

OPENING DOORS FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES ON COMMUNITY COLLEGE CAMPUSES: WHAT HAVE WE LEARNED? WHAT DO WE STILL NEED TO KNOW?

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This article reviews the Community College Journal of Research and Practice research articles related to students with disabilities and establishes a focused research agenda addressing the issues either found in, or absent from, the articles. Using a modified qualitative methodology, three common themes were found: (a) campus factors supporting student success, (b) participant label ambiguities, and (c) research methodology selection. It is concluded that there is a continued need for research addressing staff development, accommodations, needs of specific disability groups, self-advocacy and self-determination approaches, and participant-oriented research methodologies used to serve students well.

Every year an increasing number of students with disabilities enter postsecondary education (HEATH, 1999). Every year many of these same students fail to successfully compete academically or simply leave campus prior to completing their planned programs of study. In either case, past research indicates these students do not fare well in postsecondary environments (Fairweather & Shaver, 1991; National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2000; Wagner, 1989). Still, the most recent reports reflect more students seeking postsecondary education (HEATH, 1999; Henderson, 1998). NCES (2000) reports an estimated 428,280 students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary institutions in 1996–97 or 1997–98 (due to the timing of data collection not all institutions could report for the 1997–98 year), and they were more likely to attend two-year institutions. This article will

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review research previously published in this journal related to students with disabilities and will analyze the articles and propose a focused research agenda addressing the issues either found in or absent from the articles.

School reform efforts, such as content standards and performance assessment, are changing the secondary special education curricula (Lehmann, Cobb, & Tochtermann, 2001). Students are being taught traditional academic subjects to obtain passing scores on high stakes tests. This focus on outcomes has shifted the curriculum from preparing students for work, independent living, and other functional skills to helping students achieve acceptable academic performance levels. Mandating college prep curricula for all secondary level students could be advantageous. It may open new doors as students acquire academic skills, related confidence, and perceive postsecondary education as a logical transitional outcome to pursue.

However, delivery services shift dramatically between the special education system mandated for children ages 3–21 (The Individuals with Disabilities Act of 1990 [IDEA] and the IDEA Amendments of 1997) and the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) that governs supports or auxiliary aids community colleges must provide. Students change from being educational service recipients to managers of their postsecondary support should it be provided. To have these mandated support services provided, students must disclose their disability and request accommodations. Their request for accommodations is directly related to their documented needs. Most institutions provide some support; the most common forms being extended exam or alternative test formats; course substitutions or waivers; and tutors, readers, note takers, scribes, or assistive devices including tapes of texts (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001).

Community college access and success is an important step for students with disabilities. Research shows that successful college completers can expect careers and incomes comparable to those of their non-labeled peers. It is even suggested that educational achievement is the most effective means for individuals with disabilities to achieve financial independence and equality (Task Force on Post Secondary Education, 2000).

METHOD

Reviewing the selected *Community College Journal of Research and Practice (CCJRP)* articles from 1990–2000 helps us understand what we have learned concerning students with disabilities on community college campuses and what we still need to learn. The six selected

articles addressed issues related to the access and success students with disabilities have in community colleges: Asselin, 1993; Burgstahler and Olswang, 1996; Norton, 1992; 1997; Weiss and Repetto, 1997; Yocom and Coll, 1995.

We selected a modified meta-data-analysis approach (Paterson, Thorne, Canam, & Jillings, 2001) to compare the six articles, which allowed us to complete “comparative analysis of research findings of primary research studies conducted by a variety of researchers” (p. 55). We did this to illuminate and extend what is known about a particular phenomenon, in this case, what is known about community college students with disabilities and the faculty and institutions that serve them. In addition, these articles were analyzed using a process of constant comparative analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The reviewers used the constant comparative analysis to provide a structured process and an audit trail describing how findings moved from concrete to higher levels of abstraction. Each article was coded using the “open coding” method (Strauss & Corbin, 1994). The open coding process produces concepts or codes that fit the data. The concepts and relationships produced were analyzed across all documents to identify major themes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

We found common themes as well as areas absent or minimally addressed. Table 1 represents each article’s research purpose, methodology, and findings and makes apparent that the differences among the articles outweigh their commonalities. Therefore, we juxtaposed our *CCJRP* article analysis with trends found in related literature. Because the six articles were so different, we considered the research findings in conjunction with one another to determine if there were uniquenesses or glaring omissions between these *CCJRP* articles and other published literature.

Emergent Themes

Using a modified constant comparative analysis method, we found three emergent themes; campus factors supporting student success, participant label ambiguity, and research paradigm selection. The philosophical framework that seems to underlie these studies is facilitating student success in community colleges. Although this perspective is not fully articulated, it is implied in the thematic content relating to the campus factors and in the way researchers conducted their investigations.

