

Preparing Alabama's Secondary Special Education Teachers ¹

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Current literature highlights the need for improved special education programming for secondary students with disabilities and the changing role of the secondary special educator. In Alabama, this is particularly true as the state is now engaged in the full implementation of a high school program aimed at preparing students for employment. This occupational course of study is known as the Alabama Occupational Diploma (AOD) (Holder, 2001). It is due to this AOD, other educational reform efforts in our state, and the results of studies examining the adult outcomes of former special education students that teachers of secondary students with disabilities must expand their qualifications, roles, and responsibilities. Of course, ensuring that teachers are competent and well qualified is critical, since "*research has documented that students are more likely to have higher achievement when they are taught by qualified teachers*" (West, 2001, p. 3).

The purpose of this paper is to describe our master's teacher training program—*Collaborative Teacher Program with an Emphasis on Transition*. The program's primary goal is to impact the quality of the state's high school programs for secondary students with high incidence disabilities by increasing the quantity and quality of special education teachers serving secondary students with disabilities. Since its initiation in 1993, the program has graduated over 60 specialists in transition.

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

The program was developed, in part, from data gathered from a needs assessment and review of effective transition programs. The following Alabama documents were consulted in development of the program: *Comprehensive System of Personnel Development-Part B Planning Document*, *The Alabama Occupational Diploma*, *Alabama State Improvement Grant* (2001), *Alabama's Transition Needs Assessment* (1997), *Alabama Statewide Study in Transition* (Browning, Rabren, & Hall, 2001), and the *Alabama's Student Tracking System*. As well, consumers and state agency personnel provided valuable information that guided the development and refinement of the program.

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In addition, the program was based upon a comprehensive literature review of accepted “best practices” in transition services. Of course, an outgrowth of the best practices literature is the competencies needed for qualified secondary teachers (e.g., Dunn, 1999; deFur, & Taymans, 1995; Kochar-Bryant, & Ballard, 2001; Kohler, 1996; Flexer, Simmons, Luft, & Baer, 2001; Martin, & Kohler, 1997). These competencies and recommended best practices have been endorsed by (a) the Division of Career Development and Transition of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) (n.d.), (b) Interstate New Teacher Assessment and Support Consortium (INTASC), (c) National Council for the Accreditation of Teacher Education, (d) the Alabama’s State Department of Education Teacher Education Standards, and (e) The National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET), which seeks to increase the capacity of national, state and local agencies and organizations to improve secondary education and transition results. In summary, the Division on Career Development has a fact sheet entitled *Transition Specialist Competencies Fact Sheet* (n.d.).

Seven content domains that represent the field’s best practices and related competencies are: (a) functional assessment, (b) functional curriculum, (c) career preparation, (d) community preparation, (e) self-determination, (f) family involvement, and (g) collaboration (Browning, 1997). These and other important areas are incorporated into the program’s curriculum (see Program Competencies at end of paper).

PROGRAM COMPONENTS

The master’s program builds on Auburn’s existing Master’s Programs in Collaborative Teaching. Students fulfill the requirements for the Collaborative Teacher certification with regard to: (a) Curriculum and Teaching, (b) Foundations of Professional Studies, (c) Evaluation of Teaching and Learning, (d) Teaching Field, and (e) Practica. In addition, training in ten core content areas with a transition focus are incorporated into the program. These knowledge-based content areas include:

- Foundations of Transition
- Student Characteristics
- Functional Assessment
- Functional Curriculum and Program Implementation
- Self-Determination
- Family Involvement
- Interagency Collaboration
- Career Preparation
- Assistive Technology
- Multicultural Competencies

The program components that address this content include: (a) a series of five transition-related courses, (b) specialized practica, (c) summer transition clinic, (d) field visits, (e) the statewide transition conference, and (f) a field project/thesis.

Course Work

- *Foundations of Transition.* The program begins with a course designed to provide a solid grounding in the area of transition. This course reflects federal legislative mandates and State Department of Education initiatives as they relate to the needs of secondary students in transition from school to community living and adjustment. The course examines the language of rehabilitation and special education, the types of transition services provided, personnel qualifications, individualized education plans, rural transition issues, issues surrounding functional assessment and curriculum, and independent living.
- *Program Implementation: Transition.* This course builds on the Foundations course and other methods courses, focusing on educational issues affecting transition programming, functional assessment, and functional curricula. Upon completion of this course, students will be able to design and utilize assessments to develop individualized transition plans for students based on functional curricula.
- *Curriculum and Teaching: Transition.* This course is taken toward the end of the program. It is designed to allow the opportunity to integrate what is learned throughout the program in course work, practica, field trips, conferences, and other activities. One requirement for this course is to develop a system-wide transition program. Issues addressed in the development of this program include, but are not limited to, interagency agreements, curriculum, assessment, program evaluation, and grant writing.
- *Research in Transition and Research into Practice.* These courses are part of the Summer Transition Program, a 4-week summer program that offers intensive individualized training to secondary students with and without disabilities. Teachers-in-training assess students; develop intervention plans; develop, plan and implement school- and community-based curricula; and develop and implement job exploration and job shadowing experiences.

