

Leveraging Campus Collaboration to Better Serve All Students with Disabilities (Practice Brief)

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Abstract

Historically, disability services focused on serving the needs of students with disabilities who formally disclose a disability to their office. However, with only 35% of students with disabilities self-disclosing to disability services, the majority of students with disabilities must navigate postsecondary education without the use of accommodations. This manuscript argues that disability services professionals can use campus collaborations and campus outreach initiatives to provide information about all students with disabilities to a range of campus personnel. The manuscript begins with an overview of what is known about non-disclosing students with disabilities and the competence of faculty and staff to serve students with disabilities. It then presents the findings from interviews with three disability services offices that are striving to serve all students with disabilities through strategically developed collaborations, relationships, and ongoing communication with faculty and staff across campus. Recommendations for practice are presented.

Keywords: collaboration, college students with disabilities, disability services

Summary of Relevant Research

Student Self-Disclosure

Research based on the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2) established that only 35% of postsecondary students chose to inform their institution of their disability (Newman & Madaus, 2015). In contrast to most studies conducted at the postsecondary level that are dependent on student self-disclosure of a disability, NLTS2 students' disability status was identified by secondary school districts. This nationally representative study followed students from high school into postsecondary school and the extent to which these students chose to disclose their disability to a postsecondary school varied widely by type of disability. Students with more apparent disabilities frequently were more likely to self-disclose than were those with less visible disabilities; for example, 73% of postsecondary students with visual impairments disclosed their disability compared with 24% of students with learning disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). Therefore, colleges are unaware of the majority of students with disabilities

on their campuses (Leake, 2015). More than half of these students are receiving services and supports from professionals who primarily are focused on the broader student body and have limited disability-related competence (Sniatecki et al., 2015). Newman et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of such universally available supports. According to Newman and colleagues, students with disabilities who had accessed universally available and/or disability-related supports were more likely to persist in their college programs. Furthermore, retention rates were higher for students with disabilities who accessed universally available supports only.

Faculty and Staff Disability-Related Competence

Even though the majority of students with disabilities do not self-disclose, roughly one in five undergraduates report a disability (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Therefore, all faculty and staff will work with students with disabilities at some point. Like other identity groups on campus for which faculty and staff receive training, students with disabilities are worthy of the same consideration

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and support in achieving their educational goals. As the number of undergraduate students with disabilities continues to increase (Newman et al., 2011), failure to adequately serve this growing population will likely result in greater attrition rates at both two- and four-year institutions. Already, data suggests that 66% of college students with disabilities fail to persist to graduation, an attrition rate 17% higher than students without disabilities (Newman et al., 2011). It is imperative that faculty and staff adequately serve students with disabilities, but are they prepared to do so?

Research suggests that many faculty and staff lack or have limited disability-related competence and are not presently prepared to serve students with disabilities (Evans et al., 2017; Lalor et al., in press; Sniatecki et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2005). Interestingly, knowledge, dispositions, and skills have been shown to vary by institution type (Vogel et al., 2005) and factors including disability type, previous contact, and program affiliation (Rao, 2004). Nevertheless, faculty and staff recognize their need for disability-related competence and desire additional training on how to best serve students with disabilities (Kimball et al., 2016; Murray, Flannery, & Wren, 2008; Murray et al., 2011; Murray, Wren, & Keyes, 2008); and studies of faculty and staff who receive training and professional development show gains in disability-related competence (Lombardi et al., 2013; Murray et al., 2011; Rohland et al., 2003; Sowers & Smith, 2004). The importance of increasing faculty and staff knowledge has been exemplified by the National Association of Student Affairs Professionals addition of the College Autism Network as an initiative in January 2020 (Williams, 2019). An expectation of this initiative is that high-quality professional development on autism will be readily available to members of the professional association.

Depiction of the Research Problem

Students with disabilities need to disclose their disability to the disability services office before they can access accommodations. If students do not choose to self-disclose, they still are able to seek other postsecondary supports available to the general student body, such as writing and study centers. However, it is clear that most higher education faculty and staff are underprepared to serve individuals with disabilities on college campuses (Sniatecki et al., 2015; Vogel et al., 2005). One key group with disability-related expertise is disability services professionals. Disability services professionals use this expertise to provide direct service to a portion of students with disabilities on

campus—those who self-disclose a disability and are eligible for accommodations—however, many more students with disabilities do not self-disclose to disability services. Fortunately, many disability services offices offer professional development programs, sometimes formal and sometimes informal, to their faculty and staff colleagues in order to better prepare them to serve students with disabilities. It is this programming and training that provides faculty and staff with disability-related knowledge, skills, and dispositions needed to adequately serve all students with disabilities; those who disclose to disability services and those who do not. Work described above by the research team related to the positive impact of universally-available supports on the persistence of students with disabilities, both those who self-disclosed and those who did not, and related to the disability-associated competencies of student affairs professionals lead the to the present inquiry. Specifically, this research examines how disability services offices at diverse institutions leverage their campus relationships and collaborations to foster professional development and outreach programming that better meets the needs of all students with disabilities.

