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THE PRACTICAL TEACHER

This Month's Topic:

Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Institutions: What Higher Education Should Be Doing to Support Them

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This edition of **NASET's Practical Teacher** was written by Kristen Bonanno-Sotiropoulos, a doctoral student at American International College. With the increasing number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions, higher education must be prepared to address, support, and embrace the diversity of needs. Higher education institutions have federal mandates that they have to meet concerning providing accommodations and services for students with disabilities, but are these enough? Students with disabilities may require more than simple accommodations and services in order successfully transition and adapt to college life. For many students with disabilities, support in the areas of self-advocacy, social skills, independence, and academic assistance is needed.

Introduction

With the increasing number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions, higher education must be prepared to address, support, and embrace the diversity of needs. Higher education institutions have federal mandates that they have to meet concerning providing accommodations and services for students with disabilities, but are these enough? Students with disabilities may require more than simple accommodations and services in order successfully transition and adapt to college life. For many students with disabilities, support in the areas of self-advocacy, social skills, independence, and academic assistance is needed.

According to Longtin (2014) "the success or failure of these students [with disabilities] once enrolled in college could be determined by the degree to which they can be supported by their institution of higher education" (p. 64). There are services, skills, and resources that students with disabilities need access to at the postsecondary level, as well as the secondary level when addressing transitional services. The rationale for higher education institutions to develop and maintain certain programs and support systems for students with disabilities has reached a critical point. By examining the relevant literature on preparing and supporting students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions, the need to substantiate reasons for the development of support programs at the college level is of essence.

Legal Mandates

There are three federal regulations that protect the rights of individuals with disabilities- The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act. These regulations shield individuals from discrimination based upon their disability. The regulations also provide for reasonable accommodations and services to assist individuals with disabilities to gain access to the environment, learning, and services.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act protects children and students from birth to age twenty-one. This regulation provides for such things as free and appropriate public education, parent and student involvement, and participation in the least restrictive environment. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a civil rights act which ensures an individual's civil rights despite their disability. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act applies to any school, agency, and institution that receives any type of federal funding. This regulation also ensures a free and appropriate public education (at the K-12 level), but only provides for accommodations. The biggest difference between provisions in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is individualized or specialized instruction. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act provides students with disabilities specialized instruction and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act does not.

Postsecondary education is different in terms of mandates and what institutions are required to provide for students with disabilities. According to the U.S. Department of Education, "postsecondary schools are not required to provide free and appropriate public education [but] are required to provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability. (2011, p. 2) Postsecondary schools that receive federal funding must abide by the regulations outlined in Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as well as Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act requires "public colleges, universities, and graduate and professional schools... the provision of auxiliary aids and services" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 2). Auxiliary aids include such things as taped texts, interpreters, electronic readers, closed captioning, assistive listening devices, and note-takers. These types of aids are similar to those provided in K-12 settings. However, it is important to note that colleges have the "flexibility in choosing the specific aid or service it provides to the student, as long as the aid or service is useful" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 3)

Further, under these regulations, higher education institutions are not required to provide devices or services of a personal nature. This means that all devices are to be used within the classroom or campus setting only and not for personal use, such as a method of studying. In addition, auxiliary aids and services do not include personal aids or attendants, similar to paraprofessionals in an elementary or secondary school setting. The language in the regulation explicitly states that "recipients [colleges and universities] need not provide attendants, individually prescribed devices, readers for personal use or study, or other devices or services of a personal nature" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, p. 5). It is hard to understand the reasoning behind a restriction placed on using an auxiliary device for studying. Studying is certainly a huge part of the learning process and therefore if a student with a disability needs an accommodation or service to assist with his or her studying they should be able to receive it. This is simply providing access to learning.

The difference between students receiving special education services in elementary and secondary schools and receiving services in a postsecondary school are vastly different. To begin, students receiving special education services in a K-12 setting are rarely involved in the process and decision-making, until the age of 14, and even then it is not always the case. Accommodations, planning, and decision-making are made for the student by parents, educators, service providers, and sometimes local agencies or even court systems. When a student enters the world of postsecondary education, all those supports are taken away, and it becomes the full responsibility of the student to make those decisions and more importantly to advocate for themselves. Postsecondary students are required to identify themselves as having a disability, understand and identify the accommodations and services they need to be successful, and report this information to the appropriate office within the college. (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Hadley (2011), sums it up clearly when she asserts that college students with disabilities are going "from a pattern of more passive dependent behavior to a more active and responsible role" (p. 78). This transition can be very stressful for most students. Garrison-Wade (2012) supports this by identifying the differences between secondary and postsecondary education for students with disabilities. One of the changes noted by the author is "the shift in responsibility from special educators and parents to the students themselves about obtaining information and advocating for services (p. 113).

