

## Developing Effective Advocates during Doctoral Preparation: An Examination of Federal-Level Special Education Policy Internships

Jacqueline Rodriguez, *College of William & Mary*

Selma Powell, *University of Washington*

Carrie Straub, *Mursion, LLC*

Krista Vince-Garland, *Buffalo State, The State University of New York*

Wilfred Wienke, *University of Central Florida*

**Abstract** It is critically important for leadership personnel in special education to develop knowledge and skills in policy and advocacy. The Pew Charitable Trust initiated a survey to uncover resources and experiences impacting doctoral-level preparation at institutes of higher education. Results indicated that fewer than 30 percent of doctoral students were provided the opportunity for an internship experience. Thus, a large university located in the southeast United States created an internship experience reflective of current policies and trends within the field of special education. This article discusses interns' responsibilities with reference to policy and politics, opportunities for mentorship, the development of personal contacts and networking, and the impact of each experience on the intern's future role in special education teacher education and advocacy.

**Keywords** Doctoral internships; Special education policy; Special education advocacy; Mentorship; Professional development

Jacqueline Rodriguez, Selma Powell, Carrie Straub, Krista Vince-Gardland, & Wilfred Wienke. (2019). Developing Effective Advocates during Doctoral Preparation: An Examination of Federal-Level Special Education Policy Internships. *International Journal of Education Policy & Leadership* 15(4). URL: <http://journals.sfu.ca/ijepl/index.php/ijepl/article/view/468> doi: 10.22230/ijepl.2018v15n4a468

IJEPL is a joint publication of **PKD International**, the Faculty of Education at **Simon Fraser University**, the College of Education and Human Development at **George Mason University**, and the **University of Delaware**. By virtue of their appearance in this open access journal, articles are free to use, with proper attribution, in educational and other non-commercial settings 90 days after initial publication. Copyright for articles published in IJEPL is retained by the authors. More information is available on the IJEPL website: <http://www.ijepl.org>



## Introduction

It is critically important for leadership personnel in special education to develop knowledge and skills in policy and advocacy. The need for these skills has been expressed by current leaders in the field based on their higher education experience in preparing a range of personnel, from classroom teachers to college instructors to university researchers (deBettecourt, Hover, Rude, & Taylor 2016; McLaughlin, West, & Anderson, 2016). The requirement for special educators to be competent in policy and advocacy is essential to ensure they are well equipped to support the students they teach, both in the classroom and at the administrative level (Rock, Spooner, Nagro, Vasquez, Dunn, Leko, Luckner, Bausch, Donehower, & Jones, 2016), especially given the continuing fragile nature of budgets to support special education at all levels (West & Sheperd, 2016; Whitby & Wienke, 2012).

## Internships as reflective practice for leadership development

Internships, at their core, are based in experiential learning, a real-world application of skills and theory “whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience” (Kolb, 1984, p. 38). National priorities, trends in education, and political dynamics converge in Washington, D.C., forming the perfect storm and providing an opportunity for interns to gain experience with federal special education policy. This case study investigates the experiences of a cohort of doctoral scholars during summer internships in multiple special education policy organizations in Washington, D.C. Additionally, it shares how the internships broadened and enriched the cohort’s knowledge base as future teacher educators in the field of special education. The co-authors of the study are the participating interns, thus are able to effectively address the outcomes of the experience. Internship experiences pertaining to leadership development will be discussed, followed by an exploration of a theoretical framework for experiential learning theory in the context of a case-study research design. Finally, themes that emerged will be examined regarding the common experiences and knowledge gained during special education federal policy internships.

A long history of research provides evidence that well-intentioned internship experiences positively impact leadership development. In a report on innovative programs in education, the University Council for Educational Administration (Jackson, 2001) defines internship as “the process and product that result from the application in a workplace environment of the strategic, instructional, organizational, and contextual leadership guidelines” (p. 7). The report further explains that integrating the internship experience with future reflection creates a powerful synthesis of knowledge and skills useful to practicing school leaders. Cross-disciplinary studies on experiential learning have demonstrated that exposure to concrete elements of real-world practice can increase a leader’s ability to contemplate, analyze, and systematically plan strategies for action (Kolb & Boyatzis, 1999; Mellor, 1991). Further, the Southern Regional Educational Board (2005) has reported that a well-designed internship or field experience assists in broadening the knowledge and skills of students, while also measuring their capability to apply new learning in authentic settings. In 2007, Linda Darling-Hammond, Michelle LaPointe, Debra Meyerson, Margaret Terry Orr, and Carol Cohen affirmed that when considering field-based in-

ternships, adults learn best when newly acquired skills and knowledge are applied in authentic settings, and they highlighted the importance of critical self-reflection.

Emphasizing the confluence of reflection and iterative practice, Kenneth Rhee's (2008) study on developing leadership ability in graduate students heralded the importance of field experience as a tool in leadership development. The study found that only after a practical experience during summer break did students discover the value of their course and programming and become more effective educators. This finding suggests that giving students an opportunity to practice what they have learned adds to their conceptual understanding of their responsibilities and more active implementation of knowledge acquired through coursework. Future leaders learn from the experiences accrued during their internships. They can learn even more from having the opportunity to reflect on those experiences (Earley, 2009).

