Statement of Purpose

This 12-hour certificate in Special Education Advocacy is designed to meet the needs of current and prospective students interested in developing basic skills in special education advocacy. The proposed advocacy certificate is to be offered through the Interdisciplinary Learning and Teaching (ILT) Department’s Special Education (SPE) program area within the College of Education and Human Development (COEHD). The certificate proposal is part of the ILT/SPE Strategic Plan and represents the efforts of the department to address the needs of the local community while furthering the institutional mission. The purpose of this program is to provide training in special education advocacy for parents of children with disabilities, novice and experienced teachers, and other professionals who are new to special education law.

This training leading to the proposed certificate is designed to help parents and professionals better understand special education law and its application, assist future advocates develop the skills to effectively facilitate the IEP process, reduce barriers between parents and schools to promote good communication and effective negotiation, and act ethically and responsibly for the benefit of the child with special needs. Thus, the proposed certificate represents a omnibus mechanism for special education advocacy.

The proposed certificate focuses on the perspective of special education and policy studies from an applied perspective as it relates to special education advocacy. Certificate programs provide opportunities for postgraduate training to those with undergraduate degrees. Certificate programs are narrower in scope and shorter in duration than master’s degrees. Participants in this certificate program will receive brief, solution-focused, functional training in the growing field of Special Education Advocacy. The focus of the certificate program is to:

- Provide an overview of the impact of disability on the family and special education law;
- Provide knowledge necessary to advocate on behalf of students with disabilities;
- Prepare participants to become effective and collaborative advocates; and
- Enhance participants’ skills, knowledge and marketability in the field of special education advocacy.

A wide range of individuals will benefit from a certificate program in special education advocacy. Accordingly, the certificate is being developed with both parents and professionals in mind. The advocacy certificate is designed to meet the needs of multiple populations: (a) Parents, caretakers, grandparents and extended family of children (birth-22 years) with special needs; (b) Professionals involved in the special education process including school administrators, teachers and advocates as well as related-service providers such as occupational, physical and speech therapists; (c) Graduate students interested in working in the special needs field and college and university professors teaching in the field; and (d) Community agencies providing services to individuals with special needs and their families. The advocacy certificate furthers the UTSA mission by providing extended specialized skill development in special education advocacy (and learning) to meet growing school and community needs.

The special education advocacy certificate is open to interested students in other programs such as social work, counseling, psychology, among others. Special graduate students are
eligible to apply for this certificate. For students who have a bachelor's degree, the proposed certificate serves as a recruiting strategy for students to enter a variety of COEHD graduate programs. Specifically, this certificate targets: (a) professionals who are interested in a Master's degree but want to start with a certificate, (b) parents who are interested in better understanding the mandates and regulations of the individuals with disabilities education act (IDEA), (c) professionals interested in pursuing a Master's degree in Special Education who would like an advocacy specialization, (d) professionals who already hold a Master's degree but would like to become a special education advocate, and (e) professionals pursuing a doctoral degree in Special Education who would like to focus their studies on policy issues. There is no other similar certificate offered within the Bexar County or surrounding area.

**Statement of Need**

The right to individualized educational programming for students with disabilities is legally guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, commonly referred to as IDEA. Under IDEA, every child with a disability is entitled to a “free appropriate public education” in the least restrictive environment. This includes special education and related services that make it possible for every child to make meaningful educational progress. IDEA requires specific timelines and deadlines for parents and school district personnel involved in the provision of a student’s special education, as well as strict procedural rules that must be followed. Additionally, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 entitles children with disabilities to educational programs, services, and accommodations and applies to a broader range of students than IDEA.

According to the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data for 2013-2014 there are 33,997 children with a disability receiving special education services in Bexar county. Given the complexities associated with navigating the special education system, many families seek the assistance of an advocate to help them develop and implement an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and to understand their children’s rights under IDEA.

