

# Empowering Our Future: Integrating Advocacy into Special Education Coursework

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## ABSTRACT

Becoming a special education teacher encompasses more than just learning how to teach. A large component of this position requires advocacy at the local, state, and national levels. Therefore, special education teachers need to be prepared to effectively advocate across all levels. This article examines the integration of advocacy into an undergraduate special education course and provides actionable recommendations. Implications for further integrating advocacy into special education teacher preparation programs are also discussed.

## KEYWORDS

**Advocacy, policy, special education, undergraduate education**

*It is the first day of classes at her university, and first-year undergraduate student, Madison, is excited! She has always dreamed of becoming a teacher, and has recently decided to pursue a credential in special education. Madison found a passion for working with students with disabilities when she volunteered with her high school's Best Buddies program chapter. Through this experience, Madison realized similarities and differences in her educational experience versus that of other students both with and without disabilities. She is curious how this will be represented in her coursework.*

*Meanwhile, Dr. Harper is putting the finishing touches on her materials for the first day of class. This term, Dr. Harper was tasked with creating the first undergraduate course focused on inclusive special education at her institution. Housed in the School of Education, this course was open to students within the School of Education as well as students with majors throughout the university. Dr. Harper is excited because there is a diverse population of majors and years of students, most of which are planning on careers in education. She hopes this course will instill the importance of advocacy to all students.*

The field of special education was born out of advocacy—an activity used by individuals or groups to influence policy and practice—and it is the professional responsibility of all special education teachers to continue to advocate (Fisher & Miller, 2021; Nagro et al., 2018). Special education teachers face challenges rooted in inequities based on race, socioeconomic status, and disability (Bettini et al., 2024). As such, special education teachers are required to enact advocacy efforts to challenge these deficit views and meet these challenges. The Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) professional ethical principles and practice standards call for special educators to advocate for high expectations, inclusive education, safe, supportive, and culturally responsive learning environments, equitable policy, appropriate and supportive working environments and resources, professional development, the use of evidence-based practices, and opportunities to collaborate (CEC, 2015). To meet these advocacy needs, special educators must have a strengths-based perspective of their students, knowledge of their local education system's policies and practices, awareness that these contexts are malleable, and a belief in their own capacity as an agent of change (Li & Ruppert, 2020). In order

## FIGURE 1: TED Talk Assignment Instructions

### Final Paper & Presentation – TED Talk: Inclusive Education Utopia

Your final project for this class is to develop a TED Talk in which you make an argument about what constitutes an ideal inclusive classroom or school community and why this is good for kids with disabilities. The script you construct for your TED Talk is your final paper for this class and your TED Talk is your final presentation.

It is imperative that you have a thesis and make an argument in your TED Talk. You should not just be summarizing - what is your **novel idea** about inclusion? How does it benefit students with disabilities?

Guiding questions:

- What do you believe are the key components of an effective inclusive school community, and why?
- What are beliefs, policies, instructional practices, etc. that are harmful to an inclusive school community?
- How does inclusion contribute to a more equitable learning community and society?
- Who does inclusion serve? How does it do so?

This is an opportunity to synthesize the information you've learned and the discussions you've had to create the ideal inclusive educational environment, whatever that means to you. What you write and speak about should be based in theory and/or research— please utilize the resources we discuss in class! You should also feel free to utilize resources outside of our class content. Please refer to both the [Presentation rubric](#) and the [Paper Rubric](#) consistently as you develop your project.

Some example thesis statements (we will discuss thesis writing more in class!):

*Note: These are purposefully outrageous or about topics we didn't discuss much so as not to inadvertently limit the topic of your thesis statements*

- Effective parent collaboration and teacher professional development initiatives are essential components in the successful implementation of inclusive education.
- The implementation of daily, timed assessments in curriculum and classroom instruction is fundamental to creating an inclusive education system that holds all students accountable to the highest academic and behavioral standards.
- Leaders of a truly inclusive educational environment must ensure reliable and high-quality technology access for all students. Additionally, teachers must receive continuous and adequate professional development in order to effectively harness AT, AI, and other technologies to enhance instruction, not replace it.

