

# Interdisciplinary Insights: Innovative Strategies for Preparing Future Professionals

## AUTHORS

Kristin Murphy  
Jennifer Kilgo  
Serra Acar

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## ABSTRACT

Interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs are crucial in shaping the next generation of service providers in early intervention/early childhood special education (EI/ECSE), special education, school psychology and counseling, and other related service fields. This article examines three distinct interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs that have developed innovative approaches to improve scholar success, foster teamwork, and enhance community engagement. These programs promote collaboration by breaking down disciplinary silos and enabling faculty and scholars from diverse fields to learn from one another. By integrating cross-disciplinary collaboration and experiential learning opportunities, these programs equip future service providers with the skills, knowledge, and dispositions necessary to support the needs of students with disabilities and their families. This article highlights key program components, shares creative methods, and presents effective strategies for preparing personnel across multiple disciplines. It also explores how interdisciplinary approaches can strengthen personnel pipelines, improve workforce diversity and retention, and develop highly skilled, collaborative service providers who can serve alongside families and professionals as cohesive teams.

## KEYWORDS

**Collaboration; early childhood special education; early intervention; interdisciplinary personnel preparation; occupational therapy; physical therapy; school counseling; school psychology; special education**

**T**he chronic shortage of qualified personnel to serve children with disabilities has been a primary focus of the special education field for several decades (Mason-Williams et al., 2020). According to the Council for Exceptional Children's (CEC) Issue Brief (2021), 48 states reported a shortage of special education teachers, and 42 states reported a shortage of early intervention (EI) providers, special educators, and related service providers. Simultaneously, data suggest a wide gap exists between the overrepresentation of children of color in special education and the underrepresentation of special education teachers of color (Bettini et al., 2025). Addressing this persistent shortage and supporting complex needs of children require a systematic commitment to interdisciplinary workforce development that equips professionals across EI/ECSE, special education, and related service fields.

Collaboration and teaming processes are central to special education and supporting positive outcomes for students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) emphasizes collaborative, team-based service delivery, where professionals work together alongside families to develop and implement integrated, comprehensive intervention plans (Yell & Bateman, 2024). Achieving desired outcomes depends on the effective collaboration of all team members. The Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) of the U.S. Department of Education and leading professional organizations who focus on students with disabilities (e.g., CEC) further emphasize the importance of interdisciplinary

**TABLE 1:** Features of Three Interdisciplinary Personnel Preparation Programs

Feature	Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Early Childhood Education Project	Project Teachers Learning with Counselors	Project TransTeam Evolution
Disciplines	EI/ECSE and school psychology	Special education PreK-8 and 5-12 and school adjustment counseling K-12	EI/ECSE, physical therapy, and occupational therapy
Program Focus	Birth through age 8	Grades PreK-12	Birth through age 8
Course Scheduling and Modality	Afternoons/evenings with in-person courses	Afternoons/evenings, mix of asynchronous and synchronous online courses with some in-person courses	Afternoons/evenings, in-person courses with some synchronous online class meetings
Innovative program strategy	Recruitment	Nested layers of interdisciplinary support for student wellness and success	Three-phase model of case-based instruction

teaming and collaboration in personnel preparation. And yet, the preparation of personnel is typically siloed and seldom includes opportunities to practice collaborating with interdisciplinary colleagues (Foxx & Anderson, 2020). Preparing future professionals from multiple disciplines to navigate complex challenges in providing services to students with disabilities requires innovative approaches and a coordinated approach to intervention.

Interdisciplinary approaches can strengthen personnel pipelines, improve workforce diversity and retention, and develop highly skilled, collaborative service providers who can serve alongside families and professionals as cohesive teams (Dillon et al., 2021). The purpose of this article is to showcase three interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs that break down silos and bring together scholars across programs to prepare them to be skilled in their future collaborative roles. For each program, we share a programmatic overview and highlight interdisciplinary strategies. Finally, we reflect on implications for practice, including lessons learned, and our recommendations for future research and practice

pertaining to interdisciplinary personnel preparation.

