



Best Practice Update

Secondary Special Education Transition Externship

This Update provides information on an exciting opportunity for secondary personnel to participate in a summer transition externship which focuses on community-based placement and functional curriculum.

Transition

This past summer, the North Dakota Center for Persons with Disabilities at Minot State University (MSU) and the Department of Public Instruction (DPI) entered into an agreement to design and deliver a unique transition training experience for secondary special education teachers. The Transition Externship Project was conceived by Valerie Fischer of DPI in collaboration with Brent Askvig and Liz Steere at MSU.

The purpose of the Externship Project was to assist North Dakota's secondary special education teachers in identifying the work requirements of competitive community employment for their students. It was especially designed to focus on rural community job development. The following activities were proposed for the pilot project: develop course materials, schedule externship activities, recruit participants, deliver and evaluate the externship experience. Anticipated outcomes for the participants in this pilot project included a) delineate work and social skill requirements for employment in their communities, b) revise their curricula to infuse the work and social skills requirements, c) make connections with community employers for work experience sites, and d) increase placements of their students in community sites.

Development of the Externship and Course Materials

MSU faculty utilized existing university course materials and commercial curricula to develop the Externship experience. The course materials emphasized practical applications of the targeted course skills. Most of the activities were designed for use in the participants' home communities. Materials emphasized independent yet guided experiences. There were three essential aspects of the course; the on-campus instruction, the online instruction, and the students' community-based applications. Each is briefly described below.

On-campus instruction: On-campus instruction focused on a broad overview of transition, including philosophy, collaboration, planning, and curriculum development. There was a special emphasis on linking community-based instruction to local secondary curricula. The Life Centered Career Education (LCCE) curriculum as well as Diane Baumgart's Career Education manual was used extensively.

Online instruction: The online component of the project consisted of materials and activities which enriched and applied the techniques taught during the on-campus phase. Online lessons were written and posted on a course web page that students accessed through MSU's WebCT course site. In addition, the web site included links to transition articles, bibliographies, and areas for student bulletin board and email postings. The bulletin board site was used to generate discussion of transition issues, and the email component was used for ongoing faculty-student dialogue as well as assignment submissions. The electronic communication capabilities of the course allowed us to overcome distance barriers between students and faculty.

Community-based applications: When students returned to their home communities after the on-campus portion of the course, they began the process of analyzing and applying community-based placement strategies. These strategies included assessing the community for potential work sites, contacting employers about future work experiences, developing placement and instructional plans for the sites, and determining appropriate methods for evaluating the effectiveness of the placements. In addition, students evaluated and revised their local secondary curricula in an effort to merge community-based work experiences with the existing school curricula.

Schedule Externship Activities

Today's teachers are faced with a myriad of responsibilities. One specific task is keeping their skills current through ongoing professional development. However, teaching load, extra-curricular supervision, cost, and distance are typical barriers faced by North Dakota teachers. While many teachers take valuable time away from home and family for university-based summer courses, not everyone can afford that luxury. With that in mind, the Transition Externship Project was designed to provide a limited amount of on-campus instruction and then utilize distance technology (WebCT on the Internet) for the remainder of the course.

The schedule for the Externship is as described –

Date	Activity
June 3 - 4, 2001	On-campus lecture and instruction
June 5 - July 29, 2001	Online instruction through WebCT
July 30 – 31, 2001	Final on-campus sessions

Participants

The initial version of this pilot project was limited to 12 secondary teachers. A total of 12 teachers applied for the externship and 11 participated. Those 11 teachers are –

<i>Teachers</i>	<i>School / Special Education Unit</i>
Pamela Aman	Beulah / Oliver Mercer
Jalena Barfield	Lisbon / South Valley
Janet Bjornson	Ellendale / Dickey-LaMoure
JoAnn Coates	Dickinson / Dickinson
Dora Cowell	Wahpeton / Wahpeton
Judy Cunningham	McClusky / Lonetree
Clark Gripentrog	Wahpeton / Wahpeton
Don Hamm	Des Lacs Burlington / Souris Valley
Lori Kunrath	Oakes / Sheyenne Valley
Kevin Larson	LMM / Buffalo Valley
Karol Nyberg	Grand Forks / Grand Forks

Delivery and Evaluation of the Externship

As stated previously, the externship course was conducted during June and July 2001. At the last on-campus meeting, the project staff and participants discussed the evaluation components of the project. Staff conducted an initial evaluation of the activities, especially concerning the course content and delivery modes. Data suggest that the teachers had high ratings of the materials and the delivery format. They especially liked the interactive features of the course, both on-campus and online.

Nearly three fourths of the teachers indicated they put in over 50 hours of time for the four credit hour course. This is precisely in line with MSU's standards for course time per credit (i.e., the standard is 15 hours per course credit). The WebCT data system, capable of tracking time online per student and per course web page, recorded 52 hours of online time total for all 11 teachers. In addition, there were 34 bulletin board postings and 226 faculty-student emails transmitted in the course.

Anecdotal comments from the teachers suggested a general satisfaction with the course, and offered ideas for improving it. Also, the teachers suggested keeping the course web page, along with the bulletin board and email functions, in operation throughout the coming academic year, which will be done.

As part of the follow-up evaluation, MSU will initiate two contacts with all teachers regarding the impact of the project in November 2001 and February 2002 via telephone interviews and on-site visits to track the impact of the training. Specifically, MSU and DPI will examine the extent to which the teachers implement community-based vocational placements including the number of students placed along with the locations. Also, we will examine the extent to which the district curriculum for students with disabilities has been revised to facilitate community-based placements. The evaluation data will be ready for dissemination in Spring 2002.

Future Plans

MSU faculty and DPI staff are examining the pilot project and planning for next year; both parties have tentatively agreed to offer the externship again during the summer 2002 session. Full details will be announced as they become available. For more information, contact Valerie Fischer, Department of Public Instruction, Special Education at 701-328-2277.