The one thing all TED Talks have in common is that they are delivered by people who are passionate about and believe in what they are saying. Make sure that comes across in your TED Talk!

#### TED Talk Paper Guidelines

Your TED Talk script should be 6-8 pages, double-spaced, using a [sans serif font](#) (approximately size 12). Use APA formatting and include a References page. Please reach out to me if these guidelines are not accessible to you!

Your paper **must** make an argument about what constitutes an ideal inclusive classroom or school community and how this enhances the education for students with disabilities. You must have relevant and quality evidence and/or theory to support your thesis statement! If your thesis centers around instruction, you might use evidence related to EBPs, UDL, and/or co-teaching, but maybe not the transition to college, for example.

Other components you may want to address depending on your argument:

- Qualities of an inclusive teacher and/or qualities of an inclusive classroom community
  - What do you see and hear in an inclusive classroom?
  - What should students feel?
- Strategies to create an inclusive classroom community
- Explanation of the 3 UDL principles and how you plan to use them consistently
- Curricular materials and instruction
- Disrupting ableism on a whole-school level
- Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline for students with disabilities
- Policy and Advocacy work
- Considerations for specific populations (e.g., Black boys with autism)
- Proposed Physical layout of the classroom and/or school building
  - Provide a visual (not included in page count), as well as a description in words

#### TED Talk Presentation Guidelines

Your TED Talk should be between 6-8 minutes. You will assume the role of an invited speaker at a TED conference, and your classmates will be your audience.

\*Please refer to both the [Presentation rubric](#) and the [Paper Rubric](#) consistently as you develop your project. These rubrics are both on BruinLearn\*

to uphold these ethical principles and practice standards and effectively advocate, special education teachers need to be adequately prepared.

Encouraging special educators to enact change through advocacy dictates that university coursework, especially within teacher preparation programs, be explicit in advocacy instruction. Coursework should be intentional in the provision of advocacy related practice-based learning opportunities for pre-service teachers. This article provides one such example of advocacy integration and practice-based learning opportunities in an undergraduate course, actionable strategies to build pre-service teachers' advocacy knowledge and skills, and implications for incorporating advocacy into teacher preparation coursework.

## ADVOCACY IS A THEME, NOT A LESSON

Similar to advocacy work, developing a higher education course can be arduous. As demonstrated in the following course example within this article, synthesizing the most important concepts, strategies, tools, and lessons on inclusive special education into a quarter or semester can be a challenge but it is important to center advocacy in the course. In this example five-credit undergraduate education course, entitled “All Means All: Inclusive Teaching for Students with Disabilities,” only one week is devoted to policy due to time constraints. This course meets once a week for three hours over the 10-week term, and satisfies both a general education requirement and an advanced writing requirement. Mini-lessons on the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) are sprinkled throughout the course, with advocacy remaining as a consistent theme each week. In turn, advocacy was effectively a theme throughout the course rather than a standalone lesson or experience.

Having advocacy centered in the course should not only be reflected in content, but also in course structures, such as establishing learning goals indirectly or directly related to

