

From Classrooms to Capitol Hill: Special Education Doctoral Students in Advocacy and Policy

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ABSTRACT

As experts that have recently transitioned from practicing in the special education field, special education doctoral students are crucial levers that can influence special education policy and advocacy initiatives. This article details the unique role doctoral students play in this work, ways doctoral students can familiarize themselves with advocacy and policy information and resources, and how they can navigate opportunities related to advocacy and policy within their institutions and externally. Action steps for doctoral students are included. Implications for training and including doctoral students in special education policy and advocacy work are also discussed.

KEYWORDS

Advocacy, doctoral students, policy, special education, teacher education

There is an ongoing need for new faculty and other leaders in special education (Smith & Montrosse, 2012), especially those that are trained in policy and advocacy (Nagro et al., 2019; 2020). The path to meeting this need begins with doctoral students. Yet, their individual paths to becoming well-informed, skilled advocates may differ depending on their own knowledge and skills, coursework, and relevant opportunities to engage in advocacy (Frake et al., in press). Nevertheless, doctoral students in special education or adjacent programs (e.g., reading) are uniquely positioned as inherent advocates given not only their areas of research, but also, and perhaps more importantly, their lived experiences in the field. These experiences are powerful currency when it comes to advocacy. This article aims to contextualize the role doctoral students can play in advocacy and policy, to provide initial information and further resources doctoral students can use to familiarize themselves with the basics of advocacy and policy, and to discuss how they can effectively navigate and advocate within both internal and external systems. Action steps for doctoral students are provided at the end of each section to facilitate the integration of recommendations into practice. The authors of this article, as both current and former doctoral students themselves, hope to inform and empower doctoral students as well as the institutions they are a part of.

THE ROLE OF THE SPECIAL EDUCATION DOCTORAL STUDENT

Doctoral students are uniquely positioned to engage in special education advocacy due to their blend of practical experience, developing research expertise, and aspirations to influence change. Many enter doctoral programs with backgrounds as special education teachers, administrators, or related service providers, bringing with them first-hand knowledge of the challenges facing students with disabilities and those who serve them. This foundation not only shapes their identities as future teacher educators and researchers but also provides a powerful lens through which to understand the role of policy in special education. While policymakers often seek input from those with direct classroom experience, doctoral students can extend

TABLE 1: Key Terminology in Special Education Policy and Advocacy

Term	Description	Source
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part B	IDEA Part B Grants provide significant funding for states to support personnel development, including preparing and training special education teachers. These grants are allocated based on a formula considering child population, poverty levels, and prior IDEA appropriations.	https://sites.ed.gov/idea/
Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)	Title I of ESSA targets resources at low-income students, and funds can be used to support professional development for teachers serving these students, including those with disabilities.	https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/laws-preschool-grade-12-education/every-student-succeeds-act-essa
U.S. Department of Education (ED)	ED is responsible for the equitable education of all students, with all abilities, and in all states. This includes students with disabilities and gifts, as well as students needing adult education or correctional education.	https://www.ed.gov/about
Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS)	OSERS plays a larger role in the development and enactment of policy for people with disabilities.	https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/osers
Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)	OSEP “administers the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) which authorizes formula grants to states under Part B, grants to lead agencies for the infants and families program under Part C, and discretionary grants under Part D to institutions of higher education and other non-profit organizations to support grants for state personnel development, technical assistance and dissemination, technology, personnel development, and parent-training and information centers.”	https://www.ed.gov/about/ed-offices/osers/osep#about-osep

their impact beyond policy meetings. Advocacy at this level often involves writing about policy implications in manuscripts, shaping teacher preparation curricula, presenting at conferences, and contributing to grant proposals. By actively pursuing policy-rich learning opportunities, engaging with mentors, and recognizing that policy is deeply woven into all areas of educational research, doctoral students can embrace advocacy as a core part of their professional identity.

