

Access to Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Disabilities

Since Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990:

A Literature Review

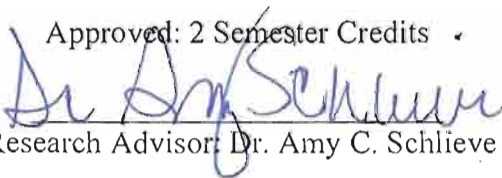
by

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A Research Paper  
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the  
Master of Science Degree  
in

Education

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Dr. Amy Schlieve", is written over the printed name.

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The Graduate School

University of Wisconsin-Stout

May, 2010

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**Title:** *Access to Postsecondary Educational Opportunities for Students with Disabilities Since Passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990: A Literature Review*

**Graduate Degree/ Major:** MS in Education

**Research Advisor:** Amy Schlieve, Ph.D.

**Month/Year:** May, 2010

**Number of Pages:** 42

**Style Manual Used:** American Psychological Association, 6<sup>th</sup> edition

**Abstract**

People with disabilities represent nearly 20 percent of the population in the United States making them the largest minority group. Over the past 37 years, significant disability legislation has been passed to prohibit discrimination and provide equal opportunities, especially in the areas of education and employment. The *Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act* has been successful in primary and secondary education. It does not apply to students with disabilities attending higher education. As a result, more people with disabilities have been enrolling in higher education; however, they continue to be underrepresented compared to people without disabilities.

Research shows that people with disabilities who have attended postsecondary schools have more success finding employment than their peers with disabilities who ended their education at the high school level. The employment rate for people with disabilities continues to

be about 30 percent, which is nearly the same as it was prior to the passage of the *Americans with Disabilities Act* of 1990.

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**Acknowledgments**

I would like to thank my wife Cyndy for her love and support over the past 25 years of our married life, especially the past few years while I was often preoccupied researching and writing my thesis. I know we were not able to attend some personal and family events we would have enjoyed while I was earning a Master of Education degree from the University of Wisconsin Stout. Your assistance in editing my thesis and encouragement throughout this project, especially when I felt totally overwhelmed, is something I will always treasure. I love you very much and appreciate everything you do for me and our family.

I would also like to express my thanks to our three children, Dana, Orion and Gabriel for being so understanding of my hectic schedule while I was attending graduate school and working full-time. I am extremely proud of you and our grandchildren, and your many accomplishments. I cherish the time we share together and wish we had had more occasions to be together while I was writing my thesis.

I would like to thank Dr. Amy Schlieve for being my thesis advisor. I am grateful for everything you have done on my behalf so I could fulfill my dream of earning a master's degree. I appreciated your meeting with me off campus when I had numerous questions regarding my research project. I realize how busy your schedule has been, yet, you always responded to my questions and concerns without delay. I will always be grateful for your willingness to share your knowledge and expertise with me over the past three years.

I would like to thank Dr. Amy Gillett for your written recommendation to the graduate college Exception's Committee on my behalf, which gave me the opportunity to complete my

thesis. I appreciate your assistance and advice over the years while I attended graduate school at UW Stout.

Finally, I would like to thank Jo Dee Martin for your skillful editing. I appreciate all your time, effort, and suggestions, which enhanced the final draft of my thesis paper.

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## Chapter I: Introduction

People with disabilities have been treated poorly throughout history and around the world. Our society has failed to appreciate the abilities of people with disabilities and still discriminates against them (Shapiro, 1993, as cited in Gadbow & Du Bois, 1998). However, some famous people with disabilities known for their major achievements include: Alexander Graham Bell, Thomas Edison, Isaac Newton, Socrates, Albert Einstein, Julius Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, and Franklin Roosevelt.

Nearly 50 million people with disabilities in the U.S. continue to face discrimination educationally, economically, and socially because of their disability. Even with the passage of significant landmark disability legislation by the U.S. Congress, in attempts to correct the injustices committed against people with disabilities, they continue to be subjected to unfair and unequal treatment. As our population ages, the lack of educational and employment opportunities provided to people with disabilities creates an additional financial burden on society.

The U.S. Congress, addressing the discrimination and prejudice toward people with disabilities in our country, stated,

Individuals with disabilities are a discreet and insular minority who have been faced with restrictions and limitations, subjected to a history of purposeful unequal treatment, and relegated to a position of political powerlessness in our society, based on characteristics that are beyond the control of such individuals and resulting from stereotypic assumptions not truly indicative of the individual ability of such individuals to participate in, and contribute to, society... The continuing existence of unfair and unnecessary discrimination and prejudice denies people with disabilities the opportunity to compete on an equal basis and to pursue those opportunities for which our free society is justifiably famous, and costs the United States billions of dollars in unnecessary expenses resulting from dependency and non-productivity (Cory, Taylor, Walker & White, 2003, p. 8)

Some people with disabilities may experience multiple disadvantages (Lakey, Barnes, &

Parry, 2001). A student with a disability, who also is a member of an ethnic minority or living in poverty, may face additional discrimination while pursuing education objectives, unlike their peers without a disability (Bignall & Butt, 2000).

