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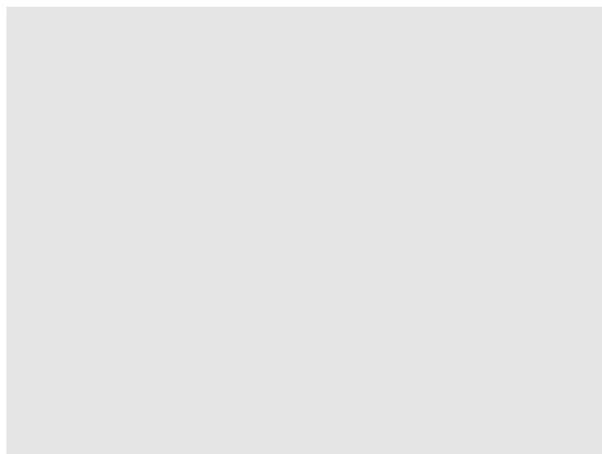
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WKU announces \$1 million grant to boost number of special education professionals

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Corinne Murphy



Christina Noel

A federal grant award topping \$1 million to Western Kentucky University will help address a shortage of special education professionals seen regionally and across Kentucky.

“The shortages are felt nationally, but definitely in an acute manner in our rural communities,” said WKU College of Education and Behavioral Sciences Dean Corinne Murphy, whose college is heading up the effort called Project PREP, or Preparing Rural Educators and Professionals for Students with High-Intensity Needs.

The American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education said there’s a shortage and a lack of diversity of fully prepared and credentialed special education teachers in public schools across the country.

Ultimately, that means fewer learning opportunities for students with disabilities, with research indicating that fully prepared teachers are both more effective and more likely to stick around than educators on fast-track routes to certification.

For school districts, especially rural ones, educators who work with students who are moderately or severely disabled are among the most difficult positions to fill given the highly specialized nature of the job.

That's where Project PREP comes in.

A university news release said the interdisciplinary effort will blend graduate-level coursework and field experiences to prepare special education teachers and speech-language pathologists to serve students with moderate to severe disabilities. WKU's College of Health and Human Services is also collaborating on the project.

Project PREP is led by Christina Noel, an associate professor in the School of Teacher Education, and the initiative is expected to help remove barriers for aspiring educators.

“As a faculty member, I work daily with a number of teachers and paraprofessionals in our area who are truly committed to improving educational outcomes for individuals with high-intensity needs. Their commitment is inspiring, but many of the common barriers stand in the way of their ability to pursue an advanced degree in the field,” Noel wrote in an email in response to the Daily News.

“This project will remove those barriers and make it more accessible for these exceptional teachers to earn advanced degrees. I am looking forward to seeing the dedication, knowledge, skills and experiences these individuals will bring to our program,” Noel wrote.



Money from the grant will support recruitment and graduation efforts and tuition scholarships for 30 students in the special education and speech-language pathology programs at WKU. The five-semester program is designed to remove barriers associated with working in rural communities, the news release said.

Project PREP is now seeking applicants for its first class of students set to begin in the fall. Those interested in the program can now apply to the WKU Graduate School. Applicants are asked to submit a statement describing why they're interested in aiding rural communities, and the deadline to apply is March 1. More information is available by email at ProjectPREP@wku.edu.

With its mix of online and face-to-face learning, Murphy said the program is targeted toward working professionals. Within the region's education community, she added, the new initiative has been well received.

“The feedback so far and the atmosphere around the grant is very exciting,” Murphy said.

– Follow education reporter Aaron Mudd on Twitter @BGDN_edbeat or visit bgdailynews.com.

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