Self-Advocacy Skills

According to Skinner (1998), Learning Disabilities are a "lifelong disability that continues to affect the individual's ability to acquire, retain, and express information" (Vogel, 1993 as cited by Skinner 1998, p. 2). Skinner goes on to suggest that the factors that significantly affect the success of individuals with learning disabilities are "the severity of the learning disability, family support, socioeconomic status...and the quality of the educational programming" (p. 3). The educational programming includes both secondary and postsecondary settings. However, it is not just the setting or environment, but rather the support, services, and acceptance provided in those environments that dictate the success of students with disabilities.

Skinner (1998) believes that the most important skill that students with disabilities need to learn before attending postsecondary schooling are self-advocacy skills. He defines self-advocacy skills as the ability to recognize and meet the needs of one's disability, have an understanding of one's disability, and practice competent communication skills when advocating for oneself (Skinner 1998). Let's break this down and understand why self-advocacy is so important. First knowing individual strengths and weaknesses allows people with disabilities to have a better understanding of what they need regarding accommodations and services to be successful. Having an understanding of an individual's rights under Section 504 of Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act is also helpful. Finally, the ability to communicate efficiently is critical in bringing awareness to what individual students need concerning accommodations and services to have access to the content and to be successful. Students who are prepared and armed with this knowledge can have a powerful voice to assert their self-advocacy.

Skinner (1998) reaffirms what the regulations state by reminding the reader that "students must know that it is now their responsibility to inform school officials of their disability, provide documentation, and request appropriate accommodations" (p. 4). Having effective self-advocacy skills will certainly help facilitate these discussions for students. Students with disabilities must understand their responsibility as well as their disability prior to transitioning to a postsecondary setting. This preparation must begin in the secondary setting.

Skinner (1998) discusses the lack of preparation for these skills in high schools for students with learning disabilities. Most college preparation classes in high school are focused on "traditional academics, learning strategies, and study skills" (p.7) and do not include such areas of developing advocacy skills and appropriate social skills. Skinner (1998) urges that these skills are critical and need to be addressed before a student going off to college. He goes on to stress the need for continued follow-up of these skills once students enter into postsecondary settings, stressing that "a system of monitoring and support is essential if self-advocacy behaviors are to be maintained" (p. 7). Some ways that colleges can support these skills and behaviors is through the use of counseling centers, disability resource centers, student support centers, and support groups (Skinner, 1998).

According to Gregg (2007), the "attainment of positive postsecondary outcomes for adolescents and adults with learning disabilities is dependent upon professionals becoming more knowledgeable about the changing demands of education" (p. 219). What the author is trying to convey is that secondary educators need to have transitional programs in place that focus on all areas of college preparation including the development of self-advocacy skills, knowledge of the student's rights under federal regulations, and how to navigate the postsecondary environment to ensure appropriate supports and services are accessible. Establishing partnerships between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions would be an effective way to help prepare students with disabilities, to navigate the postsecondary environment.

Two factors that have contributed to low attendance rates and retention of learning disabled students in the postsecondary setting, according to Gregg (2007), are "a lack of academic skills... and lack of transitional options from secondary to postsecondary programs" (p. 221). The author suggests that the lowered academic expectations and lack of rigorous learning opportunities contribute to the lack of academic skills that students who are learning disabled display in postsecondary settings. Further, Gregg (2007) goes on to identify the absence of transitional options for students that may have a learning disability. He continues to connect these lost opportunities to a lack of quality partnerships between secondary schools and postsecondary institutions, vocational training schools, and adult agencies. Secondary schools provide for college tours and fieldtrips at a steady rate. If secondary schools are already taking students to tour college campuses, then providing an opportunity for students with disabilities to visit the learning support services people would be a start and partnerships could grow from there.