**FIGURE 2:** Rubric for TED Talk Presentation

<b>Inclusion TED Talk - Presentation Rubric</b>			
<b>Criteria</b>	<b>Effectively Accomplished</b> <b>5 4</b>	<b>Partially accomplished</b> <b>3 2</b>	<b>Not accomplished</b> <b>1 0</b>
Attention Getter	Effective use of attention getting strategy (quote, statistic, question, story, etc.) to capture listeners' attention and to introduce topic. Attention getter is relevant and meaningful and seemed to gain the desired response from audience.	Use of relevant attention getting strategy, but did not seem to adequately capture audience attention and/or lead to desired outcome.	No attention getting strategy was evident. No clear or relevant connection to topic and/or speech purpose.
Thesis Statement	Speaker clearly formulated and stated thesis statement during the speech introduction. Thesis statement identifies topic and encompasses/previews main points.	Thesis is clearly implied, although not explicitly stated. Topic is clearly identified, but main points are not clearly previewed.	No thesis statement (implied nor explicit). Main points are not clearly identified, audience unsure of direction of the message.
Connection w/Audience	Thoughtful audience analysis reflected through language, tone, and interaction with audience. Clearly stated the relevance of topic to audience.	Some audience analysis reflected through language and tone. Topic seems somewhat relevant to audience, but not explicitly stated.	No attempt made to connect to audience OR ineffective tone and/or language for a TED Talk
Subject Knowledge	Depth of content reflects knowledge and understanding of topic. Main points adequately substantiated with timely, relevant and sufficient support. Provided accurate explanation of key concepts.	Provides some support for main points, but needed to elaborate further with explanations, examples, descriptions, etc. Support is relevant, but not timely.	Provides irrelevant or no support. Explanations of concepts are inaccurate or incomplete. Listeners gain little knowledge from presentation.
Organization	Uses effective organizational pattern for speech purpose. Main points are clearly distinguished from supporting details. Signposts are effectively used for smooth and coherent transitions.	General structure/organization seems adequate but some blurring between main points and supporting details. Logical flow, but no clear signposts for smooth transitions.	Lack of structure. Ideas are not coherent and transitions are forced or blurred. Difficult to identify introduction, body, and conclusion.
Logical appeal	Presents sound arguments to support major claim. Arguments are supported with sufficient, relevant and valid evidence. Reasoning is free of fallacies.	Some arguments are sufficiently supported but some unsupported assertions are also present. Minor reasoning fallacies.	Arguments lack relevant and valid evidence. Information is incorrect and/or outdated. Many fallacies are present in the reasoning.
Emotional appeal	Effectively and ethically appeals to audience emotions (anger, fear, compassion, etc.) to achieve the persuasive goal. Vivid and emotive language effectively used to create imagery to engage audience emotionally.	Appeals to audience emotions (anger, fear, compassion, etc.) to achieve the persuasive goal, but fails to observe ethical responsibilities. Creates some effective imagery through language.	Fails to appeal to audience emotions. No attempt to use vivid or descriptive language to capture audience emotions.

advocacy and assignment criteria. The learning goals for this example course are listed below:

1. Demonstrate dignity towards disabled students and people.
2. Critique the social institution of special education using critical disability studies theories and frameworks.
3. Analyze sources and data by evaluating them for their positionality, significance, reliability, and validity.
4. Apply critical reflection and thinking practices through multi-modal and traditional methods of written expression.
5. Understand writing as a recursive process that facilitates deep critical thinking and strengthens communicative practices.
6. Communicate effectively by writing clearly in an appropriate style and organizing relevant evidence in support of an argument.
7. Synthesize research, theory, and lived experience to argue for an ideal inclusive educational environment for students with and without a variety of disabilities.
8. Explore your unique role in the fight for educational equity and disability justice, while creating lasting relationships with and continuously learning from other allies.

Although not all of these learning goals are directly related to advocacy, many of them reflect the skills and mindsets needed to be an effective advocate in the future.

Beyond the course learning goals, ensuring aspects of advocacy were included in each lesson ultimately prepared students to create successful final projects. Instead of a traditional research paper, focusing on the history, descriptives, or implementation of a particular teaching method or model, students were asked to create a TED Talk-esque presentation and write a corresponding

