The right to play on any field. You have earned it. The right to study in any school. You have earned it. The right to hold a job. You have earned it. The right to be anyone’s neighbor. You have earned it.

—Eunice Kennedy Shriver

Programs in the Department of Special Education (SPED) are for people who want to improve the lives of children and youth with disabilities. Long ranked as the top special education program in the nation by U.S. News & World Report, SPED has a reputation for teaching, conducting groundbreaking research, establishing innovative practices, and developing widely used methods.

Doctoral students conduct field work and research, collaborate with faculty and other students on important initiatives, participate in colloquia with experts from various disciplines, and supervise undergraduate students’ field experiences. SPED is closely associated with the Vanderbilt Kennedy Center for Research on Human Development, one of 14 national centers for research on intellectual and developmental disabilities. This relationship allows students to benefit from the many available resources and programs. Most graduate students are fully funded through U.S. Department of Education grants. Graduates typically receive multiple offers of employment.

Specializations

- **Early Childhood**—emphasizes research and leadership for infants, toddlers, young children, and their families who deal with a wide range of developmental delays including cognitive, communication, social, adaptive behavior, or motor skills.
- **High Incidence**—for students with strong interest in research and development addressing the needs of children and young adults with serious reading and math difficulties, and persistent behavior problems.
- **Severe Disabilities**—focuses on research and leadership addressing children, youth, and adults who have intellectual disability, autism, multiple disabilities, and others with significant needs.
- **Education of Students with Visual Impairments**—for those who want to advance research and evidence-based educational practices for students with low vision and blindness and their families.

Career Paths

Graduates become university professors, policy makers, and researchers.