



2023 Academic Program Review External Review Report

College of Education Department of Special Education Academic Program Review January 30-31, 2023

Review Team Members:

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On January 30-31, 2023, the review team, comprised of Dr. Diane Ryndak, Dr. Jonte' Taylor, and Dr. Mohammad Ilyas, reviewed FAU's Department of Special Education, and the degree programs it offers. A self-study report and associated documentation were provided for the department and the programs under review.

A detailed itinerary was also provided. During the site visit the review team met or communicated with:

- Dr. Russell Ivy, Vice Provost for Academic Affairs
- Ms. Debra Szabo, Director of Assessment, Accreditation, and Articulation
- (Provost's office)
- Dr. Dan Flynn, Vice President for Research
- Dr. Steve Silverman, Dean, College of Education
- Dr. Paul Peluso, Senior Associate Dean, College of Education
- Dr. Dan Meeroff, Interim Dean, Undergraduate Studies
- Dr. William Kelies, Interim Dean, Graduate College
- Dr. Rangasamy Ramasamy, Interim Chair, Department of Special Education
- Department faculty
- Adjunct faculty, affiliate faculty, and visiting instructors
- ACI instructors
- CARD staff members
- Graduate students
- Undergraduate students

The findings in this report are based on the review of the self-study document, the information

shared by the faculty, staff, students, and administrators during meetings on January 30-31, 2023.

The Department of Special Education is one of the six departments in the College of Education. Its mission (as stated in the self-study report) is to provide leadership at local, state, national, and international level in the areas of teaching, research, and service. The department promotes research-based practices that address the needs of people with disabilities, their families, and associated organizations in a rapidly changing society. In this process, the department brings together several entities including faculty, students, professionals, community members, and associated organizations together, thus improving the quality of education.

The department offers Bachelor's degrees in Exceptional Student Education, and Early Care and Education), Master's degree (M.Ed.) in Exceptional Student Education, and Doctoral degree (Ph.D.) in Special Education. The programs are regularly reviewed by internal as well as external bodies. The curriculum for undergraduate degree programs includes internships, practicum, study abroad, and field experiences. The undergraduate courses offered by the department contribute to the institutional IFP and elective courses. The licensure rates and the placement rates of graduates from the department have been consistently 100% or very close to it. The curriculum for graduate programs also includes internships, practicum, study abroad, and field experiences. The strengths of the graduate programs include diversity of concentration areas, and preparedness of graduate students to teach at undergraduate level, linking theory and practice. The most visible strength of the department is passion among the faculty and staff to serve the students and to see the department thrive. The department lost its long-term leader and its strongest advocate, a few years ago. In addition, the department also lost a few faculty members due to various reasons including retirement. A strong commitment of the remaining faculty members and staff, to continue serving the students and the community, has kept the department afloat. The strongest manifestation of faculty/staff commitment is when they keep departmental needs and students' needs ahead of their personal needs. That is phenomenal.

The collective efforts of the departmental faculty/staff have also successfully steered the department through the COVID pandemic, and the department adapted to the new instructional environment to serve its students. The department has also started taking initiatives to address its enrollment. One such initiative is to approach Palm Beach County school district (11th largest school district in the nation) to address the educational needs of working professionals and to work with paraprofessionals. This will be a win-win situation for all parties involved. This initiative can then be expanded to Broward County school district. Some of the program offerings will be online, clearly adapting to the emerging needs of the communities within the service region of the institution. Faculty of the departmental has also been successful in attracting research grants to improve the educational environment for students with special needs. Two other strengths of the department are: Center for Autism and Related Disabilities (CARD), and Academy for Community Inclusion (ACI). Both CARD and ACI provide

wonderful service and are thriving primarily due to the commitment and dedication of the individuals associated with these entities.

In summary of this report's recommendations and action plans (all of which are described in detail in later sections of this document), the reviewers recognize the progress and promise of the FAU DSE program as a reflection of the previous comprehensive report and in the mission of the strategic plan and of the university writ large and the teaching needs of the region. The passion and expertise of the faculty and staff of the DSE and its related programs are an absolute strength of the department. Tensions exist in continued capacity due to the limits of current faculty and extended workloads and responsibilities. In an effort to relieve these tensions, it is suggested that additional tenure-track faculty are considered.

