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A Profile of Disability Support Coordinators

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Title: A Profile of Disability Support Coordinators

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Abstract

Over the past twenty years changes in the nation’s labor market have increased the importance of possessing a postsecondary education in order to compete in the workforce. It is well documented that students with disabilities often experience limited access to and success within postsecondary education programs, resulting in poor subsequent employment outcomes. Identifying the appropriate educational supports and accommodations needed by students with disabilities to progress and succeed in postsecondary programs appears to be of critical importance. To address this issue the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary of Educational Supports (NCSPES) at the University of Hawaii at Manoa recently completed a national survey of educational support provisions in postsecondary programs. The survey included questions about disability support coordinators, the personnel who support students with disabilities in postsecondary institutions. Findings reveal that a majority of disability support coordinators possess Masters degrees, represent a variety of disciplines, and reflect an emergent area of human services that is still in search of an identity.

Introduction

Access to postsecondary education is critical for persons with disabilities to obtain quality employment and to improve their standards for lifelong living. A clear positive relationship between disability, level of education and adult employment has been firmly established (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gilson, 1996; Reis, Neu, and McGuire, 1997). Employment rates for persons with disabilities demonstrate a stronger positive correlation between level of education and rate of employment than we see in statistical trends for the general population (Stodden, 1998). “For example, among people 25-64 years of age who have a disability, only 16 percent of those with less than 12 years of education are working or looking for work. The rate rises to 27.3 percent for those who complete 12 years of school, increase again to 40.9 percent for those with 13 to 15 years of education and reaches 50.6 percent for people with 16 or more years of education” (Swenson & Richards, p. 22).

The importance of postsecondary education for subsequent quality employment and lifelong living is reflected in postsecondary education attendance data. Educational, legislative and social changes have led to an increase in the numbers of students with disabilities attending institutions of higher education (Blackorby & Wagner 1996; Digest of Educational Statistics, 1996; Stodden 1998). The proportion of first-time, full-time, postsecondary education students reporting a disability has increased dramatically from 2.6% in 1978, to 9.2% in 1994 (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Gajar, 1992, 1998; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996). And in 1998 the number of all of the students with disabilities—
part-time, full-time and graduate students—increased to 10.5% of the total postsecondary student population (Gajar, 1998). The most recent report by the National Council on Disability (2000) reveals that as many as 17% of all students in postsecondary education in the United States identify as students with disabilities.

Supports and services for students with disabilities in postsecondary education have developed as a result of legislation, specifically the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA, 1990) [previously known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act, 1975]; the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990; and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Acts of 1973. An important tenet of IDEA and the Education for All Handicapped Children’s Act is to mandate a free appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment. Since its original passage in 1975, a generation of students with disabilities has had legal access to a public education. Another tenet of IDEA is the development of an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) for each student in special education. The most recent reauthorization of IDEA (1997) mandated that each student’s IEP contain a transition goal to the workplace or to postsecondary education (Jarrow, 1999). Additionally, IDEA (1997) mandates access to the general curriculum (Guy, Shin, Lee & Thurlow, 2000). IDEA tenets provide legal mandates requiring public schools to prepare students with disabilities for employment or postsecondary education.

The reauthorization of the Rehabilitation Act in 1973, Section 504 stipulates that any educational institution receiving federal monies may not discriminate on the basis of disability, if the student is otherwise qualified to attend the institution. Widely hailed as the first civil rights act for people with disabilities, Section 504 provides access to a wider range of opportunities and not just in education, as mandated by IDEA (1997). Finally, the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) maintains the case law developed by Section 504, uses the same terminology, and increases civil rights to include an array of publicly funded institutions (Dukes & Shaw, 1999; Jarrow, 1999).

