Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination: Keys to Postsecondary Success

Key Considerations for Postsecondary Leaders

As a college and university leader, your decisions impact and are impacted by individuals with disabilities in a variety of ways: You communicate to prospective students and their families that your campus is a welcoming place for them; you meet the academic and legal rights and needs of your students with disabilities across different programs; you help your faculty and staff with and without disabilities to know they have the support to do their jobs effectively; and you partner with alumni and community members with disabilities to better meet the mission of your institution for all students. As more and more individuals with visible and invisible disabilities enter your campus, you have the opportunity to help advance a remarkable educational and civil rights movement, preparing and including individuals with disabilities for successful futures.

Populations on college campuses today are becoming more diverse, and increasing numbers of bright and talented students with disabilities are joining their peers in the postsecondary education setting. Many factors can prove challenging for these students in attaining their degree, but one in particular is often overlooked: college students with disabilities may have challenges with the increased responsibility placed on them and the ownership they must take of their learning. Effective self-advocacy and self-determination are necessary for all students participating in postsecondary education, but for various reasons that will be discussed, even more essential for those with disabilities. Colleges and universities can take tangible steps to address this gap and empower every student to achieve their potential by being intentional and proactive. This piece—created in collaboration with general and special education experts and higher education stakeholders—provides background on actions that campus leaders can enable students with disabilities to practice greater self-advocacy skills and self-determination.

Students with disabilities who are more self-determined:

- ✓ Are better at asking for and receiving academic accommodations;
- ✓ Have higher grade point averages;
- ✓ Have stronger employment outcomes;
- ✓ Have more positive independent living outcomes; and
- ✓ Are more likely to be included in different aspects of community life.

Source: Wehemeyer and Abery, 2013; Bethune 2015; Sarver 2000

Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination: At a Glance

Self-advocacy skills include a person understanding themselves, their rights, and their needs, and communicating that understanding—leading to self-determination.

Examples include:

- Self-awareness
- Communication
- Navigating resources
- Forming and nurturing relationships
- Perspective taking

Self-determination is a dispositional characteristic that enables a person to act in service of freely chosen goals and make or cause things to happen in their own life.

Examples include:

- Self-advocacy skills
- Goal-setting
- Decision-making
- Problem solving
- Self-efficacy

Legal Rights of Students with Disabilities in Higher Education

Students, faculty, and staff with disabilities at colleges and universities are legally protected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990. Section 504 (see text box) provides broader protections for all individuals with disabilities while the ADA includes specific provisions regarding the prohibition of discrimination directed at individuals with disabilities with regards to employment, access to public services, and access to reasonable accommodations.

"No otherwise qualified handicapped individual shall, solely by means of handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance."

Section 504, The Rehabilitation Act of 1973

Understanding Transition Issues

When students with disabilities enroll in college, they move from an educational environment where parents, teachers, and others identify and address educational challenges on a student's behalf, to a setting where much of this becomes a student's responsibility. First, students must make a decision about where to attend college, considering not only which institution will set them up for success in the career field of their choice, but which institution will provide the supports, services, and the environment and community the student needs. In making this decision, students may experience challenges with processing information, finding information about disability support services, evaluating opportunities, and making decisions. Once enrolled in college, these challenges might continue as each course requires students to:

- make judgments about and assess the nature of class content, format of the class, and learning and performance expectations of the instructor;

- compare class expectations to (and have a strong understanding of) their personal learning profile;

- use that analysis to make decisions about academic routines and compensatory strategies they will need to use in order to be successful in the class;

- determine which accommodations are needed for each class and then actively request those accommodations in every class each semester; and

- follow through with those routines and strategies, utilizing other services and supports as appropriate.

For students who are entering the postsecondary world for the first time, these challenges arise at the same time that they are exploring and navigating an entirely new educational environment and possibly living on their own.

As a postsecondary education leader, you can take high-leverage actions to help incoming students make effective transitions to your institution and persist to graduation. This will involve understanding the importance of self-advocacy skills and self-determination to your students' personal and academic development and taking proactive steps to foster an inclusive learning environment, build a community of support for students with disabilities, prepare faculty to support their success, and help students understand resources available to them. Moreover, actions taken to address retention and graduation rates for students with disabilities are likely to positively impact retention of other students on campus.

Situations That Require Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination	Actions Colleges and Universities Can Take to Empower Students
Choosing a college and major Students must select an institution of higher education based on an understanding about their own long-term goals, learning profile, and support needs. Students must also choose a major, plan their coursework, and organize their academic schedule.	**Foster an inclusive environment** Campuses can be sure that their website and recruitment materials are fully accessible and clearly describe the range of student support resources available (those available to all students and those specifically in place for students with disabilities). Institutional admissions officers can be briefed about campus programs and initiatives designed to support students with disabilities and raise awareness about learner variability. This will empower admissions officers with the kind of information needed to engage with potential students for whom this will be a major consideration in their college selection process. Institutional leadership can invest in developing an inclusive campus culture, encouraging students with disabilities to disclose their disability, access the services they need, and practice advocating for their rights. Academic departments and advising offices can pair students with faculty mentors or advisors who have been trained to understand disabilities and can help students connect coursework and learning experiences to long-term goals.