As developing scholars and future leaders in the field, doctoral students play a multifaceted role in special education advocacy that extends far beyond direct policy engagement. Their previous professional experiences grounds their advocacy in the day-to-day realities of schools, classrooms, and related communities, allowing them to speak with both credibility and empathy. Through their research, doctoral

students contribute to knowledge that can inform legislation, influence educational practices, and advance equity for students with disabilities. In their roles as teaching assistants or instructors, doctoral students have the opportunity to embed advocacy within teacher preparation, modeling how future educators can speak up. The doctoral journey provides a space to develop the knowledge, voice, and confidence needed to advocate effectively. Whether through community partnerships, data-driven storytelling, or research, doctoral students in special education are positioned not only to understand intricate policy landscapes, but also to actively shape education and related systems.

Action Step: Write out your story. Include your personal experiences as a former special education teacher or other professional in the field and how they can tie to advocacy efforts. Read your story to people both in and outside the

field of special education to seek their recommendations to refine your story for clarity and maximize impact.

GETTING FAMILIAR WITH ADVOCACY AND POLICY AS A DOCTORAL STUDENT

Understanding the field of special education’s specific terminology and related concepts, especially those related to advocacy and policy, is necessary yet can be overwhelming. Though doctoral students need not memorize all of the organizational structure, laws, or history of special education in the United States, it is important that they are familiar with the existing vocabulary, acronyms, and foundational concepts of special education policy and advocacy that are fundamental across governmental and higher education institutions. Importantly, each state also has its own department of education and additional acronyms and policies that are essential

TABLE 1: OSERS Funding Sources for Doctoral Students

Funding Source	Description
Teacher Education Assistance for College and Higher Education (TEACH) Grant Program	This program provides grants to individuals who agree to teach in high-need fields, including special education, in elementary and secondary schools.
Supporting Effective Educator Development (SEED) Grant Program	SEED grants support states in developing or refining comprehensive, evidence-based systems for educator preparation, recruitment, and support. This can include initiatives to attract and retain special education teachers.
Special Education Training and Improvement (SETI) Grants	SETI grants support higher education institutions in developing and implementing innovative programs to improve the quality and effectiveness of personnel preparing to serve children with disabilities.
Robert Noyce Teacher Scholarship Program	This program provides scholarships to individuals who agree to teach STEM subjects, including in high-need schools, potentially serving students with disabilities.
Higher Education Act Title II, Part A- Institutional Aid Programs:	Institutions with high poverty rates can potentially utilize these funds for activities like strengthening teacher preparation programs, including those that prepare special education teachers.
HEA Title IV Grants	These grants provide various forms of student financial aid, including Pell Grants and Federal Work-Study, which can indirectly support students pursuing special education teaching programs
HEA Title VI, International Education Programs	Funds for certain programs may support faculty development or exchange programs related to special education.
HEA Title VII, Bilingual Education Programs	Funding for bilingual education programs could be used to support training special education teachers to work with students with disabilities who are also English language learners.
Research Grants	The Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) awards grants to support research on effective practices for preparing and training special education teachers. Findings from these studies can inform future funding initiatives.
ESSER Funds	ESSER Funds provide significant funding to state and local governments to address issues created by the COVID-19 Pandemic, including staffing issues.

to institutions as well as local and state-based advocacy efforts. Knowing these concepts, vocabulary, and acronyms can help doctoral students to effectively participate in current conversations, research, and advocacy efforts. As such, we will briefly review key terms of organizations and entities that are important to this field and the policy therein below and in Table 1. Although there are many critical concepts within the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), we do not have space to cover them all here. We encourage doctoral students to review core aspects of this legislation including, but not limited to, *free and appropriate public education (FAPE)*, *least restrictive environment (LRE)*, and *individualized education programs (IEPs)*. These play a vital role in special education advocacy and are made up of people, politics, process, and

policy.

First, at the time of the writing of this article, the highest federal office of education is the United States Department of Education (ED). Under ED is the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS), which is responsible for the support of all people with disabilities, including children, youth, and adults. OSERS provides funding opportunities for educators and researchers and is a resource for potential scholarships and support for doctoral students (See Table 2). Next, under OSERS is the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), which is responsible for leading and supporting the education of all students with disabilities from birth through 21 years of age. OSEP is particularly important for doctoral students in special education because it helps to fund the training of special educators through its

grant programs. It also provides grants for training, research, and community efforts to support students with disabilities, their families, and their larger communities. These three nested entities (i.e., ED, OSERS, and OSEP) work together to create, support, enact, and uphold policy, funding, and supports for special education. They administer equitable education for students with disabilities in accordance with IDEA.

