Recruiting Preservice Teachers to Top University Special Education Programs

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Abstract: *Annually, 13% of special educators leave teaching, twice that of general educators (Wong et al., 2017). In June 2017, the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Postsecondary Education announced that 46 states were drastically short of special education teachers (Robinson et al., 2019). This study explores how university special education (SPED) teacher preparation program descriptions entice students to enroll in university SPED program. Results indicate disconnects between university SPED descriptions and the realities of SPED teachers will face in special education classrooms.*

Keywords: Special Education, Teacher Attrition, Teacher Preparation

INTRODUCTION

Compared to other education professionals, special education (SPED) has the highest rate of teacher attrition (B. Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Annually 13% of special educators leave teaching, twice that of general educators (Wong et al., 2017). SPED teacher shortages have existed in the United States for decades. This issue was acknowledged again in June 2017, when the U.S. Department of Education and Office of Postsecondary Education announced that 46 states were drastically short of SPED teachers (Robinson et al., 2019). Among other issues, high rates of SPED teacher attrition negatively impact students with disabilities when teachers carry heavier case loads (Hagaman & Casey, 2018).

SPED teachers leave the field for various reasons. Inadequate training for SPED preservice teachers can result in attrition when these preservice teachers reach the classroom and feel unprepared for the job. Research suggests SPED teacher attrition may decrease if college teacher education programs carefully plan out experiences that help students fully understand expected responsibilities (B. Billingsley & Bettini, 2019). Intensifying the problem, current trends indicate school administrators may lack appropriate knowledge of SPED (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). This lack of specialized knowledge may result in insufficient support for SPED teachers.

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WHY TEACHERS CHOOSE SPED

Prospective teachers choose SPED typically because of life experiences working with individuals with disabilities including interactions through jobs (Fish & Stephens, 2010), having a family member with a disability (Marks et al., 2005), or interactions with those with disabilities in passing (Fish & Stephens, 2010).

One study explored the desires of helping and working within SPED preservice teachers. Hausstätter (2007) described helpers as choosing SPED because they want to help those in the special needs community through education (i.e. classroom teaching). Contrastingly, Hausstätter explained that workers' motivation for pursuing SPED certifications was career advancement or job retention within the education field (2007). While acknowledging variance between universities and years, Hausstätter (2007) found that the majority of SPED applicants in the study aligned with the worker perspective.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Declining enrollment and interest in teacher preparation programs along with attrition contribute to teacher shortages (Sutcher et al., 2019). University marketing strategies including impactful social media, personal contact, and campus tours can increase enrollment in universities broadly and within specific programs (Woods et al., 2016; Xiong et al., 2018). While case studies of intensive recruitment efforts resulted in growing enrollment in diminishing fields such as agriculture and wood technology programs (Peiter et al., 2004; Schmidt, 1998), scant literature has focused on increasing enrollment in special education teacher preparation programs. Instead, efforts to understand and rectify teacher shortages in special education have focused on district and school level modifications that address special educator workload, administrative support, and professional development (Mason-Williams et al., 2020; Sutcher et al., 2019; Thornton et al., 2007). While essential, district and school level adjustments to teacher working conditions focus responsibility for teacher shortages on the local level and do not invite the broader education community, including universities, to examine their practices and seek solutions to teacher shortages. Universities play an important role in preservice teacher preparation (B. S. Billingsley, 1993), especially for candidates serving individuals with special needs and should be included in the efforts to stem special education teacher shortages. This study explores how top universities' online representation (online program summaries) entice prospective students to attend that university's SPED preservice teacher program.

METHODOLOGY AND DATA ANALYSIS

Positioning theory (PT) (Harré & Van Langenhove, 1998) was the analytic tool that guided methodology in this study in order to understand how university SPED teacher education programs positioned both themselves and students. Unlike other forms of analysis (e.g., discourse analysis, textual analysis) PT allowed us to expand our analysis beyond explicit and implicit messages within the program descriptions to examine how professors and students were positioned in relationship to the program and each other. Further, PT enabled us to reveal the plotlines of special education teacher preparation programs in terms of the relationship of professors, university students, and the university students' future work in special education. PT is a "discursive process whereby people are located in conversations as observably and subjectively coherent participants in jointly produced storylines" (Davies & Harré, 1999, p. 37). The positions, storylines, and illocutionary forces represented in the discourse of the program descriptions may not be intentional

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yet analysis of the text enable researchers to uncover the way programs were inviting their audience to invoke ways of being and understanding about themselves (Davies & Harré, 1999).

PROGRAM SELECTION

Eight university programs were purposefully selected for inclusion in this study. Selected universities appeared on 2 out of 3 "top Undergraduate Special Education" websites. The universities included: Vanderbilt, University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign), University of Georgia, Florida State, University of Wisconsin (Madison), University of Minnesota (Twin Cities), The Ohio State, Michigan State, and Brigham Young University. Each university's online program description was copied from their website and pasted in a word document for analysis. A team of faculty, graduate and undergraduate researchers within a college of education participated in iterative rounds of within and across case coding.

