Revisiting AHEAD’s *Professional Standards*: Exploring Their Transformation into *Competencies* and Application to 21st Century Disability Resources Practice

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Abstract

The Association on Higher Education and Disability’s (AHEAD) *Professional Competencies* (formerly *Professional Standards*) serve as a guiding document for professionals in the disability resources field. The *Professional Competencies* are aligned with, and informed by, the Council for the Advancement of Standards (CAS) *Standards and Guidelines for Disability Resources and Services* (Council for the Advancement of Standards, 2023). The *Professional Competencies* were revised in 2022 by an institutionally and demographically diverse task force appointed by the AHEAD Board of Directors. Accompanying key attributes were written with the goal of being applicable to professionals holding various roles at a variety of institution types. The *Competencies*, when utilized by disability resources professionals to grow their own professional knowledge, skills, and traits, support the work of facilitating equitable access and ensuring equal opportunity for disabled people. This article will describe the background, methodology, and results of updating the *Professional Standards* to the *Professional Competencies*, including explanation of themes and application of the *Competencies* for practitioners. Furthermore, the correspondence between the *Competencies* and the 2021 AHEAD *Program Standards* are discussed to equate the individualized work professionals do in each of the *Competencies* to what AHEAD has defined as best practice for disability offices.

Keywords: disabilities, competencies, disability resource fundamentals, professional preparation, disability leadership skillset,
professionals maneuvering through their own career by establishing the minimum expectations to which the field has collectively agreed to meet. Combined with the revised AHEAD Code of Ethics establishing the bounds of roles, the Professional Competencies guard the integrity of the work and emphasize the role DRPs play in establishing equitable and inclusive learning environments for college students. They assert that the work of DR in meeting the letter and spirit of the law does not exist in a vacuum and instead iterates from deliberate focus on the skills, knowledge, and traits professionals possess.

As the scope and nature of the work has transformed since the original AHEAD Professional Standards were published in 1997, the changes outlined in this article are presented to direct the current-day DRP in standardizing their own practice to what has become acceptable in the field as best practice. The process of revising the original Professional Standards will be addressed and the authors will expound upon their value to the field. Furthermore, the authors illustrate the ways in which DRPs can prioritize their own growth in each of the newly established competencies.

**Literature Review**

Literature and guidance point to the importance of personal and professional standards and practices for DRPs. Arguably, the most recognizable set of standards in higher education, the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education (CAS) was established in 1979 to standardize and set metrics for evaluation of practice in various functional areas of higher education (Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, 2023). Releasing a series of program standards and self-assessment tools to support offices in measuring their progress toward meeting established guidelines and principles for practice, this model has relied on consensus-building among the professionals and programs to which those standards apply. While the CAS Standards traditionally have focused on programmatic outcomes and benchmarks, they possess a utility in guiding professionals in their own development and alignment to individual professional goals and growth (Keeling, 2010; Young & Dean, 2015).

Other functional areas and professional organizations have moved to establish a set of professional competencies to promote standardization of professionalism and skill sets. This effort largely stems from the movement for greater accountability in higher education to learning and employment outcomes for students (Mallory & Clement, 2016). Most recently updated in 2015, the ACPA-NASPA Professional Competencies endeavor to standardize common skillsets, knowledge, and practice regardless of an individual’s specific professional role on their campus (ACPA-College Student Educators International, 2015). As outlined in the Competencies, the process of generating consensus on what skills, knowledge, and standard of practice were included was deliberative, involving the review of multiple committees, solicitation of expertise in the field, and detailed evaluation of existing competency structures and documents in the field. The updated competency framework addresses the importance of holding a skillset and knowledge that often are not taught directly in traditional professional preparation programs but are learned through application of theoretical models to everyday practice (Gansemer-Topf & Ryder, 2017). In addition, the framework demonstrates the usefulness of using a competency model to identify and address deficits amongst practitioners (O’Brien, 2018).

**Methodology**

The Professional Competencies, formally referred to as Professional Standards, were first published in the late 1990s. With the maturation of the field, AHEAD moved to update the Professional Competencies beginning in 2019. A group of professionals, commissioned by the AHEAD Board of Directors, conducted a Delphi study and the first phase of revisions were made. In summer of 2021, a second group of AHEAD Board members consisting of Enjie Hall, Crystal Hill, Chris Stone, and Jill Sieben-Schneider embarked on the next phase of revisions.