Advocacy and policy inherently involve people of various cultures, beliefs, and backgrounds (West, 2023). This will mean that doctoral students may advocate and learn alongside others who may not believe or uphold the same values or politics that they do. For example, although people may agree that the equality of educational opportunity for students is important regardless of ability, some components of IDEA's

implementation—such as how much funding is allotted to students with disabilities—remain a source of contention within the field of special education policy and advocacy (Barnard-Brak et al., 2023; Kolbe et al., 2022). As doctoral students become immersed in the world of special education policy and advocacy, we recommend they embrace this diversity of beliefs as a part of their policy journey, continuing to read, learn, and ask questions, even from those who may hold differing beliefs.

The 4P Framework

When first getting acquainted with educational policy and advocacy measures, Jane West's (2023) book, *Advocating for the Common Good: People, Politics, Process, and Policy on Capitol Hill*, provides a comprehensive yet approachable introduction. This book, as indicated by the title, explores the four "Ps" of policy, aptly named the *4P framework*. Understanding the 4P framework can help orient new doctoral students to policy analysis and policy advocacy (West, 2023). The 4P framework is an analytical method for translating actions of policymakers for accessibility purposes for the public (West, 2023). This framework reflects four components: (a) the *people* involved in policymaking, (b) the *process* that transforms an idea into a policy, (c) navigating the political *landscape* while advocating, and (d) a holistic understanding of *policy* itself. By systematically analyzing these four dimensions, the 4P framework equips educational stakeholders of various policy backgrounds with a comprehensive toolkit for making informed decisions, fostering transparency, and enhancing the accessibility of policy-related information. It offers a structured approach for breaking down the complexities of policy development and implementation, making it an invaluable tool in the realm of public policy analysis and communi-

cation for doctoral students.

People

There are multiple parties involved in the development of policies. Outside of policymakers, one must consider the role of other stakeholders such as local education agencies (LEAs), state education agencies (SEAs), and outside organizations. With this comes competing initiatives and conflicts of opinion, but also opportunities for compromise. On the policy side, one must understand the role of policymakers and provide a problem and solution equation for consideration. Policymakers are also involved in balancing competing priorities, commonly resulting in give-and-take type decisions (West, 2023). Collaboration amongst education stakeholders (e.g., SEAs, LEAs, teacher preparation programs) can create a mutual understanding of how a policy's implementation will impact individuals and groups from multiple perspectives. Additional potential allies for advocacy efforts include parents, students, and professional organizations such as the Higher Education Consortium of Special Education (HECSE) or the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC). As doctoral students become involved in policy-related work, they should consider the full extent of potential partners. This can open opportunities for collaboration and lead to the creation of advocacy teams consisting of multiple stakeholders representing various aspects of special education. Additionally, learning the perspectives of others that may reflect conflicts of opinion or competing initiatives can help doctoral students craft their message in a way that shows consideration of the broader advocacy community.

Processes

There are two subsets of processes that are critical to the advocacy process. First, there are general timelines within

the policymaking process during which policymakers and their staff are actively involved in developing new policies. Secondly, there are processes associated with existing funding sources and their historical allotment to support programs and enrollment in special education teacher preparation programs. Understanding both is critical in identifying successful allocations and advocating for future funds. For example, IDEA has been the primary funding stream for special education for the last 50 years. IDEA contains four components: (a) General Provisions (Part A), (b) Assistance for Education of all Children with Disabilities (Part B), (c) Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities (Part C), and (d) National Activities to Improve Education of Children with Disabilities (Part D). Each component has a specific purpose to financially support access to FAPE for students with disabilities. IDEA financial allocations are included within the federal budget process and are completed on an annual basis. Therefore, understanding the direct connections between potential funding implications of the four components of IDEA and developing an advocacy plan that follows the federal budget cycle is critical at specific times of the year. The federal budget cycle begins with the president's budget proposal early in the fiscal year. This sets the initial funding recommendations and identifies the priorities of the executive branch. Through the spring and summer, Congress engages in the appropriations process where crucial decisions are made on the upcoming fiscal budget. Sometimes, Congress fails to pass appropriations bills by the start of the new fiscal year. When this happens, there are further opportunities to influence decision making through continuing resolutions or budget negotiations. Consistent advocacy during these periods, coupled with compelling data and personal stories, is essential to

