

## PRACTICE BRIEF

# Faculty Perspectives on Professional Development to Improve Efficacy When Teaching Students with Disabilities

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### Abstract

*Innovative and Sustainable Teaching Methods and Strategies* project staff provided professional development to instructional faculty to enhance their attitudes, knowledge, and skills in meeting the diverse needs of students with disabilities. This practice brief describes one of the professional development programs, delivered over the course of a three-day Summer Institute, its outcomes and challenges as reported by participating faculty, and implications for further research and practice.

*Keywords: Professional development, perceived impacts of professional development by faculty, postsecondary education, students with disabilities*

### Literature Review

In the U.S., students with disabilities (SWD) are participating in postsecondary education in increasing numbers. Between 1978 and 2008, enrollment of SWD in U.S. colleges and universities grew from 2.6% to 10.8% (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2009). Also, four out of five secondary school SWD indicate postsecondary education as their goal after high school (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009). However, SWD still attend postsecondary education at a lower rate than students without disabilities (Getzel & Wehman, 2005). Moreover, SWD in postsecondary educational settings face significant limits in accessibility to educational services and opportunities. As a result, SWD have lower persistence (i.e., having obtained a degree or still enrolled) and graduation rates than students without disabilities (Berkner, Curraro-Alamin, McCormick, & Bobbit, 1996; Post-outcomes Network of the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2002). SWD drop out of postsecondary education at a higher rate than students without disabilities (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000), and those who do graduate take longer to complete their

degree programs when compared to students without disabilities (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw 2002). NCES (2006) reported that only 16% of SWD compared to 27% of those without disabilities were enrolled in a 4-year institution of higher education and attained a bachelor's degree in five years.

### Problem

One of the primary challenges SWD face in postsecondary education is insufficient support from faculty (National Council on Disability, 2003). The availability of appropriate support and accommodations as well as the presence of positive attitudes among faculty are directly related to the success and retention of SWD in higher education (Rao, 2004; Stodden, Jones, & Chang 2002). However, only 62% of postsecondary institutions provided faculty and staff handbooks designed to assist them in working with SWD, and only 64% of those institutions provided faculty with information and resources to increase their knowledge of working with SWD (NCES, 2009).

Although having a supportive and positive faculty-student relationship is a prime gauge for the

success of SWD in a postsecondary environment, faculty members are often ill equipped to create these relationships (Salzberg et al., 2002; West et al., 1993). Faculty attitudes towards and misconceptions about the characteristics and needs of SWD hinder student disclosure of disabilities and requests for accommodations to which SWD are entitled (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005; Johnson, 2006). Moreover, faculty continue to lack requisite knowledge and skills needed to provide appropriate and reasonable accommodations to SWD. Studies have shown that faculty possess insufficient knowledge about federal law and their legal obligations pertaining to SWD in higher education settings (Burgstahler, Duclos, & Turcotte, 2000; Vasek, 2005). Although faculty perceive knowledge of Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) as an area of high importance, they also appraise this knowledge domain as an area of weakness among postsecondary faculty (Cook, Rumrill, & Tankersly, 2009). As the number of SWD in postsecondary education increases, faculty face greater demands to provide support to these students. Thus, there is a clear need to develop and improve the attitude, knowledge, and skills of postsecondary faculty in the context of educating and supporting SWD.

### **Faculty and Location Information**

This practice brief describes a faculty professional development (PD) program that staff from the Center on Disability Studies at University of Hawaii at Manoa (CDS-UHM) conducted as part of an Office of Postsecondary Education funded project entitled, *Innovative and Sustainable Teaching Methods and Strategies to Ensure Students with Disabilities Receive a Quality Higher Education* (IST). The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Postsecondary Education funded the IST project from 2005 to 2008. The overarching goal of the IST project was to increase the retention and completion rates of SWD in postsecondary education through the provision of PD to instructional faculty. The purpose of the PD was to enhance faculty competence in meeting the diverse needs of SWD pursuing higher education and to encourage faculty development of positive attitudes towards SWD as valued learners. The primary target for the PD was faculty within the UH system, which includes three universities and seven community colleges. Project staff also provided PD to individuals from the Pacific Rim region, U.S. mainland, and other countries through face-to-face workshops and online webinars.

This practice brief describes the content and strategies covered in the Summer Institute on Leadership in Disability and Diversity (Summer Institute), outcomes identified by faculty interviews during the follow-up case studies, and implications for research and practice. Sixteen participants were recruited for the Summer Institute through campus-wide advertisements and in collaboration with the Center for Teaching Excellence at UHM. The Summer Institute was conducted by IST project staff from CDS-UHM over three consecutive days at the UHM. After the Summer Institute, follow-up case studies were conducted during the fall semester with seven volunteer faculty members. The intent was to evaluate (a) how and/or if the instructional faculty participants implemented what they learned from the Summer Institute and (b) how well the instructional faculty participants retained the attitudinal and knowledge changes they acquired from the Summer Institute over the following semester. Although multiple data collection methods (e.g., faculty pre-post interviews, student pre-post surveys, class observations, syllabi review, and student academic record analyses) were used in the follow-up studies, this practice brief focuses on faculty interviews to highlight the faculty perspective of the effects of the Summer Institute PD. The characteristics of the follow-up study participants are described in Table 1; the faculty pre- and post-interview questions are presented in Table 2.

