Engaging Students with Disabilities

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Chapter 12
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Students with disabilities are a rapidly growing, yet historically underrepresented population in postsecondary education. Historically, underrepresented groups share a common experience: all faced unwelcoming environments when initially entering higher education (Hall & Belch, 2000). Ableism (the oppression of people with disabilities) plays a powerful role in shaping the way students with and without disabilities experience the educational environments, because “[b]y assuming one normative way to do things (move, speak, learn, and so forth), society privileges those who carry out these functions as prescribed and oppresses those who use other methods” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 242). To create engaging environments for students with disabilities, we need to identify and address ways in which ableism shapes the experiences of members of our campus communities.

It is important to start by making a distinction between disability and impairment. In this chapter, we follow the definitions provided by Evans and Herriott (2009), who used impairment to refer to “any condition that results in a way of functioning or results in behavior that differs from the expected level of performance in any given area” (p. 29); essentially, impairments are ways in which people’s bodies or minds differ from what society defines as normal. Disability is defined in many different ways, depending on the theoretical perspective one uses. In this chapter, we use the term to mean how society responds to people with impairments, particularly ways that exclude, discriminate against, or stigmatize people with disabilities (Sherry, 2004). Disabilities are consequences of attitudes and physical or social environments that support only putatively normal ways of doing things (Griffin, Peters, & Smith, 2007). As Riddell, Tinklin, and Wilson (2005) noted, “A key idea is that impairment does not necessarily result in disability, and in an ideal society, where all barriers were removed, disability would cease to exist” (p. 16). One way to indicate the distinction between impairment and disability is to use “person-first” language. Person-first language (e.g., student with a disability)
is a way of speaking that gives precedent to the individual rather than the disability, thereby linguistically recognizing that the disability is only one facet of the individual (Hall & Belch, 2000). In summary, when conceptualizing issues of student engagement, it is important to understand that the individual may have the impairment but the environment produces the disability.

Like other marginalized groups, students with disabilities differ from each other in numerous ways. Most obvious are demographic differences, including gender, race, ethnicity, age, religion, sexual orientation, social class, nationality, and veteran status. Students with disabilities also differ from each other by their type of impairment and the extent, duration, and continuity of their impairment. Mention the term disabled student and many people picture a student using a wheelchair, or perhaps with a guide dog. However, most college students with disabilities have invisible forms of impairments (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 2009), such as learning disabilities, emotional disabilities, attention deficit disorder, chronic health conditions, and neurologic impairments. Some people are born with impairments, but many develop them over the course of their lifespan, including just before or while they are college students. Some impairments require medical management, but many do not. Some people’s impairments are stable over the course of their lives, and others experience periods in which the impairment is or more less intrusive. Some people strongly identify as having a disability, and many others eschew this term. For all these reasons, it is important not to generalize about students with disabilities, and to instead, understand the needs and desires of the particular individuals with disabilities with whom one works.

Historical and Demographic Enrollment Trends

“No comprehensive history of people with disabilities in higher education exists . . .” (Mueller & Broido, 2012, p. 101). Notable historical examples of students with disabilities in the college or university environment include deaf students founding Gallaudet University in 1864 (Hall & Belch, 2000), Helen Keller entering Radcliffe College in 1900, and veterans with disabilities advocating for formal support programs at the University of Illinois following World War II (Dean, 2009). Despite these examples, the development of large-scale services for students with disabilities did not occur until after 1973, when Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act became the first national civil rights legislation that provided equal access for people with disabilities to postsecondary educational institutions (Hall & Belch, 2000). In 1990, a second major piece of legislation, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), extended the rights of students with disabilities to insure equal opportunities and full participation for people with disabilities (Gehring, Osfield, & Wald, 1994).

National longitudinal studies conducted by researchers at the U.S. Department of Education in 1990 and 2005 confirmed notable increases in postsecondary students with
disabilities since the passage of the ADA, although their numbers still lag behind those of their peers without disabilities. Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS-2) indicated “within 4 years of leaving high school, 46% of youth with disabilities in 2005 were reported ever to have enrolled in a postsecondary school” (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, Knokey, & Shaver, 2010, p. 22). This was a significant increase over the 26% of students with disabilities who reported continuing their education in 1995 (Newman et al., 2010). In fact, between 1995 and 2005, the rate of growth of students with disabilities entering postsecondary education was greater than the general population. In 2009, 10.8% of college students reported they had a disability (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2009).

