

Special Education Teacher Certification Survey: The “All-University” Report

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Introduction

In 2001, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) began providing funds to nine universities in The Texas A&M University System (TAMUS) to study the recruitment and retention of Texas special education teachers. Currently, the State of Texas Special Education Recruitment and Retention Grant is housed at Texas A&M University-Texarkana (TAMU-T) and involves the nine TAMUS universities originally involved in the project as well as four non-TAMUS universities added to the project in the 2007-2008 academic year. Table 1 provides a list of participating universities.

Table 1. University Participants in The Special Education and Recruitment Grant

Midwestern State University	Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi*
Prairie View A&M University*	Texas A&M University-Kingsville*
Stephen F. Austin State University	Texas A&M University-Texarkana*
Tarleton State University*	Texas Southern University
Texas A&M International University*	Texas Woman’s University
Texas A&M University*	West Texas A&M University*
Texas A&M University-Commerce*	

*A member of The Texas A&M University System and an original grant participant

The overall goals of this grant are to:

- Increase the number of teachers entering special education certification programs
- Increase the retention rates of special education teachers who enter the teaching profession
- Define the most effective recruitment and retention strategies for Texas special education teachers

In July 2007, TAMU-T engaged the West Texas Office of Evaluation and Research (WTER) at West Texas A&M University (WTAMU) to provide external evaluation services for this grant. WTER provides a multi-disciplinary approach to evaluation through its research associates who are WTAMU faculty holding doctorates in statistics, political science, education, and communication and staff having K-16 mathematics and science teaching experience as well as experience directing K-12 projects funded by the National Science Foundation.

One objective of the external evaluation provided by WTER is to identify factors that influence pre-service teachers' decisions about seeking special education teacher certification. WTER Associate Director Judy Kelley and WTER Research Associates John David Rausch and Jarvis Hampton worked with project management to develop a survey instrument addressing this objective and other related issues. Hampton created the online version of the survey that was made available for administration at the thirteen participating universities. WTER Research Associate Jessica Mallard assisted Kelley, Rausch, and Hampton with the analysis of the survey data.

This "all-university" report presents the overall findings of the survey. Data in this report are not disaggregated by university, but the number of survey respondents from each university is provided. Additional reports have been developed to provide each participating university a comparison between the data submitted by its students and the aggregate data from all survey respondents.

Methodology

WTER conducted a series of conference calls with TAMU-T Project Director Vickie Higgins before developing the first draft of survey questions. TAMU-T reviewed

this draft and suggested some changes. After revisions were made and approved by TAMU-T, WTER Research Associates pre-tested the survey with eight WTAMU pre-service teachers. These students offered suggestions to improve and clarify the survey questions. After additional revisions to the survey were completed, IRB approval was obtained from WTAMU, TAMU-T and the other participating universities.

On September 26, 2007, during a videoconference organized by TAMU-T for representatives from all participating universities, WTER shared the survey instrument and presented the plan for its administration. Participating universities agreed to provide potential survey respondents information about the survey and instructions for accessing the survey through the project website, beaspecialeducator.com. Targeted survey respondents were individuals who were at least 18 years of age and were seeking initial teacher certification through traditional, post-baccalaureate, or alternative programs as well as those individuals already certified who were seeking additional certifications. The timeline for administration of the survey was also discussed at this videoconference.

On October 26, 2007, the TAMU-T Project Director sent each participating university a sample message developed by WTER to use in notifying their students about the survey. The online survey officially opened on October 29, 2007, with a planned closing of November 12, 2007. WTER also created web-based access for project management and participating universities to monitor survey submissions. Having real-time submission data allowed timely actions to be taken to encourage survey participation at each site. As the TAMU-T Project Director contacted universities whose response rate was lower than expected, she learned about delays in notifying

students about the survey. Because of these unexpected delays, the online survey closing was extended to November 20, 2007.

