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# **A Private College's Response to the Emerging Minority of Student with Disabilities**

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## **Abstract**

*This case study reviews and analyzes the patterns of institutional change in a private and highly selective college that are in response to the needs of students with disabilities. Document and archival record review, interviews, questionnaires, and participant-observation are used as multiple data sources. Findings indicate that organizational changes necessary to effectively serve this emerging minority are complex and multidimensional. Six key factors that facilitated organizational change are described, recent changes are cited, and suggestions for further change or improvement are highlighted. This format of self-study and the application of findings from this case study may be useful to other small colleges initiating programs for serving students with disabilities.*

Over the past two decades, as a result of the implementation of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Education for All Handicapped Children Act of 1975 (Public Law 94-142), American society has been involved in a "quiet revolution" (Gliedman & Roth, 1980). Professionals working with students who have benefited from this legislation are aware of the increasing number of individuals with visible and invisible disabilities in higher education (Fishlock, 1987; Rothstein, 1986). The Higher Education Research Institute estimates that in 1985 over 7% of the freshman college population had disabilities (Rothstein, 1986). Since only 40% of qualified high school graduates who have a disability pursue a postsecondary education, as compared to over 50% of the non-disabled high school graduate population (Jarrow, 1987), it can be assumed that as services and awareness increase, students with disabilities will make up a larger proportion of the college student body.

Students with disabilities who apply to college have been educated primarily in the mainstream and expect that college will be ready to serve their needs. Many college communities are open-minded and are trying to be more accessible to students with certain disabilities. Sandperl (1989) described four models of program design for learning disability services which have developed in higher education. The Academic Development Model focuses on individual assistance from a writing center or a center for academic development, offers writing counseling, tutoring, individual educational

evaluations, requirement waiver or substitution, and special examination accommodations. The Consumer Advocacy Model focuses on self-understanding and self-advocacy, offers a support group and direct student support such as reading and notetaking services. The Disabled Student Services Model is administered by a coordinator from a disability resource center, has a strong services infrastructure, individualized evaluation, academic planning, strong advocacy, and a student support group. The Comprehensive Model has a coordinator, written college policy, evaluation services, individualized academic planning and support services, auxiliary aids, specialized tutoring, academic accommodations including examination adjustments, requirement substitutions, reduced course load, priority registration and housing assignments, a high level of campus awareness concerning disability issues, readily available information, faculty mentors, and an active student group.

Institutions may decide to adopt a particular model, but more likely, a unique model will evolve in response to the institution's needs and pressure groups. Within all models, program and physical accessibility can constitute major organizational challenges to institutions, while financial constraints may collide dramatically with progressive and humanistic attitudes and intent. The ensuing processes of problem-solving and compromise lead to the individualized institutional model which, to be successful, must be compatible with the mission of the college.

In small institutions with limited resources a case study format of self-evaluation allows an efficient method of data collection and the basis for ongoing self-monitoring. The resulting data base and the key factors for organizational change illuminated through this process provide a foundation for a formal program for students with disabilities. This case study explore how a highly selective private college, which has a long history of individualized planning for student needs, has responded to the emerging population of student with disabilities. The purpose of this case study is to review and analyze the patterns of institutional change that have take place in this organization in answer to the needs of these students. The study identifies the internal and external forces leading to organizational changes that respond to the physical and psychological needs of students with disabilities. It also addresses issues such as program and service development, administration and faculty attitude, current practice, progress, perceived difficulties, and future goals and objective.

## **Method**

The liberal arts college that is the focus for this case study is coeducational residential, and highly selective. As recommended by Yin (1989), multiple sources of date were utilized to determine the patterns of institutional change that have occurred over the past 17 years (1973-1990). Sources of data included documents and archival records; three questionnaires, one each for staff, faculty and students; interviews with faculty, staff, alumni; a videotape of a panel discussion with students with disabilities; and participant-observation.

Documents and archival records included college publications (catalogues, handbooks, alumni magazines, campus newspapers), mission statements, documents approved by the Board of Trustees, admissions materials, Section 504 compliance documents, affirmative action statements, accessibility committee minutes and reports, strategic planning documentation, the organizational flow-chart, budgets, annual reports, and registry data on students with disabilities. Document review focused on references to students with disabilities and their programmatic and facility needs with particular attention paid to the evolution of policy, program development and physical accessibility that reflected growing awareness and sensitivity to the needs of students with disabilities.

Three questionnaires were designed to explore aspects of awareness, commitment, and action related to improving college accessibility for students with disabilities. The first questionnaire was distributed by mail to 30 current and past administrators, faculty, and alumni whose job responsibilities encompassed issues relevant to students with disabilities, such as housing, academic modifications, accessibility, counseling, and health. Questions focused on organizational responsiveness, outstanding issues, institutional policy, and documentation that related to students with disabilities. From this group, follow-up interviews were conducted with six individuals to clarify and elaborate on specific information.