The regular practice of written reflection contributes to a holistic experience that assists in leadership development (Rhee & Honeycutt Sigler, 2010). Researchers suggest that reflective practice a) improves problem-solving, decision-making, and the complex thinking skills of leadership candidates; b) assists in embedding learning components so that understanding is constructed as a process rather than a product; and c) serves as a true application of knowledge (Kolb, 1984; Kraus, 1996). It has also been noted that a strong benefit of reflective practice is that it can be incorporated into a stand-alone course or degree program at any level (Roebuck, Sigler, & Tyran, 2006).

## **Experiential learning theory**

David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory (ELT) provides a theoretical framework for internships and field experiences. The ELT explains the central role of experience in the adult learning process and adult development (Kolb & Boyatzis, 2000). Kolb (1984) describes the learning process thusly: "whereby concepts are derived from and continuously modified by experience" (p. 26). Using this definition, Kolb developed two subsystems that elucidate and describe how adults acquire and actualize information through recursive learning (Allen, Sheckley, & Keeton, 1992).

The first subsystem includes learning through apprehension (direct contact with an experience) or detached comprehension (abstract learning). The second subsystem includes actualizing learning through intention (reflecting on observations) or extension (actively experimenting). Thus, the ELT includes four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. These stages culminate in a cycle of learning that the participant may begin at any stage, while moving from stage to stage.

## **Methodology**

A large university in the southeast United States maintains a PhD internship in special education focused on professional leadership experience at the federal level. Criteria for this internship include the successful completion of all doctoral coursework comprehensive exams, the presentation of a 10-page prospectus of the dissertation, and chapters one and two of the dissertation. The purpose of the summer doctoral internship program is for participants to gain first-hand knowledge in the areas of ef-

fective leadership, policy, and collaboration through federal programs and projects within the field of special education, and, ultimately, to apply these experiences to broaden and enrich their careers as future teacher educators (Dieker, Wienke, Straub, Finnegan, & Straub, 2014; Miller, Finnegan, Wienke, & Lopez, 2017; West & Schaefer Whitby, 2008; Whitby & Wienke, 2012). However, the purpose of the current study was to investigate how special education policy internships broadened and enriched the cohort's knowledge base, as well as the impact of internship on future teacher educator scholars within the field of special education. Thus, the study began while the co-authors were doctoral interns engaged in their internships, with a follow-up from participants post-graduation. The research questions guiding this investigation were:

1. How do doctoral interns in special education policy internship placements broaden their knowledge of federal policy?
2. In what ways did doctoral interns apply their new knowledge of federal policy after internships were completed?

## **Research design**

A case-study research design was employed using qualitative data collection through journal reflections and small-group discussions to reflect on how policy internships impact special education leadership training and future involvement in special education advocacy. The case-study approach is often seen as the best method of research to understand practice and extend understanding within the field of education (Merriam, 1998). The case-study approach is often used in educational research (Gast, 2010) to specifically answer the questions of "how" and "why" (Yin, 2009). The present study employed the case-study design to reflect on and generate common themes of the experiences of internship in a "bounded system" (a circumstance defined by the setting, time, and individual case) (Creswell, 2007; Stake, 1994, 1995). In this study, the bounded system included common experiences across one setting (the special education federal policy arena in Washington, D.C.), during a comparable period of time (four to eight weeks over a summer), and within a specific case (policy internships), in an effort to broaden and enrich the cohort's knowledge base as future teacher-educator scholars within the field of special education.

## **Participants**

A cohort of four female students completed internships at one of several locations in Washington, D.C. Doctoral interns were between the ages of thirty and thirty-eight with master's degrees in special education. Each doctoral intern had taught K-12 special education for between three and nine years and possessed relatively advanced levels of technology training from their doctoral preparation program. Doctoral interns are identified throughout the study with the use of pseudonyms: Intern A is Courtney, Intern B is Seema, Intern C is Julia, and Intern D is Karen.

## **Settings: Internship placements**

Each internship site offered the participating doctoral intern an experience unique to its particular genre and role at the federal level, and operations were reflective of

current policies and trends within the field of special education. Placement at sites with advocacy groups, federal entities, and government-funded centers all assisted in providing future special education leaders with unique perspectives and different vantage points, allowing for the benefits of intermingling and collaboration among representative parties (Whitby & Wienke, 2012).

### ***Federal administration placement***

Courtney's doctoral internship provided her the chance to work with government leaders, institutes of higher education, and national centers to learn about federal government investments in education. The intern participated in workgroups for the development of federal funding priorities for the coming fiscal year, analyzed current trends in federal investments, and observed expert panels review funding applications.

### ***Advocacy placement***

Seema's doctoral internship involved working with a national alliance of over 800 public and private teacher preparation programs. An emphasized priority of this organization was to provide a voice on the state and federal levels in policy-making and advocacy. Peggy Whitby and Wilfred Wienke (2012) urged special educators to engage in advocacy activities to support children with disabilities and their families, especially under the current socioeconomic circumstances. They contended that it was the ethical obligation of special educators to advocate for students with disabilities (Whitby & Wienke, 2012).

An important role in policy and advocacy was making, building, and maintaining relationships (Whitby & Wienke, 2012). Examples of how those relationships were developed included attending Senate and House hearings, participating in consortiums, and attending briefings and forums. Another strong priority of this association was to support programs that increase opportunities for teacher candidates to provide education to every child. This internship allowed Intern B to gain a broader perspective of policies and lawmaking in Washington, D.C., related to education and teacher preparation (West & Schaefer Whitby, 2008). There were frequent opportunities for the intern to attend hearings, briefings, and related forums. The internship administration supported attendance and participation at such events.