Hadley (2011) agrees with others, reiterating that college students with disabilities must "successfully self-advocate...[and] have a good understanding of their particular [learning] disability and the compensatory strategies that work best for them" (p. 78). Going to college is a difficult transition for students with disabilities, they may be unaware of the academic challenges and the social changes unique to the college experience. Also, students with disabilities may not be acutely aware of how their disability will affect them in college. Hadley (2011) supports the ideas set forth by Skinner (1998) and Gregg (2007) claiming that "while complying with legal mandates to provide reasonable accommodations, higher education administrators may also need to assist students with disabilities in the development of their independence and self-determination skills" (p. 78). What the authors are trying to convey here is the fact that students with disabilities might not truly understand or experience the effects of their disability right away. The transition process takes time and there should be individuals at postsecondary schools that can assist throughout the process and provide continued guidance to support the recognition of difficulties and needs.

Hadley (2011) offers a few suggestions for preparing students with disabilities for college and then supporting them while they are there. First, there needs to be proper preparation for these students. They need to know where to seek assistance and how to go about doing that. Secondly, instructors at higher education institutions should take the initiative to learn more about the various types of disabilities out there and how to accommodate for them. College disability service centers can provide on-going professional development and provide online information for easy access for faculty. Third, colleges and universities should incorporate more proactive means such as integrating principles of Universal Design For Learning throughout the campus and in classrooms. Finally, the creation and support of meaningful connections with these students are crucial. Having access to peer mentors, counselors, and peer support groups can provide the ongoing encouragement needed to maintain the self-advocacy and independence skills these students need (Hadley 2011).

Secondary and Postsecondary Supports

Longtin (2014) makes a bold statement suggesting that "the success or failure of these students [with disabilities] once enrolled in college could be determined by the degree to which they can be supported by their institution of higher education" (p. 64). With a statement like this, postsecondary institutions should be ensuring that they do more than just comply with the federal and state mandates to guarantee accessibility and success for students with disabilities.

In a 2012 article by Garrison-Wade, the author examines the outcomes of a qualitative case study, conducted at five postsecondary institutions in the states of Colorado, Idaho, Iowa, South Dakota, and Wyoming. The study explored the perceptions of fifty-nine college students with disabilities about what helped them be successful in college. The data was collected through focus group discussions and interviews (Garrison-Wade 2012). Three themes surfaced from data gathered during the study, which are "capitalizing on student self-determination skills, implementing formalized planning processes, and improving postsecondary support" (p. 117).

Capitalizing on student self-determination skills requires "creating high expectations" which helps to "influence students' perceptions about their capabilities" (Garrison-Wade, 2012, p. 117). Postsecondary instructors can accomplish this by gaining awareness about the various types of disabilities and how to support their students both in and out of class. It is imperative that faculty know, understand, and comply with the legal mandates of providing accommodations to ensure the successful journey for these students. Although knowing and understanding the legal mandates is a great start, faculty must know how to effectively differentiate instruction, assignments, and assessments as well. This not only will help students with disabilities, but also accommodate for different learning styles, interests, and cultural experiences.

Implementing a formalized planning process requires that high schools do a better job at preparing students with disabilities for a successful transition into postsecondary settings.

The preparation process should include exposure to such things as how high school environments and supports are different from college environments and supports. Students should know what to expect regarding levels of support. Students should have knowledge of how to request accommodations and services and where within the college campus. Students must also understand how their disability affects them personally and what they need to access the content and environment to be successful.

Improving postsecondary supports for students with disabilities entails advancements in use of accommodations, disability awareness, environmental accessibility, and financial assistance. Specifically looking at disability awareness and the use of accommodations, students in the study felt very challenged with what Garrison-Wade (2012) referred to as "attitudinal barriers" which suggests that "some postsecondary faculty had negative attitudes toward students with disabilities and lacked understanding of their needs and their rights to special accommodations and other supportive services" (p. 121). To address any matters of "attitudinal barriers," postsecondary schools must actively fight against this form of discrimination. Postsecondary institutions should provide faculty with ongoing professional development focusing on awareness, legal mandates, differentiation, and sensitivity training. Training should also extend to the student population as well. Providing open lectures, documentary screenings, and student trainings about disabilities would be a wonderful way to bring awareness and acceptance to college campuses.

