

8

Student developmental theory can provide a useful framework for understanding challenges students with disabilities may face, providing services, and creating a welcoming campus climate.

College Students with Disabilities: A Student Development Perspective

Wanda M. Hadley

High school students with disabilities are attending colleges and universities in growing numbers, with their rate of college participation doubling in the past twenty years (Lovett and Lewandowski 2006; Wagner et al. 2005). Students with disabilities in the secondary educational system are protected by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) of 2004, which requires secondary school districts to develop special education programs and services, including a free and appropriate public education in the least restrictive environment (i.e., with a minimum of segregation from nondisabled students). In their high school experiences, students receiving special education services are supported by multidisciplinary teams available for planning and interventions related to their disabilities. Teams typically include the student, parents of the student, teachers of the student, a counselor or school psychologist, and a school administrator, who implement Individual Education Plans (IEPs) and specialized instruction.

The college environment for students with disabilities, however, does not include the same extent of support that is required in high school settings. College students with disabilities are covered by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 (see, e.g., AHEAD 2002; Heyward, this volume). Unlike the high school environment, however, it is the student's responsibility to initiate requests for services in the postsecondary environment. When students make the transition to higher education, they are expected to contact the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), self-identify as a student with a disability, provide documentation of their disability and the accommodations needed, self-advocate to their instructors, and participate in the services that will support their academic progress. Such self-advocacy moves

students with disabilities from a pattern of more passive dependent behavior to a more active and responsible role (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, and Shaw 2002; Hadley 2009; Hadley, Twale, and Evans 2003; Milsom and Hartley 2005). In order to successfully self-advocate, students should have a good understanding of their particular learning disability and the compensatory strategies that work best for them. Student development theory can be a useful framework to help administrators and service providers be more supportive when providing services, and to consider how the needs of students with disabilities may change throughout college.

One of the main assumptions behind serving students through the context of theory is that educational institutions are instrumental in the student's psychological and sociological development (Chickering and Reisser 1993). All newly entering students must adjust intellectually and socially to the college setting (Astin 1985; Tinto 1993), and this adjustment generally requires a degree of physical separation and emotional detachment from significant others who were important during high school, along with an acceptance of college-level expectations and rules (Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering 1989). These adaptations may be more challenging for students with disabilities, who often have difficulty knowing how their disability will affect them in college, including new types of testing situations and classroom instruction, social interactions, and the need to organize thoughts, information, and tasks (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, and Shaw 2002; Janiga and Costenbader 2002; Milsom and Hartley 2005). While complying with legal mandates to provide reasonable accommodations, higher education administrators may also need to assist students with disabilities in the development of their independence and self-determination skills (Brinckerhoff et al. 2002). Students are expected to manage increased levels of personal freedom, deal with the unique challenges presented by their disabilities, and to matriculate successfully into a new collegiate environment.

Individual development is a process involving the achievement of a series of developmental tasks, with specific conditions in the college environment making a difference in student development (Chickering 1969; Schlossberg, Lynch, and Chickering 1989). As adolescents become adults, they mature in intellectual skills, emotions and self-control, autonomy, identity, interpersonal relationships, career plans, and personal beliefs and values (Chickering 1969). While maturing, age, socioeconomic standing, and environmental factors can present individuals with challenges to their identity (Evans, Forney, and Guido-DiBrito 1998; Hamrick, Evans, and Schuh 2002; Evans et al. 2010), disabilities can also be a factor in development as one of the many groups of students who must work harder than others to address the academic challenges and social changes unique to the college experience (Heiman and Precel 2003; Tinto 1993). For students with disabilities, challenges can include the development of skills such as stating one's disability or discussing disability-related accommodations with

professors—all strategies related to a successful transition from high school to college (Heiman and Precl 2003).

Likewise, for all students, knowing and interacting with professors may enhance students' intellectual commitment and involvement in their campus, encouraging them to think about their own values and future learning (Astin 1985). The greater the student's physical and psychological energy and involvement in the academic life of college, the greater the student's attainment of knowledge and the development of skills (Astin 1985; Tinto 1993). Highly involved students devote considerable attention to studying, spending time on campus, participating in student organizations, and interacting frequently with other students and faculty members. If successful integration and involvement does not happen, there will be a greater chance for at-risk students to feel isolated and withdraw. This is certainly applicable to students with disabilities, whose disabilities may require additional time to do daily collegiate tasks (e.g., homework, getting around campus) or their ability to interact with others, academically and socially. The Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD) (2009a) has stressed the importance of students with disabilities attending college, but also the importance of their being actively encouraged to explore interests, develop their academic skills, examine life choices, pursue career opportunities, and learn to be independent individuals in an environment that encourages learning and growth—without explicit encouragement, students with disabilities may be unlikely to fully engage with their campuses.

Finally, while disabilities have been viewed traditionally as a negative characteristic addressed by disability services, it is important to consider how disabilities may become a positive aspect of students' identity (Linton 1998; Weeber 2004). Especially with the growth of disability studies and its influence on campuses (see Taylor, this volume), more students with disabilities are connecting with each other and finding ways to build communities, even if their college does not have a disability studies program. These connections can even lead to greater student activism and interest in disability issues and progressive disability services (Cory, White, and Stuckey 2010).