### Interdisciplinary Programs and Strategies

The path to cultivating a more interdisciplinary workforce that supports students with disabilities and their families requires reimagining our recruitment, support, and instructional strategies to focus more on collaboration and teaming. In the following sections, we describe three distinct interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) including the Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Early Childhood Education Project (ICEP) and Project Teachers Learning with Counselors (TLC), both at the University of Massachusetts Boston (UMB), and Project TransTeam Evolution at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). These programs bring together university students and faculty from different disciplines to cultivate interdisciplinary collaboration while the students earn certifications and degrees in their area of study. Each project includes financial support from

OSEP for tuition and other expenses in exchange for scholars committing to fulfill service obligations following graduation by serving in professional roles in programs and schools for students with disabilities. Financial support packages are a recommended strategy to recruit and retain candidates of color (Scott & Proffitt, 2021). For each program presented, we share select features and highlight effective interdisciplinary strategies. See Table 1 for an overview of each program.

In planning and implementing our projects, we share a common lens that drives our interdisciplinary values and goals. The theoretical framework guiding our interdisciplinary approaches is situated learning theory (Putnam & Borko, 2000). In situated learning theory, learning is a social process and occurs among and between individuals and materials, within authentic contexts. Collaboration is an essential component of situated learning. Developing scholars' competence and confidence in collaboration requires consistent, long-term opportunities for learning and practice through guided, structured, and supervised experiences (Driver et al., 2018).

### **The Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Early Childhood Education Project (ICEP)**

Beginning in 2019, the ICEP aims to ensure the interdisciplinary preparation and support of master's level students from the two disciplines of the Early Childhood Education and Care and the School Psychology Programs in UMB, an urban Minority Serving Institution (MSI). Faculty from these programs collaborate to prepare personnel to serve infants, toddlers, and preschool-age children with disabilities, along with their families, through shared coursework, interdisciplinary group assignments, coordinated field experiences, and structured joint activities. Both programs are built on nationally recognized professional standards (e.g., Division for Early Childhood [DEC] and the National Association of School Psychologists [NASP]) focusing on the preparation of professionals who work with children ages birth through 8 who have or are at-risk for developmental delays and disabilities and their families across diverse settings.

While interdisciplinary preparation remains the core of the ICEP program, we quickly learned that an interdisciplinary approach to recruit scholars was essential to realizing this vision. As such, recruitment became a critical first step in building an interdisciplinary pipeline of scholars. Faculty collaboration not only spanned disciplines but extended across university units, such as the Office of Student Success, to holistically support prospective scholars through the application and enrollment process.

#### ***Interdisciplinary Strategy: Recruitment***

To effectively recruit scholars into an interdisciplinary preparation program at an MSI, recruitment strategies must be intentional, equity-centered, and community-driven (Flores & Park,

2013). Recognizing that meaningful interdisciplinary preparation begins well before scholars enter the program, we designed our recruitment efforts to build awareness about the program's collaborative nature and to support scholars from application through enrollment. We use multiple internal and external strategies to recruit scholars. For internal outreach, we circulate recruitment flyers with our programs' alumni and practicum/internship listservs, student clubs, colleagues within our college, and our college's Office of Student Success. To engage in external recruitment, we partner with state-level agencies, such as Head Start, state department of public health, EI-Part C community-based programs, partnering school districts, other MSIs within and outside of our state, and professional organizations' state-level subdivisions (e.g., National Association for the Education of Young Children [NAEYC] and NASP). We also use our college's official social media channels (e.g., LinkedIn, Instagram) to circulate our webinar announcements and recruitment materials.

Collaboration with our college's Office of Student Success has been instrumental in our recruitment efforts. By working collaboratively with their team, we identify barriers to access, streamline communication with prospective scholars, and offer individualized support from recruitment to matriculation and enrollment. These collaborations complement the interdisciplinary project faculty partnership at the core of the program, ensuring that scholars are supported holistically.

