

Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education: Barriers to Success and Implications for Professionals

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Introduction

The dramatic recent increase in the enrollment of students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions requires counselors and postsecondary education personnel to become familiar with emerging the educational experience of these students, it is important to fully understand the interplay of dynamics with this population, including attitudinal barriers from faculty and issues of students with disabilities during their educational careers (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). To maximize other students, physical barriers in the environment, and support barriers, all which impact the postsecondary adjustment of this population and thereby decrease their likelihood of success. College counselors are in an especially valuable position to help students with disabilities achieve their highest potential by understanding the situations of these students as they encounter barriers in college unique to this population.

General Background Information

The number of students with disabilities is growing in the postsecondary environment at an unprecedented rate. In 1996, roughly 6% of all undergraduates reported having a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999). The different disabilities reported were learning disabilities (29%), orthopedic impairments (23%), hearing impairment (16%), vision impairment (16%), and speech impairment (3%). In addition, one in five undergraduates with disabilities reported having an additional “health-related” disability or limitation (NCES, 1999, p. 7).

Legislation

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights law which prohibits discrimination based on disability in all institutions that receive federal funding, including most colleges and universities. Section 504 mandates the following requirements regarding postsecondary education institutions and students with disabilities: a) access to facilities and activities; b) admission policies and practices that do not discriminate on the basis of disability; c) testing procedures with appropriate accommodations; and d) provision of auxiliary aids and services (Rehabilitation Act, 1973, 29 U.S.C. 794).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), was signed into law in 1990 and extends the mandate for nondiscrimination on the basis of disability to the private sector and the nonfederal public sector (i.e. state and local governments). The ADA (1990) definition of a person with a disability refers to “someone with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. A person is considered to be a person with a disability if he or she a) has the disability; b) has a record of the disability; or c) is regarded as having the disability” (ADA, 42 U.S.C., 12101-12132). Colleges are required under the ADA (1990) to provide equal opportunities for students with disabilities, and higher education institutions typically agree to pay for “many academic-specific accommodations, such as removing architectural barriers from classrooms and computer software designed to assist disabled students on campus” (Hebel, 2001b, p. 44). Receiving these accommodations, however, depends on the students’ decision of whether to disclose his/her disability, which is heavily impacted by attitudes and environmental barriers.

Disclosure of Disability and Campus Climate

Disclosure of hidden disabilities, such as learning disabilities, psychiatric disabilities, or HIV/AIDS, pose unique implications for students with disabilities (Lynch & Gussel, 1996), often involving labels which

carry significant stereotypes and societal stigmatization.

Self-advocacy related to disability documentation and disclosure is often a major issue for many students. Lynch and Gussel (1996) assert that self-advocacy and appropriate disclosure are ultimately the responsibility of a postsecondary school student with a disability. For example, if accommodations are needed within a college setting, a student is required to disclose the disability and related needs, but multiple dilemmas arise for the student, including when to disclose, how to disclose, how much to disclose, and to whom to disclose. A student may make considerable effort to keep a hidden disability private and reasons may include anxiety and fear due to anticipated attitudes of faculty, staff, and peers (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). This is an especially challenging situation for students from multicultural backgrounds, who face additional discrimination based on minority status.

Postsecondary Barriers

Many students with disabilities experience frustration with their postsecondary experiences stemming from negative attitudes from others, physical barriers on campus, a lack of appropriate services and programs, and funding to improve those services and programs. This can be especially true of students with invisible disabilities such as learning disabilities, certain mobility disabilities, auditory disabilities, and psychiatric disabilities, as attitudes from nondisabled individuals often reflect preconceived opinions as to what a person with a disability can and cannot do, or stereotyped judgments of ability and stability.

Faculty Attitudes

The successful integration of college students with disabilities requires receptive attitudes of members in the entire college community, and faculty attitudes toward students with disabilities are an important influence in students' adjustment to college. University faculty may be susceptible to frequently held stereotypes, which may in turn be a barrier for students' success, and although staff may not overtly express negativity toward these students, they may lack adequate understanding of specific needs. Some faculty question the nature of reasonable accommodations and doubt their ability to effectively teach students with disabilities, or question whether the student really needs the accommodation at all.

Faculty may find it difficult to accommodate students simply because they lack an understanding of these students' needs or familiarity with campus services. Factors which have been found to influence faculty

attitude include faculty member age, academic discipline, experience teaching students with learning disabilities, years of teaching experience, and professional rank.

