

# **Current Status on Accommodating Students with Disabilities in Selected Community and Technical Colleges (Fall 1999 – Spring 2001)**

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## **Introduction**

From the fall of 1998 through fall of 1999 staff visited 9 community and technical colleges in Kansas, Minnesota, and California to investigate current practices regarding students with disabilities and how best to improve the recruitment, retention, and completion of students with disabilities in post-secondary settings. During these visits, students, faculty, staff, and administrators were interviewed and completed a series of questionnaires. The information gathered from these initial visits are contained in Part I of the document of this same title. Approximately one year later, 6 additional community and technical colleges were visited in the same three states, and similar data was collected. The major purposes of the second visits was to further investigate the recruitment, retention, and completion question, refine and revisit some of the interview and questionnaire stimuli, and gain a larger representative sample. The 15 colleges represented in both the Current Status I and Current Status II reports include both small and large campuses, rural and urban settings, and substantial and non-existent budgets for students with disabilities.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of students, faculty, staff, and administrators at six community and technical colleges in three states (Kansas, Minnesota, and California). All participants were volunteers and were requested to participate by our contact at the college. College demographic information is displayed in Tables 1 and 2. Demographic information for all available participants is displayed in Table 3. We requested that students represent diverse age, experiential, and disability related backgrounds. The students identified their disabilities as learning disabilities, emotional/behavioral, mental health disorders, orthopedic/mobility, deaf/hard of hearing, blind/visually impaired, chronic illnesses, and speech/language disorders.

### **Materials**

Several questionnaires were used in data collection, and each is included in the Appendix. Some students completed the Student Questionnaire, which asked for their demographic and educational background, their educational goals, the accommodations they received, and their opinions on several accommodation issues. Several students did not complete the questionnaire due to schedule conflicts.

Faculty and staff completed the Faculty Questionnaire, which included items about their position, their opinion of the relative strengths and weaknesses of their college's DSS program, beneficial experiences they may have had, and suggestions for necessary components to include in a program to improve educational opportunities for students with disabilities.

The College Demographics Questionnaire was used to assess the demographic information of all students enrolled in each college (summarized in Table 1), as well as financial information for the DSS and estimates of the number and classification of students being assisted by the DSS program (summarized in Table 2). College administrators and/or DSS staff completed this questionnaire. *Please note that the tables report demographic information for six community colleges (A-F), while this document reports information for seven different campuses (A-G). The reason for this distinction is that one college had two separate campuses (combined in demographic data, separated for qualitative data). This document contains information gathered from all sources, while the tables only contain information from those persons who completed a survey and/or interview.*

The Support Services Questionnaire was used to gain specific information about available college services and their implementation. DSS supervisors and/or staff completed this questionnaire.

Finally, a number of forms were used to guide oral discussions (Administrator Survey, Staff Interview, and Student Panel). The forms used are provided in the Appendix. Below is a list of abbreviations for sources used in reporting the findings throughout:

Paper-Pencil Questionnaires

SQ - Student Questionnaire

FSQ - Faculty Staff Questionnaire

SSQ - Support Services Questionnaire

Oral Interview Forms

AS - Administrator Survey

SI - Staff Interview

SP - Student Panel

College Codes

A-G

**Procedure**

Visits were completed to colleges in each state during the winter of 2000 and spring of 2001 (December, 2000 - March, 2001). After an initial meeting with the DSS coordinator at each college, selected faculty and staff were interviewed for approximately 1-1/2 hours and given the surveys for completion. A student panel was conducted, approximately 1 to 2 hours in length, to gain insight into

some of the representative experiences of students with disabilities. Meetings with administrators were also conducted, including presidents, vice-presidents, and deans. Written policies and other relevant information available at the college was also collected.

## **Recruitment**

When asked to describe the incentives for recruitment of students with disabilities, several of the administrators, faculty, and staff listed reasons such as increasing student enrollment, attracting quality students, serving the needs of the community, increasing diversity, and increasing awareness, sensitivity, and community/college growth. One college's administrator raised concerns about recruiting, however, and stated that the cost of hiring interpreters for four students who are deaf would be enough to shut down the DSS program (C, SI).

