Chapter 25
Trends and Challenges in Serving Students with Disabilities in Post-Secondary Education

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ABSTRACT

The present chapter provides a detailed insight into the challenges faced by higher education institutions across the globe in providing education to students with disabilities. The chapter examines the enrolment pattern of these learners and how this varies with the nature and kind of disabilities. It also identifies the factors that affect the academic success of these learners and suggests measures that can enhance enrollment of learners with special needs.

BACKGROUND

Post -secondary education in a college or university setting is a common experience for youth. Approximately 63% of American high school graduates go on to further academic pursuits in such settings (http://www.nchems.org/), and the empirical literature has consistently demonstrated that post-secondary education is associated with greater access to more satisfying employment and higher pay (Baum & Ma, 2007; Day & Newburger, 2002). In the past, post-secondary education, however, has not been a routine expectation for persons with disabilities. That state of affairs is changing, partly in response to legislation promoting equal opportunity for individuals with disabilities and in part due to the need by institutions of higher education to maintain enrollment levels in the face of a shrinking number of potential students because of declining birth rates (see Hussar & Bailey, 2013, for college enrollment history and projections for the U.S to year 2021).

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Protection of the Rights of Persons with Disabilities

Egalitarian principles advance the belief that disabled individuals should have equal access to all aspects of life, including education and employment. Laws protecting such rights have been enacted in many Western countries (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990; Canadian Human Rights Act, 1985; Equal Rights of Persons with Disabilities (amendment no. 2) Law, 5765 — 2005, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1997; Quinn & Waddington, 2009). Although the aim of these laws is to ensure human dignity and equal access for all, there is also an economic incentive intrinsic in these laws. Namely, higher levels of education allow people with disabilities to better integrate into society, obtain gainful employment and reduce the risk of becoming a "burden on society."

The most comprehensive legislation to protect the rights of persons with disabilities was implemented by the United Nations with the adoption of the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, which became effective in May, 2008 (United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, 2006). The Convention is a result of the United Nations' efforts over many years to transform the treatment of and attitudes towards persons with disabilities. It reflects the evolution from treating the disabled as objects of charity needing protection to approaching persons with disabilities as subjects with rights who can enjoy lives of active participation in society. Education is one of the targeted areas for equal participation under the Standard Rules on the Equalization of Opportunities for Persons with Disabilities (see http://www.un.org/disabilities/convention/conventionfull.shtml). The treaty was signed by 155 nations and ratified by 126 (including Britain, France, Germany, China and Russia), but the United States Senate failed to ratify the treaty in December, 2012. Senators who were unwilling to back the treaty cited the additional regulations it would create. Ironically, it was the Americans with Disabilities Act which became a model for the UN legislation.

Enrollment of Students with Disabilities on the Rise

General Patterns

Over the years, a number of studies have attempted to estimate the proportion of students in college who have disabilities. The studies are not entirely consistent because the number of college students with disabilities is relatively small and how the disabilities are defined and how the survey questions are phrased can produce substantial differences (Horn & Berktold, 1999). Although the exact statistics differ somewhat depending on source, the data are consistent in showing a dramatic increase in the number of students with disabilities enrolled in post-secondary education. Henderson (1999) reports that in the United States, the percentage of full-time college freshmen with disabilities climbed from 2.3% in 1978 to 9.8% in 1998. Similarly, Wagner and colleagues (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996; Wagner et al., 2005) indicate that the proportion of post-secondary students with a disability went up from 2.6% in 1978 to 9.2% in 1994 to 19% in 1996 and to 20% in 2002. Enrollment of students with disabilities appears to be on the rise worldwide (Hadjikakou, & Hartas, 2008; Shevlin, Kenny, & McNeela, 2004; Sachs & Schreuer, 2011; Tinklin, Riddell, & Wilson, 2004).

While most institutions of higher education are now admitting students with disabilities, such students, particularly ones with learning disabilities, tend to attend community college at a disproportionately high rate (Horn & Berktold, 1999; Horn, Peter, & Rooney, 2002; Mamiseishvili & Koch, 2011; McCleary- Jones, 2007). Possible reasons are that two-year colleges are more likely to provide remedial courses and other support services (Johnson, Zascavage, & Gerber,

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