**FIGURE 3:** Rubric for TED Talk Paper

Inclusion TED Talk - Paper Rubric			
Criteria	Effectively Accomplished 5 4	Partially accomplished 3 2	Not accomplished 1 0
Thesis Statement	Writer clearly formulated and stated a novel thesis statement during the introductory portion of the paper. Thesis statement identifies topic and encompasses/previews main points.	Thesis is clearly implied, although not explicitly stated. Topic is clearly identified, but main points are not clearly previewed. Thesis may be a summary of a commonplace argument.	No novel thesis statement (implied nor explicit). Main points are not clearly identified, audience unsure of direction of the message.
Attention to Audience	Thoughtful audience analysis reflected through language and tone. Clearly stated the relevance of topic to audience needs and interests.	Some audience analysis reflected through language and tone. Topic seems somewhat relevant to audience, but not explicitly stated.	Ineffective tone and/or language for a TED Talk that hinders the reader's ability to buy into main argument.
Subject Knowledge	Depth of content reflects knowledge and understanding of topic. Main points adequately substantiated with timely, relevant, and sufficient support. Provided accurate explanation of key concepts.	Provides some support for main points, but needed to elaborate further with explanations, examples, descriptions, etc. Support is relevant, but not timely.	Provides irrelevant or no support. Explanations of concepts are inaccurate or incomplete. Readers gain little new knowledge.
Organization	Uses effective organizational pattern for argumentative paper purposes. Main points are clearly distinguished from supporting evidence. Logical and coherent transitions.	General structure/organization seems adequate, but some blurring between main points and supporting details. Logical flow but lacks smooth transitions.	Lack of structure. Ideas are not coherent, and transitions are forced or blurred. Difficult to identify introduction, body, and conclusion.
Argument and Evidence	Presents sound arguments to support major claim. Arguments are supported with sufficient, relevant, and valid evidence.	Some arguments are sufficiently supported, but some unsupported assertions are also present.	Arguments lack relevant and valid evidence. Information is incorrect and/or outdated.
Counter Argument/Refutation	Balances a variety of perspectives and recognizes opposing views.	Fails to substantially acknowledge opposing perspectives.	One-sided argument. No other perspectives are considered.
Sources + Citations	Sources of information are clearly identified and properly cited. Contains both scholarly work and lived experiences as evidence.	Most sources are clearly cited. Contains both scholarly work and lived experiences as evidence.	Fails to identify and cite sources. May lack scholarly work or lived experience as evidence.
Attention to Editing	Few spelling, grammar, syntax, or diction errors.	Spelling, grammar, syntax, or diction errors are not uncommon. This may impact the readability of the TED talk.	Many spelling, grammar, syntax, or diction errors. This impacts the readability of the TED talk.

paper in which they were tasked with arguing a position (any position) about inclusive education. Specific assignment instructions can be reviewed in Figure 1. Students had separate rubrics for both the TED Talk assignment and the related paper (as seen in Figures 2 and 3, respectively).

To ensure students were prepared to write high-quality papers and give persuasive TED Talks, the final assignment was scaffolded in smaller, intentional assignments throughout the course. Some of these assignments are explained in more detail in the following section about class lessons and assignments to build advocacy skills.

Scaffolding assignments in this way provides the instructor an opportunity to check for student understanding

during each step of the writing process, enabling the instructor to make changes to instruction for the following week, if needed. This structure also allows for students to receive meaningful and timely feedback on every piece of their paper, empowering them to incorporate instructor feedback for the next stage of the writing process.

*When considering how to frame this course, Dr. Harper knew advocacy had to be infused in both macro- and micro-level ways. In this way, students were engaging in advocacy processes while learning about the significance of advocacy in education.*

*Madison is enrolled in Dr. Harper's class and excited to engage in content focused on inclusive special education. As she looks over the syllabus, she notic-*

*es a focus in class content on advocacy. Madison wonders how advocacy skills will support her in becoming an impactful special education teacher.*

## **CLASS LESSONS AND ASSIGNMENTS TO BUILD ADVOCACY SKILLS: A MODEL COURSE**

Advocacy is a skill that must be taught, and previous research has demonstrated that advocacy skills can be taught to pre-service teachers (Holmes & Herrera, 2009). Some students are already effective orators, skilled in persuasion. Others, however, are initially uncomfortable with taking a stand on an issue or are unclear on how to best support their position. In this section, we detail a model course in which students

delved into advocacy. To both support students in developing an effective TED Talk and providing them with generalizable advocacy skills beyond the classroom, the course's syllabus contains several scaffolded opportunities for students to learn, practice, and refine their advocacy skills.

### Recurring Assignments

One of the ways student learning was scaffolded in this course was by providing recurring assignments that offered structure and familiarity to students while grappling with new concepts. For example, for each week of the course students were encouraged to watch a recommended TED Talk on topics such as restorative justice in juvenile courts to "making stress your friend." Although the subject of each TED Talk varied, they all contained a clear argument with the necessary evidence, credibility, and delivery to be persuasive. Not only would watching these talks help students better understand the structure and tone of a TED Talk, but this recurring assignment also supported students in better understanding key elements of advocacy – a clear position on a meaningful cause or policy and effective evidence supporting the argument – and the persuasive actions one can take to convince others to support their position.

