

**POSTSECONDARY SUPPORTS
FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

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ABSTRACT

During the last two decades, postsecondary supports for students with disabilities have increased dramatically. Until recently, however, research has not been conducted to identify critical elements of postsecondary supports necessary to provide equal access for students with disabilities. Milestones in the development of postsecondary services and the implications of recent research on productive components of postsecondary supports will be presented. Programmatic and instructional supports appropriate to foster self-determination and provide equal opportunity for students with disabilities will be discussed.

Over the last several decades, students with disabilities have made significant strides to fulfill their expectation to be fully integrated into adult life. In fact, they have the same life objectives (i.e., business success, community participation, and economic security) as students without disabilities (Henderson, 2001). National, state and provincial laws have provided access to a public school education. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities have received special education services that have supported academic development. The implementation of the concepts of mainstreaming, least restrictive environment and inclusion combined with formal transition planning activities foster high school completion and expectation for postsecondary education (Brinckerhoff, McGuire & Shaw, 2002). The percentage of full-time college freshmen with disabilities increased from 2.3% in 1978 to 9.8% in 1998 (Henderson, 1999). Now, the challenge for both postsecondary students with disabilities and the professionals who provide postsecondary supports is to assure that access really means opportunity.

Current Realities Regarding Postsecondary Supports

Although postsecondary supports for students with disabilities have been more available in recent years, little research has addressed the planning and organization of these services (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen & Yahaya, 1989; Sergent, Carter, Sedlacek & Scales, 1988; Shaw, McGuire & Brinckerhoff, 1994). Service providers have, therefore, been left to develop programming for their students based on little or no empirical evidence (Gajar, 1992). Many studies have called for a more systematic approach to service provision for students with disabilities (Hill, 1996; Sergent et al., 1988). Though the growth in services for these students likely indicates a sincere desire to meet the needs of this cohort, services must be “grounded in

theory or supported by evaluation data” (McGuire, Norlander, & Shaw, 1990, p. 71) in order to be most effective.

It is difficult to have a well-planned program if personnel are not appropriately trained. There are only three or four programs that actually prepare postsecondary disability personnel (Brinckerhoff, et al., 2002). Disability personnel typically receive training from the disciplines of counseling, law, social work, special education, higher education and rehabilitation and in most cases they have not been specifically focused on adult students with disabilities (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). It is not surprising that these professionals provide services based on their diverse personal background (e.g., I’m from rehabilitation so I’ll focus on physical accommodations or I’m a counselor so I’ll promote counseling supports). Schuck and Kroeger (1993) identified this problem noting “inconsistent services are a significant problem in higher education programs for students with disabilities” (p. 60).

These diverse programs and supports have also been organized with the perception that the amount of support is the critical variable for success. Consumers (i.e., students with disabilities and their parents) have typically sought to access as many supports as possible from the “menu” of available services. Postsecondary disability services have, therefore, responded by promoting their efforts based on the number of supports offered to students. Too often these supports and policies foster dependence that has, unfortunately, overwhelmed the intention of providing not only a productive and successful postsecondary education, but one that would lead to graduation and employment (Cullen, Shaw & McGuire, 1996; Yost, Shaw, Cullen & Bigaj, 1994).

Successful adults with disabilities have consistently identified characteristics of self-determination as critical to success in both postsecondary and employment. This was demonstrated in the seminal research by Gerber & Reiff, (1991, 1994) regarding successful adults with learning disabilities that identified taking control, self-advocacy and reframing one’s disability as key to success in employment. It is proposed that implementing research-based supports that focus on postsecondary disability professionals and faculty fostering self-determination (Sarver, 2000) will enhance outcomes for students with disabilities.