### **Strategy**

The Summer Institute was held for three days at the UHM. The institute was designed to provide participants an opportunity to expand their understanding and skills in the areas of (a) disability culture, (b) student and faculty rights and responsibilities, (c) accessible distance education and assistive technology, (d) UDI, (e) hidden disabilities, and (f) multiculturalism and disability. The curriculum across these focal areas was delivered through presentations by expert practitioners, through dialogue with support service provider and student panels, and through participants' creation of a culminating project. All three PD days included opportunities for participant reflection, guided discussion, and collaborative work. Through an expansion of faculty knowledge and skills across these focal areas, and through faculty application of new knowledge and skills in a culminating project, it was believed that the PD would positively impact faculty attitudes, competence, and self-efficacy in meeting the

Table 1

*Characteristics of the Faculty Participants of the Summer Institute Follow-up Study*

Name	Gender	College	Experience in Meeting SWD's Needs Before the PD	Change in Competence in Meeting SWD's Needs After the PD	Change in Familiarity with Accommodation After the PD	Change in Professional Skills in Instructing SWD After the PD	Change in Knowledge After the PD
G	F	Social Sciences	Few	+ Excellent	+ Excellent	0 Good	+
J	M	Social Sciences	Many	0 Fair	0 Fair	- Fair	+
M	M	Natural Sciences	Few	0 Good	0 Good	0 Good	0*
R	F	Social Work	Many	+ Good	+ Good	0 Good	+
O	M	Medicine	Many	.	0 Good	+ Good	+
Q	F	Social Work	Many	+ Excellent	+ Excellent	+ Excellent	+
K	M	Education	Few	+ Good	0 Fair	0 Fair	+

*Note.* The criteria used to categorize the faculty by their previous experience with SWD are (1) the number of SWD one has worked with and (2) the number of accommodations one has provided to SWD. Change in competence, familiarity with accommodations, and professional skills were assessed by comparing participants' pre-post survey responses, in which participants self-rated their levels using a four-point scale: Excellent, Good, Fair, and Poor. "+" indicates increase after the PD; "0," no change after the PD; and "-", decrease after the PD. \* indicates the faculty scored 100% correct on both the pre- and post-survey knowledge assessment, so there was no change.

diverse academic support needs of SWD in their own classrooms and academic communities. A description of the enacted curriculum is detailed below.

### Day 1

(1) The first day of the PD explored disability culture, student and faculty rights and responsibilities, and accessible distance education and assistive technology. The curriculum on disability culture utilized poetry and powerful vignettes to engage participants' reflection on individuals with disabilities' shared history of oppression and resilience. Specifically, the curriculum honored the experience of disability as a part of individuals' identi-

ties and provided an alternative model through which participants might understand student and faculty rights and responsibilities in higher education.

(2) The second module, student and faculty rights and responsibilities, began by locating disability within the framework of diversity. The presenter introduced the social model of disability and offered participants an opportunity to reflect on the physical and attitudinal barriers to full participation in higher education. The module reviewed disability rights laws relevant to higher education and situated the provision of reasonable accommodations within federal mandates for equal opportunities for SWD participation in higher education.

(3) The accessible distance education and assistive technology focal areas introduced case studies of four students with disabilities participating in online courses. Through an exploration of these case studies, the module highlighted laws specific to online course offerings and explored high- and low- tech solutions enabling equitable online communications and access. At the close of the presentation, participants discussed the relevance of accessible distance education in their own educational practice.

## Day 2

(4) Day 2 of the institute explored UDI, included dialogue with the support service provider and student panels, guided discussion, and group work towards a culminating project. The UDI curriculum highlighted the guiding principles of UDI (Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2001) and shared procedures consistent with UDI that are supported by research. To facilitate participants' future use of UDI, the curriculum included links to UDI resources and examples of graphic organizers and guided notes that can be easily adapted for novel contexts. The UDI focal area concluded with a cautionary reminder that UDI does not replace or diminish SWD's legal entitlement to reasonable accommodations.

## Day 3

(5) Day 3 of the institute began with inquiry into the hidden disabilities focal area. Participants gained insight into the nature, prevalence, and manifestations of the most common hidden disabilities among adolescent and adult populations (i.e., LD, ADHD, psychiatric disorders). The curriculum directly addressed myths and prejudicial attitudes towards highly stigmatized hidden disabilities (e.g. psychiatric and learning) and prompted participants to consider how prejudicial attitudes effectively undermine the Americans with Disabilities Act. Participants explored educational barriers affecting students with hidden disabilities in tandem with practical solutions and recommended educational supports.

