The Role of the Disability Support Provider at Postsecondary Institutions

ABSTRACT

This study will examine how postsecondary disability support personnel and students with disabilities view the role of the disability support person. In particular, the study will explore how lack of clarity and differing perceptions about this role may impact service provision and the support person/student relationship. This will be achieved through a descriptive analysis of four to six open-ended interviews with students and support personnel at the University of Hawaii. The study will use qualitative methodology to collect information about (a) student and personnel perspectives and experiences with the postsecondary disability support process in general, (b) student and personnel perspectives about the role of support personnel in this process, and (c) student and personnel perspectives about how definitions of this role may impact disability-related support and the personnel/student relationship. It is expected that the study will highlight the need to better define the role of postsecondary disability support personnel.

The study should also provide directions for future research that might examine specific outcomes related to the student/personnel relationship.

QUESTIONS TO BE EXPLORED

Many colleges and universities have support personnel who are responsible for providing and/or managing services to students with disabilities. These personnel are, in many cases, a critical link between the university and programmatic and physical accommodations for the student. Given that there is increasing evidence that the provision of supports and accommodations is an important component of postsecondary success for many students with disabilities, it is important that the relationship between support personnel and students with disabilities be one of mutual respect and shared goals. One important factor in the personnel/student relationship is how both parties view the role of the support person. The proposed study will use the results from open-ended interviews to describe how
postsecondary students with disabilities (learning and physical) and disability support personnel at the University of Hawaii view this role. The purpose of the study is to:

1. Describe how students and personnel view the role of the support person.
2. Make recommendations based on the results about how to better define the role of the support person.

Specifically, the study will seek to describe perceptions about the role of support personnel in the context of the following research questions:

1. What experiences have participants had and what are their perspectives about the postsecondary disability support process in general;
2. How do participants view the role of support personnel in the postsecondary support process, and
3. How do participants think definitions of this role impact disability-related support and the personnel/student relationship?

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities

*Postsecondary Participation and Graduation Rates*

Federal legislation such as the Americas with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 (PL 101-336), along with the reauthorized Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997 (PL 105-17), has increased accessibility for youth with disabilities to postsecondary education. As a result, the number of postsecondary students reporting a disability has increased dramatically (Horn & Berktold, 1999). The proportion of first-time, full-time students with disabilities attending colleges and universities tripled between 1978 and 1994 from 2.6% to 9.2% (Henderson, 1999; Lehman, Davies, & Laurin, 2000; National Council on Disability, 2000; Vogel, Leyser, Wyland, & Brulle, 1999). By 1998, the full range of students with disabilities (i.e., part-time students and students enrolled in graduate programs) had risen to 10.5% of the postsecondary student population (Gajar, 1998). And in their report, the National Council on Disability (2000) reveals that as many as 17% of all students attending higher education programs in the United States are now identified as having a disability (learning disabilities are by far the most common type of disability reported by college students). Further, more than one half of all the students with disabilities who enroll in postsecondary education persist in the completion of their program of study. Within five years of starting postsecondary education, 41% of students with disabilities report they had earned a degree or credential, and another 12% remained enrolled in their course of study (National Center for Education Statistics, 1999, August).

*Role of Postsecondary Education in Professional Employment Preparation and Retention*

Individuals with disabilities are significantly less likely to be employed than are individuals without disabilities. In fact, data from the U.S. Census shows that only 49% of individuals with disabilities are employed versus 79% percent of individuals without disabilities (U.S. Census, 2000), and this is considered to be an “optimistic” statistic (Position Paper 4). The employment rate for individuals with cognitive impairments and
mental retardation are even lower (Kiernan, 2002).

Any type of postsecondary education benefits students by allowing them to explore their interests and by teaching them skills they might not gain in high school or subsequent work experiences. The American labor force has been shown to benefit as a result of people's pursuit of postsecondary education, because these workers participate in the labor force at a higher rate and generally have higher earnings than those who do not continue beyond high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997). Labor force trends and increased enrollment in postsecondary education demonstrate that students also see further education as a benefit to their earnings level and career success (National Center for Education Statistics, 1997).

