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Serving Students with Disabilities:
Reflections of a Community College Teacher

Robert C. Johnson, Ph.D.
Kapi'olani Community College

Kapi'olani Community College in Honolulu, where I teach Speech, is one of seven community colleges that, with an Employment Training Center, make up the University of Hawai'i Community College (UHCC) system. Unlike many community colleges, which have local or district control, the UHCC system is part of the statewide University of Hawai'i System. Governance of the community colleges is centralized under the Chancellor of Community Colleges who is also Senior Vice President of the University. Each campus has its own Provost. Ultimate governance of the University System rests with a Board of Regents. The state's governor appoints the Regents.

In this article, I discuss my college and service to students with disabilities. I also include stories of three students with disabilities who have taken my classes. These stories show that, even in a school that is committed to serving students with disabilities, success can hinge not only on how accurately a school and its teachers perceive a student's disabilities but on how willing a student is to ask for and use the help available. The stories also show that students whose disabilities seem to preclude them from succeeding in academic courses can, with sufficient internal motivation and appropriate external support, do exceedingly well.

Open Admissions and Emphasis on Diversity

Hawai'i's community colleges are "open door" institutions and impose few restrictions on admission. Admission is open to any graduate of a U.S. high school or anybody else who is 18 years old or older.¹ With such a broad admissions policy, the community colleges attract a large diversity of students, with a wide range in ages, academic preparation, ethnic groupings, and educational goals. Demographic tables for Kapi'olani Community College (the focus of this article) show that its nearly 7,000 students belong to at least 15 ethnic groups. In addition, about 300 international students at this college come from more than 30 countries.²

The strategic plans and mission statements of the individual community colleges and the Chancellor's office emphasize "diversity." For example, the current strategic plan for Kapi'olani CC states as one of its four goals to "champion diversity."³ The same words appear in the school's academic development plan.⁴ A similar note sounds in the Chancellor's strategic plan for the UHCC system. That plan speaks of "championing diversity and respect for differences" and providing "universal access." The plan also states that one of the missions of the community colleges is to "broaden access to higher education in Hawai'i."⁵

While the goals in these mission statements and strategic plans are general, none of the documents mentioned above contains the word "disability." Indeed, the diversity that is to be "championed" at Kapi'olani CC, according to its strategic plan and academic development plan, is cultural diversity found specifically in its emphasis on Hawaiian, Pacific Island and Asian programs.⁶ And in the UHCC strategic plan, the "broadened access to higher education in Hawai'i" is to enable "traditionally disadvantaged adults" and "any high school graduate or adult aged 18 or older" to enter quality educational programs within his or her community.⁷ While such general statements emphasizing cultural diversity do not signal an absence of attention to persons with disabilities, the lack of references to disabilities indicates that improving service to persons with disabilities was not thought to be a goal significant enough to mention when these plans were developed.⁸

Policies of Nondiscrimination

Nevertheless, the UHCC system and the University of Hawai'i do broadcast a clear policy of nondiscrimination for persons with disabilities. For example, inside the front cover of Kapi'olani CC's 2000-2001 catalog is the following statement: "It is the policy of the University of Hawai'i to comply with Federal and State laws which prohibit discrimination in University programs and activities."⁹ Near the end of the statement are these words about the community colleges: "The UH Community Colleges strive to promote full realization of equal opportunity through a positive, continuing program including Titles I-IV of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) P.L. 101-336. Accordingly, vocational education opportunities will be offered without regard to race, color, national origin, sex, or disability."¹⁰

The catalog also contains a section entitled "Notice to Students with Disabilities." Prefacing a list of services to students with disabilities is this statement: "In accordance with Section 88.4 of the federal rules and regulations governing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, no qualified individuals with a disability shall, on the basis of their disability, be excluded from participation in, be denied benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity that receives or benefits from federal financial assistance."¹¹

The "Notice to Students with Disabilities" repeats the university policy on nondiscrimination and affirmative action (described above) along with procedures for filing complaints: "Students, employees, or applicants for admission or employment who believe that they have been discriminated against on the basis of race, sex, age, religion, color, sexual orientation, national origin, mental handicap, physical handicap, disability, marital status, veteran's status, or arrest and court record may file a complaint with [name of official]." Thus, the nondiscrimination policies of the University of Hawai'i Community Colleges state emphatically that discrimination cannot be applied to "qualified individuals with a disability." Moreover, having a "mental handicap," a "physical handicap," or a "disability" does not appear to exclude anybody from the population of qualified individuals. Thus, the "open door" seems to be open to EVERYBODY.