In the Fall of 2021, the final group of professionals consisting of Grace Clifford, Suzie Dunn, Enjie Hall, Courtney Jarrett, Ian Kunkes, Matthew Lowe, Spencer Scruggs, Heather Stout, and Matthew Sullivan worked on the final draft of the Professional Competencies. This task force represented a diverse array of institution types and sizes and included those who held management roles and those who did not. Representation included those who specialized in professional programs, including law and health sciences, and those who identified as generalists. Several members of the revision team served as an Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) coordinator. The task force engaged an iterative process of reviewing each of the former AHEAD standards to identify themes, possibilities for restructuring, and missing key attributes critical to modern day DR practice. Reviewing a variety of existing competencies tangential to the DR field, including the most recent American College Personnel Association (ACPA) and National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)
competencies and other technical standards, the task force chose a model that outlines the general competencies and expands to various key attributes and applications of the relevant skills, knowledge, and traits.

During Spring 2022, a first draft was shared with AHEAD membership along with a survey requesting feedback. A focus group was then convened for additional input to be gathered. Their feedback was incorporated into a final version of the competencies, which was submitted to the AHEAD Board of Directors for review and input. The Professional Competencies were adopted by the Board in Spring 2022. Guidance from Sally Scott and Dr. Lisa M. Meeks informed the work of revising the Competencies.

Results

The task force organized competencies beginning with the major skills, knowledge, and traits professionals should possess at an individual level which expands to implications for offices, campuses, and, finally, the profession. These professional competencies with key attributes are intended to encourage creativity and innovation by the professional, their supervisor, and each institution. Each of the competencies outlines milestones professionals can demonstrate to meet the threshold of appropriate practice in the DR field. Despite each of the competencies being broad and overarching, the relevancy for competencies and key attributes may depend on position duties, scope of the work of the professional, and the individual institutional characteristics within which the professional works. The key attributes under each of the competencies are geared to guide professional development goals and the refining of position descriptions.

When considering the core skills, knowledge, and traits each professional in the field of DR could possess, the committee effort resulted in nine competencies and a varying number of key attributes relevant to each competency that provide further context and guidance to professionals. See Table 1 for the complete breakdown of Competencies and the key attributes associated with each competency.

Discussion

For each of the competencies and the corresponding key attributes, the task force identified action steps and applications for everyday practice. Interestingly, much overlap between the key attributes of the competencies arose, highlighting some core steps professionals can undertake to support their professional growth with respect to the competencies. The following themes emerged as part of the development of the competencies and can serve as a starting point for professionals exploring how their existing professional experience fits within the framework of the competencies. For each of the themes below, a reference for the competencies to support further discussion and exploration is provided.

Theme One: Understanding the Foundations of Disability Resources

Throughout the competencies, a major theme is the need for professionals to ground their work in the legal and historical foundations of disability access in higher education. An important consideration in this process is an appreciation for the dynamic nature of this foundation as our understanding of what constitutes as the threshold for ensuring access for disabled people on our campuses is constantly changing. The foundations of DR were a common theme amongst the following competencies:

• Competency #1: Maintain current critical knowledge and practice to facilitate disability access in higher education.
• Competency #3: Apply appropriate student and adult development theories/practices to engage with and support students in developing appropriate and effective self-advocacy skills.
• Competency #8: Possess necessary skills and aptitude to develop educational materials and training for the campus community.

The Interactive Process

Competencies 1, 3 and 8 center the interactive process as the key to professional effectiveness. To engage in the interactive process, the professional should have a deep understanding of the questions to ask and the information to gather to determine disability status, the need for accommodations, and which accommodations are reasonable. The path to reasonable accommodations for equitable access and equal opportunity includes exercising professional judgment through synthesizing personal narrative, supporting documentation, and professional observations.

Working Knowledge of Relevant Laws & Regulations

Institutional policies and practices in disability access iterate from a variety of different statutes and legal principles, including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the ADA of 1990, the ADA Amendments of 2008, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, Title IX, the Fair Housing Act, state-level statutes, regulatory guidance from different federal and state agencies, case law and court decisions. Professionals should operate with an understanding of this
## Table 1

