

Transition from Two-Year to Four-Year Institutions for Students with Disabilities

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Abstract: Acquiring a bachelor's degree is prerequisite to many career opportunities. Yet, students with disabilities in two-year colleges are often unsuccessful in making the transition to four-year schools. This study was undertaken to document the concerns of students with disabilities in two-year institutions of higher education as they transfer to four-year schools, the perceptions of faculty and staff members regarding the challenges these students face, and recommended steps that can be taken to improve the postsecondary outcomes of these transfer students. A survey was completed by, and focus groups were conducted with, postsecondary staff members. In addition, college students with disabilities were asked to complete a survey. Students with disabilities reported their concerns to include differences in disabled student services, the cost of programs, skills in self-advocacy, differences in social life, availability of educational accommodations, access to technology, and the transfer process. Postsecondary staff reported some of the challenges faced by transfer students to be adjusting to the differences in academic requirements and support services, having poor study and self-advocacy skills, securing financial support, working through the transfer process, and adjusting to a larger, less personal environment. This study also reports suggestions from postsecondary staff about how two-year and four-year colleges can work separately and together to improve the postsecondary outcomes of transfer students with disabilities.

Introduction

People with disabilities continue to be less successful in employment, postsecondary education, and residential independence than their non-disabled peers (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Although progress has been made in increasing the representation of people with disabilities in challenging college and employment fields, a simple answer to the question of whether individuals with disabilities are successfully crossing the bridge into adulthood is, "not as well as they could be" (Sitlington & Frank, 1990, p.110). The availability of adaptive computer technology, coupled with the widespread use of information technologies, opens doors for individuals with disabilities who are prepared to contribute in the information age. The success of some individuals with disabilities in fields where they have been under represented suggests

there is potential to significantly increase the representation of this group in challenging fields. However, many of these opportunities are available only to those with a baccalaureate degree. Overall, the unemployment rate of adults who dropped out of high school is almost twice that of high school graduates. Similarly, the rate of unemployment for high school graduates is more than twice that of college graduates (Murphy & Welch, 1989). Successful completion of postsecondary education can be a crucial step in the transition to autonomous, satisfying adulthood for people with disabilities (Lange & Ysseldyke, 1993).

Fewer individuals with disabilities enroll in postsecondary institutions than those without disabilities. The majority of students with disabilities who participate in postsecondary education of any type enroll in two-year (community and technical) colleges and fewer eventually earn bachelors degrees than their non-disabled peers. Specifically, two years after high school, 63% of students with disabilities have enrolled in some form of postsecondary education compared with 72% of students without disabilities. Of those enrolled in postsecondary education, 42% of students with disabilities and 62% of those without disabilities are enrolled in four-year schools. After five years, 53% of students with disabilities and 64% of those without disabilities have attained a degree or certificate or are still enrolled. Of the students with disabilities, 16% have earned bachelor's degrees and 25% have earned associate's degrees or vocational certificates. Of the students without disabilities, 27% have attained bachelor's degrees and 25% have earned associate's degrees or vocational certificates (Horn & Berktold, 1999). Clearly, postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities are not as positive as for those without disabilities. This may be explained in part by the lower success rates of students with disabilities as they transition from two-year to four-year postsecondary institutions.

Postsecondary Support for Students with Disabilities

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA) prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in higher education. According to these laws, no "otherwise qualified" individual with a disability shall, solely by reason of his/her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity of a public entity. For qualified students who disclose their disabilities and present appropriate documentation, postsecondary institutions must provide reasonable accommodations to ensure that they have full access to program offerings (Frank & Wade, 1993; McCusker, 1995; West, Kregel, Getzel, Zhu, Ipsen, & Martin, 1993). Postsecondary schools have no legal obligation, however, to help students with disabilities transition from their institutions to other schools. Even so, educators and institutions typically define their roles with students more broadly in preparing them to succeed in future education and employment (Seigel & Sleeter, 1991). Two-year schools have a commitment to preparing students for adult life; a viable adult choice is to attend a four-year school. Concurrently, four-year schools want to recruit students who will be successful.

