



CPEC

Access and Equity for all Students: Meeting the Needs of Students with Disabilities

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Access and equity for all students in California colleges and universities continues to be a high priority of CPEC. Over the past year, CPEC staff conducted research, collected data, convened an advisory committee and hosted a panel of service providers and students. They identified areas where services should be expanded. It is apparent that there is a need for increased access to instructional materials in alternative formats as well as developing campus climates that are responsive to students with disabilities.

Most colleges and universities provide services to students with disabilities without additional state funding, except for the community colleges, which receive state funding for their Disabled Students Programs and Services (DSP&S). Many campuses are challenged with providing services that meet the minimum requirements of state and federal law because of a lack of targeted funds. The community colleges sometimes find their needs exceed the available DSP&S funding. Campuses must find ways to provide services that are far above the legal minimums and promote a campus climate that is receptive and welcoming to students with disabilities.

UC, CSU, and the community colleges collect and report data to CPEC on students with disabilities in ten categories. The data are available for students who report disabilities, but self-reporting can limit the data available. Students who do not report disabilities are not identified in the data. In fall 2009, the categories will be expanded to include Autism and Asperger's Syndrome, Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, and acquired or traumatic brain injuries. Disabled students service coordinators have reported that the majority of their caseload is students with Asperger's Syndrome or psychological disorders. As these "invisible" psychological or psychiatric disabilities are increasing, campuses must be prepared to provide a wider range of resources and services, which will require additional funding and staff time.

CPEC recognizes that limitations in the state budget make it difficult to allocate more funding for services. At the same time, students should have access to appropriate support services and feel they are treated the same as other groups of students. Faculty should have access to alternative curriculum materials and professional development that enable them to better serve students with disabilities, and potentially all students. CPEC staff have prioritized policy options that are lower in cost, but some will require more funds when they become available. Ultimately, systems and campuses should seek resources that will allow them to adopt CPEC's policy recommendations.

The recommendations in this report were adopted by the California Postsecondary Commission at its meeting on June 9, 2009.

Campus Climate

CPEC's research has found that campus communities sometimes lack understanding about students with disabilities. Developing a campus climate that provides opportunities to all students regardless of race, gender, sexual orientation, or disability is essential to the success of all students. This starts with a shared responsibility between faculty, staff, and students in developing an under-

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standing of the needs and concerns of students with disabilities. It starts with a commitment from the disabled student services offices and from those in the larger campus community.

For example, many veterans with disabilities do not self-identify as being disabled. Some may not understand they suffer from a disability that qualifies them for services, or they will not go to the disabled services office themselves. A supportive climate will engage veterans and other students on campus to talk with veterans about services they have received and how to navigate the process.

Accessible workstations enable students of different abilities to use technology and services with the same ease as other students. If one in every 10 workstations in all computer labs is fully accessible and equipped with ergonomic chairs, screen readers, large print displays, speech recognition and keyboard control programs, and scan or read assistive writing systems, students can enter a computer lab without the worry of experiencing additional barriers.

Some additional recommendations include:

- Strengthen the transition process from high school to postsecondary education, with counseling services and orientation courses, in order to help students access services in college that they may or may not have received in K-12.
- Provide community-based events to link students with resources in their community.
- Inform faculty and staff of the services available on campus and in the community. Provide faculty and staff with training in how they can connect students to needed services.

Alternative Instructional Materials

Students with disabilities have identified the need to access textbooks and other instructional materials in alternative formats and in a timely manner. Alternative formats include electronic text files, electronic Braille files, Braille books and documents, tactile graphics, and others.

Public colleges and universities are working with in-state publishers, which are required by state law to provide textbooks and instructional materials in alternative formats (AB 422, Chapter 379, Statutes of 1999). However, the law only applies to publishers in California and requests often take months to fill, at which point the student no longer needs the materials they requested. CSU and the community colleges have developed their own centers to produce learning materials for students with disabilities in a more timely manner.

CSU's Accessible Technology Initiative in Long Beach is a model for the timely and accurate distribution of alternative instructional materials. CSU and UC collaborate to provide resources to students at their campuses. Additionally, UC Berkeley's Assistive Technology Teaching and Learning Center educates students with disabilities in the use of current and emerging assistive technologies to independently achieve their educational goals.

The community colleges have created the Alternate Text Production Center, located in Ventura. The center converts instructional materials into electronic documents and then creates alternative media products for use by community college students.