Presently, there are no educational requirements for an individual to serve as an advocate, nor are there federal or state guidelines to inform the practice of “special education advocacy”. Likewise, there is no regulation or licensing of advocates so there are no guidelines for minimum competency within this field. However, parents and professionals who understand the special education process are better able to advocate effectively in developing supports and services that enable children/students with disabilities to succeed. Thus, special education advocates are committed professionals who help parents secure free appropriate public education for their children with disabilities. Advocates promote dignity and respect for every individual with disabilities by encouraging vigorous enforcement of state and federal civil and human rights laws.

Special Education Advocacy is a profession comprised of a diverse group of people who work as independent private consultants or under supervision of a licensed attorney or in a law firm; in a public interest law center or other nonprofit organization; or under the auspices of a parent training and information center or advocacy center. Advocates may work in a paid or voluntary
capacity. An Advocate has knowledge and expertise concerning special education and its applicable federal and state laws, and works within the bounds of these laws. An Advocate protects the civil rights of children with special needs, their rights to due process, and their rights to equal access to equitable public school education. An Advocate remains current with applicable regulations and special education issues through continuing education and training.

There are only a handful of universities that offer certificates that specialize in special education advocacy. These include The University of San Diego, The University of Southern California, and the William & Mary School of Law in Virginia. The addition of UTSA’s certificate program in special advocacy would thus provide a unique training experience throughout Texas and the southern and central regions of the United States. In addition to addressing the lack of training programs in special education advocacy throughout the nation, it is likely that offering the certificate program to students who are interested in pursuing graduate degrees in Special Education will elect to attend UTSA over another university that does not offer this specialization and certificate option. Obtaining the advocacy certificate will increase students’ competitiveness for internship or job opportunities in a variety of related professional fields, as well as provide a much needed resource to numerous families of children with disabilities.

**Statement of Resources**

No additional resources are needed for this certificate. The Special Education program housed within the Interdisciplinary Learning & Teaching department and in concert with the Educational Leadership & Policy Studies department, employ quality faculty to direct and teach courses within the proposed certificate program. Existing courses, classrooms, and technologies will support program delivery. No new courses are being created for this certificate. No course release or buy-outs are integrated into the program or for course development.

**Description of Curriculum**

SPE 5403: Survey of Special Education
(3-0) 3 hours credit. Prerequisite: Consent of instructor.
This course will provide students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge in the field of special education including characteristics, etiology, definition, and prevalence of disabilities. Students will also have the opportunity to study effective strategies for use with individuals with disabilities. (Formerly titled “Exceptional Children and Youth in the Schools.”)

SPE 5503: Applied Behavior Analysis for Classroom Teachers
(3-0) 3 hours credit.
This course will provide students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge about principles and procedures of applied behavior analysis and classroom management for teachers. As an introductory course to behavior analysis, special attention will be paid to philosophy, terminology, and methods. In addition, ethical considerations for those delivering behavior analytic services will be discussed. Assessments will be modeled after the BCBA certification exam. Requires an applied project. (Formerly EDP 5423. Credit cannot be earned for both SPE 5503 and EDP 5423.)
SPE 5613: Legal Issues in Special Education
(3-0) 3 hours credit.
This course will provide students with the opportunity to acquire knowledge related to the historical and legal issues of special education. Through an in-depth study of state and federal laws, students will have the opportunity to engage in activities that examine the ethical implications of special education.

SPE 6623: Seminar on Current and Critical Issues in Special Education
(3-0) 3 hours credit.
This course will provide students with the opportunity to examine critical issues in special education, including a study of research-supported practices, controversial issues, and critical topics in special education. A research project is required. (Formerly SPE 5623. Credit cannot be earned for both SPE 5623 and SPE 6623.)