Disability-related legislation has promoted the creation of campus support services for students with disabilities. These offices assure that reasonable accommodations for classes and campus services are provided. Some disability service offices provide academic advising, tutoring, career planning, and/or college transfer services as well. The disability-related documentation required of students, the specific services offered, and the quality of those services vary greatly from

campus to campus (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen, & Yahaya, 1989). Although a number of guides to postsecondary education support services exist and campus resource information is increasingly available on the World Wide Web, it is difficult for students with disabilities to find accurate and complete information to determine which institutions are best for meeting their needs.

Student services tend to vary according to service goal priorities, size of institution, and specific degrees granted by the institution (Bursuck et al., 1989). Two-year institutions tend to provide more personalized services and a greater number of services to students with disabilities than four-year postsecondary institutions (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000a). In particular, two-year schools have been found to typically provide greater assistance to students with disabilities in the areas of academic accommodations, assistive technology, counseling, tutoring, and assessment (Cocchi, 1999). Two-year college students have expressed more satisfaction in terms of support services and physical access and have reported fewer barriers than four-year college and university students (West et al., 1993).

More than half of students with disabilities have reported that they are reasonably satisfied with campus support services. Some challenges they have reported are connected to services and accommodations related to their specific disabilities. For example, students with physical disabilities listed physical barriers while students with learning disabilities listed the limited availability of tutors as a challenge. Students with sensory impairments indicated a lack of assistive and adaptive equipment. Furthermore, lack of services or inadequate services, lack of awareness of services, lack of sensitivity from professors and school personnel, and social isolation were also reported as general barriers to postsecondary education for students with disabilities (West et al., 1993). Students with disabilities have suggested that services should be more coordinated, that administrative processes should be simplified and clarified, and that services should be focused on individual needs (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000b).

Determinants of Postsecondary Success

Pre-college school systems are required by law to provide a free and appropriate education for all students, identify the specific needs of students with disabilities, and develop individualized educational plans. Educators assume primary responsibility for delivering an appropriate education to children and youth at the elementary and secondary levels. Legislation and regulations require input from, and involvement of, parents in pre-college education. In contrast, in postsecondary educational settings, the primary responsibility for coordinating educational programming is transferred to the student (Milani, 1996; Norlander, Shaw, & McGuire, 1990). Postsecondary students must meet the entrance requirements of the institution, self-identify their disabilities to college staff, provide documentation of their disabilities, request desired services, and self-advocate when what they expect as an accommodation is different than what the institution considers reasonable. It is abundantly clear that college students with disabilities must have a greater understanding of their needs and stronger self-advocacy skills than pre-college students. As might be expected, the transition from institutional and parental responsibility and advocacy, to self-advocacy and personal responsibility is difficult for many students.

There are many similarities between the challenges faced by students with and without disabilities as they pursue college degrees. However, some challenges are disability-related. Variables that have been associated with employment and educational attainment include type of special education placement, manner of school exit (graduate or dropout), high school employment, reading and math levels, IQ, disability, family involvement, gender, high school vocational training, minority status, parental educational level, and socioeconomic status (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Fourqurean, Meisgeier, Swank, & Williams, 1991; Lange & Ysseldyke, 1993). Other variables that promote the success of students with disabilities relate to effective program administration, curriculum and instruction, support services, and formalized articulation and communication (Phelps & Hanley-Maxwell, 1997).

Some researchers have focused on factors that contribute to the college success of individuals with specific disabilities. For example, a body of research has identified factors that contribute to favorable outcomes for students with learning disabilities to include above average intelligence, strong verbal skills, a supportive family environment, effective pre-college instruction, one-on-one tutoring, effective study skills, and positive personal characteristics such as high motivation and persistence (Barga, 1996; Hartzell & Compton, 1984; Rogan & Hartman, 1990; Vogel & Adelman, 1990; Vogel, Hruby, & Adelman, 1993; Werner, 1989).