Throughout the three-day institute, time was allotted for group work on a culminating project. The culminating project provided an opportunity for participants to apply, integrate, and synthesize gains in knowledge and skills across the focal areas and engage with peers in communities of practice. Examples of projects included: a draft series of steps needed to

maximize the accessibility of an online course, a written case study that proposes solutions to real problems encountered by SWD, and a draft department policy that details actions that can improve the retention and success of SWD.

## Observed Outcomes

The qualitative data analysis of the faculty interviews revealed both positive outcomes and challenges. All faculty participants responded that, during the fall semester following the Summer Institute, they worked proactively with their campus student disability services office to provide reasonable accommodations for SWD, sought to make course materials more available and accessible for students, and presented information that they learned from the Summer Institute through multiple means to other faculty. When evaluating the strategies faculty participants most frequently implemented in their classrooms, three clear themes emerged: (1) providing reasonable accommodations; (2) applying UDI strategies (e.g., use of graphic organizers, providing lecture notes, use of the pause procedure, reading written course content aloud, creating communities of learners, and providing course materials in pdf formats that can be easily enlarged); and (3) enacting syllabus modifications (e.g., including a more welcoming accessibility statement). Additionally, some faculty participants became active agents of change beyond their own classrooms, advocating for systems change within larger academic contexts. The interviews also showed a positive effect of the Summer Institute on the faculty's self-efficacy in working with SWD, which can affect their efforts and persistence when encountering obstacles (Bandura, 1977). For instance, a female faculty described moving from feelings of uncertainty towards feelings of competence and a willingness to provide reasonable accommodations to SWD. She said, "Now it's like, 'Okay, let's talk about what we can do.'" A male faculty reported feeling "more up to the challenge" of pursuing live closed captioning, despite financial and institutional barriers.

The faculty also discussed challenges they have experienced in implementing the strategies from the Summer Institute. They identified technical challenges and institutional barriers to the provision of reasonable accommodations and faculty's use of UDI strategies in their classes. For example, one faculty described being placed on a waiting list for a media- equipped

Table 2

*Faculty Pre- and Post-Interview Questions***Faculty Pre-Interview Questions**

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1. What motivated you to participate in the summer institute and this follow-up study?
  2. What were the most useful and meaningful gains from the training program?
  3. How are you planning to apply your learning from the summer institute to your classes this semester?
  4. What kinds of services or accommodations are you planning to provide if you have students with disabilities in your class?
  5. What do you expect your students with and without disabilities to achieve from your classes?

**Faculty Post-Interview Questions**

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1. How well did you achieve your plan to apply the learning from the summer institute to your class?
  2. What is your greatest achievement? Please provide episode(s) or example(s).
  3. What challenged you in your practice of UDI strategies and assistive technology?
  4. What helped you in your practice of UDI strategies and assistive technology?
  5. What kinds of services or accommodations did you provide to students with disabilities and diverse needs? Please provide examples of special needs and accommodations provided.
  6. How did students with and without disabilities in your classes meet your expectations?
  7. After this semester, did you come to feel more comfortable in addressing the needs of students with disabilities and other diverse learners? If yes, to what degree?
  8. How do you evaluate your current professional skills to address the needs of students with disabilities and other diverse learners?
  9. Were your attitudes toward the UDI strategies and assistive technology changed after this semester? Why or why not?
  10. Could you have done more for students with disabilities and diverse needs? If yes, what more could you have done?

classroom while another faculty explained that in the absence of institutional support for UDI, he had to pay for close captioning of distance education courses out of pocket. Thus, the faculty members perceived that continued direct support, technical assistance, and provision of more resources are needed to fully actualize the strategies they acquired from the Summer Institute in the classrooms.

### Implications

The qualitative analysis of faculty interviews indicated that, from the participating faculty perspective, the Summer Institute did increase faculty competence, self-efficacy, and positive attitudes in meeting the academic support needs of SWD during the semester following the Summer Institute. The findings imply that the short-term effects of a faculty PD can be sustained over time, and that trained faculty will implement PD strategies in their instruction to some degree. Given little research linking disability-focused training to changes in faculty attitudes and perceptions (Murray, Lombardi, Wren, & Keyes, 2009), this study contributes to advancing the research base on this topic.

A notable finding of this study is that, despite insufficient institutional support, the faculty participants expressed increased commitment to the goal of reasonable and effective accommodations for SWD and created their own learning communities through which they advocated for system change within larger academic contexts. For instance, one faculty participant persuaded colleagues to revise a virtual class to support students with visual and hearing impairments. Another participant began seeking funding opportunities to help campus instructional technology experts learn and then support faculty members' use of high-tech UDI strategies. When combined with ongoing direct support, technical assistance, and resources, creating faculty learning communities may promise to be a natural means to further develop faculty motivation and efficacy expectations, sustain improved attitudes and skills through PD, and promote practices supporting SWD's retention and success in postsecondary education.

### Limitations

Because the data source of this practice brief is interview data from a small sample of instructional faculty, the results are not generalizable. Additionally, the follow-up study, presented in this practice brief, focused

only on faculty perception. To determine longer-term impacts of faculty PD it is recommended that additional follow-up occur with more faculty PD participants and with the use of additional data sources.

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