

## **Students with Disabilities and Access to Community Colleges: Continuing Issues and New Directions**

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Much has been written for students with disabilities, their family members, and educators about community college as a postsecondary option. This information typically focuses on the differences between high school and community college, such as differences in legislative protections and various ways to access auxiliary aids and services. Yet many students, family members, and educators remain uninformed about the questions they should be asking about the transition from high school to community college programs; the policies that determine admittance to, and continued enrollment in, community college programs; and the strategies and resources that may impact successful outcomes.

Many students with disabilities choose community college programs over four year colleges as their first or only postsecondary education experience (Savukinas, 2003). Recent research indicates that two-year institutions tend to offer more varied and specialized services that focus on serving students with disabilities, and that these programs educate and train students with a wider variety of disabilities, and maintain and provide stronger community linkages than do four-year institutions (Chang & Logan, 2002). Still, not all community colleges offer the same services or have the same policies regarding access and enrollment. It is important that students with disabilities and their supporters ask the right questions when investigating community colleges in order to make informed decisions.

Community colleges have traditionally served the most diverse groups of students with the most diverse educational goals. Such programs currently account for 44% of all undergraduate enrollment (both in two and four-year institutions) nationwide (Phelan, 2000). As the importance of postsecondary education increases, so does the range of programs and course offerings available. Students with disabilities need to be clear on what they hope to accomplish during their community college experience, and for what purposes they are pursuing education after high school.

The role of community colleges in the broader educational and workforce landscape is always adapting and expanding, frequently in response to current employment trends and changing demands of the workplace. Further, cooperative agreements and collaborative activities between state and local workforce development entities and education agencies create new directions and policies that may affect the participation of students with disabilities on the community college campus. It is important that students, families, educators, and leaders from different community spheres attend to these emerging directions in order to take advantage of new opportunities or address potential barriers to participation.

This article supplies guiding questions, clarifying notes, and strategies for students with disabilities and their supporters (including family members and secondary educators) to assist them in becoming informed consumers or service providers as they pursue their investigation of community colleges as postsecondary education options. The article concludes by identifying emerging trends and issues that may serve as new directions for community colleges and that have the potential to affect the participation of students with disabilities.

## **GUIDING QUESTIONS**

### **Issues to Explore Regarding the Purpose of Community College as a Postsecondary Option**

- Why do I wish to access community college?
- Do I wish to complete a two-year Associate's degree? If so, what do I plan to do with this degree: enter the workforce, or transfer to a four-year institution?
- Do I wish to become certified in a career/technical field or occupation?
- Do I wish to enroll in a course or two for personal satisfaction or as a way to see if college is even the right choice for me? Note: Typically, students who choose this exploratory option do not enroll full-time.
- Do I wish to continue my public school experience through the transition years of 18-21 in a new location? Note: This is an emerging special education trend for students with more significant intellectual disabilities, and while these options are increasing, relatively few public school systems have such agreements with their local community colleges.
- Do I wish to access a special program on a community college campus that is specifically designed for individuals with disabilities? Note: Again, these programs are rare and often operate semi-independently from the community college.
- Is my local community college compatible with my purpose for attending a two-year institution, or do I need to investigate other options?

### **Issues to Explore Regarding the Differences Between an IDEA Environment and an ADA/504 Environment**

- Do I understand the following differences between K-12 education and community college?
- Am I able to articulate my disability and identify the accommodations that allow me to access instruction and materials?
- Do I understand that my rights under the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 serve to protect me from discrimination and provide me with auxiliary aids and services to prevent denial of educational program benefits rather than entitling me to a free and appropriate public education as IDEA did?
- Do I understand that education at the postsecondary level is a matter of eligibility and that regardless of my disability I must meet established entrance requirements? Note: An exception is

that entrance requirements may not apply to disability-focused campus programs that have separate admissions policies or 18-21 year old public school transition programs on community college campuses.

· Have I participated in educational planning and decision-making and refined my self-advocacy skills? Note: These are important skills to master. In community college the student is responsible for requesting and managing the implementation of auxiliary aids, and services.

