Abstract

The "Research in Disabilities Education Synthesis Project" is conducting a four year synthesis research project to summarize the contributions of the NSF's Research in Disabilities Education (RDE) program to the field. The activities include investigating, synthesizing and reporting the findings and contributions from a decade (2001-2011) of funded projects from RDE. The intent is to inform secondary and postsecondary stakeholders about lessons learned in broadening the participation of students with disabilities in STEM, as well as providing NSF with a summary of the accomplishments of the RDE programs from 2001-2011. Several basic synthesis research questions guide this work:

1. How well have RDE projects met their project goals?
2. How have projects impacted their target audiences (e.g. faculty, students, teachers, and parents)?
3. In what ways have RDE projects contributed to the goals of RDE, HRD, EHR and NSF?
4. What is the contribution of the RDE-funded Research/Demonstration and Alliance/Enrichment projects to the knowledge base of STEM education of students with disabilities (SWD), educational transitions within the STEM "pipeline," student success in STEM courses and programs, and other related topics?
5. What is the impact of RDE-funded Alliances to the number and quality of SWD transitioned, retained, and completing associates or bachelors? degrees in STEM fields and the number of completers entering the STEM workforce or graduate STEM programs?
6. What other or unexpected outcomes were produced by these sets of RDE projects?
7. What are the primary lessons learned about the RDE program that can be elicited from the answers to questions 1-6?

The dissemination plan for this research project includes a technical report to NSF, an executive summary report suitable for broad dissemination within the government, a slide set for distribution, peer-reviewed journal articles, research presentations at conferences and meetings, and user-friendly reports placed on accessible websites.

The inclusion of an independent evaluator, Dr. Carol Fendt, a Senior Researcher and the Co-Director of the PRAIRIE Group at the University of Illinois at Chicago, will provide the project leadership team an external perspective to ensure the project activities are being executed as planned. Dr. Fendt will address the following evaluation questions:

1. What is the extent to which the researchers are meeting their goals and progressing according the project timeline and plan?
2. Were expectations reasonable and were modifications of the project work plan necessary?
3. Did processes operate as expected?

The findings from this research have the potential to significantly inform the direction of research about the STEM learning and education of students with disabilities. The long-term benefit is improved, and more focused, research that leads to advancing the educational knowledge base.