

Access to Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities

A Summit on Removing Barriers to Access:
Addressing Documentation Issues



Summit Report and Future
Directions

November 8, 2007

Richmond, Virginia

Virginia Higher Education
Leadership Partners (VA HELP)



Acknowledgements

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The VA HELP consortium worked several years on addressing the documentation issue in Virginia. This work led to the development and implementation of a summit. Representation on the group has changed over the 9 years that VA HELP has worked on this issue. It is important to acknowledge all of the programs and organizations who have worked to remove barriers for students with disabilities to access postsecondary education.

Current Membership: Arlington County Public Schools, Association on Higher Education and Disability in Virginia (AHEAD in VA), Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (VDBI), Fairfax County Public Schools, George Mason University, J Sargeant Reynolds Community College, New River Community College, Norfolk State University, Northern Virginia Community College, Old Dominion University, State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV), U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights, Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Community College System (VCCS), Virginia Department of Education (VDOE), Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (VDRS), Virginia Division on Career Development and Transition (VA DCDT), Virginia Tech, Washington and Lee University

Past Membership: James Madison University, John Tyler Community College, Longwood University, Randolph Macon College, Richmond City Public Schools, Shenandoah University, Thomas Nelson Community College, Virginia Military Institute, Virginia Wesleyan College



Virginia Commonwealth University

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Overview



Introduction

A one-day summit on *Access to Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities: A Summit on Removing Barriers to Access: Addressing Documentation Issues* was held in Richmond, Virginia on November 7, 2007. The Assistant Superintendent for Instruction for the Virginia Department of Education, Mr. Douglas Cox, served as the summit chair. Fourteen key leaders and stakeholders attended representing state agencies, professional organizations, higher education consortiums, university and college administrators, family members, and secondary education administrators. The purpose of the summit was to bring together decision makers, leaders, and stakeholders to develop strategies to establish consistency in documentation requirements to remove barriers for individuals seeking access to postsecondary programs. In addition, the aim of the summit was to develop systems of shared responsibility for providing documentation for all students with disabilities entering postsecondary education programs in Virginia.

The summit provided a number of outcomes that will assist Virginia in building stronger partnerships that will enable individuals with disabilities seeking postsecondary education opportunities. The primary outcomes of the summit include:

- Increased awareness and visibility of critical issues surrounding documentation that impact individuals with disabilities seeking access to postsecondary education
- Clarification for state leaders of the disability documentation issues so that steps can be taken to resolve these issues
- Identification of current state policies that can assist in addressing documentation as an access issue
- Involvement of a wide spectrum of stakeholders to identify strategies addressing documentation issues and their impact on accessing postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities in Virginia

The information obtained as a result of the planning process and the key discussion points of the summit offer a blueprint for other organizations or states seeking to address this issue. This document provides the following information to assist in these efforts:

- Description of the activities conducted by VA HELP which ultimately led to the development of the summit
- Summary of activities conducted including a review of the professional literature, structured interviews with national leaders, and a national search of current practices
- Summary of the key points discussed during the summit
- Description of VA HELP's vision for Virginia and action steps developed as a result of the summit
- Background information provided to summit participants prior to the meeting

About VA HELP

VA HELP Overview

The Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA HELP) is a consortium of diverse stakeholders that collaborate on issues of mutual concern pertinent to the enhancement and accessibility of postsecondary education for students with disabilities. Established in 1999, VA HELP meets quarterly to work on specific topical areas determined by its members.

VA HELP Outcomes

Documentation Summit

To bring together decision makers, leaders and stakeholders to develop strategies to establish consistency in documentation requirements and to develop systems of shared responsibility for providing documentation for all students with disabilities entering postsecondary education programs in Virginia. The Summit was held on November 8, 2007.

College 4 U

VA HELP has provided support in the planning of a yearly college exploratory program, College 4 U, that enables high school students with disabilities and their families to obtain information about two and four year colleges in Virginia. College 4 U is funded by the Virginia Department of Education.

Virginia's College Guide for Students with Disabilities

The members assisted the VA Department of Education in the development of a publication that helps to prepare students with disabilities for college.

www.pen.k12.va.us/VDOE/sped/transition/collegeGuide2003.pdf

Interagency Cooperative Agreement

An interagency cooperative agreement was developed between higher education and vocational rehabilitation as a result of the 1998 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. The VA HELP consortium designed a cooperative agreement template for use between the Virginia Community College System, Department of Rehabilitative Services, and the Department for the Blind and Visually Impaired.

Documentation Guidelines

One major activity of the group has been the development of documentation guidelines to promote consistent documentation requirements across Virginia. The guidelines were based on documentation requirements from various two and four year institutions and best practices nationally. They were also reviewed by representatives from the Office for Civil Rights of the U.S. Department of Education.

Current VA HELP Partners

The Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners represent a number of higher education institutions, secondary education, state agencies, family members, individuals with disabilities, and professional organizations.

