

FOCUS on Research

Newsletter of the



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President's Message

Navigating Our Current Context Together: Why Research Matters

Michelle M. Cumming, PhD, *St. Francis Xavier University*

I am honored to serve as president of CEC's Division for Research (CEC-DR). At the beginning of the fall semester, I asked Dr. Linda Lewis to speak to the CEC-DR Executive Board to better understand the origins of the division. The CEC-DR was established in the late 1980s so that CEC researchers had a voice in shaping and advancing federal-research partnerships aimed at addressing the educational needs of individuals with disabilities and their families. This was a critical time in education with the enactment of disability related federal and state laws, where the need for rigorous research was crucial in informing policy, preparation, and practice. The DR founders had two main goals: (1) establish a forum across CEC divisions that focused on research, and (2) improve understanding of the relevance and need for rigorous research to improve the outcomes of individuals with disabilities (for more details, please read *Origins of the Division for Research* on our website). As a board, we felt and continue to feel the weight of this legacy, and it has helped to strengthen our commitment to (a) the advancement of high-quality, impactful research related to individuals with disabilities and/or who are gifted, their families, and the practitioners who serve them; (b) the cultivation of the next generation of special education leaders, and (c) the importance of listening

to and advocating alongside individuals with disabilities and their families.

In light of the ongoing federal actions targeting services for students, families, and vulnerable populations, the CEC-DR Executive Board has diligently worked over the past year in multiple ways. Here are just a few highlights:

- Dr. Steve Ciullo and Dr. Kristabel Stark provide a monthly policy newsletter to keep membership up to date on research, funding, and policy. In each newsletter, they also provide policy “homework”, meaning actionable steps you can take as a DR member. They were also involved in the Special Education Legislative Summit in 2025 to advocate for special education. Additionally, CEC-DR has signed onto numerous timely letters.
- CEC-DR has two active podcasts. Dr. Federico Waitoller continues to lead the DiveIn (Diving into Special Education's Most Complex and Pressing Debates) podcast, which explores timely and relevant special education topics. Additionally, in the SPED Legacy podcast, Dr. John Romig interviews individuals who have made significant contributions to special education.
- Multiple timely webinars are forthcoming from both CEC-DR's Knowledge Utilization Committee and the Research

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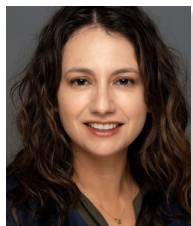
CEC-DR 2026 Award Winners

Kauffman-Hallahan-Pullen Distinguished Researcher Award



Dr. Sharon Vaughn
University of Texas at Austin

Researcher from Underrepresented Groups Award



Dr. Jeannette Mancilla-Martinez
Vanderbilt University

Martin J. Kaufman Distinguished Early Career Research Award

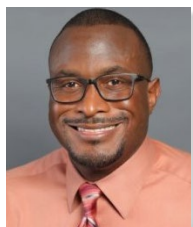


Dr. Carly Gilson
The Ohio State University



Dr. James Sinclair
University of Arkansas

Research Improving the Educational Access, Experiences, and Outcomes of BIPOC Students with Disabilities Award



Dr. Christopher Cormier
Loyola Marymount University



Dr. LaRon Scott
University of Virginia

Lynn S. Fuchs Early Career Publication Award



Dr. Jechun An
University of Minnesota

Student Research Awards



Meta-Analysis
Ying Xu
(Advisor: Florina Erbeli)
Texas A&M University



Meta-Analysis
Dr. Albert Li
(Advisor: Michael Hebert)
University of California, Irvine



Mixed Methods Design
Dr. Erica Fry
(Advisor: Jessica Toste)
The University of Texas at Austin



Qualitative
Dr. Alexandra Richmond
(Advisor: Catherine Corr)
University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign



Quantitative Design
Dr. Danielle Lariviere
(Advisor: Sarah Powell)
The University of Texas at Austin

Congrats to all of the DR Award Recipients! We look forward to celebrating with you at CEC in March!

2025–2026 CEC-DR Doctoral Scholars

Jean B. Crockett, PhD
University of Florida

Mary Theresa Kiely, PhD
CUNY Queens College

Kristen Merrill O'Brien, PhD
George Mason University

Co-Chairs, DR Doctoral Student Scholars Program

The Division for Research of the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC-DR) is pleased to announce the 18th cohort of scholars selected through an internationally competitive process to participate in the 2025–2026 DR Doctoral Student Seminars in Special Education Research (DRDSS). The Division commends all the students who applied and their nominators for upholding a high standard of scholarship, especially considering the continuing challenges presented by the pandemic. We would also like to thank the panel of reviewers who participated in the selection process and our seminar leaders.

