

# LEARN TO REACH EVERY KID

## FIU's online master's degree in Special Education focuses on culturally and linguistically diverse learners.

By Monica Smith

Florida International University's online master's degree in Special Education is unique among programs. In just 12 months, students grasp real-world experience based on ongoing, local research within one of the most diverse cities in the world: Miami. However, the real strength of FIU's online special education program for students versus other institutions, says Elizabeth Cramer, Ph.D., an FIU professor and online graduate program director of Special Education in the Department of Teaching and Learning, is that it has a very strong focus on culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) learners—especially those with disabilities.

Cramer's ongoing community projects with the Miami-Dade County Public School system, help her understand today's everyday issues within the classroom. A researcher who specializes in special education, Cramer has spent more than 20 years studying the learning opportunity gap for CLD learners and those with disabilities. One thing she has determined is that there is a need to change perspectives and talk about the CLD

student, so we can find solutions for these individuals. With hope, she feels that a change in the conversation could lead to a change in policy for our education system. This was the subject of her recently published, co-authored, peer-reviewed, SAGE Publications article entitled, "Equity, Equality, and Standardization: Expanding the Conversations." "Teachers are frustrated. Those in special education know that there's something wrong within our 'standardized' education system. Though they may not be able to pinpoint a singular causative factor that makes it broken, they understand that culturally and linguistically diverse learners—especially if they have disabilities—are not learning like everyone else," she said. "Since the Brown vs. The Board of education ruling, this notion that our students must have the same, equal education hasn't been working, because it's not an issue of equality, it's an issue of equity, and those who make the laws and rules are far removed from the everyday classroom."



DR. ELIZABETH CRAMER

Cramer's journal article is a conceptual piece that dissects today's standardized educational system, Common Core teaching and high-stakes testing and correlates deficiencies to reduced individualization for CLD students and those with disabilities. And for CLD students and those with special needs, "Individualization really is the hallmark of special education," she explained.

The journal article offers that our current educational system looks too much at homogenizing the educational experience and overlooks students' innate differences, poverty and language barriers. But it's the differences that matter and must be paid attention to if today's teachers are going to attend to the learning opportunity gap that many students of color and students with disabilities experience, the authors write.

"We work with all types of individuals and families from all backgrounds, we use technology and research, and we offer an autism endorsement. Our program is current and reflective of our urban community as our full-time faculty does research in the area where we work," expounded Cramer on FIU's online master's degree in Special Education. "We have an entire class that is specifically focused on CLD learners with disabilities, but this topic is covered throughout the entire curriculum as it is highlighted and embedded in every course—even in the autism endorsement classes. For us in Miami, CLD is a given, and an automatic. It's almost second nature for us."

For more information on the program, visit [fiuonline.fiu.edu/special-education](https://fiuonline.fiu.edu/special-education)