Candidate for Student Representative to the Representative Assembly

ASHLEY SALTER VIRGIN

- **Doctoral Candidate**
- **The University of Alabama**

Pleasant Grove, AL

Candidate Statements:

What inspired you to apply for this position? (Limit 150 words.)

I believe that service is a critical component of any well-rounded individual. I view the chance to serve as a Student Representative to the Representative Assembly as an exemplary opportunity to "pay it forward" within an organization that has already done so much for me. In working with youth with disabilities in juvenile justice and residential facilities as a second-year doctoral student, and as a former K-12 special educator, I know that there are many needs facing both our youth today and our special educators. Additionally, being a student representative to the Representative Assembly would give me a unique platform in which I would be able to provide a voice for the ideas of those I represent. I desire to contribute my time, growing expertise, and passion so that the Council for Exceptional Children can continue to flourish.

What skill(s) and experience(s) do you have that would make you an effective voice for the student membership of CEC? (Limit 250 words.)

In reflecting on this question, I believe that the skills that I possess that would make me a successful Student Representative to the Representative Assembly include being an excellent communicator, diligently following through and completing tasks, and my passion for serving others. I believe that communication is key in serving in this capacity because I will not only be working with the Student and Early Career Committee but also voicing the needs of our members to the Representative Assembly. I have a demonstrated history of following through and completing tasks, which is important to note because this position will require self-motivation and timely attention to key responsibilities. Finally, and the skill which I think is most important that I possess, is that of my passion for serving others. This position is not about me. It is about working with others to benefit those we serve. Though I am currently completing my second year in a doctoral program pursing a Ph.D. in Special Education, I have also worked as a special education teacher and later a behavior specialist within public K-12 schools. With a total of seven years of professional experience within the field of Education, in addition to my current pursuit of a doctoral degree, I believe that I have a unique perspective that will allow me to be an effective voice for the student membership of CEC. Additionally, I am very passionate about CEC and the resources that CEC offers which can greatly benefit both longtime professionals and students.

Name one challenge you see facing students and/or new special education teachers today and one strategy for overcoming that challenge. (Limit 150 words.)

I believe that providing supports to students and/or new special education teachers in the area of culturally responsive pedagogy (CRP) is a critical challenge facing students and/or special education

teachers today. With increasing diversity in schools and decreasing diversity amongst most teachers it is important to help teachers recognize and celebrate the cultures, languages, and unique characteristics that make up classrooms today. In reflecting back on my own pre-service teacher training and early years as a special education teacher, I know that I was not prepared to implement, nor did I know anything regarding CRP. CEC can aid in this by providing infographic handouts on a designated section on their webpage that gives students and/or new special education teachers ideas for how to implement CRP. Through providing an engaging, creative infographic handouts on the CEC website, students and/or new special education teachers can learn about CRP and use the information to create a more inclusive, welcoming classroom environment.

What are the three most important things CEC can do to better support new special education teachers? (Limit 150 words.)

In classrooms today it is often challenging as a new special education teacher to know who to turn to for classroom advice. Being paired with a mentor is an excellent way for new special education teachers to have a sounding board for feedback or simply to process a tough day. CEC can better support new special education teachers through providing information on how to find a mentor, establish that relationship, and keep the relationship moving forward in positive ways. Also, new special education teachers need to be able to access the latest evidence-based practices for use in their classrooms. Often times, once leaving college, many teachers struggle to find ways to access this information. CEC can provide more cost-effective online webinars and programming to assist with this. Finally, CEC can better support new special education teachers by providing an online forum in which those teachers can share with one another their experiences, both positive and negative, as they navigate the world of teaching.

When thinking about the impact of COVID-19 and long-standing social injustice and racial inequality, what is the most important thing you have learned about yourself as a teacher in the past year? (Limit 150 words.)

I have learned in the past year more than ever that I do not fully understand, and will never fully understand, the plight of those who come from different backgrounds than myself. I say that not to excuse myself from the difficult conversations that we must have as a society, but to state that I must search within myself and realize that there are situations others go through that I will probably never experience due to my life circumstances. In viewing this as a teacher, I know that our students have experienced enormous levels of trauma due to the impact of COVID-19, as well as their viewing of the way events have played out in relation to social injustices and racial inequalities. My job now is to provide support to those students who have experienced trauma, have the difficult conversations so that we can progress as a society, and create safe spaces for our students in the midst of uncertain times.

Leadership:

Volunteer Leadership Positions Held:

Student Alabama Education Association Executive Board Member, 2010-2011

Special Education Experience:

- Project INSPIRE Fellow, The University of Alabama, August 2020-Present
  Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education grant

Inspiring researchers to focus on youth in residential and juvenile justice facilities.

- Graduate Research Assistant, The University of Alabama, January 2020-August 2020
- Behavior Specialist for 7th-12th Grades, Birmingham City Schools, July 2018-June 2020
- 9th-12th Grade Special Education Teacher; E/BD, Wenonah High School, August 2015-June 2018
- 9th-12th Grade Special Education Teacher; Autism, Helena High School, August 2014-May 2015
- 9th-12th Grade Special Education Teacher; E/BD, Pelham High School, August 2013-May 2014
- Graduate Assistant/Researcher, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro, August 2011-May 2013

Highest Degree Information:

Ph.D. in Special Education; Focus: Emotional/Behavioral Disorders. The University of Alabama, 2023

Diversity and Demographic Information:

Birth Year Range: 1980s

CEC defines diversity to include race, ethnicity, culture, language, age, (dis)abilities, family status/composition, gender identity and expression, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, religious and spiritual values, geographic location, and country of origin. There is such a great range of individual backgrounds and experiences that cannot be easily conveyed by answering simple demographic questions.

Given this definition, how do you describe your own diversity? (Limit 150 words.)

I am by no means unaware of my lack of diversity within the confines of typically thought of areas of diversification. I am a cis-gender, White female who had the opportunity to pursue higher education with few barriers. That being said, I believe that my diversity comes from the experiences I have had. I have spent time in California working with homeless youth on the streets of Los Angeles, as well as working with youth with behavioral disorders at a residential school in California. These experiences instilled in me a love of youth who simply needed someone to give them a chance. For some that meant a chance at safe, reliable housing, for others it meant more rehabilitative efforts so that they could transition home successfully. This increased my global awareness of the issues facing youth today and further motivated me to pursue a career working towards finding solutions that will benefit them.