**Breakdown of Competencies and Associated Key Attributes**

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>Key Attributes</th>
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| Maintain current critical knowledge and practice to facilitate disability access in higher education | 1.1. Understand the process of determining eligibility for reasonable accommodations for qualified persons  
1.2. Understand the necessity to create and adhere to processes regarding the implementation of individualized accommodations  
1.3. Actualize the process of determining reasonable and appropriate accommodations and/or relevant campus resources based on interpreting a variety of sources of information, including personal narrative, documentation, professional judgment, and other relevant sources  
1.4. Facilitate individuals’ understanding of disability identity, including interpretation of documentation and its relation to reasonable and appropriate accommodation  
1.5. Articulate disability resource practice and apply knowledge of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990, ADA Amendments, Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, Title IX, Fair Housing Act, and other relevant laws and regulations  
1.6. Engage in relevant educational opportunities enhancing knowledge of the interactive process  
1.7. Engage with institutional and broader higher ed committees and colleagues to remain current on campus trends and culture  
1.8. Maintain general knowledge of K-12 disability access practices to aid student transitions to higher education  
1.9. Develop working knowledge of, and competency with, available assistive technology, adaptive equipment, auxiliary aids and services, alternative formats, learning enhancement tools, and general digital accessibility (WCAG 2.1)  
1.10. Stay apprised of best practice and available technology in relation to implementing testing accommodations in centralized and decentralized testing models  
1.11. Maintain knowledge of relevant case law and unique factors related to professional programs including the health sciences and apply best practices in experiential learning setting such as clinics and internships |
| Possess a philosophical approach to education rooted in an in-depth understanding of multicultural awareness and the embodiment of DEI focused leadership | 2.1. Develop a reflective practice centered on enhancing self-understand and awareness in the context of dynamic educational environments representing individuals with unique lived experiences  
2.2. Engage in educational endeavors that enhance understanding of the evolutionary formation of identity intersectionality, and justice and equity within the context of higher education  
2.3. Promote initiatives that eliminate bias; address the necessity to remove systemic barriers  
2.4. Consistently and intentionally amplify the lived experiences and honor identities of Disabled persons |
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<th>Competency</th>
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<tr>
<td>Apply appropriate student and adult development theories/practices to</td>
<td>3.1. Utilize knowledge of student and adult development theories and apply them in the work with disabled students and employees</td>
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<td>engage with and support students in developing appropriate and</td>
<td>3.2. Develop an understanding of the intricacies associated with implementing a compliance-founded resource that provides person-focused support through a Social Justice framework which incorporates features of civil rights and compliance</td>
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<td>effective self-advocacy skills.</td>
<td>3.3. Empower disabled people to exercise their rights and uphold their responsibilities through the development of transparent policies, processes, and procedures</td>
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<td>3.4. Empower disabled individuals to utilize positive advocacy skills and develop their disability identity</td>
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<td></td>
<td>3.5. Actively engage with disabled people to seek feedback and ensure access to campus-wide activities, services, and programs</td>
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<td>3.6. Establish rapport with each student or employee to learn about and to incorporate their lived experiences and promote disability as diversity</td>
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<td>3.7. Refer and connect students to campus and community resources (e.g., counseling center, learning enhancement, advising, vocational rehabilitation, social service agencies, etc.)</td>
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<td>Understand personal capacity to manage work responsibility and</td>
<td>4.1. Demonstrate understanding of working within scope of role</td>
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<td>advocate for personal and professional needs</td>
<td>4.2. Develop a personal understanding and definition of appropriate commitment to work/life balance</td>
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<td>4.3. Promote a practice that represents appropriate self-care tenants</td>
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<td>Demonstrate effective analytic and organizational skills.</td>
<td>5.1. Analyze relevant federal and/or state legislation/regulation and organizational structure/culture to develop and implement relevant policies and procedures</td>
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<td>5.2. Gather and analyze data to effectively perform ongoing assessment of campus accessibility</td>
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<td>5.3. Gather data relevant to the operation of the disability unit to effectively support ongoing assessment according to AHEAD and/or other relevant program standards</td>
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<tr>
<td>Possess leadership skills necessary to promote educational and</td>
<td>6.1. Understand varying perspectives of leadership approaches and create a personal philosophy of leadership that can be effectively applied to all aspects of work (e.g., supervision, building collaborative partnerships, creating departmental/institutional change, etc.)</td>
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<td>professional growth of DS staff members and/or institutional colleagues</td>
<td>6.2. Incorporate strengths-based approaches to influencing those with whom we work closest, empowering our colleagues and/or staff members to recognize, hone, and build upon personal talents</td>
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<td>6.3. Capitalize on personal strengths and areas of growth as leaders when working with our teams and others in order to build an effective office and institutional culture</td>
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<td>Competency</td>
<td>Key Attributes</td>
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| Possess interpersonal skills that encourage strong collaborative partnerships with campus stakeholders to create and sustain a positive disability culture | 7.1. Actively model, through concrete actions and behaviors, the values of diversity, inclusion, and equity to foster an environment of disability allyship among students, staff, and faculty.  
7.2. Develop an understanding of the political structure and ideology of your institution in order to develop and promote a culture of disability allyship  
7.3. Contribute to the development of communication channels between institutional units  
7.4. Maintain an effective working relationship with campus risk management functions and/or legal counsel  
7.5. Work interactively within and across offices and divisions to carry out the mission, vision, and goals of the office and institution  
7.6. Form in-depth partnerships with other campus operations that work with disabled students regarding accessibility considerations  
7.7. Consult with state, provincial, or community resources |
| Possess necessary skills and aptitude to develop educational materials and trainings for the campus community | 8.1. Understand key tenants of accessible/inclusive curriculum development and course design  
8.2. Utilize necessary resources to develop training materials, whether individually or within the institution and access to training to use said resources  
8.3. Develop mechanisms to assess the educational needs of campus and design learning opportunities in a variety of formats (e.g., presentations, website materials, newsletters, etc.) to promote awareness and understanding of disability access and inclusion  
8.4. Participate in departmental and institutional policies/procedures development as it pertains to ADA related grievances, documenting intake interviews/interactive processes for providing accommodations, and intersections between Disability offices and partner offices (e.g., Title IX, Facilities, Housing, etc.) |
| Understand the importance of continuous engagement in learning opportunities that enhance current knowledge and practical implications of disability services within higher education and applicable fields. | 9.1. Utilize available professional development opportunities through national, regional, and local agencies  
9.2. Conceptualize meaning of continuous updates pertaining to relevant case law and guidance, philosophical approaches to creating accessible educational environments, and best practices for facilitating access  
9.3. Actualize knowledge/understanding to create campus-based programs for students, faculty, and staff that promote in-depth awareness of disability theory and practice  
9.4. Contribute to the professional organization through the sharing of innovative thoughts and practices  
9.5. Effectively leverage relationships with disability professionals across the nation to promote and procure holistic perspectives and approaches to disability access  
9.6. Engage in mentorship opportunities (both as mentor and mentee) with colleagues across the nation to promote a spirit of continuous learning, personal/professional support, and community building |
legal foundation and how this knowledge supports the work, centering equitable access and equal opportunity as civil rights. Competencies 1, 3, and 8 also underscore the role case law plays in structuring the work of a DRP. Professionals should be able to articulate how the laws, regulations, and case law relate to the rationale for accommodations, ensuring legal requirements are met to provide accessible educational experiences.