A second questionnaire, which focused on classroom practices and faculty attitudes and concerns regarding students with disabilities, was distributed through campus mail to all 200 teaching faculty. Questions explored publicizing the Section 504 statement, alternative testing and academic adaptations used, and perceived accessibility issues.

The third questionnaire was distributed through campus mail to all 1650 full-time undergraduate students. This questionnaire focused on publicity for the Section 504 statement and explored the incidence of disability, use of support systems and adaptations, and perceived accessibility issues. A half-hour video was produced in which four college students discussed the impact of their disabilities on their college experiences. Their disabilities included visual disability, hearing loss, dyslexia, and traumatic brain injury.

Participant-observation was carried out by both authors as members of the teaching faculty and disability program administrators. Our roles in advising students, assisting admissions, participating in standing committees, and directing college programs all provide opportunities to monitor and raise sensitivities to the needs of individuals with disabilities.

## Results

### Documents and Archival Information

Documents and archival items were reviewed to establish a chronology of campus activity and action that reflected awareness and commitment to issues concerning students with disabilities. Document review revealed a two-phase process of organizational response to the mandates of Section 504 and to the needs of the increasing number of students with disabilities. In the first phase; 1973 through 1979, years which largely preceded formal implementation of Section 504, the college carried out the organizational processes required by the Rehabilitation Act, but there was little evidence of any major organizational impact. Beginning in 1980, documentation revealed a shift toward programmatic and organizational changes that reflect a more assertive and advocate-oriented interpretation of the role of this private institution in regard to students with special needs. Specific key events noted in the 1973-1990 time period are summarized in the time line (Table 1).

**Table 1**

#### **Timeline of Major Institutional Change**

- 1976 Equal opportunity statement in college catalogue; appointment of Section 504 coordinator
- 1977 Committee formed to respond to Section 504; institutional self-study and transition plan
- 1980 Establishment of Writing Center
- 1982 Writing Center offers diagnostic testing, learning disability consultation, specialized tutoring
- 1984 First Disabilities Awareness Day  
Class gift of ramp to science laboratory
- 1987 Statement regarding students with disabilities in handbooks for freshmen, advisors and faculty  
Needs assessment questionnaire for freshmen; handicapped awareness in dorm directors' training  
Ad hoc alumni and campus accessibility committees formed  
College joins State Consortium on Learning Disabilities, HEATH and AHSSPPE
- 1988 Staff and faculty Section 504 workshops established  
Appointment of Coordinator of Services to Students with Disabilities  
Budget lines established for coordinator and college-wide accessibility projects  
Student support and advocacy group formed  
College representatives attend, "Dyslexic/Learning Disabled

- Students at Selective Colleges: An Invitational Symposium"
- 1989 Sign language house chosen as theme house for 1989-1990
- Accessibility position paper presented to trustees by alumni and campus accessibility committees
  - Section 504 statement read by faculty in classes
  - College representatives attend "The Next Step: An Invitational Symposium on Learning Disabilities in Selective Colleges"
  - Coordinator participates in orientation for new faculty
- 1990 Coordination of services: Campus Safety, Residential Life, Deans
- Institutional case study presented at American Orthopsychiatric Association meeting
  - Students with disabilities highlighted in college strategic plan
  - Nondiscrimination statement revised and moved to front of catalogue and on all course schedules
  - Campus map revised to include accessibility

At the time of the study, the 94 students out of the 1650 population (5.6%) who were registered with the coordinator included students with a learning disability or attentional deficit disorder (68%), motor or sensory disability (17%), chronic physical illness (11%), eating disorders or drug or alcohol dependency (3%), or emotional disturbance (1%).

### Administration survey

Eighteen of the 30 questionnaires (60%) were completed. Highlights of the 18 complete questionnaires and six follow-up interviews were summarized. Respondees had jobs that related to students with disabilities on an average of 9.5 years (range of 1 to 26 years of experience). They described the organizational atmosphere regarding students with disabilities as generally supportive with strong case-by-case response. Issues raised included the need for more planning, policy development, faculty and staff training, and increased physical accessibility. Fifty percent of the respondents were unaware of existing written college policy and 78% were unaware of written history concerning students with disabilities.

### Faculty questionnaire

The 54 faculty returns (27%) were summarized. Responding faculty are increasingly willing to publicize the Section 504 statement to their classes (from 52% spring of 1989 to 72% in spring of 1990). Forty-three percent of the respondents have been asked to make academic accommodations including testing accommodations, teaching adaptations, and physical accessibility adjustments. Responding faculty expressed concerns about the need to increase campus physical accessibility, and to continue consciousness raising and training for the faculty.