### ***Professional organization placement***

Julia's doctoral internship was at the largest international professional organization representing children with exceptionalities and their families, including children with gifts and talents as well as children with disabilities. The organization has successfully advocated for students with exceptionalities for over 95 years. In the midst of debated accountability systems for teachers and students (West & Schaefer Whitby, 2008), the advocacy organization continues to represent students, families, teachers, and schools. This organization emphasizes the mentoring of young teachers, celebrating student successes, and lifting up schools that provided academic growth while at times receiving less-than-adequate resources. The organization fulfills a professional commitment to its members through the publication of numerous profes-

sional journals, books, and digital assets, such as webinars, podcasts, and blogs. The internship highlighted the organization's critical goals: advocating for special education legislation at the federal level and the dissemination of communication at the grassroots level.

### ***Professional development of special education leader's placement***

Karen's doctoral internship was at a federally funded technical assistance and dissemination project created in 2008 and maintained through a cooperative agreement between the national association and the US Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP). This association works to increase the nation's capacity to recruit, prepare, and retain highly qualified special educators, early intervention and early childhood educators, and related service providers. Specifically, this organization works in multiple areas to a) assist states in developing and maintaining personnel-management plans; b) build bridges of collaboration between institutes of higher education and state education agencies regarding personnel preparation programs, c) aid districts and programs in supporting new and existing personnel with professional development, and d) provide advanced training for state directors of special education.

## **Procedures**

### ***An ELT framework for designing the internship program***

The doctoral preparation program chose to use Kolb's (1984) ELT to frame the internship experience. The doctoral interns collectively entered phase one of the cycle—concrete experience—although internship start dates were staggered over the course of eight weeks. Because research in experiential learning supports structured self-reflection, during phase two, participants were required to actively reflect in written narratives on their experiences. The third phase is defined by the abstract conceptualization of the interns' experiences in Washington, D.C., coupled with future experience as professors in higher education. During the third phase, the doctoral interns were asked to justify, in their writing, their time away from the doctoral program to participate in policy internships by highlighting the components of their experiences they hypothesized would impact the choice of curriculum and pedagogy in courses taught in the future. The fourth phase, active experimentation, is ongoing, as many doctoral interns supported or assisted university professors in special education coursework. Additionally, three of the four doctoral students entered the professoriate and have been involved to varying degrees in policy and advocacy work. In order to satisfy the obligations of the internship experience, doctoral interns were required to provide a technology-supported presentation to faculty, administrators, and other doctoral students describing the internship experience in Washington, D.C., including the current active experimentation using the skills and resources acquired during the internship.

Of the four phases of ELT (Kolb, 1984), the first and second phases are represented through the experiences and reflections of each intern, the third phase serves as the platform for discussing each experience, and the fourth phase is represented in the outcomes of the doctoral interns' practices as they return to their scholarly activities and later enter the professoriate.



## Reflective journaling

According to Donald Schon (1983), reflection has several phases, including reflecting in action, reflecting on action, and reflecting for action. The use of journaling as a method to capture reflections has a long history of use in the social sciences, and more specifically during graduate and doctoral preparation programs (Anderson & Swazey, 1998; Crowe & Whitlock, 1999; Feldman, Alibrandi, Capifali, Floyd, Gabriel, Mera, Henriques, & Lucey, 1996; Glaze, 2002; Heinrich, 2000). Journaling need not be based on fact, rather on “an expression of your feelings, reactions, thoughts, expectations, and perceptions of your experience. It reflects your personal growth in a particular area of experience” (Abernathy, DeRaad, Beck, Checho, Furno, Helweg, & Whittier, 2008, p. 161). Interns were asked to write in their reflective journals daily in an effort to capture the nuances of professional tasks and meetings, as well as the human interactions with policy and advocacy.

## Immediate analysis of data and follow-up

As is required of all qualitative research, this study followed rigorous procedures to review data, parse out patterns, and develop themes across all participants in the case study (Stake, 1994, 1995; Yin, 2009). Upon completion of the internship, participants shared their journals for review and analysis and came together in a focus group to systematically review the themes for member checking. The review of data was conducted in multiple phases: 1) reviewing all four journals by daily entry to explore for patterns across intern experiences, 2) coding journal entries across all four participants with stems related to similar experiences, 3) selecting themes based on similar patterns across the codes, 4) conducting a focus group including all interns to member check themes and review verbatim entries for relevance and truthfulness, and 5) emailing questionnaires to interns post data collection as a follow-up inquiry regarding their application of the internship experience in their individual employment role.

## Results

The purpose of the study was to investigate how special education policy internships broadened and enriched doctoral-level interns' knowledge base as future teacher educators within the field of special education. The research questions guiding this investigation were: 1) How do doctoral interns in special education policy placements broaden their knowledge of federal policy? 2) In what ways did doctoral interns apply their new knowledge of federal policy after the internships were completed?

Following Kolb's 1984 ELT, the results are captured in discrete phases with the absence of one phase: concrete experience. The second through fourth phases, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, are presented. Individual interns studied each doctoral internship experience, and the experiences were analyzed using procedures guided by the case-study approach (Leedy & Ormrod, 2004). Interns' reflections on responsibilities will be explored first, followed by an examination of themes that emerged during the case-study investigation. As doctoral interns reflected on their responsibilities, four prominent themes emerged as a result of the case-study investigation: a) access to policy as it is shaped;

b) mentoring; c) personal contacts and network; and d) personal stories and the human connection. Finally, the active use of the advocacy knowledge is reviewed.

