Bridging the Gap: A Disability Services Perspective on Transition

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Abstract: The experiences of students with disabilities in making the transition to college have improved since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. However too many students with disabilities are still not adequately prepared for college due to varying levels of understanding of the differences in legal mandates and existing educational policies among school professionals, parents and students. This paper describes current conditions at the university level in one case and presents one university's efforts to address the difficulties and confusions of the high school to college transition for students with disabilities.

The problem

The National Council of Educational Statistics (NCES, 1999) reports that students with disabilities are attempting colleges at rates equal to their non-disabled peers, albeit taking longer to make the decision. According to the National Organization of Disabilities (NOD, 1999), the number of students with disabilities who graduate from high school has increased from 71% to 80% between 1986 and 1998. Similarly, the number of adults with disabilities between the ages of 18 and 35 attempting college has increased from 28% to 52% in the last decade. The HEATH Resource Center (the National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities, 1999) reports that in 1998, 9% of first time, full-time freshman entering college self reported a disability.

Students who have been a part of the special education system and have succeeded to the point of graduating from high school and attending college are understandably reluctant to see themselves as "lifers," needing continual and/or increasing assistance as they proceed with their education. Many have been taught that help is in short supply and that dependence on it is seen by some as a form of selfishness or weakness. They may be unaware of the system in place that guarantees their rights and link the absence of services as they move up through higher education with a political/economic decision on the part of institutions to reduce or constrain services. Still others may avoid services in college due to a lack of understanding of their own needs, either due to misdiagnosis or inadequate treatment, as is often the case with nonverbal learning disabilities or ADD_1. Those who consciously choose to "wait and see" how they do before seeking support services are often victimized by poor skills development.

Self-advocacy skills are specifically mentioned in the 1997 reauthorization of IDEA, but it is the rare student with a disability who has the opportunity to practice such skills before college. Many students with disabilities are well known in their high schools and the sort of "accommodations" that might be needed at college, e.g. extra time on tests, may be handled much more informally in high school. Further, the teaching of effective self advocacy skills requires a particular kind of professional knowledge which high school personnel may not, in fact, have such as intimate knowledge about each disability and the process of attaining accommodations at particular colleges. The one assumed constant, the law, is an ever-changing phenomenon that case law continues to define on an almost daily basis.

One University's experience

At West Chester University (WCU), the Office of Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSD) has almost 400 students with disabilities registered for support services and has experienced a 400% increase in Learning Disabled (LD) and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) students in the last five years. Despite this explosion in numbers, students with disabilities at WCU represent only 3% of the total student body. Applying the HEATH statistics referenced earlier would mean that another 700 students are still out there, unidentified in our larger student body, yet still in need of accommodations.

Most students with disabilities do not report in immediately as freshman either because they lack self-advocacy skills or because they confuse such advocacy with "using their disability as a crutch." Additionally, many students with disabilities are anxious about how their self-advocacy efforts will be received. In a 1995 survey we compiled at West Chester University, 80% of those students with disabilities surveyed reported that they had not contacted the DSS staff because of a fear of retribution from faculty if they did disclose. When they do report, they know little of the law or local policies and procedures that regulate the help they need. (Actually, in that same 1995 survey, we found that only a small number of students actually encountered difficulties upon disclosure.) Since that time, we have conducted dozens of faculty and staff inservices, and the climate for promoting self advocacy has clearly improved on campus. The job, then, is to better prepare students for getting their needs identified and met as early as possible in their college careers.

Starting in 1998, West Chester University introduced a series of initiatives aimed at helping entering students with disabilities bridge the gap between high school and college. The program targeted professionals at the high school level, parents, and high school students in their junior and senior years. The goals were threefold: 1) to inform high school professionals of the demands upon students with disabilities at the college level, 2) to educate parents of their rights in the transition process, and 3) to provide hands on experiences for students with disabilities, including contacts with and mentoring by college students with disabilities.