Description of the Practice Related to the Research Problem

Three postsecondary institutions were selected to learn more about how the disability service office works with the broader campus community to provide information about their services and about students with disabilities. The participants constituted a convenience sample. As students with disabilities attend both two- and four-year colleges (Newman et al., 2011), efforts were made to obtain representation from different types of higher education institutions. These institutions included a large, public university; a small, private college; and a public, two-year community college in rural, urban and suburban settings. See Table 1 for a description of each institution. The questions asked can be found in Table 2. Two of the institutions responded in writing, and one participated in a face-to-face interview with one of the authors, which was transcribed. Responses from each of the institutions featured the participation of two disability services professionals working with students with disabilities. The responses were reviewed and coded by the authors, and the following common themes emerged as ways to share information about program services: (a) developing strategic relationships with as many campus offices as possible; (b) serving on campus committees; (c) outreach to departments, divisions, and/or classes; (d) outreach to high school

students and families; and (e) problem solving with faculty and/or department heads. Each is described in more detail below.

Developing Strategic Relationships

Each of the respondents described a variety of relationships that they systematically and strategically developed with a range of campus offices. Although each campus features different organizational structures, there were commonalities in the focus of relationship building, including the campus center for teaching and learning; facilities (for renovations, new construction, and other physical issues); dining services; financial aid; and information technologies. Respondents at one institution noted that a benefit of developing and maintaining these relationships over time was that the disability services staff is “now on the cycle” for annual presentations and is invited to regularly speak to new faculty or residence life staff members. Because of personnel turnover, there is an importance to evaluating these relationships over time. As one respondent shared, “if you have individuals in an office who don’t know about your work or are not familiar with your work, it becomes our responsibility to make sure that they know of us.” Another respondent stated, “we have worked hard to build relationships with these offices and provided information about disability services so peers have the best information on [disability services].”

Serving on Campus Committees

Respondents from all three institutions commented on the importance of serving on campus-wide committees as a way to share information, learn information, and promote the visibility of the disability services office. A variety of committees were specifically noted, including Student Success, Diversity and Inclusion, Governance, and Enrollment Management. As one of the respondents noted “most colleges and universities are built on committees, so even being on a few strategic committees can be beneficial.”

Outreach to Departments, Divisions, or Classes

Each of the respondents described a variety of ways that they work with departments or divisions, both academic and non-academic, within the institution including Academic Affairs/Dean of Faculty, Admission, Academic Support Centers, Career Services, and Centers for Teaching and Learning. These include requested trainings and information sessions, faculty/staff retreats, and orientation sessions for new personnel. Each respondent described conducting workshops related to disability, and hosting movies and guest speakers. In particular, the small, private

college, highlighted how they offered standalone, “one shot” workshops as well as ongoing, multiday workshops on a variety of disability-related topics. Examples of “one shot” workshops include “What Is It Like to Have a Learning Disability?” and “Simple Strategies for Working with LD Students.” Ongoing and multi-day workshops focused on Universal Design for Instruction and supporting the development of a growth mindset for students with disabilities. The respondents also discussed going out to specific classes to discuss disability, or to discuss program services. The large, public university also noted the importance of “going to” certain populations of students, including student-athletes and veterans, rather than waiting or expecting them to come forward to seek out services. Collaborative relationships are established between the disability services and the staff of the offices supporting these students, and disability services staff hold meetings and offer different types of information and support to students in those offices.

Outreach to High School Students and Families

Representatives from the two public institutions discussed programs used to reach out to high school students with disabilities or high school professionals. One of the offices offers an annual “Agency and High School Breakfast,” with topics that change from year-to-year. Personnel from this office also host visits from multiple high schools each year, and serve on a local community transition team, with representatives from adult agencies and local high schools. Another institution described conducting orientations in the spring, for both rising seniors and for students who were accepted to the institution and were trying to decide if they would enroll. These sessions allow students to learn about disability services at whatever institution they eventually attend, but importantly, they also allow relationships to be developed between the student and the disability services personnel. For example, the respondents at this institution described how the nature of a student’s disability had changed between acceptance and enrollment, and the prior communication enabled the program to advocate for the student when an unforeseen financial issue arose. As they noted, “they’re just richer conversations for us to help students make better decisions, and not necessarily to choose (Institution Name), but to choose an institution that’s a good fit for them.”

Problem Solving with Faculty and/or Department Heads

Each respondent discussed the importance of working and consulting one-on-one with faculty to problem solve. As one of the respondents stated,

Disability services staff are available to problem-solve and listen to faculty when they come in perplexed by a student and are seeking guidance. These 1:1 conversations are valued by our staff and seen as a way to educate and support faculty, as well as the student.

One of the respondents described a liaison system in which the disability services staff has established relationships with academic departments (e.g., Psychology, Economics, Biology) that enables quick contacts in case of issues and two-way “updating.” They noted that these contacts also help to facilitate inclusion of the disability services staff in the annual orientation sessions provided to new staff and faculty described earlier.

