

**Academic Program Review**

**Special Education Program**

**University of New Mexico**

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**Submitted by**

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## Preface

This report is the 2021 Academic Program Review (APR) of the Special Education Department at the University of New Mexico. The intent of this report is to provide an objective evaluation of the strengths of the special education program, as well as to suggest ways in which the program can become more efficient and responsive to overall needs and responsibilities in New Mexico. The evaluation team included Dr. Martin Agran, University of Wyoming; Dr. Pisarn Bee Chamcharatsri, University of New Mexico; and Dr. Diane Ryndak, University of North Carolina Greensboro.

Data for this review were obtained from several sources. These sources included: the Department of Special Education Self-Study documents; UNM APR Policies, Principles and Procedures Manual; University and Department of Special Education websites; input from College and University administrators; input from faculty and students; a review of additional documentation provided during the virtual evaluation; and documentation about peer group universities.

As there were concerns about having in-person meetings due to the COVID pandemic, this evaluation was conducted virtually via Zoom technology. This precluded the conduct of onsite interviews of relevant non-university stakeholders and visits to cooperating partners (e.g., school districts, educational agencies). Nevertheless, we believe we have ample data to support our observations and recommendations.

This APR of the UNM Department of Special Education was conducted in three parts. First, there was a review of the departmental Self-Study Unit Review; the UNM APR Policies, Principles, and Procedures Manual; the University and Department of Special Education websites; and additional information provided prior to our evaluation. Second, during our two

and one-half day virtual visit we conducted numerous interviews with university administrators, faculty, students and program graduates, and staff. The evaluation culminated with a preliminary *Exit Report* presented by the review team to faculty, administrators, and staff representatives.

The results of the review presented during the *Exit Report* are summarized below. Following the recommended format used at the UNM, the report is organized according to the *Criteria* (or standards) used to assess program quality. For each Criterion, information is provided related to both (a) Program Strengths and (b) Areas that Warrant Further Attention. To ensure that we have an evaluation that is concise and to the point, we have opted to present our observations and recommendations with bullet points, with additional commentary as needed. In certain places the interviewees' responses to specific questions put forth to the evaluators are embedded in the narrative.

### **Program Strengths**

The Special Education Department is an exemplary unit based on all measures used to assess program excellence (i.e., teacher preparation, research, meeting local and state personnel needs, advocacy). Among the major strengths of the program are the following:

- Nationally recognized department, programs, and faculty.
- Exemplary faculty productivity in research, teaching, and service.
- Degree programs for students from families who speak various languages, including indigenous and foreign languages, and from diverse cultures, ethnicities, and economic backgrounds.
- Department with a full array of undergraduate and graduate level degrees.
- Exceptional delivery of degree programs, license-based programs, and certificates programs in both high and low incidence disability areas.

- Department with the ONLY program in New Mexico preparing teachers to meet the needs of students with severe disabilities.
- Delivery of doctoral program focused on the sets of students targeted in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018).

### **Areas that Warrant Further Attention**

While the Special Education Department, programs, and faculty are exemplary and have many strengths, there are some areas that, if addressed, could positively affect the productivity of the department and the university's role in the State of New Mexico. Some of these areas include the following:

- Limited and ineffective communication between faculty and administrators continues to be a problem. One faculty member described this communication problem by indicating that there is a "culture of silence." It is advised that a plan be *collaboratively* developed by faculty, staff, and department, college and university leaders to address this problem, with the intent being to develop ongoing meaningful discussions, transparency, and trust related to decision-making that impacts faculty, programs, staff and departments. Note that this need cannot be met with a new or enhanced top-down communication infrastructure; rather, it will require ongoing in-depth conversations directly among faculty, staff, college leaders, and university leaders. If this problem existed prior to the entry of current college and university leaders, then it is even more critical to address this with effective strategies.
- Although an infrastructure exists that includes a leadership team and a faculty governance committee, this was not evident to the evaluation team. It is clear that this structure for governance and communication has not been effective, however, resulting in faculty and

staff not having been sufficiently and meaningfully engaged in strategic planning and feeling disenfranchised. The evaluation team recognizes that any change of leadership is stressful under the best of times, and that the issues brought on by the COVID pandemic (especially from January 2020 to present) potentially have exacerbated any stress that existed prior to the pandemic; regardless, this must be addressed and rectified. The evaluation team strongly recommends that additional, frequent, and ongoing opportunities be scheduled and used to improve communication among the various stakeholder groups (i.e., university leaders, college leaders, faculty, staff). It is beyond the responsibility of this evaluation team to prescribe how trust can be established; nevertheless, we strongly believe that the communication structure and governance groups have not been effective in developing trust, transparency, and collaborative problem-solving, and that this must be addressed if the full benefit of the faculty expertise, staff experience, college, and university is to be achieved and/or recognized within New Mexico. This issue was mentioned by a sufficient number of faculty members to warrant serious attention.

