

Attitudes Toward Disabilities and Reasonable Accommodations and a Workable Communication Solution: *Disability Fact Sheet Handbook*

INTRODUCTION

Students with disabilities are enrolling in postsecondary educational settings more often than ever before. The number of students with “hidden” learning and medical increased fourfold between 1978 and 1994 (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, and McGuire, 1993; Vogel and Adelman, 1993). In 1988, 15.3% of first-time, full-time college freshmen with disabilities indicated theirs was a learning disability. By 1994, that statistic had more than doubled to 32.2% of incoming freshmen with disabilities (HEATH Resource Center, 2000).

Federal regulations implementing Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) establish under law that reasonable and appropriate academic accommodations must be provided to students with disabilities to allow these students to allow equal access to educational opportunities. According to the National Council on Disability, “a good education is a ticket to success in our society: it is a predictor of success in later life in terms of employment, income, and independence” (1989, 1). The primary factor that enhances academic success among students with disabilities is strong, ongoing communication. The better informed both students and faculty are about the nature of student disabilities and appropriate accommodations that work, the more likely the students with disabilities will achieve their educational potential and goals in life.

THE PROBLEM

Despite current, enforced disability regulations and laws, several persistent barriers remain in the academic environment. Those barriers include a lack of knowledge, misconceptions among both students and faculty, negative attitudes toward students with disabilities, and a lack of effective educational tools to address disabilities from the students’ point of view. Students with disabilities are not always given equal access by faculty and administration to all of the educational opportunities available for them at universities.

Attitudes Toward Disabilities and Reasonable Accommodations

The attitudes people have about their own disabilities and the attitudes others have toward persons with disabilities are multifaceted. The student’s attitudes can range from: forever unhappy, accepting and adjusting, embracing, to things could be worse (Yuker, 1988) and can have a dramatic impact on how well that person communicates with faculty and any requests for accommodations. In the same vein, faculty attitudes can range from viewing the student’s accommodation request as: an unfair advantage, something given only out of obligation, encouraged, or a right. Faculty attitudes can hinder, encourage, or enhance the student’s attempts to have appropriate accommodations implemented (Graham and English, 2001). The greater the communication between students with disabilities and faculty administration and the clearer the understanding of the nature of disability by all concerned, the more likely it will be that students with disabilities can maximize their educational potential and with ease.

OBJECTIVE/THESIS

My aim is to identify and examine the variety of barriers and develop a workable communication solution that addresses the needs and goals of students, faculty, and administration. This solution will take the form of a *Disability Fact Sheet Handbook*. The project will take a three-prong approach: 1) preliminary literature review of the research that addresses discrimination originating from prejudice, social stigmas, and negative assumptions about students with disabilities; 2) production and publication of the handbook and monitoring its use for one academic year; 3) quantitative evaluation of the handbook’s effectiveness in improving communication between students with disabilities and faculty. The quantitative section will be implemented the Fall and is not part of this particular proposal.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Findings in the literature review identified three primary attitudes that students and faculty hold toward accommodation requests: negative, indifferent, and positive (Graham, English, 2001). Research has also shown that (1) the better informed students and faculty are about student disabilities, the more likely it is that such students will maximize their educational potential (Sheila and English, 2001; Leyser, Vogel, and Wyland, 1998); (2) faculty who have solid information about disabilities have more positive attitudes toward students with disabilities (Askamit et. Al., 1987); and (3) 24% of faculty surveyed wanted more training on classroom accommodations. Of that number 34.3% wanted training on test accommodations and 31.7% wanted more written information in the form of a handbook on disabilities or one-page informational handouts (Leyser et al., 1998).

Additional findings revealed that people without disabilities (or even some with disabilities) judge the severity of a disability by the individual's functional limitations, or the adaptive equipment that the individual with a disability must use (Smart). If a person with a disability detects another person's prejudice, that person will inherently adopt those feelings into a self-identity (Smart). Those adopted feelings can diminish the student's self-confidence, self-esteem, and self-worth, and negatively affect the student's level of self-advocacy and communication skills. Thus erroneous perceptions can make it even harder for a person to discuss the nature of a disability and the need for accommodations with faculty members or college administration personnel.

