AHEAD White Paper on Students with Intellectual Disabilities and Campus Disability Services

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Introduction

At its fall 2010 Board of Director’s meeting, the following statement was prepared and then shared with members:

AHEAD is the premiere professional association committed to full participation of persons with disabilities in postsecondary education, as stated in the Mission statement for our association. In support of the recent call for proposals (RFP) from Think College on Training Initiative grants for students with intellectual disabilities, the AHEAD Board of Directors reaffirms this commitment. Additionally, AHEAD members are encouraged to learn more about the scope and purpose of this RFP, as well as its foundation in and furtherance of the Higher Education Opportunity Act of 2008.

Numerous programs for students with intellectual disabilities currently exist in a variety of postsecondary educational settings. While Disability Services professionals do not usually operate such programs, we are in a unique position professionally to inform institutional decisions to design and implement programs that are welcoming and inclusive for students with intellectual disabilities. Where such programs already exist on a campus, Disability Service professionals can work with the program staff to determine how students with intellectual disabilities can access accommodations and other resources of their offices. AHEAD, in partnership with the Institute for Community Inclusion and ThinkCollege.net, will continue to provide its members with guidance on how to support and facilitate the full participation of students with intellectual disabilities in postsecondary educational settings.

Executive Summary

The recent reauthorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act (HEOA) in 2008 contains provisions that focus attention and federal resources on the postsecondary aspirations of students with intellectual disabilities (SWID). A student with an intellectual disability is a person:

(A) With a cognitive impairment, characterized by significant limitations in—
   (i) intellectual and cognitive functioning; and
   (ii) adaptive behavior as expressed in conceptual, social, and practical adaptive skills; and

(B) Who is currently, or was formerly, eligible for a free appropriate public education under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. (HEOA, 2008)
For many years, SWID have been accessing higher education opportunities through institutions with open admissions (such as community colleges) or through specialized programs (in the HEOA a program can now apply to be recognized as a Comprehensive Transition Program, or CTP, by completing an application, which if accepted enables the program participants to receive federal financial aid). Disability Services professionals have the responsibility to become educated about the changes in the HEOA and the ways in which they can support students with intellectual disabilities within their institutions. This paper provides information about the inclusion of students with intellectual disabilities in higher education and how Disability Services professionals can respond to individual students who are or will be accessing campuses. This guidance will help professionals to become informed and responsive members of their institutions.

**Facts for Postsecondary Institutions**

1. Students with intellectual disabilities access institutions of higher education through open admissions and through specialized programs, which usually have their own admissions or screening process. These programs generally charge fees separate from and in addition to a College’s tuition.

2. Some programs for SWID may qualify as comprehensive transition programs through an application process with the federal Department of Education which would qualify SWID to apply for and receive federal financial aid (Pell and SEOG) to help cover the program participation costs. These programs are characterized as those which:
   - serve students with intellectual disabilities;
   - include academic courses, extracurricular activities, and other aspects of the institution of higher education's regular postsecondary program;
   - with respect to the students with intellectual disabilities participating in the model program, provides a focus on --
     - academic enrichment;
     - socialization;
     - independent living skills, including self-advocacy skills; and
     - integrated work experiences and career skills that lead to gainful employment;
   - integrate person-centered planning in the development of the course of study for each student with an intellectual disability participating in the model program;

3. Institutions of higher education have a commitment to diversity which encompasses persons with disabilities including students with intellectual disabilities.

4. Once accepted into a college program (including ones designed for students with intellectual disabilities) or enrolled in a course, SWID have a right to access services.

5. The HEOA directs institutions of higher education, which have specialized programs qualified as CTP, to waive ability to benefit Financial Aid requirements, modify course load requirements, and facilitate enrollment apart from the regular process of matriculation.

6. Most SWID will not go to college primarily for a degree or certificate. However, model programs or CTP are expected to "create and provide students with intellectual disabilities with a meaningful credential upon completion of the program."
7. Students with intellectual disabilities attending institutions of higher education must maintain "satisfactory progress" as defined by the institution and adhere to the Code of Conduct.

8. Disability Service professionals need to define their relationship to an existing or developing CTP focusing on such things as the delivery of accommodations, campus access, and technology usage.

9. The HEOA specifically mentions and commends Universal Design for Education as an exemplary practice and a means of ensuring greater access for all students, including students with intellectual disabilities.