**Utilizing Student Development Theory and Educational Research on College Student Success**

Student development theory has provided a framework for student affairs practitioners upon which to base daily practice and interactions with students. Having a working knowledge of the birth of theories, their evolution, and their demonstrated application in student affairs practice is a solid step toward helping students develop much needed self-advocacy. These theories provide a scaffold upon which to ascertain where students are in their development process and how professionals can nudge them along toward greater knowledge.

Development theories to study may include cognitive development; moral development; intellectual and ethical development; and, racial, ethnic, and minority development. The theories offer an opportunity for practitioners to acknowledge the vast and concurrent development students may be going through at any given time. Some practitioners may start with foundational theories, such as Baxter-Magolda’s (2001) theory of self-authorship or the Learning Partnership Model (Baxter-Magolda, 2004), both of which are useful in understanding disabled students’ movement toward greater self-advocacy. Other overarching theories on college student development are useful, and the work of DRPs is aided by a broad understanding of how college students approach the developmental experiences they encounter on a college campus.

**Theme Two: Understanding Institutional Dynamics**

By design, the task force to revise the competencies included members from different institutional backgrounds. While the core skills, knowledge, and traits necessary for a professional to excel in the work vary little across institutional contexts, the ways in which professionals put them into practice is influenced by the type of institution in which the professional is employed, the political structures of the institution, and its human capital. While, in many cases, this variability will affect the steps professionals take to make decisions within the interactive process, this variability, in extreme cases, may directly influence a professional’s determination of accommodations and define individual responsibilities within the institution for implementing agreed upon accommodations.

Some of the competencies that shared an emphasis on the influence of institutional size, relationships, structures, and other institutional dynamics include:

- Competency #3: Apply appropriate student and adult development theories/practices to engage with and support students in developing appropriate and effective self-advocacy skills.
- Competency #5: Demonstrate effective analytic and organizational skills.
- Competency #6: Possess leadership skills necessary to promote educational and professional growth of DS staff members and/or institutional colleagues.
- Competency #7: Possess interpersonal skills that encourage strong collaborative partnerships with campus stakeholders to create and sustain a positive disability culture.
- Competency #8: Possess necessary skills and aptitude to develop educational materials and training for the campus community.

