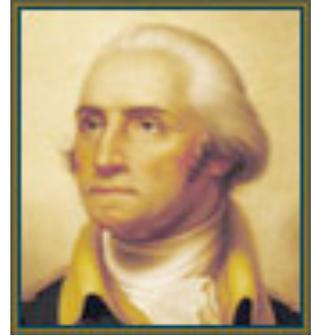


The George Washington University HEATH Resource Center



Self-Advocacy for College Students in Plain, Simple Language

By Michael J. Ward, Ph.D.

The National Council on Disability (2003) found that the percentage of college freshmen with a disability has more than tripled over the last twenty years. More recently, the National Postsecondary Student Aid Study 2000 reported a significant growth in the disability rate: 9.3% of all undergraduates or 1,530,000 students compared to its 1996 Study: 5.5%, or 919,000 students (U.S. Department of Education, 1997).

In spite of these increasing numbers, too many students with disabilities are experiencing limited success and exiting college without completing their programs (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Witte, Philips, & Kakela, 1998). For example, one study found that only 25% of students with disabilities received an associate degree after five years at a community college (Burgstahler, Crawford, & Acosta, 2001). Further, more than 80% of youth with disabilities who attempt postsecondary education require some assistance to manage the acquisition of auxiliary aids and services. (National Survey of Educational Support Provision, 2000).

The literature suggests that many of these students don't make it because they don't know how to navigate the system. Too many students with disabilities exit high school with

limited self-determination and self-advocacy skills because school and parents assume responsibility for advocating for their educational needs rather than fostering the development of these skills in students (Izzo & Lamb, 2002). Furthermore, such students are without an understanding of how to negotiate postsecondary settings on their own, where the focus is on the students' ability to request and obtain "reasonable accommodations" in terms of specific auxiliary aids and services to succeed in specific coursework. These students are unaware that this is very different from special education where comprehensive services are provided that meet individual needs (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003; NCSPE, 2002).

Students with disabilities and their families are often not well informed about the many issues and obstacles that may later arise as they transition from high school to college, or how to address them. For example, they may not be aware of their need for support to succeed in postsecondary education or of the auxiliary aids and services that can often be provided by these programs. This mismatch of disability needs and available supports is a major contributor to failure and lack of persistence by students with disabilities in postsecondary education (NCD, 2003).

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Compounding these challenges is the fact that many students with learning disabilities and other learning problems have below grade reading levels. In rankings of qualification for college admission, students with disabilities are found "much less likely to be even minimally qualified," based on an index score of grades, class rank, composite test scores on the National Education Longitudinal Study (NELS), and SAT/ACT scores (NCES, 1999). For all of these reasons, students with disabilities need self-advocacy instruction in plain, simple language.

What is self-advocacy for college students?

The high rate of students with disabilities who fail to complete postsecondary programs suggests that self-advocacy skills, such as the ability to articulate one's strengths, challenges, and necessary supports, are critical (Lamb, 2002). However, many college students with disabilities report they are uncomfortable requesting needed accommodations. Or, such students often advocate for themselves with faculty who have limited knowledge of their obligation under Federal law, specific disabilities, and appropriate accommodations (Izzo, Hertzfeld, & Aaron, 2002).

Independent decision-making and the ability to express one's needs are critical elements of self-advocacy (Goldhammer and Brinckerhoff, 1993). Self-advocacy in postsecondary education is further defined as disclosing disability related needs and limitations, presenting alternative accommodations (e.g., aids, procedural modifications, and technological devices), and describing how accommodations will enhance the student's academic capabilities (Lynch and Gussel, 1996).

A search of the World Wide Web revealed a host of self-advocacy training materials

available from publishers of educational materials. Web-based information developed by postsecondary schools directed to their own students frequently focuses on such topics as requesting accommodations, legal rights, and study skills.

Self-advocacy for postsecondary education in plain, simple language: A quandary

More students than ever are going to college, many of whom comprehend information far below a 12th grade level. All too frequently these students were in special education yet did not receive self-advocacy instruction or participate in the development of their IEPs. These students would clearly benefit from easy-to read, easy-to-understand self-advocacy material to become more autonomous and assertive to get through the postsecondary maze.

Although none of the material found through the web search was formally rated as to reading level, several content sections were analyzed for reading level using the Flesch Reading Ease and the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level functions. Content language used many polysyllabic words and long, compound sentences. Many concepts required a high degree of reading comprehension, the ability to remember large amounts of information, and the ability to connect abstract ideas. Materials targeting students with learning disabilities were not significantly easier to read and comprehend.