A wide range and variety of supports and services has developed in postsecondary education as a result of the legislation (Sergent, Carter, Sedlacek & Scales, 1988). Initially, programs for students with disabilities were decentralized and involved a variety of locations on campuses: health services offices, civil rights offices, and student services offices and learning support centers. As disability Support services evolved, personnel established themselves in those locations and may still remain in those locations with those administrative constraints or supports. Since 1973, the population of students with disabilities has shown a decrease in the number of students with orthopedic disabilities and a related increase in the number of students with learning disabilities (Sergent, et al, 1988). This dictated the development of supports and personnel in the areas related to cognitive supports, as well accomplishing physical access (McGuire, Norlander & Shaw, 1990). Learning Disabilities affect the manner in which information is received, retained, expressed and understood; and requires good assessment and guidance that matches instruction strategies to abilities (Vogel & Adelman, 1993). Working with students with learning disabilities has been a challenge to postsecondary faculty, administrators and disability support personnel.
By the end of the 1980s only a moderate scope of supports and services were available to students with disabilities in postsecondary education programs (Dukes & Shaw, 1998; Sergent, et al, 1998). Ten years later, there have been significant changes in the numbers of students with disabilities and in the complexity of their supports (Dukes & Shaw, 1998). Disability support coordinators commonly provide the delivery of these supports. In response to the growth of postsecondary disability support, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) established a set of Professional Standards (Shaw, McGuire, & Madus, 1997) and a Code of Ethics (Price, 1997) for Disability Support Personnel (Dukes & Shaw, 1999). These standards are in five areas: 1. Administration, 2. Direct Service, 3. Consultation/Collaboration, 4. Institutional Awareness and 5. Professional Development (Dukes & Shaw, 1999).

In an earlier survey, Madaus (1997) investigates the educational backgrounds of disability support personnel in Offices for Students with Disabilities. The findings suggest respondents were trained in a variety of disciplines and were most often trained in counseling (26%). Other backgrounds include law (17%), social work (17%), special education (16%), higher education (14%), or rehabilitation counseling (13%). Bijar, Shaw, Cullen, McGuire and Yost (1995) contend that the diversity of education backgrounds of disability support personnel may reflect a lack of professional standards. Based on empirical evidence, Blosser (1997) and Dukes & Shaw (1999) call for more highly trained and experienced staff and service delivery practices in postsecondary education. However, there is little empirical evidence describing the population of disability support coordinators and their education preparation.

Research Question

What are the demographic and professional characteristics of disability support coordinators working in postsecondary educational settings?

Method

A survey instrument was developed and distributed to a national sample of more than 1500 disability support coordinators (DSC). The survey was voluntary and confidential. Respondents were informed that their participation could impact national policy and practice. The study yielded a 45% response rate, and more than 650 respondents provided a profile of their characteristics.

Survey Content

Survey questions were developed by a joint working group of consortium members (each member providing their own expertise). The items generated were pre-tested in a pilot study conducted in the state of Hawaii. Based on results from the pilot study, an eight-page survey—which on average would take 45 minutes for the respondent to complete—was finalized. Questions were organized around the following topics:

- Institution’s capacity to offer supports or accommodations
• Number of students who receive support and disability type
• Availability of technological assistance
• Outreach programs
• Funding and specialized staff issues that affect students with disabilities
• Written policies
• Information about the respondent

Survey Distribution

The nationwide survey was distributed to institutions via two methods of selection. The first method involved a long-standing partnering organization, the Association for Higher Education and Disabilities (AHEAD). The AHEAD membership list is composed of disability support coordinators at 2-year and 4-year, public and private postsecondary institutions. Seven hundred fifty copies of the survey were mailed out in December 1999 to randomly selected AHEAD members. To address bias related to participant selection, a second institution list of non-AHEAD participants was generated. A list of postsecondary institutions was selected at random from a regionally stratified database: the 1995 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) CD ROM database, maintained by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES), U.S. Department of Education. The IPEDS sampling frame includes data on some 3,000 primary providers (institutions) of postsecondary education. Special minority schools were added to the list to ensure access to survey (i.e. 15 historically black institutions and 15 Native American institutions), and a total of 780 institutions were selected from the IPEDS sampling frame. Respondents were comprised of 465 AHEAD members and 184 non-AHEAD members. The respondents were profiled as follows: 422 from public schools and 193 from private schools; 246 from two-year or less than two-year schools and 369 from four-year schools.

