Using the AHEAD Program Standards and Performance Indicators to Promote Self-Determination in the Daily Practice of Office of Disability Services

Lyman L. Dukes III
University of South Florida St. Petersburg

Stan F. Shaw
University of Connecticut

Abstract

Research supports the promotion of self-determination in adults with disabilities. Those with well-developed self-determination skills typically experience greater academic success and financial independence than persons who are less self-determined. This article will help disability service professionals use selected items from the AHEAD Program Standards and Performance Indicators to enhance student outcomes by programmatically fostering self-determination.

According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2; Wagner, Camets & Newman, 2003), "increasingly and justifiably, youth with disabilities are viewed as capable of conceiving and shaping their own futures" (P. 1-3). However, the ability to become a self-determined adult who can manage his or her life (e.g., make thoughtful choices, self-advocate) is not necessarily a natural or easy process. Self-determination is "a combination of skills, knowledge, and beliefs that enable a person to engage in goal-directed, self-regulated, autonomous behavior" (Field, Martin, Miller, Ward, & Wehmeyer, 1998, p. 2). This article will briefly discuss the importance of self-determination for adults in postsecondary education and describe how the AHEAD Program Standards can be employed to enhance student outcomes.

The Importance of Student Self-Determination

Several studies have demonstrated the positive impact of self-determination on the success of persons with disabilities in postsecondary education. For example, Sarver (2000) found a positive and significant relationship between self-determination and grade-point average for postsecondary students with learning disabilities. Similarly, Parker (2004) conducted in a study with postsecondary students with a primary diagnosis of attention deficit/ hyperactivity disorder.

Parker concluded that self-determination was an important factor in students' academic success.

"If students who have received disability services for several semesters function in the same dependent way as they did when they entered, close examination of the program's philosophy and commitment to fostering independence is warranted" Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, (2002, p. 489). The AHEAD Program Standards and Performance Indicators specifically note that Offices for Students with Disabilities (OSDs) should have a mission as well as policies and procedures that foster self-determination (Shaw & Dukes, 2006). The following Standards and their respective Indicators relate to fostering independence in students and developing a program mission that promotes self-determination.

Using the AHEAD Program Standards to Foster Self-Determination

Standard 1.1: Serve as an advocate for issues regarding students with disabilities to ensure equal access.

The role of the OSD professional is to facilitate inclusion of students with disabilities by advancing the understanding of disability issues throughout the campus community. In this context, the student assumes the role of personal advocate, while the OSD

maintains effective working relationships with various campus personnel in order to ensure equal access to the campus community for students with disabilities. Entities with whom the OSD might collaborate or to whom it might provide training include, but are not limited to faculty, staff, and administration (e.g., admissions, facilities, mental health services, residential life, registrar, information technology services, and campus committees that address issues such as student discipline or student activities).

Consider, for example, whether that training includes descriptions of both student and institutional rights and responsibilities, and whether it provides recommendations for how to put the student in the role of decision-maker. A second but no less important consideration is to examine office policies and procedures. Ensure that they reflect the promotion of student independence. For example, do students self-advocate by personally delivering accommodation letters to faculty and explaining their disability at that time? Do students participate in goal-setting activities, with the guidance of the OSD, as they begin each academic year? Also ensure policies and procedures encourage and facilitate the inclusion of students with disabilities across the campus community. For example, are services available to the general student population duplicated in the OSD? If so, consider whether that is the best approach for students affiliated with the OSD.

Standard 2.2: Provide services that promote access to the campus community.

Indicators that fall under this Standard address the availability of assistive technology (AT) and the promotion of universal design (UD). Student independence may be enhanced when AT is widely available and accessible across a number of campus locations. Given this approach, AT becomes an institutional responsibility. Thus, campus information technology staff would be trained in the use of AT, and students with disabilities would access AT in the same environments in which students access other learning technologies. In contrast, if AT resources are housed solely in the OSD, students using such resources are segregated from the rest of the campus population. Engaging the campus as a whole promotes opportunities for students to practice and engage in self-determination skills. Self-efficacy is enhanced because students are responsible for accessing campus resources in the same way as any other student. Those who use the OSD for needs that could be met through other means are likely losing opportunities to engage more traditional campus and community environments and practice valuable skill sets.

Course design that proactively considers the use of inclusive instructional techniques has the potential to dramatically reduce a student's reliance upon the OSD, and, in turn, promote his or her self-determination. For example, consider the faculty member who provides choice for completion of course assignments. The student who is averse to a multiple-choice exam may have the option of writing a paper or conduct a presentation to meet the course objective. Having an understanding of one's disability (self-awareness) will allow the student to select (problem-solving skills, choice-making skills) a course activity that is the best match with her academic strengths.