In the past 37 years, federal and state disability legislation has resulted in better access and support for students with disabilities in education. The three most significant laws impacting education today are: *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act* (P.L. 93-112) (Section 504) of 1973, the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* (P.L. 94-142) of 1975, which was renamed the *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (P.L. 101-476) (*IDEA*) in 1990, and the *Americans with Disabilities Act* (P.L. 101-336) (*ADA*) of 1990, which required educational opportunities and/or access for people with disabilities. The ADA broadened Section 504 in an effort to further eliminate discrimination against people with disabilities, and is one of the most important and beneficial pieces of disability legislation for people with or without disabilities. President George H.W. Bush signed the *Americans with Disabilities Act* into law on July 26, 1990.

Prior to the requirements of Section 504 and the ADA, the *Equal Protection Clause* in the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment of the U.S. Constitution provided rights for college students with disabilities. The 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment continues to apply to higher education, by declaring, “No state shall...deny to any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of the laws” (U.S. Constitutional Amendment XIV § 1). Wisconsin also has state laws against the discrimination of individuals with disabilities in its public schools, technical colleges, and universities. Students in Wisconsin are not to be denied access to any course or school on the basis of their disability.

Changes in federal and state laws have had a significant impact on students with disabilities in education. More students with disabilities have enrolled in pre-kindergarten through high school education programs and have a greater interest in achieving a postsecondary



education (Hall, Kleinert, & Kearns, 2000). Students with disabilities transitioning from high school to college need to be aware of how changes in the disability laws will affect them in higher education. Section 504 and the ADA are civil rights laws that prohibit discrimination toward people with disabilities in their pursuit of higher education.

In primary and secondary schools, inclusion has replaced policies that kept students with disabilities separated from mainstream students. Young people with special needs are able to attend school with their peers and graduate from high school in ever-increasing numbers. More high school graduates with disabilities are able to enroll in postsecondary schools because they have not given up on their future. This group continues to grow as their success and achievement in education has become an inspiration for others.

Some secondary schools fail to properly inform students with disabilities about the differences in the disability laws they will encounter in higher education (Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003). Students should be aware that educational services under IDEA which were provided in primary and secondary schools, are not available to them at the postsecondary level (Madaus, 2005).

The parents of students with disabilities are more involved in their children's college pursuit than parents of children without disabilities. Often the parents of children with disabilities say "we are applying" to college rather than "my son or daughter is applying" (Madaus, 2005). Parents want more information available to them so they can better assist their disabled child's transition from high school into college (U.S. General Accounting Office, 2003).

Many high school seniors, with or without a disability, invest a substantial amount of time and effort applying for admission to postsecondary schools. Admission standards have become more demanding over the years (Sax, 2003). High school seniors, especially those with disabilities, are overwhelmed by the process of planning for college because they are not

familiar with the postsecondary school system (Cushman, 2005).

In 2007, Conley determined success in high school classes is not an adequate measurement for college readiness for students with disabilities. Conley (2007) also determined that college readiness for students with disabilities should be based upon their “intersecting facets” which include:

- writing skills
- study skills
- coping skills
- critical thinking skills (Conley, 2007).

Success in higher education often depends on students with disabilities utilizing the available resources and assistance. Students with disabilities attending higher education often lack familiarity with the resources and services available at college. They assume when they actually need accommodations or services, colleges will have them readily available. Students with disabilities need to be knowledgeable with regard to accessibility, available accommodations, and the requirement that they must disclose their disability in order to request an accommodation. They are the only person who has the right to disclose their disability or request an accommodation (Gamble, 2000). Most colleges have students with disabilities and provide them with varying levels of accommodations and services to improve student access and opportunities for success (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2000).

In American society, attending college represents successful achievement after graduation from high school. Admission into postsecondary schools creates additional opportunities to attain greater social status, form additional friendships, and develop resources to draw upon the rest of a person’s life. Students with disabilities often make decisions to attend postsecondary school the same way their peers without disabilities do, by taking into consideration the schools location, number of students enrolled, programs offered, extra-

curricular activities, and financial resources.

A commonly referred to 1996 study by Blackorby and Wagner, which continues to be cited in recent research, found 78 percent of all high school students were interested in pursuing a college education compared to only 37 percent of students with disabilities (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Ten percent of students with disabilities in 2005, within two-years of their high school graduation, enrolled at two-year colleges and nearly six percent enrolled at four-year colleges. Their peers without disabilities enrolled at 12 percent and 28 percent respectively, which indicates students without disabilities are around 5 times more likely to attend a four-year college within two years of graduating from high school, than students with disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). Recent changes in disability laws and social attitudes have created more opportunities for students with disabilities to attend institutions of higher education. The two-year institutions offer more individualized programs and services to students with disabilities than four-year colleges (National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports [NCSPES], 2000b).

