Summary of the Issue:

- Students with disabilities are entering postsecondary education in greater numbers, however, evidence suggests that they experience a great deal of difficulty continuing their college education and completing their program. One major factor contributing to their lack of success is the dramatic differences in the laws that govern their educational support in high school and college.
- In high school, students with disabilities operate in a protective environment in which special education staff are legally responsible to provide individualized supports and services under IDEA.
- In postsecondary settings, students with disabilities are under Section 504 and the American with Disabilities Act (ADA), which requires them to self-identify their disabilities and request accommodations.
- Another factor contributing to their lack of success is their limited development of self-determination/self-advocacy skills when they exit high school.
- Clearly, more supports and services need to be developed in postsecondary settings to support students with disabilities so they will remain in college and complete their program.

Introduction and Statement of the Problem

The demands of twenty-first century workforce include advanced training, technical skills, as well as, high standards of productivity, problem solving, and teamwork. Many studies report that the enrollment rate of students with disabilities in postsecondary education is increasing from 2.6% in 1978, to nearly 19% in 1996 (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gajar 1992, 1998). In spite of these increasing numbers, they are experiencing limited success and exiting college without completing their program (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Witte, Philips, & Kakela, 1998).
The transition from high school to college for all students is complicated and challenging. For students with disabilities it is even more gaping because of the dramatic differences in the laws that govern high school and postsecondary settings. In high school under IDEA (1997), students with disabilities are entitled to individualized supports and services provided by an array of special education staff. Postsecondary settings are governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the ADA (1990) that only mandate access to higher education, not a vast array of services and support personnel to meet their needs. In addition, any accommodations must be requested by the student otherwise the college is under no obligation to provide them. This means that in order for college students with disabilities to be able to access and learn successfully in postsecondary settings they must assume full responsibility, often for the first time, for securing any accommodations they may need for success in their college studies.

Consequently, self-determination and self-advocacy skills or the ability to articulate one’s strengths, challenges, and necessary supports are critical when entering postsecondary settings. Wehmeyer (1998) has written extensively about the need for people with disabilities to become more autonomous and to learn how to make choices and advocate for their wishes and needs. Stodden (2000) and Izzo and Lamb (2002, in press) write that self-determination/self-advocacy are critical skills for the success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education and employment. However, many college students with disabilities report they are uncomfortable requesting accommodations from faculty (Izzo, Hertzfeld & Aaron, in press). Often times they must advocate for accommodations with faculty who have limited knowledge of ADA, the characteristics of specific disabilities, and the appropriate accommodations.

Stodden (2000) proposed several research questions to address the problems and issues students with disabilities encounter in postsecondary education related to self-determination and self-advocacy:

- To what extent is the requirement that a person disclose their disability in order to obtain services a deterrent to postsecondary enrollment and completion?
- To what extent does helping students develop self-determination and self-advocacy skills assist student succeed within postsecondary settings?

**Innovative Practices**

Bridges, a transition project funded by the National Science Foundation, to connect and support students with disabilities who have career interests in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics, is piloting a College Success Class with the express purpose of developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills in students with disabilities. There are several other overarching goals of the course: promote sensitivity and awareness of disability issues within the college faculty, increase the knowledge and use of supports available to students with disabilities, and develop a more supportive college environment for students with disabilities.
The course is a one-semester course co-taught by a College Disabilities Counselor and the Bridges Project Director, a transition specialist. Students meet once a week for a two-hour class period. The qualitative method is being used to understand the effect of the intervention, i.e. the College Success Class, by listening to the voices of the students over time and analyzing the changes in their thinking and actions related to self-determination and self-advocacy. Students are asked to complete instructor designed pretest and posttest on self-determination and a comprehensive evaluation of the class. During the spring semester, students were asked to meet with the course instructors approximately every six weeks during the semester to discuss their progress, problem solve, and provide encouragement and support. Students participated in an interview concerning their college success at the end of the semester. The major course activities include:

- Write four reflective journals related to class activities
- Learn about goal setting and develop personal goals
- Research and present a biography on a person with a disability
- Participate in a panel discussion by veteran college students/faculty with disabilities
- Write a Self-Advocacy Plan including information about academic strengths, challenges, learning style, and accommodations for success.
- Present Self-Advocacy Plan to College Faculty
- Complete Campus Resource Treasure Hunt

- Complete a unit on Internal and External Locus of Control
- Develop and present a workshop on Disabilities, the Law, and Accommodations to college faculty

**Research Findings**

Twelve students enrolled in the class with nine of the students completing all of the course components and participating in the second semester follow-up meetings. Two of the twelve students quit coming to the class and one student did not participate in the follow-up meetings. Consequently the findings for this pilot study are based on data analysis of nine students.

- **Increase in ability to describe self-determination.**

An analysis of the students' pre/post surveys reveal that seven of the nine students could describe what it means to be self-determined in more detail after the class. For example: Zach described self-determination before the class as "having a goal for yourself." After the class he stated that a self-determined person "stays on top of things, plans ahead, takes charge of things and goes after what they need." On his pretest Josh described self-determination as the "motivation to want to finish something." On the posttest he stated that someone who is self-determined has "goals and a plan to meet those goals, is organized, has good time management, doesn't give up, and takes responsibility for himself."

