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# College Students and Disabilities: How They Deal

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Running Head: College Students and Disabilities

College Students and Disabilities: How they Deal

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CNS 572 – Fall 2008

In this ever changing, fast – paced world, it becomes so clear that what we once thought was the “norm,” is not quite so much anymore. Many terms and stereotypes have been turned around and reevaluated, along with perceptions. No longer is the typical college student the preppy, well-bred, Ivy League male. Now, there are students of every gender, ethnicity, race, age, etc. in the collegiate world. There is also an increase of students with disabilities. According to *The Boston Globe*, the percentage of college young adults with disabilities has more than doubled nationwide from 15 to 32 percent (Lazar, 2006). Disability, contrary to popular belief, does not just mean that someone is confined to a wheelchair. It can mean physical, mental, developmental, intellectual, etcetera. We have chosen to focus not only on different types of disabilities that college student’s face, but how they deal with it, and what various institutions implement in order to assist the student. Many times the results are heartwarming, but unfortunately not in every case. During the course of this project, a member of our team had the opportunity to talk with Patrick Stewart about what it is like being a student with a disability on Western Kentucky University’s campus. After speaking with him we learned that it is not only our campus that needs major adjustment, but our students, staff, and faculty who need to be more aware of students with disabilities.

The mission statement in the Office for Student Disability Services at Western Kentucky University reads as follows: “The goal of the Office for Student Disability Services is to ensure that all students with disabilities are provided access to all facets of the Western Kentucky University experience; to facilitate and coordinate support services and programs that enable students with disabilities to maximize their educational potential; and to increase awareness among all members of the University so that students with disabilities are able to achieve

academic success based on their abilities, not their disabilities”

([www.wku.edu/aa/SDS/mission.htm](http://www.wku.edu/aa/SDS/mission.htm)). Patrick is in his second year and lives in McLean Hall on campus. When Patrick was in his mid twenties, while working on his home, he was run over by a bulldozer. This put him in a wheelchair and affected his sight. Patrick has what is called Diplopia. “Diplopia is another term for double vision in both eyes. If the two eyes are misaligned and aim at different targets, two non-matching images will be sent to the viewer's brain. When the brain accepts and uses two non-matching images at the same time, double vision results” (Cooper & Cooper, 2008). Patrick also has Attention Deficit Disorder. Attention Deficit Disorder, or ADD, is a psychological term currently applied to anyone who meets the DSM- IV diagnostic criteria for impulsivity, hyperactivity and/or inattention. Patrick, like many other people with disabilities, has more than just one disability.

One thing that we found extremely interesting while doing research after talking with Patrick was that Western’s guidelines are out-dated. Patrick stated that most of the help he was offered in the beginning of his courses here seemed to dwindle once the school year started and never really had a course of follow-up. He said, “They say they’ll get you a reader or writer for your courses, but I’ve never really gotten one. And I never really know when they’re gonna show up.” Moreover, he goes on to state that many of his professors require him to read certain material that is not made electronically. His vision does not allow him to focus on small print, making it impossible to read text. Patrick uses text-to-speech on his computer that allows text to be read aloud. Some professors make it mandatory for him to read material without giving him an electronic version.

Another learning point for us was when Patrick shared stories of using his wheelchair. He said it is frustrating because many people do not take the time to park their vehicle correctly.

If a vehicle parks too far over the curb, his wheelchair cannot go up on curbs so he has to backtrack the entire way and take a different, unfamiliar route. He also shared with me that sometimes he has to wait for an elevator for 15-20 minutes because individuals who are completely capable of taking the stairs will load onto the elevator before him and take it only to the next floor. He said, "I don't like to complain. I understand that many students and staff just have never thought about it. But it is very frustrating because it is the little things that would make a big difference sometimes." Patrick also shared a story from last year during the winter semester. He said that one day there was a significant amount of snow on the ground, so he emailed his professor ahead of time to let them know that he would not be able to attend class due to the fact that his wheelchair did not run well during rain or snow. The professor stated that he had to find a way to get to class and would not make exceptions for him. So Patrick, "finding a way to class," got stuck going up the hill. Since the hill was icy, the wheelchair would not move and not one person stopped to help him out. Students just kept passing him and no one asked if he could use a hand. He said that an article was written about this incident in Western's newspaper, which only adds to the irony. If the student could write about it, why was it that the student could not help him out? What stops people from helping those in a wheelchair? "Fear, apathy and indifference are not quite the answer. Instead, the scientists' experiments show that the average citizen's instinctive concern for his fellow human beings is too often restrained by a taut, subtle web of social pressures. Particularly in groups and crowds," write John M. Darley of Princeton and Bibb Latane of Ohio State in a recent and already classic report, "until someone acts, no one acts." "Americans consider it bad manners to look too closely at other people in public," the scientists write, "and are embarrassed if caught doing otherwise." Psychologist Leonard Berkowitz from the University of Wisconsin writes, "Helping others is not encouraged

