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# Managing Transition and Student Support Services for Ethnically Diverse College Students with Learning Disabilities

Sunday O. Obi

Postsecondary transition for students with disabilities continues to be challenging. As it appears, transition components of special education services for students with learning disabilities have not received adequate attention (Dunn, 1996; National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1996). This sentiment is likely, in part, due to patterns of postsecondary underachievement for students with learning disabilities. First, students with learning disabilities continue to drop out of high school at rates that exceed their peers without disabilities (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003). In fact, 27% of students with learning disabilities who exited school during the 2000-2001 academic year dropped out while 64% received a regular diploma and 8% received an alternative credential (e.g., certificate of completion).

Both postsecondary education and employment, two domains of postsecondary transition planning, are causes for concern with regard to students with learning disabilities. While the number of college freshman with learning disabilities has sharply increased since the passage of the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1975 (Public Law 94-142; Scott, McGuire, & Shaw, 2003), students with learning disabilities have enrolled in postsecondary educational settings less frequently than students with other disabilities (Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000). According to the 22nd Annual Report to Congress, in 1996 only 18.7% of students with learning disabilities were enrolled in academic postsecondary educational settings and 17.8% in vocational educational settings (U.S. Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services, 2000). Clearly, many ethnically diverse students are included in the disability category of learning disabilities as this is the largest category of disabilities served under Public Law 94-142 and its amendments and reauthorization (e.g., the 1990 Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), and the rate of identification of learning disabilities for students from ethnically diverse groups has steadily increased over the past several decades (National Research Council, 2002).

As indicated earlier, the increase in students with learning disabilities attending college is due to legislation prohibiting discrimination against persons with disabilities (Murray et al., 2000). At one time, college was out of the question for many ethnically diverse students

with learning disabilities. Beginning in the mid-1970s, however, federal law prohibited institutions of higher education from discriminating against students with disabilities. After the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Public Law 93-112), colleges and universities did not suddenly open their doors to students with disabilities. Over time, as the courts helped to define the parameters of the law and public opinion about persons with disabilities improved, many colleges and universities became more comfortable with the idea of admitting and accommodating students with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities. Many institutions now have full-time faculty or staff persons who direct programs for these students. In fact, some have gained reputations as good places for these students because of the level of support offered (Bender, 2004). The overall purpose of this article is to examine the broader array of issues and challenges that impact ethnically diverse college students with learning disabilities.

## Issues and Challenges Facing Ethnically Diverse College Students with Learning Disabilities

The transition from school to work or to postsecondary training is a critical period for all students. For ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities who have the potential to pursue higher education, colleges and universities offer an age-appropriate, integrated environment in which they can expand personal, social, and academic abilities that lead to career goals and employment options. The transition of ethnically diverse high school students with disabilities to higher education settings has been made difficult because of inadequacies in the preparation received in secondary schools. Still, secondary schools face serious difficulties in developing effective instructional programs for college-bound high school students with disabilities (Halpern & Benz, 1987; Mangrum & Strichart, 1983). Many ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities find themselves unprepared at college entry in a number of areas including chronic underachievement in academic skills, inadequate knowledge of subject matter, poor test-taking skills, lack of assertiveness, low self-esteem, and poor organizational skills (e.g., study skills and time management).

If ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities are to be adequately prepared for a rigorous postsecondary education, then high school programs must incorporate those skills and competencies that are essential for coping with social and academic demands found in college settings. The content of the secondary program must provide these learners with the skills necessary to succeed in postsecondary programs. Their effective inclusion into college preparatory programs requires that both regular and special educators contribute to the process. Therefore, the extent to which each group provides ethnically diverse students with preparatory skills needed to meet the elements of college setting is important. These students must receive a fair share of special education services. Most often, school policies and limitations in special services increase the probability of their failure. For example, the majority of these students seem to be graded on the same standards set for their nondisabled classmates, and they generally are not provided with tutoring services or other assistance outside of their classes. Moreover, many regular education teachers tend to receive little support in instructing these students. Wagner (1990) observed that "encouraging greater instruction of students with disabilities into regular education classes, without serious attention to the instruction that goes on in these classes, would