Implications and Portability for Higher Education Practice

Disability services providers on all three campuses described collaborating with others to help support students with disabilities and to try to help ensure that students disclose their disability, for example, by providing early outreach to high school students and by reaching out to student groups that are unlikely to seek supports on their own, like student athletes and veterans. It is clear that disability services providers on these campuses invest considerable time and energy in forging relationships with key professionals and offices so that they have potential to impact access on campus. Likewise, these relationships may be parlayed into opportunities to participate in influential committees that have the power to facilitate or hinder access for individuals with disabilities on campus (e.g., Student Success, Diversity and Inclusion, and Enrollment Management). Through relationships and committee work, disability services professionals have the opportunity to influence and improve campus climate and access for individuals with disabilities, including, but not limited to, universally reaching out to all students – especially through orientation and first-year experience programs – first-year seminar courses, academic advising meetings, and residence hall meetings, to make sure students are aware of the availability of supports before they encounter difficulty in academics and/or in student life. Evans et al. (2017) provide useful resources related to both assessing and addressing campus climate related to students with disabilities, as well as how a variety of campus departments (e.g., advising, athletics and recreational sports, campus safety, dining services, health and counseling centers, student organizations, etc.) interact with students with disabilities. Readers

are also referred to this source for suggestions on ways to implement universal design into these areas.

Disability services professionals also spoke of outreach to faculty and staff to raise awareness of disability-related issues and enhance professional competence in serving students with disabilities. Trainings, guest speakers, and literature are frequently provided to faculty and staff on these campuses in order to ensure that all campus professionals are prepared to promote and facilitate campus access and inclusion for students with disabilities. Given the high disability services professional-to-student ratio on these campuses and the large percentage of students on campus who have not disclosed their disability, it is no longer feasible or appropriate for disability services professionals to be the only professionals prepared to work with students with disabilities.

Interestingly, only the two public institutions noted engaging in outreach to high school students and families. Given the mission of these institutions to serve the residents of their respective states and communities this is not entirely surprising. With increasing number of students with disabilities desiring higher education in the United States, this type of outreach by disability services professionals at public institutions is likely to increase. As private institutions look to compete for students in an increasingly crowded college market, more disability services offices at private institutions may be called upon or elect to begin outreach initiatives to high school students and parents.

The provision of one-on-one consultation for faculty and staff is another key outreach activity engaged in by disability services professionals. As the resident experts in matters of disability and campus accessibility these consultations are opportunities for disability services professionals to provide specific technical support and guidance to faculty and staff. As noted in the introduction, most faculty and staff are unprepared to support the unique needs of students with disabilities, and these one-on-one consultation meetings offer opportunity for faculty and staff to obtain guidance from those professionals on campus with disability-related competence.

Only the large, public university described going out to populations of students they know may not come to them, but likely will include higher proportions of students with disabilities, such as athletes and veterans. Given that collaboration between disability services and faculty and staff seems to be occurring at each of the institutions, professional development workshops offered by disability services professionals can potentially be leveraged to ensure that all students with disabilities are being served. For example,

faculty and staff can be trained on how to implement universal design inside and outside of the classroom to ensure that all instruction, supervision, and learning environments are proactively accessible to diverse students.

Also of note is the suggestion made by disability services professionals at the small, private college related to the value of directly reaching out to and providing support and professional development to staff at other learning centers, such as writing, study, and math centers, where research has demonstrated that so many students with disabilities go for additional help, independent of their decision to disclose a disability. Ensuring that learning center staff are prepared to provide accessible service and support to students with disabilities is critical. Collaborations that ensure learning center staff are familiar with topics such as assistive technology, research-based learning strategies, and executive function support can enhance services provided to students with disabilities who may not pursue accommodations and services via disability services.

Conclusion

Campus collaboration is an essential element of disability services offices. The ability to work with colleagues from around campus can be leveraged to better serve all students with disabilities regardless of whether or not they formally disclose to disability services. Through consciousness-raising, advocacy, and providing professional development to faculty and staff colleagues, disability services can expand its reach and create a campus community marked by greater awareness and access for students of all abilities.

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Table 1*Description of Participating Disability Services Offices*

Institution Type	Location	Approximate Enrollment	Full-Time Disability Services Staff Size	Other Characteristics
Large, public university	Rural	27,000	18	Flagship university
Small, private college	Suburban	2,000	2	Highly selective, liberal arts college
Public, two-year community college	Urban	7,000	6	Open admissions college

Table 2*Interview Questions*

- Please describe any campus outreach activities that your office has initiated to provide professional development to faculty and staff regarding how they can best serve students with disabilities, including those who may not self-disclose.
- Please describe how you incorporate information about students with disabilities who may not self-disclose, but who may be accessing services or enrolled in courses.
- Please describe any other programs or initiatives that your office provides to the campus related to making campus services and environments more accessible and inclusive for students with disabilities, including those who do not self-disclose.
- Do you collaborate/coordinate with other on-campus offices to provide disability-focused professional development? If so, how?
- Please describe any activities that you engage in to encourage students to self-disclose.