Special Student Services at Kapi'olani Community College

Kapi'olani CC devotes extensive resources to serving students with disabilities. The school's Special Student Services Office coordinates services for 150-200 students with disabilities each semester. The college report for its accreditation review in 2000 described its many services for students with disabilities: "The Special Student Services Office (SSSO) provides a range of services for students with special needs to achieve equal access to instruction and other campus activities. These services include readers, note-takers, scribes, sign language interpreters, and other instructional and classroom accommodations as appropriate."¹²

The SSSO also provides orientation sessions for new faculty to help them become aware of its services. Additionally, the SSSO encourages faculty to include in their syllabi a statement similar to the following: "Note-takers, readers, and books on tape can be provided for students who require such assistance. In addition, extended time on exams, in a distraction-free environment, can be provided for students who require it. If you have a disability and have not already spoken with counselors in the Special Student Services Office, you are invited to contact them."

When students identify themselves to the SSSO as having a disability, the office sends a confidential notice to faculty in whose classes the students are enrolled. The notice states that the student has a disability and has been encouraged to speak to the teacher. Also indicated are classroom accommodations that the student might require. The accommodations could include an in-class note-taker, a scribe for testing and in-class assignments, a reader, a sign language interpreter, extended time for testing, testing in a minimal distraction area, enlarged print materials, taped textbooks and handouts, special auxiliary aids (tape recorder, laptop computer, amplification devices, CCTV, magnification devices, spell checker, calculator), mobility assistance (e.g., access to elevators), an accessible table (for students who use a wheelchair), and assistance in evacuating the

room or building if necessary.

At mid-semester, the SSSO sends a follow-up form that asks teachers to report to the SSSO the student's attendance and performance on assignments and exams. The form also asks the teacher's opinion about whether the student should withdraw from the class.

The SSSO also houses the following services: The TRIO program that, under the federal Trio Project, provides services to eligible students who may have disabilities and supports educational endeavors of low income and first-generation college students. Project Pili Aloha supports students who have psychiatric disabilities and provides the faculty with information on psychiatric disabilities. The college works to meet these needs through a cooperative effort among Hawai'i's Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and the nearby Diamond Head Mental Health Center.¹³

Gallaudet University Regional Center

Kapi'olani CC is the site of a Gallaudet University Regional Center. The center's Program for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Students is administered by a counselor who is fluent in American Sign Language. This program's support-services include providing hard-of-hearing students with note-takers, sign-language interpreters, and tutors fluent in American Sign Language. The program also provides technological assistance and academic, career, and personal counseling.

The Gallaudet Center Program serves 20 to 30 students each semester with the assistance of tutors and sign-language interpreters. The program has nine interpreters working on campus each semester. They are freelance interpreters and work on a part-time basis. According to the accreditation report, enrollment of deaf and hard-of-hearing students is increasing, partly as a result of the support-services.¹⁴

Actions to Improve Access

Kapi'olani CC, which serves east Honolulu, is the newest UHCC campus (constructed over the period 1983 to 1994). Buildings constructed during the latter part of this period were designed to be barrier-free to persons with disabilities. Restrooms in each of these newer buildings are wheelchair accessible. Braille signs are in all elevators and in some other areas on campus. Access to instruction and services is assured for individuals with disabilities. Outside, parking stalls for persons with disabilities are designated in each parking lot.

Some problems exist with curbs, ramps, and steep slopes. Construction to correct some of those problems started in 2000. In addition to improving physical features, the college is working to make its web pages accessible to persons with disabilities. Because of the large number of web pages (the college home page, the library page, departmental pages, administrative offices pages, faculty web pages, and pages for the many online courses developed over the past decade), making

all web sites accessible requires enormous time and energy. The college is likewise committed to providing access to computer work stations and, with appropriate software programs, making website information accessible to students who are blind, have low vision, or have learning disabilities.

When the Reach Sometimes Exceeds the Grasp

Kapi'olani CC sits on a hill near the slopes of Diamond Head. Although the location provides a gorgeous vista of the ocean and nearby Waikiki, the sloping campus is a trial for students and faculty who use wheelchairs or have other restrictions on mobility. Construction during 2000-2001 reduced the degree of slope on several sidewalks to enable easier movement about the campus. Even so, using a wheelchair to move from the lower part of the campus to the top takes time and gumption.

