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Program Standards for Disability Services in Higher Education

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Abstract

The promulgation of Program Standards for disability services in higher education provides a research-based direction for postsecondary institutions, consumers and governmental agencies with respect to the services necessary to provide equal access for college students with disabilities. Twenty-seven Program Standards across nine categories are presented. Myths challenged by these Standards and the implications of the Standards for the future of disability services in postsecondary education are discussed.

*Following the process described by Dukes (this issue), Program Standards for disability services in higher education were overwhelmingly approved by the membership of the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) in June 1999. Although postsecondary services to students with disabilities has been growing rapidly in recent years, little research has addressed the planning and organization of these services (Bursuck, Rose, Cowen & Yahaya, 1989; Sergeant, Carter, Sedlacek & Scales, 1988; Shaw, McGuire & Brinckerhoff, 1994). Service providers in both the United States and Canada have, therefore, been left to develop programming for their students based on little or no empirical evidence (Gajar, 1992). Many studies have called for a more systematic approach to service provision for students with disabilities (Hill, 1996; Sergeant et al., 1988). Though the growth in services for these students likely indicates a sincere desire to meet the needs of this cohort, services must be "grounded in theory or supported by evaluation data" (McGuire, Norlander, & Shaw, 1990, p. 71) in order to be most effective. The purpose of this article is to discuss myths about disability services which have been challenged by the development of these Standards, present the Program Standards, and discuss implications of their use for postsecondary disability services.*

*Myths*

*Myth 1: Postsecondary Disability Services are Driven by Federal Laws*

The creation of the field of postsecondary disability services in the United States was based on a series of federal laws providing access for individuals with disabilities (Brinckerhoff, McGuire & Shaw, in press). The very prescriptive Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), originally passed in 1975, provides detailed information on how elementary and secondary schools are to serve students with disabilities. The passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 expanded access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities. Subsequent court decisions were the basis for shaping postsecondary disability services through the 1980's and into the 1990's due to a lack of empirical data on best practices (Brinckerhoff et al., in press). It is, therefore, not surprising that postsecondary disability personnel saw themselves primarily as implementers of the law rather than professionals providing data-based services (Bursuck, et al., 1989).

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms and various human rights statutes provide for equal access to Canadian colleges but do not have the national impact of U.S. laws because individual provinces are responsible for education (Wiener & Siegel, 1992). The assumption has been that the focus on 504 and the ADA has lead postsecondary institutions in the U.S. into different directions than Canadian programs, which are not "burdened" or "blessed" with federal mandates.

The research, which was the basis for the Program Standards (Dukes, this issue), demonstrated remarkable agreement on essential program elements across Canadian and U.S. colleges. This occurred in spite of the hypothesis of the researcher that the data would demonstrate differences across countries. Agreement on the Standards related to issues such as teaching learning strategies and fostering self-

advocacy across countries with different laws make the case that data on “best practices” was more influential than divergent legal precedents.

### Myth 2: The Type of Institution Determines the Approach to Disability Services

In a similar vein, Myth 2 suggests that institutional characteristics such as public/private, 2 year/4 year, and competitive/non-competitive admissions are critical components requiring different types of institutions to have different approaches to service delivery (McGuire et al. 1990; Nelson & Lignugaris-Kraft, 1989). Taken at face value, this makes sense because of apparent differences in student characteristics, admissions policies and funding (Bursuck et al., 1989). However, the conventional wisdom was proven wrong by the data (Dukes, this issue). Responses by practitioners indicated that the same services were essential across types of institutions. The point is not that programs are the same, but that essential services can be delineated across institutions. There are essential services that each college should provide regardless of specific institutional characteristics. Each institution, however, can individually determine how and by which department the service will be provided. There is now a clear Standard within which institutions can flexibly develop specific services. In addition, it should be noted that colleges could decide to provide services that go beyond those specified in the Standards.

