

# RESEARCH FINDINGS BRIEF

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## **Overview of RRTC's Purpose**

*The purpose of the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (RRTC) is to conduct a strategic program of research, training, technical assistance, and information dissemination focused upon educational supports that increase access and improve outcomes for persons with disabilities in postsecondary education programs and subsequently, in the labor force. Addressing this priority, the primary goals of the RRTC are as follows: 1) To identify the nature and range of educational supports 2) To identify new technologies that improve postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities; 3) To identify effective supports and models of support delivery that contribute to improved outcomes for students with disabilities; 4) To investigate methods by which the supports in postsecondary programs can be extended to the employment environment, including students with severe disabilities; and 5) To provide training, technical assistance and information to educational support personnel, public and private rehabilitation personnel, career placement specialist, and students with disabilities concerning the effectiveness of specific educational supports and models of delivery in improving postsecondary educational and career outcomes of the people with disabilities.*

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## **Topical Review: A State Profile of Current Practices in Community Colleges for Students with Significant Disabilities**

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**AUDIENCE** AHEAD (Association on Higher Education and Disability), Office of Disability Service personnel, Advocacy Groups, high school educators and guidance counselors, rehabilitation professionals, State Executive Office of Community Colleges.

### **ISSUE**

Students with significant disabilities are underrepresented but consistent members of the postsecondary educational environment. A postsecondary education is one of the most significant ways in which an individual can increase their employability (NCES, 1999; U.S. Department of Labor, 1999; Roy, Dimigen, & Taylor, 1998; GAO, 1997). Educational attainment closely relates to lifetime earnings and economic self-sufficiency, two of the hallmarks of successful employment (Disability Rights Advocates, 1997; HEATH, 1996). Seventy-eight percent of high school graduates enter into some type of postsecondary education compared to 37% for individuals with disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). It is critical therefore to understand the barriers that deny access and completion of a postsecondary education and, ultimately, in securing employment. In an effort to better understand the services and accommodations that can lead to better student retention, completion, or, entrance to a four year college program, this article will identify information on accommodations offered to students

with significant disabilities in the community college setting in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts.

The overall purpose of the survey is to identify the current nature of supports and services existing at community colleges for students with significant disabilities. For the purposes of this report the term "significant disability" is meant to include individuals with mental retardation, autism, traumatic brain injury (TBI), or any other significant cognitive disability.

### **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- ◆ What type of service options and settings exist at community colleges for students with significant disabilities (e.g., inclusive, substantially separate, mixed, none)?
- ◆ How many students are enrolled that have significant disabilities?
- ◆ How are programs funded?
- ◆ How many colleges have discontinued programs due to a lack of funding?
- ◆ What academic accommodations are offered?
- ◆ What teaching modifications are offered?
- ◆ What are typical areas of study for students with significant disabilities?
- ◆ Are students with significant disabilities being taught in separate programs by separate faculty?

## METHOD

A telephone survey was conducted with the director of Disability Services at each of the 15 community colleges in the Commonwealth. Fourteen of fifteen colleges responded. Frequencies for each variable were calculated and reported.

## KEY FINDINGS

### General

1. Community Colleges have an array of accommodations that have traditionally been designed to support students with learning and physical disabilities.
2. The majority of community colleges have not implemented accommodations and/or instructional modifications to support students with more significant disabilities (e.g., principles of Universal Design across curriculum, instruction, and the environment).
3. Overall, there is minimal implementation of 'best teaching practices' (e.g., differentiated problem-based instruction) for any student.
4. Professional development activities targeted at increasing faculty ability to support a more diverse student population are not consistently offered.

### Significant

1. Less than one percent of the community college population are students with significant disabilities (e.g., mental retardation, Autism).
2. Two out of fourteen community colleges offer separate programs for students with significant disabilities.
3. Approximately, 53% of community colleges report having designated staff that serve as support personnel or instructors for students with significant disabilities.

5. The most frequently identified funding sources for disability service programs include:
  - General College Fund
  - Perkins Grants
  - State and Federal Funding
  - McNair Grants
5. The most frequently provided academic accommodations were adapted computers, and books on tape at 87% with note takers and extended test time in second place at 80%.
6. The most frequently provided teaching modifications were integrating technology across the curriculum, mentoring, and job shadowing at 27% with the development of career portfolios at 26%.
7. Fourteen percent of Massachusetts's community colleges provide separate curriculum content for students with significant disabilities.
8. The most frequently offered skill training and workshops for students with significant disabilities were training in the use of assistive technology at 73%, and note taking, study skills, and computer skills each at 66%.
9. Typical areas of study for students with significant disabilities include general studies, hotel/restaurant, culinary arts, human services, Noncredit personal enrichment, and business.
10. Between 20%-26% provide separate curriculum content in the areas of basic academic skills, internships, and self-advocacy skills for students with disabilities which may include students with significant disabilities.

## IMPLICATIONS

1. Increase outreach from community colleges to high school age students with significant disabilities and their family members, high school faculty and guidance counselors, provider and adult service organizations. Information regarding access to the array of options available to students at local community colleges may help with recruitment.

2. Students with significant disabilities, age 18-22, who remain under the auspices of their school district should be offered the choice of pursuing a postsecondary education prior to their exiting high school at age 22.
3. There is a need to determine the effectiveness of the wide array of academic accommodations offered in assisting students in gaining access to, retention in and completion of a postsecondary education option.
4. Require high schools to document the students' disability and needed accommodations and learning style.
5. Teaching methodologies need to be expanded to enhance opportunities for an ever increasingly diverse student population including those with significant disabilities.
6. Make professional development training available to all faculty on academic accommodations and teaching modifications, including principles of Universal Design across the curriculum, instructional practices, and the environment.

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