Part 1: Overview

A. Degree Programs by Level

Since the last review and report (completed 2016) The Department of Special Education (DSE) has not only progressed in implementing the suggestions presented by the previous review team, DSE has had to adjust to constantly shifting realities from external realities. In response to internal and external factors related to the field of special education, DSE has made changes to their degree programs based on (a) the loss of faculty, (b) local, state, and national special education teaching shortages, (c) shifting state political realities, (d) new university strategic plan and goals, and (e) a global pandemic. Any one of these factors would require considerable changes in how pre-service special educators are taught at any degree level. The combination of these factors has led to multiple changes in degree offerings at both the graduate and undergraduate levels in Exceptional Student Education (ESE).

Bachelor's (BA):

Over the past few years, DSE has made a number of changes to their program to meet the diverse needs of their students and to support the local and state need for special educators. There has been a needed adjustment and readjustment in what and how courses are offered. Specifically, ESE offers Bachelor's degrees in ESE as Bachelors in Exceptional Student Education or in Early Care and Education (as a joint departmental offering). DSE offers courses both as in-person meetings and online meeting conventions.

It should be noted that per the FAU website and DSE page:

Upon completion of the program, students will be eligible to apply for a Florida teaching certificate in Exceptional Student Education (ESE) with an Endorsement in Teaching English as a Second language (TESOL). ESE certification applies to grades K-12. Individuals certified in

ESE and who have teaching certification in either elementary, middle grades, or secondary education, are eligible to teach in classrooms for students with learning disabilities, intellectual disability, emotional/behavioral disorders, and physical impairments, as well as in general education classes. Additionally, the Early Childhood Education Bachelor's is a joint program focused specifically on preparing future teachers to work in preschool and early elementary settings.

Given the mission of the department, college, and university, and the needs of the local and state school systems, the DSE is poised to meet these needs as it relates to the special education teaching shortage through their initial certification programs.

Master's (MA):

DSE has also adjusted the graduate programs, particularly their Master's degree, due to the need for change based on internal and external factors. As reported by the faculty, department head, and dean, the Master's program is going completely online. Along with a shift in delivery format, DSE has consolidated program tracks to focus on four areas of concentration (Autism, Early Childhood, Applied Behavior Analysis, and Intervention Specialist). By streamlining the options (which originally totaled approximately 7-8), DSE should be able to better meet the needs of the state and region. The scope and sequence of courses for this degree option are appropriate for the mission of the program and the needs of the field.

It should be noted that per the FAU website and DSE page:

This Master's degree program does not lead to initial teacher certification; students may work with their advisor to devise a plan to obtain initial teacher certification.

B. Summary of Visit

Overall, the review team was quite impressed with the work that the DSE has accomplished since the last review in 2016. The dedication, knowledge, and passion that the faculty has in the field of special education and more specifically for FAU and the department is beyond admirable. The review team was equally impressed with the amount of improvements that have occurred within the DSE at both the undergraduate and graduate levels. Faculty appear to be dedicated to program improvement, which is further complicated by the current zeitgeist of Florida education as a political area. Further, the faculty have shown an impressive amount of flexibility in response to both internal and external factors. Internally, the loss of key faculty without replacement has caused evident strain in faculty well-being, program maintenance, or program advancement. Externally, adjusting to the needs of students based on a global pandemic has been first-rate.

While the review team recognizes a plethora of positive changes, we also note a number of tensions and anxiety throughout the department and areas for growth and advances for the program. Broadly, the weaknesses fall into one broad category: capacity.

See the Findings section for detailed description of strengths and weaknesses.

C. Major changes since the last program review

Since the previous program review from 2016, the DSE has made some targeted changes to advance the program as a whole and degree offerings specifically. Notable changes at the undergraduate and graduate degree levels should provide support for the special education program to increase revenue generation and research output.

Undergraduate Program Changes

Developing and implementing the undergraduate student learning objectives based on the guidance from the previous report (2016) and on the framing from Florida Department of Education is both appropriate and should provide feedback on the success of the program tracks for Bachelor degree students. Of particular note, the addition of a degree option for current special education paraprofessionals who are in Florida classrooms and already have Associate degrees and emergency licensed teachers are especially innovative and can potentially provide a needed service as well as contribute to stemming the pervasive special education teaching shortage locally and throughout the state.