We host several webinars on (a) interdisciplinary training to provide more information about the program; and (b) how to prepare and submit an application. By integrating interdisciplinary content into webinars, we foster a pool of prospective scholars who are not only

more likely to enroll, but are also better prepared for collaborative, interdisciplinary work in the field. The webinars bring together faculty from both programs to introduce the coursework, field expectations, and answer related questions. Interdisciplinary work is embedded within the program from the very beginning, starting with recruitment. These webinars are often scholars' first introduction to the program and are intentionally designed to reflect the collaborative, interdisciplinary approach they will experience throughout their training. The innovation lies in how these webinars serve as an early and welcoming entry point, often the very first experience scholars have with the program. Designed to be engaging and inclusive, they help prospective scholars feel like, "I belong here," while introducing them to the interdisciplinary coursework and building a sense of community from the very beginning.

For application workshops, we develop sample application materials, such as statement of purpose letters and CVs/resumes. We develop step-by-step instructions with screenshots showing the entire application process, provide direct and clear guidelines on how to write an application letter, such as "*Use this paragraph to talk about your experience working with children*" and share real-life examples. We follow up with prospective scholars who have started but not yet completed their applications, and offer individualized support through virtual office hours to guide applicants through the process and address any challenges. Our goal is to empower prospective scholars by refining their skills in writing compelling application letters and effectively navigating application portals.

All webinars are intentionally structured to require email registration, allowing us to follow up with both attendees and non-attendees. We share a copy of

webinar presentations with all registered attendees. We purposefully schedule webinars outside of school hours or on weekends to reach a broader audience, as many prospective university students from racially diverse backgrounds and historically underrepresented groups may be more likely to work during the day (Deeb-Sossa et al., 2021). By utilizing targeted recruitment strategies and personalized support throughout the process, we aim to foster an inclusive pipeline of scholars well-prepared for interdisciplinary teaming.

### **Project Teachers Learning with Counselors (TLC)**

Project TLC was launched in Fall 2021 to engage in the interdisciplinary preparation of master's level students across two disciplines: Special Education and School Adjustment Counseling at UMB with personnel preparation grant funding from OSEP to begin or continue their careers in the Boston Public Schools and surrounding urban districts. In Massachusetts, the term *school adjustment counselor* refers to school mental health counselors. Our two-year program of study includes shared coursework, group assignments, coordinated field experiences, structured joint activities, and mentorship. Project TLC intentionally focuses on recruiting, preparing, and supporting nontraditional scholars, including individuals from racially diverse and historically underrepresented groups, paraprofessionals, and individuals with a bachelor's degree in an area other than education or related services.

Scholars take coursework at 4:00 pm on weekdays while engaging in field-based experiences at schools during the daytime. Most coursework is conducted online, with a mix of synchronous and asynchronous sessions, and some face-to-face courses are offered on campus.

During their first four semesters, the program of study includes one shared course per semester, alternating between a counseling or special education course. A TLC faculty member or advisory board member teaches each of the four shared courses. Across the duration of the program, scholars also participate in ongoing individual and group advising and mentoring and attend cohort workshops with topics dictated by scholars' requests and needs.

### ***Interdisciplinary Strategy: Nested Layers of Interdisciplinary Support for Scholar Wellness and Success***

Given the timing of TLC's onset in 2021 amidst dual viral and racial pandemics, focusing on how we as faculty cultivate wellness for our scholars was paramount. While our scholars represent racially diverse backgrounds and come from historically underrepresented communities, our faculty team is predominantly white, which prompts ongoing reflection and responsibility in how we foster inclusive, equitable, and culturally responsive preparation experiences.

We began our project with a heightened focus on bridging special education and school adjustment counseling content. In practice, we concurrently re-envisioned ourselves as members of interdisciplinary teams with specialized roles to support the multifaceted needs of our scholars. Our mentorship structure evolved into nested interdisciplinary layers that spans scholar peer-to-peer support, TLC faculty in special education and school adjustment counseling, university resources (e.g., counseling center, disability resource office, student success office, writing center), alumni of Project TLC, field-based mentors including teachers, counselors, and school leaders, and our advisory board consisting of practitioners and researchers local to Boston and nationally.