For people with disabilities, the importance of enrolling in and completing a postsecondary education program is magnified in relation to employment outcomes and earnings. The National Longitudinal Transition Study (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996) indicates that despite recent trends that indicate higher postsecondary participation rates by individuals with disabilities, people with disabilities still participate in postsecondary education in smaller numbers than do people without disabilities. This discrepancy leads to low participation in competitive employment and much lower earnings than average for people with disabilities (Stodden & Dowrick, 2001). However, for people with disabilities, there is a 50.4% labor force participation rate for those who have completed at least four years of college (Getzel, Stodden, & Briel, 2001, March). In fact, Stodden (1998) presents information indicating a stronger positive correlation between disability and employment and level of education than the trend for the general population (Stodden, 1998). People with disabilities with even less than four years of postsecondary education are employed at double the rate of those with just a high school diploma (Getzel et al., 2001, March). These findings show that access to the opportunities afforded by a postsecondary education makes an enormous difference in the employability of people with disabilities.

Disability Support Provision and Postsecondary Participation

How Support Impacts Postsecondary Participation

Under Section II and Section III of the ADA, postsecondary institutions “are required by law to provide any reasonable accommodation that may be necessary for those persons with an identified disability to have equal access to the educational opportunities and services available to their non-disabled peers” (Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). Access to technology and other learning supports is critical to the success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education. Advances in information technology and assistive devices have made a considerable contribution to persons with disabilities seeking to access postsecondary education (Luetke-Stalman, 1998). These devices may be as basic as a page-turner or as involved as a computer assisted communication device. It is well documented that these devices and services improve the physical and learning capabilities of individuals with disabilities (Cunningham & Coombs, 1997; Thompson, Bethea, Rizer, & Hutto, 1997). Other types of supports include, but are not limited to, exam modifications, priority enrollment, sign language interpretation or other
communication assistance, the provision of notetakers, tutoring, academic or career counseling, transportation bus lift, orientation, provision of accessible on-campus housing, lab and library assistance, the provision of readers, advocacy, peer mentoring, and transcription into alternative formats (Stodden, Jones & Chang).

Importance of Support Personnel in the Support Provision Process

Unquestionably, postsecondary students with disabilities are charged with the bulk of the responsibility for initiating, designing, and ensuring their own educational accommodations (Battle, Dickens-Wright, & Murphy, 1998; Gajar, 1998; Tucker, 1997). It is their responsibility to inform school officials of their disability, provide documentation of the disability, and propose viable options for meeting the unique accommodation needs specific to their disability (Izzo & Lamb, 2002; Lamb, 2002; Stodden, Jones, & Chang, 2002). However, disability support personnel also play an important role in the support-provision process. Most postsecondary institutions now have someone who is charged with the task of accommodating students with disabilities. How schools structure this responsibility varies across institutions. Some schools have a “disability service” or other office with several personnel who address the needs of students with disabilities, while other schools assign a single individual to this task. Still others may assign the job of disability support to an individual who has many other responsibilities as well, such as to the director of student affairs, the Deans office of individual colleges, etc. These personnel are at the “front-lines” of the support provision process. Their attitudes, skills and working relationship with students, faculty and administrators can impact the kinds of supports that students receive and the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports (NCSPES), ; Shields, 1987).

Roles and Relationships

How Definitions of Roles Shape Relationships

A role can be defined as:

“How expectations of or evaluative standards employed in assessing the behavior of occupants of specific social positions” (Scott, 1992).

Our perceptions about our own roles and the roles of others can effect our expectations about how we, and others, should behave in professional and other relationships (Barnes, Mercer, & Shakespeare, 1999). It can also effect the way we actually behave. Confusion about roles, and interactions that do not meet our expectations can create conflicts between individuals and within organizations (Scott, 1992).