Even though students with disabilities have been attending college in greater numbers, they are still less likely to enroll than students without disabilities (Wagner et al.,2005). Although progress has been made, students with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in postsecondary institutions. People with disabilities continue to have fewer opportunities in higher education and employment than people without disabilities. Additional legislation with requirements for educational and employment outcomes may be needed to insure everyone in society is treated fairly.

People with disabilities who have attended higher education are more likely to be successful in their employment and community endeavors. A college education creates

opportunities such as obtaining a job with healthcare and other benefits which can potentially increase their quality of life. Research shows that students with disabilities who fulfill their college requirements are able to find similar jobs and salaries to their college peers without disabilities (Task Force on Postsecondary Education, 2000).

### *Statement of the Problem*

Most students encounter obstacles in their pursuit of higher education. Students with disabilities face additional challenges such as discrimination, a reduction in disability services, fewer available accommodations, and the requirement that they must disclose and provide current documentation of their disability in order to request an accommodation. As a result, students with disabilities continue to be less likely to attend college or enjoy successful educational outcomes compared to students without disabilities, despite significant disability legislation designed to remedy this inequity.

### *Purpose of the Study*

The purpose of this critical review of literature is to determine why students with disabilities continue to be underrepresented in higher education and have less desirable education and employment outcomes than students without disabilities, following passage of the ADA.

### *Research Objectives*

1. To identify what percentage of students with or without disabilities have enrolled in postsecondary education, prior to and after, the ADA became law.
2. To better understand the impact of disability laws and relevant court decisions on students with disabilities, as well as people without disabilities, in higher education and employment.
3. To determine whether ADA has been effective in reducing discrimination and

creating equal opportunities intended for students with disabilities who are seeking a college education.

4. To evaluate whether additional disability services and supports may be necessary at postsecondary schools to create an equal opportunity for students with disabilities.

#### *Assumptions and Limitations of the Study*

The researcher assumes the information collected in this review of literature, about opportunities students with disabilities have to attend higher education, was accurate. It is also assumed the figures used were reliable because they were collected from governmental agencies and research professionals.

There are several limitations of this study. First, only a portion of the vast information available on this topic was reviewed due to the time constraints and scope of this paper. Additionally, the researcher determined what information was the most appropriate and relevant to include. Finally, the researcher's perspective may have been skewed by personal values, beliefs, and prior experience as a licensed social worker.

#### *Definition of Terms*

*A person with a disability* – Is “any person who, (i) has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of such person's major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment” (WTCS, 2002).

*Accommodation* – A service or support offered to qualified students with disabilities involving a change, exception, or adjustment made to assist a person with disabilities in order for them to have an opportunity to perform the requirements of a course or program (WTCS, 2002).

*Americans with Disabilities Act (P. L. 101-336)* – Federal legislation passed July 26, 1990, which prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities and applies to both the public and private sectors, (Wilde, 2004, p. 120).

*Carl Perkins Vocational Education Act* (P. L. 98-524) of 1984 - Provides federal funds for educationally, economically, and socially disadvantaged students including students with disabilities in vocational education (Paquette & Tuttle, 2003, p. 199).

*Education of All Handicapped Children Act* (P.L. 94-142) of 1975 - Mandates “free and appropriate” public education for all children with a disability and provides funds for special education, (Paquette & Tuttle, 2003, p. 199).

*Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)* (P. L. 101-476) of 1990 – A federal law passed in 1975 which provides federal funding for special education services for children with disabilities from ages three to 21 or until graduation from high school. IDEA requires a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) through an *Individualized Education Program (IEP)* (WTCS, 2006).

*Office for Civil Rights (OCR)* – An agency under the U.S. Department of Education responsible for enforcement of Section 504 (WTCS, 2006).

*Postsecondary School* – An institution of higher education beyond high school (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

*Private College or University* – Postsecondary schools funded and operated by the private sector rather than the government, usually having higher tuitions and lower enrollments than public colleges (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

*Public College or University* – Government funded postsecondary schools which allow state or local residents to pay lower tuitions (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

*Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act* – Civil rights legislation signed into law in 1973 which prohibits discrimination against people with disabilities by reducing obstacles in education pre-school through graduate school. The wording commonly associated with Section 504 is: “No otherwise qualified individual with handicaps in the United States...shall, solely by reason of her

or his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance” (Paquette & Tuttle, 2003, p. 204).

*Self-advocacy Skills* – Effective communication by an individual with disabilities in an effort to secure appropriate access and accommodations (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

*Technical College* – A postsecondary school specializing in employment related training for students who wish to pursue vocational diplomas, associate degrees, and certificates within a one or two year period (Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2007).

*Transition* – A student’s pursuit of higher education upon completion of high school.

*Wisconsin Technical College System (WTCS)* - A system of two year technical colleges and outreach centers located in 16 districts throughout Wisconsin which provides over 300 programs for students (COWS, 2008).