Other weaknesses exist also. One of these is the small number of automatic doors at entrances to buildings. The college has 17 buildings that contain offices, classrooms, or support services. Only ten automatic or power-assisted doors make entrance to these buildings easier for persons in wheelchairs. Only the cafeteria and the library have automatic sliding doors. The bookstore has a power-assisted swinging door that can be activated by a button and the SSSO has two of these doors. Another building has two of these swinging doors at opposite ends of hallway leading to three classrooms (the three classrooms themselves do not have these doors). Three women's restrooms have outside doors that can be activated by a button. No men's restroom is similarly equipped. Other than these doors, a person in a wheelchair who wants to enter a building, restroom, office, or classroom must wrestle open a heavy door or wait for somebody to help.

Maintenance of the doors is also a concern. When this article was written, the opening device for the door to the bookstore was broken. And one of the doors to the hallway mentioned above would not open when I tested it.

On a less physical dimension, the school has had difficulty providing services to students who have learning disabilities (LD). Students tested and identified as having learning disabilities may receive special support under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. According to the college accreditation report, the college has about 60 students who have been identified as having learning disabilities.¹⁵ However, the college has no licensed diagnostician of learning disabilities. Therefore, students are referred to other institutions for testing: "In 1997-1999, through successful liaison work by the Counselor for Students with Disabilities, 10 to 15 students were tested by the Neuro-Psychological Services Department at Hawai'i's State Hospital. However, due to fiscal problems in the state, this service could not be continued. Therefore, students are again being referred to other agencies for testing and documentation of learning disabilities."¹⁶

Availability of LD testing at other UH community colleges is also inadequate. In October 2000, and again in February 2001, the UHCC system advertised a position for a "Learning Disabilities Specialist/Coordinator" to be located at Leeward Community College (just west of Honolulu) but (as of April 2001) had not found the right person for the position. Kapi'olani CC has received a position designated for a LD specialist. The position was scheduled for advertising in July 2001.

Three Stories of Students with Disabilities

During my ten years on the faculty of Kapi'olani CC, my classes have included many students with disabilities. The SSSO has notified me about students who had disabilities such as attention deficit disorder, dyslexia, epilepsy, and narcolepsy. One student was blind. In working with these students, I have learned that all the policies and declarations of nondiscrimination finally come down to teachers and students actually working together to help the students in their quest for academic success. This interaction is not much different from interactions between teachers and students without disabilities, but success can require more time and effort from both the teacher and the student. And, fortunately or unfortunately as the case may be, the outcome can be determined not only by what a teacher or the school perceives as the student's needs but by a student's determination to seek and use the help available. To illustrate this observation, I report my experiences with three of my students who had disabilities, some of which were obvious, some of which were not.

The first student is a young woman I will call Loral. Prior to Loral's entry into our community college she received her education in public schools under IDEA with an Individual Education Plan. Her mind is quick and she has a witty sense of humor. She often speaks slowly and has difficulty reading and writing. Although she usually walks slowly, she does not use a wheelchair and has participated in Special Olympics races. She lives with her parents but holds a part-time job and has her own bank account and credit card. In art classes on the campus she has produced some beautiful work, some of which she has sold.

With my permission, the SSSO allowed Loral to enroll in my first-year Speech course called "Personal and Public Speech." This basic course covers interpersonal conversation, communication in small groups, and public speaking. For their graded applications of these three kinds of speaking, students do three activities: 1) perform an out-of-class interview of an expert of their choice and write an analysis of their communication skills in the interview; 2) work with four or five other students to prepare and deliver an in-class group presentation and write an analysis of the group's interaction; and 3) present two individual speeches (an informative speech and a persuasive speech) and write an outline for each speech. Students also complete two exams.

Loral registered in my course on the credit/no credit

option. To earn credit she had to perform her class work at a level that would otherwise earn a "C" grade. The SSSO did not provide Loral a reader or a note taker for this class. Also, she was not provided a scribe to help her record her thoughts for written assignments which her father typed for her.

Loral was a serious and dedicated student. Her attendance record was perfect and she sat in the front row of the class. She participated in class discussions and in all formal and informal class activities. She also completed all graded assignments. She gave no quarter to other members of the class and asked for nothing special from them in return.