Data collected by The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) indicated that for the 2008-09 academic year, 99% of public two-year institutions, 88% of private not-for-profit four-year institutions, and 99% of public four-year institutions enrolled students with disabilities (Raue & Lewis, 2011). While students with disabilities attend virtually all public, and most private higher education institutions, they are more likely to enroll in two-year institutions than are college students generally, with recent studies (NCES, NTLS-2) indicating between half and three-quarters of undergraduate students with disabilities enrolled in public two-year institutions (Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009; Raue & Lewis, 2011). Specifically, of the 46% of high school students with disabilities who went on to postsecondary education in 2005, 32% enrolled in two-year or community colleges whereas only 14% enrolled in four-year colleges or universities (Newman et al., 2009, p. 15). Therefore, it is important to design institution-specific interventions when engaging students with disabilities.

Postsecondary enrollment of students with disabilities also differs by demographic characteristics. Looking at students up to four years after high school graduation, Newman et al. (2009) found significant differences in postsecondary participation by income but not by gender or race and ethnicity. “Youth with disabilities from household with incomes of more than $50,000 were almost twice as likely as those with household incomes of $25,000 or less ever to have been enrolled in postsecondary education (57% vs. 30%)” (p. 19). While roughly equal numbers of women and men with disabilities enroll in college (49% women vs. 43% men), this is a notable difference from the population without disabilities, which sees significantly greater enrollment from women than from men (Newman et al., 2009).

Four years out of high school, 45% of African American students with disabilities, 39% of Hispanic students with disabilities, and 46% of White students with disabilities enrolled in a postsecondary education, rates insignificantly different from enrollment by peers without disabilities from the same racial and ethnic groups (Newman et al., 2009). It is important to note that Newman et al.’s data do not reflect all students with disabilities: disability status changes over the life course, and these data only capture students up to four years after high school graduation. Therefore, these numbers do not represent returning adult students or military veterans.
Theoretical Perspectives on Disability

Definitions of what it means to be disabled in America have been framed primarily by "the eyes of others." (Jones, 1996, p. 347)

Existing literature outlines three theoretical perspectives on disability: the medical model (functional limitations), the minority group paradigm, and social constructivism (Jones, 1996). Historically, the conventional approach to disability was from a medical or functional limitations perspective. This perspective is cultivated from a positivistic scientific model and defines disability in the language of medicine, thereby gaining the sheen of scientific credibility (Smart & Smart, 2006). A hallmark of the medical model is the idea that disability is an individual experience (Smart & Smart, 2006). In addition, under the medical perspective, "it is the expert's job is to return the individual to 'normalcy'" (Aune, 2000, p. 55). Strange (2000) noted that this perspective implies "the need to rehabilitate the individual as the remedy to challenges of disability" (p. 19). By focusing solely on biological constraints of an individual student, the medical model ignores social and environmental components of disability. Therefore, under the medical model, students with disabilities are perceived as having deficiencies that interventions or medical services are designed to rectify. The problems is located in the student, rather than in the environment.

A second approach, the minority group paradigm, includes students with disabilities in the spectrum of diversity. This theoretical perspective moved away from assumptions regarding the biological aspects of disability. Rather, the minority paradigm focused on issues of social privilege, power, and oppression (Jones, 1996). Specifically, proponents of the minority model perceived prejudice and discrimination found in broader society as greater obstacles than medical impairments (Smart & Smart, 2006). "This perspective is helpful in adding to a more complex analysis of disability because it acknowledges environmental factors as well as the differential power structures, group identification . . . and discriminatory treatment" (Jones, 1996, p. 350). In addition, the minority model is useful for providing insight into the daily life of people with disabilities (Smart & Smart, 2006). Critics of the minority model point out two shortcomings. First, the minority group paradigm may continue to perpetuate a stereotype of students with disabilities as victims (Jones, 1996). Second, this theoretical framework depends on individuals with disabilities consciously identifying themselves with a minority group (Jones, 1996). In summary, the minority group lens focuses on issues of prejudice and discrimination that students with disabilities may experience as significant obstacles to engagement.

The social construction paradigm expanded the analysis to include both individuals with disabilities and those without (Jones, 1996). The foundational tenets of social construction theory consider impairment as a part of normal human variation (Denhart, 2008). This theoretical perspective views disability as a social creation rather than solely an individual attribute (Mitra, 2006). Jones (1996) explained that conceptualizing disability "as a socially constructed phenomenon shifts an analysis from one focusing primarily on the disability itself to one recognizing the intersection of individual and
societal factors” (p. 349), allowing for “a more complex view of human behavior than one from a personal or environmental perspective alone” (Strange, 2000, p. 20). The social construction paradigm also allows student affairs educators to align programming with both individual and social factors (Aune, 2000; Hall & Belch, 2000). Strange (2000) wrote: “educators need to understand not only the conditions and characteristics of students with disabilities but also the conditions and characteristics of the campus environments these students inhabit” (p. 20). Under this paradigm, priority is given to academic and social engagement that requires adjustment for both students with disabilities and members of the campus community without disabilities (Aune, 2000). Therefore, through the social construction lens, both the campus community and students with disabilities are responsible for creating a receptive and integrated learning environment.

