

Program Planning Summary
Master of Arts in Teaching (MAT) in Special Education
With a Major in Visual Impairment Education
to be offered by the
School of Education
of the
University of South Carolina Upstate

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Proposal for a Master of Arts in Teaching in Special Education with a major in Visual Impairment Education

1. **New Program Proposal:** Proposal for a Master of Arts in Teaching in Special Education with a major in Visual Impairment Education

2. **Proposed Date of Implementation:** August 2010

3. **Justification for Need for the Program:**

The need for special education teachers is described as severe, chronic, and pervasive (Billingsley & McLeskey, 2004; Gehrke & McCoy, 2007). According to the American Association for Employment in Education (2004), six fields within special education, including visual impairment, are among the ten teaching fields with the greatest national shortages. A deficit of qualified professionals in the field of visual impairment is not a recent development. This critical deficit has been well documented in the literature since 2000 (Ludlow, Conner, & Schechter, 2005; Mason, Davidson, & Mc Nerney, 2000).

By offering the MAT in Special Education with a major in Visual Impairment Education, a frequently requested master's degree, the University will more completely fulfill its metropolitan mission of meeting the needs of citizens in the Upstate. Providing highly-qualified teachers should be a priority. A number of factors indicate that shortages in visual impairment certification will continue: (1) 50% of current teachers of students with visual impairments plan to retire within the next 3-5 years (South Carolina Department of Education, 2007c), (2) the number of students aged 3-21 identified as legally blind in South Carolina has increased 16% over the last three years while numbers of certified teachers in the field have remained relatively constant (South Carolina Department of Education, 2007b), and (3) the current level of preparation of teachers of students with visual impairments in South Carolina.

In addition to teacher shortages, inadequate preparation remains a significant problem in the field of visual impairment. Teachers certified in other areas that take a minimum number of courses and/or pass a certification examination may not be sufficiently prepared to adequately address the unique needs of students with visual impairments. In a survey of teachers of students with visual impairments in SC in fall of 2007, almost ½ of respondents felt that they would benefit from receiving professional development or mentoring in areas such as creating tactile graphics, using assistive technology devices, instructing preschool students, and instructing students in the Nemeth braille code (South Carolina Department of Education, 2007a).

4. **Anticipated Program Demand and Productivity**

Over the past five years, the USC Upstate School of Education has received approximately fifteen inquiries per month concerning the availability of a master's program which includes initial certification. The three master's programs in education (early childhood, elementary, and special education-visual impairment) currently available at USC Upstate are advanced master's degrees indicating that initial certification is required for admission into the degree program. Consequently when inquiries about a master's degree in education which includes initial certification are answered at USC Upstate, potential students are advised that they must come to USC Upstate as a non-degree student, earn certification by completing approximately two years of coursework including student teaching—and then apply for admission to an existing USC Upstate master's program. Not surprisingly, most potential students either elect not to become a certified teacher or quickly turn to a private college in the area in search of a different certification at the master's level.

Given the predicted demand for teachers, USC Upstate anticipates a cohort of 7-8 candidates seeking an MAT in Special Education with a major in Visual Impairment Education in August 2010 with a similar cohort in June 2011. The program will target individuals currently holding bachelor's degrees in rehabilitation, social work, and orientation and mobility. Holders of other baccalaureate degrees will be eligible for the MAT degree program though more concentration coursework will be required. A transcript evaluation will be conducted to determine eligibility and/or prerequisites necessary in order to qualify for admission to the program.

Immersing candidates immediately in the milieu of schools is desirable, especially given the compact time-line for completion of a typical MAT certification program (18-24 months). A minimum of three classes each year will be taught on site at the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind with candidates spending multiple hours observing, assisting, and teaching in classrooms at the South Carolina School for the Deaf and the Blind as well as school districts across the state currently serving students with visual impairments. Collaboration will provide opportunities for experienced teachers and MAT candidates to work together over an extended period of time to develop the pedagogical skills needed to effectively teach students with visual impairments.

5. Assessment of the Extent to Which the Proposed Program Duplicates Existing Programs in the State

USC Upstate currently has the only Visual Impairment Training Program in South Carolina. Initial certification is required for admission into this degree program. No public or private institution in the state currently offers the Master of Education in Special Education – Visual Impairment (MAT).

6. Relationship of the Proposed Program to Existing Programs at the Proposing Institution:

The proposed program would closely align with existing programs at USC Upstate and would not create the need for additional courses to be offered each year. The coursework for the proposed program would mirror the current coursework for the Masters of Education: Special Education-Visual Impairment Program with the additional requirements of taking SEPY 705: Children and Adolescents as Learners and SEPS 715: Advanced Perspectives on Educating Individuals with Disabilities. SEPY 705 is currently offered each summer and is a required course for individuals seeking a master's degree in Early Childhood or Elementary Education. A course description for SEPS 715: Advanced Perspectives on Educating Individuals with Disabilities is currently available in the 2008-2009 catalog. The course was not offered during 2007-2008, but it is also included as a required course in the proposed MAT program in Curriculum and Instruction.

Given the commitment to preparing teachers for students with visual impairment and the current and continued anticipated high demand for well-prepared teachers, it is natural that USC Upstate should seek to extend its program to individuals holding baccalaureate degrees who are interested in entering the teaching profession as teachers of students with visual impairments.

7. Relationship of the Proposed Program to Other Institutions via Inter-institutional Cooperation:

The inter-institutional cooperation of the proposed program with programs at other institutions will be determined by the criteria specified in the *2008-2009 USC Upstate Academic Catalog*. "Transfer work from a regionally accredited institution applicable to a master's degree must be within six (6) years prior to USC Upstate degree completion. A maximum of twelve semester hours credit (nine if part of a master's degree at the other institution) may be considered . . ." subject to

specific conditions (p. 218). This will apply to graduate level content courses and to graduate level education courses at other accredited institutions.

8. Total New Costs Associated with Implementing the Proposed Program

There will be no new administrative costs for this program; it will be administered under the current USC Upstate School of Education Office of Graduate Programs. Although the program will not initially mandate an additional faculty member for the School of Education, faculty involved in the program will advocate for an additional faculty member if the need should arise.

Selected References

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