

Chapter 11

Accessibility, Self-Advocacy, and Self-Efficacy of Students With Disabilities in the 21st Century University

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ABSTRACT

Few studies have addressed the challenging transition that occurs when students with disabilities graduate from the K-12 system and enter the world of higher education. Once in college, students with disabilities no longer have, among other federally-mandated supports, a child-study team to represent them, and thus must develop strong self-advocacy and self-efficacy skills in order to receive the accommodations and modifications they need to succeed academically. This chapter discusses the issues facing students with disabilities during this transition, details the services and support offered by colleges to guide students with disabilities, and shares recommended best practices for instructional strategies higher education can employ to ensure that these students flourish in the classroom and as self-assured, independent adults in society.

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INTRODUCTION

In the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2001 (IDEA), Congress stated:

Disability is a natural part of the human experience and in no way diminishes the right of individuals to participate in or contribute to society. Improving educational results for children with disabilities is an essential element of our national policy of ensuring equality of opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency (sec. 601).

As increasing numbers of diverse learners with special needs attend college, including those with hidden disabilities, this statement rings truer and more urgently than ever. Beyond what colleges and universities are required to provide in terms of appropriate academic adjustments deemed necessary to prevent discrimination against students with disabilities, much more remains to be done. This chapter begins by presenting the public policy and research literature on teaching students with disabilities in higher education, how it differs from teaching in K-12 public education, and documents the main challenges they face in transitioning from secondary to postsecondary education. The chapter next details the services and support offered by colleges to guide students with disabilities, then outlines the essential developmental skills higher education must offer in order to equip these students for their post-college roles and responsibilities. Of critical importance to students with disabilities is acquiring self-advocacy and self-efficacy tools to support their learning, and embracing the dignity of risk.

The objective of “Accessibility, Self-Advocacy, and Self-Efficacy of Students with Disabilities in the 21st Century University” is to acknowledge the significant changes in providing accessibility through the implementation of key legislation while at the same time focusing on the changes needed in policies, practices, and perceptions to reduce barriers obstructing the full inclusion of individuals with disabilities into higher education and society at large.

BACKGROUND

There is considerable American federal legislation relevant to accessibility and disability in educational programs. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA), each school-aged child with a disability is entitled to a “free and appropriate public education” (FAPE) from the age of three until high school graduation. In the case of students with more significant disabilities, this resource can be available until the age of 21. Throughout this period, parents have a voice in their child’s education. Section 300.8 of the regulation of the IDEA of 2004 lists disabilities which are considered possible reasons for providing accommodations or modifications to a child’s education. These are: (a) autism, (b) deaf-blindness, (c) deafness, (d) emotional disturbance, (e) hearing impairment, (f) intellectual disability, (g) multiple disabilities, (h) orthopedic impairment, (i) other health impaired, (j) specific learning disability, (k) speech or language impairment, (l) traumatic brain injury, or (m) visual impairments.

Many secondary students with identified disabilities are assigned an Individualized Education Program under the regulations of the IDEA of 2004, or a 504 Plan under the regulations of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. A team of parents, teachers, evaluators, and other school personnel work together to write the IEP, which suggests accommodations that provide the best education for the child. The IEP includes current levels of functioning, goals to be reached during the year, and adaptations or

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