A further review of this material found that many concepts could be rewritten using simplified language. However, concepts such as "autonomy" and "assertiveness" are difficult to describe in writing to someone with a less than 12th grade reading level. It is even more challenging to convey key concepts about student rights in postsecondary education in plain, simple language. Some of these concepts include:

- A "qualified" student with a disability

- Auxiliary aids and services
- “Reasonable”
- Discrimination
- Legal rights
- Accessible / accessible formats
- Financial aid
- Ability to benefit
- Documentation

Two self-advocacy programs for college students

Of course, better than any literature about self-advocacy are well-designed, interactive programs in which such skills are effectively taught. The following describes two examples of self-advocacy programs. The first is a collaborative program in the Lansing, Michigan area between a local high school and the community college. It involves college disabilities counselors, vocational rehabilitation counselors, a transition specialist, and both high school and college mathematics and science teachers. A major goal is to increase accessibility for students with disabilities pursuing scientific and technical careers in community colleges.

One feature of the program is a College Success Class with the purpose of developing self-determination and self-advocacy skills. The curriculum consists of 10 major action components for students:

- Write four reflective journals related to class activities.
- Learn about goal setting and develop personal goals.
- Research and present a biography on a person with a disability.
- Participate in a panel discussion with college students/faculty with disabilities.
- Complete a unit on internal and external locus of control.
- Write a self-advocacy plan including information about academic strengths, challenges, learning style, and accommodations for success.

- Present self-advocacy plan to college faculty.
- Research career interest and interview a person in the career.
- Develop and present a workshop on disabilities, the law, and accommodations to college faculty.
- Participate in scheduled meetings with instructors and rehabilitation counselor.

All activities focus on developing one or more aspects of self-determination skills: self-awareness, self-advocacy, self-efficacy, decision-making, independent performance, self-evaluation, and adjustment. In one class session, students learn about both internal and external locus of control and are asked to provide examples of both from their personal experiences. In another session, they study different learning and teaching styles and develop their personal profile of learning and accommodations.

Following these sessions, students are given an outline for developing a written self-advocacy plan. The plan includes a description of the student’s learning styles, learning strengths and challenges, needed accommodations, and their responsibilities as students. Students share their self-advocacy plans with classmates. Instructors invite college faculty to listen to students present their plans and ask them questions about their needs. Faculty members provide students with written feedback on the clarity of their plans concerning their learning challenges, the accommodations they need to be successful, their responsibilities as students, and their presentation. In the last part of the session, instructors invite students to discuss their experiences in the process, what they have learned, and how they feel the college instructors responded to their advocacy. As a follow-up activity, students are asked to write a reflective journal on their feelings about their preparation to self-advocate, their learning difficulties and accommodations, whether the

experience was good preparation for future discussions with instructors, and the helpfulness of the faculty members' feedback.

As part of college orientation, a second program offers classroom self-advocacy training to students using a behavioral self-advocacy skills format on the 17 target behaviors of the accommodation request process (Rumrill, Roessler, & Brown, 1994). These target behaviors include: introduction, disclosure, solution, resources, agreement, summary, and closure. For example, the lesson plan on "resources" explains that the student must describe the campus personnel who can assist in the implementation of accommodations and what the student's responsibility is in that process. Component behaviors are described in detail, followed by procedural steps regarding modeling, participant role-playing, and assessing the lesson's impact.

Instructors present eight self-advocacy training sessions: each session lasts 90 minutes, and two sessions are held each week. The advocacy training lessons follow a standard format which defines the topic for the lesson, explains the importance of self-advocacy, presents examples of the target behaviors, provides a student modeling the target behaviors on videotape, allows for practice of the skill with the instructor and in role plays with the other participants, and ends with a summary of the targeted skills. Students receive feedback during the training and practice the target behaviors in role-plays, until they are confident in their ability to use the skills.

Conclusion

This article was not written in plain, simple language because the terminology and concepts to make the case for self-advocacy training requires a high reading comprehension level. Hence, the challenge

of teaching self-advocacy for college success in plain, simple language: there are terms and concepts that students with disabilities need to know to be successful in college that require a high reading comprehension level.

Remember that developing effective self-advocacy skills is not an "all-or-nothing" proposition, but rather a continuum. Whenever possible, students with disabilities' attainment of self-advocacy skills should be supported by a range of information and programs that will facilitate their ongoing and successful passage into postsecondary education.

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