The Poster Child at the Crossroad of Life:
Orphans of Their Culture or Culturally Empowered
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The Poster Child at the Crossroad of Life: Orphans of Their Culture or Culturally Empowered
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The purpose of the paper is to provide a theoretical discussion about what students with disabilities need in order to persist in postsecondary education, and graduate with a degree. Many of the strategies developed for postsecondary students with disabilities originate in secondary education. These efforts are conceptualized as self-determination and self-advocacy strategies, and the general goals of these strategies are: teach students to understand and talk about their disability; enable them to identify needs and supports; and create self-advocates for supports and accommodations. In an attempt to increase the number of students with disabilities who attend colleges and universities and improve graduation rates, self-determination and self-advocacy strategies are now being adapted to postsecondary settings. The following discussion suggests a response strategy consisting of four components: self-determination and self-advocacy curriculum developed to build life skills and increase cultural capital and provide the foundation and underlying philosophy guiding every course; faculty sustained environments where positive postsecondary experiences flourish, a range of related services exist for students on campus, and a coordinated system of supports that is classroom-centered. Individually, these components appear to enhance a student’s persistence in education and an institution’s ability to retain students, together they reinforce efforts and
commitments to students with disabilities. The first section contains a discussion of the status of students with disabilities in secondary and postsecondary education.

**Introduction**

Think of the image of the “poster child,” a single face defining a group of people, a static representation of a lifetime of challenges, expressions that tug at your heart and call out, “take care of me.” The use of the poster child is the cornerstone of an effective fund raising strategy used by programs and services. Though the program benefits from the image of the child, the image of the child creates a paternalistic relationship between the disability, not the individual, and the public. The poster child may not be used as much as it was in the past, but the impact of these haunting images and how we were asked to relate to disabilities have defined how the culture accepts and interacts with people who are disabled. People with disabilities are still used to represent a group of people, their faces are included in grants to meet federal obligations and they may be hired by organizations to validate the quality and sensitivity of their services to their clients. The involvement of people with disabilities may still have only face value. It must be emphasized, individuals who attempt to include people with disabilities may have good intentions but they must also ask themselves: Do I include people with disabilities because they are individuals with valued expertise and professional skill or because they validate our organization? The question itself frames the response and if we as educators and service providers respond properly this question will never need to be asked. This article is a call to action for changes that must occur in order prevent poster children from growing up as orphans of their culture. Educators and service providers need to support the interdependence of curricula, teachers, related services and supports, and a coordinated system of supports to ensure individuals with disabilities are engaged by their culture and empowered by this relationship. The goals are individuals with disabilities:

- are able to define themselves and act as individuals;
- have valued expertise and professional skills;
- develop equitable relationships between individuals with and without disabilities; and,
- are seen as fully participating members of their communities.

The response advocated in this article appears straightforward. In order for individuals with disabilities to be able to define themselves and have valued expertise and professional skills they must be educated in school and life. Research strongly suggests, “better access to and outcomes in postsecondary education will improve not only the rates of employment for adults with disabilities but also the quality of employment” (Stodden and Dowrick, 1999, p. 19). The strategy should then become one of getting as many students with disabilities into college and graduated. The simplicity of the response ends here and a multitude of challenges begin.
2. Specific Challenges within Secondary Education and Proposed Responses

The fact remains students with disabilities do not attend postsecondary institutions because at the secondary level they continue to lag behind their non-disabled counterparts in education and employment. Unfortunately, the negative consequences of dropping out of high school are as significant (if not more) for youth with disabilities as for youth without disabilities. The consequences include unemployment; loss of opportunity for postsecondary schooling; and lack of engagement in productive activities after high school (Edgar, 1987; Padilla & Jay, 1990; Wagner, 1991). Attempts to close gaps between education and employment for students with disabilities are addressed in the secondary education classrooms through curriculum designed specifically for students with disabilities. In spite of these efforts, gaps and problems persist and these are some of the reasons why.