TABLE 1 Summary of the Articles' Purpose, Research Methods, and Findings

Article	Purpose(s)	Research method	Findings/conclusions
Norton, 1992	Explores differences in study habits between students with learning disabilities and those of non-labeled students	Community college students surveyed	Study habits between groups of students did not differ but students with learning disabilities required more assistance with basic academic content. Problems must be individually addressed
Asselin, 1993	Evaluates the effectiveness of a staff in-service program	Participants surveyed immediately following training and 4 months later	In-service designed to address student awareness, legal mandates, and accommodations seems to dispel faculty misperceptions
Yocom & Coll, 1995	Investigates perceptions regarding institutional procedures and knowledge about students with learning disabilities	Developmental educators & counselor-student affairs personnel surveyed	Community colleges offer support services to students with disabilities, but some of these services are not helpful. More frequent evaluation of services and a student tracking system needed
Burgstahler & Olswang, 1996	Examines level of computing and networking services provided and institutional barriers to service provision	Two-year & four-year postsecondary institutions surveyed	More services needed to comply with equal access mandates. Inadequate funding is greatest barrier. Need to include adaptive technology
Norton, 1997	Explores attitudes of faculty about accommodations & students' perceptions about faculty support	Faculty & students at a California community college surveyed	Faculty perceived themselves as accepting of making accommodations. Students reported less comfort disclosing disability information to faculty

(Continued)

TABLE 1 *Continued.*

Weiss & Repetto, 1997	Examines the types of services & support provided to students with disabilities	Surveyed Florida community colleges & vocational technical schools	All schools offered at least one support in each category: counseling, equipment, student-centered supports, developmental labs, program or course flexibility, & unique programs
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Campus Factors Supporting Student Success

This theme refers to institutional practices and policies affecting faculty awareness and knowledge when making student accommodations and addresses the efficacy of those accommodations. All the articles' authors were interested in how faculty and educational institutions accommodate and support students with disabilities. For example, seeking to understand the institution's role, Norton (1992) evaluates a service delivery model at a California community college. Weiss and Repetto (1997) explore the differences between services and supports offered to students with disabilities in Florida's community colleges and vocational technical schools. Asselin (1993) evaluates an in-service training model and its impact on faculty serving students with disabilities. Burgstahler and Olswang (1996) examine computing and networking services, while Asselin (1993) and Norton (1997) review faculty accommodations. Yocom and Coll (1995) and Weiss and Repetto (1997) recommend individualization and tracking to determine effectiveness of services. Finally, Burgstahler and Olswang (1996) suggest that adaptive technology should be included during the planning phases rather than being added later as projects are being implemented.

These articles evidenced some commonalities associated within this theme. Clearly these authors understood how important faculty and administrator awareness was regarding the needs of students with disabilities. In addition to reporting the accommodations and services being provided by the institutions, the articles emphasize the individualized services found in specific programs. Summarizing, Norton (1992, 1997) states that there are no magic answers that fit all special needs students and that individual cases must be viewed as unique. What seems clear is that individualizing services and support systems is critical to assuring students with a variety of disabling conditions are able to access what they need. Thus, coordinating these services across the community college campus also was deemed essential.

Similar to the findings in these six *CCJRP* articles, our broader literature review found that although federal legislation has assisted students with disabilities in gaining increased access to higher education, significant barriers exist (Horn & Berktold, 1999). Equal access barriers can be attitudinal and programmatic in nature. Research regarding faculty attitudes confirms their perceived confusion relative to disability issues (Hill, 1996; West et al., 1993). Another barrier reported is that disability resource centers and offices often have staff members inadequately trained to provide these services (Dukes & Shaw, 1998). Students find their college experience frustrating and have reported barriers related to their being accepted and understood by fellow students, faculty, and staff (Finn, 1998; Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000). The difficulties students experience when instructors are not knowledgeable, experienced, or willing in modifying classroom environments, instructional strategies, and/or grading methods was typified by one student: "we have to deal with professors, but they don't deal with us" (Lehmann et al., p. 61).

Clearly, we are just beginning to understand accommodations and the range and variety required to successfully support students with disabilities in classrooms and on community college campuses. What the *CCJRP* research articles have demonstrated is that more information about staff development and the benefits of specific student support is needed. What continues to be unknown is whether students access existing support or if the support provided is related to an actual student's identified needs. Weiss and Repetto (1997) and Yocom and Coll (1995) do recommend that program effectiveness be addressed. They indicate that it is not known whether these students are successful in college and state that a better tracking system is needed.