Changing the Disability Supports Paradigm

Fostering Self-Determination

Given its importance for college students with disabilities, self-determination must be the prime directive for postsecondary disability personnel. Unfortunately, postsecondary personnel have often inadvertently adopted the dependence provoking behaviors typical in many elementary and secondary programs (Cullen, et al., 1996). Research indicates that “practices that promote dependence in students with LD are given more emphasis than strategies that foster independence and self-determination” despite the knowledge and desire of postsecondary personnel to do the opposite (Yost, et al., 1994, p. 638). Sarver (2000) has demonstrated that supports featuring self-determination are effective in improving outcomes for college students with disabilities. It is critical for personnel who work in college Offices for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and other college personnel (i.e., administrators and faculty) to focus on the long-term goals of developing self-determined adults.

Although varied in perspective, the definitions of self-determination tend to be consistent and complementary. Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer (1998) summarized the definitions by stating,

Self-determination is a combination of skills, knowledge and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior. An understanding of one’s strengths and limitations together with a belief in oneself as capable and effective are essential to self-determination. When acting on the basis of these skills and attitudes, individuals have greater ability to take control of their lives and assume the role of successful adults in our society. (p. 2)

Characteristics of environments that support self-determination include instruction in the development of self-determination, opportunities for choice and communication patterns that support self-determination (Field & Hoffman, 1996). It is important that postsecondary students be provided with the opportunity to receive instruction and support for the individual characteristics that lead to self-determination (e.g., self-awareness, goal setting and decision making, assertive communication, and negotiation). Students are not expected to develop content

area skills without specific instruction in those skills. In the same way, students cannot be expected to acquire the skills necessary for self-determination without instruction specifically targeted toward the development of those skills (Field, Sarver & Shaw, in press).

College students with disabilities must be afforded choices so they can learn to take responsibility for their own lives. Professionals should, therefore, seek to be the facilitator of the **process**, someone who provides support for the student to learn to navigate the system. The professional should offer information, ask questions, and foster reflection to help the student make choices and achieve personal goals (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward & Wehmeyer, 1998).

Responses by faculty and other school personnel to students actions affect the level of encouragement students feel to express themselves, initiate actions, and take risks as does the type of climate that exists within that setting (Field, Hoffman & Spezia, 1998). Institutions that develop a culture where positive relationships are promoted are also taking an important step toward fostering self-determination. Institutions that provide for positive communication patterns, such as an emphasis on listening, assertive communication, appropriate use of humor and win-win negotiation strategies, help to build and support the collaborative relationships that lead to greater self-determination (Field, et al., in press).

Students with disabilities need to have the availability of *supports that foster independence not dependence*. As noted above, too often dependence-provoking supports such as course waivers and substitutions not supported by assessment data and content tutoring that may have helped the student receive passing grades but not necessarily learn---have been provided (Cullen et al., 1996; Yost et al., 1994). It is important to acknowledge, however, that supports and accommodations requested by a student that meet a documented need and which enhance student learning can be productive. On the other hand, providing instruction in note taking or role-playing various scenarios where the student self-advocates to faculty, though more time-consuming, fosters independence and, possibly, reduction in the need for support services over time. Brinckerhoff, McGuire and Shaw (2002) suggest a guide for determining the efficacy of student supports is “that if students who have received disability services for several semesters function in the same dependent way as they did when they entered, close examination of the program’s philosophy and commitment to fostering independence is warranted” (p. 489). Field, Hoffman and Spezia (1998) emphasize that the needed supports for self-determination vary

greatly by the individual. Examples of individualized supports that are consistent with self-determination include activities such as providing students with information, listening as a student verbalizes his/or her plans, helping a student identify options, and asking questions that help students reflect on and learn from the self-determination process. The ADHD coaching process is an excellent model for encouraging these behaviors (Brinckerhoff, et al., 2002). David Parker (personal communication, November 30, 2002) indicates that coaching “views the student as the ‘expert’ and uses questions as the primary mode of interaction. These questions are designed to prompt the student to stop and engage in reflective planning”. Becoming familiar with the unique needs of each student is critical to designing meaningful student support. There also needs to be clear expectations for disability support services that encourage self-determination and delineate what consumers should expect in terms of postsecondary supports. The following section describes those minimum essentials.