Graduate Program Changes

Shifting from an Ed.D. program to a Ph.D. program, recalibrating the Master's degree program to an online structure, and streamlining the Master's degree focus area offerings are specific changes from the previous review. The changes to the Master's program provides an opportunity to increase the number and variety of students enrolled and thus generate increased departmental revenue. The changes to the doctoral program degree offering support the broader goals of FAU by potentially increasing research output which contributes to moving FAU to Research 1 status.

Part 2: Findings

A. Strengths

As previously noted, major strengths of the DSE are the dedication, expertise, and work ethics of the faculty. As the program has experienced personnel drain due to retirements, university changes, and the unexpected passing away of faculty, the remaining faculty have proven to be flexible in attempts to keep the program not only viable but progressing. The passion that the

faculty have for the profession of special education, for advancing the DSE, and for improving FAU as a whole was expressed in interviews with administrative personnel, faculty, staff, and students. Students provided positive assessments of the faculty, particularly in their personal interactions. DSE is well positioned with their other programs (CARD and ACI) to support individuals with disabilities from the surrounding community, which provides a well-received service and enhances the stature of the department and university writ large. The programmatic changes that have occurred in the last 6 years have supported the continuous improvement of the DSE.

An additional strength has been the development, implementation, and accomplishment of the Student Learning Outcomes (SLO) Assessments. Based on the self-study report the development of the SLOs appear appropriate and valid for the purposes of the programs and degree options. The implementation of the SLOs also appears appropriate as they are tied to specific courses that align with the outcomes. Lastly, based on the self-study report and as reported by student interviews, the students are ultimately accomplishing the goals.

B. Weaknesses

The main weakness identified by the review team is program capacity. This weakness may stifle the ability of the department to grow and improve. There has been a persistent lack of faculty due to various forms of attrition. The need for additional faculty can be seen in the level of responsibilities that have been taken on by each member of the current faculty. If the effects from the changes that have already been enacted occur (i.e., increases in students entering the DSE degree programs), the tensions that already exist in course coverage will be exacerbated. Beyond the courses offered, the desire to increase research production is hampered by the level of advising, teaching, and service obligations that are occurring. The weakness in capacity can also be heard in the opinions of the undergraduate students who expressed that they enjoy their classes but would prefer them be in-person opposed to online. Their observation is directly related to the capacity of the program to offer in-person classes. Issues related to program capacity can also be seen in the DSE's joint degree program in early childhood education. While it is a successful offering, how it is attributed to the DSE is unclear. This may be problematic in an era of tightening budgets and responsibilities. The program capacity issue is also evident when reviewing the outreach programs of ACI and CARD. The need for faculty affects the staff of the ACI and CARD as they are now also responsible for additional course coverage as well as program duties.

An additional weakness considered by the review team is related to the SLOs. During the interview process, the students reported problems with classes and offerings throughout their respective programs. They report the cancellation or delayed offerings of courses which alters graduation schedules or results in unnecessary and irrelevant courses being taken. As this relates

to SLOs, the issues with faculty and staff capacity impacts the efficiency of the program and accomplishing the SLOs in a timely manner.

C. Recommendations

- 1) Additional 4-5 tenure track faculty across the next 3 years to support the number of programs required in the field of special education
- 2) Reconsider moving the UG program to be an online format for traditional students
- 3) investigate the expansion of cohorts of paraprofessionals (UG) and emergency certified teachers (Masters) for online courses
- 4) For BECE, figure out how student credit hours and faculty teaching loads can be allocated across colleges and departments to support the continuation of unified collaborative program
- 5) For CARD and ACI faculty, do not replace tenure track faculty lines in personnel preparation programs; facilitate their engagement in department activities (equity – find ways to empower faculty in outreach programs within the department activity)
- 6) Investigate the possibility of collaboration with other colleges at FAU for both internal and external funding opportunities and research directly tied to the Pillars (IBRAIN?) and Platforms, or future university strategic plans

Questions from the department

- 1) *The new university policy of a minimum of 8 students in graduate courses and 19 students in undergraduate courses may impede students' progression to graduation by cancellation of critical courses. What approaches can be used to maximize resources in our programs to meet this enrollment criterion while graduate student support has limited the admission of students?*
 - a) Examples of approaches to meet critical shortage: Several approaches have been used to try to alleviate this critical shortage of special education teachers. These include: (a) alternate teacher certification programs delivered by school districts; (b) support for paraprofessionals employed to work with students who have disabilities to become certified teachers; and (c) military veterans with an associate degree to become certified teachers.

