Promising Practices Resulting in Improved Programs and Student Outcomes

**Issue**: Results of the *National Survey of Postsecondary Educational Supports for Students with Disabilities* revealed that a wide range of supports are being offered through disability support offices in postsecondary education programs. Further findings, based upon the voices of students with disabilities who participated in a series of *National Focus Groups*, revealed that a number of factors, beyond the provision of educational supports, created barriers to their success in postsecondary education and subsequent employment. Those factors included:

- Negative attitudes and lack of knowledge by faculty members concerning the diverse attributes and needs of students with disabilities,
- Lack of coordination of supports and services with faculty instruction, related services provision and other campus activities available to all students,
- Lack of coordinated information or advocacy supports for students with disabilities.

The need to improve the climate of higher education programs for students with disabilities has been the focus of a $5,000,000 demonstration grant program funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education, U.S. Department of Education. The purpose of this grant program is to provide technical assistance and professional development activities for faculty and administrators so that these individuals will assure that a quality education for students with disabilities is available within their institution. In an effort to capture the activities of this grant program, the staff of these 21 grants submitted “promising practices” that they were implementing to improve the climate across their campuses. A matrix of promising practices was developed that describes the characteristics and intended outcomes of a variety of strategies that are being implemented across a minimum of 30 campuses nationwide.
Research Questions/ Method

- What are the characteristics of promising program models being implemented by the 21 demonstration projects funded by the Office of Postsecondary Education?
- What types of professional development activities are being implemented by the program models?
- Who are the critical stakeholders involved in model project implementation?

During the past year the United States Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (OPE) selected twenty-one postsecondary programs for funding to demonstrate innovative and promising models of faculty and institutional development, resulting in improved program and student outcomes. Each of the twenty-one funded projects was selected as a promising program model or practice, providing a potential database for study across the projects. Also, each of the project programs has the potential to generate data on the effectiveness of model or practice characteristics and to assess program and student outcomes.

A framework has been developed to describe the characteristics of promising practices underway within the twenty-one projects. Peters and Heron (1993) proposed that the following five criteria be applied to all potential best practices under consideration to ensure that these practices represent a reliable, valid and critical aspect of a program: (a) the practice is well grounded in theory; (b) the practice is supported empirically through studies that are internally and externally valid; (c) the practice has some underpinnings in existing literature; (d) the practice is associated with meaningful outcomes; and (e) the practice is socially valid. In addition, consumers validated emerging promising practices through a focus group consisting of postsecondary students with disabilities. The responses to these questions guided the selection process to assure that these promising practices are socially valid, from the perspective of key stakeholders, namely students themselves. Through the writing and review process, each practice is continually validated from the perspective of the end user. The authors applied these criteria to the practices featured in this brief.

Key Findings

- Project staff from the 21 demonstration projects funded by OPES submitted 63 different promising practices that are being implemented to improve the quality of postsecondary education for students with disabilities.
- These 63 promising practices were categorized into three broad areas: (1) assessing the climate of the department, college or entire institution, (2) administrator and faculty professional development, and (3) building capacity for institutional change.
- The strategies that were most often reported to assess the climate of the 21 institutions were focus groups, surveys and advisory committees.
- Approximately 50% of the universities and colleges involved in the postsecondary grant program used focus groups to assess the climate of a department or institution.
• Of the 21 institutions involved in the postsecondary grant program, 43% used survey research techniques to obtain input from faculty and administrators regarding faculty needs and preferred training formats.

• Of the 21 institutions involved in the postsecondary grant program, 15% reported using advisory committees and forums to discuss issues regarding the quality of education for students with disabilities.

• Approximately 20% of postsecondary grant programs provided self-advocacy instruction and support. Once students have the skills to understand and disclose their disability and needed accommodations, then students themselves can increase faculty awareness and cooperation.

• All 21 projects (100%) have been using some form of technology to provide faculty training on a variety of topics. These topics include, but are not limited to: Universal Instructional Design, accommodations, adaptive equipment, campus resources, and teaching strategies for instructing students with disabilities.

• Nine of the 21 projects (43%) are infusing distance education into their professional development activities.

• Approximately 50% of the projects are including accessible web design activities into their work. Furthermore, five (24%) of the projects have created centers existing only to train and educate people in development of accessible web pages, distance education courses and on-line course segments.

• Administrative and faculty directives, informing faculty of policies and institutional practices, is being used by seven (33%) of the projects. Activities encompassed in administrative and faculty directives include (a) written notices sent yearly from the Provost’s office describing the university’s commitment to diversity (b) faculty training sponsored by the Provost’s office (c) and distribution of an informational package to all faculty.

• The majority of the 21 projects involve other faculty development units across their campuses, in addition to disability services providers. By collaborating with potential users and supporters, project staff and faculty have an increased awareness of issues related to accommodating students with disabilities.

**Implications**

• Need to identify the relationship between promising program characteristics, as determined effective, and improvements in intermediate program outcomes, such as levels of faculty attitudes and knowledge, levels of support/accommodation coordination with related services, and others.

• Need to explore the relationship between assessed intermediate program outcomes and the improvement of ultimate student outcomes, such as program satisfaction, grades, graduation rates, and subsequent employment.

• Need to determine the effectiveness of self-advocacy on student outcomes, such as grades, graduation rates, and subsequent employment.

• Need to involve many different partners across the postsecondary
institution that focus on faculty and student development.

References

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