

Connecting Students with Hidden Disabilities to Resources

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The number of students with learning or psychiatric disabilities entering college continues to increase. When advisors are unaware of a student's disability, they are unable to provide direction and appropriate referrals, leaving the student uninformed of the assistance available to him or her. As a result, the educational process may be compromised, jeopardizing the student's likelihood of success. To maximize student academic success, the academic advisor should be aware of the law and key legal phrases surrounding students with hidden disabilities. Concrete examples of referrals made to students and several case studies are offered for training and further reflection.

KEY WORDS: Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); high-risk students; mental health issues; student privacy rights; psychiatric disorders, Rehabilitation Act of 1973, §504

The academic advisor can have significant influence in facilitating students' opportunities for success in both education and eventual employment. The academic advisor often provides consistent face-to-face contact with students throughout their university experience. In their role, advisors have the opportunity to refer students to resources on campus that can facilitate advisee success. Advisors can be the vital link to services such as tutoring and academic skills-building workshops as well as resources offered in student life, career services, and student disability services offices. However, advisors sometimes have difficulty determining the nature of resources most appropriate for a given student. This is especially true when students have hidden disabilities, such as learning or psychological disabilities, including attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (AD/HD).

The number of students entering colleges and universities with hidden disabilities (e.g., learning disabilities, depression, anxiety, bipolar disorder, AD/HD) continues to increase (Association on Higher Education and Disability, 1996; Karwacki, Greenfield, & Hameister, 1997), and as laudable as these new opportunities for people with disabilities are, the situation presents some unique challenges for academic advisors. For instance, Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, and Edgar (2000) found that

80% of students with learning disabilities in post-secondary settings failed to graduate within 5 years of entering their respective programs while only 56% of students without disabilities failed to graduate within the same time frame. Furthermore, the onset of symptoms for persons with psychiatric disabilities often occurs in middle or late adolescence, which can disrupt students' typical developmental tasks and interrupt educational goals. The result can culminate in educational underachievement, underemployment, or unemployment (Unger, Anthony, Sciarappa, & Rogers, 1991).

Clearly, many students with psychiatric disorders would benefit from university resources specifically designed to facilitate their learning. However, when students with hidden disabilities are unaware of these university resources, and when advisors are unaware of the concerns that students bring with them to college, the educational process is compromised and students' likelihood of success is jeopardized.

Through this article, we hope to ensure more opportunities for student academic success by providing assistance to college academic advisors working with students who may have hidden psychological or learning disabilities. The laws and key phrases regarding students with disabilities are explored, concrete examples of advising are provided, and several case studies of academic advisor and student interaction are presented.

The Law

Two laws primarily superintend the offices of disability services on college and university campuses and extend protection to students with disabilities: the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, specifically §504, and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (§504) was an expansion of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, extending to qualified individuals with disabilities the rights of a protected class and prohibiting discrimination based on disability status. The ADA further extended that protection to persons in private agencies and defined the nature of "a qualified individual with a disability." According to the ADA (1990, §3[2] [a-c]), an individual with a disability is defined as "a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more

major life activities, a person who has a history or record of such impairment, or a person who is perceived by others as having such impairment.”

These laws protect students from receiving advising that might be deemed discriminatory. For instance, advisors are discouraged from specifically asking if a student has a disability because if the student believes that he or she has subsequently received different academic advice than other students without a disability, he or she may have grounds for a discrimination complaint. Therefore, advisors should have specific strategies to address disability status, particularly learning disabilities or psychiatric disabilities, and have a plan about the best way to assist the student.

Scope of Services

For a student to be eligible to receive accommodations from the university, and more specifically the office of student disability services (SDS), she or he needs to provide the SDS office with appropriate documentation that specifically stipulates the nature of the disability and the way(s) in which that disability substantially limits the individual's important life activities. In the university setting, the phrase “important life activities” typically refers to learning or other academic pursuits. After the documentation has been evaluated and is on file with the SDS office, the student is then eligible to receive reasonable accommodations. These accommodations, depending on the type of disability, may range from extended time on tests/quizzes, to utilizing a reader/scribe for tests, to accessing in-class note takers.

The kinds of accommodations and services provided by a university or college disability office may vary widely; however, regardless of disability status, students are still responsible for completing university, departmental, and course requirements. A psychiatric disability, for instance, may precipitate more than the allotted class absences for a student. Class attendance, however, can be mandated by a professor who sees attendance as an intrinsically necessary part of the course (e.g., in a foreign language course or courses with a strong emphasis on class participation). In that case, no accommodation can annul the requirement, even if a student's documentation, from a psychiatrist or psychologist, stipulates that a waiver of mandatory class attendance should be included in the student's accommodation. In addition, departments where students are required to take math and foreign language as part of their curriculum are not required to alter those requirements for students with disabilities.

Advisors or SDS staff may need to explain to the student that a documented disability does not automatically exempt him or her from any classes, nor does it necessarily entitle the student to services that he or she may have been accustomed to receiving in high school. Academic advisors, however, can collaborate with students to help them navigate some of the more daunting university/course requirements. Informing students of various campus resources, such as tutoring assistance, writing centers, SDS offices, and counseling services, can help alleviate feelings of isolation a student, particularly one with a hidden disability, may otherwise have.