Regardless of the reasons to do so, recruitment of students with disabilities varied across colleges. A few colleges cited only general recruitment procedures, such as visits to local high schools (A, B, D, E, SSQ). At other colleges, however, DSS staff either actively recruited, or had recruited through medical centers, rehabilitation centers, and care agencies (A, SI; E, SSQ). One college noted that they had stopped active recruitment at these sites because earlier efforts had been successful and the campus now served approximately 2300 students with disabilities (A, SI). Some colleges also had summer orientations that included disability-related information and activities (A, B, D, E, G, SI).

A few of the colleges surveyed employed a retention specialist (B, C, SI). These specialists utilized assessments, meetings, phone calls, email, and orientations to impact their colleges' retention rates. Retention specialists were highly valued by DSS staff, administration, faculty, and students.

When asked why students chose or stayed at a specific college, many faculty, staff, and students stated that the college provided an opportunity to develop personal relationships with advisors, tutors, instructors, and staff members. Faculty and staff related many personal stories of how they attempted to "connect" with students including memorizing names, paying attention to the cars students drove or the logos on their hats, making themselves available to all students beyond regular office hours, and continually looking for effective teaching methods (A, B, D, E, G, SI).

Students at all of the colleges surveyed cited several influences on college selection. Location, however, was the most frequently cited factor in choosing to attend their current college. Also mentioned were athletic programs (F, SP), personal recommendations (B, D, E, SP), and small size (B, C, D, SP). Students at

several colleges chose to attend after learning about various services for students with disabilities from coaches, teachers, or other personnel (A, B, C, D, E, F, SP). One student also indicated that "college is needed in today's world" (C, SP), and that the smaller colleges provide more one-on-one attention. One student summed up his choice by simply saying that he wanted to be someplace where he could "feel comfortable" (D, SP).

### **The Registration Process**

Registration assistance was available to students with disabilities at all colleges surveyed (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SSQ). Most of the students surveyed found the registration experience to be positive (A, B, C, D, F, G, SP). One student, however, reported that someone in the admissions office demeaned older students who were filling out forms (E, SP). This student also reported difficulty locating the various records necessary for enrollment such as immunization records and verification of GED. In general, this student noted that non-traditional aged students were made to feel different.

Campus orientations of some form were conducted at all of the colleges (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SSQ). At one college, an all-day orientation "Expo" was held which included campus tours, pizza and a jazz band during lunch, a session describing the differences between high school and college, and a general assessment test which provided students with recommendations based on their personal profile. After completing the assessment, all students were encouraged to return and meet individually with a counselor to review the results. Faculty hosted the Expo, and students received a one-half unit credit for attending (B, SI).

Some of the other services offered included disability-specific scholarships (A, B, D, SSQ), peer support/counseling (B, D, E, F, SSQ), referrals to local/national disability agencies (A, C, D, E, F, SSQ), transition services (A, D, E, SSQ), transfer assistance (D, E, F, SSQ), and tuition waivers (A, SSQ).

Financial aid is another important part of attending college. With a documented disability, part-time enrollment can be considered full-time status in order to make students with disabilities eligible for financial aid at some of the colleges. Part-time status was available at all of the colleges (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SSQ). Social security tuition waivers were also available at one college (A, SSQ).

### **Support Services**

Colleges' support services are only helpful if students are aware of them and access them. Many students reported that they were reluctant to disclose to anyone that they had had a disability for fear of a repeat of the same negative experience they had in high school (A, B, C, E, SP). As one DSS staff member

said, "So many kids are so beat up by the time they get here" (E, SI). Consequently, many students did not disclose their disability until they were experiencing difficulty academically. One student reported that she failed two classes initially because she did not access support services, but earned A's the following semester after visiting the support services office and receiving assistance (G, SP). At all of the colleges surveyed, students emphasized the importance of "getting over your pride and asking for help" (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SP).

