

For collegians with disabilities, success linked to mentoring, self-advocacy

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(Phys.org)—A Rutgers study of recent New Jersey college and university graduates with disabilities has found that students attributed their academic success to a combination of possessing such strong personality traits as self-advocacy and perseverance, and their relationship with a faculty or staff mentor.

Accessing campus accommodations was not a major issue but learning about such help "was not always the smoothest process," they noted. The research also determined that [students](#) mainly used campus resources for assistance rather than a combination of college and community services.

Additionally, the report examined problems faced by college disability/special services offices, including recordkeeping and student-faculty outreach.

Twenty students from Burlington County College, Mercer County Community College, Raritan Valley Community College, New Jersey City University and Rutgers were interviewed for "[College Students with Disabilities: What Factors Influence Successful Degree Completion? A Case Study](#)." Paula Barber, a licensed clinical social worker and senior research project manager at Rutgers' John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, investigated.

"The challenges students with disabilities face on college campuses are well documented but little is known about the experience of those students who successfully completed college," Barber said. "To level the playing field for people with disabilities by encouraging college education and completion, it is essential to learn the factors supporting degree completion."

One such factor, self-advocacy, increases the opportunity to become more competitive during job searches, Barber reported. "While it appears college enrollment for students with disabilities is increasing, the ability to secure employment at a level matching their [educational attainment](#) is often limited," she said.

Barber said that despite passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990, current federal research indicates that people with disabilities have a lower employment rate and higher rate of poverty and dependence on public social services support than their counterparts without disabilities. They also complete college at a statistically significant lower rate than students without disabilities, and those who do graduate have a persistent lower rate of employment irrespective of their level of degree attainment.

For the study, college disability services professional staff identified eligible students who completed their degrees between May 2008 and May 2012 or were about to do so. The participants' self-described disabilities included a wide range of physical, emotional and cognitive disabilities, as well as dual diagnoses. All thought their personal and financial investments in their education were "life changing" and worthwhile, Barber said. She added that some were told by high school teachers that they were not "college material."

The collegians learned about accommodations through a variety of on-campus sources, including classmates, academic advisers, deans, at community colleges, and by trial-and-error. Parents, high school special education classes, medical professionals and outpatient rehabilitation providers were among off-campus resources. Accommodations included classroom and test-taking help, tutoring, technology support and counseling.

Among key findings:

- Students with disabilities completers reported using many services on campus and overwhelmingly attributed their success to a significant relationship with either a professional staff member at the Office of Disability/Special Services or a faculty member.
- Participants had observable personal qualities (self-awareness, perseverance, interpersonal skills) that allowed them to develop and maintain positive, long-term relationships with mentors, either on-campus or in their social circles. Their insight about their disabilities and ability to self-advocate were universally high.
- Although learning about accommodations was not a smooth process, access to accommodations was not a major issue.

- Participating colleges were significantly challenged in accessing service information on students with disabilities.
- Offices of Disability/Special Services are often underfunded, high-volume operations.
- Students and staff identified faculty training on their role in providing accommodations and in understanding how disabilities affect learning in the college classroom as in need of additional support and resources.

Barber says that because previous research suggests that only about half of students with disabilities at community colleges avail themselves of on-campus resources, questions about why students fail to use such resources must be answered. She also recommends conducting research on the impact of college faculty and staff development on disability as a diversity issue and on best practices to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities to employment.

"Including disability as a diversity issue on college campuses has been very slow to be adopted, if at all, and merits serious attention if we are to meaningfully include people with disabilities on [college](#) campuses as students, faculty or staff," Barber said.

More information: [www.heldrich.rutgers.edu/sites ...abilities_Report.pdf](http://www.heldrich.rutgers.edu/sites...abilities_Report.pdf)

Provided by Rutgers University

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