

Virginia's Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA-HELP): Creating Change Through Effective Statewide Collaboration

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Introduction

Greater numbers of students with disabilities are entering postsecondary education programs. The number of students entering post secondary programs has almost tripled since 1992 (Henderson, 1999). There are several transition related issues that students face as they plan and prepare for college. Not only must these students be academically prepared for higher education, students with disabilities are also responsible for documentation of a disability, assessment information, programming, advocacy, decision-making, and transition once they enter college (Brinkerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002). While in college, students with disabilities are faced with obtaining needed services and supports, working with faculty to implement their accommodations, and managing their academic studies along with the supports and services they are receiving. All too often, students with disabilities are unable to maintain their academic studies, resulting in limited numbers of students completing their programs (Wille-Gregory, Graham, & Hughes, 1995). Several factors contribute to the low retention and completion rates of these students. In many instances, students may be hampered by varying or limited support services, large student-instructor ratios which may lead to students' unique needs going unrecognized, and limited direct student-instructor contact (Brinkerhoff, 1994; Stodden, 1999).

One specific issue that has had a significant impact on students' experiences in college is the limited and often varied services and supports available on campus. Disability support services offices across the nation are faced with providing more specialized services to meet the increased demand for these services. Disability support services cover a wide spectrum of the amount and type of support services offered and often services vary from campus to campus. The range of services and supports provided by postsecondary education institutions is still relatively new and not yet well known by university faculty, staff, and administrators (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001; Mellard, 1994; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000). Faculty and other stakeholders may find it difficult to accommodate students simply because they lack an understanding of students' needs or familiarity with campus services (deFur & Taymans, 1995; Scott, 1996). Furthermore, the heavy workload

of many disability support services offices present significant barriers to students seeking services and securing needed services (McGuire & Scott, 2001).

Every college or university campus faces its own unique challenges and issues when educating students; however, higher education institutions share many of the same concerns when serving students with disabilities. There are system wide issues that need to be addressed to enhance services and supports on college campuses. As is the case in many other states, Virginia's higher education system has great variety in its service delivery system for college students with disabilities. Documentation requirements for disability vary between schools and data collection procedures are nonexistent or lack consistency on a statewide basis. This service system often creates frustration for students with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to college or from a two-year college to a four-year university. Faculty and staff members in higher education believe they lack sufficient information on instructing students with disabilities as well as understanding the process that the university or college has established for identifying students and providing accommodations.

In Virginia, a group of concerned stakeholders discussed the need to establish a work group representing a wide spectrum of higher education programs, state agencies, secondary education, advocacy groups, and students with disabilities to address the systematic issues confronting our colleges and universities. This paper describes the collaborative process that Virginia has developed and implemented to address pressing issues facing students with disabilities in higher education. This process, based on Melaville and Blank's (1991) five principles of collaboration, has proven to be an effective method to facilitate change and improvement in the service delivery system. A partnership has been formed between diverse stakeholders across the state, common goals have been established to guide their activities, and resources have been committed to accomplish identified tasks.

Establishing Collaborative Relationships

Very little information exists in the literature on advantages and disadvantages of collaborative relationships in higher education. Even though collaboration is listed as one of the key elements in successful service delivery, there is little empirical data on the effectiveness of these relationships (Scott, 1996). There are also a number of definitions used to describe collaborative relationships. One of the more comprehensive definitions was developed by Melaville, Blank, and Asayesh (1993) where collaboration is described as a process where individuals share a vision, establish common goals, and agree to commit resources and a willingness to alter existing policies. The VA-HELP consortium has structured its goals and activities to achieve system wide change within Virginia's higher education to better serve students with disabilities. The group has been in existence for three years and is beginning to develop the depth of collaboration needed to ultimately commit resources and alter existing policies.

Creating the identity of the VA Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA-HELP) has been an evolving process. Members have worked to establish themselves as a statewide consortium of stakeholders concerned with creating change for students with disabilities in

higher education. Developing a group identity has meant working through a process of defining the mission of the group, establishing how members will function as a group, determining how decisions will be made, and identifying outcomes that can be implemented and evaluated. To assist in the structuring of the group, five principles of collaboration as delineated by Melaville and Blank (1991) were used to develop a framework for establishing collaborative relationships.