There are failures to produce coordinated and integrated improvements that accommodate and support students with disabilities in learning rigorous, standards-based curriculum (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Edgar, 1997; Hatch, 1998; USDOE, 1995, 1996; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998)

Efforts to integrate students with varying abilities into core high school academic programs have been hindered by a shortage of financial and professional, resources, and an inadequate research base (Jorgensen, 1997; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Vaughn, Schumm, & Brick, 1998).

The system of grouping individuals by ability often subjects students with disabilities to dramatically different and unequal levels of curricula (Jorgensen, 1997; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Vaughn, Schumm, & Brick, 1998).

Implementing self-determination strategies has been “ineffective” in secondary education environments because curricula are not being translated into the classroom, and self–determination skills are not included in the IEP because teachers are unaware of what resources exist (Test, Karvonen, Wood, Browder, Algozzine, 2000, p. 50).

Primary influences on dropout rates are the same for youth with and without disabilities and influences include failure, poor grades; low self-esteem; poor attendance; repeating a grade(s); and dislike of school (Kortering & Braziel,
Students with disabilities continue to lack the variety, frequency and latitude of learning opportunities that allow them to experiment with behavioral options (Ward and Kohler, 1996, p. 288).

Based on what we have learned from secondary education we advocate for the following responses:

**Response: Self-determination strategies provide the foundation that guides every postsecondary course.** In response to these gaps in outcomes, the Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services (OSERS, 1988) implemented a self-determination initiative to support individuals with disabilities. Self-determination strategies are aimed at enhancing decision-making, personal choice, and self-advocacy skills; and increasing the opportunity to enhance personal control. As a testament to the success of the OSERS initiative, over 60 self-determination curricula have been created (Test, et. al., 2000). Unfortunately, the ineffectiveness of these curricula does not lie in the content, it lies in the failure to integrate curricula with the larger campus environment. Students with disabilities require more than self-determination courses to increase the variety, frequency and latitude of learning opportunities. They need long-term reinforcement and practice to internalize these principles. Research is needed to identify strategies to integrate self-determination and self-advocacy skills into every course. All students, with and without disabilities, could benefit from curricula aimed at enhancing decision-making, personal choice and self-advocacy skills; and increasing the opportunity to enhance personal control (Abery, Bruininks and Eggebeen, n.d.).
Response: Link self-determination classrooms within the campus. The main challenge to supporting students with disabilities stems from the inability to integrate curriculum outside the classroom and with the rest of the campus. OSERS demonstration projects tend to create “safe houses” (Rosaldo, 1993)—classes designed for specific groups or specific outcomes. There is value in these “safe house of separateness” because they “foster self-esteem and promote a sense of belonging in often alien institutions” (Rosaldo, 1993, p. xi). Safe houses are critical to the retention of students. Perhaps the temptation is to transplant secondary education “safe house” strategies into other settings (i.e. employment, transition, adult education, postsecondary education) so educators and service providers can focus less on curriculum and focus more on supporting students with disabilities. As we learn from secondary education, the integration of self-determination efforts falls short because they lack coordination, lack resources, and are not integrated within regular education classrooms. Self-determination curricula and philosophies need to be mainstreamed into the prime time system of support services and classrooms, and teachers should be included as part of the service delivery system. Research is needed to develop and integrate self-determination strategies within specific settings (i.e. postsecondary, employment) that tend to be less structured complex environments.

3. Specific Challenges within Postsecondary Education Classrooms and Responses

In spite of self-determination efforts in secondary education, students with disabilities are still not represented proportionately in postsecondary education and those who do attend may remain invisible on a college campus:

In 1996, only 19% of high school graduates with disabilities— compared to 53% of youth in the general population— attended some type of postsecondary school two years after leaving high school (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996).

The rates for students with disabilities in postsecondary education, while improving, are still 50 percent lower than that of the general population (Stodden and Dowrick, 2000; OSEP, 1992).

