



First-Year Faculty Feature: Advancing Integrated Mental Health Research

Written and designed by: Anne Fennimore, Ph.D.

During the first year of a faculty appointment, establishing a research trajectory that contributes meaningfully to a given field is a significant milestone. At the College of Education, Alex M. Fields, Ph.D., assistant professor in the Department of Counselor Education, has made significant strides in advancing research that supports both the academic discipline and the professional preparation of future counselors.

Fields' work demonstrates a strong commitment to interdisciplinary collaboration and innovation in integrated behavioral health, with a focus on improving mental health outcomes for individuals managing disabilities and chronic health conditions. Specifically, his research explores the role of counselors within interprofessional care teams, aiming to enhance therapeutic outcomes across the lifespan.

His early work on a latent profile analysis of clients receiving counseling in healthcare settings emphasized the need for more empirical studies on group counseling as a mechanism for improving access and continuity of care in integrated settings. In collaboration with the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Fields is applying his work to help develop Integrated Care Training, a national training program that will prepare future integrated care professionals.

Building on this foundational work, Fields joined a multi-university initiative supporting college students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) enrolled in postsecondary education programs. Working with the College of Education's Academy for Community Inclusion (ACI) and other institutions, the project unites counseling, social work, and special education professionals to support student development. In their 2024 pilot study published in *The Journal of Specialists in Group Work*, the collaborative team implemented structured group counseling sessions to promote emotional regulation, social connection, and self-advocacy among college students with IDD. The results indicated that group-based interventions can be a valuable component of integrated behavioral health services.

Fields is also collaborating with his colleagues in the School Counseling program, who pioneered the Student Success Skills (SSS) curriculum, an evidence-based program informing effective practices in the field. His contributions are helping to clarify the roles of school and mental health counselors in promoting campus-wide wellness.

His commitment to practitioner-informed professional development is also evident in grant-funded and interdisciplinary research projects. The most recent initiative, supported by a competitive four-year grant from the Spencer Foundation, is the utilization of the Bias Exploration and Awareness of Mental Health Diagnosis (BEAM) curriculum to launch a His early work on a latent profile analysis of clients receiving counseling in healthcare settings emphasized the need for more empirical studies on group counseling as a mechanism for improving access and continuity of care in integrated settings. In collaboration with the University of Nebraska Medical Center, Fields is applying his work to help develop Integrated Care Training, a national training program that will prepare future integrated care professionals.

"This work addresses a critical gap in how we prepare counselors to serve the unique needs of their clients," said Fields. "By combining rigorous research with practical training through the BEAM curriculum, we're enhancing diagnostic accuracy and inspiring a more reflective counseling profession."

Looking ahead, Fields is focused on research and grant-funded projects that encourage interdisciplinary teams and welcomes collaborations with faculty, students, and alumni who share an interest in advancing mental health outcomes across educational and healthcare systems.