

Considerations for the Strategic Recruitment of Special Educators

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According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (2004), the United States is lacking 41,141 certified special educators. Texas is no exception to the national trend; in Texas alone, there is a shortage of 5,024 certified special educators (U.S. Department of Special Education). Any successful remediation of this shortage starts with the recruitment and education of special education college majors or other undergraduate majors that lead into teaching. Therefore, this study sought to analyze the effectiveness of recruitment methods implemented by eight Texas universities in order to focus a statewide recruitment agenda.

A review of the literature confirmed that recruitment strategies implemented by the participating universities conformed to current best practice. These strategies concentrated upon grants and scholarships, community outreach, media advertisement, and technology (Jenson, Churchill, & Davis, 2000; Marso & Pigge, 1994; Tyler, Cantou-Clarke, Easterling, & Klep-

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per, 2003). When addressing issues of effective methods of recruitment five common themes emerged in the literature (NCPSE, 1996; Rosenkoetter, Irwin & Saceda, 2004; Tyler, Cantou-Clarke, Easterling, & Klepper, 2003; Whitworth, 2000):

1. Outreach to local schools and communities- geographical campaigns;
2. Advertisement through literature, radio, and interactive websites;
3. Tuition and scholarships;
4. Mentorship support from university faculty; and
5. Targeting “home grown” candidates such as local paraprofessionals.

In an earlier study, Marsoi and Pigge (1994) determined that high school students were influenced the most by peer pressure and approval, promotional materials, the potential of using teaching as a stepping stone career, and finally, having no other major that overshadowed education’s appeal as a career. Individuals that choose teaching after high school were influenced less by parents and teachers and more by previous work with children.

Studies that are more recent have determined that candidates who respond to the provision of scholarships and similar monetary incentives tend to be older than traditional college students, predominantly female, and live in the local communities close to rural colleges and universities (Rosenkoetter, Irwin, & Saceda, 2004; Tyler, Cantou-Clarke, Easterling, & Klepper, 2003). Grant-funded tuition, fees and stipends were often crucial to the recruitment and retention of these students, the majority of whom could not otherwise obtain a higher education. Scholarships, loan forgiveness plans, and financial incentives for choosing a special education major are validated recruitment incentives for special education recruitment (CPSSE, 2004). In an effort to recruit male freshman, three southern universities effectively drew 18 young men into the field of special education by offering full ride scholarships and \$400.00 a month stipends. As an extra incentive, students who withdrew from the program must return the scholarship and stipend awards (Rice & Goessling, 2005). The prototype for this recruitment and retention method occurred at Southern Florida in 1995 where 29 African American men graduated as special educators (Basinger, 1999).

Rosenkoetter, Irwin, and Saceda (2004) determined effective recruitment efforts included campaigns directed at individuals currently enrolled in other undergraduate programs. These campaigns provided students with information concerning job opportunities in special education and encouraged undergraduates to switch their majors to special education. The National Clearinghouse for Professions in Special Education (NCPSE, 1996) stated that at a local level “career choices are often based on personal experience relating to a particular profession and on information gathered from professionals in that field” (p. 1). Furthermore, “practicing professionals in a field are the best recruiters of future professionals...because [they] are in a unique position to encourage others to consider entering a career as a special educator” (p. 1).

Effective recruitment efforts need to focus on schools and community colleges

surrounding universities preparing special educators (Rosenkoetter, Irwin & Saceda, 2004). A key component of these local recruitment efforts is visibility. Providing an information session at local high school Career Night or during recruitment fairs highlights both the university and the profession of special education. In a similar manner, providing university representatives at local schools to assist in the application process for admission and financial aid might encourage the undecided major to become a special educator (Boyer & Gillespie, 2002). A broader recruitment impact occurs when faculty and project staff maintains a visible presence at community organization meetings and local schools (Tyler, Cantou-Clarke, Easterling, & Klepper, 2003).

