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THE INSTITUTE BRIEF

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MAKING EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION ACCESSIBLE FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

By Cynthia Zafft, Sara Sezun, & Melanie Jordan

INTRODUCTION

Bridging traditional classroom boundaries, successful experiential education requires that college professionals consider access issues for all students, including a growing number of students with disabilities. This publication is designed for college faculty and professional staff involved in internships, service-learning, and other types of experiential education. It provides basic disability awareness information, suggests ways to create a welcoming environment in your office, and lists resources for further information to increase access to experiential education.

Students with disabilities tend to come to college with less work experience and are less likely to complete their education. College graduates with disabilities have more difficulty finding jobs than their non-disabled peers. Experiential education can create a bridge to college completion and employment. According to a 2003 survey done by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 42.5% of college interns are eventually hired as regular full-time employees by the organizations where they served as interns.

Two key laws cover the rights of individuals with disabilities in postsecondary education. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that no otherwise qualified person may be denied the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance—due to disability (29U.S.C. § 794[a]). A "person with a disability" includes anyone who has "a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities." Major life activities are defined as functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, working, and participating in community activities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, patterned after Section 504, was enacted to "establish a clear and comprehensive prohibition of discrimination on the basis of disability." The ADA covers a broad range of activities, including public and private education and employment.

WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS

1. Promote positive attitudes in your office. Indicate to your students and employers that diversity is valued at your college by whom you hire, the information and images you portray in your promotional materials, and the welcoming environment you create.
2. Make sure that all staff members are aware of disability-related issues.
3. Let employers know that you understand their concerns about a candidate's job performance, and then send the best candidate, which may happen to be an individual with a disability.
4. Keep resources on hand to educate students and employers (especially small businesses and organizations) about key issues, like arranging job accommodations.
5. Offer assistance and support to strengthen the relationship between the student and the employer. Keep in mind that understanding and acceptance grow through the interaction between the employer and the student.
6. Be direct and honest with any student or employer if you have serious concerns. Some students, with or without disabilities, may need to take a semester to muster their resources and supports for a successful internship or coop experience. Offer to help them in their preparation.
7. If you suspect that an employer will not be welcoming and supportive, it may be time to reconsider that work site for any student.

Benefits of Experiential Education

- All students get a chance to apply academic skills to a work or volunteer setting and develop relevant "soft skills" such as teamwork and time management.
- Getting involved in meaningful activities outside the classroom helps students feel more committed to their education, making them more likely to stay in school.
- In addition to exploring potential careers, students develop networks that can help them find employment.
- Students with disabilities have an opportunity to assess the impact of their disability in employment or volunteer settings and consider issues such as disclosure of a disability and job accommodations.

Universal Design: A Definition

"The intent of universal design is to simplify life for everyone by making products, communications, and the built environment more usable by as many people as possible at little or no extra cost. Universal design benefits people of all ages and abilities."

(North Carolina State University, The Center for Universal Design)

Universal Design and Experiential Education

Office space that is well organized, uncluttered, and easy to move in is welcoming to all students, whether they have a disability or not. Additional suggestions the help a wide variety of students include:

- Providing adequate space for assistive devices, such as wheelchairs.
- Organizing materials so that they can be easily identified and reached.
- Advertising events in a variety of formats (e.g., your telephone greeting, an accessible campus webpage).
- Hold events in accessible locations.
- Let all students know that accommodations are available and student information is kept private.

DISABILITY ETIQUETTE

1. **Use "person-first" language.** For example, "a person with a disability," not "the disabled." Or "a person who is blind" rather than "a blind person."
2. **Avoid language that is outdated or judgmental**, such as "handicapped." The preferred term is "person with a disability." A person is not "confined to a wheelchair," but "uses a wheelchair."
3. **The student is the expert!** Ask if you can offer assistance before providing it. If your offer is accepted, ask for instructions.
4. **Respect all assistive devices (canes, wheelchairs, crutches, etc.) as personal property.** Do not touch, move, or use them unless the student asks you.
5. **Service animals (such as guide dogs) are at work, and should not be treated as pets.** Do not touch service animals or give them instructions without permission from the student.
6. If the student is accompanied, **always speak directly to the student**, not to the student's companion. When addressing a student who is deaf, speak directly to the student and not the interpreter.
7. **Speak in a normal tone and style.** Do not speak louder unless the student asks you to. If the individual reads lips, do not exaggerate your lip movements when speaking.
8. When speaking with an individual with a hearing impairment, **have a pencil and paper available** to use if necessary.
9. When speaking with an individual who has a speech impairment, **don't try to guess what the person has to say.** If necessary, say, "I don't understand."
10. **Many disabilities are not apparent.** Students with non-apparent disabilities may or may not need assistance. You will need to rely on the student to tell you if they need assistance.
11. **Shake hands when being introduced to a person with a disability.** People who have limited hand use or wear an artificial limb will usually give cues about shaking hands. If appropriate, it is considered acceptable to shake hands with the left hand.