Students appear to enter postsecondary institutions poorly prepared and many need significant remedial work before they can take college-level courses (Seon and King, 1997).

In some cases students do not persist simply because they do not understand the time and effort that must be put into succeeding in school (Arnold, 2000, p. 133).

The University of Hawaii provides persistence rates for major ethnic groups but statistics do not reflect the number of students with disabilities—students with disabilities remain invisible on their campuses.
Students with disabilities may choose to remain invisible because they may be concerned about the “stigma of accommodations” and feel: “Teachers and other students think I’m getting away with something when I’m given accommodations (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000, p. 11).

Looking into the future, the college student of the 21st century will most likely be non-traditional. These students tend to delay college attendance and are older when they first enroll in a postsecondary education. Non-traditional students usually live at home, commute to school, may work part-time or full-time off-campus, and have family obligations (Bean and Metzner, 1985). It is the non-traditional student who also carries the additional burden of being “at-risk” (Roueche, Roueche and Milliron, 1995). The “at-risk” student has been defined as a single parent, minority, first-generation college student, and attending school part-time. Postsecondary students with disabilities can be defined as non-traditional and at-risk and they face a completely different set of challenges than those faced by students in secondary education.

At-risk students face the challenge of earning a degree with the added responsibilities of working, having a history of academic difficulties, and being challenged by economic and child-care needs.

Family obligations appear to challenge the persistence and retention of students.

For non-traditional students, a majority of normative supports appear to come from outside the campus. Non-traditional students may rely on peer supports outside the academic environment simply “because their reference group of peers, friends, family, and employers exists outside the institution” (Bean and Metzner, 1985, p. 506).

“If school has not been a cultural value in the lives of many students’ families” it appears that “first-generation [college] students study less…and complete fewer hours during their first year. These [students] also tend to work more hours off campus” (Arnold, 2000, p. 132).

Part of the challenge may be students who struggle in school do so simply because they have not been expected to succeed in school. Students may not have been impressed with expectations that they could learn, and it is unclear whether “students couldn’t learn or just hadn’t been taught.” (Arnold, 2000, p. 132).

Services are available on campus but are not well-developed programmatically; and tend to lean toward advocacy, informational services, or remediation of content rather than accommodating areas necessary for independent learning and self reliance (Reis, Neu and McGuire, 1977; Stodden and Dowrick, 1999, p. 21).
Students who gain a perception of control [over their lives] initially appear to be gaining little more than suspending disbelief. Curriculum that keeps students engaged in life’s processes and believes they must begin to sense that they are actually gaining control over and participating in some important decisions in their lives (Halpern, 1996).

Given what we know about the challenges faced by students with disabilities in postsecondary settings and their poor outcomes, we propose a four-part response:

- self-determination and self-advocacy strategies build life skills, increase cultural capital, and provide the foundation and underlying philosophy guiding every course;
- faculty create environments where positive postsecondary experiences flourish;
- a range of related services exist for students on campus; and,
- these three responses become part of a coordinated system of supports that is classroom centered.

### 3.1. Response: Self-determination and self-advocacy curriculum developed to build life skills and increase cultural capital and provide the foundation and underlying philosophy guiding every course.

The theory of cultural capital developed by Pierre Bourdieu appears relevant to the culture of students with disabilities and cultural empowerment. Cultural capital relates to specific groups that have certain characteristics that make them fit or unfit for success (Apple and Wexler, 1978). The assumption is academic culture provides a reproduction function in society and believes the inequities of cultural capital do not lie in the cultural attributes of children, but in the limited responsiveness of our economic and educational institutions (Apple and Wexler, 1978, p. 38).