TABLE 3: Special Education Advocacy Resources for Doctoral Students

Books	Podcasts	Websites
<p><i>Advocating for the Common Good: People, Politics, Process, and Policy on Capitol Hill</i> by Jane E. West</p> <p><i>Special Education Law and Policy: From Foundation to Application</i> by Jacqueline Rodriguez and Wendy W. Murawski</p> <p><i>Wrightslaw: Special education law</i> (3rd edition) by Peter W.D. Wright & Pamela Darr Wright</p>	<p>The TED and CEC Collaboration Podcast, Available on Spotify and Apple Podcasts</p> <p>Have You Heard Podcast: https://www.haveyouheardpodcast.com/</p>	<p>CEC Learning Library: https://exceptionalchildren.org/learninglibrary</p> <p>CEC Policy and Advocacy portal: https://exceptionalchildren.org/policy-and-advocacy</p> <p>TASH Advocacy Tools & Resources: https://tash.org/advocacy-tools-resources/</p>

ensuring adequate support for students with disabilities.

Politics

West (2023) argues that politics cannot be removed from the process of policymaking regardless of circumstances. This includes both the inner politics of doctoral programs and more traditional politics amongst government officials. Advocates must understand these politics in order to determine the necessary steps for navigating the political landscape of their own universities and programs, K-12 schools, and policymakers at all levels. Although not as simple as presented here, understanding the political parties of policymakers and their historic stances on issues can help to craft a message that is more likely to be received positively. Additionally, understanding the logistics of doctoral programs will help to establish policy-related ideas that can be sustainably implemented with fidelity.

Outside of policymakers themselves, education stakeholders must also consider other levels of policy. This includes the political dynamics that SEAs must navigate, university-level politics that impact teacher preparation programs, and local level politics faced by LEAs. For example, state departments of education exist under the controlling executive power in each state. Therefore, political influence may introduce suggestions, barriers to approval, or expedited processes for policies that

match the goals of the administration. Teacher preparation programs may further face internal political struggles based on school administration and their beliefs on strategies to support needs. For example, faculty may need to obtain multiple layers of approval from different administrators to implement a program. Procedures may require departmental decisions related to key program components and faculty involvement. Finally, LEAs may need to have initiatives approved by the superintendent, other administrators, and/or the local school board.

Policies

Policy development is complex and often reflects diverse stakeholder perspectives. As a result, policy development also includes considerations of competing initiatives. Each group, informed by its own internal processes and political beliefs, contributes unique needs and ideas to the solution-finding process. Constructing policies that genuinely address the multifaceted needs of these stakeholders is important for creating effective and sustainable change. Collaborative efforts are essential in aligning diverse interests, fostering a shared understanding, and building consensus. By aligning needs and developing comprehensive solutions, doctoral students, constituents, and other interested parties can amplify their advocacy efforts and present a compelling case to policymakers.

Doctoral students' work can contribute to the development and support of policy solutions. These students are often engaged in synthesizing research literature within their doctoral programs. Therefore, they are uniquely positioned to uncover critical data that can inform and bolster potential policies. Their work can provide the research foundation necessary to advocate for effective interventions and practices. Furthermore, through the intentional integration of policy implications into their scholarly work, doctoral students can influence and educate other advocates, further expanding the reach and impact of their research.

Action Steps:

- Know the popular acronyms and terms (see Table 1) that are widely used across governmental and higher education institutions (e.g. ED, OSEP, OSERS).
- Learn more about the history of special education law through books, podcasts, and other resources. See Table 3 for suggested resources from the authors.
- Examine aspects of your own work where each aspect of the 4P framework could apply.

