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Students with Disabilities in Post-secondary Education

Introduction

In the 2007–2008 school year, 11% of all United States undergraduate students self-identified as having a disability (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2012). Community colleges are the primary avenue for participating in higher education for individuals with disabilities (Burke, Hedrick, Ouelette, & Thompson, 2008; Cory, 2011; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012). In 2008, approximately 45% of undergraduates with disabilities were enrolled at public two-year institutions, according to National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (Burke, et al.), and this number has increased to 60% in subsequent years (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012). In Illinois, nearly 12,000 students with disabilities attend community colleges annually (ICCB, 2012).

Students with disabilities who successfully complete college can expect careers and incomes comparable to students without disabilities (Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2012). Using longitudinal survey data, Newman et al. (2011) reported 44% of students with disabilities completed a community college program. Though this number is higher than the 22% graduation rate of the general population, it falls far short of the 60% college completion rate the Lumina Foundation has set for the nation to achieve by 2025 (Mertsolis, 2008). In a nation that is striving to increase academic outcomes, it is important to serve students with disabilities.

This brief provides an overview of the legal definition of a disability, as well as the legal mandates for postsecondary institutions to accommodate students with disabilities. It continues by discussing challenges faced by students with disabilities in terms of academic preparedness and institutional acceptance. Suggestions are offered for practitioners to assist students with disabilities to transition to and through postsecondary education.

Legal Mandates

What is a disability? Under the Amendments of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the definition of disability is “a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities” (ADA Amendments Act, 2008). This definition includes physical, emotional, and learning disabilities, and covers impairments that are “episodic or in remission” (ADA Amendments Act, 2008). The top five disability categories reported at community colleges are learning disabilities, emotional or psychiatric condition, orthopedic or mobility impairment, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, and health impairment (American Association of Community Colleges, n. d.).

The term “disability” is meant to be construed in the broadest sense and includes the need for auxiliary aids and services, modification of equipment or devices, and other similar services and actions. Other such services include note-takers, readers, recording devices, and sign-language interpreters (U.S. Department

of Education, Office of Civil Rights; U.S. DOE, 2011). It also includes academic adjustments such as changes in test conditions or different manners of information delivery (American Association of Community Colleges, n. d.). Test conditions must be changed as long as the changes do not fundamentally alter the examination or create undue financial or administrative burden (U.S. DOE, 2011). Institutions are not required to provide an academic adjustment that would alter the essential academic requirements (Cory, 2011) or make modifications that would result in undue financial or administrative hardship (U.S. DOE, 2011).

There are policies and programs established for students with intellectual disabilities that allow them to attend postsecondary education in a modified setting (Oertle, K. & Bragg, D., forthcoming), but the students addressed in this article are students with disabilities that have successfully earned their high school diploma or general educational development test (GED). These are students that require accommodations that do not alter the fundamental course or program content.

Academic Preparedness

In P-12 education, by law students with disabilities have to have an Individual Education Plan (IEP). These students are provided with help, accommodations, time, and resources. This is not the case for students with disabilities in higher education. Higher education is required to provide “reasonable accommodations” for students with disabilities (Wolanin & Steele, 2004, p. viii). These disabilities must be documented by a third party and students must provide proof of the needed accommodations (Cory, 2011). The process requires the students to understand their disabilities, strengths and weaknesses, and the functional limitations that result from their disability, as well as to be able to explain all of this to community college faculty and staff. This type of self-advocacy can be challenging for an individual who has had someone else advocate for them in the past; it may also require maturation that the student has not acquired yet.

The American Association of Community Colleges (AACC) conducted a national survey in 1996 with support from the U.S. Department of Education to gather information about students with disabilities and the range of disability support services in community colleges. That report found that only half of the community college students who reported having a disability used disability support services (Barnett, 1996). With 60% of college students with disabilities attending institutions with 2-year programs, this leaves a large population of students to whom accommodations are never delivered (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012).

For students with disabilities, as with all students, it is important to be academically prepared. Studies have shown that students with disabilities are not advised to take classes that meet college entrance requirements, and even when they take the college-preparatory curriculum, they do not receive the necessary modifications to help them be successful in the courses (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009 & Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza & Levine 2005). The National Council on Disability reports that those who do go on to college unprepared are more likely to have to take remedial courses and have lower grade point averages than their academically prepared peers (Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2003). These kinds of barriers can lessen students’ chances of successfully completing college and acquiring postsecondary credentials.

Institutional Acceptance

Once at college, students with disabilities can encounter a new set of difficulties. There can be lack of funding and staffing to address disability issues; lack of knowledge concerning their disabilities and how to address them; and erroneous beliefs and inadequate skills among professionals related to working with students with disabilities (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Some faculty do not know how to support these students, leading them to feel frustrated about not being accepted and understood by faculty and staff (Quick, Lehmann, & Deniston, 2003). Knowing how to effectively teach and support students

with disabilities can give instructors insights into improving pedagogy for all students (Garrison–Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Furthermore it is important for faculty to interact with students with disabilities in the classroom to understand where confusion or difficulties lie and improve their instructional approaches.

Participants in Garrison–Wade and Lehmann’s (2011) study articulated that networking and mentoring were important factors to college success. Further emphasizing these findings, in another study of 890 students with disabilities at 2–year institutions, 75% of students with disabilities did not persist to graduation (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2009). Of those non–completers, 73% never met with faculty members and 60% never participated in study groups during their first year of college. Only 6% to 13% reported they were involved in academic activities examined in the study.

What Practitioners Can Do

It starts in high school. For students with disabilities, a big factor in their successful transition from high school to postsecondary education is accurate knowledge about their rights (U.S. DOE, 2011) and being able to plan for their postsecondary experience while still in high school (Garrison–Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

High school personnel can help. Educators should work with students to provide a transition plan as well as identify and address the specific documentation requirements of the postsecondary school that the students will be attending.

Students need to learn self–advocacy. Students need to develop self–advocacy strategies and develop peer/teacher awareness. Postsecondary options come through focused training on self–advocacy; college visits and orientation activities; planning; and accommodations in community colleges.

Plan early. Educators should help students to determine what academics they need to master in high school to be prepared for college. Students should formulate goals for the future and plan what education is necessary to achieve their goals (Ankeny & Lehmann, 2011).

Continue on. Students with disabilities should be encouraged to start college immediately after high school because 67% of students who delay their enrollment for 1 year or more after finishing high school do not persist through the second year of college (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012).

Once at College

Adequately train staff and faculty. With the prevalence of students with disabilities enrolled in community college, faculty and staff need to know how to work with this student population. Many need training on behavioral strategies, building relationships with students, and other creative teaching techniques.

View disabilities as part of campus diversity. When campuses see disabilities as part of the diversity on campus, the disability is “situated in the culture and context” of the campus, rather than residing solely with the person who has the disability (Cory, 2011, p. 33). The issues faced by the student no longer become an individual’s problem but a systemic problem. Therefore, including disabilities in diversity conversations creates a more inclusive environment.

Get students involved on campus. Establish student networks to provide student–led support. This mentoring can come from other students with disabilities, as well as other students on campus. Students benefit from interactions with peers, faculty, and staff. These interactions create a sense of belonging (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2012).

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