Sampling and Non-sampling Errors

The statistics in this report reflect estimates from a sample. Two broad categories occur in such estimates: sampling and nonsampling errors. Sampling errors occur because observations are made only on samples of disability support coordinators, not on entire populations. Nonsampling errors occur not only in sample surveys but also in complete censuses of entire populations. Nonsampling errors can be attributed to a number of sources: inability to obtain complete information about all supports and accommodations in all institutions in the sample (partially completed surveys); ambiguous definitions; differences in interpreting questions; inability or unwillingness to give correct information; mistakes in recording or coding data; and other errors of collecting, processing, sampling, and imputing missing data.

To minimize the potential for nonsampling errors, the survey was pretested with respondents at institutions in the State of Hawaii, like those who completed the survey nationally. During the design of the survey and the survey pilot test, an effort was made to check for consistency of interpretation of questions and to eliminate ambiguous items. To check the accuracy and consistency of data entry 65 surveys were randomly selected.
and crosschecked against the hard-copy surveys completed by respondents. Data was entered with 100 percent accuracy.

Data Analysis

The data presented in this report were produced using SPSS Data Analysis System (DAS). Descriptive statistics were performed on each survey question to obtain the frequencies and percentages of general data.

Discussion of Results

The demographics of disability support personnel and their professional preparation is important information as increasing numbers of students with disabilities enter postsecondary education. Based on the literature review for this study it was hypothesized that there is a need for more trained specialists and experienced personnel in postsecondary disability support services. This study provides a broad-based sample describing the characteristics of disability support coordinators that can be used as empirical support for the implementation for the AHEAD Professional Standards and the AHEAD Code of Ethics (Dukes & Shaw, 1999).

Demographics of Disability Support Coordinators

Since little is known about the characteristics of disability support coordinators, our research team sought to establish a national baseline for both the length of employment and the type of employment preparation that disability support coordinators have received. Four questions were asked: two focused on employment and two were about employment preparation. Tables and discussion for each question follow:

- **Question 1**: How many years have you worked in your present position?
- **Question 2**: How many years have you worked in the area of student service in a postsecondary program?
Table I
Number of Years in Present Position as a DSC in Postsecondary Education

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Valid</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Less Than 5 years</td>
<td>301</td>
<td>46.3</td>
<td>48.2</td>
<td>48.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five to Ten years</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>26.0</td>
<td>27.0</td>
<td>75.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than Ten years</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>24.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>625</td>
<td>96.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Almost one-half of the individuals in disability support roles in postsecondary education have been in their present positions for less than five years. This figure reflects the “newness” of defined roles and responsibilities in postsecondary institutions.
Table II
Number of Years DSC Has Worked in the Area of Student Services in a Postsecondary Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid Less Than 5 years</td>
<td>155</td>
<td>23.8</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>24.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Five to Ten years</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>31.1</td>
<td>32.5</td>
<td>57.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>More Than Ten years</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>40.8</td>
<td>42.6</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>622</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing 0.00</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

Fifty-seven percent of disability support personnel responding to the survey indicated they had worked in the field less than ten years, supporting the perception of “newness” in this field of activity. But compared to disability support personnel in student services, those who have worked in the field for more than 10 years totals 40.8%, while those in student services for less than five years total 23.8%. This points to question: Is disability support provision a specialty within student support services, learned over time? Is it a coveted position?

In both the areas of demographics, the of number of years in postsecondary education and in student support services at least one half of all disability support personnel surveyed had less than ten years of experience, although there was more experience in student services. There could be a trend in the longevity of experience in student services that was not explored in this study.

Other questions asked of respondents regarding their experience were:

- Question 3: Prior to your current position, did you have experience as an instructional faculty member?
- Question 4: Prior to your current position, did you have experience as an Equal Opportunity/ADA compliance officer?

Of the respondents, 41% reported having had instructional or faculty teaching experience before becoming a disability support coordinator; 10% reported prior experience
as an Equal Opportunity/ADA compliance officer. This is yet another example of the wide range of experience of disability supports personnel.

