Training For Students Enhances University Experience | CPD

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It is generally expected that students will leave university with the education they need to begin a career. At Utah State University’s Center for Persons with Disabilities, however, students gain valuable hands-on training that can help them in the future.

One such opportunity is a two-semester class called Interdisciplinary Disability Awareness and Service Learning (IDASL) offered through the CPD’s Interdisciplinary Training Division.

According to division director Judith Holt, IDASL was formed in the fall of 2000 and was designed to provide upper division undergraduate and graduate students with a better understanding of the systems that provide service to people with disabilities, and the barriers to providing service.

Class size is limited to around 15 students, she said, and always includes at least one consumer with a disability and one family member of a consumer. Students may be eligible for a small stipend in addition to course credit.

“It’s really good for the students,” said Alma Burgess, who co-teaches the class with Jeanie Peck, Gordon Richins and Becky Keeley. “Some have had interaction with people with disabilities, and some have not. We want people to leave here more educated about people with disabilities and go out and be an advocate and not be afraid to interact.”

This year’s class includes students from social work, psychology, communication disorders, nutrition, exercise science, animal science, family life and consumer sciences, physics and business. Past classes have included landscape design and music therapy majors.

The seminar-style class offers three components: didactic, service learning and Participatory Action Research (PAR), Burgess said. Professionals or people with disabilities come and present information on a wide variety of issues related to disability.

One of their first lessons involves using ‘people first’ language, in which the person is emphasized, not their disability. Each class includes a ‘media moment,’ in which students share their observations of how people with disabilities are portrayed in the media. Students are encouraged to make changes to an article and contact the writer to promote awareness.

“A big part of the class is advocacy for others,” Burgess said. “It’s not something small and insignificant.”

In addition to the classroom work, students complete service learning projects at the Assistive Technology lab, Project PEER (Postsecondary Education, Employment and Research), Up to 3 and the Developmental Skills Lab (DSL) on campus, and at OPTIONS for Independence and Common Ground in Logan. The PAR project develops from the students’ work at one of the service learning sites.

The small class size and interdisciplinary nature make for good discussion, Burgess said. Richins and Keeley, who both use wheelchairs, bring a valuable perspective to the class, as do family members of people with disabilities.

“The parents have added so much,” Burgess said. “They’re the real experts. The students couldn’t have gotten that experience any other way.

Students are required to write a ‘pre-flection,’ in which they tell about their experiences with people with disabilities before taking the class. At the end of the semester, they write a ‘defining moments’ paper.

“The DSL (Developmental Skills Lab) has left me feeling grossly inadequate,” one IDASL student wrote in a ‘defining moment’ paper. It was difficult for the student to interact with DSL participants because some of them have severe disabilities. “This has felt like a huge learning curve, but I can tell it will eventually prove to be the
most valuable. Time spent with them individually has helped me learn to recognize the individual instead of the communication barriers ... I am embarrassed as I recognized how much of an epiphany this is.”

Another student wrote, “I have learned a lot about how my views have changed regarding disability. Before taking the class, I wasn’t aware of how negligent and naïve I was being when it came to my interactions with people with a disability. Now I understand so much more about treating everyone with respect, even when they aren’t able to do things the way I do.”

Richins said they do see a change in the students from the first semester to the second semester.

“The most enjoyable part of the class for me is seeing the students grow in understanding of disability, because the focus is on disability and enhancing the quality of life for people with disabilities and for society in general,” he said.

Alexandra Garnica is a student in the IDASL class and is Project PEER participant. She has an invisible disability resulting in a slow processing speed. Project PEER teacher Kerry Done suggested she enroll.

“People should be more involved with IDASL,” Garnica said. “It’s wonderful to have that class.”

Garnica was already familiar with service learning sites such as Common Ground and OPTIONS before enrolling in IDASL.

“I like to be involved with the community and help other people,” Garnica said. “That’s my hobby. I like helping others.”

Garnica’s PAR partner, Esther Walker, is a junior family and consumer science major from Santaquin, Utah. She first became aware of IDASL through an e-mail from an advisor and thought she’d try it.

“It’s a good learning experience about people with disabilities,” Walker said. “In most of my experience and interaction, I get to see they’re like anybody else and want to be accepted like everyone else.”