Some faculty and DSS staff members expressed frustration with students not disclosing and accessing services (B, C, F, G, FSQ). In fact, a number of faculty members reported that the most challenging students to assist were those who were reluctant to access support services (B, C, G, SSQ). A faculty member at another college went so far as to say that these students "choose to fail," and "choose not to learn" (F, SI).

Students at most colleges noted that services for student with disabilities were crucial to their academic success, even saying that they doubted they would be able to attend college without these services (A, B, D, E, F, G, SP). Student comments included "I wouldn't have made it without Academic Support Services," and "Academic Support Services made a big difference" (E, G, SP). Many of the students noted that before coming to college, they did not know that such services existed. The encouragement and emotional support that DSS staff provided to students with disabilities was also deemed very valuable (A, B, E, G, SP). However, at one college, both DSS staff and students reported that they were concerned that some students were "too comfortable" and therefore never transitioned to 4-year institutions or work (A, SP, SI).

DSS staff cited a number of factors they considered critical to their success with students with disabilities including a supportive board and administration (A, B, D, SI). At two of the colleges visited, DSS staff members mentioned having presidents and vice presidents who were supportive and knowledgeable of the issues surrounding students with disabilities. Students also reported having easy access to the president (A, B, SP) and vice president (B, SP) at these colleges and felt comfortable "airing" their concerns.

When asked what they would do with additional funds for their programs if available, DSS staff at one college said that the money would be used to hire a job developer so students could acquire a specific skill. Other suggestions included training for "soft skills" such as etiquette, job skills, and filling out a job application (B, SI). Another college said they would spend the money on assistive technology (and then getting the word out that they have it), making part-time employees full-time, and allocating emergency funds for students to access diagnostic testing, books, and counseling (D, SI).

## **Accommodation Procedures**

The goal of providing course accommodations for students with disabilities is to modify materials or testing procedures in order to increase students' success. Accommodations should be provided in such a way that the rigor of the academic program is not compromised, and without giving the students an unfair advantage.

In terms of the various colleges' support services for students with disabilities, all but one college indicated that students met with a staff member to discuss possible accommodations (A, B, C, E, F, G, SSQ). Among the factors considered in making a decision about an accommodation were availability and previous effectiveness (A, C, F, SSQ) and cost to the college (C, SSQ). When training was offered, it was provided by a support services staff member or an academic counselor (A, D, F, SSQ). At one college, training information was provided in the form of handouts (E, SSQ). One college offered training only for assistive software (C, SSQ).

Students reported using a variety of accommodations. The most commonly used were extended time on tests, student notetakers, student readers, modified examination formats, and preferential seating. Other accommodations included books on tape, tape recorders, quizzes and homework on computer, counseling with a mental health counselor, a spell-checker, receipt of copies of instructor's notes, and usage of the campus learning center. All of the learning centers surveyed provided study skills support, alternative exam formats, reading services, notetaking services, taping services, tutoring services, spell checkers, and taped texts. Appropriate accommodations were also provided for students at graduation ceremonies at some of the colleges surveyed (A, D, SSQ).

Students at all colleges were asked a number of questions regarding the accommodations that they used in classroom and academic settings. When asked if they were satisfied with the accommodation provided for them, 48.0% agreed, and 40.0% strongly agreed. Seventy percent (70.9%) of the students were satisfied with the process used in selecting the accommodation. A full 29.2%, however, indicated that they were undecided, or that the question was not applicable. This could indicate that students either did not have a choice about the accommodation, or they simply had not considered their degree of personal satisfaction with it (simply being grateful that one was provided). For those who received training on their accommodation, 59.1% agreed that it was effective. This question did not apply to 31.8% of those surveyed, while 9% were undecided. In terms of the accommodation's effectiveness, 68% of the students

found the accommodation effective, 16% determined that this question was not applicable, and 4% were undecided.

When asked specifically about the factors important in selecting an accommodation, the most significant factors were availability, ease of use, effectiveness, independence, and specific disability.