During the period when students were being notified about the survey, WTER associates were surprised to learn that not every participating university had quick access to the email addresses of students seeking teacher certification. WTER also learned that even if access to students' university email addresses was available, a problem of communication may still exist since many students do not regularly use their university email addresses. This difficulty in providing students with information about the survey was not anticipated in the planning of the survey administration and must be addressed with future surveys.

Cleaning the Dataset

Survey respondents were asked to confirm that they were at least 18 years of age. Because of regulations governing research on persons under age 18, participation in the survey was limited to those students who were at least 18 years of age. There were 15 respondents who either did not answer this age question or indicated that they were not at least 18 years old. These respondents were removed from the dataset before any further analysis was conducted.

Respondents were asked to describe their path to teacher certification. One of the choices was "I am not seeking any type of teacher certification." Even though the survey was directed to students seeking certification, 24 respondents indicated that they were not seeking any type of teacher certification. Because this research seeks to understand the factors that lead a student to seek certification in the field of special

education, the 24 respondents who were not seeking any type of teacher certification were removed from further analysis.

Additional review of the data revealed five respondents who had submitted their surveys twice. Duplicate surveys were deleted from the dataset. The cleaned dataset includes the responses of 803 students who were at least 18 years of age and seeking teacher certification.

Responses were submitted by students from 12 of the 13 participating universities. Ten respondents did not indicate their university. Table 2 provides a breakdown of the 803 respondents by university.

Table 2. Number of Respondents By University Where Enrolled (N = 803)

University	Number Respondents
Prairie View A&M University	62
Stephen F. Austin State University	44
Tarleton State University	82
Texas A&M International University	21
Texas A&M University	56
Texas A&M University-Commerce	131
Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi	19
Texas A&M University-Kingsville	32
Texas A&M University-Texarkana	38
Texas Southern University	94
Texas Woman's University	59
West Texas A&M University	155
University Not Identified	10
Total	803

Data Analysis

WTER used SPSS 15.0 as a data analysis tool. Two WTER Associates independently reviewed the responses to open-ended questions and created lists of categories to use in coding the data. They discussed their individual lists of categories and agreed on the categories for coding the responses. Then, they worked together to code the responses to the open-ended questions.

During the coding process, they discovered a problem in responses to questions asking when students decided to either seek or not seek special education certification. Some respondents answered this “when” question with a time, but others provided an event that influenced their decision without any reference to when the event occurred. Because of the differences in interpretation of this question, inferences based on the responses could be misleading. Therefore, no data will be reported for this question.

Demographics and Other Characteristics of Survey Respondents

Survey respondents were asked to provide their age. (Respondents who were not at least 18 years of age were removed from data analysis when the dataset was cleaned.) There were 23 of the 803 respondents who did not provide their age, and their non-response was coded as a missing value. The age of respondents to this question ranged from 18 to 65 with a modal age of 21 (116 respondents or 14.9 percent of the 780 respondents to this question). The mean age was 28.5 years with a standard deviation of 9.4 years. Slightly more than 50 percent of the respondents to this question were 20 to 25 years of age and 75 percent were younger than 34.

Almost all the respondents were female (702 of the 791 respondents who indicated their gender or 88.7 percent). Twelve respondents did not answer the gender

question and were coded with a missing value. This pattern of primarily female respondents was consistent across all the participating universities with the percentage of female respondents ranging from 76.8 to 100.0 percent.

Table 3 presents data on the ethnic and racial diversity of the respondents. The distribution of respondents' race/ethnicity seemed to reflect the major racial/ethnic student subpopulations at their universities.

Table 3. Race/Ethnicity of Respondents (N = 789*)

Race or Ethnicity	Percent Reporting
Asian	0.9
African American	20.5
Hispanic	14.7
Native American	0.3
White	61.6
Other	2.0

*Fourteen respondents did not select any category and were coded as missing.

Respondents also were asked about their classification or year in school. Table 4 presents this information. Most of the respondents were senior-level students. The lack of respondents in the Freshman and Sophomore categories could reflect the fact that some education programs do not allow students to enter until they have achieved at least Junior status.