As with all students, students with disabilities have concerns about how to relate to their professors. Students with disabilities, however, may experience such concerns more frequently and the problems they encounter with courses may relate to their specific impairments. Attitudes of faculty and administrators could be a vital element in the success or failure of students with a disability. Conversely, a lack of understanding of reasonable accommodations and self-doubt among instructional staff can become barriers to the educational participation for students with disabilities.

Peer Attitudes

Studies suggest that able-bodied students interact with students with disabilities based on attitudes and preconceived stereotypes, which vastly affect the social adjustment of these students in the postsecondary environment. Amsel and Fichten (1988) found that: a) college students who have had contact with individuals who have a physical disability are more comfortable during interaction and more at ease with their disabled peers; and b) students with and without contact have different patterns of thoughts concerning interaction with such individuals. Additionally, Fichten (1988) suggests when a socially acceptable way of avoiding contact with students with disabilities exists, students without disabilities will choose this option. Fichten, Robillard, Judd, and Amsel (1989) further suggest that college students without disabilities are more uncomfortable interacting with peers with disabilities than with peers without disabilities, and students with disabilities are more comfortable interacting with peers with similar disabilities.

Physical Barriers

One of the many negative consequences of having a chronic physical health problem is decreased physical mobility and difficulties in executing everyday activities. It is especially problematic for nonable-bodied students to navigate a postsecondary campus that is inaccessible.

Buildings constructed or altered after June 3, 1977 have had to comply with the relevant accessibility code required by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and, after January 26, 1992, by the ADA (1990)

(Stodden & Dowrick, 1999) which mandates that all programs within existing facilities must be accessible, and all new construction must be built accessible to all persons with disabilities.

Providing this accessible environment across campuses, however, is restricted by architectural and budgetary constraints, and postsecondary institutions often implement this code within these constraints, which often do not consider the immediate individual needs of students with disabilities. Studies suggest that students with disabilities often encounter physical barriers in the postsecondary environment which remain an unaddressed concern by these institutions.

Additionally, Hart and Williams (1995) assert that often, students with physical disabilities are treated differently in the classroom, and thus receive a different level of education. It is not surprising that students with disabilities on average express concerns related to physical barriers within the university environment which are not readily identified by non-disabled students, and this may add additional stress levels for students with disabilities not experienced by nondisabled students.

Finally, Singh (2003) found only seven percent of institutions surveyed provide full accessibility to students with orthopedic disabilities. It was also concluded that only a small minority of sample institutions offer structural, academic, and dorm accessibility as well as recreational opportunities for students with orthopedic disabilities. This heavily influences the social connectivity and experiences for students with disabilities as they are often limited to where they reside on campus and what functions they may attend.

Student Services

Student services in postsecondary institutions are growing in numbers to meet the demands of the growing numbers of students with disabilities attending these institutions. According to Yost, Shaw, Cullen, and Bigaj (1994), support services on the nation's college campuses have increased by 90 percent. Despite this increase, however, administrators need to be aware that although students may report a disability, those students may not necessarily request an accommodation or identify themselves on campus as having a disability; often, students with disabilities express a conflict between their desire to be independent and their desire to use services and accommodations available to them. Accordingly, Hartman (1993) found that campus disability support services report between one and three percent of all students on campus request such services.

Building the necessary social skills of students with disabilities are of equal priority to the necessary academic skills, which prepare students with disabilities to meet future challenges beyond the academic environment. However, an institution's support services often do not contribute to social integration. For example, students with disabilities who discontinue their education often report that reasons include a lack of social support within the university environment. It may be assumed that while students with disabilities feel academically supported by student support services in postsecondary institutions, their overall psychological and social needs are not being adequately addressed by these services, which may contribute to a lack of adjustment to the higher education environment overall.

Conclusion

Students with disabilities have increased in numbers within the higher learning environment since the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) and Section 504, but still face unique issues and barriers, including a lack of understanding and cooperation from administrators, faculty, staff, and other students; inaccessibility of buildings, facilities, and grounds; and support barriers.

Professionals in higher education, and especially college counselors, must possess skills and knowledge in the areas of administration, direct service, consultation and collaboration, and institutional awareness to fully maximize the educational, psychological, and social experience of students with disabilities.

Counselors in particular play a critical role in helping students identify their unique needs and developing the appropriate coping skills, assertiveness skills, and self-advocacy skills to help them deal effectively with the realistic outcomes of labels, discrimination, and stigmatization that threaten their developing identity as college students and young professionals.

By understanding the unique needs of this population, higher education professionals and college counselors may be better prepared to facilitate the academic, social, and emotional development of this population through referral services, political support and advocacy, and related educational and counseling services.

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