Situations That Require Self-Advocacy Skills and Self-Determination	Actions Colleges and Universities Can Take to Empower Students
Seeking accommodations and support services Students must be aware of the resources that are available to them on campus, ask for services and supports at the disability services office (as well as from other student-support offices and programs), and balance the social and academic demands of higher education.	**Build a community of support for students with disabilities** Student affairs and/or disability support offices can support the creation of peer-to-peer advocacy and mentoring networks on campus (like Eye to Eye) that help students with disabilities develop a sense of community and belonging. Academic departments and student affairs offices can invest in activities and opportunities for students with disabilities on and off campus, such as service projects, work study programs, internships, and student projects, to develop self-advocacy skills and self-determination. Higher education leaders can consider purchasing site-licenses for technologies (e.g. text-to-speech software, lecture recording resources) that are often considered assistive technology but abide by principles of Universal Design for Learning and can actually benefit all students. Make these resources available as a no-cost download to students and faculty. This will put the resources in the hands of a great number of students who may need them but who do not have a formal diagnosis, and may also reduce the stigma of utilizing these resources by no longer positioning them as a disability-related accommodation. Academic departments can provide professional development for faculty members that raises awareness of the intent and process for providing and following through with accommodations.

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Self-advocating and engaging with faculty to meet course requirements Engage with faculty to develop a relationship, determine course expectations, and advocate for individual needs, including managing deadlines, seeking accommodations, and responding to critical feedback.	**Prepare faculty to design a learning environment that effectively serves students with disabilities** Academic departments, deans, and offices of undergraduate and graduate education can offer professional development and micro-credentialing opportunities to prepare team members, including faculty, administrators, and support staff, to anticipate learner variability. Helping faculty discover how to represent content in a variety of ways and provide students with options to engage in and demonstrate learning differently (the essential principles of Universal Design for Learning) across the postsecondary setting can transform the learning experience for all students. Academic departments, deans, and offices of undergraduate and graduate education can establish a campus-wide system to recognize and reward faculty who are effectively working with diverse learners and empowering their self-advocacy skills and self-determination.
Managing finances Students must keep track of their personal finances and navigate the financial aid and bursar system effectively to ensure they remain in good standing with the college or university.	**Help students understand key timelines and resources relevant to managing tuition, fees, and expenses.** The bursar's office and academic departments can team up to provide accessible tools and seminars for students with and without disabilities to navigate personal and academic financial decisions and access relevant resources as necessary.

Examples of Postsecondary Programs That Focus on Student Self-Advocacy and Self-Determination

East Carolina University's (ECU) Supporting Transition and Education Through Planning and Partnerships (STEPP) Program

STEPP is a program at ECU designed to provide students with learning disabilities the access and support they need to succeed. Program features include a STEPP seminar series that focuses on specific skills such as goal-setting, time management, and learning strategies; a support network including professors, tutors, mentors, and counselors who help students navigate the postsecondary system; and dedicated transition services.

Learn more: http://www.ecu.edu/stepp/

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) ACE-IT in College Program

The VCU ACE-IT in College program provides an inclusive college experience for students with intellectual disabilities. Program features include participation in an "Introduction to the University" course to help students establish goals and learn how to access university services; campus activities and work experiences that support students in developing key skills for success; and trained education coaches who mentor students and help them navigate the university services and operations.

Learn more: http://www.aceitincollege.org/

UDL-IRN Higher Education SIG

Universal design for learning (UDL) is a framework that empowers learners to engage with, have information represented, and demonstrate learning in different ways. The organization UDL-IRN has formed a multi-campus affinity group to help campuses implement UDL system wide in curriculum development, procurement, professional development, and other decisions campuses make.

Learn more at: https://udl-irn.org/higher-education-sig/

PACE University OASIS Program

The PACE University OASIS program provides students with Asperger's syndrome (which is on the autism spectrum), learning disabilities, and other challenges with a structured system of support to develop the skills necessary for success. Program features include personalized study plans that leverage student strengths and address challenges; academic and social coaches who help students develop skills to navigate the university environment; and collaboration with university career services as well as outside agencies to facilitate internships and other opportunities for students to develop the skills they need to succeed.

Learn more: http://www.pace.edu/oasis

As-U-R

As-U-R is a program at Appalachian State University that provides students who struggle with executive functioning challenges with the skills they need to graduate and thrive. The program provides supports, including tutoring and peer mentoring; specific training to address executive functioning challenges; access to assistive technology; transition assistance; and coordination of individualized services.

Learn more: https://studentlearningcenter.appstate.edu/as-u-r

Eye to Eye

Eye to Eye is a national organization that pairs young students with learning disabilities and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (LD/ADHD) with college and high school mentors who have similar labels. Through the organization's proven arts-based curriculum, mentors share strategies of doing great things with learning and attention issues, while mentees learn self-esteem and self-advocacy skills crucial to success in school and life.

Learn more: https://eyetoeyenational.org/

Find more examples: https://www.collegestar.org/student-support-programs