For example, if a patient goes to the doctor because they have a sore throat, it is expected that the patient will tell the doctor about their symptoms, the doctor will examine the patient and ask questions, and then the doctor will provide a diagnosis and possibly the means for a cure. Chances are, this is how the interaction will play itself out. But if the doctor were to pull out a bible instead of a medical reference, or the patient were to tell the doctor “I know what is wrong with me and you do not”, problems with the relationship and the alleviation of the patient’s symptoms would likely ensue.
Defining the Disability Support Person’s Role

There is limited literature around the role of the postsecondary education disability support person, and there is some evidence that this role is not always clear (AHEAD, 2003; National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000). Unlike that of a physician, the role of postsecondary disability support provider is relatively new, emerging in the past several decades with the passage of civil rights legislation that has expanded access to postsecondary education to individuals with disabilities. The question remains whether these personnel should assume the role of counselor, service provider, or customer service person. All of these roles can be linked with similar human services positions to that of postsecondary disability support provider. A counselor is generally expected to nurture, listen, and offer advise; a service provider is expected to intake information and arrange for or provide specific services based on their assessment of that information, and a customer service person is expected to listen and take action to provide a service based on the customer’s assessment of whether or not they are getting what they want (Carkhuff, 1969; Gonzalez, 1994; Kelly, 1994; National Organization for Human Services Education, 2003). Confusion about how the postsecondary disability support person’s role is defined could result in conflicts in the student/personnel relationship, and other problems with support provision such as delays in provision or inappropriate support.

Below is a matrix that describes how the expectations of an individual’s role as counselor, service provider and customer service person translate into expectations and actions in the context of postsecondary disability support provision.

**Matrix of Roles: Who is a postsecondary disability support person?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Expected Activities</th>
<th>Counselors</th>
<th>Service Providers</th>
<th>Customer Service</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expected Activities</strong></td>
<td>Listen, advise, maybe train or teach</td>
<td>Provide physical and active means for solving problems and improving outcomes</td>
<td>Respond to customer complaints in ways that satisfy the customer (i.e., via allowing returns and exchanges)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expected Results</strong></td>
<td>Student feels assured, more in control, more capable</td>
<td>Student has barriers removed to the extent possible in an effective and efficient manner</td>
<td>Student’s complaints are heard and the situation corrected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training</strong></td>
<td>Therapy, social skills, empathy, problem solving, psychology, etc.</td>
<td>Knowledge of available accommodations and services, their use and fit for</td>
<td>Social skills, available remedies within the organization, troubleshooting</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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1 Chart developed by Kelly B.T. Chang, M.A., Center on Disability Studies
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Who’s in control?</strong></th>
<th>Counselor and student</th>
<th>Service provider</th>
<th>Customer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who’s responsible for action?</strong></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Service provider</td>
<td>Customer service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expectations for students</strong></td>
<td>Share feelings, talk about problems, follow advice</td>
<td>Provide adequate information about the problem to be solved or outcome to be improved. Provide proof of eligibility for services.</td>
<td>Provide specific information about the nature of the complaint. If satisfied, continue business relationship.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>View of students</strong></td>
<td>Whole person with mental, social, physical, spiritual, and emotional needs</td>
<td>Person who has a qualifying disability and a right to services</td>
<td>“Customer is always right” Person to appease</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Possible negative view of students</strong></td>
<td>Person who is emotionally needy</td>
<td>Person who is trying to take advantage of the system</td>
<td>Person who is too picky or expects more than is possible or deserved</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>First contact question</strong></td>
<td>“How are you doing?”</td>
<td>“What do you need?”</td>
<td>“How can I help you?”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who evaluates effectiveness of service?</strong></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Provider</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who pays for the service?</strong></td>
<td>Sometimes client, sometimes institution</td>
<td>Institution</td>
<td>Institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who suffers from inadequate service?</strong></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student and institution (loses business)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who benefits from quality service?</strong></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student and context (i.e., professors, peers, etc.)</td>
<td>Student and institution</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Desired bottom line</strong></td>
<td>Positive evaluations and referrals</td>
<td>Low-cost adherence to laws</td>
<td>Continued business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who initiates contact?</strong></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Who decides when the role of the relationship has been fulfilled?</strong></td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Service provider</td>
<td>Student</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
METHODOLOGY

This study will use qualitative, descriptive methodology. The texts, *Qualitative Evaluation and Research Methods* (Patton, 2002) and *Education Research: Competencies for Analysis and Application* (Gay, 1992) proved helpful in designing the study.

