

# Facilitating Self-Determination in Students who are Deaf and Hard of Hearing

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## Abstract

Self-determination skills are vital to students in postsecondary settings. Students are expected to advocate for their needs in these settings, something that they may have never had to do for themselves in secondary settings. This paper describes the characteristics of those who are considered to be self-determined, provides insights into the connection between students with disabilities and self-determination skill, and covers tips to help develop these skills in postsecondary settings.

Self-determination is often thought of as knowing what you want and being able to get it. Field and Hoffman (1994) describe it as the ability to define and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself. They give examples, such as learning self confidence, defending one's position, problem solving, standing up for oneself, making tough decisions, and, in general, being a causal agent in one's life.

Reiff, Gerber and Ginsberg (1997) point out several positive characteristics of students who are seen as self determined: they understand and accept their disability; they are proactive in their approaches to learning and therefore actively reduce their stress; they are persistent and focused on goals; they make use of support systems; they capitalize on strengths; and they find creative ways to compensate and problem solve. Wehmeyer (1998) lists several requisite skills to self determination, including choice making,

problem solving, decision making, goal setting and attainment, risk taking and safety, self regulation, self advocacy or leadership, and interpersonal communication. In order to be self-determined, individuals must be able to demonstrate these skills *and* know when and how to apply them to achieve their goals.

Common to all of these descriptions is the idea that individuals who are self-determined take responsibility for getting their needs met. People often find that when they take the initiative to get their needs met, their problem-solving and decision-making skills increase and their stress is reduced. For those in the workforce or in educational settings, this kind of proactive behavior can be the key to success. In fact, these behaviors are among those identified as the guiding principles in the 1991 report from the Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills (SCANS), guidelines that are being adopted in secondary schools across the country.

## The Significance of Disability in Relation to Self Determination Skill

The traits described above would benefit all, but can be particularly useful to students with disabilities, especially when it comes to advocating for their accommodation needs in different settings. When students enter postsecondary settings, they have graduated from secondary programs and the support of IDEA, and they are now required by ADA and 504 to advocate for their own needs. If the individual does not request the

accommodation, the school program or employer is not responsible for providing it.

How does a student begin to advocate for her needs? Before any of the above skills can come into play, the student must know and value herself. Flannery, Bigaj, Slovic, & Dalmau (1999) list four major areas that students with disabilities in particular should know about themselves: a) strengths, preferences and learning styles; b) the impact of the disability on their learning; c) the strategies and accommodations that provide them access and success in learning; and d) their rights and responsibilities.

It would behoove all students to be aware of their strengths, preferences, and learning styles, and to know how to take make the most of these traits. Different study strategies are recommended for different learning styles. An on-line test to determine if your learning style is visual, aural, read/write, or kinesthetic is available on the internet at The Active Learning Site <<http://www.active-learning-site.com>>. Descriptions and study tips are provided for each learning style. Self-knowledge and awareness of the impact one's disability has on one's learning process is vital to choosing a major that is a good match for the student's strengths and weaknesses. Developing a realistic understanding of one's own strengths and limitations is a key to identifying areas where problem-solving skills may be needed.

Knowledge of the impact of the disability is more than simply knowing that one has a hearing loss. Many students are only able to communicate that they are deaf or hard of hearing or that they use (or don't use) sign language. This information alone, though, is not very helpful to others who are trying to engage in communication with the student or in trying to develop appropriate accommodations. A better explanation would involve situation-specific examples that describe the impact of the disability for that situation or setting. For example, in talking with a new dorm roommate, the student would explain that she might not hear the phone ring. On the other hand, music played late at night might not bother her either. If the student were explaining her disability to a professor, she would let her know that she needed to see her face when she talks to her. The student would be able to identify what that person (e.g., friends, family, roommates, faculty, disability staff) needs to know about her disability to interact with her best in

that situation. One way to practice this skill is to have the student role play describing her needs to a friend, a child, an instructor, a disability services provider, or an employer so that she can practice changing her description according to the individual.

In order to understand their accommodation needs in different situations, hard of hearing and deaf students must also be knowledgeable about the range of assistive equipment and accommodations, resources, and supports available to them. This means knowing how their hearing aids work, what a telecoil is used for, and how to effectively use assistive listening equipment, interpreters, or even hearing assistance dogs. It is not enough for the student to say that she wants a particular accommodation. The student must be able to state why she prefers one accommodation to another, and to describe why one accommodation will meet her needs better than other accommodations. In addition, students should be open to learning about the pros and cons of each accommodation and evaluate each one in terms of the communication requirements of the specific situation. Being able to communicate this kind of awareness about a variety of accommodations and the benefits or drawbacks of each will greatly enhance the student's success rate in self-advocacy.

In addition to service-oriented accommodations, the student should also become aware of self-accommodations, that is, of the strategies and coping skills she uses in everyday life. Everyone uses a variety of coping skills to make it through various situations. Sometimes we are not even aware of what we do unless someone else points it out to us. Some coping skills work well in some situations and not so well in others. Some worked well when we were younger but are no longer appropriate in a college setting or on the job. The student should strive to identify behaviors she uses in different situations and which ones serve her best. She should then work on replacing behaviors that no longer serve her well with new ones.