**Strong Understanding of Institutional Structure and Characteristics**

Universities, community colleges, and technical colleges have significantly different structures. Even within the same types of institutions of higher education, political structures and perceptions of the responsibilities of each component of the institution’s structure vary. The competencies underscore the importance of professionals maintaining a working knowledge of their institution’s organizational structure to assist in decision making and identifying creative solutions sometimes with a dearth of resources. There are a variety of questions a professional can ask to begin evaluating the significance of their institutional structure including:

- Does the institution make decisions from the top-down? Are divisions given autonomy to develop what works for them?
- Has the institution shifted from disability being viewed in terms of individuals’ deficits, and if so, to what degree? Has the social justice paradigm been implemented at the institution, and if so, to what degree?
- What priorities has the institution identified, externally and internally, within the organization? What discrepancies exist between the two and how do trends in institutional and departmental decisions align with these priorities?
Understanding the current culture that exists at the institution will aid in identifying those whose work is currently overlapping with the office and those whose ideology fits within the construct of disability justice. Armed with this working knowledge, DRPs are better equipped to agilely accomplish the mission, vision, and goals of the office, and, in alignment with the AHEAD Program Domains, Standards, and Performance Indicators (Association of Higher Education and Disability, 2021).

Building Relationships Within the Institution

Historically, disability offices have been relegated to the perimeters of institutions, with students typically referred to as “your students” or “their students” when DR staff interact with campus partners and faculty. This way of “othering” disabled students—and those who serve them—is ableist and leads to ineffective outcomes around disability access for both students and the campus. It is imperative that DRPs have the skills, knowledge, and traits to build effective relationships with campus partners because the work of disability access and inclusion is that of the campus. Identifying key partners often involves understanding the intersections of disabled students’ and their campus experiences. In some cases, it is important a professional identifies their own limitations, where the professional may need the assistance of another campus “expert” to facilitate a seamless and positive experience for a student. In many cases, a professional can be effective in building relationships when they can identify the limits of their own institutional responsibilities and where a campus partner’s responsibility begins (Evans et al., 2017). These relationships may vary depending on the institution but often include the Title IX Office, the Case Management Office, the institution’s ADA Coordinator, the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Division, Academic Senate, and the Faculty Development or Instructional Design Offices.

Another critical partner the Competencies specifically reference is Campus Legal Counsel. Denials of student accommodations, standard institutional and departmental practices that are challenged, or the need for consultation prior to making an accommodation determination means the relationship with, and access to, an institution’s legal counsel essential. While some institutions manage relationships with legal counsel due to costs accrued with each consultation, considering when and why reaching out to the institution’s legal counsel is critical for supporting a professional’s accommodation decisions. As professionals build their skills and knowledge around this particular key attribute, they are able to further justify the advice they seek is warranted and will more likely result in well-informed decisions. A relationship with the institution’s legal counsel helps to avoid litigation and, most importantly, helps the DRP ensure the student’s protected right to reasonable and appropriate accommodations.

Theme Three: Engaging in Learning Opportunities and Professional Development

Methods of entry into the DR profession vary widely. Professionals may have entered the field with extensive knowledge around lived experiences of disabled individuals, often through observing those lived experiences and supporting disabled individuals (e.g., school psychologists, K-12 professionals, rehabilitation specialists) and may also be aware of the value of continued professional learning. Those individuals who came to the field driven by their own experiences with disability likely also understand the value of ongoing professional development. No matter the method of entry into the field, the work is continually evolving, shaped by new interpretations of legal and statutory constructs and a growing understanding of what it means to be disabled. This commitment to engaging in learning opportunities and professional development, reflected in the competencies, is critical to surviving and thriving in the field. The competencies where continual engagement in learning and professional development opportunities include:

- Competency #2: Possess a philosophical approach to education rooted in an in-depth understanding of multicultural awareness and the embodiment of DEI focused leadership.
- Competency #8: Possess necessary skills and aptitude to develop educational materials and training for the campus community.
- Competency #9: Understand the importance of continuous engagement in learning opportunities that enhance current knowledge and practical implications of disability services within higher education and applicable fields.

Identifying and Making Space for Continued Learning

Working in a vacuum can lead to ineffective solutions for access, an inability to meet disabled students’ needs, and a lack of institutional responsibility in supporting disabled students’ matriculation. While practitioners should continually engage in professional development at a variety of levels (e.g., national, regional, local) to infuse updated understandings into their practice, seeking out sources of profession-
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al development is not always easy or accessible. Regardless of an institution’s resources or willingness to support ongoing professional development, practitioners can find a variety of learning opportunities from the following sources:

- AHEAD
- National Center for College Students with Disabilities
- Regional AHEAD affiliate or state association of DR professionals
- National or state-level higher education affiliated organizations, such as ACPA, NASPA, or ATHEN (Assistive Technology in Higher Education Network)
- A regional ADA Center (www.adata.com)
- U.S. Department of Education Office of Civil Rights (e.g., Dear Colleague letters, redacted resolution agreements)
- State-level agencies managing discrimination complaints and non-discrimination statutes
- State-level agencies managing rehabilitation services and social supports for disabled people
- Local non-profit agencies supporting disabled people in the community
- The institutions or local community’s library
- Listservs, such as those provided by AHEAD or DSSHE (Disabled Student Services in Higher Education Listserv)

While some of these resources may require either a personal or an institutional financial investment, professionals can always find opportunities for learning and growth regardless of whether there is a cost. Continual participation in professional development opportunities is critical to effectiveness as a practitioner.