Data Collection

Participants

Demographics

Participants will include two to three students who have a physical or learning disability and two to three disability support personnel at the University of Hawaii (total of four to six participants). Depending on the pool of available participants, an attempt will be made to recruit students who vary in terms of disability (i.e. sensory, mobility, learning) and course of study, and personnel who vary in terms of experience and focus (i.e. working with students who have a specific type of disability). All participants will be over the age of eighteen. Note that participants will not be cognitively impaired or mentally incompetent.

Recruitment

Student participants will be recruited through enquiries with staff at the Center for Disability Studies. Student participants will be required (a) to be currently enrolled in an undergraduate or graduate program at the University of Hawaii and (b) to be receiving or seeking to receive support services related to a disability (except cognitive impairment or mental incompetence). As there are only a limited number of support personnel at the University, support personnel will be recruited via phone and email.

Confidentiality, Consent, Risks and Benefits

There are no known risks or benefits associated with participating in this study. However, the study has the potential to contribute to society’s understanding about the importance of service provision and the student/personnel relationship to the success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education. Additionally, there is no cost to participants others than the transportation costs they would normally incur in order to get to school or work.

The confidentiality of all participants will be strictly maintained via code names and general descriptions. Information linking codes with participants will be kept in a locked cabinet, separate from other documents. It is not expected that the data collection or reporting of the results will result in any harm to the person or reputation of any of the participants.

All participants, students and personnel, will be given a complete description of the project and asked to sign a letter of consent prior to their participation that will assure them (a) that their participation in the study will constitute no known benefits or risks and, (b) that their confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study and in any published work that result from the study (See Appendix).

Participants will be provided with alternative formats of any project descriptions or consent forms as appropriate (Braille, large print, disk, etc.)
Instruments

Because this study is intended to be exploratory, open-ended interviews will be the only instrument employed. Each participant, students and personnel, will be interviewed for approximately one hour at a location of the participant’s choice. Interviews will be conversational in style and open-ended. The interviews will be conducted by the primary investigator with a graduate student assistant taking notes during the proceedings. With the permission of participants, the interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. Each interview will start with general questions about the participant’s background and will proceed with open-ended questions that will be dependent upon the participant’s circumstances and responses to previous questions. The questions will be guided by the concepts discussed in the literature review, with a view to describing how participants view the role of support personnel and its impact upon the personnel/student relationship and the provision of supports. Questions might explore how the participant sees the value of a postsecondary education, participant goals and objectives, the participant’s general experience with postsecondary education and disability support provision (as a student or employee), the participant’s perceptions about the role of disability support provision and the student/personnel relationship, and past and current experiences with student/personnel interactions (particularly around issues of reciprocity, self-advocacy, self-determination and initiative).

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data will be descriptive and will consist of coding data and grouping it based on emerging themes. Interview transcripts will be read through several times by the principal investigator and two graduate student assistants in order to get a general sense of the data and develop codes around general themes. Data will then be coded and grouped according to more specific themes that will be described in the research findings. Again, the confidentiality of all participants will be maintained during data analysis and reporting as well as during data collection.

Reliability of the data will be achieved through (a) variation in participants’ type of disability and area of study (students) and experience and focus (personnel), and (b) recognition that the results of the study are exploratory and applicable within a limited context but could be used to direct a broader level of enquiry. Validity will be achieved through triangulation of observers and participants.

IMPLICATIONS

Implications for Practice

This study has the potential to provide practitioners with:

- Insight into how personnel and students view the role of the support person.
- Specific recommendations about areas that may need to be clarified around this role.

Implications for Research

Further research based upon the results of this study might include:

- A broader exploration of how the issue of role-definition effects the student/personnel relationship.
- An exploration of how role-definition may impact postsecondary outcomes for students with disabilities.
Bibliography


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