· With what kind of diploma will I be exiting high school? How many credits have I successfully completed, and what state or local accountability assessments have I taken/passed?

### **Issues to Explore Regarding Admission and Enrollment Procedures**

· Do I understand the many options and corresponding rules that determine how I'll be allowed to access community college programs?

· What kinds of documentation does this particular community college require for admissions eligibility in general? What about for documentation of a disability? To which office should I send disability documentation?

· Will I be required to take any special tests for admission? Note: Community colleges may require that all students, regardless of the type of high school diploma they received, take placement exams to determine if they need "developmental" or "remedial" coursework.

· Are the placement exams and cut-off scores the same for all community colleges in my state? Note: This varies among states. In some states individual institutions make their own decisions about which test(s) will be used and what passing scores are.

· If testing determines you require developmental coursework, you need to ask the following questions:

o Will developmental coursework accrue any type of credit? Note: Typically, remedial coursework does not earn credit and is not considered to be "college level" coursework, but rather coursework that prepares a student to access college-level instruction.

o May I take other coursework for credit from the community college while taking developmental courses? Note: For example, some students are required to take developmental classes in one area such as reading, but are not required to do so in mathematics. Thus, they could take math classes for community college credit. In some states this is possible, but in others you must complete all remedial coursework before enrolling in any college-credit courses. In some states you must complete all developmental coursework first, but may be concurrently enrolled in an occupational program and take that program's classes.

o If my purpose for going to community college is to access a separate special program or vocational certificate, do I still need to worry about placement exam scores?

· If I did not graduate from high school with a standard diploma, do I have to take any additional tests? Note: Many community colleges, in addition to placement exams for all students, require that students who did not graduate from high school with a standard diploma demonstrate they have the potential to access, and succeed in, college. These students must achieve passing scores on one of several federally approved "Ability-to-Benefit" tests.

· If you do not achieve passing scores on an "Ability-to-Benefit" test, you need to ask the following questions:

o May I audit courses? (Typically "yes", with some restrictions.)

o Am I prohibited from enrolling as a full-time student in any program? (Typically "yes".)

o Am I eligible for any financial aid? (Typically "no" for federal financial aid such as PELL grants.)

o May I still enter a disability-specific or workforce development-sponsored program? (Typically "yes" for those programs which are substantively separate from community college programs. These may include transition programs through the public schools or some Workforce Investment Act [WIA] or vocational programs that are housed on the campus.)

· Are there any limits on the time I have to complete developmental/remedial coursework or the number of times I can repeat developmental classes? Note: This varies widely. Some states limit by number of semester hours overall or within a certain subject area, some by calendar year, and some by number of attempts. If the student does not meet the state/institutional requirements for completing and passing developmental coursework, he/she may be declared ineligible for continued enrollment at the community college and denied readmission.

### **Issues to Explore Regarding Tuition, Expenses, and Funding**

How can I pay for tuition and expenses? Are there any disability-related supports besides regular financial aid avenues?

· Have I checked into the possibility of scholarships? Note: Scholarships exist that are designated for students with specific disabilities. Your high school guidance counselor and the campus office for students with disabilities may know what is available. Also organizations such as HEATH and the World Wide Web can be sources for scholarship information.

· Have I been referred to, and am I eligible for, services from Vocational Rehabilitation? Note: This should be discussed during high school IEP meetings when the student and his/her team are investigating transition services and community support linkages.

· If my disability eligibility testing needs updating or to be redone, who will pay for it? Note: This is not a responsibility of the college. The responsibility for evaluation expenses may be the student's or another entity's. This issue should be discussed during the student's high school

transition planning. The campus Office of Disability Support Services may be able to offer directions and sources for support.

- Am I receiving, or am I eligible for, Supplementary Security Income (SSI)? Note: Many community colleges waive tuition expenses for SSI recipients who meet entrance requirements. This is also something that should be discussed at IEP transition planning meetings, and a connection to the local Social Security Administration (SSA) office should be facilitated.