Rights and Responsibilities

Whatever the disability, a student always retains the right to disclose—or not disclose—her or his disability to any university personnel. If the student desires any accommodations or special considerations as a result of having a disability, however, he or she is required to properly disclose that information to appropriate personnel, typically SDS staff. Some students, particularly those with hidden disabilities, may not wish to disclose their disability for a variety of reasons:

1. Some students want to try their first semester or year in college without accommodations.
2. Students may be too embarrassed to ask for assistance. These students may have experienced harassment in elementary, middle, or high school as a result of having a disability and receiving special services.
3. Students either do not know they are eligible or they do not feel entitled to services. Those with psychiatric disabilities, for instance, may not realize that they, too, are covered under the ADA and may be eligible to receive services.

Advisors are encouraged to approach all students with an openness that encourages rapport and builds trust with students. Students who view their advisors as advocates and sources of support are more likely to overcome their concerns and disclose a hidden disability (Conyers & Ahrens, 2003; Dalgin, 2001). A solid advisor-advisee relationship allows the advisor to provide students with the referrals and resources designed to empower their success.

What to Say and Do

The following example dialogues include questions and responses for advisors that allow students to choose to disclose or not disclose their disability status.

Encouragement after Disclosure

Fred, this is the first time that we've met, is there anything about you I should know that would help me advise you in the best way possible? Fred responds, "No, not really. I just need some classes." But it seems like you are doing better this semester than ever before. Has anything recently changed in your life that has affected your school work? Fred replies, "Yeah, I guess. I started taking some medication for my schizophrenia and that has really helped me to be able to study. I'm a little more tired than I use to be and sometimes that gets me down, but I can at least focus now." Fred, that's great to see that kind of improvement in your grades. Have you spoken to anyone over at the Office of Student Disability Services? "Oh, yeah, they have really helped too." Wonderful. I'm glad you're working with them and found them helpful. Well, let's take a look at some of the classes that you may want to take to get that major in Recreational Management.

Allowing Student to Disclose or Not Disclose

Sue, I can see that you're having a really hard time with both math and English. What seems to be giving you the most trouble? Sue states, "Well, I've never been any good at math, you know the 'math phobia,' and English has always been a pain in the butt." Sue, did you ever receive any special services in high school, like individual tutoring or assistance of some kind? "No, those classes have just been tough because I don't like them." OK, well, have you sought out any tutoring here on campus? "Yes, I just started last week and hopefully it will save me." I'm glad you've done that; I can't promise it will save you, but it should help.

In an alternative response, Sue confirms a diagnosis of a hidden disability, "Yes, I did get a little tutoring in school with math." Was that just from friends? "No, I had special classes that I went to, and I took my tests in a small group setting. I had something they called an IEP." [An IEP is an individualized education plan used in K-12 systems for students with special needs.] OK. Well, have you spoken with anyone in the university about this? "No. Why would I?" Well, universities sometimes can make accommodations for students that help to level the playing field—kind of like your classes in high school. They can't make you successful, but they can make it more likely that your disability or diagnosis won't be the main reason that you're not successful. Sometimes you can receive extra time for exams or take them in a quiet environment. If you think this may help, you should probably contact the Office of Student Disability Services. I know a

great lady over there named Amy. Let me give you her number. "Well, I'm not disabled." You're right, but they are the ones that determine if you might qualify for any accommodations. If you do, the accommodations might really help you to be more successful. You don't have to if you don't want to. I just want to make sure that you know the resources that our university provides to help you be successful in school.

Training Example

The following is a hypothetical scenario that can be used as a training example or role play for two advisors. Each advisor takes a part and uses questions from the first two examples to practice a student-advisor interaction. They then discuss their experiences, switch roles, and practice with a different student response.

The advisor knows the following information about the advisee: Cheryl has a grade-point average (GPA) of 2.167. She's attempted 57 semester credit hours and has earned 37 semester credit hours. She was academically dismissed for 1 year after 2 semesters of D's, F's, and W's. She starts out full-time every semester but usually withdraws from at least one class and ends up with part-time status. She wants to get into business but is having a hard time with microeconomics. Last semester she took three classes and earned a B and two C's. She is going into her 7th semester, and she wants her advisor's help in figuring out what classes she needs to fulfill her core requirements and what grades she will need to achieve a 2.25 GPA and get into the College of Business.

Cheryl comes to the advising meeting with the following background information hidden from the advisor: She has three very successful siblings. She works 30 hours per week during the school year, lives at home, and commutes to campus. She really wants a business degree from this university. Her high school never provided her with any services, but she received private tutoring in English. She was diagnosed with bipolar disorder 2 years ago, takes medication daily, and is under the care of a psychiatrist. She wants her family to know that she earned her degree on her own; therefore, she would never use SDS.

Conclusion

Students with hidden disabilities can pose unique challenges to academic advisors, who cannot address issues or help remedy problems that are not readily seen nor disclosed. While no one can perfectly deal with all students, the best academic

advisors are committed to assisting students in acquiring the services that will empower them to be more successful in college and hopefully—even-
tually—more successful in reaching their desired occupational goals.

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