## **Reflective observation: Reflections on intern responsibilities**

Responsibilities for doctoral internships were as diversified as the internship sites. All four doctoral interns reported that they were encouraged to attend legislative and policy events and return to their respective sites to disseminate information gained at the corresponding event. In this way, doctoral interns were able to represent their assigned home organizations, while also continuing to expand on individual research interests. For example, Julia stated: “In most instances, I was able to capitalize on my dual roles by asking several related questions at a time of roundtable presenters or panelists during briefings.” Often, attending such events resulted in writing and relaying legislative briefs, blogs, and association statements. Doctoral interns also assisted in planning and developing training sessions, including the programmatic components of advocacy campaigns.

Doctoral interns arrived at their internship sites having completed advanced doctoral-level technology courses. Site supervisors capitalized on the skills and resources their doctoral interns brought with them and tasked two doctoral interns to redevelop sections of their organizations’ websites to reflect the mission statement and latest information regarding related supports and services. Julia worked to support the organization’s priority to collaborate with members of the global special education community. Karen worked with staff to update the webpage to introduce visitors unfamiliar with special education to the field of teaching and related services and to entice them to explore career opportunities within the field. Reflecting on this assignment Karen wrote: “I think that this experience was a particularly strong one. . . . It helped remind me that while knowledge of special education is important, it is essential to be able to convey it in an interesting and easily understood manner.”

Professional development opportunities were also arranged so that the doctoral interns were able to attend events, support meetings, and trainings; they also developed and presented seminars of their own. Two of the internship sites hosted annual organization-wide Day on the Hill events to educate and advocate for education reform and education funding. Doctoral interns developed a contextually based definition of advocacy in terms of their experience in Washington, D.C. Julia wrote, “Advocacy is a continued dialogue that is repeated for multiple audiences in order to influence decisions.” According to Seema, “Advocates, whether based in D.C. or at the grassroots level, are successful based on their persistence and their finesse.” The internship sites emphasized the importance of training community members on current legislative issues and facilitated meetings between advocates and federal legislators. Doctoral interns serving at non-participating organizations were still invited to the internship site hosting the Day on the Hill to take part in the mini-conference as student representatives of their home university.

## **Abstract conceptualization**

### ***Access to policy as it is being shaped***

The ability to access policy as it is being shaped enables one to take part in the dis-



cussion of special education at a new level. Internships such as these helped the cohort gain insight regarding the difference between policy and politics. While the two are very separate entities, they are inextricably linked. Policy helps to shape the topography of the educational system and assists in ensuring that states work to provide the best education possible for the country's children, while politics are the methods used to implement policies (Whitby & Wienke, 2012). The advocacy group where Seema worked helped to instill the need to gain and maintain the ability to, "look past the current environment and look toward future needs." The importance of sustaining such a strategic plan may include annual meetings, grassroots advocacy teams, and continuous feeds of information on various platforms, such as webinars, blogs, and email blasts. Julia reported, "Students in higher education who are also seeking special education expertise need to know which organizations advocate in support of education legislation and what the organizations prioritize."

Many internship opportunities involved attending caucuses, policy briefs, and legislative hearings. Policy events included the Development, Relief, and Education for Alien Minors Act (DREAM), the State and Local Funding Flexibility Act, To Aid Gifted and High-Ability Learners by Empowering the Nation's Teachers Act (TALENT), and the Growing Excellent Achievement Training Academies Teachers and Principals Act (GREAT).

A particular highlight of the policy experiences was the observation of proposed changes to the Elementary and Secondary Educational Act (ESEA). During this particular hearing, House members were discussing an Act that would impact children who had been discriminated against in the public school system in the past generations—children for whom protections were included in ESEA—to insure that funding was specifically spent on these vulnerable populations and to ensure basic civil rights. Seema reflected:

Emotions were high among the Education and Workforce Committee Members' ... voices were raised, faces turned red, names were even called ... as personal stories were shared, even that of childhood discrimination prior to the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Personal plights were made by the Democrats to "guarantee" [that] the funding target[ed] the intended population. However, a vote was not swayed ... votes went down party lines.

One of the many methods used to perpetuate change was demonstrated at Julia's internship site, where emphasis was placed on informing members about legislation that affected special education students and by advocating for legislation that is absent, although necessary, in special education. A strong network of professional connections that continuously inform one another about the current status of legislation was demonstrated as being essential in order to prioritize collaboration and keep constituents abreast of all significant information. Julia was welcomed as a member of this advocacy community and was expected to contribute to the collaborative efforts involved in disseminating information about the activity on Capitol Hill. Julia was given open opportunities to pursue briefings that interested her, while also participating in briefings that needed to have agency representation in the discussion. With the increased public interest in education, the amount of education briefings,

hearings, and debates has increased, which provided all of the doctoral interns a rich repository of experiences. Julia shared her perspective on the co-sponsorship of a bill to Congress:

Co-sponsorship by members of Congress demonstrates support for a bill. The important part of receiving co-sponsors is to be cautious of who sponsors the bill and the timeline of sponsorship. I came to recognize the subtle dance performed by lobbying groups seeking bi-partisan co-sponsorship of a bill. The key word is bi-partisan. If too many congressmen from one party co-sponsor a bill immediately, a strong opposition to the party—not necessarily the bill—may impede co-sponsorship by other congressmen. And, currently, most education bills require bi-partisan co-sponsorship to have a hope of making it through the committee.