- It is not clear if university and college leaders understand the complexities of preparing teachers and leaders to meet the needs of students with disabilities, or students from other groups identified in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018), especially within the New Mexico context. New Mexico has some unique challenges, with the faculty having a formidable task in preparing a variety of qualified personnel who can be effective within multiple diverse contexts. This issue also was mentioned by a sufficient number of faculty members to warrant serious attention.

- Lack of acknowledgment of expertise of the faculty (e.g., teaching, research, advisement, advocacy). The role of a special education faculty member is multifaceted. Faculty must identify potential students, encourage them to recruit, and teach and support them. Further, faculty need to be actively involved in research, work with districts and service agencies, and, last, advocate for people with disabilities in general. It was not clear if the administration recognized the full range of activities faculty undertake.
- Faculty effort required for co-planning, co-teaching, and co-assessing student performance (equivalent to at least 1.0 course load, if not higher) is not sufficiently credited.
- Faculty effort teaching courses for other departments does not generate SCH for the department.
- Accomplishments of the department, programs, and faculty appear to be not understood by new university and college leadership, or they are understood but not publicly acknowledged.

### **Criterion 1. Introduction & Background**

#### **Overall Finding: Exceeds**

The introductory and background information provided by the Special Education Programs and Department in the Self-Study Unit Review, as well as our conversations with various stakeholders across the three days, provided foundational details for understanding the history, current status, and future directions. These included:

- A brief explanation of the civil rights movement and legal underpinnings that require the preparation of effective special education teachers, other instructional personnel, leaders, researchers, and advocates to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities.

- Student variables other than disabilities that might result in additional learning needs for students with disabilities, which might include:
  1. learning English as a second language,
  2. having culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, and
  3. being economically challenged.
- The alignment of the department’s programs and goals related to students with disabilities and the additional variables (i.e., learning English as a second language; having culturally and ethnically diverse backgrounds, being economically challenged) cited in the *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018) ruling to comprise sets of students who are at-risk educationally.
- Description of an education system with insufficient “financial resources, culturally appropriate and effective instructional materials, and appropriately trained educators and staff” (Copeland et al., 2021, p. 7).
- Description of the lack of adequately prepared personnel across the state with the expertise required to meet the needs of students and address these systemic issues, including:
  1. instructional personnel (i.e., special education teachers, general education teachers with expectations and expertise to collaborate with special education teachers, related services personnel, instructional assistants),
  2. district and state leaders (i.e., directors of special education, supervisors of curriculum and instruction, principals and assistant principals),
  3. researchers, and
  4. advocates.

- Description of the vision and mission of the department, its programs, and its faculty; and how the department relates directly to meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities in New Mexico through addressing the critical shortage of, and ongoing need for, qualified and effective special education teachers and other personnel in the New Mexico education system.

The information provided situates the role of the existing special education programs and faculty within the multi-cultural, multi-lingual, rural, and economically challenged contexts that comprise New Mexico. Specifically, it provides information on the unique expertise and experience of its faculty members, as well as their willingness, ability, desire and commitment to collaborate with colleagues within and across departments, within and across campuses of the university system, with community agencies and organizations in the state and nationally, and with state department offices to meet the diverse and serious learning needs of the sets of marginalized students mentioned in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018). The evidence of the expertise and commitment to meet the statewide learning needs of students with disabilities, as well as the other three sets of students addressed in *Yazzie & Martinez*, cannot be overstated. These are sets of students who historically and currently have been marginalized and “left behind” by society and the educational system, clearly emphasized in *Yazzie & Martinez*.

To grasp the relevance of the department’s current status and positioning in relation to addressing these statewide issues, one needs to look at the evolution of the department, its programs, and its unique faculty composition. The Self-Study Unit Review briefly describes the 50-year process in which it has been engaged to develop its current, yet ever-evolving, set of faculty whose diverse areas of expertise collectively support their ability to collaborate with colleagues. The department’s unique qualities position them well for the University and College



to have major contributions to meeting the needs highlighted by *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018).

