**Research to Practice Brief**

**Effective Practices for Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education Programs**

By Joie Acosta

Over the past four years, the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports (NCSPES) at the University of Hawaii, Manoa, has explored the importance of postsecondary supports as well as effective practices for accommodating postsecondary students with disabilities in several research studies. This Brief summarizes some of the Center's findings and offers recommendations for effective practice. Findings outlined here include results from:

- A national survey on types and frequency of educational support offerings
- A focus group project on post-secondary education and employment for students with disabilities
- A promising practices project to improve higher education for people with disabilities.

Although a variety of findings emerged from these studies, a common theme across all three was the importance of self-advocacy and self-determination skills for students with disabilities in postsecondary education. And while self-advocacy and self-determination are very important for success in postsecondary education, it is also necessary to recognize the interrelationship between the individual with disabilities and supports, services, funding, and policy.

*National Survey*

NCSPES developed and distributed a national survey on the types and frequency of educational support offerings to 1500 postsecondary institutions nationwide, and 650 responded (43%) (Stodden, Whelley, Harding, & Chang, 2001). The results of the survey indicated that testing accommodations, note takers, personal counseling, and advocacy assistance were among the most common postsecondary educational supports offered to students with disabilities. Organizational skill assistance, study skills programs, and career related supports were also offered fairly often. However, disability specific scholarships, assessments and evaluations, real time captioning, assistive technology evaluations, and study abroad opportunities were rarely offered to students with disabilities. Furthermore, 50% of the respondents indicated that their institutions did not offer accessible transport on campus for students with disabilities (Stodden et al., 2001). Overall, the survey revealed that equal access to, and reasonable accommodations are still an issue for individuals with disabilities choosing higher education. Self-advocacy and self-determination become necessary skills for individuals with disabilities planning to go on to higher education because the dearth of educational entitlement after high school. Furthermore, natural supports and a strong support service network are essential to success in postsecondary education.

*Focus Group*

Although the results of the survey indicated that advocacy assistance was offered to students by postsecondary institutions more than 75% of the time by 69% of the postsecondary institutions, a focus group project indicated that the type and timing of advocacy assistance was problematic.  Participants requested that more focus be placed on the development of self-advocacy skills rather than on employing others to provide advocacy information to students with disabilities (NCSPES, 2000).  Overall, equal access to, and reasonable accommodations for persons with disabilities in postsecondary programs continues to be an ongoing issue (Stodden et al., 2001).   Students with disabilities must commonly struggle to get very basic accommodations from postsecondary institutions and faculty even when the need is apparent.  Another barrier identified by students with disabilities is the powerful impact of negative attitudes towards, and low expectations of, people with disabilities (NCSPES).  The study indicated that there is a need for a comprehensive network of support services that work cooperatively.  Furthermore, disability support service providers should encourage self-determination by focusing on the needs of individual students without micromanagement. This may require staffing of additional disability support service providers.

*Promising Practices Project*

Promising practices to address the quality of faculty and institutions were implemented across 31 universities (Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2000). Table 1 describes these practices across three phases of improvement (1) assessing the climate of the institution; (2) delivering professional development activities to administrators, faculty and students; and (3) building capacity for institutional change. These practices emerged from what students with disabilities identified as being the major difficulties that they encounter in postsecondary settings (i.e. negative attitudes, lack of self-advocacy training).  Namely, the practices promote an understanding of disability by others and encourage changes in attitudes and practice through self advocacy training for students with disabilities and through training and professional development for faculty at postsecondary institutions (Izzo et al., 2000).  Self-advocacy is encouraged through building of knowledge, encouraging communication, increasing experience with self-advocacy, and performance evaluation of the advocacy skills to understand ways to improve outcomes.  These practices are sustainable beyond the scope of the study and have potential to serve as a mechanism for changing attitudes and for increasing the type and quality of support services for students with disabilities in postsecondary settings. These practices should also assist in the alignment of effective postsecondary support practices with an individual's type and level of disability.

*Conclusion*

As stated in the American's with Disabilities Act (ADA), all postsecondary institutions "are required by law to provide any reasonable accommodation that may be necessary for those persons with an identified disability to have equal access to the educational opportunities and services available to non-disabled peers, if requested" (PL

101-336; PL 105-17).  Numerous authors have suggested that postsecondary students with disabilities are charged with the majority of responsibility for "initiating, designing, and ensuring their own educational accommodations" (Stodden et al., 2001; Battle, Dickens-Wright, & Murphy, 1998; Day & Edwards, 1996).  Findings by NCSPES confirm that self-determination, or the ability to understand and express one's needs and to make informed decisions based upon those needs (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 1998), is an important skill for students with disabilities to have before and during  their postsecondary experience.

Furthermore, the research also suggests that to support individuals with disabilities, support services must take a holistic view of individuals with disabilities and recognize the interdependent relationship between individuals with disabilities, natural supports, disability support staff, service providers, federal funding agencies, secondary and postsecondary staff and faculty, policy makers, researchers, and health care providers.  For example, if accommodations are not available through support services, having the self-advocacy skills to request those accommodations will not be enough.  As indicated by the three aforementioned research studies, current services and accommodations are still an issue and should be considered in conjunction with the improvement of self-advocacy and self-determination skills for individuals with disabilities pursuing postsecondary education.

## References

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## Table 1: Promising Practices (Adapted from Izzo et al., 2001)

| **Assessing the Climate** |
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| • **Focus groups, surveys, structured interviews**<br>o Collect information from faculty and/or students to gain an understanding of their needs, frustrations, and recommendations for improving the teaching-learning climate for students with disabilities. |
| **Professional Development for Administrators, Faculty and Students** |
| • **On-site training such as workshops for faculty, administrators and teaching assistants (TA)**<br>o Conduct interactive workshops on topics identified as high interest and needed by faculty and administrators to convey in-depth information on instructional strategies, accommodations, resources, and supports to better teach students with disabilities.<br>• **Self advocacy training for students**<br>o Teach self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities to empower them to disclose/negotiate accommodations appropriately, thereby building a positive working relationship with faculty and improving the quality of education<br>• **Technology-based training**<br>o Provide information delivered via the on-site training to faculty using an on-line format to increase faculty awareness of instructional strategies, accommodations, resources and supports to educate students with disabilities<br>• **Web accessibility and distance education**<br>o Deliver training to faculty for making web-enhanced courses accessible to students with disabilities |
| **Building Capacity for Institutional Change** |
| • **Administrative directives**<br>o Distribute written notices across campus that describe the policies, guidelines, and practices that enhance the education of students with disabilities<br>• **Student attrition/retention studies**<br>o Create a database pertaining to student retention/attrition and compare/contrast retention figures among students in diverse groups and different programs |

## Resources

Brinkerhoff, L.C. (1994). Developing effective self-advocacy skills in college bound students with learning disabilities. Intervention in School and Clinic, 29, 229-237.

Center on Disability Studies, Research Rehabilitation and Training Center Website [under construction] Available: http://devtest.cds.hawaii.edu/rrtc/products/index.html

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