The CPD welcomes four new faculty fellows, in time for Research Week. A fifth fellow, Dr. Bob Morgan, was featured in the December 2010 issue of the CPD NewsFlash. Dr. Nedra Christensen is a professor in the Nutrition, Dietetics and Food Sciences Department. She is also one of the newest faculty fellows at the Center for Persons with Disabilities. Her efforts include adapting a nutrition curriculum developed by the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP-Ed, formally known as the Food Stamp Program) for people with disabilities. It’s groundbreaking work, because no other state has nutrition education specifically for people with disabilities. There is a real need for adults with developmental disabilities to understand good eating habits that will improve overall health and help prevent obesity, Dr. Christensen said. A graduate student is involved in the project. Barb Fiechtl, another faculty fellow from the Department of Special Education provided valuable information in teaching those with a disability, and is also involved in adapting the curriculum to people with disabilities. Three nutrition education assistants from the community are employed to provide the training within the group homes. The program currently reaches 104 people with disabilities in several group homes throughout the state. Another project provides nutrition training to refugees through the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. It teaches nutrition to people who apply for SNAP assistance. The curriculum uses a lot of pictures to aid communication, and it brings in people who have learned English to teach concepts to people who are new in the country. It involves one graduate student from the Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program. In addition, two employees teach the classes. Christensen said the curriculum has been adapted to fit people from other cultures. The classes have introduced people to the idea of using a freezer, for example, or finding lower-cost alternatives to the foods that were common in their home country but prohibitively expensive here. Finally, Christensen is involved in screenings for refugees at the LDS Church Humanitarian Center in Salt Lake City. Three times a year, specialists from the URLEND program screen people who come to the clinic for medical, dental and audiology needs, and they screen specifically for diabetes. Five URLEND trainees participate in the clinics, where 140 people have received the services so far.

Dr. Gretchen Peacock is the Psychology department head. She is also one of the newest faculty fellows at the Center for Persons with Disabilities. She is involved in the Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities program, serving on its management team. She also works to develop the interdisciplinary curriculum used by the program. The training materials are not focused on delivering content specific to any discipline, she said; rather it focuses on principals for delivering services. “Interdisciplinary training is really important, particularly for children with multiple disabilities,” she said. The training helps health care leaders understand the commitments that crowd the schedule of families of children with disabilities. If several specialists are working with a child
they can make recommendations that might overwhelm the family. Instead, Dr. Peacock said they can learn to work together on services that overlap: for example, speech and psychology services can be combined to address a child's tantrums.

Dr. Peacock also works directly with one trainee a year on mentoring. URLEND is set up so that one trainee may learn from several mentors, especially as they work on their leadership projects. The idea is to help trainees figure out how to solve a problem by giving them the tools they need without giving them the solution, she said.

In addition to her work with the URLEND program, she supervises a graduate student who works with the Up to 3 program to provide behavioral services.

Dr. Lori Roggman is a professor in the Family, Consumer and Human Development Department at Utah State University. She is also involved in projects at the CPD’s Research and Evaluation Division.

She was the principal investigator on the original PICCOLO (Parenting Interactions with Children: Checklist of Observations) project, which identifies the good things moms do to contribute to young children’s learning and healthy development. Eventually the research team developed a checklist to help measure affection, responsiveness, encouragement and teaching—all behaviors they found were important to a child’s development.

PICCOLO got parent-child interactions down to a science. Researchers watched literally thousands of interactions between parents and children across several subcultures to develop the measurement tool.

Now thoroughly road-tested, that checklist has been used by numerous programs all over the United States and even internationally. (It has been distributed to 118 people at last count, and researchers from five countries have sought permission to translate it.)

The uses for the tool vary, but they all have something in common: they seek to measure—and encourage—good parenting. It allows a professional to observe a parent and tell her what she’s doing right. That’s an important angle to take, since advising parents on how to raise their children can be a touchy thing.

The PICCOLO project involved 40 students over the course of the project. The development phase of the project ended in January 2009, but it continues to be used as a measurement tool. The team that developed the checklist continues to give presentations on it, train other professionals who use it, and use it in their own research.

In addition, a related project, the PICCOLO-D, grew out of PICCOLO. Its focus: dads and play.

“The same parenting behaviors that we established in PICCOLO are important for dads as well,” Roggman said. But research shows that dads spend a higher percentage of their parent-child time playing than moms do. (Moms spend more of their parent-child time taking care of the child.)