## **Criterion 2. Teaching & Learning Curriculum**

### **Overall Finding: Exceeds**

The following is a list of the strengths of the Teaching & Learning Curriculum and areas that warrant further attention.

#### **Program Strengths**

- Comprehensive, evidence-based and state-of-the-art teacher preparation program that address both low- and high-incidence disabilities.
- Degree offerings at the undergraduate, Master's, and Doctoral Levels.
- Additional certificate programs that complement the teacher preparation program, meet current critical needs of New Mexico, and contribute to the national dialogue.
- Practicum placement process that is well thought out and customized to student, school district, and state needs.
- Only program in the state preparing teachers of students with severe disabilities.
- Only doctoral program in the state in special education.

#### **Areas that Warrant Further Attention**

- Department would benefit from a special education leadership program, either as a concentration or collaboration with educational leadership. Since the program is designed to prepare leaders in special education for the state, program-based administration classes would be of value to offer. Since the Ed.S. program currently remains "vacant," it can be used as a degree structure for such a program.

- Not clear how assistive technology, augmentative communication, or content about sensory impairments are addressed. We know that these skills are addressed in some way but not clear when and in what context.
- The Ed. S. and Ed.D. programs continue to be listed but the lack of enrollment does not justify this. Is it allowable to continue to keep these “place holders,” even though few or no students choose them as degree options.
- The faculty are involved in co-teaching of course offerings. When determining course load and student credit hours, are these factors considered?
- Faculty clearly prefer a synchronous distance education delivery format, however, an asynchronous mode is still the method that is primarily being used. A critical analysis of relative advantages of each mode should be conducted.

### **Criterion 3. Teaching & Learning Curriculum Assessment**

#### **Overall Finding: Exceeds**

#### **Program Strengths**

- The program is fully accredited by the New Mexico Public Education Department and NCATE.
- There is a high level of satisfaction with the students in the program.
- Doctoral students in program are employed by accredited higher education institutions and state and local agencies.
- Progress of students in program is systematically monitored.

#### **Areas that Warrant Future Attention**

- Follow-up data on graduates continues to be missing. Where are graduates being placed? Which districts continue to be in need of qualified teachers and staff? Are graduates

leaving the state? Such data would strengthen any proposals submitted for federal funding (e.g., through U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs) by the Department to support undergraduate, graduate, or doctoral scholars.

- Were any data collected on the effects of the distance education program delivered? What did the department learn? Which modes were most useful and effective, from both the faculty and students' perspectives?
- Are data obtained from current participating students at any point in their programs (This would be in addition to individual course evaluations)? Are students having any particular difficulty meeting program requirements?
- Are specific data obtained on the progress of students with disabilities or students from culturally diverse backgrounds in the program?
- Since practically all students opt for a Plan II master's option, is a Plan I option justified?
- Several faculty members remain unclear as to the requirements for tenure. For example, there is uncertainty regarding the number of publications and student course ratings. It is incumbent on the department to make sure the faculty understand what the expectations are.

#### **Criterion 4. Students (Undergraduate and graduate students)**

##### **Overall Finding: Exceeds**

Over the years, SPCD has been recruiting and preparing students at the undergraduate and graduate levels to serve in NM communities. The SPCD faculty and staff are actively recruiting undergraduate and graduate students into the department for the BSED Dual License Program, GCERT programs, MA, and PhD degree. The recruitment efforts include revising the

departmental website, creating a short video to introduce the department, participating in job fairs, and participating in the state funded program in assisting students financially.

During our virtual visit, the ARP team met with representatives from undergraduate and graduate students. The students have provided insights of strengths and areas that students felt they would like to see changes to the review team. This includes:

### **Program Strengths**

- Undergraduate and graduate students were satisfied with experiences in their programs especially in responding to the needs of the State of New Mexico.
- The students indicated that the SPCD certification program and degree offerings are “far superior” than other online programs that are offered in other higher institutions throughout New Mexico.
- The students reported that the issues relating to social justice, equity, cultural responsiveness, bilingualism, economic inequities, and rural contexts are addressed through coursework they have taken.

### **Areas that Warrant Further Attention**

- During the COVID-19 pandemic, the students felt that courses should be offered in the remote synchronous modality. The students also stated that the department would continue to offer the remote synchronous instead of the asynchronous modality that UNM is currently encouraged, to maintain the high quality education and preparation that the department continues to offer.
- The students shared with the APR team that they would like the SPCD faculty could teach students critical reading skills at the beginning of programs to ensure that the

undergraduate and graduate students are prepared to read course materials and can engage in scholarly activities.

