INCLUSION OUTCOMES: RESULTS FROM ONE US UNIVERSITY

Since the passage of the Education of all Handicapped Children Act in 1975 in the United States, university students with disabilities have attended regular universities. Accommodations have been provided to them which allowed them to more fairly compete with students without disabilities. Colleges and universities have systematically made the physical and programmatic changes necessary to provide accessibility for every student. This process has involved addressing architectural barriers on campuses as well as concentrating on teaching circumstances designed to create more access such as rescheduling classes and activities, and providing technical supports such as readers, scribes, and interpreters [1, 12; 3, 2; 4, 371]. The literature suggests that university instructors’ attitudes toward these practices have slowly become more positive in the
last 25 years. However, some tension regarding the fairness of accommodative practices still exist [1, 9; 8, 175].

To evaluate the effectiveness of accommodation practices, the instructor-student relationship and students’ perceptions of their options following graduation, 48 students with disabilities at Old Dominion University in Norfolk, Virginia in the United States completed a 23-question survey online. These volunteers recorded their responses anonymously. The survey listed statements to which students indicated the response that most closely matched their opinion of the statement from five choices: “strongly disagree,” “disagree,” “agree,” “strongly agree,” and “no opinion.” For example, questions asked about students’ perceptions regarding their interaction with instructors, their relationship with other students with disabilities in their classes, their relationship with other students without disabilities in their classes, how accessible they found the campus, the types of supports such as tutors and note-takers that most benefited them, whether accommodations offered were sufficient and/or helpful, whether instructors appeared comfortable talking to them about their disability and how to provide accommodations in their classes, and their overall opinion about the “climate of acceptance” they experienced while students at this university.

Question 23 of the survey allowed students to write comments to an open-ended question (see Table 1). Students with deafness or hearing impairments had the survey signed to them, if needed, while students unable to write or type their responses due to physical disabilities had a scribe assigned to them. Students who completed the survey were studying Education (35%), Humanities (10%), Business (21%), Sciences (17%), and Engineering/Math/Technology (17%). Eighty-five percent of
the respondents were undergraduate students, while the rest were studying for a graduate degree.

Old Dominion University is a public, urban university with approximately 28,000 students, about 3% of whom are registered with the Disability Services Office of the university because of visual, hearing, medical, learning and/or motor disabilities. The university provides the accommodations required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 which is designed to allow students to demonstrate their learning while not being hampered by their disability. The most common accommodations offered to the sample studied were access to taking tests in a distraction-free environment (often the Disability Services office on the campus) and the ability to turn in assignments late when there was illness related to their disability. The most common “late period” was 2 weeks. All accommodations were established by documentation provided to the Disability Services office by educational and medical professionals outside of the university. The accommodations provided were determined individually for each student based on their current needs. When a determination was made, students were given a letter which listed their “special needs” and all accommodations which the instructor needed to provide. Instructors must provide these accommodations to students to the best of their ability. No adjustments in course expectations or grading were provided.

Outcomes

Ninety-three percent of the students indicated that they “strongly agreed” that the accommodations they have received have had a positive impact on their ability to complete their university work. Ninety percent rated that they “agreed” that university instructors were comfortable
talking to them about their disability, while 83% indicated that they “strongly agreed” that instructors’ use of accommodations such as taking tests in another environment (i.e., distraction-free) and having a note-taker assigned to them helped them do their best college work. More than half of the students, 74%, stated that they “strongly agreed” that they should have the same privileges at the university as their peers without disabilities.

Further, students’ responses to the open-ended question, Question 23, were similarly positive. Students tended to be candid in their responses to this question. It is hypothesized that this is due to the fact that responses were completely anonymous and students were free of any reprisals. Selected student responses to this question are listed below in Table 1.
Table 1. Sample Student Comments to Question 23:
“State what you would like to share about your future inclusion into society after graduation.”

“It’s up to me to work with my disability and deal with it, it is just a fact of life and who I am. I am my biggest hindrance to success, not others.”

“I see no problem fitting in, in any way.”

“My disability WILL NOT stop me from doing what I want to do.”

“Make room for us, we make room for you!”

“I am confident that I will be a great teacher…I hope to be an example not only to students, but to faculty and staff as well, of what one CAN accomplish despite obstacles…because of my visual impairment I have encountered those who think that visual impairment equals stupidity and/or incompetence…I believe “disabled” is more a state of mind than a way of being in the world…I therefore see my future in society as being as wonderful as I choose to make it.”

“I am going to be an active participant in my inclusion; inclusion should not be expected to be served to a person.”

Discussion
For over 35 years, students with disabilities in the United States attending public schools and universities have come to expect accommodations and have benefited from them [6, 29; 7, 12]. This study evaluated the level of satisfaction experienced by students’ with disabilities in one American university. The university provided accommodations and attempted to create a climate of total inclusion for all students. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act in the United States
[5, 3] states that students with disabilities will receive appropriate accommodations upon request. If students choose not to identify themselves as disabled, then the institution has no obligation to find students with special needs in order to offer them support [3, 22]. This insistence on self-identification is an important cornerstone of American disabilities policy. Informal interviews with the staff of the Disabilities Services office and with 5 of the students who worked in the office as volunteers suggested that students were conflicted about self-identification. Some indicated that because their disability was clearly evident as in the case of blindness, they had no choice but to seek accommodations. However, in each case those interviewed remarked that they would have preferred not to have to ask for accommodations and may not do so if their disability were not visible. Two of those interviewed who had learning disabilities. These students noted that they were comfortable seeking accommodations but found the process of verifying their need complicated and unduly difficult. They indicated that the type of documentation that was required was difficult to acquire, expensive and the process was very time consuming. In each case, they revealed that their parents did most of this work and provided the documentation to the university. Each of these 5 students also commented about their concern of securing appropriate employment following graduation. Concerns focused on their worry that they would not be allowed to use their education and training and may be underemployed. In all cases, they reported “great unease” about their financial future. Four of the five reported that they desired to live independently but only one of the five said he believed that he would be able to achieve this after graduation.
The results of this study suggested that the students with disabilities in the university studied held strong beliefs about deserving the same privileges and opportunities as others. Their responses also indicated that they believed that they possessed a good deal of control over their individual destinies (see Table 1). However, personal interviews with five students provided a slightly less upbeat appraisal of their future and the attainment of their dreams for the future.

Today, more American students with disabilities, especially students with learning disabilities, visual and hearing impairments are attending 4-year colleges than attended 19 years ago [2, 33]. Yet, there are no national data on college graduation rates or the number of college graduates with disabilities who gain employment in their specific areas of study [33]. Because of this, it is difficult to state conclusively how effective the United States has been in truly including its citizens with disabilities across a lifetime. The research is incomplete and conflicting [1]. Part of the problem is that different states use different definitions for various disability categories. For instance, some states use the designation “low vision,” while others use the term “legally blind.” These definitions have different criterion for identification. Another challenge is that few employers keep an accurate record of the number of employees they employ with disabilities. Some research suggests that when adults with disabilities are employed, they are more likely to be underemployed than their counterparts without disabilities and similar training [8]. Although the research is not comprehensive, present literature and anecdotal evidence suggests that discrimination continues to be a barrier for far too many university graduates with special needs.
References


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