## Chapter II: Literature Review

### *Introduction*

This chapter includes some of the challenges people with disabilities in the U.S. have encountered in their pursuit of higher education. Despite passage of significant federal and state legislation since 1973, people with disabilities continue to be discriminated against by other members of society. The statistical data that follows clearly shows that people with disabilities are treated differently and have fewer opportunities in education and employment than people without disabilities.

The most recent U.S. Census was completed in 2000 and people with disabilities accounted for 49.7 million of the 258.2 million Americans older than five and non-institutionalized (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). Males ages five to 65 had a higher disability rate than females in the same age group. Men older than 65 had a lower disability rate than women over age 65. The highest disability rate, 24.3 percent was reported by Blacks, Native Americans and Alaskan Natives. Whites without Hispanic or Latino descent responded with 18.3 percent, while Asians reported only 16.6 percent. People with disabilities living in poverty were reported at 17.6 percent compared to 10.6 percent for those without disabilities. Poverty rates for children ages five to 15 were 25 percent if they were disabled and 15.7 percent if they were not (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

The National Postsecondary Student Aid Study (NPSAS) found that nine percent of students enrolled in higher education reported a disability in 2000, which increased to 11 percent in 2004 and remained unchanged in 2008 (GAO, 2009). For a ten year period ending in 2007, enrollment in public colleges by undergraduate students with disabilities increased by 20 percent



in California and 40 percent in New York (GAO, 2009). In 2008, the NPSAS also revealed nearly 57 percent of students with disabilities were women and the average age for all students with disabilities changed from 30 years old in 2000 to 26 years old in 2008 (GAO, 2009). The NPSAS further reported approximately 70 percent of these students were enrolled in public colleges, similar to their peers without disabilities (GAO, 2009).

The National Longitudinal Transitional Study (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Levine, & Garza, 2006) found that high school graduation rates for students with disabilities increased by 17 percent from 1987 to 2003, and their enrollment rate in higher education increased by 32 percent (National Council on Disability, 2003; Wagner et al., 2005).

As students with disabilities began attending college in greater numbers, they were not adequately prepared for the challenges of postsecondary education (Hong, Ivy, Gonzalez & Ehrensberger, 2007)). Over half the students with disabilities who enrolled in college withdrew prior to graduation (National Council on Disability, 2003). The high dropout rate was caused in part by the faculty at many postsecondary schools not having received adequate disability training and they were not aware of the accommodations and services available to students with disabilities (Hong et al. 2007). Some teachers lack the necessary skills or training to teach students with disabilities. According to the National Council on Disability (2003), special education teachers who thought they were doing a good job with their students did not feel as overwhelmed with their work load as special education teachers who believed they were not doing a good job.

More students with disabilities enroll in two-year postsecondary schools than in four-year colleges (COWS, 2008). Some two-year colleges may require a placement test, however, most will allow high school students with a diploma or GED to enroll. Four-year colleges generally

have higher admission standards that often require a competitive ACT or SAT score prior to acceptance.

At the University of Arizona in 2007, about 1,600 of 36,000 students reported a disability, of which 1,100 students specifically reported a learning disability compared to only 11 students in 1980 (Cole, 2007). Carol Funks, the Associate Director of Disabilities at the University of Arizona said, “The increase isn’t a reflection of more students who have [learning disabilities] but more who have been diagnosed and are willing to come forward and ask for help.” She further stated, “There are an increasing number of people who are ready for college because the high schools are recognizing and preparing the students rather than just assuming they’re not smart enough” (Cole, 2007). As high school students transition into college, it is important they choose a college that best meets their needs. However, students with disabilities have to additionally consider the availability of accommodations they may need.

In Jackson County, KY, a cooperative educational program was created to transition 18 to 21 year old students with moderate to severe disabilities between their high school and Asbury College, located in their community. The cooperative program was developed by high school teachers, college faculty, school administrators, parents, students with and without disabilities and local employers. Seven of the 14 students with moderate to severe disabilities at the Jackson County High School, ages 18 to 20, were invited to attend the new program between Asbury College and their high school (Hall, 2000).

The high school provided their students with transportation and resources required under IDEA and Asbury College waived all fees for the students with moderate to severe disabilities to audit classes and join in college activities. The cooperative program created positive opportunities both in education and in the community. Students in the alternative program were

able to build on previous relationships they had formed with high school students without disabilities who now were attending Asbury College. The cooperative program brought about positive experiences which benefited students, teachers, administrators, parents, and others in the community. College students without disabilities experienced firsthand, the advantages of interaction with students who had moderate to severe disabilities, in their courses and activities (Hall, 2000).

### *Disability Laws in Education*

In the previous chapter, Section 504, IDEA, and ADA were briefly introduced as the three significant disability laws in American education today. This body of disability legislation was designed to provide students with disabilities more positive educational and employment opportunities. Since the passage of the ADA, civil rights and entitlements in Section 504 now apply to the private sector as well as all governmental agencies and programs. The ADA is one of the most comprehensive pieces of legislation protecting people with disabilities from further discrimination in our society.