Investigating the efficacy of technology as a recruitment tool, Rosenkoetter et al. (2004), found that web sites that provided critical information to the prospective special educator on employment opportunities, university curriculum expectations, and the benefits of a career in special education encouraged applications for special education coursework. With the critical shortage of rural special educators, web site technology becomes an important tool by decreasing the geographical isolation in rural areas as it provides information and resources targeted to influence career decision (McClure & Reeves, 2004).

Hammer, Hughes, McClure, Reeve, and Salgado (2005) addressed the importance of the “grow your own” initiatives. Initiatives should include incentives directed at potential teachers combined with improved recruitment and hiring practices within local school districts. Forming teacher cadet programs in K-12 schools that include special education coursework and the extended opportunity to interact with peers who are disabled is an effective recruitment strategy. Universities can effectively use special education majors from local universities to sponsor the cadet programs and participate in Future Teachers Clubs (Boyer & Gillespie, 2002).

In 2003, NCPSE published a report entitled “Enlarging the POOL.” This report targeted effective special education teacher recruitment strategies. NCPSE determined that providing after-school clubs increased peer involvement with diverse populations. NCPSE also stated that time spent with individuals with disabilities was a deciding factor in young people’s choice of special education as a career path. Research determined that long-term support groups for students with severe disabilities increased positive attitude towards individuals with disabilities (Burn, Certo, & Story, 1999; Carter, Hughes, Copeland & Breen, 2001; Fisher, Pumpian, & Cox, 1998).

Peer support groups, such as Best Buddies or PALS, that promote involvement and community for the typical student together with the student with special needs have a significant positive influence on high school students’ choice to become special education majors in college (Zascavage & Armstrong, 2005). With the deficit of rural special educators being a national concern, Zascavage, Schroeder, Masten, and Armstrong (2006) addressed the presence and likelihood of rural peer support groups in East Texas. Their study determined that peer support for students with disabilities predominated in the larger rural school districts with larger budgets per

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student rather than the smaller, less affluent country school. This lack of the typical peer interaction potentially decreases the number of high school students considering special education as a career pathway in rural America (NCPSE, 2003).

As a nation, we have an “insufficient supply” and a “growing demand” for special education teachers (Boe, 2006; COPSSE, 2004). If easy solutions to the increasing need for special educators existed these solutions would have already been implemented (Boe, 2006). When addressing recruitment, research highlights the recruitment of paraprofessionals, individuals seeking alternative certification, or general recruiting strategies of newly graduated special educators. There is little current research on recruitment of undergraduates into the field *and no empirical data addressing cost effective recruitment strategies* (McLeskey, Tyler, & Flippivo, 2003). This study sought to examine the last three years of recruitment strategies used by eight Texas universities to increase interest in special education as a university major in order to open a line of inquiry with the potential to increase special education graduates through more efficient recruitment strategies. Effective recruitment at the university level might well benefit educational policymakers, focus university recruitment strategies, and justify federal funding initiatives.

Method

The analysis focused on differentiating between students who started as a special education major upon college entry (starters) versus those who transferred into this major after starting college (transfers). The process by which students move into and through college is shown in Figure 1. Students can change into special education at anytime during their time in college. The flow chart shows that both recruitment and retention can be ongoing activities. This focus makes clear the dynamic nature of student populations entering and attending college and guided our analysis.

Participants

University. The eight universities that participated in this study housed departments of special education that had benefited from a Texas Teacher Recruitment and Retention Initiative three-year retention and recruitment program. These geographically and demographically diversified universities covered the four quadrants of Texas, an expanse that encompassed urban, rural, coastal and border locations. The eight participating universities each provided faculty representatives to the spring meeting of the Texas Teacher Recruitment and Retention Initiative. At this meeting, the eight individual university faculty members agreed to participate in the survey by administering the test to undergraduate special education teaching majors during class. In order to minimize the inconvenience and to standardize results, each university received 40 surveys to administer. Upon completion, the university faculty representatives returned the completed copies in the envelope provided to our research team. University representatives who did not return the

Figure 1
Flow Chart of Resources and Students

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package received both phone and e-mail messages to encourage the return of the survey material.