Higher Education Institutions

- George Mason University
- J Sargeant Reynolds Community College
- New River Community College
- Norfolk State University
- Northern Virginia Community College
- Old Dominion University
- Virginia Commonwealth University
- Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University
- Washington and Lee University

State Agencies

- Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired (VDBI)
- State Council for Higher Education in Virginia (SCHEV)
- Virginia Community College System (VCCS)
- Virginia Department of Education (VDOE)
- Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services (VDRS)

Secondary Education

- Arlington County Public Schools
- Fairfax County Public Schools

Government Representatives

- U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights

Professional Organizations

- Association on Higher Education and Disability in Virginia (AHEAD in VA)
- Virginia Division on Career Development and Transition (VA DCDT)

Efforts to Address Documentation Issues

The Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA HELP), established in 1999, consists of statewide representatives in higher education, secondary education, family members, state agencies, and professional organizations committed to the rights and opportunities for individuals with disabilities seeking postsecondary education. The VA HELP members created a mission statement to drive the group's efforts in addressing key challenges faced by students with disabilities in higher education: "The Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners is a consortium of stakeholders collaborating on issues of mutual concern pertinent to the enhancement and accessibility of postsecondary education for students with disabilities." Over the nine years of its existence, VA HELP has undertaken several key activities. The group assisted in the development of an interagency cooperative agreement between higher education and vocational rehabilitation as a result of the 1998 amendments to the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. Members were also active in the revision of a college guide developed by the Virginia Department of Education; and assisted in the initial development and implementation of a one-day college preview program for high school students with disabilities funded by the VA Department of Education. This event provides students with disabilities and their families an opportunity to learn about all aspects of transitioning to and remaining in college.

Development of Virginia Documentation Guidelines

In order to obtain services and supports from a college or university, students must establish that they have a disability and how it impacts them. Frequently this requires costly medical or psychological evaluations. In addition, colleges and universities in Virginia have different expectations or requirements for the documentation to support a student's request for an accommodation. As a result, documentation of a disability often presents significant barriers to access to higher education for students with disabilities; one ongoing activity of the consortium has revolved around issues surrounding the documentation of a disability to access higher education services and supports. Beginning in 1999, the initial work of the group focused on developing documentation guidelines for use among two- and four-year colleges and universities to promote consistency in documentation requirements. The group collectively reviewed available documentation guidelines from various two- and four-year institutions and also best practices nationally. A draft document was developed and disseminated to all Virginia colleges and universities for feedback and input. The guidelines were also posted on the Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) in Virginia website for comment. The responses from the field were reviewed and the documentation guidelines were finalized. Once finalized, the document was distributed to colleges and universities across the state, along with a PowerPoint presentation. The presentation was developed for college and secondary school personnel to use to inform students with disabilities and their families about documentation requirements.

In 2004, the VA HELP members conducted an online survey of Disability Support Services (DSS) providers across the state to determine: 1) their awareness of the guidelines developed by VA HELP, 2) if they had used them when developing or revising their documentation guidelines, and 3) what issues or concerns they were facing concerning the documentation of a disability at their college or university. Eighty-one surveys were sent to DSS representatives from public and private two-and four-year institutions of higher education in Virginia with fifty-seven DSS staff members responding to the survey. When asked what resources they used to develop their guidelines, approximately a quarter of the respondents indicated using the guidelines developed by VA HELP. Of those respondents who indicated using these guidelines, over half indicated they were very useful. When asked what the most critical need they had regarding documentation at their college or university, the three most frequently stated needs were:

- lack of current documentation provided by students;
- lack of awareness of required documentation information by professionals performing the assessments, secondary school personnel, and students or family members concerning documentation; and
- lack of cost-effective resources for students with disabilities to obtain current testing.

Facilitated Discussion on Documentation

VA Help members presented the results of the survey at the 2005 AHEAD in Virginia conference. Following the presentation, the conference participants were divided into groups to discuss a series of questions concerning the documentation of a disability. Each group was led by a VA HELP member and a note taker was assigned to each group. The facilitated discussions consisted of a set of questions that were used by VA HELP members to continue exploring the issues and concerns on the documentation of a disability faced by higher education institutions in Virginia. The small groups developed a series of strategies to enhance the communication of among stakeholders concerning the documentation of a disability in higher education. Listed below are some of the strategies identified during the discussion.

- Conduct a survey of secondary transition professionals to determine their information needs
- Develop a statewide list of qualified testing centers for students and families to use for obtaining a current assessment of certain disabilities, e.g. learning disabilities
- Provide VA Department of Rehabilitation Services (DRS) with information for their consumers
- Conduct presentations to guidance counselors as part of recruitment efforts in secondary schools
- Provide information to parent resource centers

- Develop a collaboration between AHEAD in Virginia and VA HELP to work with state agencies to develop statewide guidelines and promote them
- Develop a speakers bureau through AHEAD in Virginia
- Participate in workshops or in-service trainings for special education teachers
- Conduct presentations on documentation guidelines to graduate students in counseling or psychology programs

Consensus for a Summit on Documentation

The VA HELP members reviewed all of the information gathered through the online survey and the facilitated discussions. As a result, the members determined that the next step in the discussion of the issues and concerns around documentation of a disability needed to include state level key decision makers, leaders and stakeholders. The members decided that a one-day summit was needed to bring these individuals together to develop strategies to establish consistency in documentation requirements and to develop systems of shared responsibility for providing documentation for all students with disabilities entering postsecondary education programs in Virginia.

VA HELP worked on the development and implementation of the summit over an eighteen month period. During this time, a grant was submitted to the Johnson Foundation to support the costs for implementing the summit, and financial support was also sought from the AHEAD in Virginia and the Virginia Division on Career Development and Transition (VA DCDT). The VA HELP members conducted a literature review on documentation of a disability with the assistance of Ms. Sandra Fritton, VCU Doctoral Candidate; conducted structured interviews with national leaders in the field of higher education and disability; and conducted a national search on current practices in the field to address the documentation issue. The members created a series of background materials for participants to review prior to the meeting, and a set of questions to guide the discussion the day of the summit. In addition, to ensure a student's voice was part of the summit, the members interviewed current college students with disabilities concerning their experiences obtaining documentation of a disability and entering college.

Due to the fact that the documentation of a disability is a critical step in the process for obtaining services and supports in college which often results in a significant barrier for students with disabilities as they access higher education programs, the VA HELP members focused their efforts on collaborating with other professional organizations and key decision makers to develop and implement effective strategies. The information provided in this document reflects the work conducted by VA HELP to address this issue in Virginia.