NAVIGATING WITHIN INSTITUTIONS

Within doctoral programs, there are occasions to intentionally pursue an interest in education policy. While most doctoral students will follow a set

course of study for the majority of their program, there may be elective opportunities to study outside of one's own field by enrolling in courses with a direct policy connection that can be broadly applied across disciplines. Engaging with other scholars interested in policy can deepen understanding. Additionally, applying knowledge in varied contexts can further generalize these concepts. Although some doctoral courses may not explicitly include policy opportunities, students might find ways to incorporate policy literature, make connections to chosen research topics, and consider policy implications in class discussions and assignments. These examples are opportunities for doctoral students to practice and grow in their understanding of advocacy and policy during their coursework.

Beyond the doctoral classroom, there are many other avenues for practicing and applying policy and advocacy skills in real-time within institutions. Each student's research topic(s) is likely a problem of practice, and there will likely be other faculty members at the institution that share an interest in the same area. Connecting with these faculty members can be key for locating additional opportunities for teaching, research, and service. Some doctoral students will benefit from having a policy expert as part of their future research team. Like-minded faculty members can offer connections to an often vast group of individuals that can help doctoral students build a professional network with an intentional focus on overall policy and advocacy goals.

In order to develop their skills as future policy and advocacy experts, doctoral students must purposefully create and capitalize on opportunities within both the classroom and institution. However, it is important to note the need for balance. This is crucial for doctoral students to ensure that their skills are holistically

developed and reflected through their research, teaching, and service. Many skills develop simultaneously during doctoral studies through these three outlets. Some examples include obtaining, reading, and synthesizing literature; curriculum development and teaching; understanding a variety of research methods; and public speaking. Finding ways to develop each of these collectively can help to streamline the process. Each of these areas might include an explicit policy focus, but this is not necessarily a prerequisite for a doctoral student's future policy and advocacy work. For example, a student's development of general writing skills will ultimately impact their ability to disseminate policy-focused work in the future. Developing as a writer will likely include many opportunities to write about topics unrelated to policy. Balancing work to include a policy focus, where applicable, while also developing the general skills required of higher education faculty can lead to a well-rounded professional skill-set that is backed up by knowledge of the policy and advocacy world.

Action Step: Identify one upcoming course assignment, institutional opportunity, or research activity where you can integrate a policy or advocacy component. Document how this experience contributes to your growth as both a scholar and an advocate.

A Call to Action for Institutions: Integrating Advocacy into Doctoral Coursework

Institutions need to effectively prepare doctoral students in advocacy and policy (Nagro et al., 2019; 2020). To meaningfully prepare the next generation of special education scholars and leaders, institutions must embed advocacy skill development as a deliberate and integrated component of the doctoral experience. This requires a shift in how programs conceptualize the roles and responsibilities of emerging scholars. That is, doctoral students are not only

budding researchers and teacher educators but also influential agents in relation to the policies and systems in which they operate. As such, programs should provide structured opportunities for doctoral students to develop and apply advocacy competencies across their coursework, research, and service experiences. Programs might consider introducing formal coursework or seminar series focused on education policy, legislative processes, and stakeholder engagement.

Faculty involvement in such program efforts is crucial. Even in the absence of dedicated policy courses or opportunities to incorporate such courses into a course of study—which was the case for two of the three authors in their own doctoral coursework—faculty can find ways to embed advocacy-relevant assignments into existing classes. Further, mentorship is another critical lever for building advocacy capacity. Faculty can model advocacy by sharing their own policy engagement work and inviting students to participate in these efforts, whether through committee work, collaborative writing, or public scholarship. Additionally, faculty members can support doctoral students in building their own professional networks. For instance, faculty may be more informed on the broader field of professionals who are involved in specific research and policy work. Facilitating an introduction to these individuals can initiate doctoral students' involvement with policy-related activities.