Bringing together these support layers

allows us to function as our own interdisciplinary team with different roles, responsibilities, and expertise we bring to the table to support each other and our scholars. For example, our advisory board and field-based practitioner partners provide ongoing feedback on our syllabi. As faculty, we coordinate closely with support offices such as our university counseling center, disability resource office, and student success office to consult and assist with individual university students, to implement workshops based on emerging needs and interests, and to act as a critical friend when implementing and revising student programming. We define critical friends as colleagues who engage in a mutual and collaborative relationship, offering both constructive feedback and support as needed to achieve a shared goal (MacPhail et al., 2021). Faculty and staff in higher education are often siloed from each other, but research indicates that when they collaborate, the perception is that it results in increased student success (Syno et al., 2019).

This interdisciplinary team also allows us to cultivate what Scott and Proffitt (2021) refer to as a *racially respectful mentoring/support system*, which we could not achieve alone as a predominantly white faculty team. Racial and ethnic representation among mentors is vitally important for preservice student success in their programs (Scott, 2019). For example, one of our field-based practitioner mentors is a black male veteran special educator in the same school district as many of our scholars, and he graduated from a teacher preparation program at our university while working full-time. This partner mentor can offer a different dimension of support and understanding than our faculty team can alone. Collectively, we represent a variety of identities, backgrounds, expertise, and interests that complement each other with the ultimate goal of

**FIGURE 1:** Quick Tips for Establishing Interdisciplinary Support for Scholar Wellness and Success

**1. Set a strong and transparent foundation with the interdisciplinary support team.** Engage in conversation about personal and team expectations and goals which could vary for faculty, staff, and field-based mentors. Come to a mutual agreement on roles and responsibilities, and compensation for efforts as allowable, feasible, and appropriate (e.g., financial compensation, protection of time, reciprocal efforts).

**2. Collaborate as a team to build a living calendar of “touchpoints” for various configurations of the team to engage with scholars in formal and informal ways within coursework and beyond.**

a. Co-facilitate recruitment events and incoming student orientation with representative members of the full team. This introduces the broad array of different support sources for university students from the beginning and reinforces the interdisciplinary support team-based nature of the program. Have each member of the team introduce themselves, explicitly share some of the ways they can support university students, and the ways to contact them.

b. During recruitment and orientation events, consider the inclusion of rotating small groups (or if virtual, rotating break-out rooms) so university students can get to know various members of the team more closely and begin to establish initial relationships.

c. Identify dates throughout the course of an academic program that interdisciplinary faculty, staff, and mentor teammates can co-teach and/or lead class sessions.

d. Offer a variety of opportunities for scholars to participate in small-group and whole group advising sessions led or co-led by different configurations of the support team.

**3. Engage in regular conversations with the interdisciplinary team about scholar progress and also the needs, goals, and progress of the team as these may shift and evolve over time.**

supporting scholar wellness as a foundation for scholar success. As one Project TLC graduate reflected, *“Project TLC’s unique support and flexibility have been a game changer for scholars like me. I have had to overcome some major life obstacles...The supportive team of professors, advisors at the university, and mentors in the schools...has been essential in my completing this program. I don’t get the option to give up...I get the unconditional support and mentorship of this phenomenal team.”* Refer to Figure 1 for recommended strategies for implementing an interdisciplinary support team.

### Project TransTeam Evolution

Project TransTeam Evolution, an interdisciplinary program launched over 25 years ago at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), prepares graduate students from ECSE, occupational therapy (OT), and physical therapy (PT) for effective collaboration within EI and ECSE contexts. The program began as a pilot supported institutionally by schools

from both the academic and medical campuses at UAB. Following its initial success, Project TransTeam secured federal funding from OSEP beginning in 2002, which enabled the program to expand and evolve as research and evaluation outcomes have informed knowledge and practice. The program has evolved over time and is grounded in essential cross-disciplinary content, competencies, and processes designed to foster teaming and collaboration skills. Professional organizations and federally funded projects have developed resources to guide the project’s development and implementation as described in Figure 2.