### **Student Life**

The students who were interviewed at the various colleges lived in various accommodations, including their own houses, parent's houses, and apartments (A, B, C, D, E, F, SQ). Only one college had on-campus housing for its students (C, SSQ). In terms of colleges' facilities being accessible to students with disabilities, one faculty member reported that wheelchair accessibility could be improved (C, FSQ). In terms of transportation, some colleges provided bus service (A, B, SSQ). However, the bus schedule was not always efficient. A student at one college shared an experience in which she waited more than two hours for the bus (F, SP). While public transportation was a vital component of accessing the community and the college, the services' schedule was very limiting especially regarding weekends and evenings. Students with mobility limitations frequently cited transportation issues as limiting their college opportunities.

In terms of social activities, students at all colleges mentioned going to the movies and/or going to friends' houses as things they had done within the last two weeks (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SP). Other student activities included student government (A, SP), drama (A, SP), intramural sports (B, SP), church groups (B, SP), musical events (C, SQ), and swimming (D, SQ). One student attended his college to be a member of the wrestling team (F, SP).

A number of different individuals influenced students to attend college, including parents (A, B, C, D, E, F, SP), special education teachers (E, SP), friends (B, E, SP), coaches (F, SP), and elementary and middle school teachers (B, SP). We had hopefully anticipated that students would describe some critical incident from their transition team or high school special education experience that pertained to college. None did.

### **In-Class Experiences**

A consistent theme at all of the colleges surveyed was the importance of student success and its influence on retention and self-esteem. Faculty and staff provided numerous examples of how they work to engineer success for all students and how this pays huge dividends financially and academically. For example, instructors shared inclusive teaching methods that benefited all

students, including students with disabilities. Many instructors stated that they made an effort to make themselves available to students beyond regular office hours by providing home phone numbers, extending regular office hours, and holding small group tutoring or study sessions (D, E, F, G, SI). An instructor at one college made himself available for tutoring from 1-2 PM every day except Saturday in the college library and encouraged students to drop by. This instructor also let students know that he held “virtual office hours” (via Internet chat room) every night from 10-12 PM where he addressed any questions that students had posted on his website throughout the day (D, SI).

Other examples of inclusive practices designed to increase the success of all students included posting handouts on the Internet, digitizing video from publisher materials and placing them on the Internet, ensuring active participation (lots of opportunities to “do the problem” for example, in math classes), facilitating out-of-class study groups, providing handouts of overheads, allowing all lectures to be taped, using demonstration and repetition, speaking slowly, and administering daily quizzes with feedback (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SI).

The instructors who utilized the inclusive teaching practices cited above provided insight into their belief systems. Their comments included:

Your belief system as an instructor is critical. I believe these students can succeed. (E, SI)

I chose to be an instructor at this college because there is an opportunity to make a difference. (D, SI)

My classes are richer because of the diversity of students who attend. (A, SI)

Students from all of the colleges surveyed also commented on the importance of success in ensuring retention. At one college, a number of students tutored other students after successfully completing specific classes. These students were paid tutors through the colleges’ Academic Enrichment Center. One student commented, “It helped my self-esteem that I could help someone else.” (E, SP).

Some students reported getting their first A’s and B’s that provided encouragement to continue in their respective programs (D, E, G, SP). One student commented, “The experience of success makes you want to work harder” and said that he couldn’t wait to see his diploma on the wall (G, SP). Other students shared plans to transfer to four-year colleges after meeting with success at community college (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SP). Success also prompted students to actively participate in campus activities; one student served as the student trustee on board of a very large college (A, SP), and another student served as the president of Phi Beta Kappa (E, SP).