Benefit of Increased Communication Between Students with Disabilities and Faculty

While a student is not required to discuss a "disability" with faculty, doing so opens the door for better communication. First, students are the entity that must give the faculty permission to discuss their disabilities confidentially with them (by law faculty cannot discuss the nature of a disability with a student unless the student initiates the conversation). Second, students can encourage faculty through honest discussion to become more knowledgeable about disabilities. Third, students can make faculty aware that students want to work jointly on disability issues and collaborate on the instructional strategies that will advocate for students with disabilities. Finally, students can let faculty know they expect adoption of suggestions approved by UC Irvine's Disability Services Center (DSC) or further exploration of alternate forms of accommodation.

METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research project, "Attitudes Toward Disabilities and Reasonable Accommodations and a Workable Communication Solution: *Disability Fact Sheet Handbook*," formerly "Increasing Disability Awareness," (also my Political Science honors thesis), began last year under the direction of Dr. Sereseres. I have taken the first of my required 190 Senior Thesis class with him and plan on registering for the second scheduled for Summer Session I. I took the H 82A Honors Seminar with Dr. Sandholtz in Fall. In that seminar, I submitted a project description, bibliography, partial literature review, mini-thesis, outline, and full thesis statement.

During this past year, I wrote and compiled the *Disability Fact Sheet Handbook*, scheduled to be a 100-page appendix to my honors thesis. While researching the handbook, informal meetings and discussions were held with students with disabilities and faculty to identify the degree of common knowledge about various disabilities and the level of communication and interaction that currently was occurring. Information was also gathered from published medical literature as well as statistical data on physical, learning, and psychological disabilities and specific academic accommodations for those disabilities already identified by DSC as the most commonly seen on campus. Direct contact with various disability related organizations, agencies, and individuals provided further relevant data to support the development of a handbook for use by students with disabilities, faculty, and administrative staff. An outline for the handbook and a structure for its organization and presentation were subsequently developed.

The *Disability Fact Sheet Handbook* was then created using the data gained from analyzing all the information obtained from the students and faculty, the administration, and the medical and disability literature. Once the

handbook was complete, a workshop titled “Handbook Use” was designed and presented at the Disability Services Center. The workshop discussed how the administration could provide a disability fact sheet to each student, encourage students to be self-advocates by discussing the fact sheet(s) with their faculty members, and analyzed faculty and student feedback as to regular updates of the handbook.

As recipient of the prestigious 2003 Donald A. Strauss Public Service Scholarship and a previous SURP award, I expanded this research project by revising the handbook to meet the needs of seven other UC campuses and subsequently conducted workshops for the Disability Services Center staff at each campus (a process that is still ongoing).

FUTURE SURVEY

In October of 2004, a survey will be designed and implemented to measure the handbook’s effectiveness on the campuses at UC. Participants in the study will include the following: (1) students with physical, learning, and psychological disabilities; (2) students from all four class levels (freshmen, sophomore, junior, and senior); (3) students within various schools (e.g. the School of Social Sciences, the School of Humanities, etc.); and (4) faculty from the various schools at UC Irvine. Again, it is important to note here that this particular survey scheduled for October is NOT part of this proposal. The survey will be the last part of my honors thesis and currently scheduled to be completed during Fall term (after receiving IRB approval).

CONCLUSION

Findings in the literature indicated that the more students and faculty knew about student disabilities, the more likely it was that these students would maximize their educational potential. These findings are supported by Leyser, Vogel, and Wyland’s study, where 34.3% of faculty desired more written information in the form of a handbook or one-page handouts.

The *Disability Fact Sheet Handbook* was developed to increase understanding, reduce misconceptions, and provide the University community with reliable and usable information to modify behavior positively. The goal is also to create a learning environment conducive to university faculty to assist students with their disabilities and thus achieve their educational goals. It reduces the anxiety many students have of being misjudged or labeled when they talk to faculty about the nature of their disabilities and their need for accommodations. The handbook changes the interactive behavior between students and faculty and creates a positive environment for students with disabilities and their teachers.

The handbook is a relevant tool for advocating a useful and positive change within the academic community. The UC system does run the risk of not providing reasonable and appropriate academic accommodations that meet Federal regulations consistently and clearly. Students with disabilities are entitled by Federal mandate to equal access to educational opportunities, and there has already been too high a cost from failing to make appropriate efforts.

TIMELINE:

May: (Pre-Summer grant)

1. Generate survey questions and review them with Dr. Caesar. Submit for IRB approval for Fall.
2. Give an oral and poster presentation at the UCI Annual Undergraduate Research Symposium of my research findings thus far (Fall UROP Fellow).