Table 4. Classification of Respondents (N = 790*)

Classification or Year in School	Percent Reporting
Freshman	1.0
Sophomore	4.9
Junior	26.1
Senior	45.4
Already have an undergraduate degree	22.5

*Thirteen respondents did not select any category and were coded as missing.

The survey also asked respondents to identify the level of certification they were seeking. They could choose from: Early Childhood–Grade 4; Grades 4–8; Grades 8–12; and All Levels (Early Childhood–Grade 12). Each level was indicated by at least ten percent of the respondents, but almost half of the respondents were seeking certification for Early Childhood–Grade 4. The responses are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Level of Teacher Certification Sought by Respondents (N = 787*)

Level of Certification Sought	Percent Reporting
Early Childhood–Grade 4	47.3
Grades 4-8	18.8
Grades 8-12	11.7
All Levels (Early Childhood–Grade 12)	22.2

*Sixteen respondents did not select any category and were coded as missing.

The respondents were asked to describe their path to teacher certification by selecting from five different, specific ways that teachers are certified in Texas. Table 6 provides the responses to this question. Clearly the majority of respondents were undergraduate students seeking teacher certification through a traditional bachelor’s degree program.

Table 6. Path to Teacher Certification Taken by Respondents (N = 802*)

Path	Percent Reporting
I am an undergraduate student seeking teacher certification through a bachelor’s degree program.	76.2
I already have a degree and am seeking teacher certification through an alternative certification program.	10.8
I already have a degree and am seeking teacher certification through a <i>post bac</i> program.	5.1
I already have a degree and am seeking teacher certification through a graduate program.	4.5
I am already a certified teacher and am seeking additional certification(s).	3.4

*One respondent did not select any category and was coded as missing.

Survey respondents were also asked to indicate whether they were seeking special education teacher certification. Of the 781 respondents who answered this question, 572 (73.2 percent) indicated they were not seeking special education certification.

There does not appear to be a relationship between the path to certification and the decision to seek special education certification. Almost 28 percent of the respondents whose path to certification was through a bachelor’s degree program were seeking special education certification, and slightly more than 28 percent of those in alternative certification programs were seeking special education certification.

Respondents’ Experiences with Individuals Who Have Special Needs

Respondents were asked whether they had experience working with individuals who have special needs, and 585 of 782 respondents (74.8 percent) indicated they had such experiences. These respondents were then asked to describe their experiences. Five categories were used to code these responses. Table 7 provides information related to respondents’ experiences with individuals who have special needs.

Table 7. Experiences with Individuals Who Have Special Needs (N = 509*)

Experiences	Percent Reporting
Work experiences as substitute teachers, teacher aides/assistants/paraprofessionals, day care workers, or service providers for individuals with special needs	41.9
Family member or friend with special needs	14.7
Volunteer work with special needs individuals or organizations	12.2
Pre-service teacher experiences	6.5
Quality of their experiences was valuable and/or enjoyable	24.8

*585 respondents indicated they had experiences with individuals who have special needs and 509 of the 585 provided details about their experiences.

A large number of respondents to this “experience” question just addressed the quality of their experiences and described them as enjoyable and valuable. Because of this response category, care should be taken in interpreting the data in this table. For example, a respondent who described the quality of the experience may have a family member with special needs. Therefore, the number of respondents with special needs family members may be understated.

A more detailed examination of the 213 respondents whose experiences were related to “work” revealed that 54 respondents indicated they were teacher aides, assistants, or paraprofessionals. Of these 54 respondents, 28 (51.9 percent) were seeking special education certification. Of the 209 respondents seeking special education certification, at least 28 (13.4 percent) were teacher aides, assistants, or paraprofessionals. The project may need to consider teacher aides, assistants, and paraprofessionals as good prospects for special education teacher recruitment efforts.