by law, as many people are aware. In most states, good Samaritans who intervene can be sued for their trouble and must bear the cost of any injuries they may suffer. Helpers weighing the possible risks of intervening are also concerned about losing their freedom. When one person helps another, the helper almost inevitably feels that he has come under the sway of the person whom he is assisting.” In order to assist disabled students with academic and social requests, Western Kentucky University has an Office of Student Disability Services that determines the specific guidelines for the student, staff, and faculty.

The requirements for Western Kentucky University are as followed:

1. An accessible route is only required from one site access point (such as the parking lot)
2. A ramp may be steeper than is ordinarily permitted.
3. The accessible entrance does not need to be the one used by the general public.
4. Only one accessible toilet is required and it may be unisex.
5. Accessible routes are only required on the level of the accessible entrance.

But more importantly, what can we as students, staff, or faculty do to help?

1. Do not automatically hold on to a person’s wheelchair. It is part of that person’s body space. Hanging or leaning on the chair is similar to hanging or leaning on a person sitting in any chair. It is often fine if you are friends, but inappropriate if you are strangers.
2. Offer assistance if you wish, but do not insist. If a person needs help (s)he will accept your offer and tell you exactly what will be helpful. If you force assistance it can

sometimes be unsafe as when you grab the chair and the person using it loses his/her balance.

3. Talk directly to the person using the wheelchair, not to a third party. The person is not helpless or unable to talk.

4. Don't be sensitive about using words like "walking" or "running." People using wheelchairs use the same words.

5. Be alert to the existence of architectural barriers in your office and when selecting a restaurant, home, theatre or other facility, to which you want to visit with a person who uses a wheelchair.

6. If conversation proceeds more than a few minutes and it is possible to do so, consider sitting down in order to share eye level. It is uncomfortable for a seated person to look straight up for a long period.

7. Don't park your car in a parking place in an accessible parking place. These places are reserved out of necessity, not convenience. The space is wider than usual in order to get wheelchairs in and out of the car and is close to the entrance for those who cannot push far.

8. When your dept., church, civic group or organization sponsors a program, be sure people with disabilities are included in the planning and presentation.

9. When children ask about wheelchairs and people who use them, answer them in a matter-of-fact manner. Wheelchairs, bicycles and skates share a lot in common.

10. When you hear someone use the term "cripple," politely but firmly indicate your preference for the words "person who has a disability."

11. If you wish to contribute to an organization that uses a “pity” or “sympathy” campaign, enclose a note with your check saying that the cause may be good, but the method of public appeal is demeaning to citizens with disabilities. Voice your disapproval of the “poor cripple” image.
  12. Include people with disabilities in photos used in promotional material. When people with disabilities are presented in the media as competent, or “like other people,” write a note of support to the producer or publisher.
  13. Make sure meeting places are architecturally accessible (with ramps, modified bathrooms, wide doors, low telephones, etc.) so that people with disabilities can be equal participants.
  14. Encourage your community to put “curb cuts” in sidewalks. These inexpensive built-in ramps enable wheelchair users to get from place to place independently.
  15. Include people who use wheelchairs on community task forces (transportation, building, zoning) so that your town will meet the needs of all citizens.
  16. Make it a point to try to reduce barriers in your physical surroundings. Often these barriers have been created by architects, engineers and builders who were unaware. A simple “How could someone using a wheelchair get in here?” will help identify any barriers.
- (Regional Rehabilitation Research Institute, 2001).

While physical disabilities are a common problem on college campuses (that are often looked over), so are developmental disabilities in students. There are many different types of disabilities that students can face: Autism, ADHD, Asperger’s Syndrome, other non-verbal



learning disorders, etc. Currently, the most common learning disabilities on college campuses include Dyslexia, Dysgraphia, ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, and depression (Lazar, 2006). They need accommodations and help just like a person suffering from a physical disability. Students suffering from learning disabilities find most of their problems within the classroom setting. Issues such as taking notes in class, loss of concentration, classroom interaction, and comprehension skills are just a few of the problems many students face on a daily basis ([www.olin.org](http://www.olin.org)). More and more institutions of higher learning are working to implement various programs to aid these students in being successful. After delving into further research, it is evident there are many different approaches to helping these students.