Transition from Two-year to Four-year Schools

The transition from two-year to four-year schools is a challenge for many students (Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Educational Testing Service, 2000). Little research documents the specific challenges students with disabilities face as they transition from two-year to four-year colleges. Anecdotal evidence suggests that some challenges they face are similar to those faced by their non-disabled peers; however others are related to their disabilities. For example, some students lack skills in self-advocacy and some have difficulty adjusting to the differences in services for students with disabilities offered at the two types of schools.

Overall, the best predictor of academic success at a four-year college for all transfer students has been found to be two-year college grade point average (Townsend, McNerny, & Arnold, 1993). Other characteristics that have been found to have a positive correlation with transfer success include a high level of course completion, full-time attendance, and traditional college age (Cohen, Brawer, & Bensimon, 1985; Zhao, 1999). Some students with disabilities who have transferred to four-year schools report that challenges they faced in making the transition related to a less supportive faculty, higher academic standards, and an increased sense of competition among all students at four-year schools (Townsend, 1993a, 1993b).

Little has been published about the ways that postsecondary institutions might assist students with disabilities as they transition from two-year to four-year schools. As service offerings are being planned at postsecondary institutions, it would be helpful for disabled student services staff to know specific challenges faced by transfer students with disabilities. If knowledge about successful institutional strategies was used to plan programs, the success rate of students with disabilities at four-year schools might be increased. This knowledge could lead to better services for students with disabilities who wish to transfer from two-year to four-year schools and, ultimately, to improved postsecondary and career outcomes for individuals with disabilities.

Research Questions

1. What are students with disabilities most concerned about when they are transferring from a two-year to a four-year postsecondary program?
2. What are the challenges faced by students with disabilities as they transfer from two-year to four-year institutions as perceived by postsecondary staff?
3. How can two-year and four-year institutions, separately and together, help students with disabilities successfully transition to four-year schools?

Methods

This study incorporated the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods to identify concerns and challenges for transfer students with disabilities. Qualitative methods were used to identify how staff and faculty at two-year and four-year schools can work to promote success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities who wish to transfer. A survey was used to assess student concerns in transitioning from two-year to four-year schools. This method provided the flexibility needed for this study because students were sometimes surveyed as part of a group and sometimes individually. Some participants, because of their disabilities, needed individual assistance in completing the survey. The survey method was also appropriate because the researchers were interested in soliciting individual concerns, not group input.

Focus groups of faculty and staff from postsecondary institutions were used to identify concerns and potential interventions that can be used to promote more successful student transfer. This qualitative method was selected because it provided an opportunity for participants to describe their experiences, provide examples, discuss policy and program options, and gain insights from their colleagues (Brodigan, 1992; Buttram, 1990; Morgan, 1988; Krueger, 1994). As participants spontaneously express their ideas in less structured environments, the information produced is often more candid, rich, and complete than that obtained in individual interviews or surveys (Bertrand, Brown & Ward, 1992; Byers & Wilcox, 1988).

Concerns of Potential Transfer Students with Disabilities

One hundred nineteen disabled students from twenty two-year and four-year colleges in Washington State were surveyed to assess their concerns when transferring from a two-year to a four-year school. Student participants were asked to indicate on a Likert scale from 1 (not important to me) to 5 (very important to me) the importance of specific transfer-related issues. They were also given a chance to respond to an open-ended question. The participants were located by project staff through phone contact with disabled student services coordinators on two-year and four-year college campuses throughout Washington State. Groups met for one to two hours in an informal, drop-in format. Students who participated were told about the project, given instructions on how to complete the survey, and then asked to complete the survey. When needed, assistance in filling out the survey was provided. Assistance consisted of reading survey items and/or recording responses. Participants outside of Washington were not included due to funding limitations.

Of the student participants in this study, 53% were female and 46% were male. The average age was 34 years, with the youngest person surveyed age 17 years and the oldest age 73 years; the most common age reported was 21 years. Also, 83% attended school full-time. In comparison with 1997 national statistics, the ratio of females to males was very similar; nationally, approximately 56% of students in higher education are female and 44% are male (National Center for Education Statistics, 2000). However, the most common ages of postsecondary students in 1997 were 18 and 19 (21%) (National Center for Education Statistics).

