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Special Education Faculty Involvement with College Students with Disabilities

Sally S. Scott
University of Virginia

Abstract

It has been proposed that special education faculty members have a particularly valuable role to play in providing state-of-the-art services for college students with disabilities. The literature to date, however, does not contain information about their actual involvement. For preliminary inquiry, a pilot survey was conducted of department chairs or coordinators of special education programs in institutions of higher education in the state of Virginia. Results indicate that special education faculty are not widely involved in formal services for students with disabilities. However, many are participating on a more informal basis in various institutional service functions benefiting students with disabilities. Implications of these findings are discussed.

With the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, students with disabilities have secured a place on college campuses. In response to increasing populations, postsecondary programs for students with disabilities are rapidly developing. Program descriptions in the literature are numerous and varied. Within this variety, however, a common strand is the importance of the faculty in providing access to students with disabilities. Faculty involvement and cooperation are frequently cited as necessities for disabled student services (Barbaro, 1986; McGuire & O'Donnell, 1989; Orzek, 1986; Siperstein, 1988; Torres, 1984). Faculty inservice and awareness training are common practice for broadening understanding and engendering support (Allard, Dodd, & Peralez, 1987; Lundeburg & Svien, 1988; Ostertag, Baker, Howard, & Best, 1982; Tomlan, 1988).

Salend, Salend, and Yanok (1985) suggested that special education faculty in particular have a valuable service role to offer their institutions as college communities develop and implement programs for students with learning disabilities. Salend et al. proposed a model of potential support functions of special education faculty including advocating student rights, promoting positive campus attitudes, advising learning disabled students, facilitating career planning, overseeing modification of instructional programs, and assisting learning centers in training staff and keeping abreast of new developments within the field.

Shaw and Norlander (1986) concurred with the importance of the role of the special education faculty in facilitating services for students with learning disabilities. Experience and expertise in assessment, diagnosis, consultation, program planning, and provision of direct instructional services were noted as potential contributions special education faculty could make to campus efforts to provide support services to students with disabilities. Shaw and Norlander further proposed that special education faculty extend their expertise into the training of future service providers

These calls for action clarify the unique potential of special education faculty to promote services for students with disabilities on campus. Though the authors focus their discussions on services for students with learning disabilities, it could be posited that the benefits of these services extend much further. Improved campus attitudes, broadened awareness of advocacy issues, and expanded resources for staff training, for example, would certainly benefit all students with disabilities. It would appear that postsecondary institutions have a valuable resource for providing state-of-the-art services for students with disabilities. But is this resource being tapped? Is the emerging field of postsecondary services for students with disabilities capitalizing on these resident experts?

After an extensive review of program descriptions in the literature, it was found that special education faculty were mentioned specifically in only two references. In both instances it was recommended that special education faculty be included in an advisory position in the development and overseeing of services (Dooley & Palamar, 1984; Vogel, 1982). Upon further inspection it became apparent that several of the program descriptions were authored by special education faculty members who were, in fact, initiating or developing programs at their own institutions (Bireley, Landers, Vernooy, & Schlaerth, 1986; Cordoni & Welch, 1986; Gajar, 1982; McGuire, 1986; Nash et al., 1989; Ostertag, 1986). Descriptions of the programs, however, made no mention of systematically tapping cooperation from peers and colleagues in special education. It is difficult to distinguish whether such cooperation occurs on an informal basis not specifically delineated in the formal program structure.

The present study was conducted as a pilot for a larger investigation of similar questions in a national sample. The purpose of the study was to examine the involvement of special education faculty with college students with disabilities. Are special educators participating in the formal functioning of college support services? Is involvement with students with disabilities occurring on a more informal basis through various institutional functions? Do institutions offer any incentives or rewards for such involvement? And finally, what are the opinions of special education faculty concerning various aspects of involvement with college students with disabilities?

Method

Participants

The sample consisted of all department chairs or coordinators of programs offering a major in special education in the state of Virginia. Thirteen programs in special education

were identified through the College Board Index of Majors (1989-1990). Each coordinator or department chair was mailed a cover letter explaining the purpose of the study, a copy of the questionnaire, and a stamped, self-addressed return envelope. After a follow-up letter, 10 of the 13 surveys were returned for a 77 percent response rate. No apparent similarities of size, locus of control, location, or level of degree granted were found among institutions of nonrespondents. One survey indicated occasional confounding data of the respondent as an associate dean. Applicable items were identified by the respondent and are noted in the findings.

Survey Instrument

A 34-item questionnaire was developed following a review of the literature on present and proposed involvement of special education faculty in serving college students with disabilities. One portion of the survey was based on the model proposed by Salend et al. (1985) for special education faculty involvement. Also included were questions on formal institutional services, informal faculty involvement, institutional incentives or reward structure, and opinions concerning present and desired involvement. The instrument included dichotomous (yes/no), short answer, and Likert-type items. Space was provided to elicit respondent comments.

Results

Number of full-time special education faculty at respondents' institutions ranged from 3-12 with a mean of 5 full-time faculty. Seven of ten respondents indicated their institutions had a formal program to meet the needs of college students with disabilities. One respondent indicated the presence of formal policies, though no program, and 2 respondents reported no program available. Of the seven institutions with formal programs, one respondent reported special education faculty involvement in the program, two qualified that special education faculty were available as needed by the program, and four indicated no involvement.

