



Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning
Office of the Director



UVI CELL

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Honorable Kurt Vialet, Chairman, Committee on Education and Workforce Development
 Legislature of the Virgin Islands
 3022 Estate Golden Rock
 Christiansted, USVI 00820

Testimony: University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (UVI CELL); Special Education Services

Good day, Honorable Chairman Kurt Vialet, members of the Committee on Education and Workforce Development, other members of the 36th Legislature, the Legislative staff, and the listening and viewing audience. My name is Dr. Suzanne Darrow-Magras and I am the Director of the University of the Virgin Islands Center for Excellence in Leadership and Learning (UVI CELL). I appreciate the opportunity to testify on UVI CELL's role in supporting special education in the US Virgin Islands.

UVI CELL, a division of the University of the Virgin Islands, was established in 2002 to meet workforce and professional development needs critical to the economic prosperity of the Virgin Islands. With ADA-accessible facilities on St. Thomas, St. John and St. Croix, UVI CELL is committed to supporting the intellectual and professional development and transformation of students and the workforce in the Virgin Islands, wider Caribbean, and the world as part of the University's mission. We aim to serve as the premier institute for personal enrichment and consultancy, locally and globally through innovative leadership and collaborative partnerships.

We partner with the VI Department of Education in a number of areas. Our online course catalog has over twenty courses available for educator enrollment in topics such as teaching students with autism, ADHD, and learning disabilities, designing IEP goals, managing classroom behavior, and using trauma-informed strategies. We also offer online training on inclusive classroom practices, sign language, and differentiated instruction and assessment. These courses offer practical guidance for educators, as well as parents and caregivers who are navigating diverse needs. UVI CELL receives funding from the Virgin Islands Board for Career and Technical Education to support instructor certification, which includes the use of our online special education courses to help educators meet licensure and professional development requirements.

UVI CELL receives grant funding from the VI Department of Education through the State Office of Career and Technical Education under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA). With this support, we offer Adult Basic Education, GED preparation and exams, and English as a Second Language (ESL) programs. AEFLA participants are administered the TABE (Test of Adult Basic Education) at the beginning and end of their instructional period to assess learning gains and guide individualized instruction.

In our most recent AEFLA courses, 60 ESL students on St. Thomas and St. Croix participated in beginner and intermediate level classes. These sessions ran for 10 weeks and were delivered in partnership with the UVI College of Liberal Arts and Social Sciences. Our next ESL and Adult Basic Education classes are expected to launch in June. The Adult Basic Education program will be delivered in collaboration with the UVI School of Education. GED preparation support and exams are available on a rolling basis throughout the year.

UVI CELL also offers an alternative high school program funded by the Virgin Islands Department of Labor and we are approved providers through the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA). Our program provides adults and out-of-school youth, including minors and foster youth referred by the Department of Human Services, with TABE assessments, enrollment in Penn Foster High School, access to computer labs, and one-on-one academic and case management support. Many of our learners have diagnosed and undiagnosed learning disabilities. Through WIOA, we offer training programs in high-demand fields that lead to industry-recognized certifications. Several programs provide accessible, skills-based pathways to employment, including certification as an Administrative Assistant, Childcare Worker, or in the Culinary Arts. Transportation to and from UVI CELL can be provided by arrangement with the Department of Labor.

UVI CELL's Diageo Learning Skills for Life Bartending Program is a free, hands-on training that prepares participants for jobs in the hospitality industry. The program is inclusive of individuals with special needs, offering a supportive and structured environment that builds confidence, teaches practical skills, and supports the transition into employment.

We also offer a free entrepreneurship program through our EDA University Center grant, with courses, mentoring, and small business support open to all. Designed to promote self-sufficiency and economic empowerment, the program can be especially valuable for individuals with special needs seeking flexible, independent career paths.

Our annual, territorial EmpowerU Youth Summit supports students ages 12–18 through interactive panel discussions and breakout sessions that focus on post-secondary transitions, workforce readiness, and mental health awareness. While not exclusively a special education program, its emphasis on social well-being, resilience, and future planning aligns with key priorities for students with special needs, particularly those with emotional, behavioral, or learning challenges who benefit from structured support during life transitions.

We work closely with the Bureau of Corrections to support incarcerated individuals with GED, Penn Foster High School and Career and Technical Education certification programs. Our 'Parenting Inside Out' program provides incarcerated parents with evidence-based parenting skills while also supporting the children of the incarcerated and their caregivers, many of whom face special needs related to trauma, developmental challenges, or disrupted education. Our 'Thinking for a Change' program uses cognitive-behavioral strategies to help incarcerated individuals improve decision-making, manage emotions, and reduce patterns of impulsive or antisocial behavior.

These individuals are often victims of the "school-to-prison pipeline." Those with emotional or behavioral disorders face a heightened risk of entering the criminal justice system due to exclusionary school discipline practices such as suspension, expulsion, unmet mental health needs, lack of post-high school transition support, and systemic inequities such as poverty and under-resourced schools.

UVI CELL's staff includes Dr. Latashia Edwards, who holds degrees in counseling, and Mr. Adryann Glenn, who has expertise in corrections education and reentry. We often engage experienced counselors and behavioral health professionals to design and lead program sessions, ensuring that participants receive high-quality support.

Individuals with disabilities in the Virgin Islands face significant challenges, including limited access to specialized educational support, gaps in services after high school, and barriers to meaningful and living wage employment. Individuals may also face social stigmas that can lower expectations among educators and employers. These individuals may be at an increased risk of victimization and often lack access to essential community support, such as permanent supportive housing, group homes, and adult day programs. Families of individuals with special needs may face emotional and financial strains, limited access to coordinated services, and social isolation, as they navigate complex systems with few consistent supports.

Whether through existing programs or customized solutions, we are committed to addressing challenges, building capacity, and advancing inclusive education in the Virgin Islands. We see potential in every learner and strive to provide a supportive, respectful, and empowering learning experience that meets individuals where they are.

UVI CELL is open to partnerships to strengthen special education services across the territory. We have a dedicated Community Engagement function and welcome opportunities to support our community through one-on-one education advisement, workshops, certification programs, and professional development offerings. The community can contact us by visiting our website, cell.uvi.edu, emailing cell@uvi.edu or calling (340) 693-1100.

Chairman Violet, this concludes my testimony. Thank you for the invitation to provide information on UVI CELL and special education services. I thank you for the opportunity to testify before this Committee and welcome any questions you may have.

Sincerely,



Suzanne Darrow-Magras, PhD
Director, UVI CELL