$18.2 million
Department of Education funding at Vanderbilt in FY 2015

Peabody is one of the nation’s foremost colleges of education. In recent years, it has been consistently ranked among the top five graduate schools of education by *U.S. News & World Report*, including holding the No. 1 position for five of the last seven years.

The Institute of Education Sciences

The Institute of Education Sciences (IES), part of the U.S. Department of Education, is tasked with providing “rigorous and relevant evidence on which to ground education practice and policy and sharing this information broadly.” Researchers from Peabody College of education and human development (Peabody) often depend on funds from IES to conduct breakthrough research on critical local, state, and federal education policies.

Peabody’s national research centers

IES supports national R&D centers that are intended to contribute significantly to solving education problems in the United States by engaging in research, development, evaluations, and national leadership activities aimed at improving the education system and, ultimately, student achievement. Each of the R&D centers conducts a focused program of education research in its topic area. In addition, each center conducts supplemental research within its broad topic area and provides national leadership in advancing evidence-based practice and policy within its topic area.

Peabody currently is home to two such IES centers: the National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools and the Accelerated Academic Achievement (A3) Research Center. Prior National Research Centers located at Peabody College include the National Center on Performance Incentives, which was awarded a five-year, $10.8 million grant in 2006, and the National Center on School Choice, which was awarded a five-year, $9.9 million grant in 2004.

National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools

The National Center on Scaling Up Effective Schools (NCSU)—a collaborative partnership among research universities, education support providers, and two larger urban districts—is a five-year, $13.6 million grant. As a national research and development center on scaling up effective schools, NCSU focuses on identifying the combination of essential components and the programs, practices, processes, and policies that make some high schools in large urban districts particularly effective with low-income students, minority students, and English language learners. Then the center works with both teachers and school and district leaders to develop processes to share these practices with less-effective schools in the district. By engaging practitioners in continuous improvement research, NCSU aims to ensure effective practices are implemented with depth, have local ownership and commitment, and are sustained over time.

Accelerated Academic Achievement (A3) Research Center

The National Center for Special Education Research (NCSER, a part of IES) awarded a team of Peabody professors $10 million to develop new math and reading strategies aimed at improving student success. The five-year grant, awarded in 2013 to create the Accelerated Academic Achievement Research Center, enables researchers to study instructional programs targeting students with the most severe learning disabilities in grades three to five. The research team is developing and evaluating intensive, supplemental reading interventions for these students. The reading interventions will focus on basic literacy skills and the transition from story-based to informational text. This research will help pinpoint what content, intensity, and length of instruction are optimal for students who continue to show limited or no progress in reading despite receiving intensive instruction.

National Center for Special Education Research

Vanderbilt is a top recipient of funding from NCSER. Highlights of NCSER funded research at Vanderbilt include:

- A Peabody professor received a four-year, $3.5 million grant from NCSER to evaluate the efficacy of an early social-communication and language intervention on toddlers with autism spectrum disorders (ASD). Social communication skills are particularly important for this population, because a deficit in this area constitutes a core characteristic of ASD.
- A Peabody professor is leading an intervention trial at Tennessee sites as part of a four-year, $3.5 million grant from NCSER to examine and compare two variations of the Tools for Teachers intervention and discover how well teachers sustain their use of embedded instruction practices.
With a four-year, $3.5 million grant from NCSER, a Peabody professor is evaluating the efficacy of the Voyager Passport reading program for improving reading outcomes for students with reading difficulties or disabilities.

In February 2016, a Peabody professor completed a four-year, $3.5 million study funded by NCSER to evaluate whether a comprehensive, classroom-wide preschool intervention system, Teaching Pyramid, promotes social skills, reduces challenging behavior, and enhances the school readiness of young children with and without disabilities. Over the next year, the research team will also investigate whether teachers continue to use the Teaching Pyramid system after the research support has ended.

Tennessee voluntary pre-K evaluation

Tennessee’s pre-kindergarten program expanded considerably in 2005, when the Tennessee General Assembly passed the Voluntary Pre-K for Tennessee Act. With the support of a five-year, $6 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education, the Peabody Research Institute (PRI) partnered with the Tennessee Department of Education in 2009 to commence the first scientifically rigorous statewide evaluation of the effectiveness of the TN–VPK Program. In 2015, the PRI released its latest findings showing that children attending VPK made greater gains on a range of early achievement measures than peers who did not attend pre-K and were rated by their kindergarten teachers as better prepared for kindergarten. However, by the end of kindergarten, the children who did not attend VPK had caught up and there were no longer significant differences between the two groups. By the end of second grade and continuing in third, the children who attended TN-VPK were not performing as well on many achievement measures as the children who did not attend VPK. These findings have stimulated extensive conversations among experts in education and public policy regarding how to sustain the gains VPK attendees demonstrated in kindergarten. The PRI researchers are analyzing the effects of poverty and the classroom teaching in grades 1 to 3 as possible contributing factors to the flatlined effects.

Peabody researcher wins presidential early career award

President Barack Obama named Vanderbilt researcher Christopher J. Lemons among the recipients of the 2016 Presidential Early Career Awards for Scientists and Engineers, the highest honor bestowed by the United States government on science and engineering professionals in the early stages of their independent research careers. Lemons, an assistant professor of special education at Peabody and a Vanderbilt Kennedy Center investigator, is among only two in the nation selected in the Department of Education category. His research focuses on enhancing reading interventions for students with learning and intellectual disabilities, including Down syndrome; improving special educators’ abilities to use data to adapt and intensify academic interventions for students with severe and persistent learning needs; and integrating peer-mediated instruction as a method to improve academic outcomes of students.

Using teacher evaluation data for instructional improvement

Supported by a $5 million grant from IES, education researchers at Peabody are working with the Tennessee Department of Education and colleagues at other institutions to study how state school systems can best use teacher evaluation data to drive instructional improvement. The researchers have spent several years developing an approach that uses detailed Tennessee teacher evaluation data to improve instructional practice. The resulting Instructional Partnership Initiative uses data to recommend partnerships between teachers with strengths in particular areas of practice and teachers who have room to grow in those same areas. The two teachers are encouraged to work together throughout the year to build instructional skills. In the new study, researchers will implement a statewide randomized experiment in schools in Tennessee to evaluate the initiative’s effectiveness.

Training special education leaders

The Department of Special Education at Peabody received a five-year, $7.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education’s Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) to develop a national center focused on training special education leaders to provide intensive intervention to students with disabilities who have intense service needs due to persistent and severe academic and behavioral difficulties. The department also received $7.5 million from OSEP in the form of six, five-year, $1.2 million training grants to support 131 master’s and 11 doctoral students.

For more information, please contact Vanderbilt’s Office of Federal Relations: Christina West (202) 216-4370 • Gabriella Ra’anan (202) 216-4368 • federalrelations@vanderbilt.edu