### ***Mentoring***

Another prominent theme upon which doctoral interns reflected was the importance of mentoring. Mentoring can be an effective strategy for enhancing the professional development of aspiring educational leaders (Ehrich, 1994; Gorman, Durmowicz, Roskes, & Slattery, 2010; Menchaca, Estrada, Cavazos, & Ramirez, 2000). Mentoring, as defined by Susan T. Gorman, Meredith C. Durmowicz, Ellen M. Roskes, Susan P. Slattery (2010), consists of both formal and informal interactions and/or exchanges of information between a protégé and some combination of his/her peers and supervisors for the purpose of constructive professional development. Among forty young higher education leaders from universities such as Harvard, Stanford, Johns Hopkins, the University of Michigan, and the University of North Carolina, there was strong consensus that mentors played a vital role in their development (“The Young Leaders of the Academy,” 1998).

Doctoral preparation programs that recognize the importance of developing future leaders not only provide opportunities for collaborative research but also provide leadership preparation and enhancement opportunities for doctoral students to work with individuals who have a perspective outside of higher education (Eisenhart & Dehaan, 2005). Margaret Eisenhart and Robert L. Dehaan (2005) further suggested core components of doctoral preparation to train scientifically based leaders. Of their recommendations, interdisciplinary collaboration in both courses and networking opportunities are a high priority. Professionals working in the field can provide unique perspectives, especially when matched with mentees based on interest, gender, or cultural background (Ehrich, 1994; Gorman et al., 2010; Menchaca et al., 2000). Because doctoral interns were perceived as future leaders of special education, relationships at internship sites were strongly influenced. Courtney reflected:

True leaders are acutely aware that they will not live forever to shepherd their causes, knowing that there is much work to be done. Consequently, they invest time in mentoring younger members of the field. As doctoral interns, we were informed that we will be the future leaders of special education.

To underscore this belief, professionals at various sites built time into their schedules to answer questions, clarify memos, or give sidebar commentary to complex meeting topics. The various organization professionals communicated the importance of having informed leaders in the field, whose acquired knowledge would enlighten future thinking and practice. Courtney clarified the level of professionalism that was stressed through mentoring and modeling: “Each team member welcomed my questions, while also allowing me to drive my own productivity in completing tasks that were assigned.” Karen stated, “The internship provided mentoring that examined the complexities of student-, teacher-, and school-related special education issues.”

### ***Personal contacts and networking***

While knowledge of the policy, politics, and advocacy process has been and will continue to be valuable to doctoral interns serving as special education leaders, the personal contacts made at internship sites will be of value in the future. Leaders at each of the internship sites are knowledgeable about activities at a national level, and government priorities, national research, and school outcomes inform their perspectives. Sitting at their particular crossroad of special education, they have a unique perspective on the “comings and goings” of the field. Personal relationships with internship supervisors and colleagues will help future special education leaders build a strong base to inform and support their efforts as they build their own lines of research and approaches to advocacy.

The doctoral interns agreed that, in Courtney’s words: “There were more opportunities to meet and build relationships with potential employers.” Their internships, according to Julia, “afforded the doctoral students opportunities to develop products and hold audiences with experts they may not normally come into contact with.” Networking among the experienced professionals in the field of education and special education gave the doctoral interns examples of professional journeys, broader and deeper perspectives on the timeline and hurdles associated with the burgeoning field of special education, and opportunities to initiate dialogue with experts regarding particular commonly held research interests. While the doctoral interns were expected to learn the complexities of federal-level education policy, another outcome of the internship experience was the introduction to multiple settings in which they could impact students with exceptionalities and their teachers. All doctoral interns returned with an expanded view of how to effectively advocate for students with special needs in a variety of organizational contexts, for example, nonprofit organizations, nongovernmental organizations, think tanks, and consortiums.

### ***Personal stories and the human connection***

“Good teaching, good helping, and good leadership are, in one sense, all about storytelling and story-evoking. . . . It is in the mutual exchange of stories that professionals and scholars are able to meet clients and students where they actually meet their lives” (Nash, 2004, p. 2). Based on over 35 years in academia, Nash (2004) suggested that memorable scholarly writing extends past empirical data and is also infused with personal narratives, grounding research in personal experience. Nash (2004) advised that truly high-quality research is not only probing but also engaging, and that adding

a personal perspective can enhance that research. As an example, Courtney described the impact of a day of personal visits to her placement site and reflected:

I saw that administrators were moved when they saw the faces and heard the stories of people impacted by policies and decisions made at an administrative level. These stories carried the employees through their day and put a human face on their work.

Hearing personal stories from others helped the speaker make connections on a personal level.

The theme of human connection was also evident in the private sectors of Washington, D.C. The doctoral interns were invited to learn about national organizations and events taking place in the city, and some had the opportunity to observe the preparation of influential members within higher education for visits to Capitol Hill. The importance of human connection was emphasized during the how-to-advocate training meetings. Seasoned advocates emphasized the importance of establishing a human connection before making requests for funding, co-sponsorship, or related appeals. Members were told to “make yourself human” and describe personal stories. By doing so, they would establish credibility and also give members of Congress a story of personal-level impact. Advocates reasoned that legislators would be more likely to remember data when data were coupled with personal narratives, and they might keep these narratives in mind when making decisions.