- If I do receive SSI, and do plan to use SSI income for tuition and/or expenses, do I understand the effect employment may have on this benefit? Do I also understand that Social Security offers many income exclusions and incentives to help students be able to pay for school expenses by working and still protect their benefits? Note: It is important that students and their supporters understand the programs and work incentives available from SSA. Most communities have Benefits Planning Advocacy and Outreach (BPAO) Specialists available to guide decision-making and financial planning. For more information about BPAOs and a directory of providers, go to [www.ssa.gov/work/ServiceProviders/bpaofactsheet.html](http://www.ssa.gov/work/ServiceProviders/bpaofactsheet.html).

- If I am a student who is participating in a campus-based 18-21 year old transition program through my public school, who pays for my program and transportation? Note: These programs are funded almost exclusively through the local education agency. Because students in these programs are still entitled to services under IDEA, their school system pays for the special education and related services. Many of these programs are assisted by federal grant initiatives as well.

### **Issues to Explore Regarding Disability Services and Supports on Campus**

Do I know how to apply for, access, and manage disability supports on campus?

- Do I know what types of auxiliary aids and services are typically provided to eligible students with disabilities on this campus? For more information go to [www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/auxaids.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/auxaids.html).

- Do I understand the process for being determined eligible for auxiliary aids and services as a student with a documented disability? Note: Students and supporters must remember that the documentation for eligibility that was determined under IDEA does not necessarily translate to a postsecondary environment. The campus office that serves students with disabilities will inform applicants as to acceptable documentation

- Have I made an appointment, and met with, someone from the Office of Disability Support Services on campus? Note: Different colleges call this office by different names, but virtually all community colleges employ someone whose position is dedicated to providing information and coordinating services for eligible students with disabilities.

- Once the community college has found me eligible for auxiliary aids and services, how does this information get communicated to my instructors?

- How often do I need to meet with the Office of Disability Support Services? Do I keep the same auxiliary aids and services each semester? What do I do if something needs changing or there is an issue with an instructor or course requirements?

- If I am not officially admitted to the community college, but am accessing a separate program on the campus, do I need to contact the Office of Disability Support Services? Are they required to provide auxiliary aids and services to me? Note: Typically this would not be the case. This office is designed to serve admitted students who are eligible for services. Public school transition programs or other separate disability-focused programs typically employ their own staff to make accommodations and facilitate the provision of services.
- Do I know and understand my due process rights under the ADA and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act? Do I know what entities exist to support me if I feel I've been discriminated against due to my disability?

## **STRATEGIES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES AND THEIR SUPPORTERS**

### **Strategies for Students**

- Know your rights and responsibilities when preparing for postsecondary education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).
- Be able to articulate the nature of your disability, its impact on your education, and what auxiliary aids and services allow you to access course content and be successful.
- Understand and investigate the other supports and services available from state and local agencies, including the role of Social Security Work Incentives as means to support your postsecondary education (Golden & Jones, 2002).
- Participate in, and ideally, lead your IEP transition planning meetings so that the complex issues involved in accessing postsecondary education are explored and addressed in a timely fashion by designated stakeholders.
- Evaluate your secondary school experiences, course participation, credit, and diploma attainment against the criteria used by community colleges for enrollment and participation.

### **Strategies for Family Members**

- Gradually fade your ownership of the education process and become the student's cheerleader and mentor (National Center on Secondary Education and Transition, 2002).
- Provide organizational, logistical, and moral support during the exploration process.
- Remember that the student is the person with whom the community college will wish to speak and maintain contact.
- Assist the student to become self-determined and exercise advocacy skills.
- Participate in school planning meetings, especially those addressing transition services. Federally- funded TA Projects cannot promote advocacy efforts, particularly for increased funding.

- Encourage the development of new programs that promote the inclusion of students with disabilities in postsecondary and community settings.

### **Strategies for Secondary Educators**

- Inform students and family members about the differences in policy between secondary and postsecondary environments.

- Provide students and family members with a comprehensive understanding of the processes and auxiliary supports and services in postsecondary settings.