Survey Respondents. Survey respondents, special education teaching majors, divided into starters and transfers using the demographic question: Did you change from another major, if yes, which one? Starters were those students who entered the university knowing they wanted to be special education teachers. Transfers were those students who changed to special education from another major.

Instrument

The 21-question survey questionnaire used to acquire information on students and their opinion of what was most influential in their decision to choose special education as their college major appears in Figure 2. The survey asked for basic demographic information, year accepted into the special education program and year of expected graduation. Specific questions determined the timing and nature of the participants' decision to become a special educator. Using a rating of 1-5, respondents rated recruitment determinants as more (5) important to least (1) important in their decision to become or remain a special in education.

The strategies selected for inclusion in the survey were methods reported through the Texas Teacher Recruitment and Retention Initiative (Zascavage, Marrs-Butler, & Armstrong, 2006) as funded and employed by the eight selected universities. As members of the Texas Regent's Initiative, all universities in the participant pool were familiar with the selected strategies. Therefore, students in the selected universities were also familiar with the terminology in our survey if they had participated in these funded recruitment activities. Question 8 and 9 of the survey appeared very similar yet they solicited entirely different answers. Question 8 (peer support participation) assesses organized interaction with individuals with disabilities while Question 9 (contact outside of school) encompasses the students whose interaction with family members or other individuals in the community with disability have influenced their decision to become special educators. Demographic information determined the nature of the disability for this contact experience. Although we questioned the incorporation of Question 3 (CEC booth exposure), our grant funding parameters required we ask this question of the funded universities. Question 10 was not used in this study.

Results

The original goal was to receive 40 surveys from each of the 8 participating universities, 320 surveys in all. The return of 112 surveys was approximately 33% of the original goal. All eight universities passed out and returned surveys. Respondents divided into starters and transfers. Demographic data provided the year of transfer and the year of enrollment. For transfers we calculated the year of transfer from year of enrollment and year respondent knew they were interested in

Figure 2
Survey Questionnaire for SPED Majors

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special education as a major. The majority of students surveyed (51%) transferred into special education from other majors. Education majors comprised 24% of the transfers into special education. Business and early childhood studies each comprised 14% of the transfers. Pre-med majors and nursing majors combined comprised 8% of the transfers.

Figure 1 illustrates the process by which students move into and through college. The vast majority of transfers into special education from another major ($n=19$) already knew they wanted to be special educators when they entered university but waited to declare their major. Freshman and sophomores ($n=12$) had equal numbers of transfers with a marked drop in transfer numbers in the junior ($n=4$) and senior year ($n=5$). This focus makes clear the dynamic nature of student populations entering and attending college and suggests that recruitment funding to increase transfers into special education is most beneficial at the freshman and sophomore levels. Retention funding, not addressed in this research report, would then focus on the junior and senior student since few students change majors at this late date.

Special Education majors responding to this survey ranged in age from 20 to 59 with a mean age of 30.0. Of 111 students reporting sex, 10 were male and 101 female. Two-thirds of the respondents were under the age of 35.

An independent samples t-test compared the mean importance score of recruitment activities for starters and transfers (Table 1). There was a significant difference in scores for starters ($M=2.03$, $SD=1.24$) compared to transfers ($M=2.58$, $SD=1.46$), $t(109)=1.99$, $p<.05$ for the importance of technology and media presentations on their decision to become special educators. The eta-squared statistic (.97) indicated a very large effect size. The importance of recruitment strategies, survey questions, was of similar influence for both starters and transfers upon their selection of special

Table 1
Starters versus Transfers:
Importance of Recruiting Activity to Special Education Students