**Issues Facing Students with Disabilities**

To engage students with disabilities, it is imperative to consider academic and co-curricular engagement, legal issues, and barriers to engagement. Like all students, students with disabilities require both academic and co-curricular engagement to optimize their growth and success in college. We address academic engagement in the areas of retention, graduation, dealings with faculty, and the National Survey of Student Engagement (NSSE) benchmarks of Level of Academic Challenge, Active and Collaborative Learning, and Student-Faculty Interaction. In understanding co-curricular engagement, we reviewed data on the effects of on-campus living, and interactions with peers, and the NSSE benchmarks of Enriching Educational Experiences and Supportive Campus Environments. Although we present research findings in distinct subsections for the sake of clarity, it is important to understand that students’ lives are integrated across their campus experiences. They rarely distinguish between academic and co-curricular engagement and experience barriers to engagement that come in multiple and overlapping forms—including physical, attitudinal, and legal barriers.

**Academic Engagement**

Data on graduation and retention of students with disabilities provide mixed results. In looking at the six-year graduation rates of students at public four-year, doctoral granting institution in the Midwest, Wessel, Jones, Markle, and Westfall (2009) found no overall difference in the retention and graduation rates of students with a disability and those without. However, Wessel et al. (2009) reported students with disabilities taking longer to graduate within those six years, with students without disabilities graduating in 4.44 years, students with visible disabilities graduating in 4.61 years, and students with invisible disabilities graduating in 4.67 years.

In contrast, existing research based on nationally representative longitudinal surveys conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (Newman et al., 2009) consistently found lower graduation and retention rates for students with disabilities. NLTS-2 data indicate that only 29% of students with disabilities in their sample had completed their degrees.
four years after leaving high school (Newman et al., 2009, p. 45). Using data collected from 1985 to 1990, Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, and Edgar (2000) found that 10 years after high school, students with learning disabilities were less likely (44% of student with disabilities vs. 55.9% of those without) to have graduated from postsecondary programs than cohort members without a disability. In reviewing these findings, it is important to note that 55% of students who are identified as having disabilities in high school (and are counted as such in the NLTS-2 data), do not identify themselves as having a disability once they enter college (Newman et al., 2009). This distinction may explain some of the divergent findings in these studies.

Unsurprisingly, academic engagement predicts retention for students with disabilities (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011); the authors found that students having at least minimal academic involvement were significantly more likely to be retained (77.5% vs. 68.7%) between the first and second years of college than students with disabilities having no academic involvement. Fortunately, students with disabilities reported a higher level of student-faculty interaction than did students without disabilities, and levels of academic challenges and active and collaborative learning comparable to their peers without disabilities (Hedrick, Dizén, Collins, Evans, & Grayson, 2010). However, students did not always perceive faculty interaction as facilitating their success. In one study, only 32% of students with learning disabilities indicated they had interacted with faculty members about their learning disability, and 21% of respondents indicated they experienced obstacles to obtaining accommodations or services for their learning disability, most often from faculty unwilling to make accommodations (Cawthon & Cole, 2010).

Co-Curricular Engagement

While campuses have made significant strides toward creating accessible academic programs, co-curricular aspects of campus life have received considerably less attention and resources (Johnson, 2000), despite strong evidence of the importance of out-of-class engagement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Research indicates that co-curricular engagement benefits students with disabilities as well as those without. For example, in one study, living in a campus residence hall was a statistically significant and meaningful predictor of retention for students with disabilities between their first and second years of college (Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011). Moreover, students with at least some level of social engagement were almost 10% more likely to persist from their first to their second year of college than their uninvolved classmates (81.1% vs. 72.6%; Mamiseishvilli & Koch, 2011). In a national study, students with disabilities reported similar levels of engagement in enriching educational experiences to classmates without disabilities, but they perceived their campus environments as significantly less supportive than did students without disabilities (Hedrick et al., 2010).

While some studies have found comparable levels of engagement between students with and without disabilities (e.g., Miller, 2001), most research indicates students with disabilities are less involved than their peers without disabilities. Alexis (2008) found that students with disabilities typically had limited forms of co-curricular involvement,
usually with a single organization often related to their major or to their disability. Miller (2001) found that over half of students with disabilities were dissatisfied with their current levels of involvement. What social connection they did have required that students with disabilities be the first to initiate the friendship and help their peers become comfortable with the disability: “Participants in this study perceived that they were responsible for initiating interactions and that they had to be patient while peers without disabilities gained comfort with those interactions” (Hodges & Keller, 1999, p. 682).

