

Introduction

Supporting Persons with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education and Life Long Learning

Federal legislation such as the *Americans 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. 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%. 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. 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. National Center for Education Statistics in 1999 indicated that 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. Given this new level of interest and participation in postsecondary education, it is important to further understand issues and concerns surrounding the provision of educational supports to students with disabilities in postsecondary education, as well as to understand related services and supports offered through vocational rehabilitation and other community based agencies.

This special issue of the *Journal of Vocational Rehabilitation* (JVR) has pulled together a collection of peer reviewed papers in this area of study and presents them to the many persons involved with disability supports and services in postsecondary education. A purpose of this issue of JVR is to present an organized collection of peer reviewed papers which focus upon issues faced by persons with disabilities and those who support them as they transition to and are supported to access and succeed in postsecondary education and resulting employment opportunities.

This special issue will include six peer reviewed papers intent upon providing the reader with a clear picture of the current status of efforts to support persons with disabilities in postsecondary education settings. The papers have been organized to provide the reader with evidence-based insights into this field, offering a range of data points and perceptions as currently experienced by persons in the field, and to share data on the types of supports which are effective in contributing to the quality of post-school life for persons with disabilities. The editors have reviewed and selected papers that present a range of perspectives on the topic as well as papers providing results from quantitative and qualitative data and information for the reader.

The first paper, entitled "An Analysis of Instructional Accommodations and Assistive Technologies used by Postsecondary Education Graduates with Disabilities" by Sharpe, Johnson and Murray provides data identifying and supporting those practices provided in postsecondary education which contribute to successful student retention and completion of a desired program of study, as well as successful placement in employment following graduation. The paper also shares data on

those specific accommodations and assistive technologies that have been documented to contribute to success in postsecondary education as well as subsequent employment. Also, the paper provides readers with a sense of what works and the need for further data and information to support work in this area of study. The second paper, entitled “A Two-Year Comparison of Support Provision for Persons with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education” by Tagayana, Stodden, Chang, Zeleznik and Whelley, provides the results of a two year follow-up study of the provision of educational supports to persons with disabilities in postsecondary educational settings. The study presents data collected over a two year interval from a nationally representative sample of disability support personnel in postsecondary education. The sample included a representative mix of two-year and four-year, private-public, small-large, and urban-rural postsecondary institutions. The paper provides findings which illustrate the current status of educational support provision in postsecondary education, as well as evidence pointing out areas of continuing growth of supports and accommodations for persons with disabilities.

The third paper, entitled “Advantages of Developing Survey Constructs when Comparing Educational Supports Offered to Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education” by Christ and Stodden, delineates those factors which contribute to successful support provision for persons with disabilities in postsecondary education. The paper further seeks to determine how selected factors varied between different types of postsecondary education settings and how variations occurred over a period of two years. The fourth paper, entitled “Trends in Postsecondary Education: Participation within the Vocational Rehabilitation System” by Gilmore and Bose, provides data and describes the role of vocational rehabilitation programs in supporting persons with disabilities in postsecondary education. The paper presents data in three areas regarding the participation and outcomes of persons with disabilities when compared with persons from other disability groups and with all other persons in postsecondary education and resulting employment settings.

The fifth paper, entitled “Postsecondary Education

across the USA: Experiences of Adults with Disabilities” by Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer and Acosta, provides the voice of current and past students with disabilities receiving supports and accommodations in postsecondary education settings. The paper describes the results of a series of focus groups conducted with persons with disabilities who had completed or were completing a postsecondary education program of study in different sites within the United States (representative of all disability types and postsecondary education program type nationally). The paper shares a range of concerns, needs and solutions as experienced by persons with disabilities as they sought access to and used educational supports in postsecondary education settings. The sixth paper, entitled “The Use of Voice Recognition Software as a Compensatory Strategy for Postsecondary Education Students Receiving Services under the category of Learning Disabled” by Roberts and Stodden presents findings of a qualitative nature regarding the use of specific assistive technology in postsecondary education settings. The paper offers an in-depth analysis of concerns and issues which surround the use of assistive devices, as well as a number of recommendations for persons with learning disabilities and those supporting their access to and use of assistive devices in postsecondary education.

It is hoped that each of the papers reviewed and assembled for this special issue of JVR will contribute to the research base in this important field of study. Further, it is the hope of the editor that each of the papers will be of interest and assistance to researchers, educators, family members and students, and other educational support providers as they seek to accommodate and support the disability needs of persons with disabilities as they transition to, access, and participate in postsecondary education and other life-long learning settings.

Robert A. Stodden, Ph.D
Professor and Director,
Center on Disability Studies &
National Center for the Study of Postsecondary
Educational Supports,
University of Hawaii at Manoa, USA