Tony

Tony is a sophomore majoring in English. He plans to be a professional writer but is also wondering if he would like to teach high school English. To explore this option, Tony plans to participate in the college service-learning initiative by volunteering at the local high school to tutor students in writing. Tony is blind and has several methods of reading and writing but primarily uses a computer with a screen reader at home and a small portable device, called a BrailleNote, in class.

Marcie, the service-learning coordinator, tells Tony that she has not worked with a student who is blind but has worked on arranging out-of-classroom accommodations with many other students. Marcie gives a brief description of the office accommodations procedure and asks how Tony would like to receive written information in the future. Tony typically uses information online (like the college handbook) or asks for a diskette with Word files if the information is presently unavailable online. Marcie arranges to have the service-learning handbook put on diskette for Tony but makes a note to think about putting it online, since students frequently call up to get copies.

After Marcie describes the types of activities that go on at the service-learning site, she asks Tony how he would approach issues such as reading and correcting student work.

Tony and Marcie consider if students might be interested in working as the "class assistant of the day," providing assistance under Tony's direction. Tony suggests several approaches: have the high school students read their work to him; work in the writing lab with students typing their work so Tony can read it via a simple word processing program available on most computers; have the student tape record their writing so that he can listen between sessions; and the like. Marcie suggests that Tony visit the site and gives him the number for the high school program director. Marcie offers to write a joint email to Tony and the program director, but Tony feels comfortable making the initial contact.

Tony and the program director arrange to meet in the high school writing lab. In their meeting, they discuss common concerns. For example, high school students are often too shy to read their writing aloud. Initially this seems like a problem only for Tony, but the program director says it has been a persistent problem that he has faced too. The two strategize on this and come up with several solutions.

MYTHS ABOUT INDIVIDUALS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

MYTH: Employees with disabilities have a high absentee rate.
FACT: In a study conducted by DuPont, absentee rates for employees with disabilities were no higher than for employees without disabilities.

MYTH: People with disabilities need to be protected from failure.
FACT: People with disabilities have the right to participate in the full range of human experiences, including success and failure. Employers should have the same expectations for all their employees.

MYTH: People with disabilities have problems getting to work.
FACT: People with disabilities use as many means of transportation as people without disabilities.

MYTH: Employees with disabilities are unable to meet performance standards.
FACT: According to a survey by DuPont, 90% of employees with disabilities rated average or better in job performance.

MYTH: Accommodating workers with disabilities is very expensive.
FACT: Most workers with disabilities require no special accommodations. For those who do, the costs are usually low. According to the Job Accommodation Network, accommodations for employees with disabilities generally cost about $200 per employee, with 17% of accommodations (such as changing schedules or rearranging office furniture) costing nothing at all.

MYTH: Employees with disabilities are more likely to have job-related accidents than employees without disabilities.
FACT: According to the DuPont study, the job-related accident rates for both groups were identical.

WHY STUDENTS MAY CHOOSE NOT TO DISCLOSE A DISABILITY

1. A student may have a limitation but may not consider it a disability—or even know that it is a disability.
2. A student may fear being treated differently if people know about his/her disability.
3. A student may not know that there are support systems or job accommodations available.
4. A student may underestimate the impact of his/her disability, such as a learning disability, AD/HD, in an experiential education placement.
5. A student with non-apparent disability may believe that staff members won't understand the impact of his/her disability.
6. A student may fear that the disability will overshadow their ability.
7. A student may not know whom to turn to for help and may not feel comfortable asking others.
8. A student may not know that any information about their disability must remain confidential.