The goal behind PICCOLO-D is to understand what play behaviors will contribute to a child’s development and learning. In addition to being a research project, PICCOLO-D is an ongoing doctoral dissertation by Sheila Anderson. Dr. Roggman is her mentor. So far, PICCOLO-D has involved 25 students who either work on it now or have worked on it in the past.

Dr. Roggman is also involved in the PEESCE project, which uses peer coaching, curriculum development and teacher training to improve both English language learning and behavior in a preschool classroom. She has been involved in guiding process, conceptualization, and product development for the project.

She also helped generate the curriculum products for the SHELLS and UTELL research projects. SHELLS, or Storytelling for Home Enrichment of Language and Literacy Skills, promoted parents’ engagement with children by involving them in telling family stories. The research was published in Early Education and Development last year.

UTELL, or Using Technology for Emergent Language and Literacy, encouraged families to make their own books from digital photos, documenting things they do
in everyday life. The goal was to encourage language and literacy in young children. Evidence of UTELL outcomes is published in Review of Disabilities Studies: An International Journal, last year.

The PEESCE, UTELL and SHELLS projects all involved a team of researchers led by Dr. Lisa Boyce.

Dr. Jared Schultz is an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation on the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services.

His work with the Employability Clinic was of interest to the Center for Persons with Disabilities, which seeks to support both the clinic and its grant-writing efforts. The clinic provides employment services to young adults with disabilities—both post-high-school special education students who are still in the school system and those who are transitioning into the adult world.

Special education students don’t often get the pre-work experiences that their peers do, Dr. Schultz said. Volunteer work, internships and introductory job experiences are thinner on the ground for them. What’s more, young adults who are termed “hard to engage” are usually dealing with a different set of employability issues. Typically it is not the lack of job skills that inhibits them so much as social skills, grooming or showing up on time wearing work-appropriate clothes. Transportation problems and family issues can further complicate the young adult’s chances of getting and keeping a job.

“Community rehabilitation programs are usually set up to do specific things, and when somebody’s needs are outside what they’re set up to do, it kind of creates a crack that the person falls through,” Dr. Schultz said.

The employability clinic focuses on these issues specific to young adults with disabilities, working not only with the individual and the family but also with the employer, helping them to work out accommodations. The most successful approach matches the individual with the needs of the employer. For example, a young adult with disabilities may be able to take over duties that other employees are too busy to do. In those cases, hiring a person with disabilities boosts productivity, and it can provide an unexpected morale boost to the other employees. It gives them a sense of helping out.

The clinic currently has seven or eight clients, but the potential client list is much greater—100 or more at last count. It currently employs one full-time staff member. Four graduate students also gain volunteer service opportunities there.

Dr. Bob Morgan is currently involved in Project PEER, or Post-Secondary Education, Employment and Research. Dr. Morgan serves on the PEER advisory board, supervising student teachers, working with the teacher in getting feedback from employers, and consulting.

He is a professor in USU’s Special Education and Rehabilitation Department.

The PEER project works with people with developmental disabilities ages 18-21 prior to their leaving the public school system. It helps them discover their interests and help them plan and launch a career path. Seventeen students are enrolled per year, and PEER employs one teacher and several paraprofessionals.

The project is intended to improve on some discouraging statistics. The current economy has reduced the number
of supported and competitive jobs available to them. Adult services budgets have been slashed. In a recently released study, Easter Seals revealed that only 11% of parents of adult children with disabilities say their child is employed full time. Nationally, many people with developmental disabilities are leaving high school and “falling into a chasm,” Dr. Morgan said. It’s a trend he and others in Utah State University’s College of Education and Human Services would like to help reverse. What’s more, Dr. Morgan cites studies showing that supported employment programs are nearly 65 percent more cost-effective than sheltered workshops among people with severe disabilities. (R.E. Cimera’s cost-effectiveness study was published in 2007 in Research and Practice for Persons With Severe Disabilities, Vol. 32 Issue 4).

Project PEER has also provided fertile ground for research and development in transitioning to the adult world. It has been the subject of three of Dr. Morgan’s research projects. It also uses a program he developed to assess job preferences for people with developmental disabilities. Your Employment Selections, or YES, is a website that allows people to assess their interests. It includes video of 150 entry-level jobs to help the person decide on a career path.

Deciding what a student wants to do is often the first hurdle, said Dr. Morgan. Other goals include improving social skills, which can be another formidable barrier to getting and keeping a job.

The program’s ultimate goal is for every PEER graduate to go on to a job or post-secondary education.