- While the faculty and the programs are nationally and internationally known, students feel that accomplishments of faculty need to be recognized in the community and state.

### **Criterion 5. Faculty**

#### **Overall Finding: Exceeds**

The faculty in the Special Education Department demonstrates many strengths that currently serve the department, college, university, and state very well. In addition, their strengths position the faculty to have an even greater impact on meeting the needs of the state and positioning the college and university in an elevated position of impact in the state.

#### **Program Strengths**

Overall, the program has many strengths. Some of these include:

- Having a balanced combination among types of faculty positions and ranks within those types required to develop, implement, and improve the various degree, licensure, and certificate programs in this exemplary department.
- Having an existing composition of collaborative faculty who are diverse in research, teaching expertise, and professional interests essential for the variety of effective programs offered and needed to meet the needs of the state (*Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico*, 2018).
- Being very productive in scholarship, teaching, and service and advocacy.
- Being highly supportive of and collaborative with other faculty, programs, departments, and partners.

As in every department and university, however, there are several ways in which the faculty in the Special Education Department can be strengthened, which include:

### **Areas that Warrant Future Attention**

- There is insufficient faculty with expertise in low incidence (i.e., severe or multiple) disabilities to provide the breadth of expertise required for effective special education teachers serving this set of students in New Mexico, especially considering the chronic shortage of teachers to meet the learning needs of these students. That said, this is the ONLY program in the state preparing these teachers.
- There is insufficient faculty with expertise in high incidence (i.e., learning or behavioral) disabilities to provide the breadth of expertise required for effective special education teachers serving this set of students in New Mexico, especially considering the chronic shortage of teachers to meet the learning needs of these students.
- There is insufficient faculty to meet the needs of the various teacher preparation and transcribed certificate programs offered by the department to meet the personnel needs in specialized areas (e.g., teachers, instructional assistants, administrators, advocates).
- There is a need to reinstate professional development resources for non-tenure track faculty to ensure programs prepare personnel to implement the most current research- and evidence-based practices when serving students with disabilities and the additional groups of students mentioned in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018).
- There is a serious need for increased and improved engagement of university leaders, college leaders, and faculty of all ranks and positions to be engaged together in ongoing and meaningful discussion related to visioning, strategic planning, and decision-making that impact faculty, programs, and department, college and university operations.

## Criterion 6. Research, Scholarship, & Service

### Overall Finding: Exceeds

The faculty in the Special Education Department demonstrate many strengths related to research, scholarship, and service that currently serve the department, college, university, and state very well. These strengths also position the faculty well to have an even greater impact on meeting the needs of the state, as well as position the college and university to fill an elevated position of impact in the state.

### Program Strengths

Their overall strengths related to research, scholarship, and service include the following:

- Faculty are extremely productive and active in all areas of research, scholarship, and service (i.e., publications, presentations, funded projects, collaborative relationships, board memberships, committee memberships and leadership, task force memberships), while remaining consistent with the mission of the department, college, and university.
- Faculty are increasingly productive as they earn promotion across ranks. This pattern of increased productivity is not common across universities and should be considered an indication of not only the faculty's expertise and professionalism, but also their commitment to their fields both nationally and internationally.
- Faculty are productive in their research and scholarship across a variety of topics (e.g., teacher preparation, EBPs in schools, legal issues, policy, advocacy) relevant to meeting the learning needs of students with disabilities and the additional groups of students mentioned in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018).

- Faculty frequently engage undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students in their research and scholarship activities, including conceptualizing, publishing, and presenting their research for local, statewide, and national audiences.
- The faculty's scholarship is recognized by nationally- and internationally-known colleagues, resulting in acknowledgement with organizational, national, and international awards.

### **Areas that Warrant Future Attention**

There are a few areas in which the research, scholarship, and services of the faculty in the Special Education Department warrant attention. For instance:

- There is limited recognition of the faculty's extensive research, scholarship, and service productivity on campus and in the state.
- There is limited awareness of, and support for, collaborative research, scholarship, and service within the college and university community.
- Note that these two areas are identified not as weaknesses of the faculty or department, or because the faculty or department seeks recognition for themselves; rather, these areas are identified here for two reasons.
- Consideration should be given to how the expertise, research, scholarship, services, and national recognition can be used to better position the college and university in spheres of influence within the state and nationally. This might be with the state department of education, the state developmental disabilities council, the state legislators focused on education, federally-funded national centers and research projects, and professional organizations.