Janine

Janine is a junior majoring in art history and would like to become a museum curator when she graduates. Although an internship is not required for graduation in her major, it is highly recommended and Janine has heard it is almost impossible to land a museum job without one. Students anticipating an internship semester meet as a group with the internship coordinator to go over the process and then individually with the coordinator to discuss specific placements.

In preparing for the appointment with Janine, Mark, the internship coordinator, looks over the transcript that Janine has submitted with her application. He notices that she has generally good grades but almost one course withdrawal per semester and a one-semester medical leave. At the appointment, Janine appears very nervous, needs information repeated, and has a hard time staying organized as she goes through the paperwork with him. As Janine and the coordinator work down the general checklist, Janine notices that it says accommodations are available. She asks if these are the same as the accommodations offered by the Disability Support Services office.

Mark briefly describes that accommodations are available and are based on the student's needs, pointing out that accommodations needed on an internship may differ from those needed in a classroom. Mark gives several examples: using assistive technology to produce reports, arranging for a quiet space for a student to do reading and writing on the job, arranging to arrive early to prepare for the day, etc.

Janine says that she has a significant learning disability and has experienced depression since early high school. She has used academic accommodations, such as a tape recorder and extended time for tests. Even with accommodations the fulltime workload means that one course suffers. In addition, she was hospitalized for depression the previous year but feels she can rely on her support network to help her be successful in an internship in the coming semester.

Mark reassures Janine that disability-related issues can be rolled into the discussion of considering an internship and asks if there are any particular needs she has for the intake process they are currently doing.

Janine says that she is pretty sure she will forget much of what Mark is saying because she is anxious. She carries a small tape recorder, which she uses in class and during office hour meetings with her professors. Mark encourages her to get the tape recorder out. Janine and Mark review the material covered so far and continue the meeting. As with all other students, the coordinator asks Janine what she would like to get out of an internship. Much of the remainder of the process is typical of meetings with other students, with one exception. Rather than giving all the information in one meeting, Mark sets up a second meeting with Janine, helps her create a brief list of questions for her consideration before the next meeting, and includes a handout on the office procedure for accessing accommodations.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

National Service Inclusion Project (NSIP)

This organization provides training and technical assistance to the Corporation for National and Community Service on disability issues, and is "committed to the full inclusion of people with disabilities in AmeriCorps, Senior Corps, and Learn and Serve America." The website lists common questions about disabilities and provides contact information for state commissions.

www.serviceandinclusion.org

The Office of Disability Employment Policy at the U.S. Department of Labor (ODEP)

This website contains fact sheets on employment issues for both employers and people with disabilities. The topics include employment rights, accommodations, disability and cultural diversity, a glossary of commonly used terms, and guidelines on writing a scannable resume.

www.dol.gov/odep/pubs/publicat.htm

The Job Accommodation Network (JAN)

This site is targeted to employers, educators, and individuals with disabilities. Definitions are provided for many kinds of disabilities, as well as information on how employers can accommodate employees with these disabilities. JAN is operated by ODEP.

http://janweb.icdi.wvu.edu

DO-IT

The DO-IT program at the University of Washington (Disabilities, Opportunities, Internetworking, and Technology) addresses technology issues and career choices for high school students with disabilities. The information covers both going to college and getting a job right out of high school. It also provides information for employers on accommodating people with disabilities.

www.washington.edu/doit

Equal Access to Software and Information (EASI)

EASI is part of the Rochester Institute of Technology and provides information on technology for individuals with disabilities, particularly in education and the workplace. EASI consultants are available to help colleges and libraries make their software user-friendly to people with disabilities. EASI also teaches online courses on topics such as barrier-free information technology and accessible web design.

www.rit.edu/~easi

The National Service Learning Clearinghouse

This website provides comprehensive information about service learning with a focus on higher education, K-12, community-based initiatives, and tribal programs. Several fact sheets deal with disability-related issues. The organization is funded by the Corporation for National and Community Service.

www.servicelearning.org

The Institute for Community Inclusion (ICI)

This website provides fact sheets and articles on issues for people with disabilities, the bulk of them dealing with employment. These can be directly downloaded from the site or purchased in printed form. Topics include person-centered planning, networking and other job search techniques, and the impact of Social Security benefits on employment.

www.communityinclusion.org

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