

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.

Focus Groups: Faculty Mentors and Peer Role Models

AUDIENCE Postsecondary school disability support providers, faculty members, students, and researchers.

ISSUE

The support and guidance of faculty and school disability support providers, as well as peer role models, provide important supports for students with disabilities to succeed in a postsecondary educational setting, and to subsequently obtain quality employment.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1) What are the experiences and perceptions of students with disabilities regarding their access to and participation in postsecondary programs?
- 2) What educational supports are available, effective, and/or necessary for students with disabilities?
- 3) How well do their postsecondary experiences prepare students with disabilities for employment, and what are their perspectives concerning transition to the workplace?

METHOD

Focus groups composed of prospective, current, and former students with disabilities were conducted at 10 sites nationally. The groups were designed, with participant input, to elicit student-consumer

perspectives regarding the issues of supports and barriers in the postsecondary setting and the workplace. Researchers generated a list of main issues from each focus group that were then grouped into four general categories of supports and barriers: 1) peer, 2) faculty, 3) administrative, and 4) workplace/employment. The results at each site were then analyzed across the groups to reveal both recurring and site specific issues.

KEY FINDINGS

- Faculty mentoring offers a valuable resource for students with disabilities to succeed in the postsecondary environment. For some students, faculty mentoring is an equally important component of postsecondary education as the academic learning. Faculty guidance and connections outside the postsecondary setting often assist students to obtain quality employment after finishing school.
- Some students with disabilities from an ethnic minority feel that peers and faculty with the same ethnic background can offer uniquely effective support and guidance in the postsecondary environment, and can help to prepare them to confront potential discrimination issues in the workplace.
- Peers can enable and provide guidance by example and as a resource for information about services and supports available for students with disabilities as well as their right to such services

and accommodations. Peers are more patient and understanding than faculty or administrators, and they are an important link to integrate students with disabilities into the campus community. Also, peers are more likely to recognize the abilities and potential of students with disabilities more than the students themselves. Interactions with non-disabled peers are important aspects of socialization, teaching students “how to deal with others.”

- Non-disabled peers often question the accommodations given to students with disabilities, especially for those with LD and other hidden disabilities; they tend to see these accommodations as “unfair advantages.”
- Many students found their school’s disability support providers to be committed and supportive, giving them a human connection to the services offered by the school. Particularly effective support providers offered guidance beyond their job description, such as giving

advice about helpful faculty members or just being there for the students to voice their experiences, concerns, and dreams.

IMPLICATIONS

1 – Faculty mentoring and peer support are two important factors determining success in postsecondary education for students with disabilities. Campuses should establish or build on existing mentoring programs in schools, for both faculty and students.

2 – Diversity workshops and college freshman training should incorporate disability issues. All students must be educated about the necessity of supports and accommodations for students with disabilities.

**For further information on this brief, please contact
John Anderson (808) 956 – 3642;
johnand@cchono.com**

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Central RRTC Contact Information:

Center on Disability Studies • University of Hawai‘i at Manoa
Director – Robert Stodden • (808) 956-9199 • stodden@hawaii.edu
1776 University Avenue, UA 4-6 • Honolulu, HI 96822;
WEB: www.rrtc.hawaii.edu • EMAIL: rrtc@cds.hawaii.edu
Administrative Assistant, Juana Tabali Weir (808) 956-3975 • juana@hawaii.edu