Although the weekly TED Talk recommendations were just that, students were required to watch and analyze Edie Cusak's TED Talk entitled, "College - possible for students with intellectual disabilities" (TEDx Talks, 2017) as a class assignment during the eighth week of the course. Students dissected Cusak's use of visuals, explored the types of evidence she utilized, and ultimately determined how compelling her argument was. Finally, they identified what elements of her TED Talk they wanted to incorporate into their own.

Over the 10-week course, students were required to turn in five reflection assignments as after class post-work. Two of the five reflection assignments required students to develop and support an argument based on the class content for the week. The first of these reflections was assigned after Week Two's class and the second was assigned after Week Three's class. While the task for each reflection changed, the assignment directions remained largely unchanged throughout the term. The directions – "students should write 2 thoughtful pages (unless noted otherwise), double spaced, using a sans serif font (approximately size 12)" – were clear and simple to further illustrate the low-stakes nature of these writing exercises. Both in class and on their syllabus, students were told reflections are best completed soon after class, when the class material, discussions, and activities are still fresh in their minds. However, due to competing demands on their time, students had until the start of the next week's class to turn in their reflections through the university's learning management system.

All students received feedback on their reflections and were consistently encouraged to read the comments the instructor left. Students earned full points on reflection assignments if they followed the directions and answered the questions posed. It has been demonstrated that low stakes, write-to-learn assignments, such as the reflections described above, can lead to improved learning and retention of concepts (Gingerich et al., 2014; Stevenson, 2020).

*When developing this course, Dr. Harper acknowledged that the content could, at times, be uncomfortable for students. She decided to embed a familiar assignment structure along with frequent feedback in order to encourage participation from students and support their learning.*

### Special Education Law and Policy Assignment

During the third week of class, students were introduced to disability and special education law through a modified jigsaw activity. Active learning activities, such as the jigsaw, have been found to enhance critical thinking skills in college students (Rossi et al., 2021). As they entered class for the day, students were given a fidget of one of three colors (i.e., red, blue, or green). Students were allowed to self-select their groups, as student-selected groups perform on par with instructor-selected groups (Pociask et al., 2017). While students had autonomy in creating their groups, the instructor was also able to maintain some control by requiring groups to have three people with three different color fidgets.

Once in their jigsaw groups, students had a few minutes to collaborate and select one of five important cases in the history of special education law. Students were provided the following options: *P.A.R.C. v. Pennsylvania* (1972), *Mills v. Board of Education of District of Columbia* (1972), *Board of Education of the Hendrick Hudson School District v. Rowley* (1982), *Oberti v. Board of Education of the Borough of Clementon* (1993), and *Smith v. Los Angeles Unified School District* (1993). After selecting their desired case, groups were shown an example from which to model their work after, and the class reviewed various helpful resources, such as the [Oyez.org](https://www.oyez.org) and Disability Rights California websites. Equipped with assignment directions and appropriate resources, each group then researched their case and answered the required questions. The questions included the following: What was happening in society at this time? What was the context? What conditions led to this suit being brought? Who stood to gain and lose power in this case? Imagine what consequences/

**FIGURE 4:** In Class Debate Graphic Organizer

**Inclusive Education Debate Prep**

**Debate Format**

Team Affirmative opening statement (4 minutes)  
 Team Negative opening statement (4 minutes)

Team Affirmative rebuttal (5 minutes)  
 Team Negative rebuttal (5 minutes)

Team: \_\_\_\_\_

**Opening Statement**

Thesis/Argument:		
Key Evidence For:	Key Evidence For:	Key Evidence For:
Citation:	Citation:	Citation:

**Rebuttal**

Potential Counterargument: What do you think the other side will argue? How can you refute their argument?		
Potential Counterargument	Potential Counterargument	Potential Counterargument
How will we refute it?	How will we refute it?	How will we refute it?
Citation:	Citation:	Citation:

ramifications there could be for either side if the judge sided with the plaintiff. What about with the defense? How did the outcome of this case change individual lives? Education? Society? What tropes and/or common beliefs about disability are challenged by this case and its ruling? In what ways do you see the impact of this case’s decision in today’s society?