The class requirement for service learning hours keep her busy, she said, but she enjoys going to Common Ground and the AT lab.

“It’s hands-on experience and I can go at my own pace,” she said.

**CPD participants benefit from students’ hands-on training**

Each semester, two graduate students in speech-language pathology put their classroom learning to use in a practicum with DSL participants, who practice skills like articulation, making eye contact, social language skills, turn-taking and rice-krispie-treat-making.

Jackie Sopp, a first-year graduate student in speech language pathology from El Dorado Hills, Calif., said group activities—like making treats—are her favorite part of the practicum.

“In the groups, we get to see them generalize their skills and work with other people,” Sopp said.

Patience and flexibility are essential, she said.

“I’ve learned to be flexible and just tune in to what they need and their understanding, and modify what we thought we’d do that day if we need to,” Sopp said.

Students in fields such as special education, psychology and speech-language pathology can also work in the ASSERT (Autism Support Services: Education, Research, and Training) preschool, which serves as a model training classroom for students who are interested in learning to work effectively with children diagnosed with autism spectrum disorders.

**Students have added responsibility in Clinical Services**

Graduate assistants and graduate practicum students in psychology have been part of the CPD for a long time, said Marty Toohill, one of the coordinators of the Autism
Spectrum Disorders (ASD) Evaluation Clinic in the CPD’s Clinical Services Division.

According to Vicki Simonsmeier, one of the coordinators of the ASD clinic, graduate assistants have larger responsibilities in evaluations and case management, so when they leave USU they will have clinical skills as well as expanded case management skills.

Generally, Toohill said, the students already have some experience with testing, but at the CPD they get a broader sense of the entire assessment process as an interdisciplinary process, which was first implemented with the ASD clinic in 2011.

“Now we do it with everyone who comes in the door,” he said. “Sometimes it’s a straight language assessment or OT (occupational therapy) or a behavioral assessment, but we still consult everyone.”

“It’s kind of unique and it’s not easy to do,” Toohill said. “Students are getting an interdisciplinary experience they don’t often get.”

“Graduate students in speech language pathology and psychology are becoming really good diagnosticians,” Simonsmeier said. “They don’t get to spend much time developing relationships with the patients, so they kind of have to hit the ground running. They really become experts in that part of their profession.”

Toohill encourages the students to be curious and to think like a detective to find out why the client is here, what caused them to pick up the phone and call. The students also gather client records and contact other providers to get a full picture of what is going on.

The students also learn how to write evaluation reports using descriptive language rather than technical terms and jargon. They learn to write to their audience, so the reports can be easily understood by consumers, parents or future school staff. If, for example, a client wants to get accommodations in school or workplace setting, they have to have a documented history of the disability.

“These assessments can have a lifelong impact,” Toohill said. “We need to get it right.

**Continuing ed provides training for brand-new teachers**

Chelley Shaffer teaches in a special education preschool in the Davis School District and is in her last semester in the Early Childhood Alternative Teacher Preparation (EC-ATP) program. She has a bachelor’s degree in international studies, which she admits, has nothing to do with special education.

“I think that’s a little bit who this program caters to, people who got a bachelor’s degree but not an education, and then had a change of heart about what they wanted to do,” Shaffer said.

EC-ATP program director Marlene Deer said school districts often have trouble finding people who are licensed to teach preschool special education. Districts can hire people who already have a bachelor’s degree, even if it’s not in education, on an emergency letter of authorization from the state office of education. The new teachers have three years to get licensed.

“We call these teachers home-grown,” said Deer. “They already have a bachelor’s degree. They have established roots, they’re part of the community and after they get licensed they will tend to stay in the community.”

The program has two tracks (two-year and three-year) and offers classes online after the normal school day ends. All class sessions are archived and can be accessed at any time.

“I don’t think I could have made it happen as a full-time student,” Shaffer said.

She is completing her student teaching requirement in her own classroom, under the supervision of Deer and other mentors.

“It’s a very thorough, very comprehensive program,” Shaffer said.

For more information about the IDASL program, click here.

For information about joining the 2013-2014 IDASL class, click here or call Burgess at 797-0253.

For more information about the Autism Spectrum Disorder Evaluation Clinic, click here.

For more information about the EC-ATP program, click here.

For more information about speech therapy at the DSL, click here.

For more information about ASSERT, click here.