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Serving Students with Disabilities: Institutions & Programs

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CHAPTER 12

SERVING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

Institutions and Programs

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There are around 26 million students enrolled in the 6,000 colleges and universities in the United States (Bareham, 2021). Approximately 11% of all postsecondary undergraduates report having some form of disability (Accredited Schools Online, 2022), and many institutions have programs tailored to students with special needs (Bryant, 2021; Ivywise, 2022). There is an important distinction between colleges and universities that have, as their primary mission, the provision of higher education to students with disabilities and institutions that have specialized programs and services for these populations. Yet, there are many campuses that fall into the latter category, but relatively few in the former group (National Center for College Students with Disabilities, 2022). Yet even as significant progress has been made in identifying and responding to the needs of college students with disabilities, discussions still take place among all level of administrators regarding what constitutes a disability and how accommodations can best be provided (ADA National Network, 2022). Cappex (2022) reinforced this notion:

> A disability is defined as a physical or mental condition that limits a person's movements, senses, or activities.... Whether it's a physical disability, a developmental one, or related to learning, there are programs at a number of great colleges ready to help students with everything from dyslexia to deafness, from ADHD to Autism Spectrum Disorder, from Down Syndrome to depression.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge at the onset of the chapter that words matter. As such, even the language college administrators use is important and should be taken into consideration when developing programs and services designed to meet the needs brought of students with disabilities (Boston University, 2022). Grant (2022) brings this issue into sharp focus and stated: "The disability community is split on language. Many people prefer person-first language—"person with a disability." Others prefer identity-first language—"disabled person." The best option is to use the language that the individual prefers. Do not assume all people prefer the same language.

The bottom line is that it is challenging to provide an organizational and administrative template for institutions that exist primarily to serve students with disabilities as there are very few common characteristics that these institutions possess. This chapter includes a discussion of the institutions and programs that could serve as role models for better serving students with disabilities.

HISTORY

Colleges and universities have evolved in the provision of services for students with disabilities in tandem with legislation that has steadily progressed to ensure they have the same access and opportunities afforded to other students (Sannes, 2008). Beginning in the early 1970s, these legislative milestones include Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 1985, the Assistive Technology Act of 1988, and the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (Grant, 2022). The general philosophy and guiding principle behind the legislation is that students with disabilities should be afforded the same access to educational opportunities as their non-challenged counterparts. As Wilson (2022) noted, "By law, students with disabilities have the same rights as those without them in educational settings. Nearly all educational institutions in the U.S. must provide students with disabilities the same access to quality education as other students" (para. 4). The ADA, which was expanded in 2008 with passage of the ADA Amendments Act (ADAAA), is a major milestone with respect to its implications for institutional structure in that it "prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities

in employment, education, transportation, public access, both physical and digital, as well as other facets of life" (University of Connecticut, 2022, para. 2). For more on the legislative history of students with disabilities, please review the "Milestones of the Disability Rights Movement Over the Years" presentation (University of Connecticut, 2022) at The Center for Students with Disabilities at the University of Connecticut's website.

ORGANIZATIONAL STRUCTURE AND CULTURE

The primary determinant of administrative structure at disability access institutions seems to be more related to the overall institutional type, control, and size (Cavallari, 2022). Interestingly, urban colleges and universities seem to be more suited to providing services to students with disabilities due to their access to more community-based resources (Johnson, 2019). A major consideration that institutions must take when deciding on an administrative structure most appropriate for students with disabilities is how best to facilitate the transition from high school to college. Whereas most of the services needed by students with disabilities are mandated at the elementary and secondary level, colleges and universities that want to meet the needs of these students must be more purposeful and resourceful (University of Rochester, 2022). And this can be a daunting responsibility, as noted by Accredited Schools Online (2022):

> The transition from high school to college is a big one. If you're a student with a disability, the additional stresses can be overwhelming. One of the largest changes that you will have to deal with is the substantial difference in scope between the special education services provided on the high school level and those at college. (para. 1)