Project TransTeam scholars participate in one interdisciplinary course per semester during their second year of study with field experiences integrated throughout the program. Courses in the late afternoon/evening allow scholars to enroll in coursework from their respective disciplines, field experiences, and/or employment during the day. To promote interdisciplinary collaboration,

an interactive format facilitates active engagement among scholars and faculty to learn from each other. Community collaborators (e.g., families, teachers, therapists, administrators, and teams from local programs and agencies) are included in the courses for scholars to be fully immersed in their perspectives on the day-to-day realities of interdisciplinary teamwork. Many of these participants are Project TransTeam alumni; they provide panel discussions, consultation, mentoring, and resource linkages.

### Interdisciplinary Strategy: Case-based Instruction

A dynamic learning tool used in Project TransTeam is case-based instruction (Snyder & McWilliam, 2003). This instructional approach spans two consecutive semesters based on a three-phase model of case-based instruction developed by the Project TransTeam faculty in response to scholar learning needs observed during early implementation. Case-based instruction requires scholars to actively participate in scenarios that

**FIGURE 2:** Resources for Interdisciplinary Personnel Preparation in Early Childhood Special Education

Resource	Purpose
Early Childhood Intervention Personnel Center (ECIPC) <a href="https://ecipc.org/">https://ecipc.org/</a>	Includes tools such as curriculum planning templates, checklists for integrating cross disciplinary competencies, and model syllabi to align programs with standards and evidence-based practices.
Cross Disciplinary Competency Areas and Indicators <a href="https://ecpcta.org/cross-disciplinary-competencies/">https://ecpcta.org/cross-disciplinary-competencies/</a>	This resource outlines shared knowledge and skills essential across disciplines serving young children with disabilities. They guide faculty in preparing graduates from multiple disciplines to deliver high-quality team-based services.
Early Intervention/Early Childhood Special Education (EI/ECSE) Professional Standards (2020) <a href="https://www.dec-spced.org/ei-ecse-standards">https://www.dec-spced.org/ei-ecse-standards</a>	Developed by the DEC and CEC, these standards define the specialized knowledge and skills needed by professionals in EI/ECSE. They guide personnel preparation program development and emphasize teaming and collaboration as essential components of effective practice.
Division for Early Childhood (DEC) Recommended Practices (2014) <a href="http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices">http://www.dec-spced.org/recommendedpractices</a>	The DEC Recommended Practices are a set of evidence-based guidelines designed to improve outcomes for young children with disabilities. They emphasize teaming and collaboration as critical for effective EI/ECSE services to be addressed in personnel preparation programs.
DEC Recommended Practices Monograph 6: Teaming and Collaboration (2019) <a href="https://www.dec-spced.org/product-page/dec-recommended-practices-monograph-series-no-6-teaming-and-collaboration">https://www.dec-spced.org/product-page/dec-recommended-practices-monograph-series-no-6-teaming-and-collaboration</a>	This monograph supports faculty by offering practical, evidence-based strategies for building and sustaining effective collaborative partnerships among families and professionals across disciplines and early childhood settings.

reflect the types of experiences they will encounter and prepares them for their future roles. Initially, scholars were introduced directly to complex cases; however, many encountered challenges addressing the numerous variables inherent in such cases. To scaffold learning more effectively, the faculty revised the instructional design to introduce case complexity in a developmental sequence, resulting in the three-phase model (i.e., unidimensional, multidimensional, complex cases; Kilgo et al., 2019).

The first phase, unidimensional case studies, presents a single dimension of diversity related to the type of disability,

family structure, religious diversity, or ethnic background. Addressing single dimensions of diversity during this phase allows scholars to build foundational content and teaming skills before encountering more complicated scenarios. After several weeks of practice with unidimensional cases, scholars engage in the second phase, which involves a series of multidimensional cases with more multifaceted content. These scenarios reflect the realities of early childhood service delivery where families may advocate for practices that differ from those of the educational team or are not fully aligned with recommended practices or policies.

Scholars collaborate in interdisciplinary groups to develop plans that reflect and respect family values, priorities, and goals, while also addressing professional and programmatic considerations. This promotes confidence in scholars' abilities to accommodate more challenging, multidimensional cases over time (Kilgo et al., 2019).