Cross-tabulation analysis of the data indicated 780 survey respondents provided answers to questions related to (1) having experience with individuals with special needs and (2) seeking special education certification. Of the 209 respondents seeking special education certification, 91.8 percent indicated they had experiences working with individuals with special needs. When asked to describe their experiences, 41.5 percent (73 of 176 respondents) referred to “work” experiences as substitute teachers, teacher aides/assistants/paraprofessionals, day care workers, or service providers for individuals with special needs. A much smaller percentage of the 572 respondents who were not seeking special education certification (68.5 percent) had experiences working with individuals with special needs.

Factors Encouraging or Discouraging Pursuit of Special Education Certification

Respondents were given six statements related to factors that might either encourage or discourage an individual from seeking special education certification. For each statement, they were asked to indicate the best descriptor of their agreement or disagreement. Table 8 summarizes respondents' levels of agreement/disagreement with each statement.

Table 8. Factors Encouraging and Discouraging Special Education Certification

Statement	Percent Reporting				
	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
My education adviser has given me information about special ed certification. (N = 775*)	17.3	26.2	20.1	24.4	12.0
Education professors have provided me with information about special ed certification. (N = 777*)	18.5	35.5	18.8	19.0	8.1
None of my education professors have encouraged me to consider special ed certification. (N = 775*)	7.7	19.5	21.7	29.4	21.7
Members of my family have suggested that I consider special ed certification. (N = 775*)	10.5	19.5	22.3	27.7	20.0
Some of my friends have encouraged me to become a special ed teacher. (N = 772*)	10.8	22.3	19.4	30.1	17.5
At least one of my K-12 teachers encouraged me to think about being a special ed teacher. (N = 772*)	7.9	18.4	18.8	33.8	21.1

* The number of respondents to these questions varied. If no response was given, the data were coded as missing.

When reflecting on the data in the previous table about providing special education certification information, it is important to remember that approximately one quarter of the survey respondents indicated they were seeking special education certification. These respondents should have received information about special education teacher certification and were likely to have received encouragement for seeking this certification. Since 43.5 percent of the respondents indicated they received

information about special education certification from their education advisers and 54.0 percent from education professors, there were some students receiving information about special education who were not choosing this certification. Of course, there was no indication from these responses as to whether the information provided was positive or negative toward the field. However, slightly more than 50 percent of the respondents expressed some level of disagreement with the statement “None of my education professors have encouraged me to consider special education certification.”

It is important to point out that 36.4 percent of the respondents reported not getting information about special education certification from their advisers and 27.1 percent did not get this kind of information from education professors. In reviewing this data, universities should determine if they have a broader audience to reach with their special education recruitment efforts.

Data from this table also provide some insight into the encouragement provided by family members, friends, and K-12 teachers for pursuit of special education certification. Only 30.0 percent of respondents indicated family members suggested they consider special education certification. Respondents reported a similar level (33.1 percent) of encouragement about this certification from their friends. Even fewer respondents (26.3 percent) indicated encouragement from any of their K-12 teachers. This low level of encouragement from individuals who could have influence over pre-service teachers’ choices about certification points to the possible need for greater public awareness related to special education teaching careers.

When asked if anyone had discouraged them from seeking special education certification, 82.2 percent of the 770 respondents answered “No.” The 137 respondents

who had been discouraged from pursuing this certification were asked to identify who discouraged them. Table 9 provides data related to these sources of discouragement identified by survey respondents.

Table 9. Sources of Discouragement for Pursuit of Special Education Certification (N = 130*)

Sources of Discouragement	Percent Reporting
Friends	31.5
Non-special education teachers	23.8
Special education teachers	22.3
Family members	19.2
University professors or advisers	3.1

*137 respondents indicated they had been discouraged from seeking special education certification and 130 of the 137 indicated the source of this discouragement.

Teachers were identified by 46.1 percent of the 130 respondents as a source of discouragement for their pursuit of special education certification. This reported level of negativity from teachers should be of concern to this project which focuses on recruitment and retention of special education teachers. Further investigation is needed before conclusions about teacher attitudes can be made and appropriate project actions can be implemented.

