



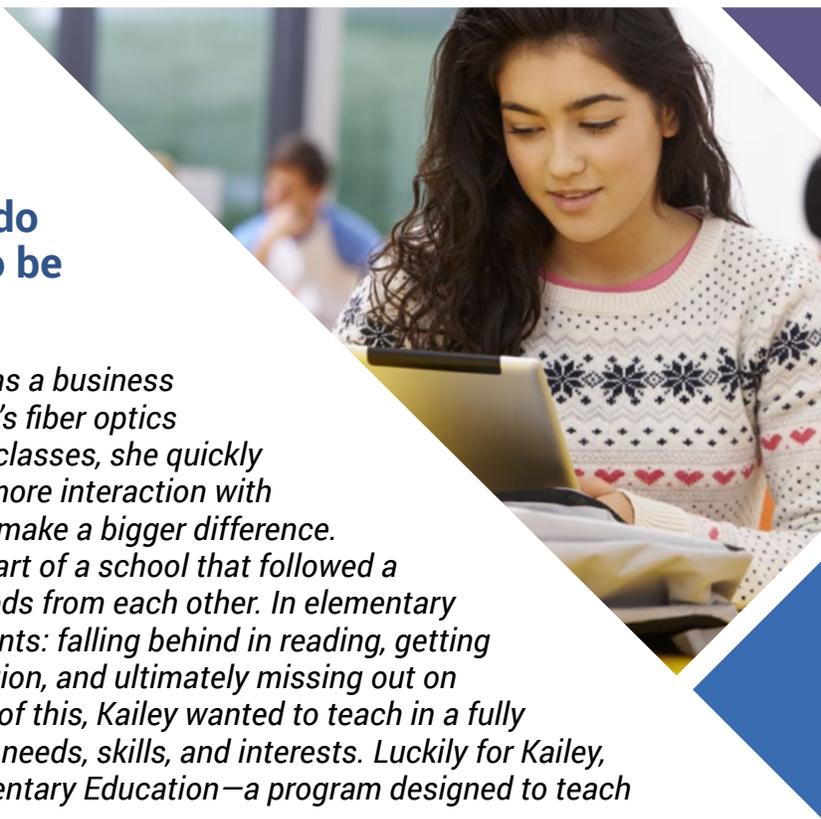
EXPERIENCES IN PRACTICE:

THE UCCS B.A. IN INCLUSIVE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

Though it's not what she originally intended, Kailey Hogan, a junior at the University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS), wants to be a teacher.

When she started at UCCS as a freshman, she was a business major planning on eventually taking over her dad's fiber optics business. Sitting in her undergraduate business classes, she quickly realized that it wasn't her passion—she wanted more interaction with people, specifically with kids, and she wanted to make a bigger difference. She wanted to teach. But she didn't want to be part of a school that followed a model that separated students with different needs from each other. In elementary school, she, herself, had been one of those students: falling behind in reading, getting pulled out of class to receive specialized instruction, and ultimately missing out on the experiences her peers were having. Because of this, Kailey wanted to teach in a fully inclusive setting that accounted for all students' needs, skills, and interests. Luckily for Kailey, UCCS offers a Bachelor of Arts in Inclusive Elementary Education—a program designed to teach her how to do all the things she believes in.

The UCCS College of Education was intentional about placing Kailey and her peers in an inclusive classroom for their field experience. In fact, Kailey realized that everything the college did—from its emphasis on co-teaching to the equity-based inclusion courses she was enrolled in—were intentional. UCCS was demonstrating its commitment to inclusivity, flexibility, and innovation. In spring of 2015, the UCCS Department of Curriculum and Instruction and the Department of Special Education joined to become the Department of Teaching and Learning. From then on, all undergraduate students would be prepared through the new B.A. program to ensure that teacher candidates would be ready to meet the needs of all students. Unlike most teacher prep settings, all students in this program take 57 credit hours in inclusive elementary education, including courses like Introduction to Inclusive Education and Collaboration and Co-Teaching. Co-teaching is where a classroom has one special education teacher and one general education teacher—both of whom work with and support all students in the room, regardless of need. Kailey and her peers will graduate from UCCS with three different credentials: a K–6 elementary initial license, a K–12 culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) endorsement, and a special education generalist endorsement. These credentials not only provide Kailey and her peers a leg up in the job market, qualifying them for multiple positions, but also set them up for success in the increasingly fluid, diverse classrooms of the 21st century.