During the second semester, scholars enter the third phase, which involves comprehensive, complex case studies. Scholars are assigned to teams of four to five members representing multiple disciplines and given a detailed complex case involving a young child that qualifies for services under IDEA. The

**FIGURE 3:** Complex Case Example: Diego

<b>Complex Case Example: Diego</b>
<p><b>Background:</b> <i>Diego, born at 26 weeks, is diagnosed with spastic quadriplegia cerebral palsy. His mother passed away after his birth, and he is in the care of his aunt Donna and grandmother Valentina, both from Honduras. Diego has a history of severe medical complications, including hydrocephalus requiring a shunt, and he uses a g-tube for feeding. His aunt speaks limited English. The family relies on interpreters and neighbors for communication support. They have limited financial resources and no personal transportation in the rural area where they live.</i></p>
<p><b>Early Intervention (Part C, Age 24 Months):</b> <i>Diego was delayed in sitting, mobility, speech, and feeding. He uses an umbrella stroller, bunny crawls, and has difficulty with motor skills and communication. The family faces religious and cultural conflicts about medical care (the grandmother prefers traditional healing), language barriers, and limited access to resources. His aunt is concerned about paying for preschool, while the grandmother prefers a local preschool with questionable developmental appropriateness.</i></p>
<p><b>School-Age (Part B, Age 42 Months):</b> <i>Diego now attends a public Pre-K class. He uses a walker for short distances but lacks proper adaptive equipment. His gross and fine motor delays affect his mobility, feeding, toileting, and classroom participation. He understands much but struggles to express himself. He uses picture cards but has trouble with symbolic images.</i></p>
<p><b>Key Issues:</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cultural and language barriers between family and service providers;</li> <li>• Conflicts within family about medical care and limited resources;</li> <li>• Preschool appropriateness and affordability;</li> <li>• Need for mobility and seating support at home and school;</li> <li>• Assistive tools for feeding, communication, and classroom tasks;</li> <li>• Transition planning from early intervention to preschool services</li> </ul>

interdisciplinary faculty collaboratively develop the complex cases that include multiple dimensions of diversity (e.g., disability, family structure, race, ethnicity, language, gender, religion, economic differences) and system-level challenges (e.g., appropriate services, inclusion, resource availability). Figure 3 provides a condensed example of one of the complex cases. The complex cases sometimes include family structures, beliefs, and situations that are unfamiliar to the scholars and often are inherently in conflict with the values of the team members (e.g., family with a religious practice that does not allow the use of traditional medicine; Aldridge et al., 2016).

The complex cases require the expertise of a team representing multiple

disciplines. In completing the semester-long assignment, teams of scholars apply their collective expertise through weekly components that build toward a culminating final product. Each case is structured to simulate authentic team-based planning and decision-making in various service contexts at different transition points. Each team of scholars develops a written report and oral presentation that address key components of the complex case assigned to their team, which includes the following: (a) describe the setting, description of the team, and available human resources; (b) describe the child (characteristics, disability, strengths, needs) and family (social history, family strengths, cultural considerations); (c) identify the roles and responsibilities of the disciplines on the

team including the primary provider; (d) determine assessment instruments and processes (formal, informal, team-based) to be used; (e) develop the outcomes/goals for the Individualized Family Service Plans (IFSP) and Individualized Education Programs (IEP) with clear evidence of opportunities for family input; (f) determine intervention strategies to meet outcomes and goals with explanations for choices of strategies, the evidence to support the intervention, and how team members will carry out the intervention; (g) identify formal and informal resources; (h) address the specific issues identified in the case; (i) plan for transitions from early intervention and preschool; and (j) describe how the team functioned and perceptions of overall effectiveness.

When teams of scholars work together on the complex cases, they practice collaboration and apply teaming strategies including communication, problem-solving, joint decision-making, consultation, and group facilitation. Multiple opportunities arise for learning to occur as the scholars develop all components of the complex case studies and focus on the issues and challenges as a team. The assignment concludes with presentations in which teams share their cases, facilitate discussions about the complexities of their case and how they addressed the issues, and respond to faculty and peer questions. These culminating experiences promote the development of teaming skills and processes, professional reflection, and cross-disciplinary feedback that further enrich scholar learning (Kilgo et al., 2019).

