Exploring the Path of Inclusive Development in Higher Education Teaching Centers to Support Special Education

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Abstract. The Center on Research for Learning and Teaching in University of Michigan has developed a robust operational mechanism and distinctive training programs over half a century, making it an exemplary model for educational centers in the United States. In China, the establishment of university teaching development centers and the initiation of special education are relatively recent endeavors. Exploring a path for inclusive development in higher education teaching centers to support special education, creating an inclusive educational environment, establishing a comprehensive service system for special education within university teaching centers, and promoting the cultivation of advanced and practical educators for inclusive education, all represent innovative approaches towards achieving the ultimate goal of high-quality education. Building upon the insights from the educational consulting services at the University of Michigan, this paper endeavors to investigate the construction of a path that ensures the development of special education within university teaching centers in China.

Keywords: university teaching center; special education; inclusion; path.

1. Introduction

In response to the global trends in higher education, the Chinese Ministry of Education and Ministry of Finance introduced the concept of "guiding higher education institutions to establish teaching development centers that suit their unique characteristics" for the first time in the document "Opinions on Implementing the Undergraduate Teaching Quality and Teaching Reform Project during the 12th Five-Year Plan" in 2011[1]. The Central Government and the State Council of China attach great importance and concern to the development of special education. The "Action Plan for Special Education Development and Enhancement during the 14th Five-Year Plan" specifically outlines clear arrangements for the high-quality development of special education. It emphasizes the "vigorous promotion of the construction of five-level special education resource centers at the national, provincial, municipal, county, and school levels" [2], which represents an innovative and systematic approach to enhance the support for special education. At present, the construction of teaching centers in ordinary universities in China has achieved nearly full coverage. Leveraging the efforts of university teaching centers to serve and support special education and creating a platform for the integration and development of teaching centers and special education can not only maximize the functions of teaching centers but also facilitate the sharing of scarce special education resources. Furthermore, it will undoubtedly promote inclusive education, foster mutual benefits between special education and higher education in terms of high-quality development, and achieve a win-win situation.

The Center on Research for Learning and Teaching in University of Michigan is the first university teaching center in the United States. With over 60 years of development, it has accumulated rich experience in the development of university faculty and teaching. The center has established standardized operational models and distinctive development projects, consistently leading the way in faculty development and research among American universities. Drawing on the experiences from the United States, this paper will attempt to localize the measures of educational consulting services according to the specific situation in China. By doing so, it aims to creatively pave a new path for precise services to support special education in higher education.
Case Study: Teaching Consultation Services at the University of Michigan

The University of Michigan, founded in 1817, is a renowned large multi-campus research-oriented public university in the United States, often referred to as the "public Ivy." In 1962, the University of Michigan established the Center on Research for Learning and Teaching (CRLT) with the aim of enhancing the university's teaching culture and improving the learning environment. CRLT provides services to faculty and administrators, and its work is grounded in consultation, encompassing activities such as teaching competence training, teaching assessment, promoting innovative teaching, and fostering organizational change[3].

1.1 Organizational Structure

The Center on Research for Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan as shown Fig.1, it is evident that CRLT operates as an independent and flat academic organization, under the leadership of the Office of the Provost. The center is closely linked to various departments and units through project-based affiliations, forming an interconnected and interactive system, functioning as an organic entity with specific purposes. Its organizational support extends from the university level to inter-university and international support.

![Fig.1. The Organization Chart of CRLT[4]](image)

CRLT's structure fosters collaboration and cooperation both within and beyond the university. It not only partners with different academic colleges within the university to conduct faculty development projects but also collaborates extensively with other teaching support entities such as centers, research institutes, and libraries on relevant pedagogical matters. For instance, CRLT cooperates with the International Programs Office on student overseas learning, works with the Center for Multiculturalism in Education on multicultural teaching and learning, and engages with the Digital Media Library and Shared Data Center on educational technology.

The members of CRLT's organization include both full-time and part-time faculty members with diverse disciplinary backgrounds, serving in roles such as assistants, program administrators, project directors, executive directors, program coordinators, and service directors. This diverse team composition ensures a comprehensive and multidimensional approach to fulfilling CRLT's mission and objectives.[4].

1.2 Teaching Consultation Services

The diverse and multifaceted teaching consultation services offered by CRLT have had a profound impact on the faculty and staff at the University of Michigan. These services are provided through a variety of project formats and encompass a wide range of topics and content. The primary
beneficiaries of CRLT's teaching consultation services are professional faculty, but they have also expanded to include administrative personnel and "future university instructors" - graduate students serving as teaching assistants. Additionally, CRLT offers assistance to undergraduate students interested in becoming effective educators. The center's commitment to supporting diverse members of the university community underscores its comprehensive approach to teaching consultation.

CRLT's teaching consultation services are well-developed, and the center has established a dedicated website to provide the necessary teaching resources for those seeking consultation. This platform facilitates easy access to valuable information, further enhancing the effectiveness of their services.

A review of CRLT's annual reports for the 2019-2020 and 2020-2021 academic years reveals that the center provides consultation services to over 15,000 individuals annually within the university community. These services not only enrich the teaching and learning experience on campus but also extend internationally through exchange and consultation initiatives, serving over 4,200 individuals annually from outside the university. This international engagement exemplifies CRLT's commitment to promoting effective teaching and learning practices not only within its own institution but also beyond its borders[4].