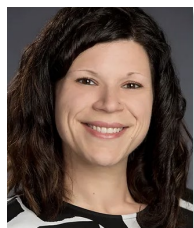
The Division is very grateful to the Hammill Institute on Disabilities for its generous sponsorship of the DRDSS program—an online seminar and discussion series designed to foster connections among students at different universities and contribute toward raising the standard of research in the field through sustained inquiry into the question, “What makes for excellence in special education research?”

Seminars will be led this year by Dr. Shanna Hirsch, University of Maryland, a recipient of the 2025 Martin J. Kaufman Distinguished Early Career Award; Dr. Karen Harris, Arizona State University; and Dr. Amber Ray, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign.

All graduate students attending the CEC 2026 Convention in Salt Lake City are invited to meet this year's DR Doctoral Student Scholars and participate in the DR Graduate Student Colloquium. For more information, see the conference website. ■

Scholar	Nominator	Institution
Phoebe Ahn	Jason Chow	Vanderbilt University
Alexandra Allen-Barret	Elizabeth Bettini	Boston University
Maggie Bethea	Melinda Leko	University of Florida
Carrie Brandon	Wendy Oakes	Arizona State University
Samantha Gonzalez	Julie Thompson	Texas A&M University
Oktaviani Hidayah	Brian Barber	Kent State
Sarah Hudler	Matt Brock	The Ohio State University
Jennifer Macko	Jamie Pearson	North Carolina State University
Suzanne McClain	Bryan Cook	University of Virginia
Kassandra Spurlock	Sarup Mathur	Arizona State University
Mackenna Vander Tuin	Sarah Powell	University of Texas, Austin
Jiaxin Jessie Wang	Jessica Logan	Vanderbilt University

Call for Nominations: CEC-DR Officers



Jessica R. Toste, PhD
The University of Texas at Austin

We invite you to make a difference for individuals with disabilities by helping us identify new Officers for the CEC Division for Research (CEC-DR).

CEC-DR is devoted to the advancement of research related to the education of individuals with disabilities and/or who are gifted, and our goals include the promotion of partnership with practitioners in designing, conducting, and interpreting research in special education. This year, we are soliciting nominations for the positions of secretary and vice-president. The vice-president serves a four-year term (e.g., vice-president, followed by president-elect, president, and past president). New terms will begin July 1, 2026, and CEC-DR leadership meets once per month virtually.

If you are interested in nominating yourself or a colleague, please reach out to the CEC-DR past president, Jessica Toste (jrtoste@austin.utexas.edu) by April 1, 2026.

Visit our website to learn more about CEC-DR activities and our current leaders. Nominees should submit a brief bio that highlights their areas of interest and intention for serving, which we can share with members. All applications will be reviewed by the Past President, who will finalize the election ballot slate. If you want to

get involved, but aren't ready for the Executive Committee, CEC-DR has nine different committees who work to advance the field of special education research, practice, and policy. If you are interested in committee work, feel free to email us to get connected with one of our awesome committee chairs for further information. We hope you will consider joining our team! ■



CEC-DR Policy Updates



Kristabel Stark, PhD
University of Vermont



Stephen Cuillo, PhD
Texas State University

In 2025, the DR Policy Committee started a new, monthly Policy Newsletter to keep members informed about policies that may impact the work of special education researchers. You can access our 2025 archives [here](#). The first 2026 newsletter recently went out to DR members and will be reflected on the website soon. ■



President's Message *(continued from page 1)*

and Families of Individuals with Disabilities Committee. These learning opportunities are aimed to support membership in navigating the current context. Keep a look out for further information!

- Given that the future of our field depends on cultivating the next generation of leaders, CEC-DR is committed to supporting early career scholars, doctoral students, and emerging researchers via professional learning, mentorship, and collaboration opportunities. In support of these efforts, we have asked two new doctoral student representatives (Chauntea Cummings and Madison Ross) to join the DR Executive Board.
- As part of our efforts to strengthen CEC-DR, we continue to examine and update (as needed) our bylaws, procedures, and website. We will be voting on our

bylaws at the CEC-DR Business meeting, which will take place during the 2026 CEC Convention. I look forward to seeing you there!

We are only as strong as our membership, and standing together is crucial during these unprecedented times. Your continued support is essential whether through maintaining your DR membership, participating in our events, listening to DR podcasts, taking action as outlined in our policy newsletter, serving as a mentor, and/or joining one of our committees. Also, you, as members, shape the direction of DR's work. Please reach out to share your insights with me and/or the DR Executive Board.

I cannot express enough gratitude to each of you for your commitment to CEC-DR and our mission. It is because of your dedication, expertise, and engagement that our mission can be realized—improving the lives of individuals with disabilities, their families, and educational professionals via quality and impactful research! ■

CEC-DR Diversity Committee Spotlight



Federico Waitoller, PhD
University of Illinois
Diversity Committee Chair

New *DiveIn* Series: Rethinking Disproportionality in Special Education

DiveIn, the podcast sponsored by the Division of Research of the Council for Exceptional Children, is launching a new series on disproportionality in special education—one of the field’s most persistent and debated issues. This series brings together scholars with differing theoretical commitments and empirical ap-

proaches to critically examine what we know, how we know it, and what claims about bias and disparities can (and cannot) be supported by evidence.