Some evidence supports the notion that engagement is influenced by the kinds of impairments students have. Research by Evans and Broido (2011) found that students with visible impairments were less likely to engage in co-curricular activities than were students with invisible impairments. Students with visible impairments often face physical barriers to their engagement, such as inaccessible buildings, or poor sight-lines for wheelchair accessible spaces. A study of students with mobility and visual impairments found that students anticipated negative responses from their peers without disabilities if they were to become socially involved (Hodges & Keller, 1999). However, students with mobility and visual impairments developed social networks with other students with disabilities, with peers in the residence halls in which they lived, and within academic organizations.

In contrast to students with visible impairments, students with invisible impairments often became extensively involved in co-curricular activities (Evans & Broido, 2011; Guajardo, 2006). Guajardo found no meaningful differences in the level of involvement of first-year students with and without learning disabilities. However, this did not hold true for students with psychiatric disabilities who often faced attitudinal barriers to co-curricular involvement, felt pressure from their families to focus solely on academics, or feared the stigma that acknowledgement of their disability might bring (Evans & Broido, 2011).

Legal Issues
The law defines a minimum standard of accommodation, but best practices go beyond just making the campus accessible and actively encourage students with disabilities to access the benefits of engagement. “Access has many faces, including physical and communications access, programmatic access, and access to accommodations. The goal of access is to facilitate the increased integration of students with disabilities” (Simon, 2011, p. 98). Three major pieces of federal legislation provide guidance when considering issues of engagement for students with disabilities. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 was the first national disability civil rights legislation. It stipulated that programs or activities that receive federal funding cannot deny the participation in, benefits of, or discriminate against any otherwise qualified people due to their disability (Hall & Belch, 2000).

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), initially passed in 1990 and reauthorized in 2009, was intended to bring social equality for people with disabilities (“Toward Reasonable Equality,” 1998). The ADA extends the protections offered in Section 504
to private employers, places of public accommodation, and programs provided by state or local governments (Wilhelm, 2003). The ADA offers a variety of resources for students with disabilities who are dealing with discrimination, including discrimination that denies, precludes, or limits their participation in academic and co-curricular aspects of campus life. The ADA defines discrimination to include:

1. The use of criteria that unnecessarily screen out or tend to screen out individuals with disabilities from the use and enjoyment of goods and services,
2. The failure to make non-fundamental, reasonable modifications of policies, practices, or procedures when such modification is necessary to accommodate disabled persons, and
3. The failure to take necessary steps to ensure that no individual with a disability is excluded, denied services, segregated or otherwise treated differently than other individuals. (42 U.S.C. sec 12182)

Thus, the ADA mandates that students with disabilities must have the same opportunities for engagement as students without disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADAAA), effective January 1, 2009, clarified who is considered to have a disability under the law, and effectively reduced the amount of documentation individuals must offer when establishing they have a disability (Heyward, 2011). In the Amendments Act, Congress noted that academic success did not indicate absence of a disability and made “it clear that students may be talented and gifted and disabled and entitled to reasonable accommodations under the ADAAA and section 504” (Simon, 2011, p. 98). The new law did not change existing requirements that applicants and students with disabilities meet the same academic and behavioral standards as students without disabilities. Because this legislation is still new, it is not yet clear how the courts will interpret ADAAA guidelines and how it will change the ways in which institutions of higher education foster the engagement of students with disabilities.

**Barriers to Engagement for Students with Disabilities**

While the previous part of the chapter has focused on levels of engagement of students with disabilities and legal mandates for equal access, the rest of this section calls attention to barriers to engagement for students with disabilities. A comprehensive listing is beyond the scope of this chapter; we limit our attention here to attitudinal, definitional, physical, and institutional barriers.

**Attitudinal**

Attitudinal barriers for students with disabilities generally fall under two assumptions. First, ableism leads to the presumption that accommodations for disabilities typically are expensive, inconvenient, hold people to lower standards, and that they have no benefit for users without disabilities (Griffin et al., 2007). Ablest attitudes, stemming from a medical model of disability, inaccurately presume that “typical” ways of doing things are the only appropriate ways, that most accommodations are expensive to the institution and/or burdensome to those providing the accommodation, and fail to perceive that everyone benefits from environments designed for universal access. These attitudes make it less...
likely institutions will proactively seeks ways to expand access, shifting the responsibility to students who must, therefore, ask to participate (Huger, 2011). Hence, it is important that key decision-makers in the campus community have an accurate understanding of what accommodations entail and how universal design often benefits all users.

Second, the social construction of stigma creates the assumption that students with disabilities are not capable, and therefore, need to be saved from their limitations. It is important that student affairs educators possess "the ability to empower rather than rescue students" (Brown, 1994, p. 104). The concept of empowerment applies to all students, but is particularly relevant to work with students having disabilities.