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seem simply to encourage greater rates of academic failure" (p. 28). The consequences of failing courses are serious, particularly those courses needed for graduation. Students who fail to accumulate sufficient numbers of required credit hours to pass 9th grade frequently drop out of high school before graduation (Thornton & Zigmund, 1986). Although passing 9th grade does not guarantee successful completion of high school or transitioning into postsecondary education, failure at this grade level increases the likelihood of dropping out, and by leaving school early, ethnically diverse students may miss educational experiences most important for transition to adulthood.

Teaching students who are not succeeding academically and those whose cultural backgrounds differ from those of the teacher requires changing instructional patterns and classroom procedures to facilitate academic success (Grant & Sleeter, 1998). Earlier, Obiakor and Utley (1997) called upon teachers to rethink their practices, revamp their strategies, and shift their paradigms as they provide services for ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities. Some years ago, Cummins (1989) noted that causes of ethnically diverse students' academic difficulties are to be found in the ways schools have reinforced, both overtly and covertly, the discrimination that certain ethnically diverse groups have historically experienced in the society at large. When research results regarding ethnically diverse students' underachievement are examined, a striking pattern emerges. The groups that currently perform poorly at school are usually those that have historically been discriminated against and regarded as inherently inferior by the dominant group. For example, in the United States, students of African American, Hispanic, and Native American ethnic backgrounds have experienced subjugation by the dominant group (Ogbu, 1978). Apparently, the educational underachievement of these groups is, in part, a function of the fact that schools have traditionally reinforced the ambivalence and insecurity that many of them tend to feel with regard to their own cultural identity (Cummins, 1986; Ogbu & Matute-Bianchi, 1986).

It seems clear that fundamental changes will have to take place in schools to address the needs of ethnically diverse students. Schools should be about enhancing the quality of life for people and about creating better communities. General and special education instructors are consistently confronted with change while trying to maintain their traditional obligations. However, they seem to be poorly prepared to handle the changing demography. Similarly, delivering quality educational programming to ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities has always posed particular challenges to students, families, and service providers. Support services for these students are one of the most vital of all college services and are primarily the responsibility of administrators to deliver and support these services. The importance of this responsibility creates controversy on how support services should be implemented and about policy directions taken by administrators and higher institutions of learning. Economic and social difficulties, such as lack of financial resources and social injustices, make service delivery issues particularly problematic in colleges. In addition, the lack of adequate facilities and available technology make implementing a comprehensive support services program in colleges difficult. Given the present climate of fiscal austerity in higher education, colleges and universities may want to develop a core of support services for ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities and not attempt a comprehensive program until long-term institutional support is ensured. One cost-effective approach that higher education administrators should find

successful is to designate a staff person who has already shown an interest in students with disabilities as the campus contact person for ethnically diverse individuals with special needs.

Individuals who are given the responsibility for providing disability support services often come from a variety of different fields, including psychology, special education, counseling, social work, curriculum and instruction, rehabilitation, and allied health areas. Frequently, their job duties are expanded to encompass ethnically diverse college students with disabilities. Within a year or two, part-time duties often evolve into full-time "learning specialist" positions. The newly appointed learning specialist often looks for additional resources and contact persons who can assist in the development and refinement of the service delivery model (Gerber & Reiff, 1994). Developing postsecondary disability services can be a challenging opportunity as well as a lonely and frustrating undertaking. College and university administrators understand the benefits of educating a diverse student body (see Harvey, 2001). Ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities represent a significant segment of the group. As these students pursue not only undergraduate education but also graduate and professional education, it becomes increasingly critical for institutions to review both their mission and philosophies as they work toward an integrated model of service provision. Based on the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, postsecondary institutions must provide equal access to programs and services for these students. It is essential that colleges and universities write policies that ensure that ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities receive the same high-quality education as their peers. These policies should address issues of admission, documentation of disability, accommodation, and curriculum modifications. Students are made aware of the existence of an appeal process, which is set forth in writing. In addition, they should have easy access to all written policies and procedures including the appeal process. Such documents should be available in a variety of formats, in all appropriate campus literature, and through available technology, such as a website, which all students can access (National Joint Commission on Learning Disability, 1996).