Activity	Mean Score Importance ^a					tStatistic	Sig.
	All	Starters	Transfers	Standard Deviation	n		
Contact w/disabled person(s)	3.83	3.69	4.00	1.55	113	1.05	n.s.
Peer Support Group part.	3.33	3.28	3.39	1.56	112	0.38	n.s.
Committee activities	2.53	2.42	2.67	1.56	111	0.84	n.s.
Tuition/scholarships	2.45	2.59	2.29	1.69	108	0.94	n.s.
Technology media presen.	2.28	2.03	2.58	1.46	111	1.99	0.05
Research grant	2.21	2.14	2.29	1.55	110	0.53	n.s.
Project expansion grants	2.19	2.02	2.39	1.57	111	1.26	n.s.
Videos & brochures	2.13	2.02	2.10	1.38	111	0.20	n.s.
Booth at CEC	1.81	1.73	1.90	1.32	109	0.68	n.n

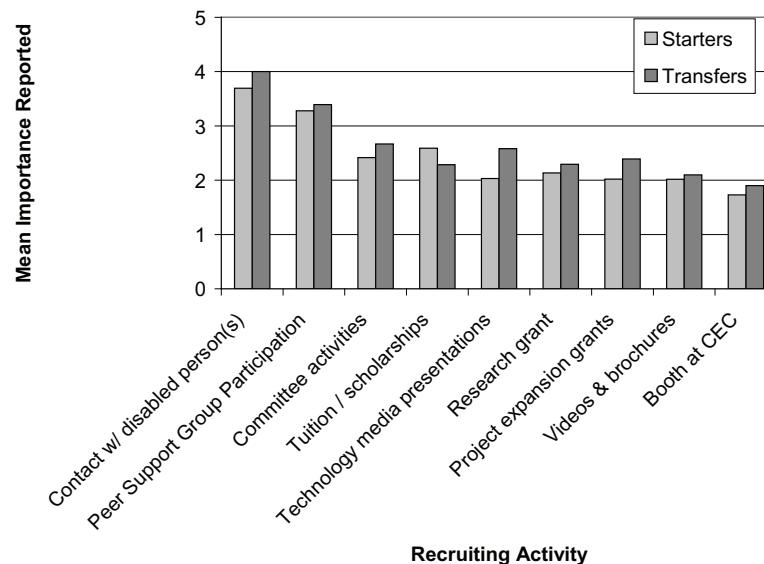
^a Importance rated from 1 (least) to 5 (most) by special education majors responding to survey.

education as a major with the exception of media presentations. Transfers into special education viewed this recruitment strategy as more influential than did starters.

Overall, starters and transfers, the top three activities in order of importance were contact with person with a disability ($M=3.83$), peer support group participation ($M=3.33$), and committee activities ($M=2.53$). When taken separately, starters and transfers agreed that contact with a person with a disability was the most important recruiting activity and peer support participation was the second most important activity. The groups differed on the third most important activity. Transfer students found committee activity ($M=2.67$) third most important while starters selected tuition and scholarship ($M=2.59$). Overall and by consensus of both groups, handing out videos, brochures, and the recruitment booths at Council for Exceptional Children Conferences was the least important to their decision-making processes.

The percentage of students ranking an activity as most important (5) or very important (4) determined an over all recruitment activity priority ranking for the 113 respondents throughout nine Texas universities. Contact outside of school with individuals with disabilities was most or very important to 69% of the respondents. Special education support groups participation received the second highest ranking (54.9 %). Tuition payment (33%) ranked as the third most influential activity. Committee activity participation was a close fourth at 32% (Figure 3).

Figure 3
Importance of Recruiting Activity to Special Education Majors



Discussion

Starters are those students who arrive on campus as special educational majors. In our survey, 49% of the respondents were starters. The statistical findings are strong. Contact with persons having special needs and participation in peer-support groups have a much greater importance to these special education majors than the next most important variable, tuition and scholarships. For high school students contact with individuals with disabilities has three likely forms: classroom interaction in an inclusive setting, contact with a family member or friend having a disability and/or participation in peer support programs such as: PALS, Best Buddies, Special Olympics, or Circle of Friends (Zascavage et al., 2006).