Existing research demonstrates that the attitudes of ableism and stigma extend to members of the campus community, including faculty, staff, and administrators. While some faculty are tireless advocates for and supporters of students with disabilities, many believe that accommodations lower academic standards (Kurth & Mellard, 2006). Hill (1996) reported that only 1 of 44 listed academic accommodations was willingly performed by faculty more than half the time and that for a third of the participants, this "impacted seriously on their ability to pursue an postsecondary education" (p. 22). Beilke and Yssel (1999) found multiple instances in the media in which faculty and administrators indicated they believed many students were claiming to have disabilities so that they would not have to work as hard or perform to the same standard as other students. Burgstahler and Moore (2009) examined challenges that students with disabilities face in effectively using student services. They found that students expressed difficulties in working with student support personnel. The students perceived some support personnel as insufficiently knowledgeable about disability or accommodations and as impatient or disrespectful.

Attitudes from other members of the campus community also can restrict the engagement. Administrators often relegate responsibility for enhancing the engagement of students with disabilities to whatever office provides accommodations, rather than seeing this as a shared responsibility of the campus community. Equally problematic, they often overestimate the cost of accommodations. Student affairs educators must be aware of and work to change ablest attitudes held by individuals across campus to remove barriers of engagement for students with disabilities.

Self-Report/Definitions
One barrier to engagement is that many students eligible for accommodations that would support their participation do not access those accommodations. Getzel and Thoma (2008) noted that the ability to accept one's disability and understand its effect on learning are critical to transition to and success within higher education. However, Newman et al. (2009) found that only "approximately 37% of postsecondary students who were considered by their secondary schools as having a disability disclosed a disability to their postsecondary schools" (p. 28). Students may be reluctant to self-identify because they are "anxious for a 'new beginning' in an educational setting by not having to deal with being labeled. Others decide to wait to disclose until they are
experiencing academic problems" (Getzel & Thoma, 2008, p. 77). For example, most students with Type 1 diabetes did not identify themselves to their postsecondary institution because they did not view it as a disability and because they were unaware that any accommodations were available (Broido, 2006).

**Physical**

Physical aspects of campus environments often function as barriers to engagement for students with a variety of disabilities. Most obvious are lack of curb cuts, insufficiently wide doors, lack of elevators and automatically opening doors, insufficient and inconveniently located parking spaces, and inaccessible bathrooms that restrict the access of students with mobility impairments. Less obvious barriers are inadequate snow removal, elevator buttons and reception desks at heights that cannot be reached by people using wheelchairs, software incompatible with screen readers, computer and standard desks that cannot be raised and lowered for students who have orthopedic impairments, absence of Braille signage, and lack of software and advertising for campus events readable by those with visual impairments. All these make it difficult, frustrating, and sometimes impossible for students to fully engage with curricular and co-curricular aspects of the campus, and even when possible, often preclude the spontaneity so characteristic of traditionally-aged college students. Despite the numerous challenges in the physical environment, many campuses have begun to make their physical and on-line spaces more suited to all students, commonly making accessibility improvements during the course of new construction and substantive renovations (Raue & Lewis, 2011).

**Institutional**

Institutional commitment to disability is a critical component of a diverse campus. Kurth and Mellard (2006) noted that institutional support for students with disabilities occurs on a spectrum:

Institutions that provide equal access by the letter of the law (i.e., primarily to avoid lawsuits) exhibit a philosophy that may not be verbalized on a campus but is felt and observed, and ultimately limits the success potential of a college and its students. Colleges that embrace the spirit of the law, on the other hand, are likely to invest in an accommodation process that considers the entire context of student life, individual functional needs, trade-offs between the immediate and long-term costs and benefits, and incorporates systemwide universal design concepts. (p. 83)

Brown (1994) identified three important pieces in creating a welcoming and supportive campus: upper-level leadership, a community orientation and cross-campus collaboration, and supportive policies. Brown suggested one method to address institutional commitment to students with disabilities was to create a campus-wide committee composed of staff, faculty, and students to address disability issues, such as access and removal of barriers.

Barriers to engagement for students with disabilities come in a variety of overlapping and interconnected forms, including attitudinal, self-identification, physical, and
institutional. Student affairs educators can create engaging campus environments by confronting ablest attitudes and encouraging students to access accommodations. Additionally, student affairs educators must address physical barriers and support an institutional commitment to disability as a component of diversity. The next section provides more strategies for better engaging students with disabilities on campus.

**Student Engagement Strategies**

There are many ways to enhance the engagement of students with disabilities in curricular and co-curricular aspects of colleges and universities. In the following paragraphs, we focus on six most relevant to those working in student affairs.

