

Introduction to Special Issue on Postsecondary Education and Disability

The past three decades have brought with them a dramatic increase in postsecondary educational opportunities for Americans with disabilities. With postsecondary enrollment rates for students with disabilities having more than tripled since the late 1970s, colleges and universities nationwide have become acutely aware of the rights and needs of these students as they pursue higher education. Thanks to federal laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act, physical and program access issues are common considerations in building a diverse and inclusive student body.

Postsecondary institutions are doing a generally good job of complying with their legal requirements to provide reasonable accommodations to students with disabilities, but the next step is to make college and university campuses places where students with disabilities feel welcome and truly included as a part of campus life. Several constituency groups need to be more actively involved in this process.

First in the sequence, secondary special educators must work in close collaboration with postsecondary service providers to ensure an effective transition for youth with disabilities as they exit high school and pursue higher learning opportunities. For college-bound secondary students with disabilities to enter postsecondary training with an optimal chance for success, they must be exposed to elements of the college environment during their high school years. This can be achieved through summer transition programs, a more involved role for the student in formulating his or her IEP during the junior and senior year, and even the opportunity to take selected courses from local community colleges while in high school. The transfer of supports from the public school classroom to the college campus is critical, especially given the inherent differences that exist in the way services are provided in those two settings.

Vocational rehabilitation personnel must take a more active role in transition planning for students who are planning to attend postsecondary institutions. The state

VR program is an excellent source of funding for postsecondary education, and it becomes the logical case management structure to replace the special education system once the student leaves high school. Work Study and Option IV coordinators can play a critical role in facilitating the important collaboration between special educators and rehabilitation professionals.

Disability issues and concerns must also infiltrate college and university faculties. Faculty members with specific content expertise in disability issues, such as those in special education, rehabilitation, and school psychology, must be encouraged to take a leadership role in ensuring that their campuses are not only accessible to people with disabilities but also inclusive in the broad sense of that term. Faculty members who are not familiar with disability issues but who want to learn should have access to technical assistance services, either from other faculty or student disability services offices, to assist them in identifying and implementing specific solutions to meet students' needs. In classes and during advisement sessions, faculty must encourage students with disabilities to involve themselves in all aspects of campus life, including social activities, intramural athletics, cultural events, work study and Co-Op opportunities, and student associations. Faculty are frequently called upon to help shape the kind of campus climate they want at their institutions, and this important matter of inclusion, diversity, and equity should be no exception.

Student disability services providers must become better advocates for themselves as well as for students with disabilities. We should stipulate here and now that these offices are overworked, underfunded, and comprised of caring, competent professionals . . . this is not the battle to fight . . . the battle here lies in being creative and diligent, in the face of limited resources, to ensure that the responsibility of colleges and universities to students with disabilities does not stop with adherence to the baseline requirements of federal law. The minimalist approach to legal compliance, which is far too often observed by postsecondary officials, has

not made people with disabilities feel truly welcome on our college and university campuses, and the most logical change agents are the people who provide the services to support students with disabilities as they enter our institutions of higher learning. These key professionals must continue to learn from one another, by sharing model programs and interventions at conferences and by scientifically evaluating the impact of selected services and initiatives to serve students with disabilities. The knowledge base in this area lags far behind the expectations one might hold for a profession that is some 30 years old, and more research will undoubtedly provide fuel for the advocacy efforts that are already underway on many postsecondary campuses.

Last and certainly not least, we must not shrink from our responsibility to require students with disabilities to advocate for themselves in an appropriate and effective way. They have more at stake in their higher education than anyone else does, and as we require more from other stakeholders to make our campuses disability friendly places we must also insist that students themselves take their share of responsibility for the experiences that await them on campus. Self-advocacy and conflict resolution training is one way to more actively engage students in this process, along with leadership development programs that provide opportunities for students to practice their group organizational and advocacy skills. Finally, students with disabilities must be encouraged to participate actively in career

preparatory activities during their college years, including joining professional associations and taking full advantage of Co-Op and internship opportunities to help them bridge the gap in employment that exists between college graduates with and without disabilities.

I would like to thank the authors who contributed such excellent articles to this issue: Deana Duncan Berg, Sheryl Burgstahler, Stanley Butkis, Chuan Chang, Joe Crank, Vicki Daugherty, Donald Deshler, Meg Grigal, Susan Hamre-Nietupski, Tom Harding, Debra Hart, David Johnson, Hanoch Livneh, Erin Martz, Terry McQuillen, M. Sherril Moon, Robert Moran, Debra Neubert, John Nietupski, Vanessa Redd, Michael Sharpe, Brian Shaughnessy, Robert Stodden, Teresa Whelley, Lisa Wilson, JoAnn Yuen, and Karen Zimbrich. Special thanks go to Dr. Paul Wehman, Editor of *JVR*, for the opportunity to undertake this project.

Phillip D. Rumrill, Jr., Guest Editor
Kent State University
Center for Disability Studies
405 White Hall, PO Box 5190
Kent, OH 44242, USA
Tel.: +1 330 672 2294
Fax: +1 330 672 2512
E-mail: PRUMRILL@educ.kent.edu