Cultural capitalists believe certain forms of knowledge are elevated above others and assert individuals and families most connected to mainstream social institutions, those possessing cultural capital, have a greater opportunity to assert their linguistic and cultural competencies and define the norm. Researchers suggest educational institutions value and maintain the knowledge and “culture” of the dominant group typically defined as middle-class whites. All other groups, lower class, minority, first-generation college students, and students belonging to the disability culture, may lack the “cultural capital” of the dominant group. Students without cultural capital may experience a world devoid of their reflection, and as Adrienne Rich states: “When someone with the authority of a teacher, say describes the world and you are not in it, there is a moment of psychic disequilibrium, as if you looked into a mirror and saw nothing.” What is proposed is a self-determination strategy that attempts to create “psychic equilibrium” and offer cultural empowerment.
The proposed response necessitates the development of a curriculum designed to provide a philosophical and pedagogical base for existing courses and established curricula to enhance a student’s self-determination and self-advocacy skills.

In every setting students with disabilities must be understood not only in terms of the skills they bring into the postsecondary environment but also the purpose and function of their actions within the postsecondary environment.

On a college campus it is not enough to create unique programs that serve as “safe houses” for students with disabilities. Self-determination and self-advocacy strategies should also be mainstreamed across departments and in many classes. The issues of students with disabilities need to be communicated through prime time campus venues.

Students with disabilities have fewer opportunities and are given much less latitude for experimental behavior than students without disabilities. As students transition out of secondary education it is important to continue to increase the variety and range of learning opportunities to reinforce the concept of self-determination and self-advocacy and enable students to continue to create successes in their lives.

Choice and control should be included programming for students with cognitive and developmental disabilities. Provide unsheltered settings so students with disabilities can experience success in competitive and natural environments.

3.2. Response: Faculty create environments where positive postsecondary experiences flourish

Research finds frequent student-faculty interactions appear to have positive effects on student retention (Feldman and Newcomb, 1973; Spady, 1971; Tinto, 1975, 1993; Astin, 1977, 1993; Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). “Issues of intellectual work, commitment to student intellectual growth, and opportunities for student involvement in learning, especially in the classroom, are all deeply affected by the way the faculty interacts with students over matters of intellectual substance” (Tinto, 1993, p. 53). Faculty provide a primary role in shaping and communicating the educational values and standards of the institution (Tinto, 1993).

Students are more likely to stay in college if positive postsecondary experiences reinforce intentions and commitments to the goal of college completion, and help the student feel integrated within the institution. Negative postsecondary experiences appear to distance the individual from the social and intellectual communities of the institution, and increase the likelihood that students will leave the institution and higher education altogether (Tinto, 1975, 1987, 1993). The classroom—the place where academic and social spheres intersect—becomes the critical link between students and faculty (Tinto, 1997). Faculty
become essential links in a college and are encouraged to engage students in the learning environment of the classroom and create opportunities for them to actively interact with other students. The assumption is increasing a student’s involvement in academic activities will also foster social involvement within the larger college environment. With this in mind it becomes particularly important for students with disabilities to be supported within a classroom. The classroom is where academic learning may open doors to social integration, and integration is one key to retention and persistence.

The proposed response defines faculty [across departments] as the primary agents to build student involvement. Faculty can strengthen student’s sense of worth and academic ability, and as a result can strengthen a student’s sense of control over his/her environment.

For non-traditional students, the classroom may be the only place where they will have contact with faculty. These students usually have limited time to spend on the college campus or to get involved in out-of-class functions. They may not have the time or opportunity to seek out help when they are having academic difficulties or problems adjusting to the social climate. In order these students are to get involved in the college and university community, the involvement may have to begin and be sustained in the classroom.

Faculty need to reach out to students during the first six weeks of the first semester and communicate that students are valued. Students who feel valued by their institution may have a stronger commitment to the institution and graduation than individuals who do not feel valued. Non-traditional students, in particular, need someone to take the initiative and reach out to engage them.

Frequent student-faculty interactions appear to have positive effects on student retention. Faculty have the primary role in shaping and communicating the educational values and standards of the institution.

Student’s involvement in academic activities may also foster social involvement within the larger college environment. If this assumption is true a college should be compelled to support students with disabilities within their classrooms. The classroom becomes the common ground for all students, academic learning may open doors to social integration and integration is one key to retention and graduation.