### Myth 3: There is No One Approach to Disability Services

Myth 3 is a generally accepted mantra of disability services. For example, Cox and Walsh (1998) noted as a conclusion from their research “What might be appropriate to implement in one institution might not be suitable in another” (p. 60). This myth has allowed individual practitioners and higher education administrators to provide whatever services they chose based on fiscal constraints (Hill, 1996) or professional training (e.g., “I’m a counselor so I’ll feature counseling services”). It has also allowed higher education personnel to side-step research on best practices by noting, “we do it differently here at Iconoclastic College”. Schuck and Kroeger (1993) acknowledged this issue stating “inconsistent services are a significant problem in higher education programs for students with disabilities” (p. 60). Recently, Johnson, Sharpe, and Stodden (2000) specified the problem noting, “there is no standard set of criteria for what constitutes effective postsecondary support services” (p. 26). Although the Program Standards described below still give postsecondary institutions great latitude in determining how they will meet the Standards and who will provide the services, they do set expectations for what services each institution will provide.

The myths discussed above were understandable given that services for college students with disabilities is a developing field which has grown rapidly in response to consumer expectations supported by legal mandates (Sergent et al., 1988). The fact that no one discipline “owns” postsecondary disability programs has encouraged variability in service delivery (Brinckerhoff et al., in press). Most important, until now, there has been little in the way of research to specify minimum components necessary to provide equal access. Dukes’ research (this issue) provided the basis for *AHEAD* to develop databased Program Standards for disability services in higher education, which replaces myth with knowledge.

### *AHEAD* Program Standards

Twenty-seven Program Standards (presented in Figure 1) across nine categories have been identified as essential regardless of type of school (two- or four-year), funding source (public or private), location (U.S. or Canada), or admissions policy (open enrollment or competitive). Their implementation will provide consistency across institutions and help students with disabilities by simplifying the selection of postsecondary services.

### Consultation/Collaboration/Awareness

Scott (1996) has described both the importance of collaboration and the challenges in implementing collaboration and consultation across a postsecondary institution. Advocating for students with disabilities (Standard 1.1) and providing disability representation on appropriate campus committees (Standard 1.2) are clearly essential elements of disability services. It is important to reiterate here that the Program Standards do not require that this responsibility be housed solely in the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). It could be provided through a disability access committee, the 504 or ADA office or some other campus department(s). The point of the Standards is that the service should be provided and both the institution and the individual or department responsible should be aware of that role.

### Information Dissemination

The focus of this category is communication across the institution regarding disability access. The three elements of communication relate to institutional publications (Standard 2.1), access to communication for individuals with disabilities (Standard 2.2), and providing information to students about available resources (Standard 2.3). It is important to note that the referral to resources specifies both campus and community agencies. This reinforces the need for an experienced, trained professional who is “networked” with other professionals and knowledgeable about the needs of students with disabilities.

### Faculty/Staff Awareness

*One of the most critical needs at most institutions relates to involving faculty and staff in meeting the needs of individuals with disabilities (Brinckerhoff et al., in press). The four Standards in this category deal with providing consultation and training for college faculty, administrators, and staff. Traditionally, this has involved training and support for faculty to encourage them to “accept” students with disabilities and make necessary accommodations. A more recent approach has been to enhance the ability of faculty to more effectively teach their content (Foley, Ruban, Scott & McGuire, 2000). Staff development which helps faculty plan instruction (e.g., delineate outcomes, construct syllabi), deliver instruction (e.g., multi-media presentations, use of technology, cooperative learning, scaffolding) and evaluate learning outcomes (e.g., alternative modes of demonstrating mastery, test format and item construction) will reduce the need for disability related accommodations and modifications (Shaw, 1999). Over twenty grants recently funded through the Higher Education Amendments of 1998 (Demonstration Projects to Ensure Students with Disabilities Receive a Quality Higher Education Program, CFDA No. 84.333) will provide state-of-the-art staff development materials and resources to help institutions fulfill these Standards (Brinckerhoff et al., in press).*

To facilitate equal access to postsecondary education for students with disabilities, the office that provides services to students with disabilities should:

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#### 1. Consultation / Collaboration / Awareness

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- 1.1 Serve as an advocate for students with disabilities to ensure equal access.
- 1.2 Provide disability representation on relevant campus committees (e.g., academic standards, policy development).