Standards for Disability Support Services

Shaw and Dukes (2001) described three myths that seemed to characterize disability support services. The first myth was that state, provincial and federal laws were the determinants of disability services in the jurisdictions where they were promulgated. The second myth was that the differences in student characteristics, admissions policies and funding sources of postsecondary institutions require different approaches to service delivery. The third myth was that there is no single approach to disability services. This last myth was best described by Cox and Walsh (1998) who concluded that “What might be appropriate to implement in one institution might not be suitable in another” (p. 60). The research by Dukes (2001) demonstrated that these myths are *not* valid.

Dukes developed a 62-item survey to identify those service components postsecondary disability personnel consider essential for assurance of equal educational access for students with disabilities. A sample of 800 postsecondary disability service providers participated in the data collection with 563 (seventy percent) surveys returned. Twenty-seven minimum components of disability supports were identified that received overwhelming agreement across postsecondary institutions regardless of type of school (two- or four year), funding source (public or private),

location (U.S. or Canada), or admissions policy (open enrollment or competitive). These components were reviewed by the membership of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD), an international organization representing almost 2,000 postsecondary disability personnel, receiving almost unanimous approval as Program Standards for Disability Services in Higher Education (Shaw & Dukes, 2001). Let us review what these Standards tell us and don't tell us about disability supports.

The Program Standards indicate essential expectations for **all** postsecondary institutions in terms of minimum supports that must be available to provide equal access for students with disabilities. They do not limit institutions that wish to provide supports they think are necessary for their population of students (e.g., remedial coursework at a community college) or unique elements that they choose to provide (e.g., summer transition program or diagnostic services). However, there is now a benchmark to use when considering availability of appropriate supports, conducting a program evaluation, considering staff development needs or implementing program development. In addition, consumers now have a clear basis for determining the efficacy of program supports. The twenty-seven AHEAD Program Standards across nine categories are specified below.

To facilitate equal access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities, the office that provides services to students with disabilities should:

1) Consultation / Collaboration / Awareness

- a) Serve as an advocate for students with disabilities to ensure equal access.
- b) Provide disability representation on relevant campus committees (e.g., academic standards, policy development).

2) Information Dissemination

- a) Disseminate information through institutional publications regarding disability services and how to access them.
- b) Provide services that promote access to the campus community (e.g., TDD's, alternative materials formatting, interpreter services, adaptive technology).

- c) Provide referral information to students with disabilities regarding available campus and community resources (e.g., assessment, counseling).

3) Faculty / Staff Awareness

- a) Provide consultation with faculty regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, physical, and curriculum modifications.
- b) Provide consultation with administrators regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, physical, and curriculum modifications.
- c) Provide individualized disability awareness training for campus constituencies (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators).
- d) Provide feedback to faculty regarding general assistance available through the office that provides services to students with disabilities.

4) Academic Adjustments

- a) Maintain records that document the plan for the provision of selected accommodations.
- b) Determine with students, appropriate academic adjustments consistent with the student's documentation.
- c) Have final responsibility for determining effective academic accommodations which do not fundamentally alter the program of study.

5) Instructional Interventions

- a) Advocate for instruction in learning strategies (e.g., attention and memory strategies, planning, self-monitoring, time management, organization, problem-solving).

6) Counseling and Advocacy

- a) Assist students with disabilities to assume the role of self-advocate.

7) Policies and Procedures

- a) Develop written policies and guidelines regarding procedures for determining and accessing “reasonable accommodations.”
- b) Establish guidelines for institutional rights and responsibilities with respect to service provision (e.g., documentation of a disability, course substitution/waiver).
- c) Establish guidelines for student rights and responsibilities with respect to service provision (e.g., documentation of a disability, course substitution/waiver).
- d) Develop written policies and guidelines regarding confidentiality of disability information.
- e) Encourage the development of policies and guidelines for settling a formal complaint regarding the determination of a “reasonable accommodation.”