1. Collaborative relationships are based on establishing partnerships between diverse stakeholders.

During the early stages of the group, it was determined that a diverse group of individuals was needed in order to cover the range of issues confronting students in higher education. These issues included secondary education preparation for and transition to college, access to post secondary education programs, and issues surrounding academic and support services while attending college. As a result the Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA-HELP) developed a consortium of stakeholders consisting of representatives from secondary education, advocacy groups, state agencies, faculty and disability services coordinators from two and four year public universities and colleges, as well as private colleges. Agency members include the State Council on Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), the Virginia Department of Education (DOE), VA Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DDHH), VA Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), VA Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS), and the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). The group also has two visiting representatives from the Office of Civil Rights.

2. Collaborative groups establish common goals to guide their activities.

Initially when the group was first established, four specific activities were identified for the group to discuss based on national and state legislative initiatives. The activities included the requirements that each university or college establish guidelines for documenting a disability and the need for more uniform guidelines among colleges and universities, the development of an interagency agreement template for use between the Department of Rehabilitative Services and institutions of higher education, data collection requirements of disability support services offices established by the Virginia state legislature, and information access for individuals with visual impairments as created in a bill by the state legislature for information technology access.

As the first year of the group progressed, members felt a need to examine the overall structure of the group. The members wanted to establish broader principles to direct their current activities, and to use when defining future endeavors. As a result, the VA-HELP members devoted one meeting a year to discuss their mission statement and to examine the group's structure, outcomes, and areas of focus. The mission statement for the group has remained the same for the past two years. The group's mission reads: "the Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners is a consortium of stakeholders collaborating on issues of mutual concern pertinent to the enhancement and accessibility of postsecondary education for students with disabilities."

3. Collaborative activities are jointly planned, implemented and evaluated by the group.

The group's structure has essentially remained the same since its inception. Members may rotate off of the group at the beginning of each year with recommendations from the group for new members to invite. The group votes by consensus on the areas of focus, and decisions on disseminating information or documents are also done by consensus. The group maintains three small working groups, which serve as the Participatory Action Teams (PAT) for the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports. The National Center is interested in using a participatory action team approach to enhance the involvement of stakeholders in identifying issues in higher education, and conducting research or other activities to address these issues.

The PAT groups in the VA-HELP consortium develop action plans that establish the specific activities of the small group, persons responsible for completing tasks, timelines for completion, and outcomes of the activities. Individuals are designated in the small groups to conduct evaluation of their activities. Evaluation activities typically involve asking individuals who are impacted by the products created by the VA-HELP members about the usefulness of the information or materials developed.

The plans that are developed by the small groups are updated each meeting to keep all of the members informed on the progress of each group. All of the members meet as a large group to discuss the activities of the small groups, inform other members of activities that are being sponsored by state agencies, universities or colleges. The large group also invites speakers to discuss research that is being conducted in Virginia on students with disabilities in higher education, legislative initiatives, or university/college programs that are successfully meeting the needs of students.

4. Participants of collaborative groups commit resources to achieve the mutually identified vision for system wide change.

The process of committing resources has begun to evolve as the trust and working relationships of the members have grown. The resources that are committed have been designated for a specific product developed by the group or a conference that would benefit that work of the consortium members. Some examples include the VA Department of Education committing resources to print a college resource guide that provides updated information on disability related services and supports, and documentation information that each college/university requires. Another example is the sponsoring of professional state conferences. The Department of Rehabilitative Services co-sponsored a state conference on students with disabilities in higher education to enable disability service coordinators, DRS representatives, and other interested professionals the opportunity to attend the meeting.

5. Collaborative groups delegate individual responsibilities to group members to fulfill the endeavors of the group.

The VA-HELP members have created a structure that insures the active involvement of each participant. As described earlier, the use of small working groups has been an effective method for identifying specific activities to meet the goals established by the consortium, assigning tasks to each member, creating a timeline for completing these tasks,

and identifying outcomes or products that will be used to disseminate the results to other universities and colleges in Virginia and nationally.

Outcomes

The VA-HELP consortium has worked very hard to identify specific outcomes that will be achieved each year. Described below are some of the outcomes already achieved by the group, and activities that the group has been working on for the current year.