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#### 2. Information Dissemination

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- 2.1 Disseminate information through institutional publications regarding disability services and how to access them.
- 2.2 Provide services that promote access to the campus community (e.g., TDD’s, alternative materials formatting, interpreter services, adaptive technology).
- 2.3 Provide referral information to students with disabilities regarding available campus and community resources (e.g., assessment, counseling).

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#### 3. Faculty / Staff Awareness

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- 3.1 Provide consultation with faculty regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, physical, and curriculum modifications.
- 3.2 Provide consultation with administrators regarding academic accommodations, compliance with legal responsibilities, as well as instructional, programmatic, physical, and curriculum modifications.
- 3.3 Provide individualized disability awareness training for campus constituencies (e.g., faculty, staff, administrators).

- 3.4 Provide feedback to faculty regarding general assistance available through the office that provides services to students with disabilities.

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#### 4. Academic Adjustments

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- 4.1 Maintain records that document the plan for the provision of selected accommodations.
- 4.2 Determine with students, appropriate academic adjustments consistent with the student's documentation.
- 4.3 Have final responsibility for determining effective academic accommodations which do not fundamentally alter the program of study.

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#### 5. Instructional Interventions

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- 5.1 Advocate for instruction in learning strategies (e.g., attention and memory strategies, planning, self-monitoring, time management, organization, problem-solving).

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#### 6. Counseling and Advocacy

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- 6.1 Assist students with disabilities to assume the role of self-advocate.

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#### 7. Policies and Procedures

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- 7.1 Develop written policies and guidelines regarding procedures for determining and accessing "reasonable accommodations."
- 7.2 Establish guidelines for institutional rights and responsibilities with respect to service provision (e.g., documentation of a disability, course substitution/waiver).
- 7.3 Establish guidelines for student rights and responsibilities with respect to service provision (e.g., documentation of a disability, course substitution/waiver).
- 7.4 Develop written policies and guidelines regarding confidentiality of disability information.
- 7.5 Encourage the development of policies and guidelines for settling a formal complaint regarding the determination of a "reasonable accommodation."

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#### 8. Program Development and Evaluation

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- 8.1 Provide services that are based on the institution's mission or service philosophy.
- 8.2 Coordinate services for students with disabilities through a full-time professional.
- 8.3 Collect student feedback to measure satisfaction with disability services.
- 8.4 Collect data to monitor use of disability services.
- 8.5 Report program evaluation data to administrators.

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#### 9. Training and Professional Development

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- 9.1 Provide disability services staff with on-going opportunities for professional development (e.g., conferences, credit courses, membership in professional organizations).

9.2 Provide services by professional(s) with training and experience working with college students/adults with disabilities.

9.3 Adhere to the Association of Higher Education and Disability (*AHEAD*) Code of Ethics.

Colleges receiving funding for such projects include the University of Arizona, University of Minnesota, Columbia University (for an Ivy League consortium), University of Washington, Utah State University, University of Kentucky, University of Kansas, and the University of Connecticut (Grant abstracts and links to individual institutions are available through the grant web site at [www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/disabilities/](http://www.ed.gov/offices/OPE/disabilities/)).

#### Academic Adjustments

The focus of this category is on the determination of appropriate academic adjustments to provide equal access for students with disabilities. It includes having a policy to determine accommodations (Standard 4.1) and determining academic adjustments on an individual basis (Standard 4.2). Standard 4.3 is an example of the rapidly changing nature of postsecondary disability services and the need to continually review and revise these Program Standards. It indicates the need for “final responsibility for determining effective academic accommodations”. It seems that when this was identified as an essential component of disability services by practitioners (Dukes, this issue), the intent was that personnel from the Office for Students with Disabilities knew more about “reasonable accommodations” than anyone else on campus and needed to have the clout provided by this “final authority” to assure equal access for students. At this point in time, however, recent litigation and the move toward collaborative decision-making has modified this Standard to mean that a person or a team has the responsibility to make such a determination, subject to any review procedures. Postsecondary disability personnel who fulfill AHEAD’s Professional Standards (Shaw, McGuire & Madaus, 1997) clearly possess the skills to have a significant role in making those decisions.