UNIVERSITY OF COLORADO, COLORADO SPRINGS INCLUSIVE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

Location:

Colorado Springs, CO

of Candidates: **148**

Year Program Began: **2015**

Other Grants/Funds Supporting
Work: **National Professional
Development Grant, U.S.
Department of Education**

THE VISION: INCLUSION, A 21ST CENTURY PREPARATION STRATEGY

Preparing candidates like Kailey to teach in the classrooms of today can be trickier than it sounds. The reality of practice in schools, the preparation of teacher candidates, and the demands for success in a 21st century economy don't always match up. UCCS was looking to bridge the gaps. "We want candidates like Kailey to see that their responsibility is to meet the needs of all students from the first time they walk into the classroom, not seeing themselves as an elementary teacher or a special ed teacher, but a teacher of all students," notes Dr. Barbara Frye, Associate Dean. This focus on inclusivity is built into the college's motto: Equity, inquiry, and innovation. In implementing this motto, the college follows a philosophical belief that educators should be able to meet the needs of all students and do so by seeing themselves as part of a team of teachers, knowing who to reach out to when they're struggling.

To achieve this vision, the college is also responding to the practical realities confronting teachers. In 2014, UCCS surveyed its departing teaching candidates to ask them what skills they felt they most needed. Topping the list were differentiation and working with students with special needs. Additionally, like other states, Colorado has a teacher shortage, especially in its rural areas. Schools hiring new candidates may need those candidates to meet multiple needs. UCCS's emphasis on a more collaborative, inclusive model provides its students with an edge to succeed in this new environment.

THE STRATEGY: AN INCLUSIVE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION PROGRAM

In response to demands from candidates like Kailey as well as from the schools they are called to work in, UCCS began to change how it approaches teacher education. As the dean, Dr. Valerie Martin Conley, put it, "We want to turn education on its head. Rather than specializing from the get-go, we want candidates like Kailey to be generally ready for a diverse, inclusive classroom, and then access the additional professional development and education necessary to obtain more specialized skills related to their discipline." This new model of an inclusive, collaborative educational experience at UCCS is supported through six components:

1. **Coursework for Three Credentials—**

As already highlighted, one of the hallmarks of this program is that Kailey and her peers take the necessary coursework to graduate with three different credentials: a K–6 elementary initial license, a K–12 CLD license, and a special education generalist endorsement. This means they are qualified to fill jobs requiring any of these licenses. The capacity to work with students with special needs will be the starting point for all candidates, not just those who, like Kailey, began the program with a particular interest in special education.



Our understanding of what it means to be classroom ready takes into account the learning needs of students in a lot of different areas and with a variety of different needs."

– Dean Valerie Martin Conley

2. **District Partner Web of Supports**—Administrators and faculty at UCCS meet frequently with school district partners where Kailey and other candidates fulfill their field and practicum experiences. Discussions range from logistics to philosophy, ensuring that Kailey and her peers have experiences reflecting inclusivity and collaboration, and that the districts are providing candidates a range of supports to achieve these goals.
3. **Intentionally Designed Field Experiences**—When Kailey went into her field experience at Mountain Vista Community School, a K–8 school in Colorado Springs, her UCCS faculty made clear that she was looking for specific practices to inform her learning on inclusivity. This includes being intentional about observing how teachers are educating students with and without disabilities in an inclusive classroom setting. As faculty member and department chair, Dr. Leslie Grant notes, “We are very careful about where our students are placed and what they see and experience. We want them to look at how teachers support students and what they are doing to provide access to the content being delivered.”
4. **Co-Teaching and Collaboration Field Experience**—Rather than just observing teachers, Kailey is provided the opportunity to co-teach with fellow students and the cooperating or mentor teachers who are hosting their field experiences. Using this model, UCCS hopes to emphasize teaching as a collaborative rather than an individual venture, especially among general and special educators.
5. **Collaboration and Co-Teaching Among Faculty**—Building on the collaboration that students experience in their field work, UCCS faculty also practice what they preach: Faculty co-teach a number of courses in the curriculum. For example, Kailey and her peers take a course on collaboration and co-teaching that is itself co-taught by two faculty members, Dr. Lissana Follari and Dr. Christi Kasa.
6. **Ongoing Training**—UCCS does not see the B.A. diploma as the end of a teacher’s learning. The college supports a number of ongoing and continuing learning experiences for graduates to hone, strengthen, and develop specializations they need in the field.

