

Facilitating Communication Among Faculty, Support Personnel, and Students with Disabilities

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Abstract

Faculty and student service personnel each play vital roles in providing educational opportunities for all students. For this reason, cooperation and communication between the two areas is essential and of particular importance for students with disabilities. Personnel from Student Services and Instructional Services at Madison Area Technical College (MATC) cooperatively developed a process that promotes student self-efficacy and thereby facilitates student success. The theoretical underpinnings, challenges, obstacles, benefits, and implementation of a system to achieve these goals will be outlined in this article.



Background of the College

Madison Area Technical College (MATC) is the technical and community college for the greater Madison, Wisconsin area. It is the second largest of the 16 technical colleges in the Wisconsin Technical College system. Founded in 1912 to teach vocational skills, it has expanded many times to include associate degrees, college transfer courses, and adult basic education. Today, MATC serves a district territory made up of all or part of 12 counties. It operates ten college facilities spread among five campuses and offers instruction in hundreds of locations throughout the district. Madison Area Technical College offers more than 100 educational programs and educates approximately 50,000 people annually in a wide variety of credit, non-credit, and life enrichment courses. The college has an open enrollment policy that admits all who wish to further their education and can benefit from it.

Increasing Numbers of Students with Disabilities

Community colleges seem to be the schools of choice for most students with disabilities. According to the American Council on Education (ACE), the majority (56%) of students with disabilities who enroll in postsecondary education of any type enroll in a two-year community college (HEATH Resource Center, 1995). A 1995 survey conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges showed that 71% of all postsecondary students with disabilities were enrolled in two-year colleges (HEATH Resource Center, 1995). Recent reports from ACE indicate that enrollment of students with disabilities has increased significantly since the late 1970s. In 1978, 2.8% of freshmen reported having a disability, compared to 9.2% (or more than 140,000) in 1994 (HEATH Resource Center, 1995).

Madison Area Technical College is also experiencing an increase in enrollment of students with disabilities. According to our client reporting system, 1,067 individuals with disabilities enrolled in FY 1993 and 1,731 individuals with disabilities enrolled in FY 1996.

Previous System

When accommodations were made in the past, one of the main things we had in our favor was a faculty that wanted to be helpful and also wanted to know how to interact with and support students with disabilities in the classroom. On the down side, we had students who typically were feeling overwhelmed and confused about where to go for assistance, how to ask about accommodations, and how their disability would affect them in the classroom. We felt that changes to the system were necessary so that we could capitalize on our strengths and mitigate our weaknesses during these times of declining resources and increasing numbers of students with disabilities.

The Change

Our first step was a literature review. We realized that what we were doing fostered dependence on staff. This was, of course, the direct opposite of what we wanted to do. Of particular interest was a list of provider behaviors from that foster independence and dependence (Brinkerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992). When we looked at the 11 points listed in *Table 1*, we found our behaviors mostly on the left side of the equation.

Table 1.

Service Provider Behaviors Fostering Dependence or Independence	
Dependence	Independence
1. Allows student to interrupt or “barge in” to get immediate response to perceived need.	1. Uses such occurrences to teach or appropriate social skills
2. Takes responsibility for the products and grades of a seemingly hard-working student.	2. Maintains focus on helping student learn without taking responsibility for student success or failure.
3. Advocates for untimed tests in all subjects.	3. Encourages extended time on certain tests in specified courses based upon specific assessment data.
4. Helps a student write a paper.	4. Provides instruction on how to write a paper.
5. Edits and corrects a student’s paper.	5. Teaches the student how to proofread a paper and/or teaches the use of appropriate computer software.
6. Explains the student’s disability and needed accommodations to a professor.	6. Role-plays discussion with a professor so the student can self-advocate.
7. Sends a list of students with learning disabilities to all faculty.	7. Discusses with student when, if, and how to disclose a learning disability.
8. Mails a letter to faculty requesting test modifications or recommendations.	8. Gives a letter to the student that indicates provider’s availability to support the students’ request for test modifications or accommodations.
9. Tells a student that a certain credit load, course, or major is inappropriate or unacceptable.	9. Helps a student determine the pros and cons of a particular decision and allows the student to experience the consequences (positive or negative).
10. Organizes the student and controls his or her environment to insure success.	10. Encourages the student to assess needs, identify problems, and develop compensatory strategies.
11. Attempts to meet all student instructional, counseling, advising, and personal needs using resources of LD services.	11. Helps student identify and access other campus and community resources.

Brinkerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1992

We chose to work with items 6, 7, 8, 10, and 11 which we felt got at the core of why the faculty and students were confused. Further, we felt these particular items could be encapsulated into helping our students become better self-advocates, especially in terms of their relationships with faculty where the critical learning takes place. If students with disabilities could learn to become better self-advocates, the literature promised this would increase their self-efficacy, which in turn would have all kinds of benefits in terms of student success. A sort of synergistic effect would take place where increases in self-advocacy skills would lead to increases in self-efficacy, greater success, more self-efficacy, and so on.

We chose to define self-efficacy as “a belief on the part of the individual that what he or she does has some effect on the outcome – the power to produce an effect” (Maddux & Sherer, 1982). People avoid activities that they believe exceed their coping capabilities and undertake those which they judge themselves capable of performing.

