

Research to Practice Brief

Promising Practices for Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education Programs

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Introduction and Statement of the Problem

Students with disabilities face many obstacles in postsecondary institutions, including negative attitudes by others, lack of knowledge about effective accommodations, and little experience with self-advocacy skills (Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2001). The Office of Postsecondary Education in the U.S. Department of Education has sponsored promising practices projects to help improve postsecondary educational programs and climates for students with disabilities. This brief summarizes a study that identified promising practices within these 21 projects (Izzo, et al.).

Description of Project and Findings

Izzo et al. (2001) reviewed promising practices that were being implemented across 21 projects that aimed to address the quality of postsecondary education for students with disabilities. Practices were deemed “promising” if they met five criteria:

1. The practice was well-grounded in theory;
2. The practice was supported empirically through studies that were internally and externally valid;
3. The practice had some underpinnings in existing literature;
4. The practice was associated with meaningful outcomes, and
5. The practice was socially valid.

The authors also conducted a focus group of ten students with disabilities that, along with the literature, helped to guide the selection of promising practices. Focus group members were asked questions such as, “From your experience, were faculty knowledgeable and understanding about common accommodations related to your disability?” and “What should the university administration, as a whole, do to better support students with disabilities?”

Table 1 describes promising practices in postsecondary education for students with disabilities identified within the 21 projects. They are categorized into three areas of improvement, including (a) practices that assess the climate of the institution, (b) practices that deliver professional development activities to administrators, faculty and students, and (c) practices that build capacity for institutional change.

Table 1: Promising Practices (Adapted from Izzo et al., 2001)

Assessing the Climate
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Focus groups, surveys, advisory committees <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Collect information from faculty and/or students to gain an understanding of their needs, frustrations, and recommendations for improving the teaching-learning climate for students with disabilities. Focus groups are usually conducted with 8-10 participants, who address questions together. Surveys are questionnaires on paper or the internet that students and/or faculty can fill out and return anonymously. Advisory committees, usually made up of a mix of invited potential users and supporters, give input to project staff on a more regular basis.
Professional Development for Administrators, Faculty and Students
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-site training such as workshops for faculty, administrators and teaching assistants (TA) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Conduct interactive workshops on topics identified as high interest and needed by faculty and administrators to convey in-depth information on instructional strategies, accommodations, resources, and supports to better teach students with disabilities. • Self-advocacy training for students <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Teach self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities to empower them to disclose/negotiate accommodations appropriately, thereby building a positive working relationship with faculty and improving the quality of their education • Technology-based training <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Provide information using an on-line format to increase faculty awareness of instructional strategies, accommodations, resources and supports for educating students with disabilities. Provide technology and training to students to improve their educational success. • Web accessibility and distance education <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Deliver training to faculty for making web-enhanced courses accessible to students with disabilities
Building Capacity for Institutional Change
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative directives <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Distribute written notices across campus that describe the policies, guidelines, and practices that enhance the education of students with disabilities • Student attrition/retention studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Create a database pertaining to student retention/attrition and compare/contrast retention figures among students in diverse groups and different programs

Table 2 shows the percentage of the 21 projects that were applying each practice.

**Table 2: Percent of reviewed projects (N=21) using selected promising practices.
(Adapted from Izzo et al., 2001)**

Function	Practice	Percentage of projects using the practice
Assessing the institutional climate	Focus groups	50%
	Surveys	43%
	Advisory committee	15%
Professional Development for administrators, faculty and students	On-site training for faculty	52%
	Student orientation or self-advocacy training	19%
	Technology-based training	100%
	Distance education	42.9%
	Web Accessibility	58%
Building capacity for institutional change	Administrative and faculty directives	33%
	Student retention studies	15%

Examples of Promising Practices: Two Case Studies

Creating an Accessible Learning Environment

Dr. Bruce W. Tuckman has created and directs a technology-enhanced motivation and learning strategies course that over 1000 students complete each year. Students spend the majority of their time in class completing assignments on-line. In an effort to improve the quality of the course for students with disabilities, Dr. Tuckman asked the disability specialist to conduct two focus groups: the first with students with disabilities, and the second for students without disabilities.

Based on feedback gained from both focus groups, Dr. Tuckman made several changes to his course. Previously, after students submitted their assignments they could not go back and review their work. During the focus group with students with disabilities, they explained that students with short-term memory deficits needed to review their previously submitted on-line assignments, in order to complete their current assignments. Although all of the course content on the web site was “Bobby Approved” – that is it was in an accessible format, students could not review previously submitted assignments. So the course was changed so all students could have access to all their submitted assignments. This proved to benefit both students with and without disabilities.