Table 1
University Statistics

Universities	Location	Selectivity	Acceptance Rate	Private vs. State	Undergraduate Enrollment
Brigham Young University	Provo, Utah	More selective	67%	Private	31,292
Michigan State	East Lansing, Michigan	More selective	71%	Public	50,344
Florida State	Tallahassee, Florida	More selective	36%	Public	32,812
University of Georgia	Atlanta, Georgia	More selective	76%	Public	35,041
Vanderbilt	Nashville, Tennessee	Most selective	9%	Private	6,886
University of Illinois (Champaign/Urbana)	Champaign/Urbana, Illinois	More Selective	59%	Public	34,120
The Ohio State	Columbus, Ohio	More selective	54%	Public	46,818
University of Wisconsin (Madison)	Madison, WI	More selective	54%	Public	33,456
University of Minnesota (Twin Cities)	Twin Cities, Minnesota	More Selective	70%	Public	36,016

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RESULTS

TOP UNIVERSITIES' ILLOCUTIONARY FORCE

The illocutionary force is the speaker's intention in producing a culturally defined speech act. Illocutionary forces can include promising, advising, warning, declaring, etc. The main illocutionary force across universities was seduction.

Universities used a variety of promises to seduce students to their SPED programs. One University promised to accept students with arrest records related to social justice. Other universities promised students higher starting wages and that they would be leaders in their districts.

Additionally, universities used declarative illocutionary force to not just promise but to claim an outcome for their students. They said, "[You will] impact society."

PRESTIGE IN PROGRAM DESCRIPTIONS

All but two schools positioned themselves as prestigious. Universities described themselves, "high ranking" programs, with "distinguished faculty," "rich tradition of excellence," and national "reputation."

Some universities demonstrated prestige by inferring students had already chosen to attend their university. One university claimed prospective undergraduates "have chosen" their school. Another university's program description included a mission statement and a course list and did not contain any information about why a student might choose the university or SPED program.

Two universities did not align their program descriptions with elements of prestige. Both program descriptions cultivated an image focused on teacher preparation. In creating an "academic home" for individuals who wish to "to create inclusive educational experiences" and promoting "course work [that] can be applied to advanced licenses" these program descriptions detailed their focus on classroom teaching.

SPINNING THE STORY OF PRESTIGIOUS GRADUATES

Universities who highlighted their own prestige, recited the future status of prospective students, prestigious in their own realm. The program descriptions described students as "bright, highly skilled" and "in demand." One university described their graduates as, "leaders in the field through their research, teaching, advocacy, and service." Another university proposed that students will "make a real-world impact on policy, practice and student success." Universities focused on prestige positioned future students as researchers and advocates for individuals with disabilities.

Contrastingly, the universities whose focus was service or efficiency crafted an image of prospective students as future teachers with the skills to meet the needs of students. For example, one university described a teacher leaving their program as "expert at meeting students' needs."

DISCUSSION

With the drastic shortage of SPED teachers, there is a need for well qualified, highly trained teachers. Yet there appears to be a mismatch between what is needed and how universities program descriptions position their prospective students. University program descriptions seemed to be recruiting individuals who want to influence the SPED field with their expertise. Only two of the

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programs in this analysis positioned prospective students primarily as classroom teachers, a sharp contrast to the well documented SPED teacher shortage.

SPED teachers report various factors that contributed to leaving the field including, stress, lack of support, large caseloads and responsibilities, challenging student behaviors, and complexities of collaboration load (Hagaman & Casey, 2018). Considering the mismatch between how students are recruited, SPED teacher education programs should attend to recruitment **and** attrition. SPED Teacher education programs should be knowledgeable of reasons for attrition and address attrition concerns during teacher preparation.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The implications of this study are intended to augment the understanding of ways university special education programs recruit preservice teachers relative to later teacher attrition. More research is needed in this area, with particular emphases on matching recruitment information to life as a special educator in the field. Universities need to do more to provide training or instruction for preservice teachers on how to effectively navigate special education programs and to provide better match between preservice recruitment and expectations in the field (Young, 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Qualitative research seeks naturalistic generalizability and may not be universally transferable. This study focused on the program descriptions of universities listed in "top undergraduate special education" websites. The findings, particularly of prestige, may have more to do with the selection criteria of top undergraduate SPED universities and may not be reflective of all teacher preparation programs. Additionally, the program descriptions used in this study include universities with more and most selective admissions. To this end, one of the universities is known as highly prestigious with a very low acceptance rate and low enrollment.

Future research may wish to compare the program descriptions of online and open admission with top SPED programs. Additionally, researchers may wish to examine how preservice SPED teachers position themselves in the field.

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