The ADA contains five Titles to ensure persons with disabilities are being protected from further discrimination. Title I deals with employer and employee relationships. Title II covers public places, institutions, and transportation. Title III has authority over private organizations, institutions, and services used by the public. Title IV covers telephone services available to the public, including people with disabilities. Title V encompasses the various requirements which were not defined or covered under the previous Titles. Under Section 504 and Title II of the ADA, the U.S. Congress prohibited discrimination against individuals with disabilities (Denbo, 2003). Title III of the ADA does the same for most private schools.

After the ADA was passed, both public and private postsecondary institutions were forced into greater compliance with the new law and made their schools and programs more accessible. This positive change created better accessibility for students with disabilities as a result of the ADA's broad legislation, lawsuits, and more students demanding their rights to accommodations. Colleges were slow to make their programs more accessible to students with disabilities from the early 1970s through the 1980s, even though Section 504 had been enacted.

In addition to the challenges all students face when going from high school to college, students with disabilities have to deal with a significant change in supports and services available to them at the postsecondary level of education. In high school, under IDEA, special education programs using IEP's to provide services and supports, need to be designed for the appropriate educational outcomes in higher education. Postsecondary schools are only required under Section 504 and ADA to provide "generic" disability services to students with disabilities who meet eligibility requirements and request an accommodation (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002).

Section 504 and ADA continue to provide students with a disability civil rights which guarantees them equal access to higher education (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). To receive an accommodation in college, a student with a disability must make a request for disability services with the school's designated contact person, meet the eligibility requirements, and provide all necessary current documentation prior to receiving any reasonable accommodation. Appropriate documentation of the student's current condition must be provided and he/she must meet other criteria the school has established.

Section 504 and the ADA are not special education laws. Therefore, no federal requirements are based on educational outcomes for students with disabilities attending college.

Section 504 only requires reasonable accommodations be provided to ensure equal access to courses or programs. In determining a university's obligations, the court in *Wong v. Regents of the University of California* (1999) reasoned that when institutions of higher education provide accommodations, they are not required to "fundamentally alter" the program (Madaus, 2005). Madaus also found students with disabilities should not expect changes to the admissions process, course requirements, or programs that students without disabilities must meet for completion of a degree (Madaus, 2005).

The federal courts in their decisions, held a narrow interpretation of what it meant to be disabled. Many Americans with recognizable disabilities brought forth discrimination lawsuits and were told they were not considered disabled under the law. In 2000, the American Bar Association reported that people with disabilities taking their employers to court for discrimination, prevailed only eight percent of the time (Cory, et al., 2003). The U.S. Congress passed the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 which restored their original intent in the ADA of 1990, to provide people with disabilities in the U.S. extensive disability coverage.

The ADA Amendments Act transferred the enforcement powers to the U.S. government to make determinations as to whether a person with a disability was denied equal access and opportunity under the law. The U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR) is the enforcement agency in charge of reviewing compliance complaints of Section 504, while the ADA is enforced by the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ).

While Section 504 and the ADA apply to public and private postsecondary schools that receive any federal funds, IDEA mandates secondary schools demonstrate that students with disabilities are progressing academically. IDEA and IDEA Amendments Acts of 1997 (P.L. 105-17) and 2004 (P.L. 108-446) require school systems to include students with disabilities in

regular mainstream classrooms as much as possible. In 2005, the U.S. Department of Education directed schools on the implementation of IDEA by stating,

To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities including children in public or private institutions or care facilities, are educated with children who are nondisabled; and special classes, separate schooling or other removal of children from regular educational environment occurs only if the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily (Wikipedia, 2010, p. 3-4).

IDEA requires state and local assessments so that academic progress can be determined for all students, including those with disabilities. Assessment results were put in place to make school systems more accountable and to raise expectations for students with disabilities. Federal law allows schools to decide whether to have exit exam policies which would require a student to pass a test prior to receiving a diploma.

The implementation of IDEA in secondary schools, in contrast to the ADA and Section 504 in postsecondary schools, had significant differences which confused parents and teachers about the legal requirements and services of the disability laws. As students transition from secondary schools to college, there is often no mechanism for preparing them for the differences in rights and services available to students with disabilities (Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003). The transition from high school to college can be a burdensome experience for students with learning disabilities, parents, and professional staff assisting them.

Further disability legislation has been passed or modified in recent years. The *No Child Left Behind Act* (PL 107-110) of 2001 mandates an accountability system for every public school and their students and is required in all states. The requirements in the Act were implemented to improve educational outcomes for all students. In some cases, students with disabilities may encounter difficulties while attempting to enroll in college because of some of the requirements placed upon secondary schools by the *No Child Left Behind Act*. Some secondary schools chose

to focus on remedial educational tasks for students with disabilities, rather than course material which would prepare them for postsecondary education opportunities.

