**Investigating Postsecondary Disability Support Outside of the College Classroom: Summary of Results and Implications**

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**Background and Purpose**

Under the guidance of Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act, students with disabilities in the higher education setting who self-identify their disability can request accommodations to support their postsecondary learning experience within the college classroom. However, there is variation on guidelines and policies as it relates to students’ with disabilities requests for accommodations for experiential learning opportunities outside of the classroom, including internships, extracurricular research work, clinicals, and/or field placements. It is unclear “particularly around how students with disabilities access academic adjustments, auxiliary aids, or work accommodations at internship or Co-Op sites, and who is responsible for supervising and paying for these services” (Nott & Zafft, 2006). As noted by Masinter (2014), “Institutions increasingly place students in unpaid external clinicals or internships… But arranging and awarding academic credit for the opportunities can put colleges in a difficult position under Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act” (para. 1). Additionally, Lund, Andrews, and Holt (2014) highlight that “Programs should not expect disability services offices to provide all support for students with disabilities, especially support related to clinical training” (p. 367).

Currently, there is limited research exploring the logistics and experiences related to the perceptions and experiences of disability support specialists when assisting students’ with disabilities requests for accommodations for internships and related out-of-classroom placements. The goal of this research is to investigate if and how accommodations are provided to and utilized for students with disabilities during experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom, including internships, clinicals, and field placements.

**Methodology**

To investigate this research problem, this project included a two-phase data collection. The first phase included a survey that solicited the participation of any individual currently working within a postsecondary disability support office. Following survey participation, participants had the opportunity to engage in the second phase of the data collection, semi-structured interviews. Project participants were recruited through the AHEAD listserv.

**Findings: Abbreviated Summary of Results**

**National Survey.** To provide background on the participants (N= 85), 61 percent of participants indicated they were a director of their institution’s disability support office. 67 percent of participants worked in four-year institutions and 25 percent worked in two-year institutions (with 8 percent working in other institutional types including law schools). 41 percent of participants worked at private institutions of higher education and, out of the participants working at private institutions, 23 percent identified as working for for-profit institutions. Only 5 percent worked at institutions of less than 1000 students, 29 percent at institutions with 1,000-2,999 students, 33 percent at institutions with 3,000-9,999 students, and 33 percent at institutions with over 10,000 students. Lastly, 20 percent of participants worked at institutions located in the northeast, 25 percent in the southwest, 33 percent in the midwest, 8 percent in the southwest, and 14 percent in the west of the United States.

Of the 85 participants, 85 percent indicated their office supports students with self-identified disabilities with accommodations for experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom. Only 68 percent noted their office is required to support this accommodations request, whereas 80 percent of participants believe institutional disability support offices should be required to support experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom, including internships, research work and/or field places.

Additionally, there appears to be a disconnect between an understanding of guidelines for outside of the classroom accommodation requests, and the available training specific to this topic. 79 percent of participants indicated they have a general awareness of related guidelines, but less than half of the percent (35 percent) received training specific to supporting students’ with self-identified disabilities accommodation requests for non-classroom experiential learning opportunities. Only 42 percent of the participants’ offices took on the expense of non-classroom experiential learning-related student accommodation requests.

As it relates to documentation of accommodation requests for non-classroom experiential learning activities, only 35 percent track the specific request types and only 24 percent keep track of ongoing non-classroom experiential learning accommodation requests. Overall, 67 percent of participants noted that it is often difficult to translate accommodations from the campus environment to experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom.

**Qualitative Interviews.** A phenomenological approach was taken for the second phase of the project, where 11 survey participants engaged in semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 60 minutes. Preliminary analyses revealed the following themes:

* Discrepancies between structured and organized intake and documentation processes for classroom-based accommodation requests and informal and inconsistent accommodation support for experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom
* Ongoing misinterpretation of faculty and administrators on the actual technical requirements (instead of perceived adherence to accreditation standards). When discussing a student in a graduate psychology program with a vision impairment, a participant noted:

*I helped them understand that technical requirement was not the ability to make eye contact. The technical requirement was to establish rapport with the client. And that could be demonstrated in many ways… behaviors, in their tone of voice, in their use of humor, in their responsiveness to the client. That person worked really well… did fine in the clinic and was able to establish rapport and, you know, do a good job in the clinic.*

* Inconsistencies with supporting travel (financially, logistically) for students’ experiential learning experiences outside of the classroom
* Discrimination still exists for students with disabilities seeking out placements during their postsecondary coursework: *“… there was outright discrimination going on... So the student went to apply. Now you have to go interview and somebody just told her that "hey, you can’t do this because you can’t see" and it’s like- what?”*
* Non-classroom-based experiential learning experiences that disability support office members had the most experience with included placements related to the students’ program licensure needs, including placements for students in law school and those enrolled in medical education programs

**Implications of the Study**

Overall, this project adds to the literature by highlighting a research area not readily explored. The documented inconsistencies between accommodation-related processes for inside and outside of the classroom, as well as the ongoing misinterpretation of actual technical requirements related to licensure and accreditation standards may create a negative impact on students’ with disabilities opportunities for constructive and beneficial experiential learning experiences. Additional awareness and associated training for faculty and administrators on topic is warranted.

**References**

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