Engaging in Learning Opportunities Earnestly and with Purpose

An assumption of the competencies equates effectiveness in DR work with a sense of humility in moments of learning as well as acknowledging one’s own biases. Rendon (2009) suggests, “it is very easy to be overwhelmed when we attempt to do things differently. That is why so many of us give up when others become dismissive about our work or when we confront resistance or see continued social injustice” (p. 148). When one is presented with new opportunities to improve practice, especially when it involves reflecting on harmful biases and assumptions, it becomes easy to engage in a process known as the backfire effect, where information is rejected that does not confirm one’s own biases and privileges (Lewandowsky et al., 2012). The tendency is to see any contradictory information as an affront to the safety and security of upholding one’s existing beliefs about the world. As an example, working with a neurodivergent student, if one is not careful with reactions to information presented directly and indirectly by the student, a practitioner may fail to realize their experiences with neurodivergence are just as valid as the people with whom one grew up around. In turn, the practitioner may miss supporting the student with solutions that meet their specific needs, instead leaning into suggestions that more closely align with assumptions.

Evolving practices to include intersectional understandings of identity and ways of being, and their influence on every nuance of a student’s life, requires that a practitioner challenges their own assumptions on biases, privilege, behaviors, and actions, even if they are not aware of their influence. Combating the backfire effect can only be effective through consistently challenging one’s own assumptions in the moment when presented with dissonant information. Some ways or educational opportunities that may be helpful include:

- Regularly consume information from reputable sources that are different from the ones to which a practitioner may typically turn
- Take an active interest in learning more about colleagues and promote a workplace where people can bring their whole selves to work by sharing their family and cultural background with each other
- Actively connect with different student groups on campus and learn earnestly what their lived experience is like on campus
- Engage in discussion and learning opportunities around intersectional understandings of identity and ways of being
- Research unfamiliar constructs and experiences shared using different reputable sources of knowledge, such as peer-reviewed journals, books, podcasts, and other media

Conceptualizing How Learning Translates into Practice

Learning in a professional capacity is not effective if a practitioner is not able to conceptualize what new knowledge means for their practice. Different institutional contexts, the varying disabled student needs on campuses, and different levels of support for implementing new knowledge all have an impact on how professionals might transform learning into practice. The competencies emphasize reflection on the following factors, translating learning into practice:
• **Institutional context**: The size and structure of an institution may impact how new knowledge and approaches may apply to DR work. Practitioners should evaluate the sources of the new knowledge or approach and compare them to their institutional context. It is important to consider how institutional size or organizational structure may impact implementation of new knowledge.

• **Context of student experience**: Not all higher education institutions serve the same student populations; nonetheless, disabled student populations will exist across the board. Consider the breadth and depth of student needs that the office encounters, both as it relates to disability as well as how it’s relevant to other identities. How congruent is the new knowledge or approach with prior knowledge to be the landscape of student needs at the institution?

• **Context of validation**: New knowledge and approaches are important but become commonplace through the validation of other professionals or institutions that have implemented them. Entities such as AHEAD or the Office of Civil Rights, or even individuals with extensive practice in the field, can often lend their own reputation to validate new knowledge or approaches to DR work. Even with the weight of reputation, it is critical a practitioner do their own research and evaluation to determine if new knowledge or approaches are applicable to their work. Practitioners should evaluate the reputation of the sources of new knowledge or guidance in practice, identifying what explanations are offered to support the validation of the new knowledge or approach. Practitioners may want to evaluate whether the explanation offered makes sense within the general discourse of best practices.

**Connecting Beyond One’s Institution to the Field**

The definition of best practices in DR develops through the innovation of practitioners and a validation of this innovation, including institutions demonstrating the effectiveness of these practices, as well as reputable entities (e.g., professional organizations, governmental agencies) endorsing the innovative ideas. If practitioners are not continually engaged in a learning community, like professional organizations such as AHEAD, innovative solutions to problems rarely translate into standard practice. Sharing an existing approach to DR work or a unique policy that has improved the outcomes of the work with a broader group of like-minded professionals not only helps with standardizing DR practices but also articulates why the practice was developed in the first place. Those who are contributing effectively to the greater knowledge of the profession do so embracing the opportunity for receiving critical feedback on what they have shared, encouraging a professional philosophy of continual improvement.

