

RAM Scholars: Integrating Teacher Development in Inclusive Higher Education

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Introduction

RAM Scholars is an inclusive higher education (IHE) program for college-aged students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) that capitalizes on a partnership between the College of Agricultural Sciences, the Prevention Research Center, and the Center for Community Partnerships at Colorado State University. This program is focused on providing students with IDD proper career skills required for employment in the agriculture industry. For adults with IDD, there is a significant disparity in employment rates, however, paid employment can benefit their overall health and well-being (Fidler, et al., 2022). Moreover, IHE programs focusing on career and technical education (CTE) training have been shown as a more effective pathway to employment for students with IDD (Grigal, et al., 2019). To develop pathways to employment in the agriculture industry for students with IDD, RAM Scholars focuses on skills training in addition to course participation. In addition to providing a pathway to employment through IHE, RAM Scholars offers an opportunity to integrate teacher development for preservice school-based agriculture education (SBAE) teachers. Often, Agricultural Education teacher preparation programs do not require coursework in special education, with many teachers indicating 0-3 courses required (Newsome, 2023). Similarly, practicing teachers in multiple states have indicated a lack of confidence when working with students with IDD (Clemons, et al., 2018; Smalley, et al., 2019). In order to prepare future agricultural educators to work with diverse populations in an inclusive setting, involvement in RAM Scholars provides experience with the intent to build confidence.

How it works

As described previously, the overall program is operated through a partnership between three entities. The Prevention Research Center, which is housed in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies is focused on the operation of the program and the work required with families to enroll students. The Center for Community Partnerships is housed in the Department of Occupational Therapy and serves as the connection between the program and potential employers as well as community organizations that aid in the transition from school to work. Finally, the Agricultural Education program is responsible for integration into the learning environment in the College of Agricultural Sciences as well as the training of career-relevant skills for both IHE participants and pre-service SBAE teachers.

The development of pre-service teachers follows an experiential learning model in which students will begin with a focus or a modeled experience, and then move into an individual experience before reflecting and generalizing what they have learned (Roberts, 2006). The modeled experience for pre-service teachers begins in their introductory Agricultural Education course where they take the course alongside the participants and serve as peers for the semester. The peer model is beneficial as a training tool due to additional support in the form of peers, instructors, and professors from the partnering programs. These additional supports allow Agricultural Education students to learn best practices and gain confidence. Following the peer experience, Agricultural Education students can apply to a summer internship where they work alongside Scholars at the university's research farm. Through the summer experience, Agricultural Education students are expected to lead the skills training and supervising of a small group of participants. During this experience, Agricultural Education students can practice effective teaching methods for students with IDD as well as garnish support as needed. Throughout the summer experience, Agricultural Education students are asked to reflect upon their work and determine areas for growth. As the final piece of the experiential learning model, students are asked to articulate the strategies and effective practices they have developed

throughout their experience. The impacts of the experience include CTE training in an IHE setting for students with IDD while also providing pre-service SBAE teachers with a valuable experience they will carry into the classroom.

Results to date

Harvey et al. (2020) discuss the importance of collaboration and integration of CTE to include practices that involve students with disabilities throughout all areas of CTE such as instruction, work-based learning, and stakeholder engagement. Through RAM Scholars, these practices can be exemplified for future SBAE teachers while utilizing an experiential learning model. As of August 2024, the first cohort of Scholars and Agricultural Education peers completed the coursework and internship portions of the program. The cohort was composed of 8 Agricultural Education students completing peer mentoring with 5 of them continuing into the summer internship experience. In addition, 10 Scholars completed both the coursework and internship experiences with 3 of them continuing to paid employment placements.

Throughout the experience, Agricultural Education students were asked to complete regular reflections in which increased confidence and practical management strategies were cited as areas in which they had improved. Areas of growth and requested support were often topics around how and when to scaffold or questions about how this is applied in implementing legal documents such as individualized education plans (IEP's) and 504's. As Agricultural Education students continue to engage with the program, they will continue to gain confidence in working with students with disabilities and confidence in collaborating with teams of professionals serving this population of students. By doing so, they will have the experience necessary to improve the inclusivity of diverse learners in their future classrooms.

Future plans

As the second cohort of RAM Scholars will begin their experience in August of 2024, the Agricultural Education team has identified two goals that will inform their practice and strengthen the student experience moving forward. The first goal is to have Agricultural Education students complete the final stages of the experiential learning model more comprehensively. To do this, students will develop scaffolded skill cards to help them assess the learning of future students with IDD. In addition, they will create a *Teaching Diverse Learners* manual that will act as a resource for themselves as future teachers. In line with the program's overall goal of integrating IHE into the College of Agricultural Sciences, the team's second goal is to better evaluate how the peer experience impacts future agricultural educators, and their self-efficacy as it relates to integrating inclusive practices in SBAE classrooms. This goal will ultimately inform practice in such a way that allows for the preparation of future SBAE instructors to work with diverse learners and serve a population that greatly benefits from CTE.

Costs

Initial funding for [PROGRAM] was provided through a local county workforce development grant. Through this grant, the partner programs received funds to pay for peer internships, peer transportation to experience facilities, and supplies for Scholars' experiences. Summer internships for Agricultural Education students and course consumables were funded through Agricultural Education program funds. Other expenses such as Scholar transportation, faculty summer salary, and non-consumable materials were funded through the College of Agricultural Science. The total initial cost for the Agricultural Education program and College of Agricultural Science was \$22,100, and funding is projected to continue through state funding, grants, and gifts.

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