**Universal Design**

One method of engaging students, with and without disabilities, is to institute college policies that support universal design. Universal design is “the design of products and environments to be usable by all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design” (Center for Universal Design, 2011, para. 1). When applied specifically to teaching and learning, it is referred to as universal instructional design (UID). UID is a pedagogical innovation that seeks to establish an accessible classroom learning environment for all students (Higbee, 2004). The concept of universal design flips the traditional campus on its head by expecting that the “environments and activities are designed in such a way that they are accessible to anyone, regardless of the person’s functional limitations” (Aune, 2000, p. 57). Three fundamental principles of universal design are multiple means of representation of information, multiple means of expression of knowledge, and multiple means of engagement in the learning process (Roberts, Park, Brown, & Cook, 2011; Schelly, Davies, & Spooner, 2011). Basically, “in an ideal world, universal design would provide access to all people in advance rather than after the fact” (Kalivoda & Totty, 2004, p. 217).

Training faculty to implement universal design supports the academic engagement of students with disabilities (Schelly et al., 2011). Students reported their instructors who received universal design training made multiple changes to their teaching that supported students’ academic success. However, due to inadequate staff resources, it is rare that faculty receive UID training; approximately half of faculty in two-year and four-year public institutions and only one-third of those in private four-year institutions receive training (Raue & Lewis, 2011). By advocating for training and implementation of universal design concepts, student affairs educators support an empirically demonstrated way of improving engagement for all students on their campus, including those with disabilities.
Universal design also applies to student development programs and services (Burgstahler & Moore, 2009; Higbee, 2009), institutional and departmental websites (Harper & DeWaters, 2008), residence halls (Wisbey & Kalivoda, 2008), and administrative planning (Arendale & Poch, 2008). Higbee (2009) outlined nine universal design principles of student development programs and services: create welcoming spaces; develop, implement, and evaluate pathways for communication; promote interaction among students and between staff and students; ensure equal opportunities for learning and growth; communicate clear expectations; use methods that consider diverse learning styles; provide natural supports for learning; ensure confidentiality; and define service quality.

Many of these universal design principles are similar to other guidelines for good practice in student affairs (Blimling & Whitt, 1999). These commonalities should not be surprising; however, the unique component of universal design lies in the focus on inclusion as a unifying goal (Higbee, 2004). Applying universal design principals to student affairs offers several benefits. For example, because universal design takes a proactive approach, fewer students with disabilities may need accommodations, thus increasing overall efficiency of student services (Burgstahler & Moore, 2009). Additionally, because of the focus on providing access to all students, by default universal design supports students who are aware and unaware of their disabilities, as well as the diversity of students without disabilities who benefit from multiple ways to be engaged in their campus environments (Burgstahler & Moore, 2009; Kalivoda, 2009).

Transition Programs
Transition or bridge programs can be an effective way to engage students with disabilities. Transition programs play an important role in helping students navigate the legal and social changes that occur when switching from K-12 schools to postsecondary education, which operate with major legislative and philosophical differences. In primary and secondary education, students with disabilities are covered by legislation that guarantees evaluation, remediation, and accommodation of impairments (Wolf, Brown, & Bork, 2009). Furthermore, parents and education providers are intimately involved in securing these services for the student. “As students move forward to higher education, however, the legal focus shifts from entitlement and remediation to protection from discrimination and equal access” (Wolf et al., 2009, p. 72, italics in original).

These legal and philosophical shifts lead to several key differences in students’ experiences. First, in order to receive services, students must identify themselves to the institution as people with disabilities and become their own advocates. However, students often lack the self-advocacy skills that are crucial to success in the postsecondary setting (Camarena & Sarigiani, 2009), and many students with disabilities have trouble with the transition (Dean, 2009). Second, the student is legally
an adult; hence, the Federal Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) prevents campus officials from discussing a student's personal information with parents unless the student signs a release. These changes may come as a shock both to the student who is accustomed to being provided for and to parents who are used to serving as their advocates. Therefore, programs designed to educate families about transition issues and teach students self-advocacy skills are critical to creating an engaging environment for students with disabilities.

Conceptually, self-determination and universal design offer guidance for educators committed to engaging students with disabilities in the transition to college (Korbel, McGuire, Banerjee, & Saunders, 2011, p. 35). Pragmatically, transition programs that engage students with disabilities can take several different forms. First, transition programs for all incoming students can be modified to meet the principals of universal design. Second, transition programs can be developed specifically for students with disabilities by working collaboratively with the Office of Disability Services. Third, existing transition programs can have sessions or sections (e.g., in a first-year experience course) reserved for students with disabilities.

