Resource Mapping Matrix Proposal

Issue

Research from Focus Group Discussions on Supports and Barriers in Lifelong Learning has shown that a successful postsecondary education for students with disabilities leads to a more productive and fulfilling life [National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports (NCSPES), 2000a]. Research strongly suggests that supports for students with disabilities warrant adequate funding from federal and state agencies. However, inadequate and inconsistent funding is cited as the main concern of disability support coordinators in the National Survey of Educational Support Provision to Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education Settings (NCSPES, 2000c).

With as many as 17% of all students in higher education programs in the United States identified as having a disability, quality and range of supports for these students is an issue that needs to be addressed (National Council on Disability, 2000). As shown in the 2001 NEA Higher Education Almanac, from 1992 through 1997 students and parents had the largest percentage (48%) of total expenditures of funding sources for all of postsecondary education, with state and local governments trailing behind them and the federal government in a dismal third place (National Education Association, 2001).

There is a great deal of variability between states, and even schools, for supports being funded in postsecondary institutions [National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), 1999b; NCSPES, 2000b, NCSPES 2000d]. This may be due to a lack of knowledge about what funds are available or a lack of coordination between supports and funding streams (NCSPES, 2000a). For students in postsecondary institutions, these supports are fundamental in ensuring an optimal education (NCES, 1999a; NCSPES, 2000c; Stodden, Jessen, & Lolotai, 1999; Stodden, Whelley, Harding, & Chang, 2001). It is up to students with disabilities, parents, Disabled Student Services personnel, and advocates to be informed of supports needed and funding sources available in order to maximize benefits. With increased awareness of all the relevant resources available, they may be able to use these funds more effectively.

Funding Resources

Initial research of funding streams shows a broad range of options distributed in a complex bureaucracy for
students with disabilities in postsecondary education. General information can be accessed through institutional sources, the web/internet, government documents, and reports. This information includes national scholarships, institutional funding, and financial aid opportunities. However, it is up to individuals to make sense of the policies and guidelines.

While some funding streams provide detailed outlines of supports available and direct services offered, most do not. Numerous resources have generalized criteria and do not detail the specific supports covered. It is up to the individual to determine what requirements the resource is looking for and how to obtain the generalized supports that may be covered.

Target populations of requirements for funding resources range from specific criteria for individuals to the general pool of students with disabilities. It is difficult enough to gather all the information necessary to fund a postsecondary education, but this process is made even more difficult by having complex and often fragmented funding sources that students must piece together. Higher education institutions do not provide adequate assistance to students with disabilities in maneuvering across the terrain of funding their education (NCSPES, 2000a).

In theory supports may be available, but in reality accessibility appears to be a major obstacle. Students with disabilities maintain that barriers to funding streams could be minimized with improved coordination among disability services of institutions, administration, and students themselves (NCSPES, 2000a). This research supports the need for improved coordination of supports, communication between providers and/or students, and understanding the system of supports by the campus-at-large.

A striking issue identified from initial research is the lack of structure for determining funding streams for specific supports. While general guidelines may detail what areas of support will be covered, it is difficult to decipher what specific supports might be offered. Students with disabilities are forced to chase numerous funding streams for various supports in order to obtain a fraction of their education expenses. This makes funding a postsecondary education for a student with disabilities even more daunting than for the average student. Funding mechanisms need to help students with disabilities finance their postsecondary education and not create additional obstacles.

Implications

Postsecondary institutions must work collaboratively to improve the coordination of funding resources for support services. Students with disabilities should not be further hindered by resource confusion in trying to fund their education. Advocacy agencies, such as AHEAD, need to facilitate the coordination of funding streams and lead the effort. Guidelines may be set at federal and state levels to regulate funding resources in areas where they are needed. For example, funding streams may be categorized into specific areas where the most support is needed for students with disabilities. Funding resources must aim to provide either comprehensive and/or specific coverage for supports. By resting on a middle ground of vague criteria for support given, individuals have a more difficult time obtaining adequate funding for their postsecondary education.
More research needs to be done in the areas of resource information dissemination and funding accessibility. Part of the problem may be due to lack of knowledge about funding resources available. Distributing information about possible funding streams would aid individuals in finding support for their education. By examining how much information is being disseminated, through what medium, and who is the target audience, a clearer picture can be reached as to how the funding stream process can be improved. The web/internet offers an ideal means to disseminate information to a large audience and can implement a tracking system to monitor usage as well. Computer-based systems could be created to coordinate supports needed and funding resources available to aid students with disabilities in financing their postsecondary education.

There are numerous incentives for postsecondary institutions to welcome students with disabilities into their halls. Funding resources direct many of their dollars toward institutional funding for programs specifically supporting students with disabilities. If postsecondary institutions are made aware of these resources and are able to access them in an efficient manner, greater opportunities may be available for students with disabilities to further their education.

Future research needs to concentrate on the area of collaboration among possible funding resources for the postsecondary education of students with disabilities. There may be much overlap and competitiveness among various funding streams. If there are numerous resources providing funding for specific supports that benefit only a few, then there may be resources going to waste. Restructuring funding mechanisms within postsecondary education may provide ready access to the supports that are necessary for success. More research needs to be done to determine optimal funding streams for a variety of supports.

By streamlining the process of funding a postsecondary education for students with disabilities, they are given an advantage to take their place in society. In competitive job markets, a college degree provides a significant edge. If funding a postsecondary education is less of a concern for students with disabilities, they can focus their energy on academics and skills acquisition to place them in a stronger position to compete with their peers in the classroom and for jobs.

References


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