

Recommendations for Applying to the PhD in Special Education

The Ph.D. in Special Education program is a highly mentored experience where students work closely with their advisors on their research interests. To facilitate your success in the program, it is important that you have research interests that align with one (or more) Special Education faculty members.

As such, before you begin your application, review our faculty research interests and course topics to ensure that your interests are represented in our program. Special Education faculty who serve as primary advisors to doctoral students currently include:

- Dr. Kathryn Burke
- Dr. Minyi Dennis
- Dr. Sara Kangas
- Dr. Lee Kern
- Dr. Emily Mauer

Please note: Dr. Brinea Charles and Dr. Elise Settanni are critical members of the Special Education Program faculty. However, their responsibilities are primarily focused on teaching and clinical supervision. You can search for faculty members' research interests [here](#).

After you have identified a Special Education faculty member whose research interests align with yours, make personal contact with the Special Education faculty member(s) via email or phone. Individual conversations provide applicants and Special Education faculty members an opportunity to determine whether your research interests and career goals can be supported in the Special Education program. Also, in some years, individual Special Education faculty members may not be accepting new doctoral students for various reasons. Please be sure to inquire whether the faculty member is accepting doctoral students at this time and/or when they anticipate accepting doctoral students. Additionally, the program director is a good point of contact for general inquiries.

Writing A Compelling Personal Statement

Your personal statement is a critical component of the Special Education Ph.D. application package. Your statement provides a lens into your perceived fit into the Special Education program in regard to research interests and career goals. Below are tips to write a thoughtful and comprehensive statement. On average, personal statements are 2–3 pages in length.

1. Focus on your research interests and professional/career goals. Articulate why you want to pursue a Ph.D. degree in the Special Education Program at Lehigh University. Note: Although many programs ask for personal statements, these are not meant to be biographies or life stories. What we hope to find out is how well your abilities, interests, and goals would fit within and can be supported by our program.

- What are your career goals, and how will pursuing a Ph.D. in Special Education advance them?

- What are your research goals? How do you believe your research ideas contribute to the academic conversation in special education? Why do you believe that pursuing a Ph.D. in Special Education will help you achieve your research goals?

2. Describe your relevant experience (e.g., work experience, research experience) in specific detail.

- What work, research, or other experiences have you had that draw you to this Ph.D. program or line of inquiry?
- If you have worked on a research project, what did you investigate and what did you find? Being specific shows us that you were a key part of the project.

3. Identify concrete skills that you would bring to graduate school, and also describe the skills you hope to acquire.

- For example, *“As a teacher, I have experience implementing interventions for students with social, emotional, and behavioral needs, but I am eager to develop knowledge of interventions specifically designed to improve academic outcomes of students with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).”*
- For example, *“I have foundational knowledge and practical experience as a special education teacher developing IEPs for students with disabilities in high school. I would like to expand my knowledge about effective practices for supporting high school students in co-creating their transition plans.”*
- For example, *“I am familiar with experimental research in general, but I am seeking to expand my methodological expertise in special education. In particular, single case research design is important to learn, given the types of research questions I intend to pursue.”*

5. Discuss your main research interests and explain why you think they are important to the field. Again, be specific. Note: applicants’ ideas commonly shift and become more fine-tuned as they engage in doctoral work; thus, you are not “locked in” to these ideas.

- Not very convincing/lack of specificity: *“I am interested in investigating supports for students with specific learning disabilities.”*
- More convincing: *“I am interested in investigating the effectiveness of special education evaluation processes within multitiered systems of support (MTSS) framework for students at-risk for specific learning disabilities in mathematics. In particular, I want to examine the effectiveness of Tier 2 small group mathematics interventions. I am also interested in exploring practical guidance for developing formative mathematics assessments within MTSS that enable progress monitoring.”*

6. Explicitly link your research interests to the expertise and research programs of faculty here. Reminder: You should reach out to Special Education faculty member(s) who are potential matches to your research interests and schedule a conversation with them to more fully examine the fit.

- Identify at least one faculty member with whom you would like to work.
- Read some of their papers and consider how your interests align with their research directions. If appropriate, describe how you think the research could be extended in one or more novel directions. Please be as specific as possible.
- This is where you have the opportunity to demonstrate your fit to a program and your ability to think critically about research.

7. Ask at least one professor or colleague at your current (or prior) institution to give you feedback on your statement. Is what you have written clear to a non-specialist? Are your interests and research plans aligned closely with a faculty member's interests? Is it clear you have thought about how and why this research fits into larger arenas of concern?

8. Proofread! Or better yet, have a spelling and grammar-obsessed friend proofread your statement.