The competencies also highlight the importance of relationships that are built beyond each institution. Disability resources work thrives on a community of practitioners collectively developing best practices. When practitioners are faced with challenging decisions or circumstances and need to make the most measured decision, having connections to other practitioners can make a difference in what decision is made. A quick call or email to a close colleague at another institution can provide the confidence needed to make the decision that a practitioner originally was intending to make or help one pivot to a more effective solution. The interactive process relies not only on information gathered from faculty and students, but also from colleagues whom one trusts and respects. Collegial relationships are the foundation of the work and enhance one’s ability to make the best decisions in support of both students and faculty. Intentionality in how professionals leverage these relationships is critical for success in the field.

**Theme Four: Prioritizing Principles of Equity, Inclusion, and Disability Justice**

The work of DRPs inherently involves a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) lens. The foundation of the very laws and regulations that guide DR practice iterates from the outcomes of the Civil and Disability Rights Movements. Moreover, disabled persons’ collegiate experiences are complex and nuanced, requiring the DRP to understand the institutional structures and socially unjust practices on their campuses that hinder disabled student success (Kraus, 2021). Prioritizing the importance of equity, inclusion, and disability justice contributes to professionals’ understanding of how a person may experience their disability through the intersectionality of identity, cultural customs, and lived experiences. Principles of equity, inclusion, and disability justice were interwoven throughout the following competencies:

• Competency #1: Maintain current critical knowledge and practice to facilitate disability access in higher education.
• Competency #2: Possess a philosophical approach to education rooted in an in-depth understanding of multicultural awareness and the embodiment of DEI focused leadership.
• Competency #3: Apply appropriate student and adult development theories/practices to engage with and support students in developing appropriate and effective self-advocacy skills.

**Importance of Individual Work**

Embracing a DEI-focused lens in educational work requires much personal development. All professionals arrive at the work of DR and higher education with different lived experiences that affect how they approach the work. While acknowledging that these lived experiences may influence the work, they often can be limiting without reflective or introspective practice. Working through the lens of one’s own lived experiences prevents validation of the experiences of the disabled people centered in DR efforts. Arguably, professionals cannot objectively make decisions about accommodations and support for disabled people without understanding their own biases and lived experiences.

Self-reflection is one of the most important tools that can be used to combat the effect of a professional’s lived experiences on the work with disabled people. Introspection becomes easier when it is understood that bias, particularly implicit bias, is a natural human cognitive function. Normalizing bias can help unlock a willingness to engage with what can be a personally challenging process (Burgess, 2007). Reflective practice can often come in the form of engaging with tools like the *Implicit Association Test*, an empirical bias identification tool developed by Harvard (Nosek et al., 2015), or simply reflecting on how their past experiences may be affecting their present thoughts or actions. Below are some points to consider regarding the impact of bias and privilege in professional decisions:

- When making accommodation decisions, professionals might turn to a colleague with different personal or professional backgrounds for verification or bias checking.
- Professionals may consider assessing whether disabled people feel their experience with their disability is validated in any interactions with them.
- Professionals can also reflect on how their assumptions lead to missed opportunities for individual reflection in the interactive process.
- Finally, professionals can define and trace the ways that their personal and professional experiences influence their beliefs and perceptions, then identify strategies to help remind them of these connections in moments of decision making.

**Actively Seek Out Opportunities to Promote These Principles**

Professionals engaging in reflective practices hold much more responsibility to act upon this new knowledge. For those individuals who have challenged their biases and assumptions through reflection, taking action can be overwhelming. Identifying a locus of control can be critical to affecting change and may include some of the following steps:

- Identify intentional work habits that act upon these reflections to reduce or eliminate biases.
- Share any new knowledge and reflections (with proper attribution) with personal and professional communities, especially with those who have similar cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Take steps to center the impact of lived experiences of students on campus in DR and related work on campus. Professionals can specifically identify opportunities where the voices of disabled students, and other marginalized identities, can guide their work.

Through engaging in reflective practice, participating in educational opportunities earnestly, and dismantling systemic barriers, professionals get closer to amplifying lived experiences and honoring the identities of disabled people. Most importantly, the DRP’s success in centering disabled people relies on a sense of inclusion and respect communicated by disabled people themselves. When professionals open themselves to understanding the lived experiences of disabled individuals on their campuses, it will support inclusive practice.

**Theme Five: Cultivating a Sense of Self in a DRP’s Practice**

Integrated into the competencies and key attributes are components that help professionals define the intersection of personal values and needs with professional expectations. Sometimes referred to as work-life balance or work-life integration, examining this interaction of life outside of work with professional responsibilities becomes critical to identifying a sense of satisfaction in all the roles someone may have in life (Bulger, 2014; Greenhaus et al., 2003). The competencies elevate these considerations to equate individual professional wellbeing with successfully accomplishing the responsibilities of DR work.