Some doctoral students may find limited opportunities to engage in policy work based on program opportunities and faculty priorities. However, these students may be able to pursue program electives by asking about policy-related courses that fall outside of the traditional program track but may still meet requirements. There might be policy-focused courses designed for programs and majors outside of education. Such

courses could allow doctoral students in special education to learn about competing initiatives while engaging with other students that view policy through have a lens that goes beyond education. This also presents the opportunity for doctoral students to represent the field of education amongst peers of other disciplines, mimicking future spaces where faculty engage in advocacy efforts focused toward individuals without a special education background.

Research is needed to more fully understand the impacts of these institutional shifts on long-term outcomes of advocacy training in doctoral education, including how graduates engage with policy, influence systems change, and mentor the next generation of advocates. Furthermore, efforts across the field need to complement those of institutions. By envisioning and enacting these changes, the field of special education can ensure that doctoral students are not only prepared to generate knowledge but also to leverage it in the service of equity, access, and justice for students with disabilities and their families.

NAVIGATING OUTSIDE INSTITUTIONS

One of the most helpful ways to navigate opportunities related to advocacy and policy external to the institution(s) doctoral students are a part of is to seek local, state, and national organizations and associations with similar advocacy interests. First, if a doctoral student is interested in a specific topic or need (e.g., student mental health) or population (e.g., students with intellectual and developmental disabilities), we recommend searching online to find local and state organizations who support those specific needs or populations. Organizations and associations who educate the public and support individuals with disabilities may also have advocacy and policy initiatives. Additionally,

a doctoral student might locate other higher education institutions, faith-based organizations, or research agencies across their state that are involved in the causes and populations they care about. Students might explore such possibilities by reaching out to local schools or faith-based groups for information on becoming involved in their policy and advocacy support, especially if located in a rural or less populated area. Lastly, doctoral students might connect with state units or chapters of national organizations, such as their state's unit of CEC, to learn more about local, state, and national special education policy and advocacy efforts.

Students can also become involved in policy and advocacy outside of their own institution by building their knowledge of their state's special education policies and practices along with their district and state representatives. As policy and advocacy becomes a more integral role of special education faculty members, "doctoral students prepared to fill special education faculty positions will likely need to expand their roles and responsibilities to include an emphasis on advocacy across research, teaching, and service" (Nagro et al., 2020, p. 234). Advocacy, at its heart, is about "communicating a viewpoint for or against a particular policy or issue and taking the necessary steps to achieve that change" (Miller & Roup, 2022, p. 35). Without knowledge of state and federal policies, it is difficult to speak to the problems and solutions related to a specific research area, population of interest, or other need. Further, policy expertise is not required to meet with representatives or advocate for an issue. State representatives are motivated to hear about their constituents' needs and viewpoints and desire to understand the issues that are important to them (Miller & Roup, 2022; West, 2023). Doctoral students are constituents as well as experts in their

area of research, and they often have lived experiences related to their work. Many representatives will acknowledge this expertise and welcome the opportunity to learn from them (West, 2023).

State organizations and agencies are another resource doctoral students can explore to navigate outside of their institution. Organizations and agencies often offer policy and advocacy training workshops, advocacy summits at state capitals, and pre-written letters that can be sent to representatives to facilitate advocating for specific issues or policies. We recommend doctoral students take advantage of these resources within their states and interact with their representatives through phone calls, written communication, and meetings. Similarly, doctoral students can apply these same resources and actions when engaging with their federal representatives.

Larger advocacy summits via state-based or national organizations and agencies can present excellent opportunities for connecting with state representatives on Capitol Hill. For example, doctoral students might attend summits such as the annual Special Education Legislative Summit (SELS) organized by the Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE) and CEC. Attending SELS is an opportunity both to learn about special education policy and to advocate for individual state-level needs on Capitol Hill. This experience also allows doctoral students to meet other special educators from their state and across the nation who are passionate about advocating for students with disabilities and their families. Additionally, the Summit is a chance to network with and learn from leaders within the CASE and CEC organizations who have advocacy experience. Yet, the most crucial part of attending SELS is visiting Congressional members on Capitol Hill. During these visits, constituents from each state visit their elected officials in teams to advocate for policies

