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A new program in the College of Education at USF St. Petersburg now offers students a unique degree that combines special education and elementary education.

Teachers for All Children, commonly referred to as the TAC Program, was designed to fill a need for special education teachers and address the instructional and professional challenges special educators encounter.

"There is a critical shortage of local special education teachers today," said Kim Stoddard, PhD, special education associate professor and one of the four founding faculty members of the TAC Program. "We wanted to create this program to offer something back to the community."

The TAC Program re-started Fall 2004 and requires eight semesters that combine undergraduate courses in elementary education with graduate courses in exceptional student education. Students earn a master's degree and certification in exceptional student education for K-12 as well as a certification in elementary education.

"As the diversity among students enrolled in general and special education increases, teachers of these populations must have knowledge, skills and attitudes that will enable them to serve the rapidly changing student population," said Margaret Hewitt, PhD, associate professor and one of the creators of the TAC Program.

This unique program combines four distinct elements: teacher mentor experience, use of portfolios as evaluative tools, professional behavior assessment self-reflection and the implementation of team building skills.

Hewitt said that one of the strengths of the TAC Program is the mentor experience that pairs the student with a local public school teacher. In a follow-up study done by the TAC faculty, their findings showed that TAC graduates relied heavily on their mentors for advice, guidance and direction during their first year of teaching.

"This mentor experience really provides pre-service teachers with the academic background and practical experience to be prepared to work successfully with all children," Hewitt said.

The TAC Program was originally created in 1999 and has since re-developed to fit the growing needs for teachers with a special education program.

"The TAC Program seems to embody the spirit of preparing teachers to meet the needs of a diverse population of students," said Bonnie Braun, PhD, special education professor and a TAC program founder.

For more information on this program, please visit the College of Education Web site at http://www.stpt.usf.edu/coe/index.htm or call Stoddard at 727-553-4573.