The scholars have consistently provided positive feedback on the program's benefits and effectiveness. As one graduate reflected, "*We were prepared to implement a transdisciplinary model by working with team members representing different disciplines. We learned from each other, developed team-based*

goals, determined appropriate interventions, and found the best available evidence as a team. The team assignments allowed us to put trust in each other and effectively communicate, problem solve, and sometimes compromise to work through our complex case studies, which is what working as a transdisciplinary team requires.”

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE INTERDISCIPLINARY PERSONNEL PREPARATION**

Engaging in interdisciplinary education yields bountiful opportunities for innovative and improved methods for recruitment, support, and instructional approaches. In looking to the future, we believe interdisciplinary personnel preparation should continue to expand as a model for preparing individuals to support students with disabilities and their families. In this section, we share lessons learned from our experiences building and implementing personnel preparation programs.

### **Lesson One: Recruitment Begins Early and is a Shared Responsibility**

Our recruitment efforts have underscored a vital lesson: building a diverse cohort of scholars for our interdisciplinary programs requires far more than targeted outreach from an admissions office. It involves sustained, relational engagement by faculty who offer individualized guidance to prospective scholars, alongside coordinated institutional support. Partnership with university offices (e.g., financial aid, Student Success) also ensures that the pathway from matriculation to enrollment to graduation is accessible for scholars from historically underrepresented communities.

Our work within an urban MSI has demonstrated that innovative impact

arises from active listening to our prospective scholars, offering transparent information about the interdisciplinary program, and building infrastructure that reduces systematic barriers. As we envision the future of special education, we are called to redefine recruitment as a proactive, inclusive endeavor, one that begins with how we better introduce our programs to future scholars.

### **Lesson Two: Ongoing Effort is Key for Interdisciplinary Success**

How can higher education institutions collectively foster interdisciplinary connections and prepare future professionals with the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to address complex, intersectional needs in education? Interdisciplinary preparation is not a “set it and forget it” effort. Once interdisciplinary scholars are admitted into our programs, faculty collaboration plays a critical role in leveraging insights gained during recruitment to provide meaningful, targeted mentoring throughout their academic journey. We must embed interdisciplinary practices into all aspects of our personnel preparation programs (e.g., recruitment, scholar support, instructional strategies). Achieving this requires a willingness to innovate, extensive planning, clear communication, and institutional support. Challenges such as varying levels of experience and background knowledge among scholars also highlight the need for flexible and individualized approaches, including mentorship and support from faculty, university staff, and community partners.

In addition to preparing our scholars via their interdisciplinary-focused coursework and field experiences, we must simultaneously “walk the walk” of engaging in interdisciplinary practices ourselves as faculty members. A rich variety of resources and staff are available on each of our campuses that

hold unique expertise to support our scholars. These resources are in addition to community-based partners, including veteran teachers and administrators, and graduates of our programs, who can all provide targeted and specific types of support and possess unique bases of knowledge and experience above and beyond what we alone as faculty bring to the table.

In collaborating within this interdisciplinary team of partners, we would be remiss not to acknowledge the importance of investing ongoing time and offerings of reciprocal support to cultivate true partnerships. Furthermore, when collaborating with partners of color and women partners of color, we must recognize the disproportionate service burdens they often experience. Where appropriate and allowable, we must advocate for financial compensation and protection of time (e.g., course releases or relief from other roles/responsibilities) to acknowledge their service (Scott & Proffitt, 2021).

Our scholars consistently report that working closely with the variety of individuals in our program’s support network has helped them better understand the roles of multiple professionals, foster mutual respect, experience academic success, and feel a sense of belonging. This support network also increased opportunities to cultivate racially responsive mentoring/support systems, which are a critical tool to further support a sense of belonging and success among scholars of color (Scott & Proffitt, 2021).