Literature Review and Other Sources of Information

A series of activities were conducted by VA HELP members to gather background information for the summit. The information was compiled to assist in the development of a packet of materials and in structuring guided questions for summit participants. A literature review was conducted using an open coding method. This allowed for broad topic areas to emerge and the development of specific categories under each of the broad themes. To further expand on the information obtained through the literature review, structured interviews were conducted with key leaders in the higher education and disability field. In addition, a national search was conducted on current and promising practices for documentation of a disability addressing access issues for students with disabilities seeking services and supports in higher education. The information collected through these various activities is summarized below.

Key Issues that Contribute to a Disconnect between Secondary and Postsecondary Education

1) Entitlement vs. Eligibility

When students with disabilities transition from high school to college, the legal framework that defines their rights and responsibilities changes significantly. This causes difficulties for students, families, and service providers because the end result is the need to navigate between two different systems. High school students whose disabilities entitled them to special education or related services will find that in college they are no longer entitled to, but must request, and be determined eligible for, accommodations. This results in a number of critical issues that present a barrier to access to postsecondary education. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (2007) report on documentation issues identified the differences between the nature and extent of disability documentation gathered during the students' K-12 experiences and documentation required by higher education as a "disconnect" between these two systems.

2) Differences in Definition of Disability

Under the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), a student is considered to have a disability if he or she has one or more of thirteen enumerated impairments, such as a speech or language impairment, autism, or a specific learning disability, and by reason thereof, needs special education (i.e., specifically designed instruction).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA); however, offer a broader definition of a disability (i.e., a physical or mental impairment that substantially

limits one or more major life activities).¹ If the student has a disability under this definition, the student may require special education or related services at the elementary and secondary level and accommodations at the postsecondary level. However, secondary students whose disabilities entitled them to special education or related services will find that in college they are no longer entitled to, but must be determined eligible for, accommodations.

Secondary education and postsecondary education personnel operate in separate professional worlds. As a result, the public policy “tools” that influence one sector (i.e., funding, accountability, assessment, and governance systems) have little in common with the policy tools that influence the other. The issue of disjointed systems remains largely invisible because it falls between the cracks of the separate governance and policy systems (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

3) Differences in Policy among Higher Education Institutions

The Association on Higher Education and Disability in Virginia (AHEAD in VA) is an organization of disability support staff in colleges and universities. A facilitated discussion with its members was conducted in 2005. Results from this discussion found that Virginia colleges and universities are using different standards for documentation purposes, requiring different types of documentation and interpreting that documentation differently. Differences among disability support providers on information needed to determine accommodations were divided between college and universities requiring a diagnosis of a disability, including a description of functional limitations, versus other higher education institutions requiring only a description of functional limitations. Many participants spoke in favor of creating greater consistency among colleges and universities in the state, perhaps to the point of having statewide guidelines or even requirements. Other participants disagreed, taking the position that each institution needs the flexibility to create requirements tailored to its mission and programs (although perhaps falling within a general framework of guiding principles).

In higher education, there are no consistent or agreed upon principles related to interpretation of information to determine student eligibility, access to services, and appropriate accommodations (NJCLD, 2007). There is also a widespread lack of information about, and understanding of, the current postsecondary requirements by middle and high school students with disabilities and their families, teachers, guidance counselors, and medical services providers. In a study to identify acceptable documentation of a disability, Madaus (2001) concluded that the lack of documentation guidelines in Section 504 and the ADA has led to a wide variance in the scope and quality of documentation submitted to higher education institutions.

¹ The recently enacted the ADA Restoration Act does not change the definition of disability. While the new law will make it easier for a student to prove substantial limitation, there will still be a need for documentation. As regulations to implement the new law are developed, educational institutions may need to revisit their documentation policies and requirements.

An alternative approach for determining the amount of documentation needed by a student with a disability is to review the nature of the disability and the type of services or accommodations requested. If a student requests one of the more standard accommodations, for example, extra time on exams, the disability support services provider could use information other than psychoeducational testing to document the need for extra time. Stricter documentation requirements would be used for more complicated situations involving those disabilities where the impact is less clear and/or the accommodations are less common or less obviously connected to the student's disability (Comments from a structured interview with a national leader in postsecondary education, 8-07). A study conducted of graduates with disabilities from 2 and 4-year colleges and universities found that a majority of the accommodations provided to these graduates were providing extra time and a quiet testing environment. The results of the study suggest that most accommodations provided to students with disabilities in higher education are generally not complex (Sharpe, Johnson, Izzo, & Murray, 2005).

Section 504 and the ADA do not require universities to establish a standard delivery of services. This provides universities flexibility in developing and providing services to students with disabilities (Pingry, 2007). On the other hand, the lack of clear criteria creates obstacles for students with disabilities in advocating for appropriate accommodations (Pingry, 2007).

A study conducted by Dowrick and colleagues (2005) found there is a perceived gap between policy and practice on postsecondary education campuses. The results of a series of focus groups held nationally found that disability policy does not often lead to practice in postsecondary institutions. Participants expressed the ongoing issue of having to advocate for basic accommodations (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005).

