

HIGHER EDUCATION ACT

Fact Sheet

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The funding authorization for programs in the **Higher Education Act** (HEA) of 1965 will expire during the 108th Congress. In preparing to reauthorize HEA, it is important to focus on the positive outcomes that have been reported for youth with disabilities, and to expand and enhance the strategies and practices that are known to improve outcomes. To guide Congress on disability-related HEA reauthorization issues, the National Council on Disability (NCD) published a paper, *People with Disabilities and Postsecondary Education*, which can be accessed at <http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/education.html>. NCD's paper highlights the challenges for students with disabilities in the nation's university systems and recommends solutions that would result in better support systems for postsecondary students with disabilities.

The Issues

Education is the key factor in achieving employment and thus an enhanced quality of life for people with disabilities. Students with disabilities, who now are estimated to represent nearly 10 percent of all college students, currently experience postsecondary outcomes far inferior to those of their non-disabled peers. While federal law requires a full array of supports and services for students with disabilities through their high school years, there is little that has prepared them for the barriers and lack of adequate disability related supports and services they will face in university systems. Several interrelated issues impact student preparation and access to postsecondary education:

- **Transition to Postsecondary Education**
 - Students often lack advocacy skills, knowledge of how their disability will impact their education, and an understanding of how to negotiate services in postsecondary settings. Many academic and career counselors lack the necessary skills to provide guidance to students with disabilities.
- **Student Progress in Postsecondary Education**
 - The retention rates of students with disabilities in postsecondary education have been considerably low (Stodden, 2001). This is due to the lack of supports,

inconsistent interpretations of accommodation requirements, and lack of awareness on the part of faculty members regarding disability issues.

- **Financial Aid Barriers**

- Many students with disabilities are faced with greater costs than those without disabilities. Many students with disabilities are forced to pay for disability related accommodations themselves. They may also require an extended period of time to complete their degree, which increases the final cost of their education. Most students with disabilities are not aware that their financial aid packages can be increased to match their out-of-pocket disability related expenses calculations, as required by HEA. For more information please refer to the NCD Youth Advisory Committee paper, *Students with Disabilities Face Financial Aid Barriers* at http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/advisory/youth/yac_aidbarriers.html.

- **Difficulties in Interagency Collaboration**

- Fragmentation and inconsistencies in service provision and differences in service emphases among educational institutions and service agencies result in varying information being provided to students with disabilities.

NCD Recommendations

The following recommendations are designed to help policy makers attend to the gaps in the knowledge, practices and policies involving people with disabilities in postsecondary education, and to build on the progress already made to create a seamless system to improve the educational outcomes for all students with disabilities.

1) Improve Access to Postsecondary Education through the Formation of a Federal Commission. A Federal Commission is needed to investigate and resolve discrepancies and issues across secondary and postsecondary institutions and to study and develop solutions for systemic transition problems for students with disabilities.

2) Improve Access to Postsecondary Education by Providing Information on Postsecondary Educational Support Provision. A national Web-based Assessment Center and Register of organized data and information on disability supports and services is recommended to enable students and families to better anticipate what supports and services will be needed, and whether they are available, in postsecondary settings.

3) Improve Participation and Persistence in Postsecondary Education through Formation of a National Technical Assistance Network. A national network of technical assistance centers should be established to assist faculty and disability support programs in postsecondary education settings, and to provide effective practice models, training of faculty and support personnel, and technical assistance to programs and people with disabilities.

4) Improve Financial Aid for People with Disabilities in Postsecondary Education with New Flexibility. Amendments to the Higher Education Act are needed to remove barriers to financial aid for students with disabilities and to provide funds for research, demonstrations, and training on disability-related financial aid issues.

5) Address Emerging Needs through Targeted Personnel Preparation and Research.

Postsecondary education personnel preparation should include research and training on disability-related supports and services and should emphasize recruiting, educating and providing accommodations to teachers with disabilities.

To address the numerous barriers and gaps in knowledge that remain, the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act should contain a mandate to conduct evidence-based research that will yield a clearinghouse for the collection, classification, and ongoing dissemination of data regarding the status of people with disabilities in postsecondary education and subsequent professional employment.

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