We used a definition of self-advocacy by researchers from Nebraska University (Egly, Leuenberger, Morris, & Friedman, 1985). They defined it as “the ability of a person to look after his or her own interests, to present and defend his/herself in the most positive manner by capitalizing on personal strengths, downplaying weaknesses, and resolving problems.”

Certainly we felt these skills were valuable for all students but especially so for students with disabilities who have been, as a rule, less likely to have learned them. This skill deficit can stem from two main areas. The first is the secondary school environment, which may have been a custodial environment for students with disabilities. Students with disabilities may be accustomed to being mothered, fathered, or “done-for” instead of having any voice in their educational planning. The second phenomena which leads to poor self-efficacy and self-advocacy skills is based on the research work of Albert Bandura, the Stanford University social-psychology “guru” of self-efficacy theory. Bandura has demonstrated through extensive research that people who have a strong sense of efficacy exert greater effort to overcome challenges (Bandura, 1977; Bandura, 1982). He couples this proven research with the phenomena of “learned helplessness” to demonstrate the converse – that when people have serious doubts about their capabilities they not only give less effort to tasks, but are often likely to give up altogether. When they come to college, many students with disabilities have already developed habits of passiveness and “learned helplessness.” Our system of providing accommodations was one that ensured continuation of our students’ feelings of being “out of control.”

We also took to heart the research done by Nancy Chism from Ohio State University in the article “Taking Student Diversity into Account” (McKeachie, 1994). She identified the importance of the quality of relationships students have with faculty as a critical factor influencing their learning and comfort level with the institution. Although financial aid, residence, personal problems, and a host of other factors are important, students report that positive in- and out-of-class relationships with their teachers are the single most important determinant of their belief in their ability to overcome constraints and achieve academic success.

Thus, if we could get students to talk to instructors about their disabilities and become self-advocates, we would be helping the student to achieve a higher sense of self-efficacy/internal control. At our summer transition workshops, we had already done some self-advocacy role-playing activities and stressed this concept in individual interactions, but we felt there were ways we could increase this behavior.

One of the most dreaded experiences for our students was interaction with their instructors. If we could help them experience coping efficacy this would, as research in social learning theory promises, “help diminish fear arousal and increase confidence with what was previously dreaded and avoided” (Bandura, 1982, p. 136). We had nothing to lose since, even if it did not work out exactly as planned, research also demonstrated that the mere *illusion* of choice or control could improve performance (Perlmutter & Monty, 1979).

As Bandura demonstrated, an added benefit to improved self-efficacy was that it tended to generalize to other situations “in which performance was self-debilitated by preoccupation with personal inadequacies” (Bandura, 1977, p. 195). This meant that if we helped our students improve their self-advocacy, we would not only be helping them in college but also giving them valuable skills they needed to compete when they graduated and took their degrees into the “real world.”

The New System

The changes to our service delivery system based on our goals of increased student self-advocacy and the concomitant benefits were implemented in Fall 1996. The procedure is described below.

The incoming student with a disability meets with a disability resources staff person, providing documentation regarding the disability. An accommodation plan for appropriate support services is developed. The student receives an *accommodation card* that lists those support services for which there is a documented need. Examples of the accommodations offered are textbooks on audio tape, notetaker services, testing accommodations, etc. The card is in triplicate: one for the student, one for the file, and one for entry into a common database. For each class where services might be needed, each student receives an *instructor folder* and a *notetaking card*. The accommodation card is inserted into a *student accommodation folder* that lists all the names and job responsibilities of people who work with students with disabilities at MATC and a description of the procedure for showing the card to the instructor. The card is the key to the system because it is the tool for the student’s self-advocacy.

Initially, when we went to the new system, all staff members were informed of the upcoming changes and alerted to the fact that they would be receiving the accommodation card. Further in-service workshops throughout the year for incoming teachers keep new faculty informed about the procedure. Thus, they are on the lookout for the card. Students are instructed about the use of the accommodation card either in the summer transition workshops, or in the offices of staff members. They show the card to their instructors during the faculty office hours and discuss how their disability affects their classroom performance or how they *think* it will affect their classroom performance. This one-to-one meeting allows the instructor to interact with the student, describe the class expectations, and discuss how the necessary accommodations can best be implemented. In addition, the instructor receives an *instructor folder* that contains staff members’ names and a resource entitled *Whose Responsibility is This?* The latter outlines the instructor’s, student’s and DRS staff person’s responsibilities for each service (e.g. testing accommodations). The instructor folder also contains a form where the instructor can record accommodations given and make notes of the discussion. To obtain a notetaker, the student would give one of the notetaker cards to the instructor, who would then assist the student in finding a notetaker.

By having the responsibility back on the student, the system not only contributes to the student’s growth in self-advocacy skills, but also builds positive relationships between the student and the instructor.

We believe that what we initially set out to do has been generally beneficial in terms of our stated goals. It is hard to quantify how the changes have actually impacted on student success, but we do have a bit of hard data and certainly some anecdotal evidence. The hard data is contained in a 1996 report on institutional-level cohort tracking with a focus on graduation. This report shows students with disabilities at MATC are actually graduating at a slightly higher rate than students without disabilities. While this could be for any number of reasons, the fact that this is happening *against* the general trends outlined above, is cause for celebration.

References

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