TABLE 4: Non-Profit Organizations with Policy Internships, Opportunities for Doctoral Students

Organization Name	Description	Contact Information
Council for Exceptional Children (CEC)	CEC is the largest professional organization for special education educators, which advocates through research, professional development, and public awareness campaigns.	Kuna Tavalin ktavalin@exceptionalchildren.org Laurie VanderPloeg LVanderPloeg@exceptionalchildren.org
The Arc	The Arc advocates for the rights and inclusion of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities, including education policy.	https://thearc.org/about-us/contact-us/
Higher Education Consortium for Special Education (HECSE)	HECSE as an organization supports its members in engaging in dialogue with national leaders in both houses of the US Congress, in federal agencies that oversee research and training programs related to education and human services, and in professional organizations and advocacy groups that focus on topics and issues in special education and disability services.	Kuna Tavalin ktavalin@stridepolicy.com
National Disability Rights Network (NDRN)	NDRN is a consortium of advocacy agencies working to protect the civil and legal rights of people with disabilities, including education policy advocacy.	https://www.ndrn.org/team/cheryl-bates-harris/
Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)	LDA is the largest non-profit organization supporting individuals with learning disabilities and advocating for their educational needs.	https://ldaamerica.org/contact/
Association of University Centers on Disabilities (AUCD)	AUCD is a network of universities across the US working to improve the lives of people with disabilities through research, leadership development, advocacy, and technical assistance.	Denise Rozell drozell@aucd.org
National Council for Learning Disabilities (NCLD)	NCLD is a non-profit organization focused on building community and shaping policy to help individuals with learning and attention issues	https://www.nclid.org/teams/jacqueline-rodriguez/
American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE)	AACTE is the voice of U.S. educator preparation and maintains a constant presence on Capitol Hill to influence federal policies and funding on behalf of the profession.	Marta Perez Drake Chief Operating Officer Phone: 202-478-4507 mdrake@aacte.org
Division on Career Development and Transition (DCDT)	DCDT is a division of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) that focuses on secondary transition research and positive postsecondary outcomes.	Josh Taylor josh.taylor@wsu.edu https://dcdt.org/

and legislation related to specific issues within the field of special education. Prior to these visits, state teams determine who will speak on which issue, prioritizing those who have pertinent stories or experiences. Adding in this personal touch further emphasizes the significance of the policy the state team is advocating for and can be influential for policymakers. Overall, SELS provides a unique hands-

on experience to learn about the people, politics, and process(es) involved in creating policy, and we recommend doctoral students participate in the Summit as often as they are able.

For an even deeper understanding of policy and advocacy, doctoral students might choose to take part in the HECSE Short Course, originally conceptualized by Jane West. For the last decade, when

offered, the Short Course has taken place in January ahead of the annual meeting of HECSE members in Washington, D.C.. The Short Course objectives are:

- To expose students to the organizational structure and key players in special education-related policymaking in the nation's capital, including governmental agencies, non-profit organizations and coalitions

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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Jarrod Hobson, Ph.D.

Dr. Jarrod Hobson is an education coordinator for the Virginia Department of Education's Training and Technical Assistance Center at James Madison University. He also works for the "I'm Determined" project which focuses on developing self-determined youth, families, and educators. He previously taught as a collaborative special education teacher in both elementary and secondary settings. Hobson received his doctoral degree in Special Education from Virginia Commonwealth University where he studied strategies to address long-standing special education teacher shortages. He is the current past-president of the Virginia Council for Exceptional Children.

Alison N. Kearley, ATR-BC, LMHC, LPC3

Alison N. Kearley is a Board-Certified Art Therapist and licensed mental health counselor. She expects to complete her Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Alabama in Special Education and Multiple Abilities in December 2025. Kearley is one of two inaugural Policy Fellows with the Teacher Educator Division of the Council for Exceptional Children and is leading efforts to increase awareness and advocacy across Alabama for the needs of students with disabilities and the educators who serve them. She hopes to continue collaborative research and service around students with disabilities and mental health, including trauma-informed practices; supportive policies, enactment, and advocacy for students with disabilities; and training and supports for educators.

