

# RESEARCH FINDINGS BRIEF

APRIL 2000 • STUDY AREA 4a, VOLUME 9

## 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.

## Topical Review – Enhancing the Post-secondary Campus Climate for Students with Disabilities

**AUDIENCE** Higher Education Administrators, Disability Support Service Providers, Faculty

### ISSUE

With greater numbers of students with disabilities enrolling in colleges and universities nationwide, it has become more apparent that many campuses are not equipped to meet the unique and varied needs of these students. Just because access to post-secondary education is increasing for students with disabilities, it does not always follow that students selecting this option will discover welcoming, supportive campus climates, programming and services that will facilitate choice, independence, and social participation, or adequate supports to promote academic success. Even at universities that have a solid record of developing and implementing model service delivery activities in support of students with disabilities, it is questionable as to whether these activities have, to any significant degree, impacted the underlying campus climate.

### RESEARCH QUESTION

- What are the information and resources that faculty need to better meet the educational needs of students with disabilities?
- What is the level of satisfaction with and need for services of students with disabilities attending postsecondary schools?

- What are the critical institutional structures that need to be in place in order to meet the needs of students with disabilities in postsecondary education programs?

### METHOD

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) has set a course to develop and implement a broad, comprehensive disability services program designed to enhance the degree with which it supports and serves its students with disabilities. A comprehensive external review of Services for Students with Disabilities at VCU was conducted in the following four phases:

- 1) On-site visits to the Office for Services for Students with Disabilities (OSSD).
- 2) Direct mail survey of currently enrolled students who were receiving services or had previously received services.
- 3) Personal interviews with 49 administrators, faculty, support staff, and students.
- 4) A systematic review of OSSD programs nationwide.

The purpose of this manuscript was to provide an overview of the initial comprehensive evaluation

phase of Virginia Commonwealth University's efforts toward making its campus more welcoming and supportive of students with disabilities.

## KEY FINDINGS

The following major themes emerged from evaluation results:

- Students strongly believe that the instructional faculty, more so than any other campus entity, can impact their academic success.
- Too much emphasis is placed on the removal of the architectural barriers without adequate consideration of the "service-oriented" barriers, which are most critical to student success.
- Coordination of services on-and off-campus is crucial to students as they attempt to successfully manage their disabilities in the context of postsecondary education.
- Students are eager to participate in all phases of service planning and policy making in an effort to improve services for students with disabilities.
- Students and administration/faculty perceive the universities' commitment to providing support services differently.
- The lack of administrative and support staff influenced the efficiency and coordination of support services.

## IMPLICATIONS

- Universities may gather valuable information by conducting an external review of disability support services on their campus.
- At the VCU campus, there was a need for faculty training regarding disabilities and student's rights to accommodations and course modifications.
- At the VCU campus, there was a need for efficient delivery of support and services for invisible disabilities.
- Students may benefit from more formalized interaction between higher education and community based agencies.
- Students may want to be involved in all phases of service planning and policy making.

## REFERENCE

Wilson, K., Getzel, E.E., & Brown, T. (in press). Enhancing the post-secondary campus climate for students with disabilities. *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation*.

**For further information on this brief, please contact Kristi Wilson, Research Associate - Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports, Virginia Commonwealth University P.O. Box 842011, Richmond, VA 23284-2011; (804) 828-1851; kewilson@vcu.org**

The RRTC on Postsecondary Educational Supports is supported by grant #H133B980043 from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research (NIDRR) within the U.S. Department of Education. Opinions and perceptions as shared in this document are those of the researchers involved and no endorsement is implied by the funding agent.

### *Central RRTC Contact Information:*

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