



# Quarterly Update

## **Self-determination and the College Student with a Disability**

Postsecondary enrollment of students with disabilities is at an all time high (NCES, 2006). Yet, students with disabilities entering postsecondary education can face challenges that their peers without disabilities may not experience. In k-12 educational settings, a student with a disability's needs are addressed and managed by his or her parents and educators. At the college level, students with disabilities learn that they are now responsible for their own educations. They can be academically prepared for their postsecondary endeavors but may be lacking in self-determination (SD) skills. What is SD and how can faculty and staff promote it in their students with disabilities?

### ***The Self-determination Construct***

Possessing SD skills has been associated with positive post-school outcomes (Wehman, 2001). Central to the SD construct is the belief that a self-determined person makes decisions and choices regarding his or life without undue pressure from others (Wehmeyer, 1996). Attitudes and abilities that enable one to become self-determined include choice-making skills; decision-making skills; problem-solving skills; self-observation, self-evaluation, and self-reinforcement skills; self-instruction skills; self-advocacy and leadership skills; internal locus of control; positive attributions of efficacy and outcome expectancy; self-awareness; and self-knowledge (Wehmeyer, 2001). It is not uncommon for postsecondary students with disabilities to have deficits in these essential elements of SD.

### ***Choice-making, Decision-making, and Problem-solving Skills***

Prior to entering postsecondary education, students with disabilities typically have very structured daily routines. Parents will tell them, for example, how and when to study or go from one activity to the next. Sometimes teachers provide additional supports that unintentionally impede a student's development of choice-making, decision-making, and problem-solving skills. Such skills are necessary for the academic success of any student. Disability Services Office (DSO) staff and faculty should be aware of resources available to students such as courses designed for all incoming students that focus on teaching study skills, test-taking skills, and time management techniques to strengthen students lacking in these areas. The campus' Student Counseling Office should be considered for students requiring a more individualized approach.

### ***Self-observation, Self-evaluation, Self-reinforcement, and Self-instruction Skills***

More often than not, students with disabilities graduate from high school without a clear understanding of their disability and their needed accommodations. Until now their parents have taken the lead in working with the schools to address and provide for their academic needs. Accommodations may have been provided without much explanation to the student. Some students with disabilities will expect the same practices in a college setting without realizing that they are no longer covered under an entitlement program (i.e., IDEA) but rather eligibility programs (i.e., Section 504 and ADA). DSO service providers may find themselves educating these students re-

*Continued on page 2*

garding their disability rights, responsibilities, and needs. Helping the student with a disability to understand oneself will also help the student understand why certain accommodations are suggested. The DSO staff may use the student's documentation as a guide in educating the student with a disability about the disability, associated limitations, and academic modifications or accommodations.

### **Self-advocacy and Leadership**

Advocating for one's own needs is often a new concept for many students with disabilities entering college. Even if the student has an understanding of the disability and its resulting limitations, previous opportunities to speak of these issues with others is rare. It is important for faculty and DSO staff to consider this when a student is requesting or discussing accommodations. It is also during this time that a student with a disability may encounter barriers, such as an inaccessible classroom, that may be new to him or her. Assisting a student in strengthening self-advocacy skills will encourage the student to initiate action when such barriers arise. There are ways to build on these skills such as role-playing, sharing experiences of other students with similar disabilities, and encouraging peer mentoring.

### **Internal Locus of Control**

Having an Internal locus of control means that a person is controlled by internal forces as opposed to external ones (e.g., the environment, parents). A child builds on this as he or she grows by being allowed to make choices and learn from the results of these choices. Oftentimes students with disabilities are not held responsible for their own actions, but instead learn how to blame their poor grades or lack of academic progress on perceived attitudinal and physical barriers. Students with disabilities in a postsecondary setting are expected to perform at the same level as their peers. When a student is not performing at what is believed to be his or her fullest potential, it is important to talk with the student and determine where the problem lies. Is the student not receiving granted and necessary accommodations, such as note-taking assistance or extended testing time? Or is the student possibly at fault by not studying properly or completing course assignments? Educating the student that they are responsible for their own actions will enable them to make better decisions as they progress through their academic career.

### **Positive Attributions of Efficacy**

Along with not knowing one's limitations comes not understanding or believing in one's strengths and abilities. Many students with disabilities are told throughout their lives that they are incapable of obtaining the same goals as their peers. They may have heard that attending college is an unrealistic aspiration because of a learning disability or that someone with a physical impairment is incapable of living independently on or near a college campus. What these students do not realize is that once accepted to a university, half the battle is already won. Acceptance requirements are the same for everyone, regardless of any disability. Students typically request to meet with faculty and DSO staff when something is wrong. This is also an opportunity to talk with them about what is going right. Encourage the student to consider strengths and abilities when deciding on a major, choosing which courses to take, and talking to academic advisors in selecting instructors most suitable to the student's learning style. Accommodations and other supports are put in place to reduce the strain of disability related limitations. Redirecting a student with a disability to make decisions based on abilities rather than limitations will make the postsecondary education experience a more positive and successful one.

## **References**

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