In November 2007, the GW HEATH Resource Center surveyed individuals associated with colleges and universities that used Disability Supports Services (DSS) to answer questions that had been frequently posed to them. They were asked if they had students on campus who suffered from Autism Spectrum Disabilities (ASD), or other intellectual/developmental disabilities, and what services, accommodations or support they offered to the students. All of the schools that were surveyed were state universities, except for one community college, Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute. Answers varied all across the spectrum.

Western State College of Colorado implemented a mentoring program, which is similar to a “big brother, big sister” program. An older, upperclassman will (for credit), assist the developmentally disabled student with day to day functions, and help create a smooth transition into college life by exposing them to social situations (athletic games, eating in the dining hall, etc). One member of the DSS supervises the mentoring student.

The University of Findlay in Findlay, Ohio is a bit different. While they do not have a specific program geared towards developmentally disabled students, they do have a successful

history of dealing with autistic students. The school is a small campus with a more “family oriented” environment that offers a support system. However, they do ask families to possibly seek a “personal care attendant.”

The Caldwell Community College and Technical Institute does not provide any type of accommodation for developmentally disabled students. They will admit students who have Asperger’s, but they are enrolled in the same classes as other students, and expected to uphold the same academic and behavior standards.

The University of Denver is not as lenient as some others. As far as admitting students with developmental disabilities, they will only admit those with Asperger’s. Students with intellectual disabilities are not admitted (Heath Resource Center, 2007).

While there are some institutions, like the ones listed above, who are doing great things to help the autistic, developmentally challenged, etc. students on their campuses; some are taking it quite a bit farther. Bellevue Community College has a program called the Venture Program, where student who have developmental disabilities graduate with an Associates of Occupational and Life Skills degree. It is the equivocal to a typical Associate of Arts degree (approximately 90 hours), but it is completed in twice the amount of time – four years. The program challenges students not only with academics, but with developing stronger life skills. The Venture Program Director, Mary Allason, said their strongest goal is to make sure the students become self-sufficient and independent. “We want them to be advocates for themselves,” she stated in an interview. According to interviews with the soon-to-be graduates in July 2008 proves that what Allason and her crew set out to do apparently worked. Many of the students want to move away from their parents, and many want to have their own families. “I can really one day see myself being a mom – whether I adopt or have kids of my own,” said Anna Harnois, a 26 year old

graduate who is going to work in the field of child care. Many also feel like the program is a family to them, and it is going to be hard to part ways after graduation (Rolph, 2008).

Unfortunately, the Venture Program did receive some criticism in July 2008. Charges were made by some parents and one former professor that certain students were forced out of the program, even if they could not perform at the academic level. First and foremost, not every student is admitted to the program. They have to meet the requirements of achieving an IQ of 70 or above and at least perform on a fourth grade reading level. The program has been charged with trying to sway professors to make claims that certain students were acting violently or dangerously, when in fact they were not (Inside Higher Ed, July 2008).

Another program that is significantly helping college students with developmental disabilities is the College Living Experience (CLE). It mainly focuses on students with autism, ADHD and Asperger's. The CLE program is located in five cities in the United States (Austin, Chicago, Ft. Lauderdale, Washington, DC and Denver). The program accepts any student that is enrolled in a nearby higher learning institution, and focuses on making advancements in three major categories: Academic, Independent Living, and Social Skills. To aid with the Academics, students go to weekly tutoring sessions with professional tutors. To help their skills of Independent Living, the students are introduced to apartment living, and have bank accounts, cook, clean, pay bills, and etcetera. CLE also offers a type of "big brother, big sister" program to enhance Social Skills. Students are also able to attend many community and school activities, encouraging them to socialize and participate (Morrison, 2008).

It is gratifying to see how institutions differ in supporting students who suffer from developmental disabilities. It's reassuring to see that there are many who are doing all they can to help the students, because there has been a growing trend of students with disabilities who

want to attend and be successful in college. You also have to be curious about which type of campus environment is better for those students – a larger state school with thousands of students on campus, or a small, private institution with a smaller enrollment. Realistically, it depends on what setting that student is more comfortable in. For instance, 19 year old Amy O’Dowd chose debated between five schools researching their academic and special needs service programs. In the end, she chose New England College in New Hampshire because of her love of the cross country program she will be participating in (Lazar, 2006). To be successful in college, whether faced with a disability or not, a student must feel comfortable to have an environment that is conducive to learning.