As acknowledged previously, there are very few colleges and universities—relatively speaking—that have been established specifically to meet the needs of students with a particular disability (National Center for College Students with Disabilities, 2022). As such, providing an institutional administrative structure that could be used as a template or a model for so-called best practices is exceptionally difficult (StateUniversity.com, 2022). However, there are examples that college and university stakeholders can emulate when making decisions regarding administrative design. With respect to institutions that exist to serve the needs of students with learning and intellectual disabilities, there are a couple of colleges that administrators need to carefully study. First, there is Beacon College is Leesburg, Florida. According to Ivywise (2022):

Founded in 1989, Beacon is the first accredited college offering four-year degrees designed around the needs of students with diagnosed learning disabilities.... The group of parents who conceived of Beacon College did so knowing that given the right environment, support, and tools, all students can succeed. The College is committed to student success, offering academic and personal support services that help each student achieve his or her goals.

Moreover, Cappex (2022) highlights Landmark College in Putney, Vermont, which also serves students with learning disabilities:

Landmark College caters entirely to students who learn differently. Students receive individualized attention from instructors with classrooms offering a low 6:1 student-teacher ratio. Students are also provided with frequent visits with experiences advisors, executive function coaching, and education technology support. Landmark offers a Bridge Program as well as a number of summer programs, and is home to the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training.

There are also a few institutions that were established specifically to meet the needs of students with disabilities of a more physical nature. As administrators, it is important to recognize the distinction between students with "invisible" disabilities (ADHD, autism, psychiatric disabilities, diabetes, some vision and hearing deficiencies, and chronic pain) and those of a more "visible" nature (students using wheelchairs and other assistive or communication devices). These are critical considerations that have implications for administrative structure (Barnett, 2018, October 28). This difference is highlighted by Wilson (2022):

Getting around campus, using writing utensils and keyboards, and turning pages in a book, to name a few examples, can be challenging for individuals with physical disabilities, and universities typically have a range of human support services for students in this category. Sometimes referred to as "non-medical help," your school can make accommodations to help you carry out daily tasks on campus where you might need extra time or assistance. (para. 37)

Chief among the physical disabilities are students who have hearing impairments. There are institutions that have been established specifically to meet the needs of these students, including Gallaudet University, the only liberal arts college in the world exclusively devoted to deaf students, National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID), a private technical college for the deaf in Rochester, New York, and the Southwest Collegiate Institute for the Deaf, a community college for the deaf in Big Spring,

Texas. The complexities inherent to the administration of these institutions are underscored by Verywell Health (2021):

> While deaf or partially deaf students in the United States can attend any college in the country, many are drawn to schools that specifically serve deaf students. In addition to offering more resources and classrooms tailored to deaf and partially deaf learners, these schools provide a sense of identity, understanding, and pride for their students and alumni. Instructors may be deaf, partially deaf, or hearing, and communicate using American sign language (ASL), spoken language, finger spelling, printed and visual aids, and online resources. (para. 1)

Similarly, there are a few institutions that cater exclusively to students with visual disabilities. One such college is the Perkins School for the Blind. Many of the challenges facing administrators at these institutions are delineated by Leslie Thatcher, Director of College Success at the Perkins School (2022):

> As a student with a visual impairment, you may be wondering which campuses are most accessible? You may be wondering, more generally, where are the best colleges for students with visual impairments? Other disabilities? While we all like clear, immediate answers, there really is no short answer to these questions. The college process is complex, and many factors need to be taken into consideration.

Regardless of institutional type, culture seems to be more important than administrative structure when it comes to institutional factors that define colleges and universities are more responsive to the needs of students with disabilities. According to Shaewitz and Crandall (2020):

> Disability is part of the human condition. To ensure inclusion in higher education, campus leaders must consider how to fully embrace all students, faculty, and staff with and without disabilities. When developing a culture of inclusion, colleges and universities have specific responsibilities to students with disabilities to ensure they can learn and achieve their goals. (para. 2)

Specifically, institutions that establish and maintain cultural centers for their students with disabilities seem to represent best practice, according to Landin (2021):

> Higher education should provide the same efforts, support, and resources for students with disabilities as they do for other cultural student populations to help challenge ableism and validate the disability identity. A *Disability Cultural Center (DCC)* can serve university students with disabilities by providing a safe space for students to connect with other students.... A

> Disability Cultural Center is needed at universities to enrich and cultivate a community of intersectionality and interconnectivity for students with disabilities, allies, and all other student populations.