The national Association on Higher Education and Disability is an organization for professionals in higher education especially postsecondary education service providers. The AHEAD organization developed a series of recommendations for creating disability-specific documentation guidelines. As described on its website, AHEAD has taken the position that it is not practical or desirable to create specific protocols for documenting every possible condition that might be considered a disability. Instead, institutions may choose to establish preferred profiles for the more common conditions. Preferred profiles for disability-specific guidelines are more helpful when they request information that describes the condition, validates the need for accommodation AND includes information to support educational planning. Higher education also should anticipate accommodation needs in new contexts and facilitate referrals to outside services and agencies. In doing so, AHEAD strongly encourages postsecondary programs to incorporate several specific elements in order to:

- help ensure that all documentation guidelines are consistent,
- offer direction for the case-by-case review of documentation that doesn't fit the established protocol for a specific disability,
- clarify specific guidelines for diagnosticians, and

- provide information to individuals seeking services

There is a need for standards or guidelines that are reasonable. How many students are being left behind by overly strict requirements? (Comments from a structured interview with a national leader in postsecondary education, 8-07)

4) Confusion among Clinical Professionals

Many professionals who evaluate students to determine the presence of a disability are confused by the lack of standardized requirements for postsecondary education. Essentially, clinicians are unsure about the differences between the IDEA on the one hand, and the requirements of Section 504 and the ADA on the other – and in particular, the diagnostic standards under each of the laws (Gordon, Lewandowski, Murphy & Dempsey, 2002). They also may not be familiar with the differences in educational settings, such as services and supports they may recommend for secondary settings, may not be appropriate or effective in postsecondary settings.

Keys Issues on Financial Resources for Documentation

1) Lack of Funding Resources

Neither Section 504 nor the ADA requires school divisions to provide additional evaluations (e.g., psychoeducational testing) to high school students with disabilities seeking college admission. As a result, students with disabilities and their families must bear the cost of obtaining these evaluations, which in many instances can create a significant financial impact. The cost, especially for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, can serve as a considerable (perhaps even insurmountable) barrier to obtaining accommodations (NJCLD, 2007).

Because of the disconnect between secondary, postsecondary, and community service systems, students with disabilities and their families too often face financial burdens and barriers to access postsecondary education as a result of not having available resources to pay privately for the required evaluations (NJCLD, 2007).

2) Extensive Documentation Requirements for Higher Education

Postsecondary education institutions generally require documentation at the adult level, particularly for students with learning disabilities. Currently, documentation criteria at the adult level require an extensive amount of background and current psychoeducational information to

support diagnosis of a learning disability and access to accommodations. One result of the documentation requirement is that individuals without sufficient financial support systems will not gain access to accommodations at institutions of higher education. For this and other reasons, it is time that professionals reexamine the validity and fairness of existing documentation criteria (Gregg, Coleman, Davis, Lindstrom & Hartwig, 2006).

Key Issues on Need for Research and Evaluation

1) Critical Need for Research on Policy Integration

Research indicates that connecting secondary education, post secondary education and adult service systems and ensuring that they work together closely can improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities. However, there is limited research showing how these systems can overcome huge obstacles to policy integration. (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

2) Potential Strategies and Approaches

Secondary and postsecondary education should work together (with students and families) to be sure there is a clear understanding of each student's needs and how these needs have been met in secondary education. In some cases, the Summary of Performance could provide sufficient information for postsecondary documentation purposes (Comments from a structured interview with national leader in postsecondary education, 8-07).

Florida's House Bill 785 enables students with disabilities to include the cost of testing in their financial aid package if they meet the criteria described in the legislation. The bill allows a public or private higher education institution to include in its cost of admission, adult norm-referenced testing that is required for eligible students to qualify for accommodations for disabilities. To be eligible, a student must be a legal resident of Florida; enrolled in a minimum of 6 semester hours per term in a degree, certificate, or diploma program; and must have a documented learning disability under IDEA or the ADA.

The Regents Centers for Learning Disorders were established and funded in 1993 by the Board of Regents of the University System of Georgia. The three centers (located at Georgia Southern University, Georgia State University, and the University of Georgia) were established to provide comprehensive evaluations for students with possible learning disorders who are attending schools within the University System of Georgia. Their mission also includes consultation, research, and training focused on the needs of college students with learning disorders. To be referred to a center for evaluation, a student must be currently enrolled in one of the public colleges or universities in Georgia, or admitted for enrollment. Under some circumstances, a student may also be referred to a center as part of a special review during the admissions

process. For more information, please visit www2.gsu.edu/~wwwrld/BORWEB/introduction.htm

The Wisconsin Technical College System and the University of Wisconsin System jointly developed “A Wisconsin Post-Secondary Guide to Disability Documentation.” This guide assists all organizations in determining their roles to understand and assist students with disabilities who enroll in postsecondary education to obtain needed documentation. Each partner in K-12 and postsecondary has a role in disability documentation. The guide provides the following: 1) Summary of Applicable Laws; 2) Guiding Principles for Disability Documentation; 3) Elements of Proper Documentation of the Disability; 4) Resources Websites; and 5) Examples of a Transition Checklist and Letters showing Documentation History. The guide is intended to improve the quality and usefulness of documentation of students’ disabilities, and to create improved communication between K-12 schools and postsecondary education regarding transition planning to postsecondary education. For more information, please visit <http://dpi.wi.gov/sped/transition.html>

The state of Iowa has been working on the design and implementation of the Support for Accommodation Request (SAR) form. The SAR was developed as a tool for summarizing documentation from a student’s secondary education experience. Students with disabilities and their teachers or transition coordinators summarize relevant and useful information from a variety of sources. The form can be used as the basis for verifying eligibility and supporting requests for accommodations, academic adjustments, and /or auxiliary aids at the postsecondary level. The SAR is currently being piloted with an extensive evaluation of its effectiveness. For more information, please contact Barbara Guy at Barbara.Guy@iowa.gov