Reasons Respondents Chose Special Education

When respondents were asked whether they were seeking special education teacher certification, 209 indicated they were pursuing this certification. These respondents were then asked to explain why they wanted to be certified in special education. Table 10 provides respondents' reasons for choosing special education certification.

Table 10. Respondents' Reasons for Pursuit of Special Education Certification (N = 186*)

Reasons for Pursuing Special Education Certification	Percent Reporting
Have a personal commitment to make a difference for special education students	69.9
Have the personal characteristics needed to be a good special education teacher	11.8
Believe there is a need for special education teachers	7.5
Will help me to be a better teacher	6.5
Will make me more marketable as a teacher	4.3

*209 respondents indicated they were seeking special education certification and 186 of the 209 provided the reason for pursuing this certification.

Reasons Respondents Did Not Choose Special Education Certification

The 572 respondents who indicated that they were not seeking special education teacher certification were asked to explain why they made this choice. Table 11 provides respondents' reasons for not choosing to seek special education certification.

Table 11. Respondents' Reasons for Not Pursuing Special Education Certification (N = 500*)

Reasons for Not Pursuing Special Education Certification	Percent Reporting
Have no interest in special education teacher certification	24.0
Would be too overwhelming, too challenging, and/or too much work	23.8
Want to teach in a specific content area or age group	21.2
Have not received any information about special ed certification and/or have never even considered the possibility	16.0
Will not get special education certification now, but may pursue it in the future	8.6

Table 11. Respondents' Reasons for Not Pursuing Special Education Certification (N = 500*)

Reasons for Not Pursuing Special Education Certification	Percent Reporting
Do not have the time or money for the extra classes needed for special education certification	4.8
Would not be a good career move/would always "get stuck" teaching special education	1.2

*572 respondents indicated they were not seeking special education certification and 500 of the 572 provided the reason for not pursuing this certification.

Having 16.0 percent of respondents identify lack of information and/or thought as a reason for not seeking special education certification should be an area of concern for this project. Further investigation is needed as to whether a better awareness of special education certification would change individuals' decisions about not seeking this certification.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The survey discussed in this report collected a large amount of data from each respondent. Because of the large volume of data collected, several key conclusions can be drawn from the analysis presented.

The dissemination of information about special education teacher certification is important not only to potential special education teachers but also to individuals who influence these potential teachers. The type of information disseminated should be appropriate for the targeted audience. Increasing the pool of individuals who consider special education teacher certification is a first step in increasing the number of special education teachers. Maximizing encouragement for and minimizing discouragement of pursuit of special education teacher certification is another important step in the process of increasing the number of special education teachers.

Experience with individuals who have special needs is an important factor in influencing decisions to seek special education teacher certification. Survey data revealed that a large percentage of respondents seeking special education certification had experiences with individuals with special needs. The reason given by a majority of respondents for seeking special education certification was a personal commitment to make a difference for students with special needs. Individuals' experiences influence the commitments they feel.

Based on the data collected from this survey and the conclusions drawn, WTER makes the following recommendations for consideration by project management.

- Work with participating universities to expand efforts to disseminate information about special education teacher certification to more pre-service teachers.
- Identify and implement strategies for increasing public awareness of opportunities for experiences with individuals with special needs.
- Identify and implement strategies for increasing public awareness of information related to special education teacher certification.
- Identify recruitment strategies that take advantage of special education experiences of teacher aides, assistants, and paraprofessionals.
- Identify strategies for enhancing and expanding opportunities for experiences with individuals with special needs.
- Gather more information about in-service teacher attitudes toward special education teacher certification.
- Explore the connections between pre-service teacher awareness of special education certification and the decision to seek this certification.

- Modify strategies for distribution of future pre-service teacher surveys to obtain more diverse participation at each university that is representative of the student population served as well as the special education/non-special education pre-service teacher ratio.