Finally, the most surprising information that came out of the study was that students with disabilities felt that "their high school classes were not challenging and did little to prepare them for college" (Garrison-Wade, 2012, p. 119). This finding speaks directly to the larger problem stated above by Gregg (2007) who identified the epidemic of lowered academic expectations and the lack of rigorous learning opportunities in K-12 settings for students who have a learning disability. The lack of rigor and lowered expectations for students with disabilities was supposed to be eliminated through the No Child Left Behind Act, but still continues today.

Autism in Postsecondary Education

The number of students with high functioning Autism who are attending postsecondary institutions has been increasing. In a 2014 article written by Pinder-Amaker, the author discusses the correlation between students with high functioning Autism and the increased risk of developing a major psychiatric illness within the first year of attending a postsecondary institution.

Most students with high functioning autism have the intellectual capability to succeed in college. However, it is the "psychosocial challenges" that are the most difficult. Pinder-Amaker (2014) explains that these students have "difficulty engaging in reciprocal social interactions and relationship development, problems maintaining a conversation in social settings, perseverative obsessive thought patterns, fixated or restricted behaviors or interests, and difficulty interpreting nonverbal cues or the perspectives of others" (p. 125). It is these challenges that will ultimately make the postsecondary educational experience difficult for students on the autism spectrum.

It has been well studied that stress creates increased anxiety and depression in individuals with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Pinder-Amaker (2014) makes recommendations to ensure a smooth transition into postsecondary settings and further provides options for on-going supports for these students. First, the coordination between high schools and postsecondary schools, during the planning process, needs to be further developed, as "periods of transition are especially challenging and stressful for Autism Spectrum Disorder" individuals (p. 127). There needs to be better preparation and support systems in place to address the many challenges of starting college. Some of the problems include, "concerns about academic achievement, developing peer and intimate relationships, increased exposure to alcohol and other substances, living away from home and the pre-existing support structures, financial pressures, and poor eating and sleeping habits" (p. 127). There are a vast number of elements that can and will contribute to the increased stress, anxiety, and apprehension of students with Autism at the postsecondary level. It is critical that these students are supported to lessen or eliminate the effects of these factors. Postsecondary schools need to do a better job acknowledging these struggles and provide resources to diminish their prevalence.

In her article, Pinder-Amaker (2014) mentions the Transition Programs for Intellectual Disabilities Initiative which was "established by the U.S. Department of Education in 2010 on twenty-seven college campuses across the country" (p. 130). This initiative was created to "develop comprehensive programming for college students with cognitive disabilities, including autism, enabling them to gain access to academic enrichment, social activities, employment training, and assistance in establishing an independent living environment" (p. 130). The author provided a list of the colleges and institutions that were awarded the federal aid to create these programs, but offered no other information, such as outcomes of the programs. A study exploring the outcomes of these programs would be significant to provide data for postsecondary institutions.

A few of the suggestions that Pinder-Amaker (2014) suggests to help ensure smooth transitions and supports for students with disabilities, specifically autism, include building self-advocacy skills, ensuring that the principles of Universal Design for Learning are embedded in courses throughout postsecondary institutions, access to tutoring centers, access to counseling centers, and providing summer bridge programs and ongoing seminars or support groups for students with disabilities.

Longtin (2014) supports the ideals of Pinder-Amaker (2014). Specifically, that students with autism and other disabilities struggle with social issues, which can result in "difficulty interacting with professors and classmates," which ultimately may lead to "academic problems" (p. 65). Furthermore, students with Autism and other disabilities may struggle with "executive function skills [such as] planning, flexibility, self-monitoring, working memory, and goal setting" which contribute to difficulty in learning and successful independence" (p. 65). It is important to teach these critical skills to students before they enter postsecondary settings and then provide on-going support to maintain these skills in postsecondary settings. Skills such as self-monitoring and goal-setting should be goals written into students' individual education plans from the very start. Teaching self-monitoring and goal-setting skills are becoming more common in the classroom at all levels, especially in the realm of special education, which is especially promising.