### *Court Decisions*

One of the most significant landmark civil rights cases decided in U.S. history was *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). This case gave equal education rights to all people including persons with disabilities. The court decision impacted the Civil Rights movement and children with disabilities who were previously separated from their non-disabled peers in schools and classes (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993, as cited in Getzl & Wehman, 2005). The U.S. Supreme Court found that school students who were being separated were being treated unequal.

Additional landmark cases which set legal precedence for people with disabilities in the U.S. were *Pennsylvania Association for Retarded Children v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania* (1971) and *Mills v. Board of Education of the District of Columbia* (1972), which led to the creation of the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* of 1975 (PL 94-142). This legislation gave legal rights and better access to public education for children with disabilities. In another court decision, *Abdo v. University of Vermont* (2003), colleges were mandated to provide a reasonable documentation process for students with disabilities.

Major changes in education provided new opportunities for students with disabilities to become more skilled and interested in pursuing a postsecondary education. As a result, students with disabilities began to demand similar rights they received in primary and secondary schools. Section 504 provided civil rights to the students with disabilities at any college or university where any public money was received. Often, postsecondary schools chose to narrowly interpret Section 504. As a result, the U.S. Congress clarified and revised their intentions when they

wrote the *Education for All Handicapped Children Act* of 1975. Following the U.S. Supreme Court's narrow interpretation of Section 504 decisions, Congress again strengthened Section 504 by passage of the *Civil Rights Restoration Act* of 1987 (PL 100-259). This Act gave postsecondary students with disabilities more rights and included all people, programs, and activities where federal funds were being received.

### *Secondary and Postsecondary Education*

Studies on adolescents with disabilities have previously focused on how they will survive in society, rather than providing the resources to create opportunities for success (Polat, Kalambouka, Boyle, & Nelson, 2001). Parents attempting to secure resources for their children with disabilities often lack the strong communication skills necessary to interact with the various health and educational service and support providers they need, placing them in a weakened position (Morris, 2002).

At the secondary level of education, schools and staff have a tendency to focus more attention on students with disabilities than students without disabilities, causing mixed results. Educational staff, students with disabilities, and their families, often have lower expectations and believe educational opportunities are less available to them than to their peers without disabilities (Stodden, Jones & Chang, 2002). Teachers sometimes stereotype students with disabilities and expect less from them in the classroom (Gray, 2002). If completing secondary school is perceived as a successful outcome, students with disabilities may choose not to pursue postsecondary education out of fear they may not be successful. The lack of a clear definition for positive results can interfere with the student with disabilities achieving their full potential.

Students with disabilities in secondary schools often spend part of their day in special education classrooms, segregated from their peers without disabilities. In these settings the



students often receive inferior curriculum (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003; Stodden, Galloway, and Stodden, 2003). According to Stodden et al. (2003), more attention was placed on remedial learning or behavior issues than on utilizing services and supports aimed at future academic success for students with disabilities.

Currently, at many secondary schools, students with disabilities are working more on their academic achievement and less on independent living skills. Requiring all students to take some college introductory courses may create more opportunities for students with disabilities to pursue a postsecondary education (Lehmann, Cobb, & Tochtermann, 2001).

A group of doctoral students studying students with disabilities at Syracuse University, created the Beyond Compliance Coordinating Committee. In 2003, their committee determined that the inclusion of students with disabilities is beneficial for postsecondary students and faculty because it creates awareness and provides opportunities to share individual experiences which would otherwise not occur (Cory, et al., 2003). The students without disabilities learn to challenge the established stereotypes and change their beliefs about students with disabilities (Cory, et al., 2003).

The committee believed it was in the best interest of colleges to do more than attempt to meet the basic requirements of disability laws. Although the ADA and Section 504 provide opportunities for students with disabilities to overcome discrimination, the results are not impressive. Since the ADA went into effect in 1992, progress has not been as favorable as expected. Unemployment rates for people with disabilities remained at nearly 70 percent, which is about the same as it was when the ADA became law (Cory, et al., 2003).

It is also common for some school administrators and employers to view people with disabilities as a significant draw on their budget. As a result, the administrators and employers

intentionally provide only enough disability resources to meet the minimum compliance requirements of federal law (Cory, et al., 2003).

### *Disability Services and Supports*

When students with disabilities attended primary and secondary schools, they were recognized and were provided with the necessary resources and services automatically (Heward, 2000). In postsecondary schools, there are no laws or requirements for schools or staff to assist students with disabilities until they formally disclose their disabilities and request accommodations or services. In college the burden shifts to the student to be more proactive in getting their disability diagnosed.

Some of the services and supports provided in special education programs at secondary schools end when the student with a disability graduates. Other services and supports may not be considered reasonable under Section 504 or the ADA while attending college. Postsecondary schools must consider the student's requested accommodation and the course requirements in making a determination whether the request is reasonable. Accommodations are not meant to guarantee the success of students with disabilities, but rather to give them an equal opportunity to be competitive in higher education.