Synopsis of Summit



Agenda

- 8:30 Opening Remarks by Dr. Dan LaVista, Executive Director, SCHEV
- Words of Welcome by:
- Mr. James Rothrock, Commissioner, VDRS
 - Dr. Charles Taylor on behalf of the VCCS Chancellor
 - Mr. Joseph Bowman, Commissioner, VDBVI
 - Mr. Douglas Cox, Assistant Superintendent, VDOE
- Introduction of Summit Participants
- 8:45 Overview of VA HELP and Background on Summit
Elizabeth Getzel, VCU and Erica Lovelace, VDRS
- 9:00 Discussion on Guided Questions facilitated by Mr. Douglas Cox
- Guided Question 1:** What steps can Virginia take toward developing policies and practices to establish consistency in the requirements for the documentation of a disability?
- 10:00 **Guided Question 2:** What steps can Virginia take to establish mechanisms for sharing resources enabling students with disabilities (especially underserved populations—minority, economically disadvantaged) access to assessments/evaluations to document a disability for accommodations?
- 11:00 **Guided Question 3:** What steps can Virginia take to establish and support research studies, practices, and/or strategies to evaluate new approaches in developing a statewide approach to transition/documentation?
- 12:00 Working Lunch
Discussion on Prioritizing Strategies and Approaches
- 1:30 Determining Next Steps
- 2:00 Adjournment

Summit Participant List

Chairperson: Mr. Douglas Cox

Assistant Superintendent Special Education
and Student Services
Department of Education (VDOE)

Mr. Joseph Bowman

Commissioner
Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired
(VDBVI)

Ms. Mary Churchill

Disability Services
University of Richmond

Ms. Candace Cortiella

Parent Representative

Dr. Larry Dotolo

President
Virginia Tidewater Consortium for Higher
Education

Dr. Martha Lou Green

Associate Dean, University College
Virginia Commonwealth University

Dr. Dennis Gregory

Director of the Higher Education Graduate
Program
Old Dominion University

Mr. Stephen Hale

President of the Virginia Academy of School
Psychologists
Representative for the Virginia Psychological
Association

Dr. Dan LaVista

Executive Director
State Council of Higher Education for Virginia
(SCHEV)

Dr. Alan T. Lee

Superintendent Washington County Public Schools
Virginia Association of School Superintendents

Dr. Fred Morton

Superintendent Henrico County Public Schools
Virginia Association of School Superintendents

Ms. Janet Riddick

Policy Analyst
Office of Community Integration for People with
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Mr. James A. Rothrock

Commissioner
Virginia Department of Rehabilitative Services
(VDRS)

Dr. Charles Taylor

President
Thomas Nelson Community College

Ms. Elizabeth Evans Getzel, VCU

Ms. Erica Lovelace, VDRS
VA HELP Facilitators

VA HELP Member Summit Participant List

Jennifer Allman

VA Community College System

Susan Asselin

Virginia Tech

Lori Briel

Virginia Commonwealth University

Wendy Carria

Arlington Public Schools

Ann Deschamps

Fairfax County Public Schools

Jeananne Dixon

New River Community College

Elizabeth Getzel

Virginia Commonwealth University

Beverly Harris

Norfolk State University

Howard Kallem

George Mason University

Joyce Knight

Virginia Commonwealth University

Gary Krapf

State Council of Higher Education
for Virginia

Erica Lovelace

VA Department of Rehabilitative Services

Shannon McManus

Virginia Commonwealth University

Marianne Moore

VA Department of Education

Lenna Ojure

Washington & Lee University

Susan Payne

VA Department for the Blind and Vision Impaired

Virginia Reilly

Virginia Tech

Judy Risch

Office for Civil Right (US DOE)

Colleen Thoma

Virginia Commonwealth University

Deborah Wilkerson

J Sargeant Reynolds Community College

Kathe Wittig

Virginia Commonwealth University

Key Discussion Points

The following comments reflect key points that emerged from the discussion on the three guided questions provided to participants. The participants were encouraged to share their ideas and experiences from their perspective.

Guided Question 1

What steps can Virginia take toward developing policies and practices to establish consistency in the requirements for the documentation of a disability?

- Need to answer question as to why there is this inconsistency across higher education institutions. Is it a staffing/budget issue? Is it a result of different levels of staffing? Need to determine what the current documentation policies are, understand the inconsistencies and develop a workgroup that will create a model that demonstrates the information that higher education needs.
- Determine if Virginia's 2005 Higher Education Restructuring Act is a place to begin. The Act allows universities and colleges greater flexibility in some fiscal areas if in return the institutions align their missions with the mission of the state. Higher education must annually document they are making progress toward each state goal. The first goal is access to higher education. As to documentation, the key is to delineate any reasons for inconsistencies and address how these inconsistencies impact access to higher education for individuals with disabilities.
- Need to build consensus across colleges and universities perhaps establishing the top four set of items in documentation that should be consistent.
- Need to continue building mutual respect/relationships among all institutions serving individuals with disabilities. Take what is developed at one level (secondary education, community college, etc.) and adapt it to the current higher education environment.
- Continue to build ties between the K-12 system and higher education to help students with disabilities successfully transition to college. Need to make sure that special education staff and superintendents in the K-12 system are aware of the documentation issues.
- Need to ensure clinicians understand what information is needed for students with disabilities in higher education and how the information is used.

Guided Question 2

What steps can Virginia take to establish mechanisms for sharing resources, enabling students with disabilities (especially underserved populations-minority, economically disadvantaged) access to assessments and evaluations to document a disability for accommodations?