**Faculty List**
Because this certificate draws from existing course offerings across within the College of Education and Human Development, a full-time, tenured or tenure-track faculty member from SPE will be appointed to the certificate program and serve as the program advisor. Additional SPE faculty will support the program as needed. These include:

Dr. Lee Mason, Assistant Professor of Special Education  
Dr. Richard Boon, Associate Professor of Special Education  
Dr. Candace Gann, Assistant Professor of Special Education  
Dr. Shanun Kunnavatana, Assistant Professor of Special Education

**Program Administration**
The Special Education Advocacy Certificate will be housed in the Interdisciplinary Learning & Teaching Department, whose faculty and staff will support the students. The program advisor will be a qualified faculty member from the ILT department. The program advisor will oversee admissions and advising activities for certificate applicants and students. The program advisor also will be responsible for overseeing the processes related to admissions’ decisions, supervising students’ progress, preparing certificate plans for students, and working with the Dean’s Office in the College of Education and Human Development to certify students who have completed the requirements for the certificate. Students who declare the certificate but are not part of a master’s program will be admitted as Special Graduate students in ILT. The Program Advisor will work with an Advisory Committee, consisting of ILT faculty members, to make decisions about advising, recruitment, scheduling courses, and program policies. Certificates will be awarded upon completion of the 12 approved UTSA hours in the area of special education advocacy with a GPA of 3.0 or above and completion of the special education advocate project portfolio.

**Admissions Requirements**
As per the 2013-2015 Graduate Catalogue: “Students who are not currently enrolled in a graduate degree program will be required to apply for admission to UTSA as a Special (non-
degree-seeking) Graduate student and to indicate their intent to seek admission into a certificate program. Applicants will be required to meet University admission requirements for Special Graduate students. Once admitted as a Special Graduate student, the student will contact the Certificate Program Advisor and complete a form requesting permission to enter and complete the certificate program. The [Special Education Advocacy] Program Advisor and the Dean of the College of Education and Human Development will sign the form. A copy of this form will be sent to the Graduate School.

University policy allows for a maximum number of only twelve hours of graduate coursework as a Special Graduate student status to be transferred to a graduate degree program. Students accepted into the Special Education Advocacy certificate program as Special Graduate students will be required to designate formally at the completion of the first nine hours whether they want to remain as a Special Graduate student or be formally admitted to another graduate program.

Departmental entrance requirements include:

- A bachelor’s degree from an accredited university in an approved area of study (e.g., education).
- A minimum GPA of 3.0 for the last two years of work toward the bachelor’s degree.
- To maintain enrollment in the certificate program, students should maintain a 3.0 GPA throughout tenure in the program.

Projected Enrollments
While the certificate is likely to draw new students to UTSA, it is also likely that current students enrolled in the SPE program area will pursue the certificate in addition to the Master’s degree. This certificate will increase the student’s marketability in the field for internship and job placement upon completion of the degree. Many students in SPE are already asking about the certificate.

Table 3. Projected Admissions and Enrollments

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Budget
There are no additional funds requested in the management of this certificate beyond the specific course associated fees.

Endorsements
The Special Education Advocacy Certificate is development of the SPE program area within the Department of Interdisciplinary Learning & Teaching, whose chair, Dr. Mari Cortez, has reviewed the proposal and provided a letter of support (See Appendix 1).
Evaluations/Reviews
Evaluation of the certificate program will be conducted annually (see Table 4). Student portfolios (including the application for review in advocacy certificate) will be used for formative and summative assessment. Student progress will be evaluated formatively based on success in UTSA approved Advocacy Certificate coursework. Upon completion of each semester of coursework, students will submit their portfolios with the application for review completed to date. The portfolio will include items demonstrating mastery of coursework and the application of advocacy experiences as well as a student self-assessment of progress.

The Program Advisor will review the application and portfolio using the annual review rubric. Upon completion of review by the student’s Program Advisor, Advocacy Certificate faculty will approve the review results. The summative evaluation will include student GPA of 3.0 or better in the certificate area coursework and a final portfolio (including a culminating project in special education advocacy). Both attrition rates and completion rates in the general certificate evaluation will be included.

The final portfolio will include:

- Cover letter stating progress and development, summary of activities related to special education advocacy
- Transcripts
- Sample artifacts from course work that relate to special education advocacy. All artifacts will include a narrative explaining how theory and principles have been appropriately utilized
- Log of special education advocacy fieldwork experiences
- Completed special education advocate portfolio project, which may include professional work or research artifacts that are evidence of application of course learning to professional work. All artifacts will include a narrative explaining how theory and principles have been appropriately utilized.
- A current CV or resume.