

Inclusion at the Postsecondary Level for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders

Dianne Zager

Tom E.C. Smith

## **Inclusion at the Postsecondary Level for Students on the Autism Spectrum**

Historically, students with autism have not had access to supports within universities that would enable them to succeed academically or socially. In response to the heightened recent attention to inclusion at the postsecondary level for students with disabilities, the Division on Autism and Developmental Disabilities (DADD) has taken the initiative to develop a paper on this critical topic. The goal of DADD in developing this paper is to illuminate and promote effective practices to support students with autism spectrum disorders in postsecondary education. Toward this end, this manuscript addresses the need for institutions of higher education to educate students with autism spectrum disorders (ASD) among their peers in college programs. The intent of the authors is to voice a call to action to expand the inclusion momentum that has become firmly rooted in our nation's high schools so that it reaches universities and leads to improved adult living outcomes. Through discussion of the history of postsecondary education (PSE), a review of relevant legislation, and consideration of current PSE options for students with autism, a clear picture of the current state of affairs emerges. Connections among legislative initiatives and current practices substantiate the need for increased program options and supports through which academic, social and career development may be provided to students with ASD.

The role of legislation in supporting the establishment of infrastructure and building capacity to sustain programs is examined to foster recognition of the need for institutions of higher education to provide inclusive postsecondary programs. Components of effective postsecondary education for students with ASD are described in relation to legal mandates leading to the development of PSE opportunities for these

students.

### **The New Inclusion Frontier**

The prevalence rate for children with autism has increased dramatically, and it is likely that many of these students will be matriculating to postsecondary educational programs in the next few years. A movement has begun for colleges and universities to become more inclusive of students who traditionally were not on college campuses. Programs and supports to foster integration into college are springing up. Types of services offered, as well as intensity and quality vary greatly among these programs.

For public schools in our country, including students with disabilities is no longer an issue (Hines, 2008). Not only are students with disabilities attending the schools they would attend if they did not have disabilities, but they are receiving more educational services in general classroom settings with their non-disabled peers than ever before. Currently, approximately 75% of all students with disabilities are included in general education classrooms for at least 40% of each day, and almost half of all children with disabilities are educated in general education classrooms most of the day (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). This represents a significant change from the way students with disabilities were historically educated, when they were either completely excluded from school programs or served in isolated, self-contained special programs (Smith, Polloway, Patton, & Dowdy, in press).

Inclusion is being implemented at a rapid pace in secondary schools. In the 2007 *Annual Report to Congress on the Implementation of IDEA (2007)*, it was noted that that during the 2003 school year, more than 1.2 million students with disabilities, ages 12 - 17, were outside their regular classroom less than 21 percent of the time, meaning

that they were in their regular classroom at least 80% of the time. This accounts for approximately 44% of all secondary students served in special education. Another 966,000 were outside the general education classroom between 21 and 60 percent of the time. This means that most students with disabilities in secondary schools are receiving most of their education in general education classrooms.

The movement to include students with disabilities in general education classrooms resulted from several different factors. In the late 1960s, professionals began to question the efficacy of providing services for students with disabilities in separate schools and classrooms. At the same time, parents of students with disabilities began advocating for the rights of their children to receive appropriate educational services in public schools. The result of professional investigations and parental advocacy was legislation and litigation that dramatically changed special education services in public schools. Because only an extremely limited number of individuals with autism had been included in public school, the questions of whether or how to include these students in college programs had not yet arisen.

### **Legal Basis for Inclusion of Students Educational Settings**

The key legislation resulting in the provision of educational services for students with disabilities in inclusive settings in public schools was the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Originally passed in 1975 as Public Law 94-142, this law has resulted in dramatic changes in how students with disabilities are identified and served. The re-authorization of the law in 2004 continues to mandate appropriate services for this group of students. While IDEA does not use the word *inclusion*, the intent of the legislation has always been to ensure that students with disabilities are

educated with their non-disabled peers to the extent possible. Specifically, IDEA requires schools to provide educational services for students with disabilities in the “least restrictive setting”, meaning that *to the maximum extent appropriate*, students with disabilities should be educated together with students without disabilities.

IDEA mandates appropriate educational services for students with disabilities, ages birth through 21, in public schools. It does not impact students older than 21 or postsecondary educational institutions, meaning that when students with disabilities exit public schools the IDEA-mandate does not follow them into postsecondary educational programs. This has resulted in many students with disabilities not having access to postsecondary educational opportunities.