Practica

An innovative feature of this program is the emphasis given to applied experiences through practica. Specifically, students will be required to take a minimum of three (3) practica. Students at the beginning of their programs are given a practicum assignment list which must be completed by the program's end. At the beginning of each practicum, the student and the practicum teacher identify the assignments that are relevant to that particular setting. These assignments include a range of activities: (a) IEP development, (b) secondary curriculum accommodations and modifications, (c) consultation and collaboration with school-based personnel including general education teachers and career/technical teachers, (d) consumer and parental involvement in the transition process, (e) community work experience, (f) unit development, and (g) interagency collaboration. Also, students will have practicum experience in both rural and urban settings.

Summer Transition Clinic

This is a 4-week summer program that offers intensive individualized training to secondary school students with and without disabilities. Adolescents with disabilities receive instruction in basic skills, study and organizational skills, social skills, self-advocacy, career awareness, career exploration, and functional academics. They also participate in a service learning project. Additionally, they explore job sites in the community and participate in job shadowing experiences. This experience ensures that teachers-in-training have the opportunity to apply the research and theory they have learned in their coursework in a real-life teaching situation where they receive immediate feedback.

Field Visits

In addition to practica and the clinic, students visit transition programs throughout the state. One- or two-day trips are taken to exemplary work experience program sites. In cooperation with the State Department of Education and the coordinators of a select number of these work experience programs, students have the opportunity to visit no less than two such programs. Some of the systems visited in the past include Dothan City, Jefferson County, Sylacauga City, Scottsboro City, and Covington County.

Annual Statewide Transition Conference

Students enrolled in this program take an active part in this annual event. In addition to being required to attend the entire conference, assignments include (a) preparing and presenting a paper; (b) helping in the planning, implementation, and/or evaluation of the conference; and (c) serving as facilitators for small groups. The significant learning experience to be gained, among other things, is becoming aware of and linking to the many and varied transition activities taking place throughout the state.

Field Based Project or Thesis

*The field-based transition project is the sixth innovative feature of this program. By the end of the students' Fall semester, they will have identified a transition project of unique interest to them to be developed and executed in an LEA setting. The nature of these projects could vary from student to student, although there is a set of guidelines and standards all projects must adhere to. The foci of the project might be, for example: (a) to help establish a "partnership" between the LEA's secondary special education program and a business or industry in the surrounding area, (b) to help develop a "functional assessment program" to be used by all parties involved in the LEA's transition program, or (c) to join in with employers in the community to help develop work sites for the secondary students.*³

³ Browning, P., & Dunn, C. (1994). Teacher preparation with an emphasis at the secondary level, *Alabama Federation Council for Exceptional Children Journal*, 11 (1),13-23.

As noted in the above statement, each student enrolled in Auburn's Master's Program in Transition is required to satisfactorily complete a field-based project/thesis, in order to earn the teaching certificate and degree. By definition, a project/thesis is a scholarly product that addresses an acknowledged problem or need area in the field of transition. A project and thesis are alike in that they both pertain to a problem in the field, they both use methods/strategies to address the problem, they both include the results of those methods/strategies, and the outcomes of both are written in a professional document.

Follow-up Component

Another innovative feature of the program is its follow-up component. One of the factors that contributes to the high turnover rate in special education is lack of support/mentoring for new teachers (Alabama's Teacher Preparation, Recruitment, and Retention Summit Results, 2000). As well, follow-up data from our past transition program graduates indicates that many of our students feel they could benefit from support/mentoring during their first years of teaching. They report that they are confident they know the elements that need to be incorporated into a secondary special education program, but sometimes face implementation barriers (e.g., other teachers, administrators, funding) that interfere with program development and implementation. We will try to address this issue through several means.

First, students will have access to a **departmental Web site** through which they can communicate, via threaded discussion and on-line chats, concerning program development and implementation issues they face in their schools. As well, a problem solving and program sharing session for our graduates and other select transition leaders will be made available at the **Annual Transition Conference**. Finally, our students will be paired with a **Transition Leadership Academy mentor**. They will have the opportunity to meet with this mentor while they are still in the program. Upon graduation, they will then have a relationship with someone they can contact if necessary.

ELIGIBLE STUDENTS

Three types of students are eligible to participate in the program, including Traditional, Fifth-year, and Alternative fifth-year students. Traditional students are those who have previously earned special education teacher certification. Fifth-year students are those who have teacher certification, but not in special education. Alternative fifth-year students are those who have an undergraduate degree, but no teacher certification.

PROGRAM OPTIONS

The program is offered through two delivery options—on-campus and distance education. Our distance education delivery model requires both off-campus and on-campus experiences. The off-campus feature requires learning through the Internet. Course materials will be presented in a variety of ways, including utilizing AU's course tool software package – WebCT. Either within WebCT, and/or on a program

website, a few of the tools and materials that would be accessible to students are: (a) PowerPoint presentations/notes; (b) Word/WordPerfect Acrobat/Excel documents; (c) electronic textbooks and/or course packets; (d) online (live) chats with instructor and fellow students; (e) threaded discussion boards; (f) streaming video and audio; (g) video archives; and (h) email/communication center for prompt student feedback. The instructor for each off-campus course dialogues and interacts with the enrolled students, both individually and as a group.