- b) Accomplishments: The tenure-track faculty already have streamlined programs (see 2c below) and begun to collaborate with regional school districts to identify cohorts of their employees that have a need to complete a certification program. These cohorts include paraprofessionals and emergency licensed teachers currently employed by the districts.
 - c) Recommendations: To make this strategy work and result in increased enrollment, additional sections of courses will be needed to match the schedules and needs of district employees. This will, however, require tenure-track faculty committed to develop, coordinate, and maintain intense communication with each district in order to meet each district's unique needs. This cannot be accomplished with adjunct or non-tenure track faculty whose main responsibilities are for other efforts (e.g., CARD, ACI). The level of coordination and collaboration required extends far beyond teaching courses; thus, additional tenure-track faculty focused on these initiatives are required.
- 2) *Given the National Shortage of Teachers, especially in Special Education, and the fact that we are emerging from the pandemic (Covid-19), how should the Department of Special Education position its degree offerings to address these issues and increase enrollment?*
- a) National and state critical shortage of special education teachers: For over 20 years the field of special education has been documenting the critical shortage of special education teachers nationally due to practicing teachers reaching retirement age, university special education faculty reaching retirement age, low enrollments in teacher preparation programs (i.e., for both preservice teachers and currently employed teachers), and the deprofessionalization of the teaching field. This documentation has led to numerous predictions about devastating impact on teacher preparation programs at the universities, school districts seeking to hire special education teachers, and outcomes of services provided for students with disabilities. These predictions are evident in the FAU Department of Special Education.
 - b) Accomplishments: The department tenure track faculty have shifted the Masters' program to online formats (i.e., both synchronous and asynchronous). The faculty currently are working on converting the undergraduate programs to online formats. Continuing these efforts will make courses accessible to currently employed pre-service teachers. However, relying solely on online formats will not meet the needs of traditional undergraduate programs, as the Program Review Team heard from multiple people engaged in this review process. In particular,

the undergraduate students were very clear that they and their parents were not supportive of enrolling in undergraduate courses that were offered on-line.

- c) Other faculty: Staff from CARD and the ACI program, as well as a cadre of adjunct and visiting faculty, assist the department in meeting the needs of their undergraduate, Masters, and doctoral students. In addition, these faculty members are the source of the majority of the research disseminated by the department. While these faculty members teach courses, are members of doctoral committees, and conduct research and other scholarly activities, they are neither full-time tenure-track faculty, nor voting members of the faculty. Currently, therefore, the department relies on contributions of non-voting, non-tenure track faculty in programs that are either housed in or collaborate with the department (i.e., CARD, ACI program). While their efforts are admirable, they cannot supplant or replace the roles required of tenure-track faculty in any department.
 - d) Recommendations: Increase the number of tenure-track faculty to meet the needs of both traditional undergraduate students and non-traditional pre-service teachers at the undergraduate and graduate levels already employed by regional districts.
- 3) *At present the Department of Special Education has seven faculty members. What steps should the department take to address the shortage issue (i.e., critical shortage of special education teachers in the region, state, and country) and recruitment issue (i.e., recruitment of undergraduates, Master's program students, doctoral scholars) in an environment of shrinking resources?*
- a) Special education is an essential component of any college of education and any university system. It is the component designed to meet the needs of children with disabilities and their families, from birth through death. At FAU special education is addressed in the BECE program, the K-12 special education teacher preparation programs, the ACI program, and CARD. Education cannot stand alone; rather, it must include special education in order to meet the needs of all students in society. Furthermore, having a department of special education has been known to be a key factor in being competitive for external funding (e.g., Office of Special Education Programs; Institute for Education Science) and the production of rigorous research and other scholarly activities (e.g., articles in peer reviewed journals, textbook development, national and international presentations, podcasts) that improve outcomes for students.
 - b) Faculty lines: Historically the department had 17 faculty members with expertise across numerous specialty areas in special education (e.g., early childhood; mild