Additional options to increase access to instructional materials in alternative formats:

- Provide options to take exams in alternative forms, such as verbally, in large type, or in Braille. Provide more time on tests, and alternative spaces to take tests with the understanding that some students perform better in different environments and under different constraints.
- Develop and maintain contracts with local and in-state vendors to provide materials in Braille and other formats to increase the quality of the product and decrease waiting time for students.
- Require computer labs to be equipped with assistive software. Campuses should ensure funding is available to upgrade software within six months of new releases.

Faculty and Staff Development

The experts who provided information to CPEC identified a lack of preparation and training of faculty who work with students with disabilities. They suggested that this may be due to a lack of exposure to students with disabilities and lack of training in alternative teaching models. In order for faculty and staff to actively seek out and take this training, the campus must develop a culture that integrates diversity into professional development, and encourages faculty and staff to become advocates for students with disabilities.

Professional development provided by campuses or at a system-wide training center could provide faculty the tools to incorporate alternative instructional methods and alternative technology into their curriculum. Faculty would have the opportunity to understand the needs of students with disabilities, and how best to assist them. Multiple methods of teaching and individualized instruction has been found to benefit all students, not just those with disabilities.

The community college system operates the High Tech Center Training Unit at Foothill-De Anza Community College District Center. The training center was established for faculty and staff to acquire or improve their skills in assistive computer technology, alternative media, and web accessibility. The training center could collaborate with other colleges and universities and share their course content in order to expand professional development to other public and private campuses.

Additional recommendations:

- Provide ongoing training to faculty to help them better understand multiple teaching models and the needs of disabled students. Training should include current and emerging instructional technology such as auditory aids, visual aids, and hand-held models.
- Provide professional development to all student support staff, including guidance counselors, financial aid advisors, career counselors, veterans' affairs counselors, admissions and records staff, and health services staff in developing a campus culture that is committed to the success of all students, including students with disabilities.
- Promote emerging strategies to minimize physical barriers and learning barriers and ensure knowledge is accessible to everyone, such as Universal Design for Learning, where curriculum is developed for different learning styles and students are provided multiple ways to interpret the same message.

Student Services

It is a challenge for campus disability services offices to support students. Since students' needs vary greatly from semester to semester, it is difficult to anticipate the need to increase a certain ser-

vice, such as readers or note takers. Therefore, disability services offices need to be prepared to adjust the services they provide to support students with varying types of disabilities. Students have a role in providing disability services offices with information about their needs, and the people who staff those offices need to make an effort to provide support services in a timely manner. Those offices should also assist students in working with their professors to help faculty understand how best to support their learning needs.

Additional recommendations for support services:

- Ensure that each campus has a veterans' affairs counselor who can help students apply for benefits, access disabled services, and to provide veteran-specific support.
- Ensure that each campus has an adequate pool of live readers, test assistants, and note takers, by providing incentives such as community service hours, work study time or salaries above the minimum wage.

Next Steps

Funding for higher education is limited and many campuses are challenged in providing services with no additional funding. Increasing the quality of services and programs may become increasingly difficult as more veterans with disabilities enroll, and more students are diagnosed with psychological or psychiatric disabilities. It is important that policies are in place that ensure funding for disabled student services are not reduced or cut in hard economic times. University and college officials should continually evaluate disabled student services programs as funding is reduced or threatened in order to protect those services to the greatest extent possible.

CPEC monitors and supports legislation that promotes access to postsecondary education and requires equitable treatment of all individuals within the higher education system. CPEC also supports budget initiatives that provide resources for institutions to pursue these recommendations. CPEC can consider the following:

- Support legislation that seeks to improve access to educational materials for people with disabilities. For example, AB 386 (Ruskin) proposes to expand the definition of "non-printed instructional materials" to include audiovisual works, podcasts, and web clips.
- Support legislation that allows campuses to convert books into different formats, thus reducing the time taken for students to receive their course materials in these formats.
- Support legislation that requires software publishers to provide free or reduced-cost copies of assistive software to campuses whenever they update or purchase new software.

CPEC's limited staff and budget resources limit its ability to follow up on all recommendations in this report. However, CPEC can:

- Make its reports available online and in communications with the systems and encourage all postsecondary institutions in California to consider these recommendations in developing their own policies and programs.
- Consider establishing pages on CPEC's website to share best practices and other information that will help postsecondary institutions address the needs of students with disabilities.
- Consider additional research and expanding data collection on students with disabilities.