- **Increase in ability to describe self-advocacy.**

The analysis of the pretest on students' definition of self-advocacy five of the nine students gave no description. The other four gave very limited definitions.
On the posttest all nine of the students could describe the meaning of self-advocacy in greater detail. Kris could not define self-advocacy on the pretest but provided this description on the posttest, "to talk with your instructor for feedback about your work in class, and to ask for assistance when you don't understand and ask for accommodations for your disability." Zach clarified his understanding of the self-advocacy between the pre and posttest. On the pretest he defined self-advocacy as "making the right decision without help from outsiders." On the posttest he reported, "that you talk with the instructors about your disability, about the class style and the types of homework and about the accommodations that you need."

In the College Success Class, students had to develop a self-advocacy plan describing their abilities, challenges, and accommodations and then discuss it with college instructors who volunteered to come to the class and listen to their plans and provide them feedback. The majority of the students (7/9) reported that they felt more confident and better prepared to talk with college instructors after this experience. Two of the students reported that they were nervous and that the experience did not prepare them for doing this in the future because they will still be nervous when they talk with their instructors about their disability.

In an individual meeting with the students at the end of their spring semester, seven of the nine students reported that they spoke with one or more of their instructors in the spring semester about their disability and the accommodations they needed. One student who did not self-advocate by meeting with his instructors stated, "That was my downfall. I would have done better in physics, if I had talked with him about my progress in his class and asked for more time on the tests. I won't make that mistake again."

- **Student comments on class**

At the end of the class, students were asked to complete a written evaluation listing the things they liked best and least about the class, the one major thing they learned in the class, and to rate the value of the major activities of the class on a scale of 1 (least) to 5 (most). Five of the students reported that they liked the friendly, laid-back atmosphere of the class. Three students reported that the class gave them the support they needed to be successful in college. One student reported that he felt the atmosphere of the class and the curriculum was too much like high school and the students were immature. Two students felt that goal setting was overemphasized. Three students reported that they learned a great deal about their disability and accommodations. Three other students reported that they felt this class helped them become more independent, responsible, and in control. In the words of Kris, "I learned that I am able to be what I want, but it is my responsibility to make it come to pass."

When asked if they would recommend the class to other students with disabilities, seven out of nine students indicated “Yes”. Rick wrote, "It will teach them what college is all about and give them a support base." Joe felt that, "it would help them more to get through the first semester of college." Two of the nine students indicated that maybe they would recommend the course. Lyle
wrote, "Some things can't be taught they have to be experienced. Maybe if it were more of a guide." Kris indicated, "I didn't learn much, but some students will find it helpful." However, in the final individual meetings at the end of the spring semester, all of the students would recommend the class including the two who were ambivalent. Lyle shared in the last meeting, "Having this program has kept my mind on my long term goals and helped me stay focused on school. The encouragement has been very helpful." Kris stated that the course and the support in the second semester "helped me quite a bit and I would recommend it to other students." Two students in their last interview shared that they would have quit college before the end of their second semester if they did not have this class and the follow-up support.

- **Student ratings of the course activities**
The majority of the students rated the course activities between average value (3) to above average (4) or most valuable (5). Two activities: The Research and Presentations on People with Disabilities and the Panel Discussion by College Students and Faculty with Disabilities were rated by 6 of the 9 students as “above average” value or “most valuable”. The most valued activity by all students was the College Teacher Forum on Disabilities. In this activity students were divided into two groups and asked to develop an hour workshop for college faculty on disabilities. The workshop had to include information on the ADA and accommodating students with disabilities, information on one or more disabilities, the accommodations that would assist students in class, and how college faculty could help students with disabilities feel more comfortable in class. Students were required to develop a handout for teachers on the important information and have a visual display. All students were required to present a part of the workshop. They were required to meet outside of class as they were only given one hour of class time to discuss and plan. Fifteen faculty members attended each session. All thirty of the college faculty attending the workshops reported that the student presentations were one of the most valuable and meaningful they had ever attended. Although this class activity was the most challenging and complex it received the highest value rating. Two students rated it of average value (3). Three students rated it above average value (4) and four students rated it the most valuable (5).

In the final analysis, the data on the College Success Class, while limited by the small number of participants, does offer researchers and postsecondary educators/counselors some valuable information. First, a course with activities on self-determination, and self-advocacy can increase college students’ with disabilities understanding of these concepts. Second, when given opportunities to practice self-advocacy with college instructors their confidence increased and they are more likely to talk with their own instructors. The fact that all of the students would recommend this course to other students with disabilities as a means to support and assist them during their first year in college is an indicator that courses like these offered on college campuses may be of value in teaching them how to self-advocate and become more self-determined. In the long term, courses
like this may increase students with disabilities capacity to remain in college and achieve their postsecondary goals. However, further study in this area is needed. The course will be repeated in the fall of 2002 with an enrollment of 18-20 students.
Preliminary Student Outcomes on College Success Class

Increase in defining self-determination
Increase in defining self-advocacy
Increase confidence in talking with instructors about disabilities and accommodations
Increase in students requesting accommodations from one or more instructors
Recommend the course to other students with disabilities

Number of Students

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9
References:


Izzo, M. & Lamb, P. (2002). Self Determination and career development: Skills for successful transition to postsecondary education and employment, a White Paper written in collaboration with the Post-Outcomes Network of the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) based at the University of Hawaii at Manoa. For a copy of the White Paper please contact meganj@hawaii.edu or go to http://www.rrtc.hawaii.edu/capacity.

