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COLLEGE & RESEARCH LIBRARIES

news

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The Disabled Student on American Campuses

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Postsecondary education for the disabled student is guaranteed by Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973. A conference held in August 1977 at Wright State University in Dayton, Ohio, explored the issues that affect the integration of the disabled student into campus life. The barriers are attitudinal but can be overcome by involving faculty, staff, administrators, and disabled students in cooperative planning. The campus library has a responsibility to make its resources accessible to disabled students and will need to be flexible.

The conference was called "The Disabled Student on American Campuses: Services and the State of the Art," but one question seemed to be on everyone's mind: How is Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 going to affect us?

From August 21 to August 25, 300 educators met at Wright State University to explore the issues which affect the postsecondary education of individuals with physical disabilities. The conference was partially funded by a Bureau of Education for the Handicapped grant and attracted deans, counselors, and administrators from large

and small academic institutions throughout the nation. "Consumers" (students), representatives of government agencies concerned with the focus of the meeting, and two librarians also attended.

The format for four busy days, crowded with meetings, was to have a presenter give an overview of a topic from his or her vantage point. Topics included "Guidelines for Program Operation, A Focus on Principles"; "Planning for Architectural Accessibility"; "Library Services and Testing"; "The Role of Special Studies Programs on Attitude"; and "Financing: Who Pays for What?" Questions from the audience were encouraged, and in many cases smaller groups continued the discussion, further stimulated by specific questions prepared by the conference planners to elicit their opinions.

Postsecondary education for the disabled student is not only a moral imperative, it is now *the law of the land!* Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 requires that any institution of higher education that receives federal money—and the exceptions are few—must accept and assure accessibility of programs and activities to handicapped students and employees. Where the program is not made accessible by other means, architectural barriers must be removed by June 2, 1980. The regulations, which were published in the *Federal Register* on May 4, 1977, spell out the obligations of the institution and the procedures disabled students can follow when

they feel their rights have been violated.

INTEGRATION INTO CAMPUS LIFE

There is a real concern on the part of college and university personnel as to how best to integrate the disabled student into campus life. Where offices for handicapped individuals have already been established, their staffs are asking, "Whose needs are we meeting? Our own, those of the university, the state vocational rehabilitation agency, or the disabled student?" There is recognition that the way in which these offices relate to faculty, staff, and administration affects the way the rest of the campus feels about the disabled student. If the special office is overprotective and sets up "ghettos," the student appears to be someone who must be segregated in order to get along.

College for the disabled student, as for any other, is the last stop between the sheltered environment and the real world. The role of the special office is to encourage independence and self-reliance on the part of the student and at the same time help the student evaluate his or her needs for support services. The trend is toward using existing campus services to meet these special needs. If a transportation service is offered to other students, the office that provides it should offer an equivalent service to disabled students. The special office functions as both an advocate and coordinator of services.

BARRIERS

It is attitudinal barriers, rather than architectural barriers, that are responsible for discrimination against disabled people. Yet there is a very subtle interplay between the two. On the campus where the architectural barriers have

been eliminated, the person in a wheelchair appears more able, and so others react in a more positive manner.

Administrators are concerned with the costs of providing quality education and complying with federal regulations. They may not have the adequate information to make wise decisions concerning disabled students.

Concern about the costs of implementing Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is real. A case against Converse College in Spartanburg, South Carolina, has already gone through the courts, and the college was required to provide a sign language interpreter for a deaf student who had to take a course to maintain her teacher certification. The cry has been: They'll force us to close! A more rational approach is for the college administration to form a committee to do a self-evaluation. This, incidentally, is a requirement of the 504 regulations, which must be met by June 2, 1978. The regulation also specifies that handicapped persons or organizations representing handicapped persons should be involved. A college-wide committee might include a vice-president or dean of students and academic affairs; the building and grounds superintendent; faculty, including those who have not had disabled students; and disabled students. The committee should develop priorities and explore ways of financing modifications. Other sources that can be tapped for funds and advice are the state rehabilitation agency and local private rehabilitation agencies.

For faculty members, each category of disability presents different concerns. They worry about the amount of extra time that will be required. They are fearful that a change in their teaching method will alter the course content. They anticipate a disruption of class procedure.

Courses may need to be modified for the disabled student, yet what student hasn't at one time or another asked for special consideration? Under Section 504, the student has the right to file a complaint against any faculty member who will not adapt a course so a disabled student can meet the requirements. Advisory committees made up of disabled students who have attended college for at least a year, sensitive faculty members, advocates for the students, and learning specialists can help faculty and staff handle the problems they encounter in working with disabled students.