When interviewing internship site administrators, Karen asked whether there was a priority placed on passion for work versus relationships. Responses at this site varied, and one project director responded that it is more important to be well connected within a circle of influence than it is to hold passion. The project director maintained that a person can be very passionate about something, but if the person was not connected to the right people, pleas and plans fall on deaf ears. Conversely, an executive-level administrator replied that unless passion drives the vehicle, the road might be long and unsatisfying. It was agreed by both that the hand and the heart are an essential combination, and that one cannot come at the cost of the other for any extended period of time.

### ***Active experimentation***

Graduates of the participating university brought this knowledge with them, maintaining contacts with their alma mater, while building strong new foundations at their universities, and impacting other special educators. Upon the completion of their PhD program, two of the four doctoral interns participating in this study were employed in tenure-line faculty positions at Research One universities, and two were employed as directors of large-scale grants at Research One universities. By mid-tenure review, only one participant’s primary focus had broadened to include the whole of education programming, while the other three participants continued to focus on special education in her employment role.

All four participants continue to participate in advocacy for students with exceptionalities and special education teacher preparation to varying degrees. Three of the four participants are active members of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC), participating in CEC Divisions, sitting on boards of directors, and on working

groups for the organization. Two of the four participants are their university's designee for special education professional organizations that organize annual Day on the Hill activities. In addition, three of the four participants mentor special education pre-service teachers as well as graduate and doctoral students on current events and policy initiatives. Each deliberately and intentionally infuses her mentorship with knowledge of policy and advocacy to develop advocacy skills in their mentees.

## Discussion

Special education leaders across multiple advocacy and policy organizations are at the forefront of the debate on how to ensure that an excellent, equitable education is provided to the children of the United States. Across the four internship settings explored in this study, common themes of policy, politics, personal contacts, and personal stories emerged.

Two broad research questions guided this study. Reflecting on the first research question, it is apparent that doctoral interns gained experiences, knowledge, and personal contacts during their summer policy internships that served to broaden and enrich the cohort's knowledge base as future teacher educator scholars within the field of special education. Seema stated that understanding how to "take a position" or "make a statement" in an objective, nonbiased way was her most important take-away, allowing her to gain a national perspective on teacher preparation programs as well as participate in policy related to broad topics that impact colleges and universities. Specifically, Seema wrote, "My perspective of what this organization does to impact institutes of education has definitely changed, and I realize what a valuable resource they are and will be to my future." Karen reflected, "I feel that I have gained an in-depth understanding of how this organization works to provide effective leadership in the development and implementation of national policies related to services that produce successful outcomes for individuals with disabilities."

These summer internship experiences allowed the four doctoral interns to work alongside visionary, innovative professionals within the field of special education and assisted in honing skill sets that will strengthen their knowledge base of policy and collaboration strategies. In several cases, doctoral interns observed and actively participated in cross-organization collaboration. When working toward a larger goal, doctoral interns gained experiences advocating on behalf of their organizations, as well as larger issues in special education. As if playing in a symphony, each special education policy internship site participated in its own individual movement, while diligently paying attention to the overarching score of the music, ensuring that the movements were joined in such a manner that a united message was presented to members of Congress and their staff. The demonstration of collaborative efforts to disseminate quality scholarship from and to the national level served to enrich the experiences of the doctoral interns, while simultaneously advancing equity and excellence for students with disabilities.

In reflecting upon the second research question, Courtney, Seema, Julia, and Karen shared that they continue to apply their acquired knowledge of federal policy after the internships were completed. All participants attribute a large degree of their successful employment immediately following graduation to their internship expe-

rience, specifically noting that a) the experience provided much-needed background on the grant-application process, b) they recognized the importance of collaborating with colleagues in the field outside of one's own university, as well as strategies to successfully collaborate, and c) they gained the ability to fluently communicate how legislation, policy, and research interact, specifically noting the perennially present research-to-practice gap (Deshler, 2003; Francis & Turnbull, 2013) that exists in the field of education.

As special education legislation, such as the Individual with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 2004), has not seen any significant advancement in over a decade, advocacy and policy internships continue to be pertinent and necessary to raise the level of awareness and engagement in future leaders of the field. Furthermore, given the current climate of the administration toward public education, legislation impacting students with exceptionalities, such as IDEA and the Every Student Succeeds Act, requires continued monitoring and attention by all of our educators, especially those who will mentor pre-service teachers and graduates in the field of special education.

## **Recommendations**

### ***1. Match interns with a site***

The internships are valuable for a variety of reasons and purposes. The sites provide the interns with knowledge and skills relative to policy and advocacy in special education, and personnel at the selected site tend to establish the area of focus in which the intern develops expertise. The major sites used in this program focused on four different areas: 1) personnel preparation, 2) state-level special education administration, 3) national professional organization work, and 4) research in special education. While all areas are useful in gaining expertise, it is best if the interns have expressed an interest in the area they are placed. But engaging in an internship in any of these areas is useful, in that it provides a hands-on experience with action in the field.

In returning to the home university setting, the interns have gained an enhanced and enriched knowledge base for sharing and challenging ideas, which will hopefully result in the better understanding of policy issues in special education.