June:

1. Meet with Dr. Caesar to review the project timeline and update my honors thesis plan.
2. Complete literature review regarding attitudes toward disabilities and update project bibliography.

3. Begin the writing of the honors thesis.

July:

1. Continue with writing the honors thesis.
2. Meet with Dr. Sereseres to review progress, modify research plan/timeline if necessary, and incorporate changes or recommendations.

August:

3. Continue writing honors thesis.
4. Meet with Dr. Sereseres to review progress.

September:

1. Complete honors thesis, except for the survey and analyzing quantitative data from the survey (to be completed during Fall).

*14 week period (400 hours, approximately 29 hours per week)

\$3,000.00

*Due to my disability, and the nature of this project, I will need additional time (14 weeks, instead of 10 weeks: June – September 15, 2004).

W o r k s C i t e d (from literature review)

About ICEVI. International Council for Education of People with Visual Impairment.

11 June 2003. <<http://www.ieevi.org>>.

Aksamit, D., M. Morris, and J. Leuenberer. "Preparation of Student Services Professionals and Faculty for Serving Learning-Disabled College Students." Journal of Collge Student Personnel. 28, (1987): 53-59..

Baggett, D. (1994). "A Study of Faculty Awareness of Students with Disabilities." Paper presented at the annual meeting of the National Association for Development Education, Kansas City, MO (ED 369 208).

Blair, Jim. Disability Discrimination (Provision of Programs and Services).

California: University of California, Irvine, 2003.

Brinckerhoff, L.C., S.F Shaw and J.M. McGuire , "Promoting Postsecondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Handbook for Practitioners." Austin, TX: PRO-ED. (1993).

Connecticut College Office of Disability Services. Connecticut College Handbook for Students with Disabilities.

22 October 2002.

<<http://www.conncoll.edu/offices/deans/disabilities/#defdisab>>.

Fichten, D.S., R. Amsel, D.V Bourdon, and L. Creti. "Interaction Between College Students with a Physical Disability and Their Professors." Journal of Applied Rehabilitation Counseling. 19, (1988): 13-21.

Graham, Sheila and Ronald English. " Requesting Academic Accommodations." CHADD. Attention!. October 2001.

<http://www.chadd.org/webpage.cfm?cat_id=7>

Fonosch, G.G., and L.O. Schwab. "Attitudes of Selected University Faculty Members Toward Disabled Students." Journal of College Student Personnel, 22, (1981): 229-235.

HEATH Resource Center. 2001 College Freshmen with Disabilities: A Biennial Statistical Profile. Washington, D.C.: American Council on Education, 2001.

Houck, C.K., S.B. Asselin, G.C. Troutman, and G. M. Arrington. "Students with Learning Disabilities in the University Environment: A Study of Faculty and Student Perceptions." Journal of Learning Disabilities. 25(10), (1992): 677-684.

Leyser, W (1989). A Survey of Faculty Attitudes and Accommodations for Students with Disabilities. Journal of Post-secondary Education and Disability. 7(3&4), (1989): 97-108.

National Council on Disability. Rehabilitating Section 504. Washington, D.C.: National Council on Disability, 2003.

Nelson, R.J., G.M.Dodd, and D.J. Smith. "Faculty Willingness to Accommodate Students with Learning Disabilities: A Comparison Among Academic Divisions." Journal of Learning Disabilities. 23(3), (1990): 185-189.

Satcher, J. "Community College Faculty Comfort with Providing Accommodation for Students with Learning Disabilities." College Student Journal. 26 (4), (1992): 518-524.

Tanner, David. "The Learning Disabled: A Distinct Population of Students."

Encyclopedia Britannica. 4th ed. 2001.

Triandis, H.C., J. Adampoulos, and D. Brinberg. "Perspectives and Issues in the Study of Attitudes." In R.L. Jones (Ed.), Attitudes and Attitude Change in Special Education: Theory and Practice. Reston, VA.: The Council of Exceptional Children. (1984).

University of Washington's Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology (DO_IT). Mobility Impairments. 15 November 2001.

<<http://www.washington.edu/doi/Faculty/Strategies/Disability/Mobility/>>.

University of California, Irvine, Office of the Dean of Students. A UCI Guide to

Teaching Students with Disabilities. CA: University of California, Irvine, 2002.

U.S. Department of Labor's Office of Disability Employment Policy. Accommodations Fact Sheet: Job Accommodations for People with learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder. 3 March 2003.

<<http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu/media/employmentldaddfac>.