We have found through our experience that the On-Campus Learning component is an important element to include in our distance education model. Students who participate in the distance education option will be required to spend two 5-week summers on-campus as full-time students. Their primary focus will be to work under faculty supervision in the 4-week Summer Transition Clinic.

In summary, there is a serious shortage of qualified secondary special education teachers in Alabama. The goal of Auburn’s Master’s Program in Secondary Special Education and Transition is to impact the quantity of well trained teachers who in turn will improve the quality of Alabama’s secondary special education programs that currently serve 42,639 students with high incidence disabilities.

| PROGRAM COMPETENCIES | |
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| <u>Foundations</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Historical and legal antecedents of transition from school work and community b. Theoretical and applied models of transition c. Transition-related legislation in fields of special and vocational education, rehabilitation and civil rights d. Roles of federal, state, provincial, and local legislation and implications for providing transition services at local level e. Research on student outcomes and effective transition practices f. Problems and issues related to transition |
| <u>Student Characteristics</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Implications of student characteristics with respect to post-school outcomes, environments, and support needs b. School and post-school options available to specific populations of individuals with exceptional learning needs. |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Develop accommodations and adaptations that meet student needs across a variety of settings. |
| <u>Functional Assessment</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Formal and informal career and vocational assessment approaches b. Formal and informal approaches for identifying students’ interests and preferences related to school goals and educational experiences |

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| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Conduct functional assessments (e.g., ecological inventories, analysis of behavior, student preferences and interests) d. Interpret results of functional assessments for individuals, families, and professionals e. Match skills and interests of the student to skills and demands required by vocational or employment settings, community residential situation, and other community participation options. f. Outline long term transition goals, short term objectives/benchmarks, services and supports based on assessment results |
| <u>Functional Curriculum and Program Implementation</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Functional skills content in the areas of: academics, self-determination, social skills, learning strategies and study skills, independent and family living skills, and career awareness b. Methods for providing community-based education |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Select and/or develop appropriate curricular content in the areas of employment/education, community involvement, recreation/leisure, emotional /physical health, home and family, and personal responsibility and relationships d. Develop accommodations and adaptations that meet student need across a variety of settings, such as vocational, home, and community e. Develop and implement systematic instructional programs f. Develop and implement community-based instruction g. Assess and develop natural support systems to facilitate transition to specific post-school environments h. Evaluate and modify transition goals on an ongoing basis |
| <u>Self-Determination</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. The historical and legal antecedents for the consumer movement b. The concepts and skills related to self-determination c. Strategies for involving individuals with exceptional learning need in all levels of collaborative program planning and evaluation |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Develop and implement instructional activities to teach self-determination e. Develop students' abilities to participate meaningfully in the development of their IEP f. Utilize a planning process that is student-centered and facilitates students' self-determination, including decision-making |
| <u>Family Involvement</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Methods and strategies for increasing families' knowledge and skills about transition-related issues and topics, including transition-focused educational program development |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> b. Facilitate parent attendance at individual education program planning meetings c. Provide information to families about transition-related education and services, and possible options in specific outcome areas d. Systematically identify family service needs related to transition outcomes and assist families to connect with support networks e. Set goals collaboratively with families in a way that is culturally sensitive |

| <u>Interagency Collaboration</u> | |
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| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Available community, state and national resources b. Procedures and requirements for referring students to community service agencies c. Methods to increase collaborative transition service delivery through interagency agreements and collaborative funding |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Collaborate with general and vocational educators regarding students' learning needs and instructional planning e. Interact effectively with community service providers to identify and address students' service and support needs f. Develop cooperative relationships with individuals/agencies involved in the transition process g. Use strategies for resolving differences that may arise in the implementation of interagency agreements or the provision of transition services for individuals with exceptional learning needs h. Identify future post-school service needs using transition planning documents in conjunction with relevant agencies |
| <u>Career Preparation</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Career and vocational assessment strategies b. Career and vocational curriculum content |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Select and implement appropriate career and vocational curriculum content d. Select and implement appropriate career and vocational training techniques e. Develop and implement community-based work experience programs |
| <u>Assistive Technology</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. Advances in assistive technology, commercially available devices and costs and funding b. Applications of computer software in special education, rehabilitation counseling, vocational evaluation, work adjustment, and job placement |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> c. Use technology in providing greater independence for persons with disabilities in such areas as environmental control, communication, mobility, and work place support |
| <u>Multicultural Competencies</u> | |
| Knowledge of: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> a. How cultural differences between team members may impact team processes for identifying and addressing the students' needs, interests, and preferences in the transition process b. Potential conflicts in developing participatory decision making with families who are not acculturated into the American interaction style c. Strategies for preparing staff and families in culturally competent interaction processes |
| Skills to: | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> d. Use multicultural planning questions to weave the goals of multicultural education into short-and long-term planning |

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