Concepts of personal and professional values, their role in making professional decisions, and the importance of establishing individually meaningful and unique outcomes for DR work were illuminated by the following competencies:
• Competency #2: Possess a philosophical approach to education rooted in an in-depth understanding of multicultural awareness and the embodiment of DEI focused leadership.
• Competency #4: Understand personal capacity to manage work responsibility and advocate for personal and professional needs.
• Competency #6: Possess leadership skills necessary to promote educational and professional growth of DS staff members and/or institutional colleagues.
• Competency #9: Understand the importance of continuous engagement in learning opportunities that enhance current knowledge and practical implications of disability resources within higher education and applicable fields.

Prioritizing and Making Space for Joy and Self-Care

Throughout the development of the competencies, the committee recognized how easily DR professionals could promote self-care practices for colleagues and students but could have difficulty applying those same self-care principles to their own personal lives. Conversations revolved around the ongoing sense of burnout in the field, communicating how DR professionals driven to support disabled students often prioritize others over themselves. Reversing the impact of burnout requires creating a culture where professionals can integrate personal passions and the reality of their day-to-day lives into the professional context. Action plans that are effective against burnout often involve regularly scheduled self-care activities integrated into staff meetings, office cultures that emphasize utilizing leave time and not working during vacation or sick time, and clear communication about the expectation of separation from work activities when professionals are not on the clock.

Establishing a Professional Philosophy and Identity

The competencies specifically explore how professionals find success through exhibiting leadership skills within their roles. Aiding in leadership on campus, developing a personal philosophy of practice takes time, deep thought, and an analytic dive into principles and how a professional remains aligned with values as one does the work. Much like an institution develops a mission and vision, a philosophy of leadership helps professionals remain congruent with their ideals and consistent in their practice. Some things of which to be mindful while developing a philosophy of leadership are:

• What does one value?
• What practices observed may contribute to staff development and satisfaction?
• How might one foster collaboration and consensus among departmental staff and those across departments with whom one works?
• How are expectations communicated in a way that provides a space for employees to develop and flourish?
• What does one do to stay open, welcoming, and available to staff while still attending to the body of work?

Creating and staying aligned with a philosophy of leadership requires regular self-examination. It is not a “one and done” exercise, but rather a fluid, ever-evolving practice while always being mindful of the glue that holds it all together: articulated values.

Limitations

There are a few limitations the authors would like to mention. First, feedback from the organization brought to light concerns regarding the universal approach to DR provision articulated herein. While the effectiveness of the application of the Professional Competencies have not been formally assessed, anecdotal feedback from DR professionals in the field as they engage in growing in the competency areas would indicate their efficacy. Second, the rapidity with which the field changes is limiting. This is due to many factors including, but not limited to, the rate of technology development and application, the increasing emphasis on equity and disability justice, and ever-evolving case law decisions influence the relevancy and applicability of competencies. Practices are evolving at an exponential rate. Lastly, the authors acknowledge that the application of these competencies are drawn from the scope of practice of the authors themselves. More assessment must be done to fully understand how the competencies are being applied by professionals throughout the academy.

Conclusion

The Professional Competencies are designed to support the development of professionals in the DR field. Though aspirational, these Competencies allow for professionals to check their growth as professionals and subject matter experts on disability access against what the field collectively has identified as best practice. The Professional Competencies assist professionals to nurture their professional investment in their career and help to sustain the field with competent practitioners. With the adoption of Professional Competencies by AHEAD, professionals are now armed with guidance pertaining to the knowledge, skills, and traits necessary to thrive in their work.
AHEAD believes equipping professionals with this guidance will ultimately enhance equitable access and foster inclusivity at institutions of higher education.

References


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Mary Gerard earned a Bachelor of Science in Biology from Eastern Michigan University and a Master of Student Affairs Administration in Higher Education from Western Washington University. Mary is the Director of Accessibility Resources at Bellingham Technical College. Washington State leadership roles include serving as President of both the Washington State Disability Support Services Council (DSSC) and the Washington Association on Postsecondary Education and Disability (WAPED). She has fifteen years’ experience in higher education, disability education, and accommodation determination and provision. She served for three years on the Washington State Governor’s Task Force for the Transition to College for Students with Disabilities. Mary’s practice intentionally creates an environment where students with disabilities engage in their disability identity development, enhancing students’ self-efficacy and self-advocacy. She pioneered the BTC Accessibility Team in 2012, a cross-campus constituency of those committed to the work of disability allyship. This work paved the way at her college for a greater focus on accessibility as well as an institution-wide commitment to supporting students with disabilities. Currently, Mary is implementing a Decentralized Accessibility Resources (D-AR) model, overseeing the accessibility efforts of seven departments campus-wide. She can be reached by email at marylgerard@gmail.com.

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