### Student questionnaire

The 133 student returns (8%) were summarized. Students reported that the Section 504 statement had been heard in classes more frequently each semester (from 33% in spring of 1989 to 50% in spring of 1990). Thirty of the responding students (23%) indicated that they had a visible or invisible disability, with 19 of these students (63%) having made their needs known to some appropriate member of the college staff or faculty. Specific course adaptations that have been requested by these students included flexible deadlines, increased testing time, additional support for notetaking, foreign language requirement substitution, and course adaptations regarding expectations for classroom oral participation. Students expressed pleasure with the college's progress toward increased program accessibility but were concerned about inadequate physical accessibility and the need for more tolerance, awareness, and information on campus.

### Video Panel Interview

The video offered four junior and senior undergraduates the opportunity to discuss a wide range of topics that related to their college experience. In general, all the students were pleased by the progress made on the campus over the past years and cited specific programs that they believed would ease future students' experiences, including the writing center, the presence of a coordinator of services to students with disabilities, the peer support group, and campus-wide sensitivity training. All students expressed both frustration and difficulties while at college but described how the specific challenges in this competitive setting had made them more competent and confident.

### Participant-observation

The authors have been on the faculty for 18 and 12 years, respectively. Job requirements, including student advising, teaching, committee participation, and administrative responsibilities, have provided both authors opportunity to observe, monitor, and encourage institutional planning and responsiveness to the needs of students with disabilities. Personal observations were used to corroborate case study findings.

### **Discussion**

Findings from document review, questionnaires and videotaping are consistent with the authors' participant-observation findings. The review of the documents and archival information reflects an institutional shift in the last decade beyond compliance and toward a more assertive and proactive model of institutional preparation and response to students with disabilities. Questionnaire results demonstrate a generally responsive and open-minded attitude on the part of the staff, faculty, and students who responded. Returns indicate that despite increased awareness of Section 504 and its implications, respondents believe that there remain areas needing clarification in institutional design, role definition, and institutional documentation of policies. Answers indicate that there remains a need to educate the campus concerning the policy documentation that already exists. Low response rates in both the faculty and student questionnaire may reflect the general lack of priority given to this issue. It is interesting to note, however, that the faculty who did respond to the questionnaire have had a high rate of experience teaching

students with needs for academic adaptations, and likewise, students who responded have a high rate of personal experience with disability issues. Alternative distribution and collection techniques need to be used in future surveys to increase the return rate and provide a better reading of institutional change. The videotaping of the student panel provided a first-hand documentation of organizational change as experienced by four students with disabilities. These students expressed an awareness of increased sensitivity and responsiveness in the institution and attributed these changes to specific organizational action.

Findings of this case study indicate that the organizational changes necessary to effectively serve students with disabilities are complex and multidimensional. For this college they include six key factors: (1) utilizing strong trustee and alumni advocacy, commitment, and support; (2) appointing and coordinator of services to students with disabilities and developing a program budget; (3) increasing administrative, faculty, student, and staff awareness; (4) building an internal network of administrators and faculty who have demonstrated individual support to students with disabilities, and building an external network with other institutions and organizations who are working on similar goals; (5) establishing two committees to monitor and support the process of change, and increasing the efforts for physical accessibility; and (6) improving programmatic and physical accessibility. In the following discussion of the six key factors, recent changes are cited and suggestions for further change or improvement are highlighted.

### **Utilizing Trustee and Alumni Advocacy**

Trustees and alumni serve as advocates and support the administration in their commitment to provide services beyond the minimum required by law. Trustee support is crucial in any action that requires policy innovation. In the institution studied, trustee support was key in endorsing the diversity statement which set an institutional goal of increasing enrollment of student with disabilities, and in making budget decisions that stress physical accessibility. The alumni have a strong emotional and financial connection to the institution and, returning year after year for reunions, they are personally interested in the physical accessibility of the campus. The establishment of the Ad Hoc Alumni Committee on Accessibility was an effective initial step in the process of change because the alumni organization had the mechanisms in place for communicating with and influencing trustees and administrators.

### **Central Coordinator and Budget**

It is important to have a designated person responsible for coordinating disability services. The coordinator not only provides more efficient delivery of services but also keeps records and statistics which help establish priorities for services. Designating a specific coordinator or services to students with disabilities is a key step in committing the organization to improving services for students with disabilities. A job title ties the project to a budget line and ties the individual to the organizational structure. The individual is accountable to a more senior member of the organization, and annual goals

and objective for the project become part of the annual performance review. This assures accountability and furthers organizational commitment. The budget for office activities, even if the financial amount is modest, solidifies the project and makes it more viable in the institution.

