

Open Door or Revolving Door: Is the Community College a Viable Option for Students with Disabilities?

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Introduction

For students with disabilities, community colleges are the colleges of choice. Seventy-one percent of all students with disabilities in higher education attend two-year colleges (Barnett, 1996). Community colleges serve more students with disabilities than any other branch of postsecondary education. What faces students with disabilities when they come to a community college? Do they find an *open* door or do they experience something more like a *revolving* door? How have various community colleges responded to the challenges of an open door admission policy as it relates to students with disabilities?

Various legislative acts (i.e., Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990) state that educational programs and facilities, including vocational education and training programs at the secondary and postsecondary levels, may not discriminate against persons with disabilities solely on the basis of their disability. These Acts indicate that institutions may not discriminate in recruitment or admissions and must provide reasonable support services, accommodations and modifications to course requirements and facilities (Dowdy & Evers, 1996).

As students with disabilities graduate from high school, they move away from a protective environment in which school personnel are legally responsible for identifying and providing appropriate services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Many students with disabilities entering

a postsecondary environment need extraordinary and intensive services just to make minimal progress toward their personal, academic, and employment goals. The postsecondary environment is different for these students in that they need to *request* specific accommodations and provide documentation of their disability before services will be provided (Fairweather & Shaver, 1990). Concerns arise that many students with disabilities have not learned how to advocate for themselves by the time they enter postsecondary education; and are therefore, not provided the services needed to help them succeed. How do community colleges respond to these students' needs?

Services

Factors drawing students with disabilities to community colleges include open admissions, geographic accessibility, emphasis on faculty teaching over research, strong counseling components, and special services for special populations (Alexander, 1982). In response to students' needs, many community colleges have developed programs and support services necessary to assist students with disabilities as they accomplish their educational and/or vocational goals. Colley and Jamison (1998) studied 720 former special education students in New York. Forty percent had attained a high school diploma but less than half of those students enrolled in postsecondary programs. In addition, less than half of those who did go on to college utilized the academic support services the colleges offered: Are these findings typical?

leave community colleges (Barnett, 1996).

Success of Disability Support Programs

In 1992, Barnett (for the AACC) sought to identify key factors contributing to the success of disability support programs. The six mentioned most frequently were administrative commitment, community linkages, staff expertise, faculty support, student-oriented approach, and stable funding.

In a related study, Scott-Skillman, Guichard, Halliday, Tarrer, Wilson, (1992) examined the effectiveness of a specific California community college program that serves students with disabilities, the Disabled Students Program and Services (DSP&S). The DSP&S Program provides support services, specialized instruction and educational accommodations for students with disabilities to ensure full participation and benefits equal to those of their non-disabled peers in the college experience. In this program, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) connects the student's goals and curriculum to his/her academic accommodations. Highlights of the findings include:

- The program positively impacted the college access of students with special needs.
- * Students with special needs can be mainstreamed into general college courses. They can successfully complete and can reach their identified educational and career goals.
- It costs more to educate students with special needs. The costs have often exceeded the available allocation of funds.

To facilitate the transition from secondary to postsecondary education for students with disabilities, Garten, Runrill, Serebreni (1996) propose "The

Higher Education Transition Model." The model consists of a three-part framework. To be effective, all three parts must co-exist and interact.

- Academic Development- learning and using effective study and time management skills and utilizing college services.
- Psychosocial Adjustment- moving from dependence to independence and establishing and maintaining adult relationships.
- College and Community Orientation-early linkages with the college, making connections with other students and participating in orientation sessions and campus activities

Programs for students with disabilities have centered on the first of these three parts, leaving one to speculate how much more success the student with disabilities would enjoy if the last two received more attention.

As discussed above, as a direct consequence of open-door admissions policies, 71% of students with disabilities attend community colleges (Barnett, 1996). Therefore, students with disabilities *enter* community colleges, but educational opportunity means more than access. Is the open-door policy, which allows students with disabilities admittance to higher education, really the *revolving door* described in community college literature? Are community colleges retaining these students? Are students successfully completing programs (Alexander, 1982)? These questions must provide the backdrop for institutional and program evaluation and planning in order to address accountability.

Iowa's Response

In an effort to respond to legislation and student needs, a number of Iowa community colleges have collaborated with local public schools (which also act as funding agents) and area education agencies to develop secondary programs for students with disabilities on community college campuses. By law, all public school students with an identified disability must have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). This IEP includes individualized annual goals and objectives as well as a section that addresses transition. If a student has completed his or her high school requirements, yet has an unmet IEP vocational goal and would require special education support and assistance to accomplish it, he or she can continue his or her IEP programming at a community college. This is considered a secondary program at a post-secondary institution. In this type of transitional/vocational program, the student can accomplish his or her vocational goal while receiving the structure, support, and assistance of a secondary special education program. The overriding goal of these programs is for the students to become self-sufficient adults, ready for employment and independent living.

The Iowa Lakes Community College's secondary at a postsecondary program, SAVE (Student Alternative Vocational Education), often works in tandem with the college's COC (Career Orientation Center) program to address the student's social, self-determination, and independent living deficiencies. The COC program philosophy involves a holistic approach in which the student develops self-esteem and a positive work attitude. Social skills and independent living skills are practiced in an integrated setting,

through real life experiences. Often unacknowledged in a postsecondary setting, self-determination, social, and independent living issues have an impact on the success of the postsecondary education venture (Gartin, Rumrill & Serebreni, 1996; Colley & Jamison, 1998). These needs as well as the student's vocational goals are addressed and integrated into the student's SAVE program Individualized Education Plan.

By participating in a secondary at post secondary program the student with disabilities receives requisite individualized services, structure, and accommodations. Within the arena of the community college and supported by special education programming, the student can develop the self-determination, social skills as well as vocational skills needed to be successful once she or he completes the community college program.

Summary and Conclusions

Clearly absent from the pool of literature related to services and programs for students with disabilities at community colleges is effective tracking documentation of students while they are in college and after they leave. Student outcomes and program evaluation scream for future research- Simply providing services for students with disabilities lacks social validity if not included within the framework of positive student educational and vocational outcomes. Follow-up research and ongoing evaluation must occur in order to provide the feedback loop needed to improve and develop effective programs to ensure the success of community college students with disabilities.

If examined, the results and information previously addressed could lead to improved

services for students with disabilities attending community colleges. Several approaches are recommended:

- Establish formalized programs for students with disabilities. Then back the program by identifying the resource commitment to make it happen.
- Develop linkages with secondary schools to identify students who would benefit from postsecondary education. Set in place transition practices to ensure and ease the movement from one educational environment to the next.
- Connect students with the programs and services they need to be successful.
- Track all students, both while in school and once they leave, as one gauge of institutional effectiveness.

With questions on the horizon about costs and outcomes, community colleges must be prepared with documented answers. Once established, programs/services, the formalization of linkages, and documentation of tracking creates an enviable situation. Rather than mumbling an apology about having to follow legislative as well as open door mandates, learning opportunities for students with disabilities can be championed. Only if community colleges provide the innovative programs/services and the required financial commitment, not only to admit but also to serve, their unique needs is the community college a viable option for students with disabilities. Without this commitment the community college's open door remains a revolving door for students with disabilities.

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