In keeping with the idea of a comfortable environment for all disabled students, there are specific social, classroom, and technological necessities required of students with learning and physical disabilities. As discussed previously, learning disabilities affect the majority of disabled students. Students with either learning or physical disabilities require a local support network which can include family, close friends, and/or a psychiatrist. For example, Roger Diehl is a freshman at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. However, Roger is not from Madison, WI. His parents and psychiatrist live in his hometown of Nashville, TN. In order to prepare Roger for his first year away from home, his mother Sita decided that he would live with his grandmother the first year of college in order for Roger to get adjusted to new surroundings. She also found a psychiatrist in Madison and had her son appoint a power of attorney for his mental and health care so that her and her husband could remain knowledgeable of his care (Trudeau, 2008). When institutions have physically disabled students, items such as ground floor dorm rooms, handicapped parking, and wheelchair access are vital. Most colleges offer accessible parking and bigger dormitory rooms for any student displaying a physical disability. For a more

tailored approach, in Oxford, Keble College offers amenities such as ground floor study bedrooms, caretaker facilities, and lifts into the dining hall ([www.keble.ox.ac.uk](http://www.keble.ox.ac.uk)).

As students pour into college classrooms every day, physical and learning disabled students enter with a multitude of requests. These requests, while seemingly basic in nature, require many professors to become more accommodating than some would like. Faculty members are normally not trained on specific disabilities thus do not understand the rationale behind many student requests. Consequently, students are embarrassed about asking for certain accommodations and are emotionally exhausted (Bento, 1996). One student remembers a professor saying “I’ll do it only this time!” The student replies “What does she think? Can I stop being disabled when I want to” (Bento, 1996). Being comfortable in a classroom ultimately affects grade performance and professors should provide the outreach and support needed. FAME, a resource for college administrators designed to improve education for students with disabilities provides a list to professors of classroom needs. Many of the requirements do not mandate a major change in teaching style: reviewing assignment in class or repeating out loud what is on the chalkboard are simple adjustments that provide students who have difficulty with memory recall and directions a huge relief ([www.olin.org](http://www.olin.org)). Moreover, there are some requests that dictate a change in behavior and teaching methods. Allowing extended test time or permitting students to take a different version of the test may require extra preparation time or may take away from a professor’s break schedule. Another form is providing alternate forms of an assignment such as print, online, or audiotape ([www.olin.org](http://www.olin.org)). Although time consuming, adhering to the specific classroom needs, professors are able to successfully include disabled students in the campus community. A study completed at Baylor University reveals that overall students with disabilities are looking for professors and professionals in the Office of Disability

Services that care. Caring allows students to have a sense of security and a safe environment in order to ask for special testing accommodations (Graham-Smith, 2004). “The goal is to develop and use classroom teaching strategies that allow all students a place where they can safely express their personal experiences, examine differences among students from various backgrounds and social strata, and explore the particular issues relevant to their own cultural identity in short, a nurturing place for all students” (Graham-Smith, 2004).

Conversely, students with disabilities have a list of items they should complete in order to be more prepared for class each day. Dr. Kathleen Nadeau, clinical psychologist and author, wrote a book for college students with learning disabilities entitled *Survival Guide for College Students with ADHD or LD*. In her book, she discusses a list of strategies and behavioral habits that will allow a student to succeed their first year of college. Those ten tips are as follows:

1. Seek out help when you need it
2. Map out how you will use your time
3. Plan ahead, especially for final projects and tests that are a big part of your grade
4. Learn how you learn
5. Be an active learner
6. Create effective study routines
7. Organize your study space
8. Start early
9. Identify problems that repeatedly get in your way
10. Inquire about resources that can help you learn

A student, Emily Algire was diagnosed with ADD went to Dr. Nadeau for counseling. She was given these ten tips to change her behavior towards her studies. Dr. Nadeau also created an

exercise schedule, realistic class schedule, and food regimen. She told Emily not to register for classes that began earlier than 11 am and required a note taker so she could pay more attention class. To date, Emily is in her sophomore year at Pacific Lutheran University and currently has a 3.4 grade point average (Aubrey, 2008).

Technology for students with disabilities increases the number of options available. Technological needs allow students who struggle with reading and writing a chance to increase their productivity in and out of the classroom. As our technological advance continue to improve, new software and gadgets are created to assist those with disabilities. Items such as word prediction software to help with poor keyboarding skills, citation software, books on tape, and computers that type while you speak provide students the ability to remain in an institution's mainstream culture. Similarly, some professors have the ability to digitize their handouts allowing students the ability to receive it in an electronic format ([www.olin.org](http://www.olin.org)).