- Need to review what other states are doing to assist students with disabilities to obtain assessments to determine what might work in Virginia.
- Need data on the numbers of students with disabilities entering college from secondary education in Virginia. The federal Indicator #14 (U.S. Department of Education) will help to provide some data on the number of students as a result of the follow-up interviews of students with disabilities conducted annually by school divisions for this indicator.
- Need data on individuals with disabilities who are entering higher education several years beyond secondary education and returning veterans who may have acquired a disability in the service.
- Need data on how many students with disabilities could benefit from support to obtain needed assessments for access to higher education.
- Need to explore other methods for collecting information that can be used by higher education, for example the Summary of Performance or curriculum-based assessments in secondary education.
- Need for resources and staffing to assist students with disabilities in their transition to higher education. Examples provided included resources for conducting assessments and increased numbers of transition coordinator positions in secondary education divisions.
- Build relationships with state legislators through active engagement concerning the access and documentation of a disability for individuals. Redefine the concept of diversity in state policy to include individuals with disabilities. Discuss with legislators how this issue might be addressed through a budget item.
- Develop a joint policy model with cooperation between the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) that identifies common ground among colleges and universities and distribute to institutions to use as a baseline model. Each institution would then determine whether there were any reasons for its requirements to be different.

- Need to deal with the underlying issues of how many students with disabilities face access problems as a result of documentation issues due in part to the lack of resources. Collecting data will provide a basis to seek legislative support for these initiatives.

Guided Question 3

What steps can Virginia take to establish and support research studies, practices, and/or strategies to evaluate new approaches in developing a statewide approach to transition and documentation?

- Develop collaboration between state agencies and higher education to share data and expertise to research access issues for students with disabilities seeking documentation of a disability for higher education.
- Develop connections with workforce development and economic data. Need to include the business community concerning the issues of educating individuals with disabilities. Involving workforce development could be a source of funding for research initiatives. Need to look at ways to connect with state initiatives such as the Governor's Commonwealth Initiative that focuses on economic development.
- Establish a connection between access issues around documentation and an existing state priority that would not compete with other research priorities and work with state leadership to support research efforts.

Major Themes of the Summit

The main themes that emerged from the discussion and ideas raised by the participants are summarized below.

- Identify major inconsistencies in policy and practice among colleges and universities and, based on this information, develop a joint policy model with cooperation between the State Council of Higher Education for Virginia (SCHEV), the Virginia Community College System (VCCS), and the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) that identifies common ground among colleges and universities and distribute to institutions to use as a baseline model
- Identify existing streams of funding that could assist students with disabilities in covering costs for assessments (e.g., workforce development)
- Access data sources to provide information on the number of students with disabilities entering Virginia higher education programs

- Identify current practices in other states to determine if specific strategies can be adopted or adapted in Virginia
- Explore the use of the Summary of Performance as a resource for documentation purposes
- Identify methods for communication between the K-12 system, the higher education system, individuals with disabilities and family members, and clinicians conducting assessments
- Align issues affecting access to higher education for individuals with disabilities with state policies on diversity and access in higher education programs
- Establish a connection between access issues around documentation and an existing state priority that would not compete with other research priorities and work with state leadership to support research efforts



VA HELP's Vision for Virginia



VA HELP's Vision for Virginia

Following the summit, VA HELP members reviewed the collective responses of summit participants. Discussions held by members led to the development of a clear vision for Virginia. Key activities and actions steps provide direction and structure for the consortium's continuing work on access issues experienced by students with disabilities seeking documentation of a disability for services and supports in college.

Vision Statement

The Commonwealth of Virginia ensures equal access to higher education for students with disabilities by removing the barriers caused by documentation requirements.

Next Steps for Building a Common Ground between Secondary and Postsecondary Education

1) Determine data sources within the Commonwealth to identify the number of students with disabilities entering college

- Review Virginia's results for the federal Indicator #14 (U.S. Department of Education) on secondary education post school outcomes related to postsecondary education
- Identify other data sources in the state to assist in determining the number of individuals with disabilities entering postsecondary education programs

2) Identify strategies or processes to enhance collaboration between secondary and postsecondary education

- Meet with community college system, four year college system, secondary education, and adult service agencies to further discuss summit outcomes and discuss ideas on enhancing and expanding communication mechanisms across these entities
- Meet with state legislators and state level representatives of higher education to align access to higher education for individuals with disabilities with the Higher Education Restructuring Act
- Meet with state legislators and state level representatives to expand the definition of diversity to include individuals with disabilities within the State Strategic Plan

3) Identify potential sources of information and resources for documenting a disability in higher education programs

- Collect information and ideas on use of the Summary of Performance, IEP information, student portfolios, and assessments conducted by adult service agencies as possible sources for documentation purposes
- Collaborate with AHEAD in Virginia to gather information from college disability support professionals on:
 - a) essential information needed for documentation purposes including formal assessment measures
 - b) alternative information used for documentation purposes (e.g., assessments conducted in secondary education, Summary of Performance)
 - c) reasons for inconsistencies in documentation requirements across postsecondary programs
 - d) key elements needed for documentation to build consensus across postsecondary programs
- Identify funding resources to explore new strategies or models for documentation of a disability. For example, conducting pilot studies using assessment information collected by secondary schools to use as documentation with 2- and 4-year colleges to determine type of accommodations provided, cost of accommodations, and educational outcomes
- Consider models used in other states to address the documentation issue and how they might be adopted or adapted in Virginia

4) Enhance information sharing

- Develop training for students with disabilities and parents, college disability support professionals, clinicians, and secondary education personnel (e.g., administrators, special education teachers, transition specialists, guidance counselors) on topics pertinent to the documentation of a disability in higher education
- Create communication mechanisms to share information and resources with colleagues in other states to keep abreast of national trends (e.g., national AHEAD, DCDT)



Preparation Materials for Summit Participants



Mission & Outcomes

Summit Mission

To bring together decision makers, leaders and stakeholders to develop strategies to establish consistency in documentation requirements and to develop systems of shared responsibility for providing documentation for all students with disabilities entering postsecondary education programs in Virginia. No other state has held a summit that brings together leaders to address specific issues that impact their citizens seeking access to higher education programs.