In addition to self-awareness, the student should also be on the lookout for behaviors or strategies used by peers that she might use for herself as well. In addition to observing how others handle various situations, she can ask peers what they do in similar situations. If the student is the only student who is deaf or hard of hearing on the campus, she might try joining a group like

SHHH (Self Help for Hard of Hearing Persons) or ALDA (Association for Late Deafened Adults) or an internet group, such as Deaf-L or Beyond-Hearing. These are all great resources for finding out what others have done in similar situations and for how problems were resolved. It will help the student to anticipate consequences and to learn new coping skills. This kind of knowledge can be invaluable in developing a “Plan B” when the original plan does not work, and can save a lot of time and stress.

Finally, students must be aware of both their rights and their responsibilities. This means understanding both the law and procedures for obtaining services through the postsecondary institution, as well as consequences for not following through with the procedures.

### Learning New Skills

Building on this foundation of knowing and valuing oneself, self-determination skill building is described in the following a four-step process. First, the student must *develop a plan*. In this planning stage, the student should consider her goals and develop a creative plan to accomplish those goals. She must think about the logistics of the situation and determine what she will need. Needs might revolve around scheduling, equipment, location, and/or conditions of learning. She might walk herself through the plan in order to anticipate the results of her actions.

The next step is to *act* on the plan. This might involve acquiring new skills, collaboration with others, negotiation, being prepared for conflict and criticism, and problem solving. It is a step of risk-taking and being willing to persist until the goal is met.

The final two steps involve *experiencing and evaluating the outcomes*. What worked and why? What did not work and why? Where did the plan fall apart? What could she do differently the next time to be successful? This leads to a greater understanding of her needs in a greater variety of situations, to improved problem solving strategies, and to a larger repertoire of accommodation options.

Students can make great progress in developing self-determination skills through this reflective process, evaluating successes and failures in a variety of situations. Before the student can solve

a problem, she must first identify it. For example, the student should consider different situations where there were problems with communication, and other situations where communication was a seamless process. Situations that were very comfortable and situations that were very uncomfortable should also be considered. She would look at each situation and identify why one interaction was successful and the other was not. The student should look for patterns (e.g., difficulty communicating in noisy or group settings) that she will now be able to address proactively.

### Teaching New Skills

Much of the instruction developed for self-determination focuses on students in k-12 settings. At the postsecondary level, few curricula exist, even though self-advocacy and self-determination skills are vital to the student’s success. At the postsecondary level, service providers may be able to develop workshops for students that focus on developing these skills. In addition to the self-determination elements and skills described above, other specific topics to include are rights and responsibilities, academic accommodations, and strategies to request them effectively.

Service providers should look for ways to incorporate self-determination information into pre-existing programs. They can integrate curriculum into summer bridge programs or into networking groups. Adjusting the environment for both students and staff can be vital to the success of the project. Staff should always be on the lookout for opportunities for self-determination. For example, staff need to be “on the same page” concerning the goals of self-determination. Instead of a staff person making the call for an appointment with a professor or at the Health Center, have the student do it on her own with practice or support, if necessary. Role-playing exercises can be very useful in these situations. With this age group, stress student responsibility, and the goals of independence, career transitions, and preparation. Emphasize learning from peer networks and provide structure for students to meet.

Be sure to support and guide students through this process, providing spontaneous support and feedback. Encourage students to establish goals. Assist students to understand their disability. Actively share feelings, con-

cerns, opinions, and needs with students. You may find it useful to incorporate questioning techniques in this process. Whatever the method used, always reinforce facilitating rather than enabling behaviors. Finally, be on the lookout for the teachable moment.

### Resources

PEPNet has many materials available that can help students in their self discovery. Check out the PEPNet Resource Center website under PEPNet products for information on a variety of accommodations, and the pros and cons of each. There are also Tip Sheets available that students can read for their own understanding or that they can pass on to others to help them to understand the student's needs. There are also several videos available to help students in the decision making process about attending college. *College...Now What?* addresses the questions students should be asking themselves about choosing a postsecondary program. *Pah! I'm in College...Now What?* addresses the differences students will face in receiving accommodations in college programs that they may not have faced in their secondary settings. *Look out World-Here I Come!* is the story of a young woman describing her experiences in a mainstream college program and how they differed from her previous residential school background. These materials, and many more, can be found at <<http://pepnet.org>> under Resource Center.

The Northwest Outreach Center webpage also includes helpful information on understanding the ins and outs of using assistive listening devices (Demystifying Assistive Listening Devices) and how to connect with others through internet e-mail lists (Internet Resources Related to Hearing Loss). These can be found at <<http://www.wou.edu/NWOC>>.

Finally, don't forget that there are PEPNet trainers available to present on this and a variety of other topics to your program. Contact the PEPNet Regional Center serving your area for more information.

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