### **Lesson Three: Embrace Adaptation**

When engaging with various teammates and merging distinct programs in interdisciplinary personnel preparation, we encourage higher education faculty to embrace adaptation while remaining committed to their goals. For example,

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### **Kristin M. Murphy, Ph.D.**

*Kristin M. Murphy, PhD is Associate Dean of Faculty Development and Academic Programs and Associate Professor of Special Education at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research interests include personnel preparation and professional learning in special education, mixed reality simulations, exclusionary school settings, and participatory action research methods, including photovoice.*

### **Jennifer Kilgo, Ed.D.**

*Jennifer Kilgo, PhD is Professor of Early Childhood Special Education at the University of Alabama at Birmingham. Her research interests include interprofessional education, recommended practices in ECSE, transdisciplinary teaming, and family-centered services.*

### **Serra Acar, Ph.D.**

*Serra Acar, PhD is Associate Professor of Early Childhood Education and Care at the University of Massachusetts Boston. Her research includes culturally and linguistically responsive assessment, executive function and bilingual/dual language learners, and personnel preparation in early intervention/early childhood special education.*

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during the initial implementation of Project TransTeam's three-phase case-based instruction model, faculty overestimated scholars' readiness to address complex cases, revealing a need for a more gradual introduction to case complexity. The phased approach that begins with unidimensional cases and progresses to multidimensional and complex cases was then developed which allows scholars to build foundational knowledge, confidence, and teaming skills over time in a scaffolded manner.

Similarly, when we first designed Project TLC, our focus was on the academic program of study, and we paid less attention to our existing model of advising, which we believed to be sufficient. Over time and based on listening to our scholars and soliciting feedback from project partners, we expanded advising and mentorship to occur in a variety of formal and informal ways to more fully support scholars in individualized and larger group models with a diversity in representation.

## CONCLUSION

Our projects reinforce that interdisciplinary education is not only possible but essential for preparing a workforce that can deliver high-quality, team-based services to students with disabilities and their families. The benefits of interdisciplinary training are illuminated by the roles our program graduates go on to pursue. For example, one Project ICEP graduate is now a family childcare coach and focuses their research and practice on the birth-to-three age group and advocates for their needs. One of Project TLC's graduates is now a therapeutic support counselor in a therapeutic day school in an urban public district and focuses on supporting students with emotional and behavioral disorders. Project TransTeam graduates are employed in early intervention, preschool, and early primary programs as service

coordinators, teachers, therapists, and administrators serving as collaborative leaders and advocates for young children with disabilities and families.

When we think about our preservice scholars' professional futures, we know one thing for certain. They will graduate from our programs and join interdisciplinary teams that must collaborate across professional roles to support the outcomes of students with disabilities and their families. Therefore, in higher education, it is imperative to create more opportunities for interdisciplinary personnel preparation focused on special education and related services.

While the importance of incorporating collaboration into personnel preparation has been acknowledged for some time (e.g., Brownell et al., 2010), further research is required to identify the most effective methods for equipping teachers with collaborative skills (Kilgo et al., 2019). We recommend that institutions of higher education (a) broaden the interdisciplinary focus within personnel preparation programs; (b) invest in innovative interdisciplinary practices to address recruitment, scholar support, and team-based instructional strategies; (c) enhance approaches to assess program effectiveness and team-based learning; and (d) develop improved evaluation processes that link the effectiveness of interdisciplinary training to graduate performance (Kilgo et al.).

We must continue to innovate to develop and sustain well-prepared professionals to serve in interdisciplinary collaborative roles that achieve the goals of IDEA (Yell & Bateman, 2025). We urge faculty and institutions of higher education to break down disciplinary silos and reimagine personnel preparation. We hope the projects described will serve as resources for those seeking to implement, expand, or improve interdisciplinary personnel preparation programs. Investing in high-quality

interdisciplinary education at the higher education level will elevate the quality of team-based services, benefiting students, families, and professionals from multiple disciplines who serve them. We hope that in time, interdisciplinary personnel preparation will no longer be considered an innovation and will simply be the norm.

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