There are several strategies for administrators, faculty, and professionals to consider in applying developmental theory to interactions with students with disabilities:

- For students preparing for college, it is imperative that they understand the support services available to them at the school in which they are interested in attending before choosing a particular university (Milsom and Hartley 2005).
- Educators can learn more about specific disabilities of students and disability-related accommodations (e.g., extended testing times, access to printed text, physical accessibility to classrooms) through online information, health services, and disability services.

- Campuses can seek ways to implement universal design, a relatively new concept. Universally designed instruction seeks ways to create courses that are inclusive for all students from the onset (McGuire, Scott, and Shaw 2004). In this approach, the student with a disability does not have to continually advocate for access, because disabilities are seen as a naturally occurring human difference and is addressed in the same manner as other individual differences (AHEAD 2009b). Accessibility is inherently included through flexible instruction and curricula and does not need to be readdressed for each new student with a disability.
- Create connections between professionals who have a background in student development (e.g., staff in student affairs or counseling) and disability service professionals. Encourage discussions about how student development theory may influence service provision, and how knowledge of students with disabilities may enhance understanding and interpretations of developmental theory, campus diversity, and ways to improve integration and retention of students.
- Encourage cultural centers and student organizations for students with disabilities, to support connections between students with disabilities and their allies on campus. Having opportunities to build identity can help campuses feel more welcoming and provide safe places for students outside of disability services offices (Cory, White, and Stuckey 2010).
- While students with disabilities may face additional challenges in developmental tasks and their involvement on campus, supportive administrators and faculty can use developmental theory as a foundation for improving awareness and services. Campuses can be a more welcoming place when students feel safe, supported, and encouraged to grow as individuals, and their disabilities are viewed as part of the diversity of campus.

References

- Association on Higher Education And Disability (AHEAD). 2002. *Section 504: The Law and Its Impact on Postsecondary Education*. Huntersville, NC: AHEAD.
- 2009a. *Advising Students with Disabilities*. Huntersville, NC: AHEAD.
- 2009b. *Universal Design in Higher Education: What Is Universal Design?* Huntersville, NC: AHEAD.
- Astin, A. W. 1985. *Achieving Educational Excellence*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Brinckerhoff, L. C., J. M. McGuire, and S. F. Shaw. 2002. *Postsecondary Education and Transition for Students with Learning Disabilities*. 2nd ed. Austin, TX: PRO-ED.
- Chickering, A. W. 1969. *Education and Identity*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chickering, A. W., and L. Reisser. 1993. *Education and Identity*. 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Cory, R. C., J. M. White, and Z. Stuckey. 2010. "Using Disability Studies Theory to Change Disability Services: A Case Study in Student Activism." *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 23 (1): 28–37.
- Evans, N. J., D. S. Forney, and F. Guido-DiBrito. 1998. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

- Evans, N. J., D. S. Forney, F. M. Guido, L. D. Patton, and K. A. Renn. 2010. *Student Development in College: Theory, Research, and Practice*, 2nd ed. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Hadley, W. M. 2009. "The Transition and Adjustment of First-Year Students with Specific Learning Disabilities: A Longitudinal Study." *Journal of College Orientation and Transition* 17 (1): 31–44.
- Hadley, W. M., D. J. Twale, and J. H. Evans. 2003. "First-Year Students with Specific Learning Disabilities: Transition and Adjustment to Academic Expectations." *Journal of College Orientation and Transition* 11 (1): 35–46.
- Hamrick, F. A., N. J. Evans, and J. H. Schuh. 2002. *Foundations of Student Affairs Practice: How Philosophy, Theory, and Research Strengthen Educational Outcomes*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Heiman, T., and K. Precel. 2003. "Students with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education: Academic Strategies Profile." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 35 (5): 462–68, 479.
- Janiga, S. J., and V. Costenbader. 2002. "The Transition from High School to Postsecondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Survey of College Service Coordinators." *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 35 (5): 462–68.
- Linton, S. 1998. *Claiming Disability: Knowledge and Identity*. New York: New York University Press.
- Lovett, B. J., and L. J. Lewandowski. 2006. "Gifted Students with Learning Disabilities: Who Are They?" *Journal of Learning Disabilities* 39 (6): 515–27.
- McGuire, J. M., S. S. Scott, and S. F. Shaw. 2004. "Universal Design for Instruction: The Paradigm, Its Principles, and Products for Enhancing Instructional Access." *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 17 (1): 10–20.
- Milsom, A., and M. T. Hartley. 2005. "Assisting Students with Learning Disabilities Transitioning to College: What School Counselors Should Know." *Professional School Counseling* 8 (5): 436–41.
- Schlossberg, N. K., A. Q. Lynch, and A. W. Chickering. 1989. *Improving Higher Education Environments for Adults: Responsive Programs and Services from Entry to Departure*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Tinto, V. 1993. *Leaving College: Rethinking the Causes and Cures of Student Attrition*. 2nd ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Wagner, M., L. Newman, R. Cameto, and P. Levine. 2005. *Changes Over Time in the Early Postschool Outcomes of Youth with Disabilities: A Report of Findings from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and the National Longitudinal Transition Study-2 (NLTS2)*. Menlo Park, CA: SRI International.
- Weeber, J. E. 2004. "Disability Community Leaders' Disability Identity Development: A Journey of Integration and Expansion." Unpublished doctoral dissertation, Department of Educational Research, Leadership, and Counselor Education, North Carolina State University.

WANDA M. HADLEY is the Coordinator of Disability Services at Central State University and an adjunct professor in Higher Education in the College of Education. She has written extensively about the needs of first-year students with disabilities, particularly learning disabilities.