### ***2. Require interns to record contact information for persons/ideas encountered***

The critical nature of this information is not always apparent during the period of internship. However, interns report that having immediate electronic access to a file of this nature after-the-fact is extremely useful for a variety of reasons, from setting up meetings at conferences to extending invitations to co-engage in professional activities, such as research, publication, or a conference presentation. It is best to have a system and strategy to collect the information when it is most convenient: during the internship.

### ***3. Instruct interns regarding the values of internship in seeking employment***

The value of the internship begins with the very first job search. For example, when responding to position openings, it is important for interns to communicate that



they have engaged in a policy internship at the federal level. This may find its way into the letter of response, as well as being outlined in more detail in the resume. Participating interns report that employers are quite interested in learning of such experience, an experience that they believe to be important for their employees.

#### **4. Suggest interns present intern-related papers at conferences**

After securing employment in higher education, the internship experience provides an opportunity for both the presentation of papers at conferences and the publication of ideas and research. In all but extreme cases, participating interns provide policy-related presentations at conferences prior to the completion of their degrees. The information is readily available and the opportunity to present a paper opens the door for meeting attendees interested in the topic.

#### **5. Suggest interns prepare internship-related manuscripts for publication**

Most participating interns have submitted policy- or advocacy-related articles for publication, co-authored with fellow interns prior to their graduation or shortly thereafter. And not all authors are from the same university; the internship provides an opportunity to meet and develop professional relationships with colleagues who have similar research interests. One of this program's earliest interns has six publications in the area of policy and advocacy. The publications focus, for example, on sharing successful ideas in working with parents of children with disabilities, assisting state departments with challenges in autism, preparing advocates, and securing funding to implement a personnel-preparation program. In addition to supporting the research requirement for faculty, the internship also provides rich ideas to support the training of teachers to become successful advocates in the field of special education and disabilities.

#### **6. Components for IHEs (Institutions of Higher Education) to address when considering development of policy internships.**

Colleges and universities have many considerations when they begin the challenging process of planning for and fielding special education policy internships. Critical topics for attention include

- a. Selecting a knowledgeable person to direct and supervise the program.
- b. The preparation and approval of a new course for the internship.
- c. Establishing criteria for, and the selection of, sites and site supervisors. Planning ample time to establish intern sites for the initial fielding of the internship, especially when communicating with federal agencies, as many have various levels of required approvals.
- d. Funding for travel to the internship site and making arrangements for lodging the interns. The university's approval of the residence is usually necessary to assure appropriateness and the safety of interns. This may include the university's legal office to approve the details of a contract with the provider of a residence in Washington, D.C.

- e. The availability of funds from within the institution, or securing grant funding. Will interns be required to take on costs? Who will be responsible for the costs of the interns returning home?

Addressing these topics early in the planning stage is important for a variety of reasons within a higher education setting. Adding a new component to an existing program requires careful communication with other units, some of which may already have existing policy internships and be concerned about encroachment. Others may express concerns about a request for additional funding. Resolving as many issues as possible in advance may help avoid unexpected deliberations and delays and allow the planning and approval process to proceed in a business-like fashion.

## References

- Abernathy, T.V., DeRaad, K., Beck, G., Checho, C., Furno, L., Helweg, C., & Whittier, L.E. (2008). Through the looking glass: Critical reflections of doctoral preparation experiences. *Teaching & Learning*, 22(3), 149–163.
- Allen, G.J., Sheckley, B.G., & Keeton, M.T. (1993, Winter). Adult learning as recursive process. *The Journal of Cooperative Education*, 28, 56–67.
- Anderson, M.S., & Swazey, J.P. (1998). Reflections on the graduate student experience: An overview. *New Directions for Higher Education*, 26(1), 3–13.
- Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five approaches* (2nd ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA, US: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Crowe, A.R., & Whitlock, T.W. (1999). *The education of teacher educators: A self-study of the professional development of two doctoral students in teacher education*. Montréal, QC: American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 430 942)
- Darling-Hammond, L., LaPointe, M., Meyerson, D., Orr, M., & Cohen, C. (2007). *Preparing school leaders for a changing world: Lessons from exemplary leadership development programs*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University, Stanford Educational Leadership Institute.
- deBettencourt, L.U., Hoover, J.J., Rude, H.A., & Taylor, S.S. (2016). Preparing special education higher education faculty the influences of contemporary education issues and policy recommendations. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 39(2), 121–133. doi: 10.1177/0888406416641007
- Deshler, D.D. (2003). Intervention research and bridging the gap between research and practice. *Learning Disabilities: A Contemporary Journal*, 1(1), 1–7.
- Dieker, L., Wienke, W., Straub, C., Finnegan, L., & Straub, C. (2014). Reflections on recruiting, supporting, retaining, graduating and obtaining employment for doctoral students from diverse backgrounds. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 37(2), 147–160. doi:10.1177/088406413505874
- Earley, P. (2009). Work, learning and professional practice: The role of leadership apprenticeships. *School Leadership and Management*, 29(3), 307–320.
- Ehrich, L. (1994). A mentoring programme for women educators. *School Organisation*, 14(1), 11–20.
- Eisenhart, M., & Dehaan, R.L. (2005). Doctoral preparation of scientifically based education researchers. *Educational Researcher*, 34(4), 3–13.
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act, Reauthorization of 2001*. Pub. L. 89-10, 79 § 20, 20 U.S.C. § 70 (1965).
- Feldman, A., Alibrandi, M., Capifali, E., Floyd, D., Gabriel, J., Mera, M., Henriques, B., & Lucey, J. (1996). *Looking at ourselves look at ourselves: An action research self-study of doctoral students' roles in teacher education programs*. New York, NY: American Educational Research Association. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 397 057).
- Francis, G.L., & Turnbull, R. (2013). Lessons from the legislative history of federal special education law: A vignette for advocates. In A. McDonald Culp (Ed.), *Child and family advocacy: Bridging the gaps between research, practice, and policy* (pp. 233–251). New York, NY & Heidelberg, DE: Springer Publishing.