3.3. **Response: A range of related services exist for students on campus**

There is a 90 percent increase in the number of postsecondary programs offering opportunities for adults with disabilities to continue their education (Pierangelo and Crane, 1997). The number of postsecondary students reporting a disability is also
increasing: in 1978 there were less than 3 percent; 1994, 9 percent; and in 1996, 19 percent. The number, variety and range of support services needs to keep pace with the growing demand of students with disabilities.

The proposed response would establish a human connection to a range of services and supports available on campus for students with disabilities.

Unlike secondary students who are identified as having a disability, postsecondary students can remain invisible on a campus. It is necessary to have a range of service options available to serve a student population that is hard to reach.

Postsecondary students who have supports available feel, “disability support providers often give students a human connection to the services offered by the school” (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000, p. 10).

Programs should promote a “student-centered approach to ensure students do not feel they are micro-managed by the system” (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000).

3.4. Response: A coordinated system of supports that is classroom-centered

It is important to learn from the self-determination efforts implemented in secondary schools and the ineffectiveness of these efforts is due in part to a lack of service coordination, and poor integration.

There are failures to produce coordinated and integrated improvements that accommodate and support students with disabilities in learning rigorous, standards-based curriculum (Berliner & Biddle, 1996; Edgar, 1997; Hatch, 1998; USDOE, 1995, 1996; Waldron & McLeskey, 1998).

Efforts to integrate students with varying abilities into core high school academic programs have been hindered by a shortage of financial and professional, resources, and an inadequate research base (Jorgensen, 1997; Oakes & Wells, 1998; Vaughn, Schumm, & Brick, 1998).

Implementing self-determination strategies has been “ineffective” in secondary education environments because curricula are not being translated into the classroom, and self-determination skills are not included in the IEP because teachers are unaware of what resources exist (Test, Karvonen, Wood, Browder).
The proposed response would create a seamless, coordinated system of services delivered within the classroom. The system should be inclusive and reflect all personnel, and all personnel should be responsible for the learning of all students on the campus.

_Promote a philosophy that celebrates the disability culture and knowledge and is classroom-centered._

_Service support mechanisms exist on college campuses and programs may appear at-odds or uncoordinated because they compete among themselves for limited funds. Since the provision of postsecondary supports is not as extensive as entitlements in secondary school, it is critical for students to have a range of supports at their disposal—supports that appear seamless and reinforce each others efforts._

_Non-traditional students appear to expect institutions to take the initiative in assisting them. In order to support postsecondary students, institutions need a system of supports—reinforced through services, curricula, pedagogy—designed to reach out to, engage and teach students with disabilities._

_The University of Hawaii (UH) does not have special admission policies to assist in the recruitment and retention of students and support services for students with disabilities appear in the form of programs operating independently from classrooms. The retention and persistence of students with disabilities must be promoted from within classrooms._

4. **Conclusion**

The goal of educators and service providers should not simply be to increase numbers of students with disabilities in postsecondary education. The goal is also to increase the visibility and impact that students with disabilities have on campus. When students see themselves reflected in the image of a college campus they might begin to see themselves as part of a larger group of people who—in spite of their differences—face similar challenges and achieve similar goals. We need to enable that our students think beyond the two-dimensional image of the “poster child” or they will continue to be cultural orphans identified by their disability and not their humanness. We want to create classrooms, where when someone of authority describes your world, you are in it, you experience that moment of psychic empowerment, as if you looked into a mirror and saw someone special.
References


### Employment and High School Graduation by Disability and Non-Disability

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<th>Without A</th>
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<tr>
<td>Full- and Part-time Employment</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>79%</td>
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<tr>
<td>High School Completion</td>
<td>80%</td>
<td>90%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attend Postsecondary Institution 1-2 years after high school</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>56%</td>
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<tr>
<td>3-5 years after high school</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>68%</td>
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(Stodden and Dowrick, 1999; Blackorby and Wagner, 1996)