Generally, when creating effective transition programs, educators should consider three phases: preadmission, enrollment, and post-enrollment (Korbel et al., 2011). Preadmission and enrollment transition programs might occur during the summer before enrollment or during the first semester. As the majority of students with disabilities attend two-year public institutions (Newman et al., 2009; Raue & Lewis, 2011), transition programs geared at preadmission and enrollment need to consider engagement for both traditional and transfer students.

Although bridge programs generally are thought of as supporting students as they enter the college or university setting, engagement opportunities that target the transition out are equally important. “Students with disabilities face many barriers in their efforts to secure satisfying employment which have very little to do with their training since they are in fact college graduates” (Roessler, Hennessey, Hogan, & Savickas, 2009, p. 127). Hence, post-enrollment transition programs that address the move from two- to four-year institutions and from college to gainful employment and graduate education are vital (Korbel et al., 2011). Ideally, career preparation programs begin in the sophomore or junior year by exploring career options and matching individual strengths with viable career paths through engagement in career assessment, internships, co-ops, and on-campus employment opportunities. Strong examples can be found in California's WorkAbility III (for community colleges) and WorkAbility IV (for four-year institutions) programs.

Mentor Programs
Mentor programs are a way to support academic and co-curricular engagement for students with disabilities. Mentor programs have been shown to enhance general self-efficacy, learning strategies, and study skills for students with disabilities.
(Zwart & Kallemeyn, 2001). As an outcome of participation in mentor programs, students with disabilities have a better understanding of skills needed to succeed, knowledge of their specific career interests, and accommodation needs (Burgstahler, 2001). Characteristics of successful mentoring programs for students with disabilities include flexibility and a system of multi-layered supports (Brown, Takanashi, & Roberts, 2010, p. 108).

Similar to transition programs, mentoring programs that engage students with disabilities can take several different forms. Existing programs can be modified to follow the principals of universal design. Topics to consider when making existing mentoring programs accessible include preparing, educating, and supporting mentors regarding disability-related issues; making the programming website accessible and screen reader friendly; designing promotional material to indicate disability inclusion; and insuring that appropriate accommodations are in place (Sword & Hill, 2003).

Alternatively, disability-specific mentoring programs can be developed. Mentor programs for students with disabilities generally are designed to target three areas: the transition to higher education, success in higher education, and career development opportunities (Brown et al., 2010). Although mentoring programs commonly conjure up the image of one-on-one in-person relationships, they also occur in small groups and via electronic communication (Axelrod, Campbell, & Holt, 2005). One-to-one models typically pair students with disabilities with an older student peer, a faculty member in area of academic interest or who has a disability, or a community member, usually in the area of the student’s career interest. Group mentoring models generally pair a graduate student, faculty member, or career-related community volunteer with a small group of students. The learning outcomes of group mentoring may vary with the programs; one example is using small groups to develop social skills for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders via role playing, games, attending campus events together, and guided small-group discussion.

Web- or Internet-based mentoring uses a variety of methods for communication (e.g., e-mail, social media, and video chat) to develop relationships. Web-based mentoring programs are a successful way to address the barriers of schedule, distance, and disability (Bierma & Merriam, 2002; Burgstahler, 2001). Educators interested in creating or redesigning mentor programs designed specifically for students with disabilities are encouraged to explore the website of DO-IT, a mentoring and transition program focused on students with disabilities at the University of Washington, programs at the University of Illinois (particularly in residence life and intercollegiate athletics), and at Purdue University’s Disability Resource Center.
Collaboration with Disability Service Offices

Student affairs educators can create engaging opportunities for students with disabilities by collaborating with disability resource offices on their campus. Disability service offices are as diverse as the institutions and students they serve (Harbour, 2009). They provide services and resources for students with disabilities along a continuum (Vogel, 1993) reflecting “fundamental philosophical differences, variations in allocated resources (fiscal and personnel), and/or limitations based on administrative and programmatic structures at the institution” (Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000, p. 37). Staff members in the disability service offices have both ethical and legal obligations. Ethically, disability services providers’ work addresses issues of stigma and creates a welcoming campus; legally, staff must insure the institution complies with federal regulations prohibiting discrimination (Cory, 2011). When seeking to collaborate with staff in an office of disability services, it is important to be aware of legal parameters as well as their financial resources and philosophical perspectives.

Student affairs educators can collaborate with the disability service offices in multiple ways. They can attend educational events sponsored by the office to gain a better understanding of students with disabilities and existing resources to support them. They can also work collaboratively with disability service offices to insure that events and programs their department sponsors are welcoming to students with disabilities. Pragmatically, this means that advertisements for events are sent out to the campus community via multiple manners, the physical space in which programs are hosted is accessible, and content provided during the program is presented in format that is varied and accessible. Moreover, educators are an integral part of developing a campus network to assist students with disabilities in negotiating the transitions into and out of higher education. Educators interact with students in a variety of settings (academic advising, student support, athletics, residence life); they are the eyes and ears of disability services, able to refer students who are struggling with academic or co-curricular engagement. Finally, when purchasing new technology (software programs and products), it is imperative that educators collaborate with both their disability service and information technology offices to ensure the technology is usable by students with and without disabilities.

