



INNOVATION ABSTRACTS

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PREPARING FOR OUR DISABLED STUDENTS

Disabled individuals—quadriplegics and other physically compromised individuals—can hope to be self-sufficient, productive citizens. Voice-activated computer programs, such as Dragon Dictate, help them write papers without a keyboard. A remote control device, Tongue Touch Keypad, installed in the roof of the mouth, can activate electronically programmed devices. Custom vans and safer wheel chairs are recent innovations. Were it not for such technologies, we may never have been privy to the phenomenal work of Stephen Hawking; his Big Bang and Black Holes theories have given him a place next to Einstein in scientific history. Yet, he is afflicted with a motor neuron disease that has confined him to a wheelchair for most of his adult life and rendered him unable to speak for 30 years. Equalizer, a computer program, allows him to select words from a series of menus on a computer screen, and using a hand-operated switch, head or eye movement, send them to a speech synthesizer—and so he has been able to share his knowledge with the world.

Hawking's success in overcoming his disability has been largely dependent upon a very strong family support system, and, of course, funding and support from institutions and people who realized his great talent. Technology, important legislation, and improved public awareness have started the ball rolling. It is up to us, especially at the two-year college level, to keep it moving. Disabled student enrollment in postsecondary institutions has more than doubled in the last 10 years, and most of these new students are choosing community and technical colleges. Are we ready for them?

My first disabled student was a young woman, perhaps in her early 30s, with cerebral palsy. Despite her severe physical handicap that was accompanied by intermittent, incoherent speech, she was adamant about fulfilling every single requirement that more able-bodied students were expected to complete, including active participation in class discussions. Her only request was for extra time. She was lucky to have a stu-

dent helper, who assisted her in note-taking, writing out assignments, taking tests, and more personal matters. I was touched when that woman was wheeled across the stage at graduation and again three years later when a personally handwritten invitation arrived, requesting my presence at her university graduation.

My association with that student and her particularly attentive helper changed the way I regard people with disabilities and awakened me to the important role community and technical colleges can and must play in their educational advancement. It caused me to wonder about the others who followed her, and the profound disabilities that seem to spark an especially determined effort to succeed. How could they manage such sustained perseverance? What drives them to enter an educational system that was created primarily for more able-bodied students and expect to make it? Just as important, how was my college faring in its role to help them?

To my knowledge, there had been no regular open forums, as at some larger schools, in which students with disabilities could share concerns and ideas with the college community, so I decided to provide such an outlet through an essay project.

Over the next five or six semesters, I invited my biology students who had severe physical limitations to write personal narratives in which they could talk indirectly and anonymously about their conditions, how they were faring in school, and any concerns they might have about the college, its personnel, and its students. The 20 or so participants were quadriplegics from recent road accidents; victims of cerebral palsy, multiple sclerosis, frequent seizures, and strokes, and individuals who had lost limbs.

Their candor about their disabilities and the daily difficulties they encountered to attend and stay in school was humbling. Their faith in God and abundant praise for family and other caregivers, including college personnel, clearly indicated that a strong emotional support system from family and the educational institution was the single most important element in their academic achievement. They shared a common determination to enter a university, most to major in the social sciences so they could help others in similar circumstances. They



fully anticipated doing what the more able-bodied students expected to do—e.g., join the workforce and become financially independent. Such expectations would have been naïve years ago, but now their goals may be realized, especially with increasing cooperation from the public sector. Many programs are underway to employ skilled individuals with disabilities. Over an eight-year period, for example, an internship program developed by the American Association for the Advancement of Science—ENTRY POINT!—has placed more than 350 interns who suffer from blindness, deafness, cerebral palsy, paralysis, and other conditions. Most of these students are now either employed in science- and engineering-related jobs or enrolled in graduate schools.

As recent figures indicate, community and technical colleges are where they will more than likely begin their training. Our size and reputation for serving students in a compassionate and personal way promise an ideal venue for disabled students' transitions to independence. One student participating in this project spoke of how she had entered our college and then decided to transfer to a university before graduating. Not only did she find the coursework far too demanding under her circumstances, but she felt lost and profoundly distressed in a sea of anonymity. She wrote about eventually returning "home, to my little community college that makes me feel I am important."

While many community colleges are prepared for increased disabled student enrollments, we can be better prepared—not only with physical accommodations, but in understanding this segment of the college population. While numerous innovative disability services and facilities are available, data gathered by the National Center for Education Statistics indicate that fewer than half of America's postsecondary institutions the size of ours—i.e., less than 3,000 students—have adaptive equipment/technologies, textbooks on tape, interpreters/transliterators, or course substitutions or waivers. Only 55% have readers, classroom note-takers, or scribes. Few have regular workshops or seminars available to college personnel to acquaint them with the "etiquette" involved in working with the disabled. We believe that student helpers should complete an "orientation to etiquette" workshop, perhaps for one credit. One disabled young female essayist expressed agonizing frustration over how her note-taker, whom she paid out of her monthly Social Security insurance money, had left her just before midterms, and she could not locate another. With some prodding, the note-taker later agreed to resume the job, but her initial behavior was unacceptable. And, a mature woman—a study-tutor for a student with cerebral palsy—expressed concern that she had never been briefed about the parameters of her assistance.

Clearly, improving institutional training for understanding and effectively working with this growing segment of the student population is critical to our and their success.

Most of our colleges have dealt with the basic compliance requirements stemming from the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and probably all college campuses have a Disability Services Office or equivalent, but we can certainly do more. Recently, Syracuse University formed the Beyond Compliance Coordination Committee, in which faculty, staff, and students with disabilities meet regularly to identify problems. Together, they have identified several major areas that must be addressed to improve disability services beyond ADA requirements.

It is a matter of mindset and commitment. The more familiar we become with the daily difficulties many disabled students endure, the easier it will be to remove obstacles to their successful learning. In praise of her high school teachers, one of my essayists said, "I graduated from high school with support from teachers who recognized that there was nothing wrong with my brain—just my body." If this were the case throughout our society, more physically challenged individuals would be in postsecondary institutions and eventually hold jobs in the community. Currently, only about one-third of disabled people work; and of these, only a quarter works full-time.

Finally, we must consider how to recruit more disabled individuals into community and technical colleges. The National Center for Education Statistics reports that in 2000, 56% of America's disabled youngsters left public schools with a diploma but only two-thirds went on to college. We can change that. It requires working closely with high schools, having rehabilitation facilities, and working with social service organizations, churches, and the like.

Thinking "outside the box" does not require a lot of money necessarily, but it does require decisiveness, cooperation, and imagination. What a grand opportunity for community and technical colleges, some of which may be suffering from dwindling enrollment, to make an important difference in the lives of these special people and society as a whole, while at the same time improving our institutions. With interest, effort, and coordination, we will be prepared to receive these students and improve their opportunities for success.

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