Summit Focus

To determine strategies, approaches, or areas of collaboration among summit participants to move Virginia in a direction of shared language among stakeholders, collaboration of resources or information sharing among stakeholders, and consensus across postsecondary education programs on documentation guidelines. There is a great need for information about best practices, clear policies, and effective communication on documentation requirements to facilitate the transition of students with disabilities from secondary to postsecondary education, and the transfer of students with disabilities from one higher education program to another.

Summit Participants

Individuals invited to the summit include key decision makers representing secondary and postsecondary education, state agency officials, legislators, family members, and professional organizations representing superintendents, principals, and evaluators. These stakeholders will be asked to participate in a facilitated discussion on approaches for Virginia to create a smoother, more seamless transition for students with disabilities into higher education programs. Participants will receive briefing papers, prior to the date of the summit, on the issues surrounding the documentation of a disability for eligibility to receive accommodations in college. This background information will enable participants to engage in a discussion on constructive approaches to resolving existing issues.

Summit Outcomes

Specific strategies, recommendations, or actions determined by summit participants will be summarized in a proceedings document that will be disseminated throughout Virginia and nationally. The Virginia Higher Education Leadership Partners (VA HELP) will use the results of the summit to create an action plan and will begin working with stakeholders on developing and implementing the summit outcomes across the Commonwealth.

Statement of the Problem

This briefing paper describes several of the issues that contribute to barriers for individuals with disabilities seeking to access postsecondary programs. Addressing these issues will enable Virginia to create a smoother, more seamless transition for students with disabilities into higher education programs.

The federal and state legislative protections that drive services for students with disabilities drastically change as students move from high school to college. Eligibility for services, documentation requirements, disability disclosure, and request for accommodations and access to technology are all examples of key areas and processes that differ between high school and college. This transition from a familiar model of special education or related services to variable services and accommodations at a college level can be overwhelming for students with disabilities, their families and the secondary-level professionals and evaluators who assist them, thereby creating a major obstacle for success (Madaus, 2005).

One major difference between high school and college concerns the process for requesting services in college and the “eligibility requirements” for receiving those services vs. the “entitlement” to services in secondary education. In high school, student services and supports are designed to meet specific educational goals. However, the supports and services provided in college are designed to ensure access to the college’s education programs and other activities. Many students with disabilities and their parents realize the difference between high school and college only when the level of service provision drops off and/or is not automatically extended (Stodden, Conway, & Chang, 2003).

Lack of awareness among students, parents and even counselors and teachers regarding the difference in policy between the secondary level and the postsecondary level also presents a challenge (Wehman & Yasuda, 2005). Many secondary and postsecondary schools do not establish the relationship and communication that would enhance the transition process due to time constraints, confusion over documentation requirements, and the differences in receiving accommodations between secondary and postsecondary systems. This confusion over documentation requirements also creates difficulties for psychologists and other evaluators who provide testing for individuals with disabilities seeking to enter college and access needed accommodations. The result of this confusion is the development of evaluation reports that may not provide the information required by specific postsecondary programs for documentation purposes. Furthermore, the need for such an evaluation creates an undue financial burden to family members and individuals with disabilities who are routinely responsible for the costs of these reports.

Background Information

Importance of Access to Postsecondary Education Programs

For individuals with disabilities, perhaps more than for others, earning a college degree/certificate or completing some college courses (Fairweather, & Shaver, 1991; Stodden & Dowrick, 2000; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000):

- Enhances obtaining and maintaining employment
- Provides greater opportunities to earn higher annual income
- Creates a path-way to life long independence
- Creates a greater quality of life

Individuals with Disabilities in College

Secondary students with disabilities are showing greater interest in college. An increasing percentage of Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are indicating college as students' transition goals (Wagner, Cameto, & Newman, 2003). There are several factors that contribute to this increased interest in higher education, and as a result the number of individuals accessing college is increasing. Estimates of individuals who chose to self-disclose their disability to receive accommodations in postsecondary programs range from 3% to 17%. Most higher education sources estimate the number to be around 10% (National Center on Education Statistics, 2000; National Council on Disability, 2000).

However, the gap for individuals completing college in comparison with individuals without disabilities is widening. From 1986 until 2001, completion of college for individuals with disabilities dropped from 19% to 12%. The rates have also dropped for completion of some college coursework from 30% to 26% within this same time frame (National Organization on Disability, 2001)

Impact on Employment

Research shows a stronger positive correlation between level of education and rate of employment for individuals with disabilities than for the general population. This difference is critical to consider since only 35% of people with disabilities report being employed full or part time, compared with 78% of those who do not have disabilities (National Organization on Disability, 2004).

The need for advanced training or education is essential for individuals with disabilities since 90% of the fastest growing occupations require postsecondary education or training.

Need for Summit on Removing Barriers to Access

If there is a single issue that has captured the attention nationally of secondary and postsecondary education professionals, students with disabilities, family members, psychologists and other evaluators it is the documentation of a student's disability as he or she transitions from high school to college, or transfer from one college (2 or 4) to another. This is also an issue for students with disabilities attending graduate or professional schools. Documentation of a disability is required by postsecondary education programs to determine the eligibility of students to receive services while in college. As is the case in other states, documentation requirements vary among Virginia's higher education programs. This creates a number of issues for students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary education programs--one of the most significant being access to higher education. Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) are not considered as providing sufficient information for documentation purposes. As a result, barriers exist between secondary and postsecondary education, which ultimately create significant challenges as students with disabilities attempt to access higher education programs.

Guided Questions

Guided Question 1

What steps can Virginia take toward developing policies and practices to establish consistency in the requirements for the documentation of a disability?