The able-bodied staff and students may view the disabled student as a curiosity, or they may be fearful or overprotective.

The disabled students and the staff of the special services office (or someone acting as an advocate) have a joint responsibility for changing attitudes through providing accurate information, creating positive experiences with disabled students, and helping people understand the origin of their negative attitudes.

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THE LIBRARY'S RESPONSIBILITY

What is the library's responsibility to the disabled student? The language of the Section 504 regulations is not specific and will be subject to much interpretation, but essentially it says that services provided to handicapped individuals must be as effective as those provided to others.

At the University of Massachusetts at Boston, where the director of the Handicapped Student Center works closely with the library staff, disabled students are allowed to have someone else check out their books. They are asked to let the library staff know a day in advance when they will need special help in using the library, and volunteers are called in to assist them. There is a library orientation specifically for deaf and blind students. A room is provided where blind students can listen to tapes or work with a reader. Another room has tape recorders, closed circuit television that magnifies print, a typewriter, and Braille reference material. Braille textbooks are stored in the library. While library staff members feel that study materials are not their responsibility, they do help with ordering textbooks from Recording for the Blind (215 East 58th Street, New York, NY 10022) and locating them through the American Printing House Central Catalog (1839 Frankfort Ave., Louisville, KY 40216).

Other college and university libraries accept full responsibility for the production of taped textbooks. They utilize volunteers for this purpose, provide soundproof booths for taping, and keep a master file of tapes, duplicating them as necessary. They also use regular staff for the special help required by the disabled student, such as pulling drawers out of the catalogs, getting books from the shelves, and using indexes and reference material.

A 1976 publication by Stephen R. Cotler and Alfred A. deGraff, *Architectural Accessibility for the Disabled of College Campuses* (State University Construction Fund, 194 Washington Ave., Albany, NY 12210) offers a guide for a diversity of handicapped students. The authors suggest specifically that where space permits, at least thirty-six inches should be provided between the shelf edges of stack aisles to accommodate the person in a wheelchair. However, they realize that available floor space does not permit ideal accessibility and rarely can all resources be put within wheelchair reach. Because of this, library staff should retrieve material that is out of reach; pull out-of-reach drawers from card catalogs; photocopy materials; aid disabled students to enter and leave the library when special routing is needed due to turnstiles; unlock doors to areas reserved for the physically handicapped; allow another student, upon presentation of the disabled student's identification card, to charge out books for the student who is unable to get to the library; renew loaned materials by phone; provide

information on the availability of a book by phone and hold it until it can be picked up; and deliver materials requested by phone via campus mail.

Most of the information in this guide is concerned with general standards for architectural accessibility (e.g., ramps, parking, restrooms, elevators, telephones), and these needs must be met by libraries, too. *Architectural Accessibility for the Disabled of College Campuses* also states that rooms should be set aside for use by those with visual impairments who require an area for listening to readers or taped material without being disturbed or disturbing others with their activities. These rooms should be suitable for special magnifiers, tape recorders, and specially designed lighting fixtures.

Magnifiers, tape recorders, taped texts and reference material, and Braille and large-print books are other aids that may be needed for the visually disabled.

Elevator keys should be provided to the physically handicapped student at after-hour study times, when elevators are normally cut off to certain floors for security reasons and thus prevent access for the student who cannot use the stairs.

Permission to remove materials normally restricted to a certain area should be granted to the disabled student who needs to use a special study area. Permission to use computerized records of library-owned materials, when such exist, obviates the use of an inaccessible card catalog.

Where staff and/or catalog information is not located on each floor, an accessible phone-intercom system should be provided at a central location on each floor. This system also has the potential for summoning aid during emergencies.

To accommodate the person in a wheelchair, carrels and index and reference tables should have a knee clearance of at least 32 inches in width and 27 $\frac{1}{2}$ inches in height. For the carrel, maneuvering space from the front edge to the nearest back obstruction should be at least 4 feet 4 inches.

These modifications, recommended by Cotler and deGraff, are necessary to make library resources as accessible to the disabled student as they are to the able bodied. Whether or not the library specifically receives federal funds, it almost certainly is part of a college or university that is affected by Section 504.

Probably the best advice coming from both the federal regulations and from those assembled for the conference on the disabled student at Wright State University is to involve the disabled student in evaluating needs and planning for change to make the total college program accessible.

The proceedings of the conference are being published by Wright State University and can be obtained by writing to Pat Marx, Director, Handicapped Student Services, Wright State University, Dayton, OH 45435. They are surely a "must" for every college and university library. ■■