Virginia’s Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA-HELP): Creating Change through Effective Statewide Collaboration

Virginia’s higher education system, like many other states, has great variety in its service delivery system for college students with disabilities. Documentation requirements for disability vary between schools and data collection procedures are nonexistent or lack consistency on a state-wide basis. This service system often creates frustration for students with disabilities who are transitioning from high school to college or from a two-year college to a four-year university. This brief describes the collaborative process that Virginia has taken to address these pressing issues for students with disabilities. This process, based on Melaville and Blank’s (1991) five principles of collaboration has proven to be an effective method to facilitate change and improvement in the service delivery system. A partnership has been formed between diverse stakeholders across the state, common goals have been established to guide their activities, and resources have been committed to accomplish the tasks.

Mission and Membership

The Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA-HELP) is a consortium of stakeholders collaborating on issues of mutual concern pertinent to the enhancement and accessibility of post secondary education for students with disabilities. The current membership consists of representatives from state agencies, faculty and disability services coordinators from two and four year public universities, as well as private colleges. Agencies include the State Council on Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), the Department of Education (DOE), VA Department for the Deaf and Hard of Hearing (DDHH), the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired (DBVI), the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS), and the Virginia Community College System (VCCS). We have also had two visiting
representatives from the Office of Civil Rights.

History
The VA HELP consortium grew out of a previous collaborative effort between the Departments of Education and Rehabilitation to address results of a legislative study that focused on access to support services and retention in post secondary education for students with disabilities in 1994. Initially, the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS) took the lead in coordinating a Higher Education Workgroup that consisted of representatives from six state agencies, college faculty, administrators, students with disabilities, secondary school counselors and members of the Association on Higher Education and Disability in Virginia (AHEAD-VA). Two-year, four-year, public and private institutions were represented. The group met for approximately one year and identified six areas that could improve the accessibility of higher education in Virginia for students with disabilities. Under each area, a set of recommendations was developed outlining specific activities that should take place. The areas included student support services, transition services, faculty and staff development, disability awareness campaign, assistive technology and continuation of the Higher Education work Group as an ongoing advisory board.

In October, 1999 the Higher Education Work Group was reinstated as a result of a collaborative effort between DRS and Virginia Commonwealth University's Rehabilitation Research and Training Center (VCU-RRTC). The Department of Rehabilitative Services was looking to develop cooperative agreements between themselves and institutions of higher education, and the VCU-RRTC was interested in developing an advisory committee for a contract with the national research and training center on post secondary education and disability in Hawaii, to address issues concerning educating students with disabilities in Virginia colleges and universities.

Process
At the first meeting of VA HELP, the DRS Education Services Manager and the VCU-RRTC Project Coordinator expressed that their vision for the group was to improve the overall accessibility and retention of students with disabilities in higher education in Virginia. Additionally, information was provided on the establishment of Participatory Action Teams (PAT's) to fulfill one of the research components of the sub contract with the University of Hawaii. Input was received from participants regarding preferred meeting format, frequency, location, communication style, and priority issues or barriers that face students. It was decided that the group would meet quarterly on Fridays from 10-2pm and would establish PAT's or small work groups. The bulk of the meeting would involve working in identified small groups, but time would also be made available to share information, network, and to get feedback from representatives in the larger group. Fridays were voted the best day for faculty members and disability service coordinators. The midday time slot allowed some time for representatives who were traveling long distances.
Participatory Action Teams (PAT’s) - Year 1

In the first year of operation, the following four PAT’s were established:
1) Interagency Cooperative Agreements,
2) Documentation Guidelines, 3) Data Collection and Evaluation and 4) Visual Access Legislation. Each group prioritized issues and identified activities and members to address them. A work plan was developed at each meeting for the next quarter. This method proved to be an efficient one with many positive results. A brief summary of the group process and outcome is described below.

Interagency Cooperative Agreement. An interagency cooperative agreement was developed between higher education and vocational rehabilitation as a result of the 1998 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This legislation directed states to specify agency financial responsibility, conditions, terms, and procedures of reimbursement, procedures for resolving agency disputes, and the coordination of service procedures for vocational rehabilitation clients who were attending post secondary schools.

Through review of a survey by Virginia AHEAD and statistics from the Department of Rehabilitative Services, it was found that interpreter and CART costs were by far the most expensive accommodations for university budgets and would be targeted in the first cooperative agreement. In Virginia, one blanket cooperative agreement was signed between the Virginia Community College System, Department of Rehabilitative Services, and the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired. For four year universities, it was determined that each college needed to develop and sign their own agreement. A template was designed and pilot tested with Old Dominion University. Upon approval, the template was forwarded to Disability Service Coordinators and the Vice Provosts or Directors for Student Affairs at each 4 year public university in the state.

Documentation Guidelines. The purpose of this PAT was to draft a document that provides consistency in guidelines for necessary disability documentation and determination for use within Virginia institutions of higher education. It was determined that these guidelines were needed by colleges (both 2 and 4 year) and high schools to help make a smooth transition for students with disabilities.

The group collectively reviewed available documentation guidelines from various 2 and 4 year institutions and also best practices nationally, including AHEAD’s Learning Disabilities Guidelines, ETS’s Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder guidelines, and ETS’s psychiatric disabilities guidelines. A document was developed and eventually reviewed by visiting representatives from the Office of Civil Rights.

Data Collection and Evaluation. The purpose of this PAT was to look at all of the ways that colleges were collecting data such as disability information, accommodations provided, student retention, and evaluation of services. Consistent data collection methods would be necessary to make legislative requests for changes or funding. It was determined that there was great disparity in the data collection methods state-wide. The VA-HELP group at large decided to have each individual PAT be
responsible for its own research, goals, and evaluation related to the respective topic area.

**Visual Access.** This goal of this PAT was to determine how the Information Technology Access Act of 1999 would impact colleges and Information Technology procurement. This act has provisions to ensure that information technology equipment and software is accessible to employers, students, program participants, or members of the general public who are blind or visually impaired. This PAT invited a speaker from the Virginia’s Department of Information Technology to talk about this act and to answer questions. Additionally, specific information was provided to the group by Virginia Tech to illustrate their proactive response to this legislation.

**Participatory Action Teams (PAT’s) Year 2**

Through a similar brainstorming process in the second year, new issues were identified and three PAT’s were formed.

- **A Transition PAT** is currently focusing on the review and update of the VA Dept of Education's College Selection Guidebook for Students with Disabilities, Their Parents, and High School Staff. One of their goals is to get important transition information to the local high schools.

- **A Retention PAT** is developing a survey to be conducted with upperclassmen with disabilities across the state to identify perceived factors that contribute to success in college.

- **The Documentation PAT** is continuing with dissemination efforts by identifying key agencies, professional associations, and individual practitioners across the state that would benefit by having these guidelines. Further discussion is occurring regarding the best training and dissemination method for each organization. A PowerPoint presentation has already been developed and piloted at the annual Transition Forum in Virginia. This sub-committee is planning on developing a brochure to explain VA-HELP and the documentation guidelines. In addition to this, all represented schools in the group will be asked to post the documentation guidelines on their website.