Two pieces of federal legislation, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA, 1990) do apply to postsecondary programs. Section 504 applies to all entities, including postsecondary educational programs, that receive federal money, while the ADA applies to every postsecondary educational program that is not associated with a church. Therefore, every college or university that receives federal money, which is the majority, must comply with Section 504 while most others must comply with the ADA. These laws, considered civil rights laws for individuals with disabilities, prohibit colleges and universities from discriminating against individuals with disabilities. As a result of these protections, individuals with disabilities who are *otherwise qualified* to participate in postsecondary educational programs must be provided that opportunity.

Section 504 outlines specific requirements for postsecondary education programs. Subpart E of the regulations focuses specifically on postsecondary

education, underlining the fact that qualified individuals with disabilities may not be denied or subjected to discrimination in admission or retention on the basis of a disability. Regarding admissions, this includes (104.42):

- Not limiting the number or proportion of individuals with disabilities who are admitted;
- Not using any test or criteria that disproportionately discriminates against individuals with disabilities;
- Selecting admission tests that reflect the aptitude of individuals with disabilities rather than their sensory, manual, or speaking limitations;
- Not inquiring about the existence of a disability during the admissions process.

A key focus of Section 504 related to students with disabilities in postsecondary settings is the application of academic adjustments. Section 104.44 specifically requires postsecondary educational programs to make modifications in academic requirements that prevent discrimination on the basis of a disability against qualified students. This does not mean that colleges and universities must alter their academic standards, but rather that they must provide accommodations and modifications that result in equal opportunities for students with disabilities to achieve success on those standards. Colleges and universities are therefore not allowed to deny students the use of tape recorders, service animals, or other supports they need to be successful. Regulations also require colleges and universities to take into consideration accommodations needed by students with disabilities during course evaluations.

Colleges and universities are also required to provide auxiliary aids to students with disabilities to ensure equal opportunities. These could include taped textbooks,

sign language interpreters, readers in libraries, and adapted equipment for students with physical impairments. The law does not require colleges and universities to provide "attendants, individually prescribed devices, readers for personal use or study, or other devices or services of a personal nature." (Section 104.44 (2) In addition to academic supports, Section 504 prohibits colleges and universities from discriminating against qualified students with disabilities in housing, financial assistance, physical education and athletics, counseling and placement services, and social organizations. The result of this legislation is that students who are otherwise qualified for educational programs in colleges and universities must be provided equal opportunities to access and achieve success in these programs.

Regardless of the legislation mandating equal access, weaknesses in campus-life services and infrastructure present obstacles to expanding postsecondary options. In 2009, the U.S. Department of Education brought together stakeholders and experts, including representatives from the National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation Research, the Office for Postsecondary Education, and the Office for Special Education Programs, to examine issues related to postsecondary education for students with intellectual disabilities. came together for the first. Among the critical areas addressed at this State of the Science Conference on Postsecondary Education for Students with Intellectual Disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2009) were campus life and university housing. Similar to students with intellectual disabilities, much work is needed to build capacity and infrastructure to support students with ASD on college campuses and to prepare them for productive careers and independent living.

### **Legislative Support for Career Preparation**

Postsecondary experiences lead to better employment and adult living outcomes (citation). The severity of the problem caused by inadequate preparation for integrated employment and adult living becomes clear when one considers that only 22% of adults with developmental disabilities are currently participating in integrated employment, and 57% are still receiving services in specialized facilities (Migliore & Butterworth, 2008). The Olmstead decision, President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health (Executive Order 13263, 2002), and Developmental Disabilities Assistance and Bill of Rights Act of 2000 address weaknesses in services to support independent living and employment. The Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 provides a framework to address the need for supports to fully include all persons in their communities. The New Freedom Initiative (2001) recognizes that people with disabilities need a complete and appropriate education to join their communities as equal members.

The 1978 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 recognize the problems of low employment and insufficient integration of persons with disabilities in their communities. The Act calls for models to promote inclusion and to foster full participation. The Higher Education Act of 2008 calls for expanded college access for students with ID through comprehensive transition and postsecondary programs. A major focus of the Higher Education Act is the need to develop postsecondary teaching strategies and curriculum that are consistent with Universal Design for Learning (UDL

In addition to the legal mandate to include students with disabilities in educational settings there is a strong philosophical basis for inclusion. In order to appreciate the history of inclusion, we must look back to the 1960s when the term *normalization* was coined to describe the movement to create opportunities for individuals with disabilities

that were as *normal* as possible. The normalization movement set the stage for inclusion by underlining the importance of creating typical opportunities for individuals with disabilities, whether in employment, community living, or educational opportunities.