Also impressive was the way the class accepted her. They laughed at her wit and applauded her speeches. As an indication of their support for her, a member of her group spent one Sunday afternoon with Loral helping her develop her part of the group's oral presentation.

Her success in the course also required an extra amount of time from me. Since she could not write her exams, I prepared oral exams for her. As I do with all students, I gave her a study sheet to prepare for each exam. Loral's study sheet focused on the topics that I considered absolutely essential to passing the course. I was glad to find that her oral answers showed a satisfactory knowledge of those topics. As a result of her efforts throughout the semester, Loral received "Credit" for this class, her first truly academic class at the college level.

Now I turn to two students with disabilities who enrolled in my second-year speech class in debate. The debate class requires students to participate in several informal debates and three formal (graded) debates. Students also complete two exams and write an analysis of argumentation in a public controversy. For their formal debates students research the debate topics and hand in outlines of their debate speeches.

Barbara and Leonard, as I will name them here, both used wheelchairs. Leonard was smaller in stature than Barbara and seemed to have less physical strength. Both students enrolled for the grade option (A, B, C, D, F). I do not recall receiving any notification from the SSSO that these two students needed special accommodations and I do not have any such notification in my class folder for that class. However, when I saw them in class the first day, I did not anticipate that either student would need any special help from me in the class.

In the class introductions, Barbara said she held a full-time professional job. Leonard was a student. Among the college classes he had taken was another Speech class before he enrolled in debate. I had occasionally seen him and his Speech teacher talking in the hallway and, as far as I could tell, Leonard's disability required only that he use a wheelchair. Thus, based on information I acquired before and during the first class session, my perception was that any disability these two students had was purely physical, not mental or emotional. As far as I could tell, the only accommodations they would need in class were a table (supplied by the SSSO to roll their chairs up to) and help in

opening the door.

My initial perception of Barbara was accurate. When her turn came to debate, she rolled her chair to the rear of the lectern and stood to present her debate speeches. Her speeches were well prepared and based on satisfactory research. She completed exams in the same time-period as the other students and passed the course with a high grade.

But my early perception of Leonard was inaccurate. Leonard's physical disability was more extensive than Barbara's was. He presented in his debate speeches while sitting in his chair - not that sitting was less acceptable than standing. I just report this as an observation. And although Leonard seemed to handle his part of the first formal debate adequately and received a passing score, his debate partner told me after the debate that Leonard had just borrowed the partner's debate outline and spoke from it instead of having an outline of his own.

Now you must understand that Leonard was not the first student of mine who had come to a debate without an outline and I did not take his using his partner's outline as a sign he could not handle the class on his own. However, although he continued to come to class, he completed only one other formal debate and with a less satisfactory score. He did not complete the assigned paper or either of two exams. As a result, Leonard failed the class.

Or, as I wondered later, maybe the class failed Leonard. I recall a remark he made to me when I discussed his grades with him. "You need to make allowances," he told me. It was more a plea than a complaint. I wondered if I had misperceived the degree of his abilities and disabilities. His disabilities may have been only physical, as I had assumed, but his frail stature and lack of strength may have presented walls that were invisible to me but that kept him from preparing for his debates by doing even minimal research and gathering information. Or he just may not have had access to, or have been unable to use, computer resources for research and preparation. However, he did not ask me for help and, I thought, had not asked for help from the SSSO. To me, Leonard seemed to represent a failure of the teaching system that could have done more to help him succeed.

But as a matter of fact, Leonard HAD received, or at least had been offered, much more help than I had been aware of. I learned this from his SSSO counselor who, after she read a draft of this article, wrote, "Leonard received hours and hours of encouragement and assistance. We had conferences with him and his parents to try to put a plan together for his progress. Although I wasn't his primary counselor, I arranged meetings with instructors prior to his enrolling in their classes so he would know what was expected and could judge his level of comfort in a class."

The counselor told me that the SSSO had encouraged Leonard to get professional help for personal problems that they thought outweighed his physical problems. But Leonard could not/would not ask for help. As the counselor observed, "We aim to provide a

foundation of generic support, but the responsibility is with the student. By law, we must provide equal access; beyond that, there is a maelstrom of individual differences and problems encountered."

Postscript

Three students with disabilities: one needed extra help and got it; one did not need help; one needed extra help, was encouraged to seek it, and did not. Loral went on to take our first-year class in "Interpersonal Communication." She passed that class and further demonstrated that a person who has her disabilities can handle academic coursework.¹⁷ Barbara went on to graduate from the University of Hawai'i. I have not seen Leonard on our campus since he took my debate class.

