

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 Awareness of Disability Rights

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

ISSUE

Postsecondary faculty are often unaware of disability issues in general, and about the needs of students with LD and other hidden disabilities. This negatively impacts students' ability to self-disclose and self-advocate, as well as faculty teaching styles and students' success in postsecondary programs.

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

- Postsecondary faculty are often unaware of disability issues in general, and are not educated about the needs and rights of students with disabilities. This is especially true for LD and other hidden disabilities such as TBI, when students appear "normal." Faculty must trust students when they disclose their disability, and not assume that they are "faking" their needs.
- Students with disabilities are reluctant to self-disclose to faculty, because they experience faculty who are unwilling or unable to accommodate their needs. Some faculty refuse to share lecture notes or allow for extra time on assignments, because they perceive accommodations as unfair advantages and disability as an excuse for not wanting to do the work assigned. This provides disincentives to self-advocacy for students.
- Partly because of negative experiences with faculty ignorance of disability issues, some

students prefer to self-disclose using form letters from DSS offices stating the nature and implications of their disability. This gives them the credibility and institutional backing when asking for accommodations.

- Once a student self-discloses, the faculty must maintain their privacy and not disclose the student's disability to the rest of the class. Students fear that such disclosure would increase peer perception of unfair advantages.
- In some cases, faculty are exceptionally supportive and understanding and provide important role modeling for students. Their accommodations exceed legal requirements as well as student expectations and make a large impact in the students' postsecondary education experience and success.
- Faculty also must learn different teaching styles to accommodate specific disabilities, such as blindness, hearing impairment, or LD. Students

with blindness, for example, need teaching styles that are verbal, rather than visual.

IMPLICATIONS

- 1 – Postsecondary faculty must be educated about disability needs and accommodation rights to facilitate student self-advocacy and postsecondary success.
- 2 – Faculty should be encouraged and supported to teach to a variety of learning styles, which will better accommodate the needs of all students.
- 3 – Disability services offices need to have procedures for facilitating student disclosure to faculty.

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