Challenges Faced by Transfer Students with Disabilities and Campus Support Strategies

A survey was sent to 2,404 postsecondary institutions in the United States that were included in the Higher Education Publications (HEP) database of postsecondary institutions. Two-year schools were sent 965 (40%) of the surveys and 1439 (60%) were sent to four-year schools. The surveys were mailed to postsecondary schools with enrollments of 1,000 or more, and envelopes were addressed to "Disabled Student Services." The survey instrument asked respondents to rate challenges faced by two-year college students, using a Likert scale from 1 (not very significant) to 5 (very significant). Items included on the list were developed after personal interviews with disabled student services staff and after analyzing the results of a pilot study in which 22 surveys were collected from Washington State disabled student services officers.

Three hundred fifty one people (15%) responded to the survey of disabled student services staff. Two-year institutions completed 38% of the returned surveys and 56% were completed by four-year institutions; 6% of the respondents selected "other" as their type of postsecondary institution. This mix of two-year and four-year schools was very similar to that of the original mailing, where 40% of the surveys were sent to two-year and 60% were sent to four-year institutions. Respondents reported that they provided services to an average of 214 students with disabilities.

The disabilities of these students were reported as follows:

- Learning disabilities or attention deficit 50%
- Mobility or orthopedic impairments 11%
- Health impairments 11%
- Psychiatric disabilities 11%
- Hearing impairments 5%
- Blindness and visual impairments 4%
- Other impairments 7%

This breakdown is similar to national statistics. In a recent study (Lewis & Ferris, 1999) the number of postsecondary undergraduate students identified as having disabilities in the United States was 428,280, representing 6% of the student body. The types of disabilities reported by these students were:

- Learning disabilities 46%
- Mobility or orthopedic impairments 14%

Health impairments 12%
Mental illness or emotional disturbance 8%
Hearing impairments 6%
Blindness and visual impairments 4%
Speech or language impairments 1%
Other impairments 9%

To further assess challenges faced by students with disabilities, as well as measures two-year and four-year schools can take to help two-year students with disabilities successfully transition to four-year schools, twenty-one faculty and staff from seven postsecondary institutions in Washington State participated in focus groups. Responses were used to supplement the ideas submitted by survey respondents and provide suggestions for interventions in a mutually stimulating environment. Four meetings of less than two hours each took place across Washington State. Focus group participants outside of Washington were not included due to funding limitations. Of the participants, nine were disabled student services staff, two were faculty, and ten were other staff and administrators. Twelve of the participants were from two-year schools and nine were from four-year schools. Participants were selected so that, in total, a diverse set of geographic locations, institutional characteristics, and professional positions were represented. Staff members who provide support services to postsecondary students with disabilities conducted the focus groups.

Results

This study identified concerns and challenges for transfer students with disabilities and suggestions for ways that two-year and four-year schools can work separately and together to promote success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities who wish to transfer from two- to four-year institutions.

Concerns

Students rated their concerns in transferring from a two-year to a four-year institution using a Likert scale of 1 (not important to me) to 5 (very important to me) and in a separate open-ended question. The results are summarized in Tables 1 and 2.

Table 1: Concerns of College Students with Disabilities Regarding the Transfer from Two-Year to Four-Year Schools

Concern of Students Average Rating

Cost of the program 4.4
Skills in self-advocacy 4.1
Differences in social life (making new friends) 4.0
Availability of educational accommodations 3.9
Access to technology 3.9
Differences in academic requirements (keeping up with other students academically) 3.7
Availability of tutors 3.4

Table 2: Most common responses to the open ended question

Concern of Students % of Respondents

Differences in disabled student services 24%
Inadequate financial support 21%
Transferring process 16%
Housing/transportation 11%
Differences in academic requirements 7%

Disabled student services staff survey respondents rated the challenges faced by transfer students with disabilities using a Likert scale from 1 (not very significant) to 5 (very significant). The results are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3: Challenges Faced by Postsecondary Students with Disabilities According to Disabled Student Services Staff