Institutions that continue to implement programs that aid students with disabilities allow new doors of success and opportunity to open in the minds of a new student population. They all deserve a chance, and many of them end up being success stories to be very proud of. Increasing numbers of students with disabilities are enrolling in two-year and four-year postsecondary education institutions. These students with disabilities often face many challenges when going on a higher education campus. However, the transition from high school to a postsecondary education institution does not have to be one of the challenges if the student is well informed.

After reviewing the different types of disabilities that college student's face and how they deal with them, the path to receiving other types of aid is examined.

Receiving disability services at a university or college is much different than receiving disability services in high school. For example in high school the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) required public schools to make available to all students with disabilities a free appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment. Public Schools then had to develop an Individualized Education Program (IEP) which reflected the individualized needs of the student. In college, there is no IEP. Colleges are not required to provide FAPE. In order for students to receive Student Disability Services they must self-identify and supply a current (within the past three years) documentation identifying the disability from a licensed professional. The Office for Student Disability Services (OFSDS) will then determine the accommodations needed based on the licensed professionals' advice and student records. The Office for Student Disability Services will provide a Letter of Accommodation (LOA) which is a document form requesting Instructors cooperation in providing equal access based on recommendations from the licensed professional. The student will then take two copies of the LOA to the professor for signatures and for the professor's records. Once the professor receives letter the student will then receive services.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II), prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. Therefore postsecondary schools (who receive federal funds) are required to provide appropriate academic adjustments as necessary to ensure that it does not discriminate on the basis of disability. The appropriate academic adjustment is determined based on type of disability and individual needs. Academic adjustments may include auxiliary aids and modifications to academic requirements as are necessary to ensure an equal playing field with equal educational opportunities.



Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), a student has a disability if he/she has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity. You must be regarded by a certified medical authority as having a substantial impairment, as opposed to a minor impairment. A qualified impairment is one that significantly limits or restricts a major life activity such as hearing, seeing, speaking, walking, breathing, and performing manual tasks, caring for oneself, learning, or working.

Students come into college with many different types of disabilities. Below is a list of just a few:

- Diseases—multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy, diabetes, AIDS, etc.
- Injuries—spinal cord damage, head trauma, etc.
- Recurring conditions—epilepsy, etc.
- Developmental problems—learning disabilities, mental retardation, cerebral palsy, etc.
- Physical conditions—impaired sight or hearing, incomplete or missing limbs, etc.
- Mental illnesses

At Western Kentucky University (WKU) the goal of the Office for Student Disability Services is to ensure that all students with disabilities are provided access to all facets of the Western Kentucky University experience; to facilitate and coordinate support services and programs that enable students with disabilities to maximize their educational potential; and to increase awareness among all members of the University so that students with disabilities are able to achieve academic success based on their abilities, not their disabilities.

WKU offers a number of support service programs to ensure equal access and opportunity. Listed below are just a few support services offered:

- Priority registration
- Offering specialized orientation, campus tours, and maps
- Reducing a course load
- Substituting one course for another
- Note-takers or scribes
- Recording devices
- Sign language interpreters
- Extended time for testing
- Alternative testing sites
- Tutors
- Readers
- Books on CDs
- Adaptive furniture
- Help in locating attendants (responsibility of student to interview, hire and make financial arrangements)
- If telephones are provided in dorm rooms, a TTY in your dorm room
- Equipping school computers with screen-reading, voice recognition or other adaptive software or hardware.

The following documents the kinds of disabilities that students reported according to 2007 disability data provided by the OFSDS at Western Kentucky University:

- Learning Disability = 217
- Physical = 69
- Hearing = 19

- Mental/Psychological = 67
- Neurological = 25
- Miscellaneous = 106
- Visual = 11

The above disability data also showed that the number one accommodation requested by students with disabilities was extended time, followed by due dates and need for a note taker. That makes a lot of sense, since the largest number of students receiving disability services, according to the OFSDS at Western Kentucky University were identified as having a learning disability.

After speaking with Patrick Stewart and researching the needs of students with disabilities, one thing is clear: All students, no matter their physical or mental handicap, need an institution that is able to cater to their needs and provide a sense of comfort. What matters most to the student is a professor or department that recognizes a student with disabilities as a student first and foremost, not a disability. Moreover, the aforementioned institutional programs and special needs are useless if not provided by faculty who genuinely care for each individual student and their specific needs. Caring faculty not only provide the resources necessary to educate a student with disabilities, they are able to empower them through encouragement and a trusting atmosphere.

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