Towards the end of class, students dispersed from their jigsaw groups and joined a group with classmates who were given the same color fidget as they were (i.e., all students with red fidgets now became a group). In this group, every student represented each of the five different court cases and were able to report out to the other students in their group about their selected case.

**In Class Debate Activity**

Debate instruction has shown to improve college students’ critical thinking skills (Li et al., 2020; Oros, 2007), as well as improve students’ self-perceptions of their communication skills (Chikeleze et al., 2018; Zare & Othman, 2015). As such, Week Five was centered around an in-class debate on inclusive education. In preparation, students read and annotated an article arguing against full inclusion using the social annotation tool, Perusall, before coming to Week Five’s class. Perusall allows instructors to upload course readings to an online platform and then annotate the readings with comments or questions, directing the students to a particular concept or idea in the text. Instructors and students can see each other’s comments, questions, and responses in real time, so students are able to build off of their classmates’ ideas. The use of Perusall has been demonstrated to motivate students to engage with curriculum-based reading (Li & Li, 2023).

For this assignment, students were required to answer four questions that were posed about the article, paying particular attention to the argumentative structure and evidence the author used to argue her claim. The questions included the following: What elements of argumentation (discussed in Week 4) do you

see in this article? What evidence does the author use in this paragraph? What types of evidence does the author use or draw upon to sway her readers? (e.g., personal experience, empirical data, anecdotal stories, laws/legal precedence, etc.) In your own words, what is the author's stance/thesis on inclusive education? What were the author's best and worst pieces of evidence? How effective was the author's argument? After reading the article, how do you feel about inclusive education for students with disabilities?

At the start of class, students had an opportunity to review and summarize the article with their peers before engaging in a whole class discussion about it. This was done to help students recall the key arguments of the article before engaging in the debate. Students were then given the structure and rules of the debate, as well as the two positions: in favor of full inclusion (Team Affirmative) and against full inclusion (Team Negative). The latter position carried various meanings, including advocating for half-day inclusion or full inclusion only for certain populations. Students were randomly divided into two teams and provided a graphic organizer (see Figure 4 above) to collaborate on the evidence for their position, potential counterarguments the other team might utilize, and how to effectively rebut those counterarguments. In the debate, teams gave opening statements and rebuttal statements before the online contingent (students who were ill and participating in class via Zoom) determined a "winner."

During the debate debrief, students answered questions about the utility of the debate for their TED Talks and final paper, but also about the strength of the evidence each team presented and how well the evidence supported the claim. For example, students were asked to identify the strongest pieces of evidence

from each team and explain why these specific pieces of evidence were so integral to the overall argument. The debrief highlighted the dissatisfaction of some students on the negative team with this activity, as they felt they had less evidence from which to draw on as compared to the affirmative team and were arguing against their personal principles. However, the majority of students recognized the value of the debate in developing their advocacy skills. That is, most students generally agreed that the debate activity supported the development of the skills necessary for effective persuasion.

*Madison was struck by the debate activity in Dr. Harper's class. She had been assigned to debate with a position she did not agree with. However, she felt that by doing this it helped push her out of her comfort zone and forced her to think critically. She realized these skills will be crucial moving forward in her role as a special education teacher in order to advocate for students and compromise with stakeholders with opposing perspectives.*

### Wrapping and Stepping Up

Instruction for Week Nine was focused explicitly on special education policy and advocacy. The relevant learning outcomes for the week were as follows:

1. Students will be able to identify various key players and moments in disability advocacy history.
2. Students will be able to empathize with stakeholders in disability or special education advocacy and policy work.

For their pre-work to be completed before the start of the week's class, students were required to read, comment on, and answer questions about the article, "When to Hold 'Em and When to Fold' Em: Lessons Learned from Enacting the Americans with Disabilities Act" (Wright & West, 2002), using Perusall.