**Preparation of Disability Support Coordinators**

Since the literature review for this study reveals the sentiment that the provision of disability support services is becoming more complex requiring more highly trained personnel, our research team sought to establish a national baseline in the preparation of disability support coordinators.

- Question 5: In what discipline or field did you receive training?
- Question 6: What is your highest degree earned?

### Table III

**Range of Disciplines or Fields in Which DSC’s Received Training and Degree**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline or Field</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>165</td>
<td>25.4</td>
<td>28.9</td>
<td>28.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts and Sciences</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>14.2</td>
<td>43.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Counseling/ Psychology</td>
<td>204</td>
<td>31.4</td>
<td>35.7</td>
<td>78.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational/ Adult</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>84.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Disability Services</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>13.8</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>571</td>
<td>87.8</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>12.2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Although Counseling/Psychology had the largest percentage, with 31.4%, education was a close second with 28.9%. These data are not definitive and questions remain about the substance of these training programs. Additionally, are the 31.4% at the beginning of their profession in the student services area? It is also disturbing to note that only 13.8% have training or degrees in disability services.

Table IV

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Highest Degree Earned by DSC</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Valid Percent</th>
<th>Cumulative Percent</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Valid</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less Than a Baccalaureate</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baccalaureate</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master’s</td>
<td>442</td>
<td>68.0</td>
<td>72.9</td>
<td>83.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doctoral</td>
<td>101</td>
<td>15.5</td>
<td>16.7</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>606</td>
<td>93.2</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Missing</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>650</td>
<td>100.0</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion.

More than 80% of the disability support personnel responding to the survey indicated they received a Masters Degree, reflecting the complexity of the position.

Another question asked of respondents regarding their experience were as follows: Prior to your current position, did you have experience as an:

a) Instructional faculty member
b) Equal opportunity/ADA compliance officer

Of the respondents, 41% reported having had instructional or faculty teaching experience before becoming a disability support coordinator; 10% reported prior experience as an equal opportunity/ADA compliance officer.
Summary and Conclusions

Disability support provision is a new, emergent and scattered field. Disability support personnel are performing their jobs with a range of preparations and appear to be learning on-the-job with out coherent preparation. In our survey we found about half of the disability support coordinators had been in their positions less than five years, but about half were in Student Support Service more than 10 years. About ¾ of Disability Support Coordinators had a Masters Degree, reflecting a high level of education commensurate with the complexity of their positions. But their training was scattered, reflecting the still ill defined field of Disability Support. In a previous study, the categories Maddus (1996) used to describe training vary from those in the study reported on here, but some similarities can be drawn. In total Maddus found that 30% of respondents were trained in education while we found 28.9% trained in education. Maddus (1996) found 26% of the respondents trained in counseling and 17% trained in Social Work while we found 35.7% trained in counseling/psychology. The stability of the findings gives credence to our study and supports the findings of the diversity of personnel preparation in the emergent field of disability support coordinators.

This new field of Disability Support at postsecondary institutions is in need of definition, standards and professionalism. There is great promise in the implementation of the Professional Standards and Code of Ethics for several reasons. First this implementation will provide information to the consumers, the students with disabilities themselves and their parents as they choose postsecondary institutions. The informed consumers may then, given access to the information, be aware of the comparative competency level of the institution that they choose for their needed supports for long-term success in postsecondary education and beyond. Second, the field itself needs the Standards and Ethics as a basis of credentialing existing disability support personnel. A program to accomplish these Standards needs to be developed by professional organizations and offered to their members. Third, Professional Standards and Ethics can be the basis for graduate programs and a way to credential incoming Disability support coordinators. And finally, The Professional Standards and Code of Ethics need to be aligned with collegiate accreditation systems. Professional associations representing Disability Support Coordinators should work with accreditation boards to integrate Professional Standards and the Code of Ethics as elements of their reviews. Integrating Standards and Ethics in this way will serve both to inform consumers and to enhance the inclusion of Disability Supports fully into institutions of higher education.

Reference List


Reis, S., Neu, T., & McGuire, J. (1997). Case studies of high-ability students with learning disabilities who have achieved. Exceptional Children, 63, 463-479.