Of the numerous developmental programs across the nation, several can be identified as exemplars in terms of their success. However, many programs, including those considered successful, frequently encounter a variety of problems. The continuous burdens that programs face include problems of funding, staff recruitment and retention, admission and placement standards, ethnically diverse student enrollment, the relativity of curriculum, the quality of tests, and perceptions of the program. There are other problems that affect the implementation of developmental programs. Many of these problems are contingent upon each other such that one tends to exacerbate the other and, thereby, thwart the effective delivery of services to possibly larger numbers of students. Any of these problems or a combination of them can be identified in programs that are considered successful (Tomlinson, 1989). Apparently, it is not enough to merely place ethnically diverse students with disabilities in supportive developmental programs without providing appropriate training, materials, and support to them and to their professors. If these students are to be effectively assisted in supportive programs, critical issues and problems surrounding these programs must be addressed. Clearly, every successful program needs someone (e.g., a full-time staff member) to champion its cause. This also applies to programs for ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities. It

is upon this person's shoulders that responsibility falls for initiating the steps to bring disability programs to fruition at an institution. Support services are typically coordinated by this staff member who is responsible for providing a variety of "academic adjustments" that are mandated under law. Again, these laws require that postsecondary institutions make modifications to their academic requirements to ensure that they do not discriminate against a qualified student with a disability (Frank & Wade, 1993). These modifications may include the provision of course substitutions, adaptation of instruction methods, and modifications in the length of time for the completion of requirements; or the provision of auxiliary aids such as taped texts, sign language interpreters, guide dogs, tape recorders, readers or writers, and access to adaptive or assistive technology. The individual who provides these core supports is often instrumental in linking students with disabilities with other support services on campus, e.g., writing laboratory, math tutorial, and academic development center (Smith, 2004).

### Vital Roles of Administrators

To effectively deal with these issues and problems, effective and efficient culturally sensitive leadership must be identified at college and university levels. A disability program is characterized by a variety of functions and typically includes a full-time coordinator or director with additional staff persons who are supportive in delivering a comprehensive menu of services. This administrator and his/her staff coordinate diagnostic services, provide specialized tutorial support, screen admission applicants, assist students in arranging for priority registration, and lead disability support groups. While the laws stipulate institutional flexibility in choosing the methods by which academic adjustments and auxiliary aids are supplied (Frank & Wade, 1993), it is the responsibility of the student with a disability to identify and document the disabling condition and request reasonable accommodation (Gordon & Keiser, 1998). Once a student has identified a disabling condition in a timely manner, has documented it adequately, and has requested specific academic adjustments and auxiliary aids, it is then the obligation of the postsecondary institution to determine what, if any, academic adjustments and auxiliary aids are appropriate for the disabling condition (Frank & Wade, 1993). Such decisions must take into consideration the essential nature of the educational program in question. According to Frank and Wade, postsecondary institutions are not obligated to waive course requirements, or academic or non-academic standards, as long as they can be shown to be essential to the program of study.

The person who serves as the initial catalyst for support services frequently is the program administrator. Program administrators work formally as the driving force behind all aspects of program development. Consequently, they should have knowledge of disabilities and ethnic diversity and possess good interpersonal skills and multidimensional administrative experiences. For instance, interpersonal skills are needed for working with faculty members and administrators to help them understand the nature of disabilities and types of services students need to succeed in college. Administrative experience is needed to hire and supervise staff and to prepare and monitor the budget and logistics of the program. More specifically, it is important for college administrators to understand and be supportive of service-delivery efforts for ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities as well as to handle obstacles to professors implementing the spirit of ADA (Smith, 2004).