10. Students with intellectual disabilities may access college courses, programs, and campus activities through various approaches:
   a. Hybrid – students participate in some courses and social activities with college students without disabilities. Specialized courses and instruction designed for SWID tend to focus on life skills, transition to adulthood, and readiness for employment.
   b. Substantially separate – students participate in classes only with other SWID. They may participate in social activities and/or supported employment opportunities. In this approach and the Hybrid approach, the number of students involved is usually between 15 and 20 per semester.
   c. Inclusive individual support – an individual student’s goals and vision drive their involvement on campus. Students with intellectual disabilities may take continuing education classes with others or may audit college courses (in some cases, the curriculum content and assessment are modified for them through an established agreement with specific faculty). This is a case management approach and involves significant individual guidance for each student. The numbers of students involved in this model is usually small. There are usually dedicated program staff to support these students.

11. To have a full college experience, living in a residence hall at a college or university may be a goal of a SWID.

Key Disability Services Issues – stated in a question (Q) and answer (A) format

Q: Are SWID eligible to receive accommodations or access?

A: If a student with an intellectual disability is admitted for enrollment or is involved in a college program, course, or event on campus, the answer is yes. Since accommodations are not given to ensure success but are for access, SWID once admitted or participating on campus should be able to request and receive accommodations that address their known strengths and weaknesses. Some SWID attend and participate in a specialized program but are not admitted through the regular matriculation process. A SWID participating in courses or a program on campus, even though not admitted through the usual matriculation process, is eligible (otherwise qualified) to receive accommodations, just as a student with a disability taking a continuing education class would be.

Q: Do SWID’s need to provide documentation to the Disability Services office and go through an interactive process, i.e. interview, to obtain accommodations?
A: Yes, documentation should address the strengths and weaknesses of their cognitive and adaptive skills. A SWID is defined as a person with "significant limitations in cognitive/intellectual functioning and adaptive skills." Decisions should be made on a person by person basis.

Q: What are appropriate accommodations for a SWID?

A: The process for determining accommodations for a SWID is the same as for other students with disabilities. It should involve a careful consideration of information provided through documentation and personal contact. Disability Services staff should consider and discuss the functional impact of a student’s disability in relation to the courses being considered and the types of tasks required in the course. Answering what types of access and/or accommodations will facilitate this student’s involvement and learning is important. Some students with intellectual disabilities may have other disabilities which also need to be considered when planning accommodations.

Q: Are SWID who are enrolled in college credit courses (degree focused or developmental – English, reading and math) any different than other students with disabilities with respect to the use of accommodations?

A: No, once enrolled for credit or audit, they have been deemed eligible, and they must comply with Disability Services procedures to receive accommodations. All matriculated students must meet course standards and any other pertinent academic standards. NOTE – a CTP or a specialized program might offer a SWID an opportunity to participate (without being matriculated) in a college course such as History with modified standards (curriculum and assessment changes). Other matriculated students with disabilities taking college courses are expected to participate, with or without accommodations, and meet the usual standards.

Q: Should Disability Services professionals advocate for curricular modifications for SWID taking courses that are degree/certificate focused?

A: No, curricular modifications or changes to standards are not required and would actually be a violation of Section 504 and the ADA, as colleges are not expected to modify or waive essential skills embedded in a course’s structure. However, some specialized programs do advocate for non-matriculated SWID to audit college courses and, through an individual agreement with an instructor, arrange for curricular changes in the course material and/or assessments. Additionally, Disability Service professionals can play a vital role as advocates for the implementation of Universal Design for Education on their campus, which offers the promise of creating more inclusive learning environments for all students.

Q: Do IHE or Disability Service professionals need to provide additional resources or services for SWID beyond those required by Section 504 and the ADA?

A: No, the requirement is the same. All campus programs and services should be accessible and adhere to practices that do not exclude or limit the participation of any person with a disability.
Some Disability Services departments do offer programs or services that go beyond the requirements of the law, i.e. tutoring, use of personal devices, etc. and these programs/services should be accessible to SWID unless there are specific eligibility requirements to participate in such programs/services. Also, some colleges have already created specialized programs that do provide additional support to SWID and can charge for such services. Revenue to support such programs comes from multiple sources: tuition, fees, governmental funding, private support, etc.

Q: Can SWID live in residence halls?

A: If the campus in which the SWID is taking classes offers a program of residence life, the student’s enrollment in courses or a program should enable him/her to participate. In 2010, after a federal court ruling, a student with a developmental disability was admitted to a residence hall at Oakland University in Michigan where he participated in a transition program for SWID. If a SWID requires personal assistance to live in a residence hall, it is the responsibility of the student and his/her family to make needed arrangements as it is for other students with disabilities.

Resources:

Think College! College Options for People with Intellectual Disabilities
(Useful link for Disability Service professionals)
http://thinkcollege.net/for-professionals/for-professionals

U.S. Department of Education: Transition and Postsecondary Programs for Students with Intellectual Disabilities
(Link to information on federal Department of Education sponsored programs for SWID)
http://www2.ed.gov/programs/tpsid/index.html