The series opens with a conversation between host Federico Waitoller and Paul Morgan, whose work challenges dominant interpretations of disproportionality by emphasizing careful comparisons among similarly situated students. Upcoming episodes will continue to expand the dialogue, highlighting contrasting perspectives and encouraging rigorous, evidence-based discussion. You can listen [here](#) or on Spotify and Apple Podcasts.

Listeners are invited not only to tune in but to join the conversation by participating in the new *DiveIn* [Discord community](#)—a space to discuss episodes, share research, and engage with colleagues across roles and viewpoints. ■



CEC-DR Families of Individuals with Disabilities Committee Spotlight



Sally V. Drew, PhD
Sacred Heart University



Lydia Ocasio-Stoutenburg, PhD
Pennsylvania State University

What do families of individuals with disabilities have to do with research?

What does research have to do with families of individuals with disabilities?

Why should we prioritize this in our current sociopolitical climate?

Let’s face it: we are at a challenging moment where the future of special education, the Department of Education, and the service provisions as we know them hang in the balance.

Families of individuals with disabilities and their allies advocated to create the field of special education

that we are all deeply committed to. Now more than ever, we need their voices and their advocacy. But we also need to support them in interpreting research, as there is so much information and misinformation affecting them.

As CEC’s Division of Research Families of Individuals with Disabilities Committee, our focus is to find ways to support families by listening to the critical issues impacting families of individuals with disabilities, helping researchers to build stronger and more inclusive relationships with them, and to help families interpret research findings about individuals with disabilities and their families. Importantly, we do not just want families to be our research “participants” but to be a part of the research and critical consumers of the research about them and their loved ones.

Will you help us fulfill our mission?

This season we have created a [video introduction](#) and [survey](#) to drive our committee priorities based on your input about the needs of families of individuals with disabilities and how families might like to be involved.

We have engaged in the amazing work of our past chairs, heard their vision for the future, and are building a dynamic and responsive agenda to meet the needs of this critical moment in history. This includes learning

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DR Families Spotlight (continued from page 5)

and listening sessions, as well as new ways to disseminate information beyond our own group.

If you have not already, please consider filling out our survey and joining our committee, especially if this is your research focus or you are a family member engaged in research.

For more information you can reach Lydia Ocasio-Stoutenburg at lpo5123@psu.edu and Sally Drew at drews2@sacredheart.edu. Thank you for all that you do. ■



DR Student Committee Spotlight

DR Business Meeting: Calling All Students!



Madison Ross, MEd
University of Illinois
Urbana-Champaign



Chauntea S. Cummings, EdS
Florida International University

DR Student Representatives

Have you ever wondered how decisions are made within the Division for Research (DR) or how graduate students can play a meaningful role? The business meeting is a great place to start. It brings division members, including graduate students, together to hear updates on division accomplishments, learn about ongoing initiatives, and celebrate the work of our members and award recipients. It's also an opportunity to meet and network with division leadership.

Why should students attend? For students, the business meeting offers a behind-the-scenes look at DR's inner workings and how it supports research, policy,

and practice in special education. It's a valuable networking space to connect with other students who share similar interests, meet experienced scholars, and begin building a community within the division for research. Students can also learn about upcoming opportunities designed specifically for them, such as DR Scholars and other professional development pathways. DR fosters meaningful connections between research and practice and encourages students to consider how their work can contribute to advancing the field of special education.

Next DR Business Meeting:

March 12

5:00 p.m. – 6:00 p.m. MST

Whether you're new to CEC or looking to become more involved, the DR Business Meeting is a low-barrier, high-impact way for students to engage, learn, and connect. We look forward to meeting you there! ■



Thank you!



We extend a sincere thanks to Dr. Pamela Mims for her service as Focus on Research newsletter editor (2019–2026). Since becoming an editor in 2019, Dr. Mims has overseen more than 20 issues of Focus on Research. We appreciate your time and dedication to keeping members of CEC Division for Research connected! ■

2026 CEC Convention DR Events

Date and Time*	Event	Location
Wednesday, March 11, 9:00am–12:00pm	CEC-DR Executive Board Meeting	250 E
Thursday, March 12, 5:00pm–6:00pm	CEC-DR Business Meeting	250 F
Thursday, March 12, 7:00pm–10:00pm	CEC-DR Reception	Salt Lake City Museum of Illusions 110 South Rio Grande Street, Ste 1102, Salt Lake City, UT, USA

**Local time*



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