctoral degree at FAU. We sent surveys to 24 of these completers and received results from 23 (96% response rate). One alum did not complete the survey, and one completer died prior to the survey. Information that depended on respondents completing the survey is thus based on an N = 23; information that could be gathered from other sources is based on N = 25.

Our completers' demographics show a respectable amount of diversity, particularly compared to national norms (Robb, Smith & Montrosse, 2010): 12% (3 of 25) are males; 12% (3 of 25) are ethnic or racial minorities; and 26% (6 of 23; this data was not available for two of our 25 completers) speak at least one language other than English. *Among the 8 graduates in the*

last 5 years, 13% (1 of 8) are male; 25% (2 of 8) are ethnic or racial minorities; and 25% (2 of 8) speak at least one language other than English.

Post-Doctoral Employment

When examining employment after graduation from the doctoral program, 74% (17 of 23) of our completers are employed in full or part time positions in higher education. This includes roles as professor and department chair; assistant, associate or senior professor; program coordinator, instructor/clinical supervisor; and adjunct professor. All of these alumni (100%) reported they were satisfied or very satisfied with their FAU doctoral preparation for these IHE positions. *Among the 8 graduates in the last 5 years*, 75% (6 of 8) of our completers are employed in full time positions in higher education; the remaining two hold part time IHE positions. Six of our grads were not in higher education, but were employed in positions in the K-12 public school system (i.e., three teachers, one ESE coordinator, one school principal, and one chief academic officer). In addition, one respondent is employed as editor for a publishing company. All of these graduates (100%) also reported they were very satisfied or satisfied with their FAU doctoral preparation for these positions.

A measure of doctoral program effectiveness for the IHE teacher educators can be inferred from their satisfaction with their interactions during preservice and inservice activities. The graduates employed in IHE roles reported being satisfied or very satisfied with their preparation at FAU to *supervise preservice and inservice teachers*. Another indicator of our program effectiveness is the continued instructional interaction of our doctoral graduates with students with disabilities. FAU alumni reported that they continued to teach students with disabilities; 77% (17 of 22) identified that they continued to engage with students with disabilities in their current jobs; 53% (9 of 17) reported that they taught or had other instructional

interactions with 1-5 students with disabilities a year; 12% (2 of 17) reported 6-10 students per year. Finally, assuming a strong link exists between a professional's effectiveness and one's willingness to mentor others, the completers' data suggest another measure of effectiveness. Of the 23 completers, 57% (13 of 23) reported that they mentored K-12 educators, and 22% (5 of 23) mentored other IHE faculty. The graduates provided other examples of mentoring experience including mentoring families, parents, students with disabilities, and other professionals.

Contributions to the Field

Our alumni survey also provides evidence that FAU doctoral graduates make impressive professional accomplishments after graduation. This includes continuing to conduct research (65%; 15 of 23); publishing journal articles (70%; 16 of 23); presenting at conferences (74%; 17 of 23); serving on editorial boards as journal reviewers, as grant reviewers (57%; 13 of 23), and as an officer in professional organizations (40%; 9 of 23). Of those who publish in journals, four published between 1-5 articles, five published between 6-10 articles, and four completers published between 11-30 articles. Our alumni published in a variety of journals, including: *Teaching Exceptional Children; Learning Disabilities Quarterly; Middle School Journal; Theory into Practice; Psychology in the Schools; Journal of Teacher Education; Focus on Autism and other Developmental Disabilities; Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities; Multicultural Education; Teacher Education and Special Education; Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, and elsewhere. Additionally, six doctoral alumni (26%) published books and nine (39%) published book chapters. Our alumni also have successfully written grants; 52% (12 of 23) secured grant funding totaling approximately \$3,785,000. In the last five years, eight of our graduates have engaged in a great deal of scholarship. These most recent completers (a) published 38 journal articles, 8 chapters, and 2

books; (b) delivered over 70 national and international presentations and 98 state and local presentations; (c) secured 5 external grants; and (d) reviewed for 8 journals as consulting editors or reviewers. These recent graduates also earned eight awards for their service or research, including a Distinguished Service Award from *Exceptional Parent*, an Outstanding College of Education Advisor Award, their University President's Citation for Exceptional Service, and an Outstanding Professional Educator Award.

Their Experiences During the Program

In response to the question of time to completion, we are again able to provide results for all 25 alumni at the time of this survey. The median length of time to complete the degree of this pool was 5 years. Individual completion times ranged from 3-17 years. We also were able to establish the length of time to graduate for *the eight graduates in the last five years*. The median length of time to completion for these graduates was also 5 years, and their individual completion times ranged from 4-17 years. It was significant that the 6 students who had the shortest times to completion (4 years or less) obtained financial support for full time study, or were employed at FAU during their studies. The FAU doctoral completers compare favorable to the recommendations by Tyler, Montrosse and Smith (2012).

Finally, we examined the doctoral completers' reactions to their (a) coursework preparation, (b) interactions with faculty advisors and committees, and (c) dissertation experience. When asked about the content of their programs, 96% of the ESE graduates reported being very satisfied or satisfied with the knowledge they gained. Ninety-one percent reported being very satisfied or satisfied with their coursework. When asked about their interactions with faculty, 87% of respondents strongly agreed or agreed that DESE faculty members were approachable and helpful. Regarding faculty members and advising committee members, 86%

of respondents reported they were very satisfied or satisfied with faculty support, and 83% reported they were very satisfied or satisfied with the support they received from their advising committee. The input regarding help provided by their dissertation committee during proposal development was generally positive. Seventy-eight percent strongly agreed or agreed that the dissertation committee was helpful, 13% somewhat agreed, 9% disagreed or strongly disagreed. When asked about the committee's awareness of their progress and issues related to their study during the conduct of their research, 87% reported their committee was aware of their research progress and issues. Two respondents somewhat agreed there was awareness, and one respondent disagreed with the statement that the committee was aware. Eighty-two percent of the DESE doctoral alumni strongly agreed or agreed they were able to access the substantive and methodological expertise needed to design and conduct a meaningful dissertation. Eighty-seven percent strongly agreed or agreed that they received adequate training and experience with the substantive and research issues related to their dissertation topic prior to actually conducting the study and 83% reported being able to access this expertise during the write-up and presentation of the final dissertation report.

Summary

In summary, our data show that FAU doctoral program completers, including completers in the last 5 years, reflect a respectable degree of diversity. They are employed in both higher and public education positions for which they were well prepared, continue to participate in high levels of professional activities, and report multiple measures of their effectiveness. This first assessment of ESE doctoral program completers overwhelmingly reported satisfaction with their doctoral preparation at FAU.