

# Work environment found 'critical' in interdisciplinary practices



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## Discussion of the findings

This study provided compelling evidence that the work environment is a critical factor in early intervention faculty being able to engage in interdisciplinary practices.

For example, results showed that variables in the work environment (i.e. type of primary work setting and opportunities and support in the primary work setting) explained a significant portion (25%) of the variance in the amount of time faculty spent in interdisciplinary activities.

Furthermore, the work environment was more likely to be a barrier rather than a facilitator for interdisciplinary collaboration; an inordinately large number (94%) of the responses to the question about barriers related to the work environment. In contrast, work-related resources (e.g., time, money) were rarely mentioned as facilitators.

The work environment was not always described as a negative factor. The aspect of the environment that was most likely to be a facilitator was the support of colleagues.

An interesting finding was that leadership in the work

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## Abstract of study

Quantitative and qualitative methods were used to investigate interdisciplinary practices of 116 early intervention faculty.

Results indicated that faculty engage in a small amount of interdisciplinary teaching in their preservice programs.

No significant differences were found in the amount of interdisciplinary teaching that faculty from four different discipline groups provided.

The work environment variables were the stronger predictors of level of interdisciplinary collaboration.

The most frequently reported hindrance to interdisciplinary collaboration was the work environment and the most frequently reported facilitators were the extent to which the faculty value interdisciplinary collaboration and the relationship with colleagues.

Findings suggest that policy supporting interdisciplinary service delivery has outstripped the field's capacity to prepare personnel using interdisciplinary practices.

## Mean percentage of time during a 40-hour workweek that university and UCEDD\* faculty report doing six activities: Comparison of total mean and interdisciplinary mean

Activity	University faculty		UCEDDs	
	Total mean %	Interdisciplinary mean %	Total mean %	Interdisciplinary mean %
Preservice	44	8	22	7
Research	18	9	11	8
Administration	15	7	18	13
Inservice	8	5	15	10
Consultation	8	5	9	6
Curriculum development	5	3	12	9

\*UCEDDs=University Centers of Excellence in Developmental Disabilities

This Snapshot is based on "Interdisciplinary Collaboration Among Early Intervention Faculty Members" published in the *Journal of Early Intervention*, Vol. 25, No. 3, pp. 173-188, and written by Allison E. Mellin of the University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, and Pamela J. Winton of the FPG Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

# Discussion of findings

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environment was seldom mentioned as either a barrier or facilitator of interdisciplinary practices. This suggests that benign neglect might be the best way to describe the support that faculty get from their bosses.

The finding that faculty at UCEDDs\* have higher levels of interdisciplinary collaboration is not surprising. Interdisciplinary training is a stated mission of the UCEDDs. UCEDDs, however, do not play as big a role in preservice education as traditional university and college settings. As seen from our results, faculty in UCEDDs spent about half as much time in preservice activities as faculty in traditional university settings.

This study found that time spent in interdisciplinary collaboration did not vary significantly by discipline. This suggests that all disciplines and departments are in equal need of support for interdisciplinary teamwork.

Results showed that number of years spent in interdisciplinary collaboration contributed a significant amount to the variance in participants' current level of interdisciplinary collaboration. Furthermore, the results indicated that past experiences with interdisciplinary collaboration were mentioned as a facilitator to collaborative efforts and were never mentioned as a barrier. Perhaps, success breeds success.

**Limitations:** This study was conducted with a selected group of faculty. They were all participants in two of four regional faculty institutes whose purposes were to promote family-centered interdisciplinary personnel preparation activities. If any group of faculty had the resources to succeed at interdisciplinary collaboration, this would be the group that one would predict would succeed.

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## Implications and Recommendations

The accumulating evidence about the capacity of institutions of higher education to prepare personnel suggests that policy has outstripped practice in the area of interdisciplinary teaming. Personnel are not being prepared to implement the interdisciplinary practices we say we value. The attitudes and commitment of faculty are not the problem; the lack of supportive and flexible work environment appears to be the major roadblock.

Research with a more representative group of faculty is needed to understand the true extent to which interdisciplinary collaboration is occurring in early intervention preservice programs.

We must develop strategies for reaching higher education administrators whose leadership is essential, yet apparently lacking.

- We must find ways to engage their genuine commitment for making changes in institutional policies and procedures.
- A possible strategy is to examine existing program standards from accrediting bodies to see if interdisciplinary practices are reflected in those standards, and if they are not, lobbying for changes.
- Another strategy is to provide administrators with knowledge, skills, and support related to making institutional changes that foster interdisciplinary collaboration.

We must continue to support faculty who are willing to incorporate interdisciplinary practices in their teaching.

### If you want to know more

Bailey, D.B. (1996). An overview of interdisciplinary training. In A. Winderstrom & D. Bricker (Eds.), *Preparing personnel to work with infants and young children and their families: An interdisciplinary approach* (pp. 3-21). Baltimore: Brookes.

Early, D.M., & Winton, P.J. (2001). Preparing the workforce: Early childhood teacher preparation at 2- and 4-year institutions of higher education. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 16, 285-306.

Kilgo, J.L., & Bruder, M.B. (1997). Interdisciplinary approaches to personnel preparation in early intervention. In P.J. Winton, J.A. McCollum, and C. Catlett (Eds.), *Reforming personnel preparation in early intervention: Issues, models and strategies* (pp.81-102). Baltimore: Brookes.

Miller, P.S., Fader, L., & Vincent, L.J. (2000). Preparing early childhood educators to work with children who have exceptional needs. In D. Horm-Wingerd & M. Hyson (Eds.), *New Teachers for a new century: The future of early childhood professional preparation* (pp. 89-122). Jessup, MD: U.S. Department of Education.

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