In answering the instructor-posed questions, students identified strategic actions they thought were most impactful for the eventual passage of the ADA, such as sharing the lived experiences written about in diaries and the importance of bipartisan support and champions on both sides of the aisle. Additionally, students were asked to envision life as a lobbyist and reflect on what organization or policy issue was important enough to them to consider a career in this field. They wrestled with the three principles the ADA coalition agreed to and whether they would have made the same decision. The reading provided students both important historical information on the passage of the ADA, but also demonstrated what successful advocacy could look like. In addition to the reading, students were also required to watch videos of the CEC Senior Advisor on Policy and Advocacy, Kuna Tavalin, explaining advocacy and the legislative process ahead of Week Nine's class.

Week Nine's class included a mini-lecture with an accompanying slide deck on the key moments and players in special education and disability advocacy. This included Judy Heumann's legacy, the 504 sit-ins, and the Capitol Crawl for ADA, in addition to the relevant committees, structures, and leaders in Congress. Students learned about the interplay among lobbyists, coalitions, advocates, and advocacy organizations. To demonstrate their understanding of these concepts, students wrote a short diary entry from the point of view of a disability advocate, congressperson, or special education lobbyist. The prompt for this in-class writing assignment is as follows: Write from the point of view of a disability advocate, congressperson, special education lobbyist, etc. in any time period you want, in any place you want. Who are you? What is your connection to disability? What views do you hold on disability rights?

**TABLE 1:** Ten Steps for Legislative Advocacy for Special Education Teachers

STEP #	STEP DESCRIPTION
1	Develop an advocacy mindset
2	Take a stance
3	Be active in advocacy organizations
4	Join social media groups
5	Connect with other special educators
6	Communicate effectively
7	Contact policy makers
8	Develop strong leadership skills
9	Stay informed
10	Stay engaged

Note. Adapted from "Legislative advocacy for special educators" by Fisher, K., & Miller, K. M. (2021), *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 53(3), 244-252.

What is going on in this time period in terms of disability rights? What is your involvement in disability rights? What role do you play? What are your responsibilities? What challenges are you facing? What successes are you having? What keeps you going?

### Final Project and Paper

During the final week of instruction, students in this course presented their TED Talks to their classmates and professor. During each presentation, students filled out Google Forms asking them to share a takeaway from the presentation, as well as positive feedback for the presenter, while the instructor graded the student based on the rubric (Figure 2). In this way, students received another round of feedback from both their peers and their instructor on the persuasiveness of their argument - a key element of advocacy. The TED Talk paper was due the following week, in lieu of a final exam, providing students one final evaluation of their ability to present a persuasive argument.

### Learning About Advocacy is the Beginning, Not the End

Advocacy in the field of special education is, and has always been, a neces-

sity. The course described in this article provides strategies and ideas for lessons that can be implemented into any special education credential or degree coursework. Further, while these lessons are not only important, they contain skills pre-service teachers *want* to learn. Advocacy, therefore, is not just important to teach for the future of the profession and for PreK-12 students with disabilities, but also because higher education students, including pre-service special education teachers, enjoy learning the skills needed to enact their agency and advocate for a better future.

Special education teachers can use their skills to engage in advocacy at different levels including their classrooms, schools, local communities, and states, as well as federally. Fisher and Miller (2021) provide insight for how to engage at the local, state, and federal levels, as well as ten steps for legislative advocacy for special educators. These steps are provided in Table 1, and are a helpful framework for in-service special education teachers and instructors responsible for creating courses in special education teacher preparation. The steps provided by Fisher and Miller (2011) help promote agency within special education

teachers. Relatedly, special educator teacher agency is a driving influence of teacher advocacy (Li & Ruppert, 2021). Taken together, agency and being well-equipped with skills and resources drive meaningful advocacy in special education, as they empower educators to take initiative, influence policy, and create positive change across various levels of the educational system.

