INTRODUCTION

Special Education: Comprehensive K-12
Undergraduate Professional Education

The Department of Special Education at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University has a rich tradition of excellence in teacher education and is routinely ranked as one of the top training programs in the country. A rigorous four-year undergraduate program combining theory and extensive field-based and clinical experiences prepare candidates to become highly skilled teachers of persons with disabilities. Special education graduates teach in many settings, including resource rooms, special education classrooms, itinerant positions, residential facilities, and community agencies.

The Undergraduate Comprehensive Special Education Program is structured to prepare future teachers with the necessary skills to assess, plan for, and monitor the progress of persons with disabilities. Candidates pursue an interdisciplinary major in exceptional learning with an emphasis in severe and multiple disabilities. Candidates complete a 60-hour liberal core and the Comprehensive Special Education major. Candidates are not required to seek a second major, but most do. Candidates often select second majors such as a second focus in the area of Special Education, Elementary Education, Child Development, Cognitive Studies, Human Organization and Development, or an Arts & Sciences major such as English, Spanish, or math.

SPED 2050, Augmentative and Alternative Communication is a new course designed to meet the Tennessee Standards regarding technology and augmentative and alternative communication devices. SPED 2350, Advanced Procedures in Teaching Students with Severe Disabilities is also a new course added to meet the new Tennessee Standards. In the past SPED 2820, Teaching Math, and SPED 2870, Accommodating Academic Diversity, were required of students enrolled in the modified program. These classes are now required of all undergraduate students in order to meet the Tennessee Standards. In addition, a new 5-credit practicum experience (SPED 2871) has been added. During this pre-student teaching experience candidates spend 15 hours per week in an elementary general education classroom or an elementary class for English Language Learners. This experience allows candidates to have access to the general education curriculum as well as collaborate with general educators and other school personnel. Pre-student teaching is completed the semester before candidates complete their student teaching and is taken at the same time as the Accommodating Academic Diversity course. All students seeking licensure are required to complete a semester of student teaching. Students complete two 7.5-week experiences at two different grade levels. Students also take a reading course and practicum from the Department of Teaching and Learning. One course (EDUC 2117) focuses on early childhood and the other course (EDUC 2215) emphasizes elementary grades.

Several themes run throughout the Special Education program at Peabody College of Vanderbilt University: application of the principles of IDEA, implementation of empirically based instructional methods, and understanding of the relationships among
home, community, and school. Our overarching goal is to produce teachers who are well versed in current special education practices and are able to work with general educators, administrators, parents, and community members to provide quality special education services.

The Council for Exceptional Children and the State of Tennessee Standards provide the guideposts by which the Special Education program is structured. The philosophy shared to candidates through each of the courses echoes principles of FAPE, LRE, and rights of students with disabilities to specially tailored instruction. In teaching to the letter of the law, we also embrace the spirit of the law – the assurance that students with disabilities receive an appropriate education. The 2004 Individuals with Disabilities Act Amendments and the Tennessee State Standards emphasize access to the general education curriculum, collaboration with parents, and interagency collaboration. Each of these components serves to support the effective instruction foundation and is important for justifying a curriculum that is responsive to the cultural and social needs of the student.

Students with disabilities create unique demands in terms of teaching and behavior management. Our courses are sequenced to first introduce students to what is known about the cognitive, social, and behavioral needs of students with disabilities. Then, we directly link that information to the instructional implications associated with those unique needs. In the methods courses, we work to develop a repertoire of teaching competencies that have been validated by research as effective.

Field-based and clinical experiences are an essential component of each student’s program of study. Beginning in the freshman year and continuing through the four-year undergraduate program, candidates observe and work in a variety of education settings, with diverse age groups and levels of disabilities. These extensive experiences allow candidates to apply the knowledge and skills they are learning at the University while mediating that with the demands of the classroom.

All of our performance assessments, field-based evaluation forms, and disposition forms are aligned with our Unit Conceptual Framework. Peabody’s Conceptual Framework is based on four distinct, but interrelated components: (1) subject matter knowledge; (2) understanding learners and learning; (3) conceptions of the practice and profession; and (4) initial repertoire in curriculum, instruction, management, and assessment. Please refer to the Conceptual Framework for a more detailed elaboration of these four components. In February 2008, The Comprehensive Special Education Program submitted a report to the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) and in July 2008 we received word that our program was Nationally Recognized with Conditions. The program submitted a response to these conditions in September 2009. Please see the Undergraduate Comprehensive SPA Report, the Undergraduate Comprehensive SPA Results, and the Undergraduate Comprehensive Response to Conditions reports for further detail.
In addition to the SPA reports, please see the Undergraduate Comprehensive Program of Studies, which includes course descriptions and a suggested sequence for taking courses, the Undergraduate Comprehensive Professional Standards Matrix, the Undergraduate Comprehensive Common Core Matrix, and the Undergraduate Comprehensive State Matrix, which show specifically how our program achieves the Tennessee Standards.

Report submitted by Kim Paulsen