The coordinator has improved interdepartmental communications among the offices of residential life, campus safety, deans, and counseling services in regard to student safety issues. The coordinator is developing more structured data collection on newly admitted students which will facilitate better demographic monitoring and program evaluation. With the Dean of College, the coordinator needs to initiate a system of information-sharing with the Director of Health Services to assure better data collection and analysis, maximum program accessibility, and coordinated safety systems for students. To assure campus-wide policy development it is important that the coordinator establish a regular system of communication and collaboration between her office and the Director of human Resources and the Affirmative Action Officer, who are both responsible for staff and faculty members' disability rights and needs. The position of Coordinator of Services to Students with Disabilities needs to be placed on the organizational chart with a reporting line to the Dean of the college. In order to assure continued program development and evaluation an increase of office support should be considered for the Coordinator's office.

### **Increasing Campus Awareness and Training**

Campus awareness of accessibility issues and needs is crucial to gaining support for developing programs and for ensuring that academic modifications and physical accommodations are appropriate. Campus awareness is developed through accessibility committee work, the development of campus support groups, feature articles in campus and community publications, and through speakers, awareness weeks, and library displays. Awareness programs have the advantage of being generally inexpensive and having an immediate impact on all levels of the organization.

The policy of having faculty read the college's nondiscrimination policy in all classes is an effective communication technique. New admissions disability support group brochures should be designed to increase the information readily available to prospective and enrolled students. The nondiscrimination statement is now placed on the inside cover of the college's catalogue, and the registrar now regularly publishes the same statement on the cover page of every semester schedule. Continued efforts must be made to increase administrative, staff, and faculty awareness, sensitivity, and knowledge concerning policies and practices for students with disabilities.

## **Building Internal and External Networks**

The statement passed by the trustees which asserts that the college should be more diversified gives the impetus for staff and faculty to work together and network more successfully. From the point of application for admissions there is a system of communication among the admissions office, the coordinator of services to students with disabilities, and the deans' offices. As training and awareness programs have been carried out with staff, faculty, and students, the coordinator has become aware of individuals who act effectively as ombudsmen for students with disabilities. The goals and visibility of the program are being aggressively pursued on the campus. Public information meetings, student panel presentations, and news coverage have all been useful in increasing the visibility of the program and in strengthening and expanding the network of cooperation and enthusiastic advocates.

Networking is also conducted outside the immediate college community. By joining appropriate organizations (Association on Handicapped Student Service Programs in Postsecondary Education, and the state Consortium on Learning Disabilities, HEATH) and attending and making presentations at conferences, a network of professionals is developed. This group is a support system and a resource to the coordinator as the college develops more policies and programs. Policy statements and research forms are shared. General exchange of ideas and problem-solving techniques saves the coordinator both time and frustration. This external network also increases the visibility of the college's program and adds to its public recognition.

## **Accessibility Committees**

In small colleges, the number of students with disabilities will always be relatively small and will lack the power of a highly visible mass; therefore, it is crucial to have specific advocates who can continually remind the organization about the goal of increasing diversity. Campus-wide accessibility committees help to develop campus awareness for the need for services and establish a campus network to provide these services efficiently. It is recommended that either the current accessibility committees or a new task force begin work on developing a set of policy recommendations that address admissions, registration, advising, course load, requirement substitution, and testing modifications.

## **Program and Physical Accessibility**

Physical accessibility is an important goal, but because of the financial expenses intrinsic in physical renovation, it is a long-term goal. Students, alumni, faculty, staff, and trustees have all gained awareness concerning physical accessibility. The campus map has been redesigned to specify handicapped accessibility of buildings and handicapped parking areas. There is now funding in the annual budget specified for use in projects that improve physical accessibility. There needs to be established a public format to report to the college community the projects completed each year that increase physical accessibility.

Program accessibility is much more immediately achievable and has been a major focus of the coordinator's time and efforts. This case study found significant success in this area. There needs to be an annual progress report made to the full college community that highlights changing demographics and program initiatives for students with disabilities.

Application of this approach to self-study and the findings from this case study may be useful to other small colleges initiating programs for serving students with visible and invisible disabilities. As this case study illustrates, inclusion of the newly emerging population of students with disabilities into a highly selective college can be successfully executed, but not without an organized and extensive plan for change. In smaller colleges, because of limited personnel and financial assets, providing adequate services for students with disabilities will mean utilizing all the available resources both inside and outside the institution. But careful planning, consistent effort, and efficient methods of self-monitoring can lead to significant institutional change.

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