*Leaving Dr. Harper's final class, Madison feels empowered to enter the special education teaching profession. In this course, she was reminded of the marginalization that students with disabilities often experience, and has begun to consider ways to mitigate and eventually eliminate this marginalization. Madison also feels that her argumentative writing and speaking skills have greatly improved as a result of this class, setting her up to be a successful advocate for her students in the future.*

*As the last students trickle out of her classroom, Dr. Harper can't help but smile. She is proud of the work students have done in her class this term. From learning about special education history and the policies that came out of it, to practicing argumentative writing and debating, and so much more, they are well positioned to begin advocating beyond her classroom and instead out into the world.*

### IMPLICATIONS

If knowledge and training on advocacy is not provided in preparation programs, special education teachers must rely on their innate abilities. Special education teachers, especially novice ones, already report their workloads as being unmanageable (Bettini et al., 2017). Providing adequate training and preparation in advocacy for special education teachers is one less thing that they would need to navigate on their own in the field. Relatedly, by integrating advocacy into coursework,

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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*Dr. Emily A. Frake (Ph.D., Baylor University) recently earned her Ph.D. in Special Education at a joint program with California State University, Los Angeles (CSULA) and University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). She is currently working as a postdoctoral researcher at the Baylor Center for Developmental Disabilities at Baylor University. Prior to pursuing her doctoral degree, Dr. Frake taught for eight years as an inclusive special educator in Los Angeles. Her research interests include inclusive postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities, as well as matters relating to disability culture, rights, justice, and advocacy.*

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this helps better prepare pre-service teachers to navigate systemic barriers that could impede on their work or their students' progress.

The course described in this article uses many interactive strategies to mirror real-world circumstances pre-service special education teachers may encounter. By using these strategies rather than ones that would be more traditional and potentially passive, this allowed students to practice and refine their skills in a structured, supportive environment. As such, the design and instruction within the course modeled instructional techniques that they could carry into their own practice along with the advocacy skills they were developing. Overall, coursework that is advocacy focused presents an opportunity to bridge the research-to-practice gap by having evidence-based practices, such as those showcased in this course, incorporated and used to influence school-based decision making along with corresponding policies. In addition, emphasizing that advocacy work takes time and meaningful relationships (Fisher & Miller, 2021) are important lessons that must work in tandem with evidence-based practices.

*After finishing her undergraduate degree and earning her special education teaching credential, Madison accepts a special education teacher position at a local elementary school. As the school year progresses, Madison finds herself having to advocate for her students to administrators who seem to lack knowledge about special education. Madison also feels like she is the only one continuously advocating for these students, despite the students interacting with multiple teach-*

*ers. It is clear to Madison that these other teachers have not been prepared to advocate like she was in Dr. Harper's class, making her feel somewhat alone in the fight. She remembers she is not, and Madison emails Dr. Harper seeking advice.*

*Just as she is about to close her laptop for the evening, Dr. Harper receives an email from her former student, Madison. In her email, Madison details the conundrum she is in with advocating for her students and feeling somewhat isolated in doing so. Dr. Harper is thankful Madison has reached out, and she recommends connecting with other special education teachers at their upcoming school district professional development day. It may be these other special education teachers have similar grievances to what Madison is feeling at her school, and Dr. Harper thinks in their shared community they can brainstorm solutions together and further organize advocacy efforts that may need to be taken to the school board. Dr. Harper also recommends that Madison reach out to her local and state chapters of the Council for Exceptional Children to engage with other special education professionals and gain access to more resources for both advocacy and knowledge building. Madison could bring these resources to her administrators to help them gain further understanding regarding special education, which seems like a need. Dr. Harper believes with increasing her connections both within her school district, local community, and state, as well as adding to the resources and information she has available to her and her school, Madison will effectively bolster her advocacy efforts.*

## CONCLUSION

Advocacy is intertwined in every facet of special education, including, importantly, how pre-service special education teachers are prepared. Coursework needs to have pre-service teachers actively engage in skills such as argumentative writing, debate, and policy analysis in order to cultivate advocacy and teacher agency. If this is not accomplished in a preparation, degree, or otherwise credentialing program, special education teachers enter the workforce without these crucial skills and knowledge that they need on the first day of their jobs to effectively advocate for their students. This article showcased an undergraduate class that can be used as a model for programs on integrating advocacy in their coursework. Ultimately, advocacy can and should be incorporated in every pre-service special educator course. While the topic of inclusive special education lends itself well to concurrent advocacy instruction, the primary content in the course described in this article was inclusive education and not about policy or advocacy. This distinction underscores that advocacy is not a standalone skill but an essential thread that can and should be seamlessly woven into the fabric of every course in a special education preparation program.

\*For access to the full syllabus of the example course described in this article, please contact the first author.

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