## Attitudes about Students with Disabilities

In addition to visiting with faculty and staff about disabilities and how they assist students, we also discussed attitudes about disabilities among both teachers and DSS office staff. Several questions in the Faculty-Staff Questionnaire revealed these attitudes most directly. When asked which students were most difficult to assist, all DSS staff persons agreed that students with psychological disabilities versus physical disabilities were the most challenging to assist (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, FSQ). Several faculty/staff members indicated that students who were afraid of revealing their disability for fear of being stigmatized were the most challenging to assist (B, C, F, G, FSQ). One staff person indicated that in the self-paced program at her college, students with learning disabilities were rarely motivated enough to succeed (B, FSQ). Another staff person said that challenging students include those who “do not possess an ability to benefit from college education due to their disability, and are here because of a lack of programs for them in the community.” (B, FSQ). Another comment was, “My biggest challenge is working with students with motivational and time management problems.” (F, FSQ).

Faculty and staff cited a variety of influential experiences with one or several students in helping to understand and assist students with disabilities. These experiences included working individually with students in a traditional classroom setting (B, FSQ), working at a summer camp for students with physical and mental disabilities (C, FSQ), working at the college’s learning center (G, FSQ), attending workshops offered by DSS staff (B, FSQ), and working with students who are deaf and blind (F, FSQ). One faculty member also added that: “I can make mistakes, even in the area of disabilities, and then move on” [adding that the environment is safe for learning] (F, FSQ). Several teachers cited a lack of time as the biggest obstacle to helping students with disabilities (E, G, FSQ).

Students generally reported that the attitudes of fellow students and DSS staff at the six colleges visited were very supportive. One staff member said that many students had told her that they like the fact that the student body is diverse, including individuals with various disabilities. The instructor added that this provides for a more realistic, accepting classroom setting (A, SI). Students’ most negative experiences generally occurred in high school and earlier. Many of the things they said, and were told, were revealing. Here are a few examples:

“High school teachers are aware of learning disabilities, but don’t know how to take them into account in the classroom.” (A, SP)

“Some teachers don’t realize that hand-holding doesn’t help. They are not focused enough on developing independence.” (A, SP)

“We develop learned helplessness.” (A, SP)

“But you’re so bright!” (told to a learning disabled student, A, SP)

“Elementary and middle school learning disability programs made me feel stupid.” (B, SP)

“I’ve known some very bright students in wheelchairs.” (teacher, B, SI)

“No one did squat to help me go to college.” (C, SP)

“Girls, particularly blind girls, shouldn’t be in science classes.” (told to a student years ago, C, SP)

“I don’t teach **these** kind of students.” (told to a student years ago, C, SP)

“People tell you you’re dumb, and you eventually start to believe it.” (E, SP)

A number of students commented that too much “hand-holding” occurred in high school, resulting in “learned helplessness” (A, B, SP). Overall, students reported a much more positive community college experience as compared with high school. Many students seemed pleasantly surprised at the amount of assistance they received and believed that they benefited from the more flexible schedules. Hence, overall, they enjoyed college more (A, B, C, D, E, F, G, SP). When asked what they would tell other students with disabilities who were considering going to college, students replied:

Take a year off and work, see what kind of jobs you can get without a degree. (Implied that they’re not good ones!) (C, SP)

There is more freedom at college, you’re treated like an adult, and there is more time to get help. (C, SP)

Choose a college you can afford. (B, SP)

Do it now, because you have the rest of your life to work. (B, SP)

Don’t go just because your friends go there. (B, SP)

You can do it no matter what you know if you really try. (E, SP)

## Conclusion

Administrators, faculty, staff, and students from six community colleges in three states were surveyed and interviewed about several aspects of college life to determine the status of students with disabilities in community colleges. Reviewing five key areas summarizes their experiences below:

- 1) Administration (recruitment, registration, retention, financial aid)
- 2) Services for students with disabilities (accommodations, self-advocacy)
- 3) College life (peers, social, transportation)
- 4) In-class experiences (faculty, class requirements, assignments);
- 5) Transition (difference between high school and community college)

### Administration

Although staff at community colleges cited many benefits for recruiting students with disabilities, they also listed concerns, including a lack of financial

resources if a large number of students with disabilities enrolled in their colleges. The most common method of recruitment at the six colleges surveyed was visits to local high schools. When asked why students chose or stayed at a particular college, many faculty, staff, and students stated that it was the opportunity to develop personal relationships with advisors, tutors, instructors, and staff members. Students reported that location and size were two primary considerations when selecting a college.