A critical component in the culture of an institution that successfully meets the needs of students with disabilities is how the faculty see their inherent responsibility to accommodate students who may need enhanced support in the form of services and programs that effectively levels the playing field (Sniatecki et al., 2015). This is reinforced by Sullivan (2021):

> As a faculty member, I believe we owe it to our students to hire more people with disabilities (PWD).... Over 22 percent of Americans have a disability, but only 4 percent of faculty members do, according to the National Center for College Students with Disabilities. We have no national statistics on staff. This means a wide swath of students may never interact with faculty and staff who may well be uniquely qualified to engage them. (para. 4)

STUDENT SUCCESS AND POPULATIONS

Historically, students with disabilities have had to overcome many inequities to succeed in higher education due to barriers colleges have put in place. However, with the rising rates of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education, it is essential to understand how to best support these students (Francis et al., 2019). At specialized disability-serving institutions, there seems to be a level of understanding of how best to help these students. Each college works to meet the specific needs of their students, leading to increased retention and graduation rates.

Though there is little research about the success of students with disabilities at 4-year colleges, this could be related to students with disabilities who are not required to disclose their disability status. Research shows that 12–13% of students do not inform their college of their disability status (NCES, 2022). When comparing the retention and graduation rates between traditional 4-year colleges for students who disclose their disability status and those who are at disability-serving institutions, there is a 20% increase in success when looking at 6-year graduation rates. The critical question to ask is what contributes to students with disabilities experiencing higher success rates on disability-serving campuses?

Comparing the student experience of students with disabilities at traditional 4-year colleges and specialized disability-serving institutions can provide some insight into student success. There were five common themes when working with students with disabilities at traditional 4-year colleges. Students stated feelings of discouragement, debasement, insecurity, isolation, and repeated cycles of disempowerment (Francis et al., 2019). In

comparison, Daisy (2008) had a participant who discussed their experience at Gallaudet University:

> I would say my many visits to Gallaudet through my high school years and beginning of college was a major influence. Gallaudet is a very strong, pro-Deaf Culture campus, and my experiences there became an important stage for me because they allowed me to understand different perspectives, especially because I spent my middle school and high school years in a mainstreamed program. (p. 64)

Radder and Smith (2019) shared a student's academic journey with Landmark College. The student graduated with their associate's degree from Landmark, transferred to a 4-year institution to come back to Landmark College to complete their bachelor's instead, "People have brains that may operate in some ways a little bit different than other people, but it doesn't make them a deficient person it just makes them unique, and I think that uniqueness is important in a lot of ways ... it strengthens my learning to be around people that aren't exactly like me." The students' experiences at Landmark College and Galludet University highlighted here signal a sense of belonging and inclusion that was in opposition to what they experienced on traditional 4-year college campuses. Anecdotal data such as these point to the need for further research that explores the experiences of students with disability across institutional mission and type.

PROFESSIONAL CONTEXT

To work at a specialized disability-serving institution, understanding the student population and students' unique experiences before coming to higher education is essential. In addition, knowing the different pathways that lead them to this point is critical for them to continue success. As a faculty or staff member at a specialized disability-serving institution, this requires a unique set of skills or the ability to use a different language and understand a different culture on some campuses. Below are excerpts of two college presidents about their own experiences of how to support their student populations at their institutions. College President Hagerty (2017), shares his experience at Beacon College and with students with learning disabilities:

> A college culture that works for students who learn differently accepts the reality that we are part of a neurodiverse world.... So for institutions that accept students with special learning needs (and this is universal), the tone, expectations and priorities need to be set at the top ... we must prepare faculty and staff to embrace and accommodate the learning different resident

on campus; our academic support resources must be available in the right measures to address the needs of the mix of admitted students; adaptive technology should be accessible and convenient; and new and renovated learning spaces should be increasingly reflective of the best features of universal design.