The second change that Dr. Tuckman made was to install Assistive Technology (AT) Programs in five computers within the computer lab. The most common AT Programs used on campus were installed and the instructors and teaching associates were invited to attend a training on the purpose and use of the AT Program.

Currently, when a student with a visual impairment or learning disability needs to use AT to access the course content, s/he has a variety of AT programs already loaded on the computers. The environment is already accessible so that all students have access to the course without retrofitting.

Teaching Students with Disabilities to Self-Advocate for their Accommodations

Jim met with a disability specialist prior to his first quarter at a two-year community college. Ms. Aaron, a disability specialist, met with Jim to explain both his rights and responsibilities as a student as well as the rights and responsibilities of the faculty. Ms. Aaron gave Jim a short information brief called the Fast Facts for Faculty – Rights and Responsibilities (see <http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/fastfact/rights.html>, October, 29, 2002). Because these information briefs were designed for faculty, Jim could give these to his teachers and instructors so they would have additional resource materials. Also, Jim gave his teachers Ms. Aaron's name and contact information so they could gain additional information from the appropriate office, if needed. Ms. Aaron explained:

- How the characteristics of Jim's disability effect his ability to learn;
- How accommodations can help Jim compensate for his auditory processing disorder. For example, he could use a notetaker to take notes during a lecture to assure that he had accurate notes of the lecture;
- How Jim needs to meet with his teachers within the first week of classes to explain why he needs accommodations and to suggest strategies to coordinate the accommodations.
- How Jim can encourage his teachers to meet with the disability specialist if teachers had questions or concerns that Jim could not address.

Ms. Aaron role-played these interactions with Jim several times so that he was comfortable discussing his need for accommodations with teachers. Sometimes she acted like a very skeptical teacher who questioned Jim's need for accommodations. Other times she acted like a teacher who wanted to over-accommodate Jim's disability by waiving the test or projects. Jim understood why neither scenario was acceptable – that he needed to meet the same standards as the other students.

Further research is needed to examine the effects of these practices on student outcomes. Practices that are linked with positive student outcomes (i.e. academic achievement, employment in a chosen field, satisfaction with quality of on-campus and post campus life) could then be widely applied and sustained beyond the demonstration phase in order to provide long lasting improvements in the postsecondary education of individuals with disabilities.

Innovative practices

Ohio State University Partnership Grant

<http://www.osu.edu/grants/dpg/index.html>

This project is involved in faculty development through publications, such as “Fast Facts for Faculty” brochures and training aimed at improving faculty awareness about students with disabilities, and creating an accessible syllabi and curriculum.

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DO-IT Program (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology)

<http://www.washington.edu/doi/>

DO-IT serves to increase the participation of individuals with disabilities in challenging academic programs and careers, such as science, engineering, business, and technology. It promotes the use of computer and networking technologies to increase independence, productivity, and participation in education and employment for students with disabilities.

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Web Resources

Center on Disability Studies, Research Rehabilitation and Training Center Web site
www.rrtc.hawaii.edu

The Office of Postsecondary Education under the U.S Department of Education:
Information for students and institutions on financial aid, postsecondary programs, OPE sponsored projects, etc. <http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/>

Suggested Reading

Brinkerhoff, L.C. (1994). Developing effective self-advocacy skills in college bound students with learning disabilities. *Intervention in School and Clinic, 29*, 229-237.

National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports. (2000). *Postsecondary education and employment for students with disabilities: Focus group discussions on supports and barriers in lifelong learning*. Honolulu, HI: University of Hawai'i at Manoa.

Wilson, K., Getzel, E.E., & Brown, T. (2000). Enhancing the postsecondary campus climate for students with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation, 14*, 37-50.

References

Izzo, M, Hertzfeld, J., Simmons-Reed, G., & Aaron, J. (2001). *Promising practices: Improving the quality of higher education for students with disabilities*. National Center for Postsecondary Educational Supports, Center on Disability Studies. Available on-line: [http://devtest.cds.hawaii.edu/rrtc/products/phaseII/pdf/022d\(1\)-H01.pdf](http://devtest.cds.hawaii.edu/rrtc/products/phaseII/pdf/022d(1)-H01.pdf)