8) Program Development and Evaluation

- a) Provide services that are based on the institution’s mission or service philosophy.
- b) Coordinate services for students with disabilities through a full-time professional.
- c) Collect student feedback to measure satisfaction with disability services.
- d) Collect data to monitor use of disability services.
- e) Report program evaluation data to administrators.

9) Training and Professional Development

- a) Provide disability services staff with on-going opportunities for professional development (e.g., conferences, credit courses, membership in professional organizations).
- b) Provide services by professional(s) with training and experience working with college students/adults with disabilities.
- c) Adhere to the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) Code of Ethics.

(Shaw & Dukes, 2001, p. 84 & 85)

These Program Standards represent service components that are fundamental for assuring equal educational access for postsecondary students with disabilities. They establish parameters for essential services that institutions of higher education need to provide to meet the needs of students with disabilities. They provide direction to the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and other campus departments to identify which office in the institution is responsible for each Standard. The Program Standards are a research-based vehicle for professionals when helping their institutions provide all the necessary elements to effectively meet the needs of college students with disabilities. As noted previously, they also enhance the status of disability programs and personnel and clarify the responsibilities of higher education institutions for program development, staff development and program evaluation. They provide consumers with a baseline of what to expect from postsecondary disability services, a format for evaluating potential colleges, and a clear expectation of what may or may not be available (i.e., special classes, preferential treatment). These Program Standards in conjunction with the previously developed Professional Standards (Shaw, et al., 1997) and Code of Ethics (Price, 1997) give the field a firm professional base for what it should do, who they should be and how they should act. Another, often neglected, element of effective supports is the type of instruction provided to students by college faculty. The following section proposes a new approach to instruction.

A New Standard for Instruction

The primary means to assure equal access to instruction for college students with disabilities has been to provide modifications and accommodations. Although modifications and accommodations are often a necessary and appropriate means to provide access, they can foster a number of problematic dynamics, particularly for the growing number of students with hidden disabilities. Field, Sarver & Shaw (in press) have noted that,

It requires faculty to make time consuming and difficult modifications for individual students. It puts disability services personnel in the role of mediator between student and faculty. Most important, it forces students with disabilities to disclose their disability to faculty semester after semester, specify their disabilities/limitations and request “special” treatment (i.e., reasonable accommodations). Although access to accommodations is guaranteed under the law, it is a frustrating, embarrassing, unpleasant,

stigmatizing, and unending process for students with disabilities.

Stodden (2000) has identified similar concerns raised directly by students :

“Teachers and other students think I’m getting away with something when I’m given accommodations” (p. 11);

“I’ll be honest with you, if you’ve got a hidden disability, you might not want to be identified with us....it’s better to keep it hidden” (p. 12); and

“I had a professor who once went, ‘We want to accommodate certain people in here,’ being sarcastic, but I know he was talking about me” (p. 12).

These same students correctly note that college faculty need to learn different teaching approaches which would help all students not just students with disabilities (Stodden, 2000). An approach to instruction that seeks to overcome these problems is Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) that is described in detail by Scott, McGuire, and Shaw (in press). UDI is designed to anticipate the needs of diverse learners and incorporate effective strategies to make learning more accessible to a wide variety of students. The general concept of Universal Design (UD) includes a specific set of principles to systematically incorporate accessible features into a design instead of retrofitting changes or accommodations. As it is applied in the field of architecture, UD results in the creation of environments and products that are as usable as possible by a wide range of diverse individuals. Building on the framework of UD and its principles (Follette Story, Mueller, & Mace, 1998), Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) anticipates the needs of diverse learners and incorporates effective strategies into curriculum and instruction to make learning more accessible.

By adapting the principles of UD to reflect the instructional practices that have been acknowledged as effective with students with disabilities, a more inclusive paradigm for teaching emerges. UDI provides a conceptual framework for thinking about access and inclusion for diverse individuals. The framework consists of nine general principles (Scott, McGuire, & Foley, 2001) to guide faculty in thinking about and developing instruction for a broad range of students.