#### Instructional Interventions

The one Standard in this category indicates that students with disabilities should have access to instruction in learning strategies (Standard 5.1). As noted previously, this is research-based (Deshler, Ellis & Lenz, 1996)—not a product of legal decisions. Edmunds (1999) has noted “the research is quite clear that once students with learning disabilities receive instruction in the use of cognitive and metacognitive strategies, they typically do better in school” (p. 69). While these strategies have been extensively used for students with learning disabilities for years, they can also be effective for the organizational and psychosocial problems of students with ADHD and psychiatric disabilities, among others.

It is interesting to note what is not listed under instructional interventions. There is no expectation that content tutoring will be provided. This is appropriate for a number of reasons. Many academic departments have content tutoring available to any student who is having problems in a subject area. More important, Decker, Spector and Shaw (1992) report that the research on the efficacy of content tutoring for students with disabilities is not encouraging. Since content tutoring provides few long-term benefits, its ethical appropriateness is questioned. The data indicate that while it may provide short-term help, it does not enable students to become effective, independent learners capable of remembering, maintaining and applying any knowledge or skill initially learned.

#### Counseling and Advocacy

Although there is only one item in this category, that does not diminish its importance. Its focus is that students with disabilities will be taught the skills necessary to self-advocate (Standard 6.1). This Standard may be perceived as being in conflict with Standard 1.1, which calls for the office to serve as an advocate for students. In reality, it is a progression. While there must be institutional advocacy (i.e., on committees, decision-making, resource allocation), the primary goal is for each individual student to become self-determined. Self-determination includes decision-making, problem solving, goal setting and attainment, self-evaluation and self-knowledge as well as self-advocacy (Brinckerhoff et al., in press). It is, therefore, important to support students in setting goals, taking control of decisions involving their future, personal decision-making and developing positive outcome expectancy. Details regarding elements included in

fulfilling this requirement can be found in the Direct Service category of the Professional Standards (Shaw et al., 1997), which specify the role of postsecondary disability personnel. The continuity between these Program Standards and the previously developed Professional Standards is clearly illustrated by comparing Standard 6.1 with the Professional Standard “Provides counseling/advisement to enhance student development (e.g., self-advocacy)” (Shaw et al., 1997, p. 29).

### Policies and Procedures

There are five Standards in the Policies and Procedures category that deal with critical issues regarding reasonable accommodations, student and institutional rights and responsibilities (such as disability documentation and course substitutions), and appeal procedures. In discussions of the Standards at professional meetings, the question has been raised whether policy development is a one-time concern or whether it is an on-going process. Given the relative youth of the field, the limited research base from which to make decisions, the need to respond to judicial rulings, and the developmental process most institutions experience with respect to administrative policy regarding disability issues, it appears necessary to review policies and procedures on a regular basis. There are a number of resources which simplify this process. Brinckerhoff et al., (in press) not only discuss policy development but also include model policies from two- and four-year colleges that relate to this Program Standard in the appendix of the new edition of *Postsecondary Education and Transition for Students with Learning Disabilities*. National and state chapters of *AHEAD*, the *HEATH* Resource Center, and published postsecondary disability newsletters (e.g., *AHEAD's ALERT*, *Disability Compliance in Higher Education*) also provide significant direction for practitioners.

### Program Development and Evaluation

The first Standard in this category provides a rationale for diversity in disability services within the context of Program Standards. It indicates that disability services should relate to the institution's mission or service philosophy (Standard 8.1). Therefore, which department(s) provide the services described by the Standards, where they are housed (e.g., academic affairs or student affairs), whether they are distinct and separate (e.g., OSD) or integrated with other services (e.g., Learning Center) are among the many permutations driven by mission and philosophy.