The first step in promoting better communication between the secondary and post-secondary level was to find a contact at the local high school or intermediate unit level. We held meetings with other state system universities and consortia of local two and four year colleges to discuss initiatives. Among these were college fairs for students with disabilities and their parents and presentations at state and national associations for K-12 special educators and advocates for

people with disabilities. In 1997, WCU received a TRIO Student Support Services grant that allowed us to extend the DSS support program of self-advocacy training, strategies tutoring, and academic coaching to 150 students. In 1998, we received a second grant directly focused on transition activities.

Meeting and establishing a working partnership with our local intermediate unit coordinator for transition was fortuitous. She had excellent contacts at the high school level and even some funding for publicity. Together we planned a series of activities and "get acquainted" meetings with community agencies and special education directors. With the help of a state grant, we hosted a day long seminar that brought in an expert on the law and its applications at the college level[2] to speak with administrators, school psychologists, teachers, parents, and students. The highlight of this event, however, was a panel of college students with disabilities who discussed their experiences, successes, and failures.

It is worth noting here that a survey of the transition literature reveals an emphasis on providing information about the process of applying to college or examining a particular college's services in book or text based formats. For example, Brinckerhoff cites Cowen (1993) as stressing the "extensive search" process requisite to a college or university quest and enumerates a number of essential skills that must be developed by students in order to assess the disability services described in popular college guidebooks.

Our WCU Transition program and related activities are unique to the extent that we provide students, parents, teachers, and disability services professionals with experientially based sessions in on campus sessions. For example, during some of our programs, high school students with disabilities visiting our campus sat in on college class sessions of interest to them. In this way, they viewed first hand the types of discourse and study they would be expected to participate in should they decide to matriculate at a place like West Chester University. This experience is qualitatively different and (the authors believe) more valuable than anything one might learn from reading the promotional materials provided by a given college to a guidebook company.

Feedback from participants was very helpful in identifying continued areas of misunderstanding so that we could design and conduct follow-up sessions. In particular, four areas of unresolved concern were articulated: the role of the special education teacher (in public schools) in informing parents of their rights; the need for parents to be informed of their rights in the transition process; the obligations of colleges to provide comprehensive and consistent guidelines for documentation; provision of more materials for parents about their rights and responsibilities under the law at the college level.

Follow up meetings at the Intermediate Unit were helpful in setting up a series of panel presentations with college students with disabilities serving as "ambassadors" during visits to high schools. These panels also helped in the recruitment of summer transition students for the college. Working together, the university team set up another seminar aimed at parents and students.

The focus of this day long workshop was to provide attending students with a primer on disability rights, at the same time emphasizing the central importance of self-awareness and advocacy skills. For parents, our goals were threefold: to prepare them to advocate effectively for their children's' rights throughout the transition process; to update their documentation files; and to assist them in turning over control of the exercise of rights to their children who would need to exercise this control in order to succeed on the college level. As a result of these successful contacts and exchanges, we applied for and received a second grant to provide a continuation of the ambassadors program.

West Chester University has a well-established program of support for students with disabilities and to it we added a peer mentorship program. The state grant the University received supported the development of a formal association between the School of Education's Department of Special Education and the OSSD to offer mentorship opportunities between the college's Council on Exceptional Children group and students with disabilities to aid the transition of the latter students to the university. This new component of WCU's already existing student support services is aimed at making students with disabilities more informed and independent in seeking their rights at the college level.

The continuing disparity between state and federal laws overseeing the rights of students at the secondary and post secondary levels remains an obstacle to greater cooperation. We still have a long way to go to achieve the goals of the civil rights legislation that attempts to ensure students' with disabilities rights to an education or, as it plays out on the college level, equal access to higher education. As those in the field have become acutely aware, achievement of full access requires much more than curb cuts, established budgets, or designated office space.

Notes

1. According to Heiligenstein et al. (1999) in "Psychological and Academic Functioning in College Students with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder," "the impairments related to ADHD in college students have received little scholarly attention." This deficiency of scholarship is of great concern to DSS providers because, as Heiligenstein et al. argue, "understanding the pattern and development of academic impairment in ADHD is particularly important because most students . . . [do] not have apparent academic problems during childhood," that is, prior to college matriculation.

2. For this event, our speaker was Jane Jarrow, President of the consulting firm Disability Access Information and Support.

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