In addition to fiscal issues, administrators must deal with litigation and related concerns about program modifications and instructional accommodations, and must be responsible for adjusting policies and procedures to meet ever-changing needs of students. A concerned administrator or coordinator must be ready to make presentations to institutional executive councils or deans. Individual discussions with key college officials present effective initial approaches to reinforcing the reason, mission, and legal base for services to students. Ongoing collaborations with the dean of students, dean of academic affairs, admissions director, and Section 504 coordinator provide important opportunities to share information needed by those officials to effectively serve this population. Relevant articles from the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, court cases, Office of Civil Rights rulings from newsletters (e.g., Association on Higher Education and Disability's *Disability Accommodation Digest*, or the University of Connecticut's *Postsecondary Learning Disabilities Network News*), or journal articles and brief handouts from conferences can be very effective in keeping administrators connected to the campus.

As it appears, disability service administrators must wear many different professional hats. Individuals in this role must possess skills and knowledge in the areas of administration, direct service, consultation/collaboration, and institutional awareness (McGuire, 1998). They must engage in professional development activities if they are to keep abreast of critical issues in the field (Madaus, 1998). It is essential that they interact regularly with ethnically diverse students with disabilities. Whether in the initial intake interview or as part of an ongoing supportive relationship, those administrators must play pivotal roles in ensuring equal access within contexts of reasonable accommodations (McGuire, 1998). On any given day, they may encounter a range of situations that require attention and creativity. Below are event samples that might confront an administrator during the course of a normal week (see Korbel & Lucia, 1996):

- A student may request a sign-language interpreter and notetakers because of a profound hearing loss;
- A student may identify himself/herself as having a learning disability one week prior to final exams to seek extended test time;
- A student may file a complaint regarding physical accessibility to a campus building.
- A student with a bipolar disorder may want to apply for clinical placement in a local hospital;
- A student with attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) may want a reduced course load and testing accommodations on the basis of a note from his/her doctor;
- A student with learning disabilities may want the same accommodations he/she received in high school e.g., oral essay exams, no foreign language, and no penalty for misspelled words in writing assignments, when the documentation substantiating his/her request is shaky.

Clearly, the student support administrator is often the only professional on campus with direct responsibility for overseeing day-to-day operations of the office that is the "clearinghouse" for disability-related services. While the campus might also employ an ADA compliance officer and perhaps a counselor who offers personal and academic advice, most daily decisions rest with the student support administrator (McGuire, 1998). According to McGuire, the "essential functions" of this job include, but are not

limited to the following:

- Determining a student's eligibility for protection under the ADA;
- Analyzing documentation to ensure that it reasonably supports the claim of disability;
- Deciding the nature of a reasonable accommodation on a case-by-case basis;
- Developing institutional policies and procedures.

The multidimensional roles of student support administrators are reflected by the many fields of training from which they come. For example, Madaus (1996) reported that most administrators had training in counseling, social work, law, special education, education (elementary, secondary, and higher), and rehabilitation counseling. Given the diversity of backgrounds among administrators, it seems that they need ongoing professional training to ethically and fairly discharge their duties.

### Conclusion

For many ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities, participation in postsecondary education is necessary. However, to achieve this goal, a comprehensive transition planning is essential. As a consequence, postsecondary personnel must collaborate with others to ensure nondiscriminatory but sensible treatment of ethnically diverse students. In this article, I have discussed issues and problems surrounding the delivery of support services, accommodations and modifications, and the role of the administrator in establishing support services for college or university ethnically diverse students with learning disabilities. Clearly, for a program to be successful, it is important that administrators understand their roles in providing opportunities for these students. They must be a part of the mission of the college or university to comply with the civil rights laws and make sure that discrimination of any kind is prevented, reduced, or eliminated on campus.

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