



### University of Vermont's Graduate Concentration in Emotional and Behavioral Disabilities

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*Lessons We Learned on How to Keep a Graduate Program Going Long After The Initial Seed Money Has Ended*

By the early 1990s, Vermont had developed a reputation as being a state that promoted the inclusion of students with disabilities. Furthermore, there was an emphasis in Vermont on bringing youth with labels of emotional disturbance (ED), who were in out-of-state residential settings, back home to their local communities. However, once youth with labels of behavioral and emotional problems were back home, it became clear that the schools needed more training and assistance to support youth with ED and their families.

Many classroom teachers did not feel equipped to address the level of needs before them -- the elementary age child who was throwing chairs, the middle school student who was refusing to do any work, the adolescent girl who would hide her head on her desk each day. Several statewide and federally sponsored projects focused on building schools' capacity to support all students through intensive in-service trainings. This was met with variable success. As is often the case with grant sponsored initiatives, it was frequently

difficult to sustain practices and grant funded staff beyond the life of the grant. It soon became clear to us that a pre-service training model, specializing in emotional disturbance, would have a broader and more lasting impact on the system.

In response to this need, we submitted a grant proposal to the U.S. Department of Education to support a pre-service training program at the University of Vermont. The initial grant was designed to support youth with ED within their local public schools by providing graduate level training to special educators and related service providers who wanted to work with this population.

The program was designed as a concentration in emotional disabilities within the special education program. It provided a core curriculum in emotional disabilities that could be combined with other coursework to meet the requirements for a Masters Degree (or Certificate of Advanced Studies) and special education licensure.

In addition to classroom-based instruction, students were required to participate in a year long internship at their school site. Students needed to demonstrate applied competencies in working with individual students and families (conducting functional assessments, implementing positive behavior supports, engaging in family-centered and culturally sensitive planning), as well as in having an impact at a broader systemic level (training others, developing and revising policies, fostering interagency connections). The program was particularly directed towards educators who were already in the field. Courses were tailored to adult learners, with classes meeting in the evenings and on weekends.

Many months after the grant submission, an envelope appeared in our mailbox. With excitement, we realized that we had been awarded the funding to begin the program. But then the reality set in...we had in fact received the funding and now needed to carry out this initiative! The task was a bit daunting, as it was August and the entire graduate program needed to start up by the

end of that month. We scrambled to recruit students, develop the courses and begin teaching almost immediately. An Advisory Council was formed, composed of educators, administrators, and family members, to ensure that our program was meeting identified needs in the field.

Four years later, we were faced with the challenge of how to sustain and expand upon the graduate program, while making it accessible to those in more rural areas. In the latter 1990s, we received a second multi-year federal grant to support program costs, as well as student tuition. In this initiative, we added a Distance Learning component. While we had always served students from throughout Vermont, the travel distance to classes was difficult for those in remote areas of the state (particularly during the snowy winter months!). The Distance Learning aspects included the use of interactive television, an emphasis on email and the internet, and on-site supervision (which we had previously provided, as well).

As the second grant came to an end, we still faced the issue of how to sustain a grant supported graduate program. While submitting another grant proposal, the University agreed to provide matching support for faculty salaries. In addition, we wrote the grant so that the program would be a good fit with a statewide initiative to provide training for educators seeking licensure in special education. Students who completed the requirements for the special education licensure program (at higher education institutions across Vermont) could combine their credits with our coursework to receive their Masters degree or Certificate of Advanced Studies.

We also developed a cohort model to encourage participating school districts to sponsor a group of educators from their district. While we did receive federal funding, school districts provided supplemental financial support to cover the cost of on-site supervision and related activities. As a result, we were able to build collaborative relationships with school districts, encourage district buy-in to support long-

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term sustainability of the program and foster greater capacity building at a local level through the district cohort model. Graduate students remarked that they appreciated having like-minded "allies" in their districts so that they weren't "lone rangers" trying to change the system.

As of June 2005, this third federal grant has now come to an end. Both the University of Vermont and the Vermont State Department of Education have now agreed to provide funding towards faculty salaries and to incorporate the program with other statewide initiatives.

In the upcoming years, staff from the Vermont Department of Education will provide course instruction on-site at locations throughout Vermont. These will serve to supplement coursework offered on-campus. While a fourth federal grant has been submitted to provide support for student tuition, the mechanisms are now in place to keep the program going at a strong pace, regardless of how the federal dice fall.

*In loving memory of Linda Backus, a core faculty member with the UVM graduate program in Emotional Disturbance, who passed away during the Spring of 2005.*

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