Hagerty (2017) explained that his student support model mimics the K–12 experiences in higher education for supporting students with learning disabilities. This culture of support requires structured planning and support from the student, faculty, and staff to meet the student's needs. Previous College President, I. King Jordan, Gallaudet Universities' first deaf president, discussed what it is like to work on Gallaudet's campus:

> While Gallaudet, is a unique institution, the one thing people readily identify as special is the fact that we rely on visual communications. Most important, we sign. No matter where you are, in our classrooms, our meeting rooms, the offices where we work, public areas … visual communication access will always be present in the form of sign language or text messages. People who come to our campus and who do not know sign language are communicatively disabled.

This excerpt provides a glance at the experiences on Gallaudet's campus. When you work at Gallaudet university, you need to understand sign language and deaf culture. Jordan (2005) touched on this briefly, discussing how disability studies and deaf studies diverge on this point. Some deaf individuals view their deafness as not something that needs to be fixed and resent that idea. Though serving different groups of students with disabilities, there are common themes in both excerpts of college presidents. Both colleges discuss how they put students first. Everything they do and their campuses are designed around a culture of support and understanding to meet their student needs best.

A culture of support can also be found in professional organizations. Professional organizations can be instrumental for individuals working at specific disability-serving institutions. Due to the variety of specialized institutions and range of disabilities, there are countless organizations to provide individuals the ability to stay up to date on research in the field and connect with others on new technology or about best practices for meeting the needs of students with disabilities on traditional college campuses and at disability serving institutions. Notably, the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD; 2024) "is the leading professional membership association for individuals committed to equity for persons with disabilities in higher education." AHEAD publishes books and monographs, hosts an annual conference, is home to the Journal of Postsecondary Education and

Disability (JPED), and provides an online career center. Furthermore, both of the leading student affairs and higher education organizations offer spaces for connection and professional development—NASPA's Disability Knowledge Community and ACPA's Coalition for Disability.

FUTURE CONSIDERATIONS AND DIRECTIONS

The term "Universal Design" was mentioned briefly in the quote from Beacon College President Hagerty, yet it is an important idea to explore and adequately explain as we discuss the future needs of and considerations for students. Universal Design was a term coined in the Assistive Technology Act of 1998, defined as:

> A concept or philosophy for designing and delivering products and services that are usable by people with the widest possible range of functional capabilities, which include products and services that are directly usable (without requiring assistive technologies) and products and services that are made usable with assistive technologies. (p. 112)

Burgstahler (2008) discussed how universal design reinforces the characteristic that universal design is proactive and not reactive. Universally designed devices or environments have built-in features that anticipate the needs of a diverse group of users. This idea is critical when supporting students, both in and outside the classroom. Jordan (2005) discussed how all universities need to provide students with a complete experience beyond the classroom. Though there are not many disability-serving institutions currently, with the increase of students with disabilities entering higher education, there could be an increase in demand for disability-serving institutions or an increase in accountability at traditional 4-year colleges to meet the needs of students with disabilities better. This demand could move traditional 4-year colleges to adopt a universal design approach inside and outside the classroom.

Each disability-serving institution is unique by meeting the specific needs of its student population, providing them with an environment that leads to high rates of student success and retention. Though these colleges are unique in working with different groups of students with disabilities, they are brought together by the idea that they put students first not only in their mission and values but also in their actions. These specialized disability-serving institutions are creating spaces for students to feel a sense of belonging that is not currently replicated at traditional 4-year colleges.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Given the fiscal constraints colleges and universities are anticipated to have to negotiate over the coming decades, is the concept of a "disability-serving institution" going to continue to be a viable concept?
- What are some additional and/or emerging disabilities that may warrant the development of institutions designed to meet the needs of the affected students?
- What role should serving students with disabilities play in the institutional accreditation process?
- What special skills and competencies (pedagogical, administrative, etc.) are needed to effectively meet the needs of students with disabilities?