2. The Path to Supporting the Integrated Development of Special Education by Chinese University Teaching Centers

To some extent, the principle and positioning of "supportiveness" have been essential factors contributing to the success of the Center on Research for Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan. Therefore, after clarifying the construction logic behind CRLT's distinctive "supportive" service projects, the author further investigates how to explore the support provided by Chinese university teaching centers for special education from a novel perspective of educational management. This research aims to address the effective utilization of the teaching center's functions, the integration of the support system for inclusive education into diverse teaching projects, and the seamless harmony between "higher education" and "special education." The realization of this integrated development is crucial for addressing the key challenges. The author proposes that the construction of a pathway for Chinese university teaching centers to support special education and foster integration can be achieved through the following breakthroughs:

2.1 Taking Concept Transformation as a Breakthrough Point

Since their inception, university teaching centers should have a clear mission: to enhance the teaching culture of higher education institutions, improve the quality of teaching and talent development, and foster collaboration among different departments and personnel in nurturing students. The mission of the Center on Research for Learning and Teaching (CRLT) at the University of Michigan, for instance, is to "cultivate a teaching culture at a research university, enhance university teaching and student learning, conduct and disseminate teaching research to improve student learning efficiency".

Constructing a high-quality inclusive education system is crucial for the new era of Chinese education to achieve greater equity, quality, inclusivity, and sustainability. It serves as a crucial foundation for meeting the diverse educational needs of the people, improving the education service system, and promoting balanced distribution of educational resources. This concept lays the cornerstone for the interdependence of special education and university teaching centers.

To accelerate the development of professional support for higher education and avoid being misconceived as yet another administrative body for teacher evaluation, Chinese university teaching centers must clearly position themselves as internally supportive and specialized service organizations, aimed at diagnosing and enhancing teaching effectiveness. Emphasizing "support," "motivation," "guidance," and "inclusiveness" as the main principles of their services, teaching
centers should consciously integrate diverse interdisciplinary and cross-disciplinary consultation demands when formulating their development plans. Operating under a "needs-response" model instead of a top-down administrative approach, they can create a collaborative and sharing-friendly environment. Supporting the establishment of interdisciplinary teacher communities and fostering the overall progress of learning communities, they can facilitate the training of high-level practitioners in inclusive education.

Given the strong real-life demands and clear policy orientation, it is essential to achieve a conceptual transformation and embed elements of special education services into consultation projects to overcome barriers to collaborative human resource and information resource sharing in teaching centers. Embracing a transformational mindset and a service-oriented approach represent the primary breakthroughs for university teaching centers in achieving their goal of supporting special education services effectively.

2.2 Using institutional mechanism construction as a carrier

The development of conditions to support special education is closely related to the organizational structure of higher education institutions. The "14th Five Year Plan" for the Development and Improvement of Special Education in China proposes the construction of special education resource centers at the national, provincial, municipal, county, and school levels[2]. Given that the construction of these five-level special education resource centers involves various fields such as education, medicine, psychology, sociology, and information technology, scholars in the field suggest that besides special education, other areas of higher education institutions and research organizations should also have equal opportunities to establish national-level resource centers, collectively fostering a friendly, suitable, and convenient environment for the development of special students[5].

As a vehicle for system and mechanism construction, the university teaching center actively endeavors to establish an organic and reciprocal organizational model that bridges higher education teaching and special education. This choice is both a necessary development in education and a response to practical demands. Naturally, during the initial stages of implementing this organizational model, some friction and differences are expected. China can draw from the experiences of the United States, wherein establishing a flat and independent organizational structure has proven effective. Additionally, learning from the practices of the University of Michigan, which leverages specific projects to promote inclusive education, China can provide a series of cross-institutional and international activities, plans, and tasks to facilitate comprehensive integration of inclusive education. Such integration would extend to interdisciplinary teaching and consultation projects both within and beyond campuses, forming an effective mechanism that promotes seamless integration of inclusive education.

2.3 Taking resource sharing and co construction as the basic approach

Talent cultivation is a fundamental external characteristic of university teaching centers, which utilizes its platform and resource advantages to promote communication and integration with special education. The teaching center serves as a main hub for cultivating comprehensive and practical faculty across multiple disciplines, as well as a primary arena for facilitating the implementation of inclusive education. Drawing from the diverse and inclusive service experiences of the University of Michigan's Center for Research on Learning and Teaching (CRLT), a university teaching center, while advancing the development of special education, should prioritize resource sharing and collaborative construction as a fundamental approach. This entails maximizing the efficiency of resource repositories, focusing on the development of faculty in the field of inclusive education, equipping them with curriculum resources for inclusive education, and establishing interdisciplinary and permeating teaching and consultation services to gradually address the challenges in achieving high-quality development of special education.
Additionally, encouraging exchanges and collaborations between the teaching center and external and regional inclusive education institutions is essential. Emphasizing support for teaching and research and information technology is crucial, as it involves building a shared platform for special education teaching resources. Together, these efforts create a diversified and multicultural environment for teaching and consultation services. It can be stated that the distinctive "special education" and "inclusive education" resource sharing projects, empowered by information technology and supported by scientific research, serve as the green channel for ensuring integrated development, as well as the key to forging a path of coordinated and inclusive progress.

3. Summary

Achieving effective communication and integration between university teaching centers and special education is a long-lasting educational challenge that requires continuous effort and determination, without the slightest thought of giving up.

Only by leveraging the platform and resource advantages of universities and using teaching centers as the basis, creating supportive programs for special education, and fully utilizing the mechanisms of supportive services for inclusive education, can we establish a "university teaching center" that not only meets the learning needs of special groups but also effectively reduces the cost of consulting for inclusive education. This center should emphasize six core functions: faculty training, consultation services, teaching research, quality assessment, resource sharing, and regional outreach. It is hoped that the exploration of the path to integrate university teaching centers in supporting inclusive education can eventually achieve a perfect combination of the two, and contribute to the high-quality development and reform of education in China. The author's endeavors in this direction are dedicated to the cause of educational progress and research in China.

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