Collaboration is critical for successful implementation of this standard. Is the staff that train faculty to improve or change their instructional techniques aware of the value of UD instructional methods? Do student learning centers engage in practices that promote learning for all? Have deans in academic affairs been apprised of the importance of UD instructional approaches? Is UD reflected in OSD policies and procedures? Is it included in the training the OSD provides to campus constituencies?

To support faculty in this process, a website is available that contains resources and information about UDI that faculty can be accessed online (http://www.facultyware.uconn.edu). The site hosts a growing repository of high-quality instructional products submitted by college faculty from diverse academic disciplines and selected for publication on the Facultyware site through a peer review process. Instructional tools that are rated of high quality and reflective of the principles of UDI are showcased on the site and are available as freeware for other faculty. The DO-IT presentation and resource materials (available at www.washington.edu/doit/) are another source for service providers who are interested in conducting training on topics such as UD for the campus community.

Standard 2.3: Disseminate information to students with disabilities regarding available campus and community disability resources.

Hoffman and Field (2006) note that one of the important characteristics of environments that promote self-determination is the use of communication patterns that support student self-determination. What does this mean for practices in the OSD? It means that students should be encouraged, even prior to being physically on campus, to examine OSD policies and procedures, and resources that are available through the office's website. For example, does the OSD webpage include procedures for accessing accommodations, list

OSD policies and procedures, provide information about university resources or career planning, and list community resources for needs such as a diagnostic evaluation? To the degree possible, the OSD webpage should provide clear direction to students about how to gather necessary information and forms (e.g., request for a course waiver).

Standard 4.2: Determine with students appropriate academic accommodations and services.

The determination of reasonable and appropriate accommodations provides an extraordinary opportunity to help students practice self-determined behavior. OSD personnel can query the student about his or her strengths and needs and how the student intends to use those strengths to successfully complete college. In addition, OSD personnel should dialogue with the student about the many and varied campus services (e.g., learning centers, student activities, mental health) available as well as when and how it is appropriate to access each of these campus offices.

A good starting point is to examine the Summary of Performance (SOP) each student completes during high school. One of the stated purposes of the SOP is to link formal testing data as well as informal (e.g., transition assessment, classroom observation, student-family interview), yet valuable, data with the selection and provision of reasonable and appropriate accommodations and supports (Dukes, Shaw, & Madaus, 2007). Additionally, in many cases, the student will have a played a major role during high school in completing the SOP. Thus, the SOP provides an ideal opportunity to put the student in the role of meeting leader, even during the first office visit, when disability documentation and the SOP are discussed. Have the student direct the discussion in which his disability documentation is examined. Ask him to self-advocate by explaining what accommodations and supports might be appropriate and why. Ultimately, the goal should be to ensure the student recognizes that accommodations and supports are determined by examining the environment, the task, and the unique needs of each individual.

Standard 5.1: Use a service delivery model that encourages students with disabilities to develop independence.

The OSD mission and its policies and procedures should reflect practices that promote and encourage student self-determination. Examples include:
- Address the topic of self-determination during the hiring process, in staff orientation, and in staff development.
- Train staff to model self-determined behavior in their professional practices.
- Ensure staff engages in instructional practices that are aligned with self-determination competencies.
- Provide students the opportunity to make choices.
- Hold students accountable for following OSD protocols.
- Ensure that other campus constituencies understand the importance of promoting student self-determination.
- Promote the use of UD practices on your campus.
- Ensure students play a role in the determination of reasonable and appropriate accommodations and supports.
- Gather program evaluation data to determine the degree to which you are meeting your goal of promoting student self-determination.

As a student's academic career progresses, the OSD should have less contact with the student as he develops the skill sets necessary to be a self-determined young adult.

Conclusion

The AHEAD Program Standards and Performance Indicators can and should be used as a guide for the development of a mission statement and policies and procedures that foster student independence. Additionally, OSD staff should be transparent when interacting with students by communicating their problem-solving or choice processes, thereby serving as models of self-determined behavior. Finally, the OSD should have a mission and policies that encourage parents' willingness to relinquish control as students learn to be self-determined adults. Self-determination is emerging as an evidence-based practice and is one of the keys to success in adult environments.

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About the Authors

Lyman Dukes III, Ph.D., is associate professor of Special Education at the University of South Florida St. Petersburg. His research interests include transition from school to postsecondary settings, operationalizing the AHEAD program standards and performance indicators for postsecondary disability service providers, the use of the summary of performance for high school students with disabilities, and the use of web-enhanced instruction at the postsecondary level.

Dr. Stan F. Shaw is Co-Director of the Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability and Professor Emeritus of Special Education at the University of Connecticut (UConn). He is the Coordinator of UConn's Annual Postsecondary Disability Training Institute for college disability personnel. Dr. Shaw is currently writing a book, Preparing students with disabilities for college: A practical guide for transition, to be published by Brookes in 2009. He wrote the postsecondary education chapter for the international Handbook of Special Education (2007).