- Consideration should be given to the time, energy, and resources required to collaborate with and/or mentor other faculty. For instance, in the field of special education no one faculty member can hold all the expertise required for teachers to be prepared to meet the learning needs of students with disabilities and the additional groups of students mentioned in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018). When teaching a methods course, the faculty of record most likely will not have the expertise required to teach students with and without disabilities, from culturally diverse backgrounds, and engaged in learning English as a second language. To prepare effective teachers, relevant knowledge and skills must be embedded within preparation programs, thus having faculty model the collaborative teaching and other evidence-based practices expected of teachers in today's schools. To accomplish this, collaboratively teaching a course must be counted in workload as if the faculty member is teaching that course alone; when in reality, such collaborative teaching requires *more* time (not less) than teaching individually. While collaborative teaching would not be required for every course, it is critical for specific courses and with specific faculty combinations, based on expertise and experience.

### **Criterion 7: Comparison Institutions**

#### **Overall Finding: Meets**

#### **Program Strengths**

- Program meets, if not exceeds, all measures across comparison institutions.
- Smallest enrollment but program serves the largest number of Hispanic students.
- Faculty productivity is distinguished compared to comparison institutions.

### **Areas that Warrant Further Attention**

- Department may want to explore a secondary-level dual licensure program. Having such a program would allow the department to offer licensure programs across all grade levels.
- No information was provided about salary levels, course loads, student credit hours generation, professional development allocations, effects of distance education modes, and staff service models. All of these are important issues and a comparison across institutions would provide useful information on relative standing.

### **Criterion 8. Resources & Planning**

#### **Overall Finding: Meets**

Based on the APR document and conversations with faculty, students, and staff, the SPCD department has provided information on their resources, current and future plans to ensure that they maximize the resources for the benefits of the longevity of the department.

#### **Program Strengths**

- The SPCD has a strong leadership. Dr. Ruth Luckasson has been serving as the chair of the department for the past 15 years.
- With the strong and long serving department chair, the faculty and staff feel secure in working and supporting students. The continuation of the department chair has provided stability for the faculty and staff.
- Because of the complexities of the programs, the faculty in the department has decided to advise their students; therefore, they carry heavy loads.

- While UNM has been facing budgetary issues, the SPCD tenured/tenure-track faculty have financial support for their professional developments.
- Program offers eight endowment and three non-endowed scholarships

#### **Areas that Warrant Further Attention**

- Administration needs to seek input from faculty in planning curriculum-related activities.
- Additional staff to help with grants related activities.
- No clear objective in the shared services model.
- Competitive to request for faculty lines.

### **Criterion 9. Facilities**

#### **Overall Finding: Meets**

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the APR review team has scheduled the virtual visit.

#### **Program Strengths**

- Since this is a virtual visit, the technological facilities are working smoothly.

#### **Areas that Warrant Further Attention**

- Based on the previous APR recommendation, there is still not a common area/room for students to wait, rest, and collaborate in the Hokona Hall.

### **Conclusion, Strategic Planning**

#### **Overriding Recommendations**

- No major changes to special education are warranted. Special education certification and licensure programs need to be maintained, supported, and encouraged to grow in order to address the state's needs.
- The university needs to promote the programs and advertise their productivity to relevant stakeholders. For example, do principals or other important stakeholders

- know about the alternative programs? Additionally, the department needs to develop a plan to “showcase” its accomplishments (e.g., university newsletter, local newspaper, state agencies), building a stronger reputation to support “presence” during key state level meetings and initiatives.
- Concentrated efforts are needed to ensure an informed working relationship among the faculty, staff, and college and university leaders. Several faculty members and staff referred to the college as having a top-down structure in which they have limited, if any, opportunities to engage in collaborative decision-making. The existing separation helps none of the stakeholders.
  - Recruitment has been identified as a high priority activity. Nevertheless, there appears to be no detailed plan to achieve desired outcomes. Further, will a college across the board initiative be sensitive to the unique needs of the special education department?
  - There appears to be no long-term plan to assess the effects of the department’s efforts to address the needs identified in *Yazzie & Martinez v. State of New Mexico* (2018), particularly the need to serve students identified in more than one of the sets of students (e.g., indigenous students who have disabilities. students with disabilities who live in poverty).
  - There are faculty and staff concerns about the administration’s focus on “efficiencies” (e.g., reducing or combining staff). Several faculty and staff members described feeling left out of related conversations as decisions were being made. Further, has the advantages of a shared services model been sufficiently studied in relation to its

impact on staff, faculty, and students? It remains uncertain how these issues are being discussed and by whom.