disabilities; autism; severe disabilities; applied behavior analysis; transition). At that point the department ran several vibrant high-quality programs at the undergraduate, Masters, and doctoral levels. In addition, the tenure track faculty had a strong national presence and reputation for research and other scholarly activities. According to multiple university/college/department personnel, when budget cuts historically occurred at FAU, the Department of Special Education was “disproportionately” impacted with the loss of faculty, resulting in the lack of tenure track faculty to maintain the programs, conduct the work of the department, contribute to the college and university, and contribute to research. Today the department has 7 tenure-track faculty members, with additional recent loss of faculty due to retirements, death, or resignations. As with historic budget cuts, these faculty have not been replaced in the department, requiring the remaining faculty members to teach course overloads; pick up essential committee obligations in the department, college, and university; and engage in critical leadership roles that impact the college, faculty, programs, and students. For instance, 2 of these faculty members currently are interim department chairs in the College of Education, and at least 2 faculty members are in time-intensive leadership roles in the university (e.g., President of the Faculty Senate). As stated by several FAU participants in this APR, in spite of these demanding and essential positions, the 7 remaining faculty members have “stepped up” to meet the needs of their programs and students. This level of commitment and workload, however, cannot continue if the (a) programs are to be maintained, (b) tenure track faculty are to be engaged in research and/or seek external funding opportunities (e.g., OSEP funding to support doctoral students and recruit doctoral scholars; IES research), and (c) enrollment is to be increased across programs.

- c) Recommendations: If the Department of Special Education is to offer teacher preparation programs and a doctoral leadership program that are vibrant, rigorous, competitive, and responsive to the needs in the region, state and nation, then the number, roles, and status of faculty must change. For example, areas of faculty specialization must be expanded for the department to be competitive for external funding and attract students to their programs at all levels (i.e., undergraduate, Masters, and doctoral); and to allow students to progress in their EPOS and complete their programs as scheduled, with required courses being consistently taught on a regular and timely schedule. Without the addition of such faculty in the next few years, tenure-track faculty are in jeopardy of burning out and being more likely to either retire or leave FAU for positions at other universities. This would only exacerbate the current issues related to low enrollment leading to fewer faculty, and fewer faculty leading to fewer courses, and fewer courses

leading to fewer students. Steps to take to address the critical shortage and recruitment issues, in spite of university budget issues, include:

- i) Hire additional faculty with specialized expertise in specific areas currently not reflected in the tenure track faculty
- ii) Advertise the addition of these faculty members
- iii) Return the teaching load to the standard load
- iv) Allocate faculty specifically for recruitment at the undergraduate, Masters, and doctoral levels
- v) Allocate faculty and activities specifically for welcoming students across levels into the department and field; focus on retention beyond students' academic needs
- vi) Continue engagement with regional school districts to recruit cohorts or cadres of students (e.g., paraprofessionals, emergency licensure teachers)

4) *The Bachelor's degree in Early Care and Education (BECE) is currently a shared degree between two departments: DSE and C&I. Since the inception of the program, the cost of managing the degree across two departments has been a major and continuing distraction. The University assessment system has still not found a way to award "credit" for faculty and department effort to the appropriate units, and this has resulted in stressors among those whose efforts are minimized. Also, the program has not undergone several program improvements in the curriculum due, in part, to the difficulty in coordinating the efforts across two different departments and faculty groups. [It is noteworthy that both departments have been very active in curriculum re-design efforts in programs offered within our respective departments.] The initial perceived advantage of designing a "joint program" involved an interdisciplinary focus that would be gained by including faculty from two departments. However early childhood expertise is, by definition, interdisciplinary. The DSE is re-considering the original logic of operating a program across multiple departments. What steps should the Departments take to address this issue?*

- a) National and state early childhood programs:
- b) Recommendations: If the department, college and university want the BECE program to remain competitive in the state and nationally, then the program

should remain a unified program offered across the two departments. Issues about this program being faced within FAU are more about administrative management of a dual-department program. It would be best if the FAU system addressed these issues, and maintained the integrity and rigor evident in the program.

- i) Establish a way for both departments to get credit for students enrolled in the program, and student credit hours for which the students are enrolled.
- ii) Establish a way for the increased workload of faculty who are co-teaching sections of courses to be formally acknowledged and documented.
- iii) Maintain the “joint program,” or strengthen the unified collaborative work of the faculty engaged in this program.