- Gast, D.L. (2010). *Single subject research methodology in behavioral sciences*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Glaze, J. (2002). Ph.D. study and the use of a reflective diary: A dialogue with self. *Reflective Practice*, 3(2), 153–166.
- Golde, C.M., & Dore, T.M. (2001). *At cross purposes: What the experiences of doctoral students reveal about doctoral education* [report]. Philadelphia, PA: Pew Charitable Trusts. Retrieved February 23, 2013 from [www.phd-survey.org](http://www.phd-survey.org).
- Gorman, S.T., Durmowicz, M.C., Roskes, E.M., & Slattery, S.P. (2010). *Women in the academy: Female leadership in stem education and the evolution of a mentoring web*. Forum on Public Policy Online, 2010(2), 1–21.
- Heinrich, K.T. (2000). The passionate scholar: A mid-life, woman doctoral student's quest for voice. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 13(1), 63–83.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004*. Pub. L. No. 108–446. (2004).
- Jackson, B.L. (2001). *Exceptional and innovative programs in educational leadership*. Paper presented at National Commission for the Advancement of Educational Leadership Preparation. Sponsored by the National Policy Board for Educational Administration, Fairfax, VA, and the Johnson Foundation Inc., Racine, WI.
- Kolb, D.A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Kolb, D.A., & Boyatzis, R.E. (1999). Experiential learning theory: Previous research and new directions. In R.J. Sternberg & L.F. Zhang (Eds.), *Perspectives on cognitive learning and thinking styles* (pp. 227–247). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.
- Kraus, C. (1996). *Administrative training: What really prepares administrators for the job?* Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association. New York, NY.
- Leedy, P.D., & Ormrod, J.E. (2004). *Practical research: Planning and design* (8th ed.). Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson.
- McLaughlin, V.L., West, J.E., & Anderson, J.A. (2016). Engaging effectively in the policy-making process. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 39(2), 134–149. doi:10.1177/0888406416637902
- Mellor, A. (1991). Experiential learning through integrated project work: An example from soil science. *Journal of Geography in Higher Education*, 15(2), 135–149.
- Menchaca, V.D., Estrada, V., Cavazos, C., & Ramirez, D. (2000). *Changing the face of educational leadership: A unique method of mentoring Hispanic doctoral students* [Report in 2000 Literature Monograph Series]. Houston, TX: National Association of African American Studies.
- Merriam, S.B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education* (Rev. ed.). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Miller, K., Finnegan, L., Wienke, W., & Lopez, A. (2017). The impact of federal level special education policy internships in preparing special education faculty: A preliminary investigation. *Journal of Educational Leadership in Action*, 5(1), Retrieved November 1, 2018, from <https://www.lindenwood.edu/academics/beyond-the-classroom/publications/journal-of-educational-leadership-in-action/all-issues/volume-5-issue-1/faculty-articles/miller/>.
- Nash, R.J. (2004). *Liberating scholarly writing: The power of personal narrative*. New York, NY: Teachers College Press.
- Rhee, K. (2008). The beat and rhythm of competency development over two years. *Journal of Management Development*, 27(1), 146–160.
- Rhee, K., & Honeycutt Sigler, T. (2010). Developing enlightened leaders for industry and community: Executive education and service learning. *Journal of Management Education*, 34(1), 163–181.
- Roebuck, D., Sigler, T., & Tyran, K. (2006). Through the looking glass: Using reflections as a learning tool. *Journal of the Academy of Business Education*, 7(2), 52–62.
- Rock, M.L., Spooner, F., Nagro, S., Vasquez, E., Dunn, C., Leko, M., Luckner, J., Bausch, M., Donehower, C., & Jones, J.L. (2016). 21st century change drivers considerations for constructing transformative models of special education teacher development. *Teacher Education and Special Education*, 39(2), 98–120. doi: 10.1177/0888406416640634

- Schon, D. (1983). *The reflective practitioner*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass Publishers, Inc.
- Southern Regional Education Board. (2005). *The principal internship: How can we get it right?* Retrieved February 23, 2013 from <http://www.sreb.org>.
- Stake, R.E. (1994). Case studies. In N.K. Denzin & Y.S. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (pp. 236–247). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Stake, R.E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- The Young Leaders of the Academy. (1998). *Change: The magazine of higher learning*, 30(1), 22–33.
- West, J., & Schafer Whitby, P. (2008). Progress for students with disabilities under NCLB and the path forward. *Focus on Exceptional Children*, 41(3), 1–16.
- Whitby, P.J.S., & Wienke, W. (2012). A special educator's call to action for advocacy in national education policy. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 47(3) 191–194.
- Yin, R.K. (2009). *Case study research: Design and methods* (4th ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.