IMPLEMENTING THE INCLUSIVE ELEMENTARY EDUCATION PROGRAM

To candidates like Kailey, the implementation of these six components feels seamless and natural. The reality, however, is that UCCS has engaged in ongoing concerted efforts to support the cultural and logistical transitions that allow a program like this to work. These transitions include but are not limited to supporting faculty who themselves have been taught with a different mindset, empowering faculty co-teaching, and identifying districts that embrace an inclusive philosophy and that can support student field experiences.

While the College of Education faculty at UCCS aspire to infuse this inclusive model across all its programs, they have taken the approach of “going slow to go fast.” By building investment in the B.A. program and scaling up, the goal is to foster faculty and stakeholder buy-in and commitment before requiring wholesale program revisions. In the meantime, a team of faculty members meet weekly to discuss outreach and inclusion of existing faculty into this new approach, the state of partnerships with districts, and other program needs. Regular meetings and events such as breakfasts with district partners also help strengthen UCCS College of Education’s relationships and ensure that the cultural change UCCS is undergoing is actively supported by its partners.

BENEFITS AND CHALLENGES OF AN INCLUSIVE APPROACH

The UCCS College of Education experience with this bold experiment has been positive: There have been challenges, but those challenges have been far outweighed by benefits.

Key Benefits of Inclusive B.A. at UCCS

- **Breaking Silos**—Students and faculty have noted a greater sense of shared purpose. In the past, students like Kailey who are interested in special education may have been educated in a special education silo. Now they share more experiences with their peers.
- **Greater Sense of Mission**—The UCCS College of Education faculty have long prided themselves on their focus on inclusion—it's one of the things that draws candidates like Kailey to the program in the first place. The shift to this program has only strengthened the college's sense of mission.
- **Satisfied Partners and Candidates**—Surveys of partners and candidates reflect satisfaction with the flexibility and preparation this new program provides students in increasingly diverse classrooms.



Key Challenges to Overcome to Ensure Its Success

- **Scalability**—This program requires a great deal of system and culture change for it to be successful. Leadership at UCCS highlights that, even in light of the college's support of this transformation, it is important not to thrust changes across an entire program in one broad stroke. Faculty, staff, and students need time and space to transition to greater ownership and investment.
- **Faculty Expertise**—While not all faculty may be steeped in this inclusive model at first, it is important to build on faculty members' strengths and recognize the potential important contributions they may each make to different dimensions of the overall vision: inclusiveness, collaboration, innovation, etc.
- **Culture of Teacher Preparation**—The culture of separation within teacher preparation programs is often reinforced by different programs of study having different state licensure requirements. This can itself be an obstacle to implementation of a program like UCCS's and must be approached strategically.



CONCLUSION

Teacher preparation programs across the country are confronting many of the same demands UCCS faces: Districts and schools require more flexible and versatile candidates to instruct classrooms that are increasingly looking different from the ones that students or faculty themselves experienced in their K–12 education. What the UCCS College of Education has realized is that these challenges provide opportunities to transform teacher preparation. If candidates like Kailey Hogan are to have successful, fulfilling careers, teacher preparation programs have to change their vision of teaching and learning. While this is no easy task, success of colleges like UCCS in this endeavor may be among the most important factors in helping to bridge the gap between our educational aspirations and reality.