

# New Faculty Fellows | CPD

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The Center for Persons with Disabilities will ring in the new year with a group of fellows—faculty members from other parts of the Utah State University campus who bring real-world experience to their students. Through their relationships with the CPD, members of this group employ and teach students and trainees in CPD programs. They conduct research on and provide services to people with disabilities and their families.

They took on projects that grew beyond their original scope, said CPD Director Bryce Fifield. The Faculty Fellows designation recognizes them for their work in the disability community. Here's a quick introduction:

## Dr. Sarah Bloom



Dr. Sarah Bloom is an assistant professor in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation.

She and Dr. Andrew Samaha co-direct the Severe Behavior Clinic, working with children with severe behavioral problems including self-injury, aggression,

inappropriate vocalizations and property destruction. Prior to coming to Utah State University, they were involved in a similar clinic affiliated with the University of Florida. The USU clinic provides assessment and treatment services to identify why children and adults engage in problematic behavior. Then the clinic's staff members develop interventions and train families and care providers. The clinic is supported in part by the CPD. The project's research component seeks to make assessments more efficient. The researchers will also evaluate factors that improve a treatment's effectiveness and find treatments that work in a family setting, so that families can also focus on other family members at home. Three graduate students work part-time at the Severe Behavior Clinic. Two additional volunteers gain practical experience.

## Keith Christensen

In addition to being a research scientist at the CPD, Keith Christensen is an assistant professor in the Landscape Architecture and Environmental Planning Department.

As a research scientist with the CPD, he explored the relationship between design and social access, social values, human rights and social justice. Those interests are continued in his current research on how different types of play environments affect the play of all children. While an accessible playground may allow children to physically use play equipment, he is interested in finding out how different environments affect social interaction. One doctoral student is employed in Christensen's CPD-related research; another doctoral student is gaining practical experience.

Another research project involves making computer models that take people with disabilities into account as they plan for the emergency evacuation of a space. Currently, architects use computer modeling to simulate how evacuation would proceed and to find the best building plan to facilitate it. Unfortunately, most models assume that all people have the same ability to move. The research of Christensen and doctoral student Matthew Manley takes a more realistic approach, introducing people of all abilities into the model. This study is supported in part by the Transportation Research Board. Keith developed and continues to direct [Beyond Access](#), a technical assistance program on inclusive play environments for children with disabilities. The program works with industry partners, consumers and advocates to create inclusive play environments which recognize the child's right to equal play, full participation and independence.

Recently, Keith worked with the CPD's [Interdisciplinary Training Division](#) to conduct a study of the impact of neighborhood characteristics on the physical activity of adults with disabilities, with a special emphasis on how outdoor recreation affects wellness.

His research has been published in the *Journal of Artificial Societies and Social Simulation* and the *Journal of Architectural and Planning Research*.

### **Barbara Fiechtl**

Barbara Fiechtl is a clinical instructor for the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation at Utah State University.

She currently studies the feasibility of virtual home visits, seeing if the technology works and if early intervention services can be delivered effectively to families via internet video conferencing. The project is being conducted in northern Utah, and roughly half of the families in the study are from rural areas.

She has also participated in the [Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities](#) program as a faculty representative in special education. URLEND is a multi-state collaborative program with the University of Utah Medical Center's Department of Pediatrics; the CPD; the Utah Department of Health's Children with Special Health Care Needs Bureau; Primary Children's Medical Center; Family Voices organizations in the participating states, and CSHCN programs in Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, Wyoming, and Utah. Through URLEND, Fiechtl mentors two trainees on their leadership projects.

In addition, she teaches 11 students through the [Early Childhood-Alternative Teacher Preparation Program](#)., an off-campus, distance education program aimed at licensing early childhood special education providers. The program is housed at the CPD.

Her research is published in *Infants and Young Children* and the *Rural Special Education Quarterly*.

### **Dr. Thomas Higbee**

Dr. Thomas Higbee is an associate professor in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation and the founder and director of the [Autism Support Services: Education, Research and Training](#) program. This early intensive behavioral intervention program for children with autism is a collaborative effort of the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation and the CPD.

As a Board Certified Behavior Analyst, Higbee has published and presented at the state and national level. Throughout his career, he has worked with children with autism and other developmental disabilities in homes, centers and school-based programs. Through workshops and consultation, he has trained teachers and related service providers in school districts in four states. His research focuses on techniques that help individuals with autism and other developmental disabilities develop appropriate communication, academic, social, and life skills. His articles been published in *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis*, *Journal of Special Education Technology*, *Education and Treatment of Children* and *Rural Special Education Quarterly*.

Twenty to thirty undergraduate students are employed at ASSERT at any given time. Five doctoral students are currently employed.

### **Vicki Simonsmeier**

Vicki Simonsmeier is an assistant clinical professor in the Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education Department.

She coordinates clinical and leadership activities for 10 speech-language pathology and audiology graduate trainees in the [Utah Regional Leadership Education in Neurodevelopmental Disabilities](#) program who gain some of their experience through programs and clinics at the CPD.

She has been involved with URLEND from its inception, working with Dr. Judith Holt and others to write its initial training grant. Through URLEND, she worked in conjunction with the trainees in occupational therapy and psychology, along with Dr. Dennis Odell to start an interdisciplinary feeding clinic that provides services to children who have trouble getting enough nutrition. The children range from 0 to 12 years old, with many of the referrals coming from the newborn intensive care units at Primary Children's Medical Center and Logan Regional Hospital. The clinic has served 21 children in the last year, and Simonsmeier has previously published a related article in the journal *Infants and Young Children*. The clinic is now located in the Lillywhite Building on the Utah State University campus.

Another project, the Social Language Group, also grew out of URLEND program and its relationships on campus in order to assist children on the autism spectrum with

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pragmatic (social language) skills. Most of these children were either undiagnosed in their preschool years or did not qualify for services within school services. This fee-for-services clinic is a project in collaboration with Dr. Odell and the clinical faculty in Communicative Disorders and Deaf Education. It has served 10 children in the past year. The URLEND audiology component is a result of a grant written by URLEND principal investigator Dr. Judith Holt and Communicative Disorders and Speech-Language Pathology Endowed Chair Dr. Ron Gillam. In addition, Simonsmeier is working on a research project to understand how parents make decisions about alternative treatments or complimentary medicine, especially as it relates to their decision whether to vaccinate their children.