- To provide a working knowledge of the legislative process
- To empower students with the skills and knowledge to be effective advocates on behalf of students with disabilities, special education and equity
- To understand the history, purpose and impact of HECSE (HECSE, 2022)

A cohort of up to ten doctoral students from HECSE-member institutions works towards these objectives during the Short Course. The Short Course has documented positive outcomes in both the short-term, by influencing the work of doctoral students (Nagro et al., 2020), and the long-term, by motivating doctoral students to pursue policy-focused career options or opportunities, including research (HECSE, 2022).

A final way to learn about and participate in policy and advocacy is to join a committee or division within a national special education or disability-focused organization. For example, the Teacher Educator Division (TED) is a special interest division of the CEC that champions policy and advocacy efforts. One specific branch of TED is the TED Policy Committee. This committee consists of higher education faculty and staff as well as doctoral students in special education or adjacent specialties. The committee meets at least monthly to coordinate advocacy initiatives, such as translating policy information through infographics known as Advocacy Briefs or inviting experts to dissect concepts and share experiences related to advocacy on the TED CEC Collaboration Podcast. Additionally, the TED Policy Committee offers opportunities for doctoral students to serve as Policy Fellows for one year. During this fellowship, the Policy Fellows focus on their advocacy-related research interests by conducting projects, developing

resources to support the committee's advocacy initiatives, and receiving exclusive mentorship from the TED Policy Committee Member-At-Large and TED Policy Advisor. We recommend that any interested doctoral students who are TED members consider applying to this fellowship. Moreover, Table 4 lists other organizations that provide internships and other opportunities to learn and engage in policy and advocacy endeavors.

Action Step: Choose one local, state, or national organization aligned with your advocacy interests and take a concrete step to engage with it (e.g., subscribe to their emails, attend a webinar, join a committee). Track how this connection deepens your understanding of policy and advocacy and expands your professional network.

IMPLICATIONS

Doctoral students are influential to special education advocacy and policy in many different ways. First, they have often recently transitioned from the classroom and are emerging researchers. This position supports their ability to translate complex concepts and relevant research to both school-based professionals and policymakers. This allows them to effectively advocate across different levels and can also provide direction for their own research endeavors. Relatedly, by conducting research that aligns with current legislative and policy priorities, doctoral students have the potential to influence systemic change.

In addition to translating their knowledge and experience and conducting pertinent research, doctoral students can further develop their advocacy skills by building relationships and connections within their institutions and professional organizations. Institutionally, working with policy-focused doctoral students and/or faculty members who share

similar research interests allows doctoral students to capitalize on advocacy development during the limited time of their doctoral programs. Outside of their institutions, actively participating in organizations such as CEC and its divisions provide opportunities to build relationships with other professionals and to further engage in advocacy by serving on committees or even taking on leadership roles. By establishing these networks and receiving training and development from different organizations, special education doctoral students can create a throughline rooted in advocacy and policy to carry throughout their careers.

CONCLUSION

Doctoral students are integral agents in special education policy and advocacy. Positioned at the intersection of research, practice, and policy, doctoral students bring unique insight and potential to shape the future of the field. By translating research into actionable policy, aligning their work with legislative priorities, and participating in advocacy-oriented organizations, doctoral students can contribute meaningfully to systems-level change. To support this potential, doctoral programs and their faculty must move beyond passive encouragement to instead intentionally embed advocacy into doctoral preparation. This includes offering policy-focused coursework or modules, providing mentorship in advocacy and public scholarship, and creating structured opportunities to engage with advocacy organizations and policymakers. Programs should treat advocacy not as optional, but as a core competency for emerging scholars in special education. At the same time, doctoral students can take their first steps in advocacy work by identifying a policy issue connected to their research, joining professional organizations like CEC, and seeking mentorship or field experiences that

expose them to advocacy in action. Even small steps such as writing about policy implications as part of a coursework assignment can contribute to building advocacy skills that will be utilized throughout their careers. While each doctoral student's path with advocacy and policy will be different, their collective efforts have the potential to transform the special education landscape and improve outcomes for students, teachers, and families alike.

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