Interagency Cooperative Agreement. An interagency cooperative agreement was developed between higher education and vocational rehabilitation as a result of the 1998 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This legislation directed states to specify agency financial responsibility, conditions, terms, and procedures of reimbursement, procedures for resolving agency disputes, and the coordination of service procedures for vocational rehabilitation clients who were attending post secondary schools.

Through review of a survey by Virginia Association on Higher Education and Disability and statistics from the Department of Rehabilitative Services, it was found that interpreter and CART costs were by far the most expensive accommodations for university budgets and would be targeted in the first cooperative agreement. The VA-HELP consortium designed a cooperative agreement template and piloted at a university before finalizing it. After the template was approved, it was decided that one blanket cooperative agreement would be signed between the Virginia Community College System, Department of Rehabilitative Services, and the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired. It was also determined that four year universities would develop and sign their own agreements.

Documentation Guidelines. The purpose of this small work group was to draft a document that provides consistency in guidelines for disability documentation and determination for Virginia institutions of higher education. It was determined that these guidelines were needed by colleges/universities (both 2 and 4 year) and high schools to help make a smooth transition for students with disabilities.

The group collectively reviewed available documentation guidelines from various 2 and 4 year institutions and also national best practices, including AHEAD's Learning Disabilities Guidelines, ETS's Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Guidelines, and ETS's Psychiatric Disabilities Guidelines. A document was developed and eventually reviewed by visiting representatives from the Office of Civil Rights.

The current activities of the VA HELP consortium are as follows:

- A Transition PAT is currently focusing on the review of Virginia's Education College Selection Guidebook for Students with Disabilities, Their Parents, and High School Staff. The guidebook is out for review by secondary school personnel, students with disabilities and their families. Once the comments have been reviewed and incorporated into the final draft, Virginia Department of Education will provide hard copies of the guidebook and post it on their web site.

- A Retention PAT is developing a survey to conduct with disability services coordinators across the state to determine the type of information they collect on the retention of students with disabilities and how this information is used. This information will be disseminated to all colleges and universities in order to begin working on methods for collecting information to share with the state legislature concerning the numbers of students with disabilities attending Virginia colleges and universities and the support needs of these students. The Retention PAT sees a two-step process in collecting information. The first survey will provide an overall picture of the type of information that is being collected by disability support services offices, and the second phase will consist of a series of focus groups across the state on how information can be collected and disseminated.
- The Documentation PAT is continuing with dissemination efforts of the Documentation Guidelines by identifying key agencies, professional associations, and individual practitioners across the state that would benefit by having these guidelines. Further discussion is occurring regarding the best training and dissemination method for each organization. A power point presentation has been developed and piloted at a statewide conference. This sub-committee is planning on developing a brochure to explain VA-HELP and the documentation guidelines. In addition to this, all represented schools in the group will be asked to post the documentation guidelines on their web site.

Conclusion

The formation of a statewide consortium to work on issues and concerns related to educating students with disabilities in higher education has taken the time and dedication of each member. There is still a great deal of work that needs to be done. The members continue to work on building visibility among the colleges and universities in Virginia, and defining the role of the VA-HELP consortium in the higher education system. The ultimate goals of committing resources to achieve outcomes and change existing policies are still in the early stages of development. The commitment of resources has begun to occur around specific products developed by the work group. However, further work is needed to evaluate the impact the group's collaborative relationships have had on changing existing policies or practices. The VA-HELP members plan on evaluating the use of the documentation guidelines that were developed by the group and disseminated to colleges and universities across the state. The consortium is interested in learning what schools have adopted these guidelines and the impact the guidelines have had on providing services to students. Another area of evaluation will be to determine the effectiveness of the interagency agreement developed for higher education institutions and the Department of Rehabilitative Services and the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired

It is critical that further research be conducted on the effectiveness of collaborative relationships in higher education. Research activities need to cover all areas of collaboration including the sharing of resources and information on college campuses, collaborative structures between universities and community agencies, and statewide collaborative relationships through such groups as VA-HELP consortium. Without empirical data on the impact and effectiveness of these relationships, the key elements for

establishing collaborative relationships will not be substantiated (Scott, 1996). Higher education is in need of these data to replicate effective collaborative relationships or structures to enhance the educational experiences of students with disabilities.

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