

# Alumna in Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling Awarded Emerson Fellowship

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Tami Pyfer, one of the Emerson Collective's 2024 fellowship awardees.

Tami Pyfer, a former student and educator in the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services (CEHS) never imagined her career would evolve into working with Tim Shriver, chairman of Special Olympics International, founder of the nonprofit UNITE, and co-creator of The Dignity Index, a communication tool used to help politicians speak more civilly. The Emerson Collective, created by the Steve and Laurene Powell Jobs' philanthropic venture, recently named Pyfer as one of its 2024 Fellows and awarded her \$125K to use The Dignity Index as a resource to train, recruit, and support women interested in holding public office.

Long before joining the nonprofit UNITE, Pyfer was a student at USU in the Department of Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling and then went on to be an instructor in the department for 10 years. "I owe so much of what I am doing now to my degree at USU," says Pyfer. "You know that book, *All I Really Need to Know I Learned in Kindergarten*. For me, instead of kindergarten it was my Special Ed training. I was lucky enough to learn from the best of the best at USU in Special Ed."

Pyfer also acknowledges the life-altering principles of behavior change analysis she learned at USU. She says, "These principles have shaped my life, personally and professionally. In Special Ed, it is the practice of applied behavior analysis that changes someone's behavior. This

process of knowing what motivates behavior change, along with my teaching in the Special Ed Department, has been instrumental in every aspect of my life."

Special Education and Rehabilitation Counseling Department Head and Professor Tom Higbee noted, "Tami learned about and then applied the principles of the science of human behavior to change the lives of her students and help them maximize their potential. Her practical understanding of human behavior and experience helping people learn how to become the best versions of themselves has served her well in the various leadership roles she has filled since leaving our department."

During her years teaching at USU, Pyfer also served as a Logan City councilmember. She remembers thinking, "When I am finished with my commitment to the City Council, I'm done with politics." But leaving public service was not in the cards for Pyfer. She was appointed to fill a vacancy on the Utah State Board of Education (USBE). Then, after serving on the USBE from 2010-2014, Pyfer was appointed by former Utah Governor Gary Herbert as his education policy adviser in 2014, a role in which she served for seven years.



Pyfer teaches the principles of The Dignity Index.

Pyfer recognizes that each of these experiences are a result of the behavior change principles she embraces, which build upon each other one step at time. She recalls the first time she met Tim Shriver, who started building UNITE in 2019. "Tim spoke about how divided our country had become in the way that we speak to one another. He shared about a new endeavor to heal the country's toxic political divides."

Shriver is a pioneer in the field of social and emotional learning, which Pyfer had been learning about during her years at the USBE and then elevating while in the Governor's office. These principles include skills such as empathy, being able to disagree while being agreeable, working with groups of people with differing beliefs and perspectives, and managing emotions. "I heard Tim mention these principles at a lecture that I attended in

2019. He said, ‘What if we could apply these principles to politics?’ That was it. That was the connection between what I learned in Special Ed and in my time serving in public office. I knew at that point that this was what I wanted to work on for the rest of my life,” shares Pyfer.

Following the completion of her work in the Governor’s office in 2020, Pyfer began working on a few small projects with Shriver and the UNITE team. This evolved into working with another UNITE colleague Tom Rosshirt, in creating The Dignity Index, a tool that scores political language from a ONE to EIGHT—with ONE being the most contemptuous language and EIGHT representing the highest level of dignity and acceptance. Pyfer’s role with UNITE encompasses being the chief of staff and vice president of external affairs. She now travels the country teaching the principles of The Dignity Index to political and non-political audiences.

In November 2023, Pyfer received a call from the Emerson Collective letting her know that she had been nominated for one of the 12 fellowship spots for 2024. According to Pyfer, she plans as a fellow, to survey women across the state to test her hypothesis that contemptuous language and tactics used in political settings decrease women’s desire to step into the public eye. Her goal is to create a partnership with organizations that support female candidates and other women leaders by using The Dignity Index as a tool to recruit, train, and support women in public office.

“I would like to see us get back to having a society that has more dignity,” concludes Pyfer, “where certain topics are not tearing friendships apart, tearing families apart. We could get back to when we could talk about politics without contempt.”

Currently, Pyfer is also serving on the Emma Eccles Jones College of Education and Human Services as a member of the Advancement Board. She was appointed by Endowed Dean Al Smith. Her commitment is to help govern philanthropic efforts in the college for the next three years.

Learn more about [The Dignity Index](#) and [The Emerson Collective Fellowship](#) at their websites.