Participant Label Ambiguities

This theme discusses how students were referenced in the *CCJRP* articles as being study subjects (participants) or as being study objects. All six articles were interested in community college students with disabilities, but student identification by disability (e.g., learning disability) was not obvious. Norton's work (1992, 1997) focuses specifically on the population she identifies as students with learning disabilities. Other authors reflect broader definitions including students with sensory or physical disabilities (Asselin, 1993; Burgstahler & Olswang, 1996; Weiss & Repetto, 1997).

Encouraging students to self-advocate and self-disclose their disabilities was evident in articles pertaining to students who appropriately might be labeled as having a learning disability, noting that administrators and faculty are not required to provide accommoda-

tions if the student does not inform the appropriate college personnel and establish a documented disability (Norton, 1992; Yocom & Coll, 1995). Perhaps the invisibility of learning disabilities makes this disability-specific need particularly salient.

The lack of uniformity and specificity related to student disability labels is problematic. Not only are more students with disabilities accessing postsecondary education, but their diversity of disabilities needing to be accommodated has expanded (Henderson, 1999). In 1996 the National Postsecondary Student Aid study (NCES, 1996) reported that 29% of all undergraduates identified as having a label were identified as being learning disabled. Twenty-three percent of all labeled students were considered orthopedically impaired, and the remainder reported having hearing, vision, speech and language, and other health-related labels. The 1999 NCES report finds that a larger number of students with learning disabilities are entering postsecondary education (i.e., over half of all students with disabilities enrolled in colleges), and their statistics include the category of mental illness or emotional disorder as representing more students than either the hearing or visually impaired categories (Horn & Berktold, 1999).

What we learned from the CCRJP articles is that there is ambiguity about how we sample and describe our samples relative to students with disabilities. Labels must be clearly defined and recognized for the specificity that they bring to the work. The diversity of disability labels shown in the national data reports suggests that there may be a complexity of issues and responsibilities associated with providing support not being realized in the current research.

Research Methodology Selection

This theme addresses the research methodology selection and data collection techniques. What is immediately apparent in Table 1 is that all six articles were quantitative research studies. In addition, all six researchers employed the survey method to collect the data. Several were national surveys (Burgstahler & Olswang, 1996; Yocom & Coll, 1995) and some were state surveys (Asselin, 1993; Weiss & Repetto, 1997). Study recipients were almost all administrators or faculty; missing was the voice of the students themselves (Asselin, 1993; Burgstahler & Olswang, 1996; Yocom & Coll, 1995; Weiss, 1997). Norton's research on a California community college campus provides the exception, asking students with learning disabilities first about their study habits (1992) and, subsequently, probing faculty attitudes toward accommodation (1997).

These six *CCJRP* studies have taken a very narrow methodological approach to data collection. Using only survey methodology precludes investigating any issues in depth. While the literature records a variety of strategies being used, it does not appear that there is a coordinated or coherent approach to collecting data that elicits information from students, families, representatives of secondary and post-secondary faculties, and from disability resource service providers.

In addition there were no articles that established a theoretical framework to guide their work. Instead, the researchers address the rising numbers of students with special needs entering into post-secondary education and/or cite the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 in order to support the need for their studies. The theories associated with researchers' perspectives about student inclusion in higher education are absent, although these perspectives are implied. A theory that might have contextualized the research conducted is the model of success developed by Reiff, Gerber, and Ginsberg (1997).

We wonder what other research methodology might be employed to assure equal voices in the research process? An authentic way to address this topic would be participatory action research (PAR). In PAR the persons or study subjects literally become co-researchers to help identify and address their own issues (Reason, 1994). In this instance, students with disabilities would be recruited to join the research process with interested faculty members and participate in the research design, implementation, evaluation, and dissemination. Researchers, then, are guaranteed that the information they gather is grounded in the students' day-to-day reality and is specifically addressing their needs.

Composite Review

Reviewed together, these articles paint a broad and almost complete picture regarding the issues surrounding serving students with disabilities in community colleges. Combined, these articles provide an overview that identifies the state of services, addresses factors related to students, and presents postsecondary faculty and institutional support. For example, Norton (1992) considers students' characteristics, dispelling the myth that students with learning disabilities do not work as hard as their counterparts, but also confirming that these students do arrive at college with academic deficiencies that may impede persistence to graduation. Norton (1997) also highlights contradictions between how faculty perceive their willingness to make accommodations for students with how students perceive their own personal inadequacies in requesting instructor support. Yocom and

Coll (1995) report that college professors lack knowledge and consistency in supporting students with disabilities, concluding that there is a need for more staff preparation. In Asselin's (1993) article we find an in-service model that may address the problems identified in the previous two articles. The in-service model has promise for helping staff to understand legislative mandates and suggests a strategy for facilitating faculty's providing appropriate accommodations. Burgstahler and Olswang (1996) and Weiss and Repetto (1997) describe support services that institutions offer students. According to Burgstahler and Olswang (1996) institutional funding is the constraint to providing adequate computer and networking services. On a positive note, it seems that there are student supports available to students in all institutions, such as advising and counseling services, textbooks on tape, assistive technology, peer mentors, developmental courses, course substitution policies, and modified testing.