The simple gift of belonging to a community of learners is the purpose of inclusion. Research suggests that the implications of inclusion may be more far reaching than originally anticipated (Winterman, 2003). Students with special needs who participate in inclusive learning environments have improved self-esteem and self-confidence. This is demonstrated through improved problem solving, coping techniques and more appropriate classroom behaviors. Improved behavior attributed to positive peer pressure, clearly defined roles for the collaborating teachers, and strong discipline role models. When compared to non-included peers, included children participate in more extra curricular activities.

For most starters, initial contact with individuals with disabilities first occurred in the routine activities of the typical elementary, middle, and secondary school setting. It was in this setting that students with special needs and typical peers mutually benefited from the inclusive classroom setting. The advantage the typical child receives consists of a wider variety of friendships, an appreciation that everyone is unique, a respect for diversity, and a feeling of empowerment to make a difference (Raschke & Bronson, 1999).

Walther-Thomas, Korinek, and McLaughlin (1997) suggest there are mutual benefits for all students. Benefits to students with special needs include increased peer acceptance, improved self-concept, and improved academic performance. In turn, the general education students have demonstrated improved academic performance, improved social skills, and more positive classroom communities when classes are inclusive programs. By enabling all learners to live and survive in the real world, we may be developing a new generation of empathetic individuals who choose to become future special educators.

To recruit non-traditional students, those not entering directly out of high school, recruiters might address parent groups within local chapters of The Autism Society, The Down's Syndrome Association of America, or the Association for Retarded Citizens (ARC). This plan would in effect target potential special education candidates over the age of 35 and if combined with, the third most important influence for starters, tuition and scholarship incentives prove a powerful persuasive factor.

This plan correlates with other studies on recruitment that determined monetary incentives were more important to older females from local rural communities (Tyler, Cantou-Clarke, Easterling, & Klepper, 2003).

University campus special educators interested in increasing enrollment might benefit from inviting members of these high school peer support groups to interact with university organizations such as Student Council for Exceptional Children or campus Best Buddies. Offering scholarships based on service to the disability community would be an added incentive for choosing a special education major. Crutchfield (1997) in a report entitled, "Who's Teaching Our Children with Special Needs," stated that people aspiring to become special educators either know from an early age that this is their destiny, realize a mission to work with children having disabilities, or respond to meaningful contact with persons with disabilities as they were growing up. Experiences such as working at summer camps for children with disabilities (i.e., long-term service support) helped the prospective educator to see the value of each person and the challenges and reward of working with groups of children who have special needs. University recruitment drives for potential special education majors potentially strengthen when focused upon the volunteers and staff at summer camps, riding academies for individuals with special needs, or interactive service groups such as Cincinnati's Renegade Garage Players.

Brownell, Bishop, and Sindelar (2005) determined that to increase the supply of special educators in any given geographical location we must consider the principle of location specific human capital. Under this principle, there is an increased likelihood that individuals will remain in a given community or one similar to home after completing college. School districts, where there exist critical shortages of special educators, might encourage and reward the active local high school special educator who is a visible presence as a leader in high school peer support committees and activities. These special educators directly influence the consideration of special education as a profession by local students, students most likely to return to the community as special educators.

Transfers

Transfers are students originally enroll in another major. Transfers into special education were 51% of our respondents. The majority of transfers into special education (38%) are from students already enrolled in an education major (all levels of general education or early childhood). As can be seen from Figure 1, the prime time to influence transfers into special education is towards the end of the first year or at the beginning of the sophomore year. Data indicated that most transfer students were aware of their interest in special education before they arrived at the university (Figure 3) even though they chose other; therefore, reaching these students during their sophomore year is critical to the increase of special education majors. Rosenkoetter et al. (2004) found that successful in-house recruitment concentrated on undergraduates and used job opportunity information to encourage transfers.

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Our study determined that media presentations were a more effective recruitment tool for the transfer students than the starter.