Outside of formal programs, various involvement of special education faculty was reported across institutions. Conducting specific activities to promote positive campus attitudes was indicated by 90 percent of the respondents. Half of the respondents reported faculty serving on committees charged with protecting the rights of students with disabilities. Other functions were indicated less frequently and dispersed across respondents. Thirty percent reported special education faculty serving as advisors of students with disabilities. Monitoring program modifications and assisting faculty in designing and/or implementing modifications were reported by 40 percent of respondents though one respondent indicated these activities were primarily the result of his role as associate dean. Thirty percent reported special education faculty involvement in the area of monitoring admission procedures. All respondents concurred that these activities were deemed service functions by the institutions. No institutions were reported to offer an incentive program to promote faculty involvement, though four respondents indicated that these activities could be categorized and considered in evaluation of service to the institution. The final item on the survey requested an indication of agreement or

disagreement on a Likert-type scale on several statements concerning service delivery for college students with disabilities (see Table 1).

Table 1

Opinions Concerning Services for and Involvement with College Students with Disabilities

Statement	Agree	Neutral	Disagree
1. Services for students with disabilities at my institution need to be improved.	90%	0%	10%
2. Serving college students with disabilities is an institutional responsibility of all special education faculty members.	80%	10%	10%
3. Faculty members from all disciplines are equally responsible for meeting the special needs of students with disabilities at my institution.	80%	0%	20%
4. Extending professional involvement to college students with disabilities exceeds reasonable demands on the special education faculty.	50%	0%	50%
5. Serving college students with disabilities is not a professional responsibility of special education faculty members. a	20%	20%	50%
6. The current reward structure at my institution encourages special education faculty involvement with college students with disabilities.	10%	0%	80%
7. At my institution we need better ways of reinforcing special education faculty involvement with college students with disabilities.	50%	20%	30%
8. Any involvement of special education faculty members at my institution with college students with disabilities is the result of individual initiative and interest.	100%	0%	0%
9. The special education faculty at my institution would like to see more incentives provided for their involvement with college students with disabilities.	40%	60%	0%

Note: Strongly Agree (1) and Agree (2) responses have been combined to form percentage of agreement. Strongly Disagree (5) and Disagree (4) responses have been combined as well, forming the disagree percentages. Neutral responses consist of items ranked as 3 on the 5 point scale.

a) Percentage does not total 100% because of lack of response by one respondent.

Discussion

Consistent with the literature, the findings of this survey indicate little involvement of special education faculty in formal institutional service components for students with disabilities. However, despite lack of formal involvement, special education faculty in this sample appear to perceive themselves as advocates of college students with disabilities. Eighty percent of department chairpersons reported that serving college students with disabilities is an institutional responsibility of special education faculty; actual involvement is evidenced in a variety of service functions pertaining to the quality of life and campus adjustment of college students with disabilities. Of interest is the fact that many of the reported service functions being fulfilled by special education faculty could also be perceived as legitimate activities or responsibilities of formal campus support programs. For example, in institutions with formal support programs many respondents indicated that special education faculty were involved in monitoring admissions procedures, advising students, overseeing program modifications, assisting faculty design and implementation of modifications, conducting campus awareness activities, and serving on committees to protect student rights. Further research is needed to determine whether these service functions of special education faculty are overlapping formal support programs or are being coordinated to complement the support available to students with disabilities.

Also of note was the finding that the two respondents reporting no formal programs for students with disabilities at their institutions also indicated the least amount of special education faculty service. These respondents indicated an average of .5 service functions fulfilled by special education faculty as opposed to an average of 4 service functions conducted by special education faculty in institutions with formal programs. Numerous reasons for such correlation could be posited: predominant campus attitudes that foster support services may also encourage special education faculty involvement; the presence of support services on campus may raise faculty awareness and increase involvement; or perhaps active special education faculty members have increased the sensitivity and awareness on campus giving rise to acknowledgment of the need for formal support services. Further research is needed to clarify this correlation and determine whether it is displayed in a larger sample of respondents.

Faculty time allocation has been described as "a function of an internal standard-how such participation squares with personal and professional needs-rather than organizational pressures and incentives" (Finkelstein, 1984, p. 131). Respondents concurred with this statement as they clearly voiced the opinion that the current reward structure of their institutions did not encourage special education faculty involvement with college students with disabilities. Respondents indicated unanimously that any involvement was the result of individual initiative and interest.

It is less clear, however, how these respondents perceive their professional responsibility towards college students with disabilities. Whereas 80 percent indicated involvement with college students with disabilities was an institutional responsibility, only 50 percent felt this was a professional responsibility as a special educator. Respondents were evenly

split on the question of whether extending professional involvement to college students with disabilities exceeded reasonable demands on the special education faculty. Respondents were divided as to whether they desired better incentives from the institution for working with college students with disabilities. Among this sample of respondents, then, there appears to be divisiveness on the interpretation of the professional role of special educators. The increasing presence of students with disabilities on campuses of higher education is a relatively recent phenomenon. It could be speculated that perhaps special education faculty are in a time of professional role definition in this area. Complimentary to this study, the attitudes of DSS professional staff towards special education faculty involvement in programs may prove a beneficial area of future research. In particular, it may be important to ascertain whether involvement of special education faculty is desired, to clarify possible barriers to such participation, and to reveal potential solutions to more collaborative efforts.

Caution must be used in generalizing the findings of this study. The data provided in this survey are a sample of impressions from program leaders in one state. Though data is limited at this time, it may perhaps provide a basis and reveal directions for future study.

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