Colleges receiving any federal money must provide disability services to any student with a disability who meets their criteria. Section 504 mandates colleges have a specific person assigned to coordinate services and supports for eligible students with disabilities in order to access reasonable accommodations. There is no fee for providing a student with a disability an accommodation, nor is any training required for the contact person. There are no standardized policies regarding accommodations for students with disabilities. Accommodations are often expensive for schools to provide. Therefore, they are not always available to students with

disabilities. Some colleges choose to provide additional services and supports, for example having a disability program in place with full-time staff to provide assistance to students with disabilities. Most of the disability programs offer differing levels of support to students with disabilities.

Postsecondary schools are not permitted to ask prospective students whether they have a disability, nor are they allowed to require documentation of a disability during the admissions process. Students are not required to self-disclose a disability unless they are requesting assistance from a support program. Postsecondary schools must accept students with disabilities if they meet the admissions criteria. College students with disabilities need to be aware of their rights and responsibilities to request and receive available accommodations and services. A student with a disability should request any reasonable accommodation they may need early on. It is important for a student with a disability and the college to complete an evaluation and determine whether the accommodation requested is appropriate prior to starting a course.

Some students with disabilities avoid enrolling in higher education because they are unfamiliar with the changes in the rights and services available to them at college. The students and their parents are often unaware of the decrease in disability services or supports available at postsecondary schools, until they arrive for classes (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

If a student's disability is identified in college, he/she should provide that information to his/her professors as early as possible. When a student with a disability falls behind in their classes or is at risk of failing, it may already be too late for them to request an accommodation. Some accommodations and services take time to put in place. The earlier a student with a disability requests an accommodation or support service, the more likely they are to receive the necessary assistance.

Students with disabilities are responsible in postsecondary education to request an accommodation to compete equally with their peers without disabilities. Whether a student chooses to disclose a disability is their right. However, should they encounter a problem in a course or program, the college is not required to provide an accommodation retroactively. Colleges are not required to change grades assigned prior to a student's disclosure of a disability (Madaus & Shaw, 2004). Individuals with disabilities attending postsecondary schools, who disclose their disability, have civil rights under the ADA and Section 504 which allows them to request a reasonable accommodation to make their college experience more enjoyable and successful. Students with disabilities who disclosed their disabilities and received support services had greater achievement in college than students with disabilities who did not disclose their disability. The students with disabilities, who did not take advantage of accommodations or services, experienced more negative educational outcomes. Some accommodations needed by students with disabilities may include: extra time to take test, a quiet place to complete a test, use of a calculator, and/or permission to record lectures.

According to information reported in the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2, about 66 percent of postsecondary students with disabilities did not disclose their disabilities (Wagner et al., (2006). Approximately 50 percent of these students did not consider themselves to be disabled and another seven percent chose not to disclose their disability (Newman, 2005).

#### *Educational and Employment Outcomes*

The 1970 British Cohort Study found, students ages 16 and older who developed sensory or mental health impairments as young children, were less likely to continue their education than the students with physical disabilities (Burchardt, 2004). Although a similar number of students with or without disabilities were interested in attending higher education, more of the students

without disabilities considered academic courses. Nearly 25 percent of each group wanted to seek employment rather than continue in school and nearly seven percent of students with disabilities, compared to half as many students without disabilities, had not decided whether they would pursue higher education (Burchardt, 2004).

When asked what they planned to be doing at age 21, over half of students without disabilities thought they would be in a career or working in an office, compared to 38 percent of the students with disabilities. Approximately 24 percent of the students with disabilities thought they would still be attending a postsecondary school compared to only 18 percent of the students without disabilities (Burchardt, 2004). Students with disabilities felt they needed more time to complete college than students without disabilities and were disappointed by the reduction in services and supports they received.

In 1998 and 2000, the Youth Cohort Study (YCS) conducted national research on the choices and actions of students ages 18 to 19, as they approached graduation from high school and decided whether to pursue higher education or seek employment. The YCS survey found that only 45 percent of students with disabilities were going to school full-time, compared to 54 percent of the students without disabilities (Burchardt, 2004). The YCS study also found, students with disabilities were almost three times more likely to be unemployed compared to the students without disabilities, and a larger percentage of the students with disabilities were only working part-time compared to their peers without disabilities (Burchardt, 2004). Students with or without a disability realized that a lack of educational credentials would reduce their earnings and limit their job offers.

Providing equal opportunities and compensation for people with disabilities is thought to increase their productivity and reduce their dependency on society. Inclusion of people with

disabilities is meant to create more diversity in employment and educational experiences.

However, people with disabilities, no matter how persistent and resilient they are in their pursuit of a better education and better employment opportunities, appear less likely to achieve outcomes that people without disabilities enjoy.

According to the U.S. Census Bureau, during 1997 a person without a disability earned \$23,700 while those with a minor or serious disability earned \$20,500 and \$13,300 respectively.

About 20 percent of disabled workers said they had trouble finding and maintaining employment and another 34 percent said their employment opportunities were limited by the hours or jobs offered to them (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005).