Climate Assessment

Student affairs educators aspire to create learning environments that are inclusive, diverse, and affirming of human dignity and equality (Hall & Belch, 2000). These core values serve to inform all programs, individual interactions, policy decisions, and programming. “The first step in creating a supportive environment for all is to assess the needs of current and potential students at the institution” (Torres, 2003, p. 335). Climate assessments, sometimes called environmental audits, are one method...
of obtaining data regarding physical, attitudinal, and resource barriers to engagement for students with disabilities. Climate assessments are useful when designing interventions for students with disabilities because they provide insight into "prior experiences, needs, and preferred training formats of administrators, faculty, and students" (Izzo, Hertzfeld, Simmons-Reed, & Aaron, 2001, para. 9). In addition, climate assessment can provide evaluative information that will be used to "reveal either the efficacy and benefit of programs, or conversely, that these programs do not yet meet stated performance objectives and require more support and/or funding to achieve specific goals" (Stodden, Brown, & Roberts, 2011, p. 84).

Climate assessments may take a variety of different formats (focus groups, surveys, interviews, observations), target different levels (institutional, programmatic, or departmental), and seek information from various populations (faculty, students, administrative staff, and facilities personnel). Assessments such as those created by Wilson et al. (2000) and by Stodden et al. (2011) are good examples of disability-specific climate assessments. Stodden et al. (2011) emphasized that data collection should include assessment of "programmatic support, physical/facilities access, and instructional access" (p. 87), and that commonly multiple assessments were needed to develop a full understanding of the campus climate. An examination of their instrument also indicates the importance of assessment of attitudes toward students, staff, and faculty with disabilities.

While the design, collection, and analysis of data regarding the climate for students with disabilities can itself provide important awareness and knowledge about the climate, it is most important to act on the findings (Upcraft & Schuh, 1996) or risk losing the trust and future participation of those participating in the assessment. Data from climate assessments must be used to inform policy decisions and direct programmatic funding to create a more engaging environment for students with disabilities.

Include Disability as a Multicultural Issue
Student affairs educators can engage students by intentionally including disability in multicultural conversations, programs, and campus wide events. Most student affairs educators learned little about disability in their professional training (Evans, Herriott, & Myers, 2009), and disability is often overlooked in general discussions of diversity and multiculturalism. Pope, Reynolds, and Mueller (2004) defined multicultural competence as "the awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to work with others who are culturally different from self in meaningful, relevant, and productive ways" (p. 13), and included disability in their framework.

To most effectively engage students with disabilities, student affairs educators should be aware of their own attitudes about disability, their acceptance of socially constructed stigma associated with disability, and the extent to which they value
students with disabilities as part of the campus community. They must recognize environments that are inaccessible to students with disabilities and understand their own attitudes, fears, and preconceptions about disability (Burgstahler & Moore, 2009; Evans et al., 2009).

Burgstahler and Moore (2009) found that many student affairs educators lack knowledge regarding forms of disability, available and appropriate accommodations, and their legal responsibilities to students with disabilities. Educators who desire to foster engagement must acquire knowledge about the social constructions of disability, legal parameters, universal design techniques, and accessible technology.

Multicultural skills supporting engagement include the ability to promote dignity and self-advocacy and to design programs, physical spaces, services, and curricula that are accessible to students with and without disabilities (Evans et al., 2009). Students with disabilities have reported that student affairs educators often seem unable to communicate respectfully with students with disabilities, to proactively create accessible environments and services, and to effectively advocate for inclusive practices (Burgstahler & Moore, 2009).

Conclusion

Research indicates that two of the most important components in academic success are the empowerment of students with a disability and the education of others about disability (Kurth & Mellard, 2006). In working with students with disabilities, the goal is to provide equal access in all areas of the campus. To accomplish this goal, educators must actively educate themselves on current issues and work to infuse the campus community with this knowledge. Access is not limited to classroom learning but rather, the entire campus environment should be shaped according to principals of universal design. Disability service offices are responsible for keeping accurate records, assisting students in receiving reasonable accommodations, and educating other campus members including faculty and staff about support for students with disabilities. From the institutional level, leadership must view disability as an important aspect of campus diversity and allocate funding to support educational initiatives. Finally, the values of human dignity and self-advocacy must be honored in working with students with disabilities.

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