Factor Average Rating

Unprepared to address the differences in academic requirements 3.9
Poor study skills 3.7
Inadequate pre-college academic preparation 3.6
Lacks skills in requesting accommodations and in self-advocacy 3.6
Lack of role models and mentors with disabilities 3.5
Inadequate financial support 3.5
Difficulty in adjusting to the differences in support services 3.5
Difficulty in adjusting to the differences in social life 3.4

Postsecondary faculty and staff participating in focus groups reported that challenges faced by students with disabilities transferring from two-year to four-year institutions include:

- * Moving away from home.
- * Understanding and working through the transfer process.
- * Securing financial support.
- * Meeting the admissions requirements and academic standards of four-year institutions.
- * Adjusting to differences in disability documentation requirements and the disability-related services offered.
- * Adjusting to a larger, less personal environment.

Campus Support Strategies

Focused discussions of faculty and staff resulted in a list of suggestions for increasing the success rate of students with disabilities as they transition from two-year to four-year schools. Participants suggested that staff from four-year institutions can:

- * Make sure that campus recruiters, admissions staff, and academic counselors are knowledgeable about disabled student services.
- * Include information about services for students with disabilities in all general student orientations and tours, student handbooks, and other publications and programs.
- * Attend two-year college career/transfer "fairs" to share information about services and programs for students with disabilities. Recruit students with disabilities from two-year schools.
- * Make sure two-year college staff are aware of relevant programs and events.
- * Assign someone within the disabled student services office to specifically work with transfer students.
- * Educate faculty and staff members about disability and transfer issues, accommodation strategies and resources.
- * Create a summary sheet of intake and documentation requirements for all state schools and standardize if possible.
- * Address campus access issues (e.g., dorm rooms, transportation, technology) proactively.
- * Make disabled student services more visible. Create a publication and World Wide Web pages with procedures and campus map/overview.
- * Offer orientation sessions specifically for students with disabilities.
- * Simplify administrative processes when possible.

Participants suggested that staff from two-year institutions can:

- * Become more familiar with four-year colleges' policies, procedures, programs, and services (this includes disabled student services and other campus staff).
- * Educate faculty and staff members about disability and transfer issues, accommodation strategies, and resources (e.g., new faculty orientations).
- * Share information about transfer strategies and steps using publications and the World Wide Web.
- * Assure documentation used is acceptable to most four-year schools and give each student a copy of his or her disability documentation to take to four-year schools.
- * Provide academic and career counseling to students with disabilities including how obtaining four-year degrees might support their goals. Encourage transfer students to select four-year schools early and help them make good choices. Help students develop transition plans and work through the transfer process (e.g., how to fill out financial aid forms). Help students develop self-advocacy skills.
- * Arrange visits to four-year schools for students with disabilities so they can learn about services, sit in on classes, talk to faculty, and meet other students with disabilities.

Participants suggested that, to help two-year college students successfully transfer to a four-year school, two-year and four-year schools can work together to:

- * Visit each other's campuses to become more aware of campus climate, program offerings, and services.
- * Develop a cooperative relationship between disabled student services offices, coordinate activities, cooperate and follow through, and share resources.
- * Coordinate acceptance of disability-related documentation.
- * Create a state/regional advisors group of faculty, staff and students from two-year and four-

year schools to advocate for transfer students with disabilities and discuss program and policy issues.

- * Co-sponsor transfer fairs that include disabled student services information.
- * Coordinate campus visits between two-year and four-year schools for students with disabilities.
- * Facilitate contact between two-year and four-year students with disabilities and coordinate peer mentoring.
- * Develop a "handoff" system for students with disabilities whereby staff working with a student at a two-year school works closely with the staff member at the four-year school who will become the key contact person for that student.

Discussion and Future Research

When ranking concerns about transferring to a four-year school and listing concerns in an open-ended format, students with disabilities reported the cost of the program and adjusting to the changing disabled student service offerings to be of greatest concern, respectively. They also reported skills in self-advocacy, differences in social life, availability of educational accommodations, access to technology, and working through the transfer process in general as concerns.