Standard 8.2, indicating that services for students with disabilities are provided through a full-time professional, has created some controversy. It may be the first time that disability services has been specified as a full-time position. It also indicates that this full-time person is a professional. This is a strong indication that this individual should have the competencies specified in the Professional Standards for postsecondary disability personnel (Shaw et al., 1997). It is, therefore, no longer acceptable to simply add the disability “hat” to a college administrator's other job responsibilities.

The last three items in this category (Standards 8.3-8.5) all relate to data collection and evaluation. Both process data (i.e., documenting hours of service, type of service) and outcome data (i.e., grade point averages, graduation rates) should be collected. These Standards reinforce that given our limited research base, threat of litigation, and constant battle for limited institutional resources, it is critical that evaluation data be collected, organized and disseminated to all relevant constituencies. Brinckerhoff et al., (in press) provide an entire chapter on program evaluation methodology for disability services, which can be used by professionals who do not yet have experience implementing the Standards related to program evaluation.

### Training and Professional Development

This last category of the Program Standards provides a direct link to the previously promulgated Professional Standards (Shaw et al., 1997) and Code of Ethics (Price, 1997). Standards 9.1 and 9.2 indicate the need for trained and experienced professionals and for on-going professional development for disability personnel. These elements are detailed in the Professional Standards. Postsecondary institutions, to be in compliance with the Program Standards, need to hire and continually provide training for personnel according to the specifications in the Professional Standards. The need for trained professionals has taken on added meaning given the decision in the *Guckenberger v. Trustees of Boston University* case (1997) which noted that appropriately trained professionals were required to make disability related decisions.

The final Standard (9.3) specifies that programs and related personnel must adhere to the *AHEAD* Code of Ethics (Price, 1997). This Standard formally puts disability professionals and their supervisors on

notice that professional ethics are a part of program efficacy. The many challenging decisions regarding eligibility, service delivery and confidentiality must be dealt with in an ethical manner. In addition, this category has linked the trinity of standards (i.e., program, professional, ethics) into one comprehensive presentation of the role and responsibility of postsecondary disability services.

#### Limitations

Although these Program Standards are based on research involving more than 1,000 postsecondary professionals, limitations must be acknowledged. Even the most rigorous survey has limited generalizability. To overcome this limitation, this study followed all the current conventions regarding survey research including a very large sample and a high return rate (Dukes, this issue). Nevertheless, subjects providing responses to a single questionnaire at one moment in time must be considered in discussing these results. Specifically, given that postsecondary disability services is a rapidly developing field with a relatively short history these results have a limited “shelf life”. All of the Standards will, therefore, need to be monitored and revised on an on-going basis to keep them abreast of state-of-the-art practice based on current research.

#### Conclusion

*These Program Standards represent service components that are fundamental for assuring equal educational access for postsecondary students with disabilities. They set parameters for essential services that postsecondary institutions need to provide to meet the needs of students with disabilities. They provide direction to the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and other campus departments to identify which office in the institution is responsible for each Standard. The Program Standards are a research-based vehicle for professionals when helping their institutions provide all the necessary elements to effectively meet the needs of college students with disabilities. As noted previously, they also enhance the status of disability programs and personnel and clarify the responsibilities of higher education institutions for program development, staff development and program evaluation. They provide consumers with a baseline of what to expect from postsecondary disability services, a format for evaluating potential colleges, and a clear expectation of what may or may not be available (i.e., special classes, preferential treatment). In addition, governmental agencies (e.g., courts, Office for Civil Rights, state and provincial higher education agencies) now have a standard which can be used for program development as well as to assess the efficacy of services. These Program Standards in conjunction with the previously developed Professional Standards (Shaw et al., 1997) and Code of Ethics (Price, 1997) gives the field a firm professional base for what it should do, who they should be, and how they should act.*

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