In 2001, students following graduation from college were likely to earn \$40,000 to \$50,000 annually compared to \$22,000 to \$31,000 for their peers who had only graduated high school (Gilmore, Bose, & Hart, 2001). Twice as many students who completed less than four years of college were employed compared to their peers who only graduated high school (Getzl, Stodden & Briel, 2001). Research shows that people who have attended at least some courses in higher education have been more successful than those who have not, especially for people with disabilities.

## Chapter III: Discussion

### *Introduction*

In this chapter the researcher included a summary of the previous two chapters, a critical analysis of the reviewed literature, and recommendations regarding access to postsecondary schools for people with disabilities. Until fair and equal opportunities exist in higher education for everyone in society, people with disabilities will continue to be treated as second class citizens educationally, economically, and socially.

### *Summary*

In the U.S., there are approximately 50 million people with disabilities. They are the largest minority group in the country and continue to encounter discrimination in their quest for higher education and better employment opportunities.

Following the passage of major disability legislation, especially the ADA, in attempts to create a level playing field for people with disabilities, limited progress in this area has been achieved. Despite some positive changes in federal and state laws to prohibit discrimination against students with disabilities in education, colleges were slow to make their programs more accessible during the 1970s and 1980s. After the ADA went into effect in 1992, institutions of higher education were forced to meet at least minimum compliance with federal law (Cory et al., 2003).

The transition from high school to college can be an overwhelming experience for students with disabilities and the people assisting them. The difficulties all students encounter when going to college is even greater for students with disabilities because they need to secure disability services and supports. Even though more students with disabilities have been

attending higher education, they still are less likely to enroll than students without disabilities (Wagner, et al., 2005).

People with disabilities still have fewer opportunities in higher education and employment than people without disabilities. When students with disabilities enroll in higher education they often encounter additional challenges because they have not been properly prepared while attending secondary schools (Hong et al., 2007). In a study by the National Council on Disability (2003), they determined more than half of students with disabilities who enrolled in college eventually withdrew.

One of the factors responsible for the high dropout rate for students with disabilities has been that college faculty have limited training and are unaware of the services their institution provides (Hong et al. 2007). Some teachers have not received training to teach students with special needs, which further compounds this problem. Research shows there are not enough special education teachers available to meet the current needs in the U.S. school system.

Success in higher education often depends on students with disabilities utilizing the available resources and assistance. Students with disabilities attending higher education often do not understand what resources and services will be available for them. They assume when they actually need an accommodation the schools will have them on hand. Students with disabilities must realize that they have to disclose their disability prior to requesting an accommodation. Students will come to realize that the services they received in secondary schools are often not considered “reasonable accommodations” in college (Madaus, 2005).

Students with disabilities, who have encountered difficulties in higher education, should try to maintain a positive attitude and stay in school. Students with disabilities who have



experienced some success in college are more likely to find better employment than their peers with disabilities who did not attend college.

### *Critical Analysis*

The researcher gained a better understanding of what people with disabilities encounter in the American culture. They have a remarkable determination to be treated fairly and equally rather than being discriminated against in education, employment, and society. Even with significant disability legislation over the past 37 years by the federal and state governments, very limited progress has been achieved to prevent discrimination against people with disabilities in their daily lives. Research shows that people with disabilities have not been provided equal opportunities in life that people without disabilities have enjoyed.

The statistical data in education and employment for people with disabilities compared to people without disabilities has been quite alarming. In 1996, Blackorby and Wagner determined that 78 percent of all high school students compared to only 37 percent of students with disabilities were interested in attending college (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). When members of both groups had not graduated from high school, only 16 percent of the students with disabilities were able to find work compared to 75 percent of students without disabilities, and for those who completed four years of college, the rates were 50 and 90 percent, respectively (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Why would one of the most civilized and powerful countries in the world allow such blatant discrimination against their citizens with disabilities?

People with disabilities are the largest minority group in the U.S. and account for nearly 20 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). More students with disabilities than ever before have accessed higher education in recent years and this trend is likely to continue.

They will continue to build upon their recent success by demanding more rights and opportunities.

If people with disabilities continue to exert their influence, they may eventually receive equal treatment and status in American society similar to that which people without disabilities have enjoyed for many years. They will obtain better employment opportunities at higher wages than their peers with disabilities who did not graduate from college. The services that people with disabilities can provide in the workforce will be invaluable.

### *Recommendations*

Research has shown that when federal and state laws mandated services and supports be provided to primary and secondary school students with disabilities under IDEA, enrollment in the schools increased. As students with disabilities enrolled and stayed in school longer, they graduated from high school in record numbers.

Following graduation from high school, many students with disabilities wanted to pursue higher education. However, no disability support program like IDEA had been provided or required at the postsecondary level. The passage of the ADA, the most comprehensive disability legislation in history, resulted in many positive changes for everyone in the U.S., especially people with disabilities. If the ADA had gone further and required equal opportunities in higher education, like IDEA has for students with disabilities in primary and secondary schools, they would likely not be as underrepresented in college today.

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