Principles of Universal Design for Instruction

| <i>Principle</i> | <i>Definition</i> | <i>Example(s)</i> |
|--|---|---|
| <u>Principle 1:</u> Equitable use | Instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities. Provides the same means of use for all students, identical whenever possible, equivalent when not. | Using web-based courseware products with links to on-line resources so all students can access materials, regardless of varying academic preparation, distance from campus, etc. |
| <u>Principle 2:</u> Flexibility in use | Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. Provide choice in methods of use. | Using varied instructional methods (lecture with a visual outline, group activities, use of stories, or web-based discussions) to support different ways of learning. |
| <u>Principle 3:</u> Simple and intuitive | Instruction is designed in a straightforward and predictable manner, regardless of the student's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Eliminate unnecessary complexity. | Providing a grading rubric for papers or projects to clearly state performance expectations. |
| <u>Principle 4:</u> Perceptible information | Instruction is designed so that necessary information is communicated effectively, regardless of ambient conditions or the student's sensory abilities. | Selecting text books, reading material, and other instructional supports in digital format so students with diverse needs can access materials through print or by using technological supports (e.g., screen reader, text enlarger). |
| <u>Principle 5:</u> Tolerance for error | Instruction anticipates variation in individual student learning pace and prerequisite skills. | Structuring a long-term course project with the option of turning in individual project components separately for constructive feedback and for integration into the final product. |
| <u>Principle 6:</u> Low physical effort | Instruction is designed to minimize nonessential physical effort in order to allow maximum attention to learning. <i>Note: This principle does not apply when physical effort is integral to essential requirements of a course.</i> | Allowing students to use a word processor for writing and editing papers or essay exams. |
| <u>Principle 7:</u> Size and space for approach and use | Instruction is designed with consideration for appropriate size and space for approach, reach, manipulations, and use regardless of a student's body size, posture, mobility, and communication needs. | Using a circular seating arrangement in small class settings to allow students to see and face speakers during discussion—important for students with attention problems. |

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| <i>Principle 8: A community of learners</i> | The instructional environment promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty. | Fostering communication among students in and out of class by structuring study and discussion groups, e-mail lists, or chat rooms. |
| <i>Principle 9: Instructional climate</i> | Instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive. High expectations are espoused for all students. | Creating a statement on the syllabus affirming the need for students to respect diversity, underscoring the expectation of tolerance, and encouraging students to discuss any special learning needs with the instructor. |

Note: Adapted from Principles of Universal Design for Instruction by Sally Scott, Joan McGuire and Stan Shaw. Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability, University of Connecticut. Copyright 2001.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and other legislation has fostered the application of universal design in architecture (i.e., providing curb cuts, ramps, doors that open automatically, elevators, wide doors, accessible bathrooms) so that all people, including those with physical disabilities, can access stores, schools and other facilities. Therefore, just as a student in a wheel chair needs **no** disability services in such a physically accessible environment, a student with a learning disability may not need disability services in an **instructionally accessible environment**. Such an environment will obviously foster student self-determination because options are available that allow the student to select personally productive approaches to learning.

It is recommended that disability personnel focus on effective instruction and self-determination for all students rather than just accommodations and modifications for students with disabilities. Efforts to improve campus instruction should be given as high a priority as providing physical access was in previous decades. Collaboration with personnel from the Faculty Resource Lab, the Learning Center, and Undergraduate/Academic Affairs Deans should become a priority (Brinckerhoff et al., 2002). The University of Connecticut is developing a web site (Facultyware.com) that will be available this fall to help faculty implement UDI.

Conclusion

It has been demonstrated that individuals who are self-determined are more successful in achieving their stated goals. A case has been presented that a focus on self-determination will help both postsecondary disability personnel and higher education faculty provide productive

supports and effective instruction to assist students with disabilities to successfully function in adult environments including postsecondary education and employment. If a campus-wide emphasis on fostering self-determination, fulfilling the Program Standards and implementing Universal Design for Instruction were undertaken, the research indicates that it would likely increase achievement and effectiveness across the campus, among staff and faculty as well as among students, both with and without disabilities.

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