### **Supports and Services: Programs for Students with Autism in Higher Education**

As colleges are beginning to develop innovative systems to deliver services and supports for students on the autism spectrum, funding initiatives in the US Department of Education are helping to enable institutions of higher education (IHE's) to build and sustain PSE programs. When provided appropriate supports, young adults with ASD can be engaged in academic, social, and vocational programs, participate fully in the college community, and reside in college dorms. It is possible to utilize research-based practices based on person-centered planning and Universal Design for Learning to create positive learning environments that provide opportunities for academic enrichment, socialization, self-advocacy, and career development leading to productive employment and independent living. Indeed, empowered and self-determined individuals represent the highest goal for inclusive programs (Eisenman, 2007).

### **Components of Successful PSE Inclusion**

Successful PSE inclusion programs are, in many ways, similar to successful inclusion programs in P-12; students need to have active participation in all aspects of postsecondary education programs, a sense of belonging, and finally, there must be a shared ownership among faculty and others who provide supports (Voltz, Brazil, & Ford, 2001). Similar to P-12, if students do not feel like they belong with their peers, then inclusion cannot be successful. Therefore, a sense of belonging and social acceptance is critical. For this to occur, professional staff at postsecondary institutions must work

together to create an environment where students can belong and achieve success.

### **Collaboration**

A critical requirement for successful inclusion and support of students with ASD is collaboration among stakeholders (Roberts, 2010). These stakeholders may include service agencies (e.g., Vocational Rehabilitation), advocacy groups, state and local education departments, IHE administration and faculty, admissions offices, university disabilities services offices, offices for residential life, career services, and advisement offices. In particular, collaboration is essential for this new group of college attendees in orchestrating the provision of customized accommodations and services. IHE personnel are finding that they need to broaden the support menu from currently available accommodations, such as note takers and distraction-free testing sites, to include academic and campus-life coaches, peer mentors, and social communication facilitation (Zager & Alpern, 2010). Zager and Alpern found that it was necessary for stakeholders within the university to come together on an ongoing basis to plan, deliver, and readjust supports and services.

### **Academic Studies**

Best practice dictates that college curriculum should not be modified (i.e., diluted) for students with disabilities (Grigal & Hart, 2009). The academic integrity of college degree programs must remain intact for all students. Including students with ASD in college courses does not need to result in altering course standards. Academic rigor can, and should be maintained through the provision of individualized supports, such as an academic coach. The role of the academic coach may vary from student to student.

For example, some students may require the coach to assist them with organization and time management while others may need their work organized into approachable chunks. Still, others may need their coach to accompany them to classes, through transition periods, and/or until appropriate behaviors are developed.

For some students with ASD, the current definition of academic success may need to be revisited so that attainment of an undergraduate degree is not necessarily the ultimate goal for every college attendee. Rather, it is important to realize that education is about individual growth, increased independence, growth in social competence, career preparation, and self-determination. Educating students among their same-age peers on college campuses can contribute to these vital outcomes. Today most transition-age youth with high functioning autism are still being educated in high school settings, among younger students or students with more severe disabilities (Zager, Klainberg, & Myers, 2008). Neurotypical students with whom the students with ASD have spent the majority of their time have graduated from secondary school and are in college. Enabling and empowering students with ASD to attend classes through provision of academic supports will continue and extend the inclusion movement into the new frontier of postsecondary education.

### **Campus-Life Inclusion**

Campus-life involves residential living and participation in activities and events. Competence in personal hygiene, nutrition, and community safety skills is required in order to live independently. Students with ASD may require extensive services to learn to live independently and to participate in college activities.

Most postsecondary institutions have not yet considered how to provide

adequate housing supports to students with ASD (Eisenman & Mancini, 2010; Grigal, Moffit, & Kisa, 2010). Services to support students with disabilities in university housing should foster independent living skill development in the natural environment. The type and level of support is critical so that students may benefit from safe and enriching experiences.

### **Conclusion**

Over the past few years, an increasing number of students with ASD have begun to consider college a viable option. With adequate support, it is possible for these students to engage in meaningful academic, social, and career development programs; and to participate actively in their college community. Such opportunities for academic enrichment, self-advocacy, and career development are more likely to lead to productive employment and independent living than continuation in traditional secondary programs until age 21.

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