

## **SMSU Receives Funding to Help Paraprofessionals Earn Special Education Degree**

Marshall, Minn. — Southwest Minnesota State University has received legislative funding to help solve the acute shortage of special education teachers in rural Minnesota.

The University received a \$385,000 appropriation during this past session to offer online classes that will allow special education paraprofessionals to take courses to earn their special education degree.

“The money will fund the faculty, adjuncts and overload time needed to deliver a fully online paraprofessional to special education teacher licensure program,” said Education Professor Dr. Rhonda Bonstetter.

SMSU is collaborating with SWWC Service Cooperative (SWWC), along with the Minnesota Rural Education Association (MREA), said Bonstetter.

“I was a board member of the MREA last year and was at a meeting in St. Paul. The Commissioner of Education, Brenda Cassellius, was there to talk about initiatives, and mentioned she wasn’t seeing innovative programs coming forward. We had been talking with SWWC for two years already about a program like this, but we didn’t have the funding. I talked to her about it. She was excited to learn more, and encouraged us to contact our legislators, and that is what started it all.”

Bonstetter said the three-year program will include two years of coursework and a year of student teaching. Those taking the program should have an AA degree, or be close to it, said Bonstetter, and have a full year of experience.

“The Service Coop sent out a survey to their member schools a year-and-a-half ago, and there were 50 responses of those that were interested,” she said. “The holdup was the paraprofessionals could not afford to stop working to go back to school, so that’s why it will be an online format.”

SMSU President Dr. Connie J. Gores said the initiative is an example of how collaborative efforts can help solve region-wide concerns. “We are especially grateful to Senators Gary Dahms (Redwood Falls) and Terri Bonoff (Minnetonka), along with Representative Chris Swedinski (Ghent) for their legislative efforts that resulted in funding for the program,” she said. “There’s a demonstrated need for special education teachers in Greater Minnesota, and we hope that the ease of delivery of this program will encourage paraprofessionals to pursue their four-year degree and meet the needs of their students.”

The licensure will cover a number of behavioral areas, said Bonstetter, including autism, emotional behavioral disorder (EBD), learning disabilities (LD), developmental disabilities (DD) and other special needs.

“It’s for those who want to be special education teachers in grades K-12, working with students at the mild to moderate level, which is what you will see at a school place setting,” said Bonstetter.

The program begins in the fall semester 2016, she said. Those interested in further information should contact the Education office at [smsueducation@smsu.edu](mailto:smsueducation@smsu.edu).