How do these *CCJRP* articles conform to articles found in the broader literature? They do not contradict other literature and address the major areas found generally in the literature including institutional policy and procedures, faculty awareness and skills, and student accommodations. What research areas are omitted? Student self-determination and self-advocacy are only minimally addressed in this work. According to Reiff et al. (1997), the success of adults with learning disabilities is predicated on the ability to control their own lives; the internal factors of desire; the ability to reframe the disability from being something dysfunctional to something functional; goal orientation setting; and persistence, suggesting the need to teach and study these self-determination skills.

In our own exploratory research we found self-advocacy related to disability documentation and disclosure was a major issue for many students. High school special education services records were not routinely given to students or transferred to the postsecondary institutions. Without appropriate documentation, students have to prove their eligibility for postsecondary services. Often, students felt unable to explain fully or even minimally identify strategies previous educators had found to be helpful for enhancing their learning processes. Thus, students explained their need to learn the accommodations and compensatory skills that might enhance their success. Students believed they lacked self-advocacy skills, because they had no training or experience in describing their disability to others. They wanted to learn how to advocate for themselves; to help educate their college community; to be more assertive in gaining knowledge of their disability; to be forceful in communicating their strengths and weaknesses, abilities and inabilities; and to gain the necessary strength and

courage to ask for what they needed to be able to succeed (Lehmann et al., 2000).

CONCLUSION

From the literature, it appears that there are many reasons for considering postsecondary education, particularly two-year colleges, as a viable option for students with disabilities. More students at postsecondary institutions mean an increased demand for staff who are knowledgeable about laws, disability issues, reasonable accommodations, and resources (Dukes & Shaw, 1998). We have raised several issues related to the CCRJP research we reviewed. We found that there is a continued need for research addressing (a) staff development, (b) the utility of and knowledge about various accommodations, (c) the needs of specific disability groups, and (d) self-advocacy and self-determination approaches to student support. Additionally, there is a need to expand the types of research questions being asked so that a variety of research methods are employed in seeking solutions. There are many remaining questions around how to best serve these students and how to address related institutional needs.

What research questions remain; what do we need to know? It is troublesome that 1997 was the last published research article focused on this topic. Since then much has changed, including the federal special education mandate (i.e., Individuals with Disabilities Education Amendments of 1997; PL 105-17) that includes students in the school reforms focusing on academic content standards. Since 1997 more students are accessing community colleges, and more research is needed to serve these students well. This article is a call for that research.

We conclude with recommendations that may help the journal work with the researchers to pursue a more coherent and coordinated line of research. Therefore, our recommendations address both the journal editors and researchers interested in this topic. We hope that the *CCJRP* editors and researchers consider the utility of research conducted and disseminated to the journal's readership. As mentioned earlier, employing an action research approach (Reason & Bradbury, 2001) "where the primary purpose is to produce information that is useful to people in their everyday conduct of their lives" (p. 2) may provide a new starting point for research questions and endeavors.

For editors we suggest answering the following questions in order to make informed decisions for designing a coherent research agenda that is relevant to the journal's readers. Who is the audience/reader-readership of this journal? What research is most timely and useful to

this audience? How can authors and reviewers be found who are knowledgeable about the topic? Are there ways to develop liaisons with professional organizations with special education that will further research partnerships to improve the lives of students with disabilities and our higher education institutions?

To prospective researchers we recommend building research agendas around what this journal has already published and extending this research using a variety of research methods including quasi-experimental designs and single subject designs to test the efficacy of specific accommodations and intervention for students, faculty, and staff. Qualitative methodologies are also recommended to understand the complexities of students' experiences in community colleges, the compensatory skills they prefer to use, the external factors of goodness of fit between the student and setting, and social support networks. Further, we suggest that researchers clarify the population studied and identify their perspectives and biases in conducting the research. Finally, it appears an area that is "ripe" with possibilities for research would be the intersection between individuals with disabilities and other aspects of diversity (e.g., gender, ethnicity, class). For instance, are there specific needs related to students' success that are associated with gender, disability label, and/or ethnicity?

We hope that researchers will build on the existing body of research that supports the access and success of students with disabilities on community college campuses. The published work over the last decade provides the "open door" to see what one set of researchers has contributed to our knowledge base. Still, it appears a more systematic and comprehensive literature review across a variety of journals would clarify what is already known about these students and the faculty and institutions that serve them. We hope that this journal is willing to take a leadership role promoting the development of special topic issues tackling some concerns highlighted in this review.

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