Postsecondary staff reported in surveys and focus groups some of the challenges faced by transfer students to be adjusting to the differences in academic requirements and support services, having poor study and self-advocacy skills, securing financial support, working through the transfer process, and adjusting to a larger, less personal environment. Some of these concerns and challenges (e.g., financial concerns, differences in academic requirements) are consistent with concerns and challenges reported by transfer students in general (e.g., Cohen & Brawer, 1996; Townsend, 1993a, 1993b). Others (e.g., differences in disabled student service offerings, availability of educational accommodations) are specifically related to disabilities.

The results of this study include specific suggestions for how two-year and four-year colleges can work separately and together to improve the postsecondary outcomes of transfer students with disabilities. Postsecondary staff came up with many suggestions for easing the transition of two-year college students with disabilities to four-year schools. They include having staff from each type of institution become more familiar with other colleges' policies, procedures, programs and services, educating faculty and staff on both types of campuses about disability and transfer issues, standardizing or coordinating policies about acceptable disability-related documentation, having staff from four-year institutions attend two-year college career/transfer fairs to share information about services and programs that are available on their campuses, having four-year schools host separate orientation sessions for students with disabilities, including transfer information for students with disabilities in general and disability-related publications, orientations, and Web sites, working together to develop handoff systems for individual students with disabilities, and coordinating campus visits between two-year and four-year students with disabilities.

Caution should be exercised in generalizing these results because of the usual limitations of survey research and focus groups. Additional limitations are introduced by the low response rate

obtained in the nation-wide survey of disabled student services staff. In addition, all students who were surveyed and staff members who participated in focus groups were from Washington State and not randomly selected. Therefore, they do not provide representative samples from institutions of higher education in Washington State or the nation.

Overall, this study suggests that two-year and four-year student support staff could do more to ease the transition for postsecondary students with disabilities. Further research on the topic of transition from two-year to four-year institutions for students with disabilities could help to evaluate current transition support practices with a goal of improving them and, ultimately, lead to more successful academic and career outcomes for people with disabilities. For example, all of the research conducted in this study was a form of self-report which has well known limitations. In future research, it might be possible to do more direct observation of interactions between students with disabilities and their service providers at two-year and four-year institutions. Analysis of the relationships between the types of resources available to students with disabilities and patterns of success in persisting to graduation would be another useful approach.

This study suggests the following questions for further research.

1. How and when can skills such as self-advocacy, requesting accommodations, study/time management/organization best be taught to students with disabilities and does such skill development improve the success rate of students with disabilities transitioning from two-year to four-year schools and, ultimately, completing four-year degrees?
2. Can a state-wide or regional system of standardized intake, documentation, and basic accommodation strategies lead to higher success rates of students with disabilities transitioning from two-year to four-year schools and ultimately, completing four-year degrees?
3. What are the specific knowledge, skills, and personal characteristics of students with disabilities who successfully transfer from two-year to four-year institutions?

Conclusion

Students with disabilities in two-year colleges face challenges as they transition to four-year schools. Some are similar to those faced by their non-disabled peers (e. g., changes in academic requirements, poor study skills, and inadequate financial support). Some challenges, however, are related to their disabilities. For example, some students lack skills in self-advocacy while others have difficulty adjusting to the differences in disabled student services between the two types of schools. To improve the postsecondary outcomes and career outcomes for people with disabilities, staff members at both two-year and four-year schools should take action to make their campus services more supportive of this important transition. Both students and staff members from two-year and four-year campuses could begin by visiting each other's campuses to become more aware of campus climate, program offerings, and services. Two-year and four-year schools should develop a cooperative relationship between disabled student services offices, share resources, and consider creating a state or regional advisory group of faculty, staff, and students to address programmatic and policy issues. Such actions can lead to higher levels of postsecondary and career success for people with disabilities.

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Transition from Two-Year to Four-Year Institutions for Students with Disabilities offers extensive discussion of the differences in supports provided at two-year and four-year institutions through the use of a good focus group format coupled with good research questions. The article provides a helpful section on the "predictors of success" for students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions while also providing good suggestions for increasing success rates on campus.