- Make students and family members aware of the community supports available.

- Encourage and train students and family members for meaningful participation in the transition planning process.

- Explore various accommodations and instructional approaches with students that will more closely approximate those auxiliary aids and services available in postsecondary settings.

- Engage in backwards design and person-centered planning to help students gain the experiences that will allow them to successfully attain their postsecondary goals (Stodden & Jones, 2002).

### **EMERGING TRENDS AND ISSUES FOR COMMUNITY COLLEGES THAT MAY IMPACT STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

Community colleges are spending more and more of their budgets on remedial education and may seek alternatives in order to maintain fiscal accountability and strengthen degree attainment rates.

Approximately 63% of students at two-year postsecondary institutions take remedial courses (College and Career Transitions Initiative, 2003). Students with disabilities take a higher percentage of remedial or developmental courses than other student groups. Research by the Education Commission of the States (2002) shows that 25% of students who must take remedial courses fail to complete all their remedial coursework. Less than half of students who took remedial coursework attained a two or four-year degree by the time they were thirty. With funding increasingly tied to accountability measures such as degree attainment, community colleges may try to reduce the amount of students in need of remediation by requiring a standard high school diploma or GED (Savukinas, 2003). Some community colleges are experimenting with outsourcing remedial education to specialized private tutoring vendors (Phelan, 2000).

Transition programs for students with disabilities ages 18-21 are increasing on community college campuses.

According to Grigal, Neubert, and Moon (2001), students with more significant disabilities, especially those with intellectual disabilities who require extensive educational support services, have typically remained in public school settings until they "age out" of their entitlement to services under IDEA. Many of these students and their families have advocated for continued inclusive opportunities in different settings for the post-high school years of 18-21. Encouraged

by inclusive philosophies and systems change grants, public schools have approached community colleges about providing opportunities for these students to receive their public school instruction on the campus. The local education agency usually provides the funding, transportation, and instructors, while the community college provides space and an inclusive environment. The students (although not officially admitted to the college) have access to peers without disabilities, classes (in some cases community college classes are available for auditing or credit), and work experiences in a more age-appropriate environment. A database of Community-Based Transition Programs for students ages 18-21 can be found on the Transition Coalition's website: [www.transitioncoalition.org](http://www.transitioncoalition.org)

Dual enrollment for students with and without disabilities will increasingly be an option to promote the transition from high school to postsecondary education.

There is increasing emphasis on K-16 education rather than K-12 education. Policymakers are interested in streamlining linkages between public schools and community colleges and promoting more seamless transitions for students to access postsecondary education and gain career and technical skills. The impact of accountability standards in education is more accurately measured when tests, requirements, and outcome data are aligned across educational systems. Dual enrollment, where students remain enrolled in high school while accessing community college coursework, is one way to expose students to the opportunities and demands of a postsecondary environment while they are still in secondary education. The Education Commission of the States (2000, p. 3) postulates that dual enrollment can better prepare high school students for college coursework, expose them to motivating coursework including career and technical programs that may be unavailable at the high school, help students progress more quickly through their college educations, make their high school experience more productive, and help to bridge gaps between high school and college.

Many youth and young adults with disabilities qualify for WIA services through One-Stop Career Centers. Community colleges are often key partners in local workforce development activities.

Students with disabilities may find themselves accessing community college services and/or programs even if they intended to seek employment training rather than postsecondary education. Community colleges in many states are considered prime mechanisms for implementing state-supported workforce development and training under the Workforce Investment Act (WIA). Many state and local Workforce Investment Boards (WIBs) have community college representation, and in some cases the community colleges have primary responsibility at the local level for implementing WIA training programs or operating one stop centers. This means that students with disabilities, who are typically highly qualified for WIA youth and adult services, may receive services (traditional coursework or customized non-credit training) through a community college as a result of accessing a one stop career center or other WIA-funded services. For more information about WIA services through community colleges in your area, or to search for training and education resources in your community, go to America's Service Locator at <http://www.servicelocator.org/>.

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