Registration assistance and some form of campus orientation were available at all of the community colleges surveyed. At one college, students received credit for attending an all-day orientation that included music, food, informational sessions, and a general assessment test that could be later reviewed with a counselor. Retention specialists were also employed at two of the colleges surveyed, and their services were highly valued by DSS staff, administration, faculty, and students. Part-time status for students with disabilities was available at all of the colleges surveyed. A number of students expressed concerns over the attitudes of personnel in the financial aid and admissions offices at their colleges. Specifically, students reported feeling demeaned and awkward and added that it was difficult to locate some of the necessary forms.

#### Services for Students with Disabilities

Students at most colleges noted that services for students with disabilities were crucial to their academic success. In addition to helping students make the adjustment to college and select appropriate accommodations, DSS staff provided emotional support and encouragement to students. Many students felt that they would not have "made it" without these services. Interestingly, once students experienced success, they became more involved with helping other students, more motivated to work harder, and felt an increased sense of self-confidence.

One concern noted by faculty, staff, and students was the reluctance of many students to disclose a disability. Faculty and DSS staff members expressed frustration over this scenario, and students shared compelling reasons why they chose not to disclose (fear of stigmatization, wanting to try college on their own, breach of privacy). Still, at all of the colleges surveyed, students emphasized the importance of "getting over your pride and asking for help."

Eighty-eight percent of students surveyed agreed or strongly agreed that they were satisfied with the accommodation provided for them. Reading, writing, and math achievement laboratories were cited, as well as tutors, computers, and study groups. Individual accommodations such as notetakers, extended time on tests, and alternative testing environments were also frequently utilized. While 71% of the students surveyed reported that they were

satisfied with the process used in selecting an accommodation, 29% indicated that they were undecided about this question, or that it was not applicable. This may indicate that students did not fully understand the range of accommodations available to them or a framework for evaluating accommodations' utilities.

### College Life

Students with disabilities reported living in a variety of housing environments and participating in various social activities. Only one college reported on-campus housing for students; however, this is not unusual in light of the fact that all of the colleges surveyed were community colleges. At some colleges, students did report frustration over unreliable transportation services and inaccessible buildings.

### In-Class Experiences

At all of the colleges surveyed, faculty and students provided examples of inclusive practices designed to increase the success of all students. These examples included extended office hours, use of the Internet, active class participation, and demonstration and repetition. A number of instructors indicated that they valued having students with disabilities in their classes, pointing out that diversity added a new richness to the class environment.

Not all students reported positive in-class experiences. In some classes, students reported feeling ridiculed and even harassed. Other students expressed serious concerns over real and potential violations to their right to privacy.

### Transition

Many students highlighted the stark differences between their high school and college experiences. In high school, students reported being ridiculed and generally receiving very little assistance to accommodate their disability. One student with a visual impairment reported that in high school, she had to go off-campus to enlarge her own copies (C, SP). In general, students seemed pleasantly surprised at how much assistance was available at community college. Students also appreciated the difference in atmospheres between high school and college. Students commented that in college, the "bullies are gone" and people attend because they want to be there. They also enjoyed the more flexible schedule that college life brings, with time to prepare and study before class sessions. They also believed that the college environment fostered a climate of more rigorous academic study.

Students also reported that they were not prepared for the transition from high school to college. A general sentiment was that teachers, "made me feel stupid by doing my work for me" (B, SP). Students also reported that they experienced "learned helplessness" (A, SP), and the teachers they appreciated

most were the ones who let them do work on their own. As one student stated, "I'm concerned that high schools aren't focused on the independence of students. Handholding does not help. It's all about transition" (A, SP). Overall, students were not aware of their rights and responsibilities, nor had they practiced skills such as self-advocacy.