Media presentations highlighting special education as a career choice, made during the first semester of an education-major's sophomore year, has the best potential to effect career change. These video presentations might be part of an overall university career day and shown in the student commons area. Presentations should highlight both job opportunity and the intrinsic benefits of a career in special education.

Business majors (14% of respondents) transferring into special education possibly use this teaching field as a "stepping stone" profession into administration (Marsoi & Pigge, 1994). Before entering educational management curriculum, most universities require a minimum of three years classroom experience. With the shortage of special educators nationwide, a job in special education might be more readily available. Recruiting might focus on media presentations targeting this group specifically. In the end, special education might benefit from having administrators who are knowledgeable and empathetic to the field of special education. In the short run, the transfer into administration most likely involves coursework taken while working as a special educator extending the time directly teaching to seven years.

Both transfers and starters saw contact with individuals with special needs as the most influential method of recruitment. Therefore, forming an alliance with the local high school and bringing events to the university campus that encourage friendship formation, supportive interactions, or committee work with individuals having a disability might be a very effective recruitment tool. Other groups such as Cincinnati's Renegade Garage Players have activities that draw together adult individuals of different abilities and talents to put on events such as plays. Hosting and promoting events that encourage all students on campus to interact with individuals with special needs promotes understanding, equity, respect, as it sublimely encourages individuals to consider special education as a career pathway. Having promotional material that highlights scholarship and career opportunities with the personal touch of a special education program recruiter at such events is just good marketing.

Transfer students indicated that scholarships were not a powerful influence their choice to become a special education major. It is our contention that each campus addresses the types of scholarships offered to sophomore students considering transferring into special education. For example, sophomore students who work on campus as peer tutors or who participate in local Special Olympics have already decided that they wish to help others with special needs. Offering scholarship opportunity to these service oriented individuals is a strategy supported by the results of this study.

Future Research

A full understanding of enrollment in special education programs would require data on individual students, term by term through their college years. Future

research might consider such a complete description; this description would compare starters, transfers into and out of special education, to a normative sample of general education major. Policy decision regarding the methods of recruitment used for special education might benefit from an investigation into the cost effectiveness incentives. A federal initiative promoting the addition of peer support as an essential, organized component of any individualized education plan for students with disabilities would benefit the students with disabilities as it helped to combat national teacher shortages in special education.

Limitations of Study

The return rate of surveys was lower than anticipated even taking into account the low enrollment overall in special education. The survey was part of an overall program assessment of these universities funded by the Texas Regent's Initiative. The low return rate from all 8 participating universities was possibly a byproduct of distribution during summer session with fewer students and reduced course loads for the participating professors. It is also possible that faculty who did not participate in the survey were not willing to have their university rated by their students on recruitment strategies. Reminder notices sent to individual campus directors each addressed the assessment's importance to the Texas Regent's Initiative.

Additionally, it needs to be noted that recruitment strategies do not operate in a vacuum. Many contextual factors that were not measured, such as the influence of teachers, counselors, parents, and friends, interact with recruitment strategies to influence a student's decision to pursue a career in special education. It is unknown to what extent these forces were operating for the respondents.

Finally, it should be noted that little demographic information was collected on the individual respondents. This is unfortunate given the current focus in education on recruiting individuals from minority backgrounds. More demographic information about the individuals would be useful for additional analyses that might indicate which recruitment strategies work best for particular minority groups.

Overall, this study identified the success or failure of recruitment strategies employed by eight Texas universities to increase interest in the major of special education at the undergraduate level. Analyses of student opinions indicated that contact with individuals with disabilities and participation in peer-support groups for individuals with disabilities were the most important determinants of their choice to pursue a major in special education. Results also indicate that recruiting already enrolled college students to transfer into the special education major should focus on media presentations that encourage education, business, and early childhood development majors to switch into special education. The survey results in this study are not unique to the eight universities and the Texas Regent's Initiative recruitment drive. Implementing the results of data driven decision-making based on the effectiveness of university recruitment practices is one way to combat the national shortage in certified special educators.

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