Longtin (2014) offers more recommendations in her article. One such suggestion is that "secondary schools could help ensure that their students on the spectrum [or other disabilities] who wish to go to college have the readiness skills to enroll by providing advanced preparation in the social, self-advocacy, and organizational domains during the IDEA mandated transition-planning phase of high school" (Longtin, 2014, pp. 64-65). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act correctly identifies the necessity of transition planning once a student with a disability turns the age of 14. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act recommends transition planning to include preparing for college, career, and the skills needed to obtain these goals. The transition planning starts at age 14 so that middle schools and high schools can provide the necessary services, preparation, and training for students so that they experience successful transitions into college and careers.

In another recommendation, Longtin (2014) suggests is using the college infrastructure to assist and support students with disabilities. Services such as "disability [centers], health clinics, personal counseling centers, career counseling centers... and residential life offices" may benefit students with disabilities in helping them transition into college life (p. 66). By employing the expertise of these centers to support and encourage the success of students with disabilities would be promising.

Application

Looking closely at the statement by Longtin (2014), as stated above, "the success or failure of these students [with disabilities] once enrolled in college could be determined by the degree to which they can be supported by their institution of higher education" (p. 64). This statement clearly asserts that it is the responsibility of higher education institutions for the success of students with disabilities. However, as evidenced by the review of the literature is this entirely the case? After reviewing the related literature, it appears that three concurring themes emerged from the various authors. First, the need for better preparation and transition programs at the secondary level, on-going training and support for faculty at postsecondary institutions around disabilities and how faculty can help students with disabilities, and finally an increase supports and services for students with disabilities on college campuses.

When it comes to better preparation programs at the secondary level, the authors were quite clear about the need to address and develop self-advocacy skills in students. Students with disabilities in secondary schools have most likely been receiving special education services for several years. However, decision-making, advocacy, and legal protections were different than what is provided for at the postsecondary level. Students with disabilities must learn and understand how their disability affects them, what they need, in terms of support, to access learning and be successful, and most importantly how to become advocates for themselves. The authors referenced above concurred that this was lacking in secondary preparation programs.

Higher education institutions must do a better job at bringing awareness and sensitivity to their campuses and in their classrooms. Providing on-going professional development and resources to faculty is one way to accomplish this. Monthly faculty training, online course modules, online resources that faculty can turn to, collaborative practices, and reimbursement or incentives for training or coursework that occur outside the institution are other examples that higher education institutions should embrace.

Postsecondary institutions must ramp up the services and supports that may already be in place for students with disabilities. Some of the recommendations by the authors above included the use of disability centers to help support the advocacy of students, learning centers to assist with tutoring and study habits, and counseling centers to provide individual counseling and peer support groups. One other way that postsecondary institutions can support the success of students with disabilities is to provide peer mentors to assist with the transition process.

Conclusion

The literature shows that in order for students with disabilities to be successful in postsecondary institutions there are several key elements that must be in place. First, the transition from secondary to postsecondary settings must be smooth. This can be accomplished by ensuring that certain preparations take place and partnerships are formed. First, secondary schools need to teach students how to be advocates for themselves. Students need to understand their individual strengths and weaknesses associated with their disability. With that understanding comes the identification of what they need regarding accommodations and services to be successful and have access to learning and the environment.

It was also mentioned that the lack of rigorous standards, expectations, and teaching afforded to students with disabilities puts them at a huge disadvantage academically once in a postsecondary setting. Public K-12 schools need to provide instruction, meaningful learning opportunities, and exposure to rigorous expectations in order to academically prepare students for postsecondary learning. Schools can accomplish this by holding students with disabilities to the same expectations as non-disabled peers, and providing them with the legally mandated accommodations, support, and scaffolding.

Postsecondary institutions need to be proactive in training and supporting faculty in the areas of how they can effectively support students with disabilities in the classroom. Higher education should be providing professional development, support, and resources to their faculty. By doing this, institutions are arming their faculty with the necessary skills and resources to effectively differentiate within their classrooms. In addition, higher education can provide opportunities for collaboration between departments and the sharing of ideas to better serve the increasing student diversity on college campuses.

Finally, opportunities to create or expand existing supports for students with disabilities should be high on the priority list for postsecondary institutions. As the authors stated above, the number of students attending postsecondary schools is increasing every year. Higher education institutions need to be ready to support the unique learning needs that come with various types of disabilities. Institutions of higher learning should be offering academic supports, but also mentoring supports, counseling supports, and advocacy supports to students with disabilities.

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