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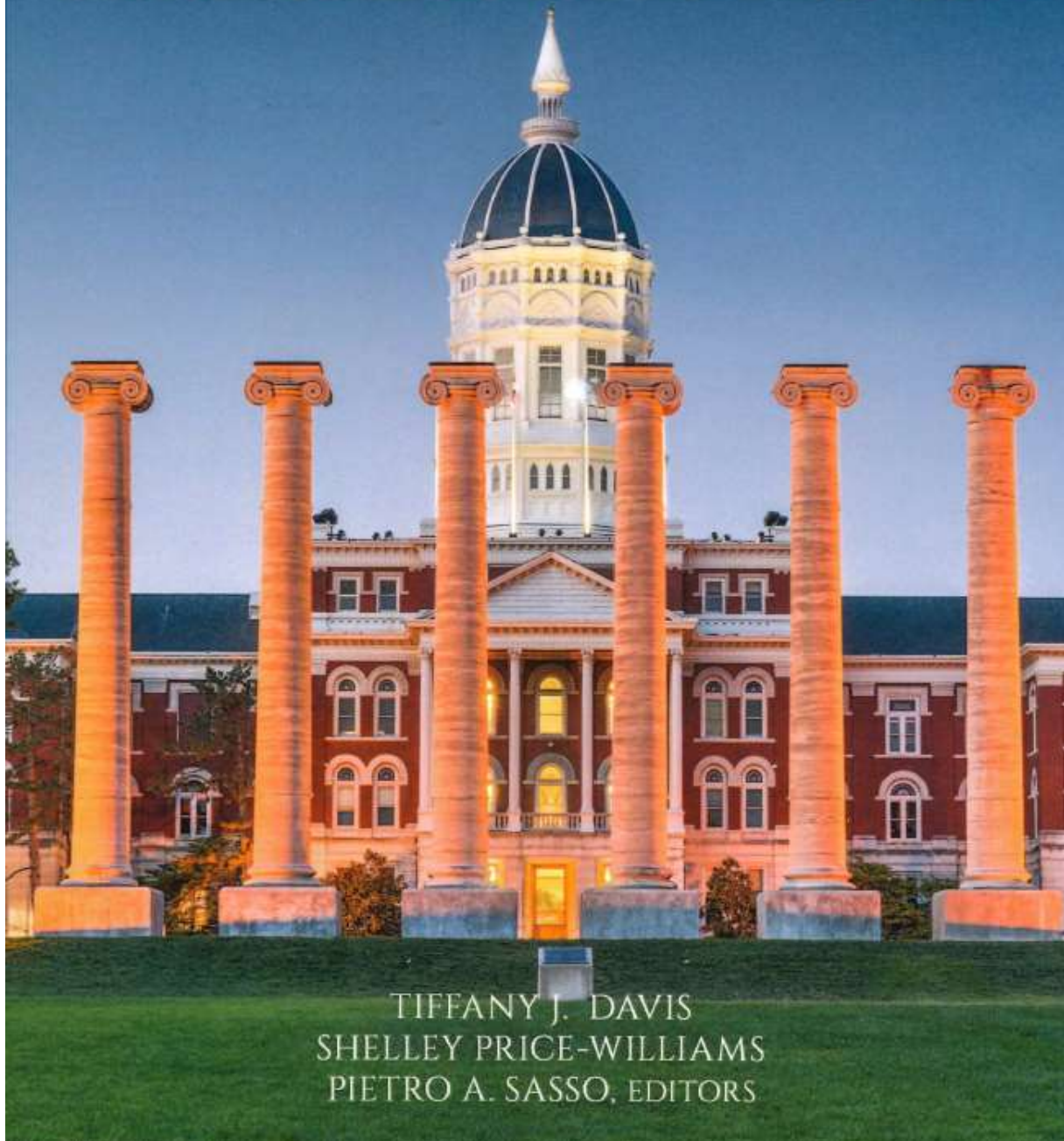
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