Since completing "Personal and Public Speech" Loral has asked me several times to permit her to enroll in a second-year course in public speaking. Because that course requires students to do extensive research and to master some advanced skills in speech making, I have been reluctant to let her enroll. My concern, on the one hand, is that Loral would be over her head and would fail.

But, on the other hand, Loral would not be the first student who, even without apparent physical or mental disability, has enrolled in this second-year class, found it difficult, and dropped out. Loral could not do worse. Perhaps she could do better. Perhaps, with proper academic support from the SSSO and me, Loral should be given the same chance to fail, or succeed, as any other student.

Endnotes

1. Kapi'olani Community College General Catalog, 2000-2001, p. 10. Available online at <www.kcc.hawaii.edu/academics/catalog.index.htm>.

2. These data are from the Accreditation Self Study, Kapi'olani Community College, 2000, p. 19. Available online at <www.leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/~kcca/>. The accreditation report was a useful source for information for this article.

3. Kapi'olani Community College Strategic Plan for 1997-2007, p. 3. Available online at <www.leahi.kcc.hawaii/~kcca/CollegePlans/dplan/dplan.html>.

4. Kapi'olani Community College Academic Development Plan, 1997-2002. Available online at <www.leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/~kcca/CollegePlans/dplan/dplan.html>.

5. University of Hawai'i Community Colleges Strategic Plan 1997-2007, pp. 4, 5, and 12. Available online at <www.hawaii.edu/cc/Prpp/prpp_fameset.html>.

6. "This goal consists of strengthening KCC as a premier resource in Hawaiian, Pacific Island and Asian Programs; recruiting and retaining students, faculty, staff and administrators from under-represented groups and promoting a

respect for differences." Kapi'olani Community College Academic Development Plan 1997-2002, Goal B, Champion Diversity.

7. University of Hawai'i Community Colleges Strategic Plan 1997-2007, pp. 4, 5, and 12.

8. The absence of the word "disability" from these plans is not insignificant, as a counselor for students with disabilities wrote to me in private correspondence: "Because much of our money [for providing services to students with disabilities] comes from the federal government, we need to document the institution's commitment. The word 'disability' must appear in our strategic plans and academic development plans." Not mentioning diversity in these plans could also have other significant implications because the Provost's introduction to the Academic Development Plan (ADP) states, "Activities that can be shown to further the priorities outlined in the ADP are likely to receive more support than those which have not been identified by the 1997-2007 Strategic Plan or the 1997-2002 ADP."

9. Kapi'olani Community College General Catalog 2000-20001. Online at <www.leahi.kcc.hawaii.edu/academics/catalog/index.htm>. The statement cites laws that include Title IX of the Educational Amendments of 1972 and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The statement also cites laws that prohibit discrimination in employment.

10. The word "vocational" in this policy is required to show that the colleges comply with requirements for receiving vocational funds. Presumably, the community colleges apply the same nondiscriminatory policies in their nonvocational educational opportunities such as in liberal arts.

11. Kapi'olani Community College General Catalog 2000-2001, pp. 28-29. The statement includes these words: "In compliance with requirements relating to nondiscrimination on the basis of a disability (Section 504, Rehabilitation Act of 1973, rules effective June 3, 1977), and the Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990) Kapi'olani Community College prohibits discrimination on the basis of a disability and assures qualified students with disabilities access to all programs of the College."

12. Accreditation Self Study, Kapi'olani Community College, 2000, Standard 5, p. 165.

13. Accreditation Self Study, Kapi'olani Community College, 2000, Standard 5, p. 183.

14. Accreditation Self Study, Kapi'olani Community College, 2000, Standard 5, p. 177-78.

15. Accreditation Self Study, Kapi'olani Community College, 2000, Standard 5, p. 165.

16. Accreditation Self Study, Kapi'olani Community College, 2000, Standard 5, p. 165.

17. In private correspondence, Loral's counselor wrote about her: "[Loral] is really 'special.' She has bloomed in every sense. She has a strong support system that also makes a big difference. Through her own persistence, she has made progress in a system that does not routinely recognize individual strengths and differences."

Robert C. Johnson, Ph.D., is Associate Professor of Speech at Kapi'olani Community College, Honolulu, Hawai'i.