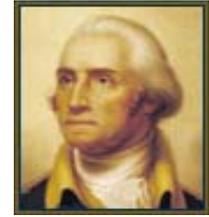


GW HEATH Resource Center

Community Colleges and Students with Disabilities

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Community colleges fill a distinct role in American postsecondary education and are the primary source of higher education for individuals with disabilities. The latest figures from the U.S. Department of Education suggest that nearly 60% of students with disabilities who attend postsecondary institutions, attend those institutions with two-year programs or less than two-year programs (U.S. Department of Education, 2002). Community colleges typically serve adults in their surrounding communities by providing low-cost education through a wide range of programs, including remedial, vocational, and occupational courses.

These vocationally oriented institutions frequently emphasize teaching rather than research, and are uniquely hybrid organizations in that they share some characteristics of public high school, junior college, four-year college, and university. Many students choose to transfer their community college credits (upon earning their Associate's degree) to four-year universities to pursue a Bachelor's degree. Most community colleges are driven by and operate under the following basic commitments:

- Serving all segments of society through an open-access admissions policy that offers equal and fair treatment to all;
- Providing a comprehensive educational program;
- Serving as a community-based institution of higher education;
- Teaching; and
- Lifelong learning (Vaughan, 2000).

Individuals with Disabilities

The nation's community colleges have long welcomed and accommodated students with disabilities on their campuses. In fact, nearly 80 percent of community colleges have a formal disability support services office (Barnett, 1996). A more recent survey found that community college faculty were generally responsive to the needs of students with disabilities (Norton, 1997). Of course, there are many benefits unique to community colleges that make them an attractive choice for students with disabilities, including:

- Living at home while making the transition to college;
- Community colleges (generally) have open enrollment;
- Increasing academic skills through developmental or remedial classes, if needed;
- Gaining college experience by taking one or two courses;
- Establishing a record of success doing college-level work for transfer to other schools;
- Learning a trade, academic skills, or methods for accommodating learning challenges;
- Upgrading job or academic skills to improve employment opportunities; and,
- Accessing higher education that is typically lower in tuition and other costs than four-year colleges (Taymans, West, and Sullivan, 2000).

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Enrolling in a Community College

Most community colleges have a true open admissions policy—that is, they strive to admit all. Such institutions will admit students regardless of whether they have a high school diploma, a certificate of high school attendance, or a GED. However, as community college education standards are established at the state level, admissions standards may vary from state to state. For example, in some states, all students may be admitted but also be required to take a placement exam, the results of which are used to place students in remedial classes, if needed. And in other states where community colleges may be overwhelmed by demand, admissions requirements might include a regular high school diploma or a GED.

We recommend contacting a college's admissions office for details about the requirements of a particular program. Of course, even though many community colleges have open admissions, selecting an appropriate community college for a student with a disability also requires obtaining detailed information. General areas that should be investigated regarding admissions include application criteria, financial aid programs, and disability support services.

I've Enrolled, What Next?

Students with disabilities who require accommodations will need to identify themselves as having a disability and provide documentation of the disability. As stated before, many community colleges have formal offices through which the needs of students with disabilities are served. Typically, these offices are called Office for Disability Support Services, or some similar name. Current and clearly presented documentation will assist in identifying and arranging appropriate services. Once a student has identified a need for accommodations, a variety of services may be provided. Such accommodations might include:

- relocating classroom location;
- modified course scheduling;
- faculty training on supporting and facilitating the learning of students with disabilities;
- altered testing formats (oral/written);

- tutors (if tutoring is provided to all students);
- sign-language interpreters;
- note takers or tape recorders;
- extended time for test taking;
- assistive computer technology (e.g., Kurtzweil readers or refreshable Braille);
- magnifying devices;
- books or other curricular materials on tape or other alternate media; and
- student–instructor communications via video conferencing or distance learning platforms.

Conclusion

Many individuals with disabilities continue to rely on community colleges to achieve their educational goals. These institutions provide easy accessibility at low cost to a variety of courses for all individuals. Attending community college also allows students with disabilities to adjust to college-level work while developing self-advocacy skills that will serve them well in a four-year program or other subsequent endeavors. Proximity to home, and the freedom to ease into the social and personal demands that a residential experience require are other benefits. And, as increasing numbers of students with disabilities are served in these institutions, the institutions in turn become increasingly prepared to meet the diverse needs of students with disabilities.

References

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