Key Issues that Contribute to the Disconnect between Secondary & Postsecondary

Entitlement vs. Eligibility: When students with disabilities transition from high school to college, the legal framework that defines their rights and responsibilities changes significantly. This causes difficulties for students, families, and service providers because the end result is the need to navigate between two different systems. High school students whose disabilities entitled them to special education or related services will find that in college they are no longer entitled to, but must request, and be determined eligible for, accommodations. This results in a number of critical issues that present a barrier to access to postsecondary education.

Differences in Definition of Disability: Under the IDEA (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act), a student is considered to have a disability if he or she has one or more of thirteen enumerated impairments, such as a speech or language impairment, autism, or a specific learning disability, and by reason thereof, needs special education (i.e., specifically designed instruction).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) offer a broader definition of a disability (e.g., a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities). If the student has a disability under this definition, the student may require special education or related services at the elementary and secondary level and accommodations at the postsecondary level. However, secondary students whose disabilities entitled them to special education or related services will find that in college they are no longer entitled to, but must be determined eligible for, accommodations.

Secondary education and postsecondary education personnel operate in separate professional worlds. As a result, the public policy “tools” that influence one sector, (i.e., funding, accountability, assessment, and governance systems) have little in common with the policy tools that influence the other. The issue of disjointed systems remains largely invisible because it falls between the cracks of the separate governance and policy systems (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Differences in Policy among Higher Education Institutions: The Association on Higher Education and Disability in Virginia (AHEAD in VA) is an organization of disability support staff in colleges and universities. A facilitated discussion with its members was conducted in 2005. Results from this discussion found that Virginia colleges and universities are using different standards for documentation purposes, requiring different types of documentation, and interpreting that documentation differently. Differences among disability support providers on information needed to determine accommodations were divided between colleges and universities requiring a diagnosis of a disability, including a description of functional limitations, versus other higher education institutions requiring only a description of functional limitations.

In higher education, there are no consistent or agreed upon principles related to interpretation of information to determine student eligibility, access to services, and appropriate accommodations (NJCLD, 2007). There is also a widespread lack of information about, and understanding of, the current postsecondary requirements by middle and high school students with disabilities and their families, teachers, guidance counselors, and medical services providers (Madaus & Madaus, 2001).

There is a need for standards or guidelines that are reasonable. How many students are being left behind by overly strict requirements? (Comments from a structured interview with a national leader in postsecondary education, 8-07)

Confusion among Clinical Professionals: Many professionals who evaluate students to determine the presence of a disability are confused by the lack of standardized requirements for postsecondary education. Essentially, clinicians are unsure about the differences between the IDEA on the one hand, and the requirements of Section 504 and the ADA on the other – and in particular, the diagnostic standards under each of the laws (Gordon, Lewandowski, Murphy & Dempsey, 2002).

Guided Question 2

What steps can Virginia take to establish mechanisms for sharing resources enabling students with disabilities (especially underserved populations—minority, economically disadvantaged) access to assessments/evaluations to document a disability for accommodations?

Key Issues on Financial Resources for Documentation

Lack of Funding Resources: Neither Section 504 nor the ADA requires school divisions to provide additional evaluations (e.g., psychoeducational testing) to high school students with disabilities seeking college admission. As a result, students with disabilities and their families must bear the cost of obtaining these evaluations, which in many instances can create a significant financial impact. The cost, especially for students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, can serve as a considerable (perhaps even insurmountable) barrier to obtaining accommodations (NJCLD, 2007).

Because of the disconnect between secondary, postsecondary, and community service systems, students with disabilities and their families too often face financial burdens and barriers to access postsecondary education as a result of not having available resources to pay privately for the required evaluations (NJCLD, 2007).

Extensive Documentation Requirements for Higher Education: Postsecondary education institutions generally require documentation at the adult level, particularly for students with learning disabilities. Currently, documentation criteria at the adult level require an extensive amount of background as well as current psychoeducational information to support diagnosis of a learning disability and access to accommodations. One result of the documentation requirement is that individuals without sufficient financial support systems will not gain access to accommodations at institutions of higher education. For this and other reasons, it is time that professionals reexamine the validity and fairness of existing documentation criteria (Gregg, Coleman, Davis, Lindstrom & Hartwig, 2006).

Guided Question 3

What steps can Virginia take to establish and support research studies, practices, and/or strategies to evaluate new approaches in developing a statewide approach to transition/documentation?

Key Issues on Need for Research and Evaluation

Critical Need for Research on Policy Integration: Research indicates that connecting secondary education, postsecondary education and adult service systems and ensuring that they work together closely can improve access and outcomes for students with disabilities. However, there is limited research showing how these systems can overcome huge obstacles to policy integration. (Kirst & Venezia, 2004).

Potential Strategies and Approaches: Secondary and postsecondary education should work together (with students and families) to be sure there is a clear understanding of each student's needs and how these needs have been met in secondary education. In some cases, the Summary of Performance could provide sufficient information for postsecondary documentation purposes (Comments from a structured interview with national leader in postsecondary education, 8-07).

Florida's House Bill 785 enables students with disabilities to include the cost of testing in their financial aid package if they meet the criteria described in the legislation. The bill allows a public or private higher education institution to include in its cost of admission, adult norm-referenced testing that is required for eligible students to qualify for accommodations for disabilities. To be eligible, a student must be a legal resident of Florida; enrolled in a minimum of 6 semester hours per term in a degree, certificate, or diploma program; and must have a documented learning disability under IDEA or ADA.

The state of Wisconsin has developed a guide to disability documentation that is being implemented statewide to encourage uniformity across postsecondary education programs.

Presently, there are no evidence based research studies on the validity of current documentation requirements. There are no studies or pilot projects comparing current documentation requirement usage at one institution to another institution piloting other methods for documentation, for example, the Summary of Performance.



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