

Disability Services Partnerships with Faculty Members

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Abstract

Creating impactful partnerships across university divisions can enhance the effectiveness and impact of the Disability Services Office. Research has shown the benefits of practitioners and faculty members collaborating; however, careful consideration and communication is needed in order for these collaborations to be successful and beneficial. In this practice brief, successful collaborations are examined and suggestions are made for Disability Services to foster partnerships with faculty members.

Keywords: *Disability services, collaboration, partnerships*

Higher education encourages and supports collaboration and partnerships across institutional divisions (AAHE, ACPA, & NASPA, 1998). Collaboration can influence student learning and outcomes while promoting needed change and advancement for the effectiveness of an office (Kezar, 2009; Schroeder, 2003). For professionals to begin partnerships outside of their areas, there are many strategies to successfully balance daily duties and form meaningful collaborations. Through strategic relationship building and understanding individual strengths, professionals can form meaningful partnerships across divisions.

Disability Services is an important resource for students on campuses. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) ratified in 1990, have played critical roles in ensuring access to higher education for students with disabilities (Madaus, 2011). By promoting inclusive campus practices and facilitating reasonable accommodations, Disability Services ensures that students with disabilities receive equal opportunity for education and the ability to succeed in college while preparing for future careers.

Disability Services function in varying administrative units; some offices work within the Division of Student Affairs while others function in divisions of

Academic Affairs or Equity and Inclusion. Duffy and Gugerty (2005), in their examination of the roles that Disability Services fulfills and how the structure of the office interacts with the rest of campus, found that Disability Services can operate from centralized or decentralized orientations. Centralized offices offer wide-ranging services that provide multiple resources for disability-based needs. Decentralized offices provide disability-based services not available elsewhere on campus. Both of these models, depending on the size, mission, and organizational structure of the campus, have proven to be successful. However, both program models can be enhanced by collaborating and forming partnerships across divisions as Disability Services should not work in a vacuum on campus (Association on Higher Education and Disability, n.d.).

Along with verifying disabilities, ensuring reasonable accommodations, and assisting students with disabilities, a priority for Disability Services should be collaborating with faculty and staff (Cory, 2011). Collaboration across the university can ensure commitment to the success of students with disabilities and can assist Disability Services professionals and faculty members to better meet the needs of students with disabilities, and help foster an environment conducive to academic success. Additionally, Disability Services assists the

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university in complying with ADA regulations and civil rights while maintaining institutional academic standards (Wessel, 2016). When faculty members have an understanding of the needs of students, they are able to create accommodations that allow students to succeed academically while maintaining the rigor of the curriculum. Forming relationships with faculty and staff can foster partnerships to successfully meet the needs of students across campus.

Collaboration across divisions or units has often been used as a catalyst for reform and ensuring best practice. Collaboration was positively implemented to enhance the training of future teachers (Sharpe, Lounsbury, & Templin, 1997). The authors examined a partnership between university faculty members and K-12 public school teachers. They viewed this effort as a scholar-practitioner model of combining research and theory with the practical execution of working in the field. The collaboration of these two perspectives and insights allowed individuals to ensure college students were receiving effective training for their future careers. Through the data collected in this study, it was found that successful collaborations begin with a shared vision of the purpose of the partnership and that the participants agree to defined roles.

In the field of Disability Services, collaboration can be an important practice for professionals in higher education. Practitioners seek to promote the development of their students throughout their university experiences. In particular, Disability Services aims to help students transition from high school to college, develop while in college, and effectively find employment after graduation (Scott, 1996). The additional support that collaboration fosters for students with disabilities can enhance their experiences and success on campus, while spreading understanding of students with disabilities to all sectors of the university community. In particular, the partnership between Disability Services educators and faculty members can foster a relationship that enhances the effectiveness of the office and impact with students. With the emergence of universal design and its applications to college instruction, successful faculty and disability resource partnerships in recent years have focused on ways to promote inclusive teaching (Roberts, Park, Brown, & Cook, 2011). New types of partnerships describe the changing role of disability resource professionals to include that of assisting and supporting faculty with instructional design that anticipates diverse learners (Scott & McGuire, in press).

Despite mostly widespread success of partnerships across divisions, there is some caution that collaboration should not receive blind acceptance. Peter Ma-

golda (2005) encouraged those interested in building partnerships across divisions to carefully examine themselves and the situation before proceeding. Creating an effective partnership takes careful consideration of not only the desired outcomes of the relationship but also an understanding of the cultural differences that can exist across divisions. Such cultural differences could be the priorities of being student centered, research focused, or goal driven (Kezar, 2003). Effective collaborations should have “a meaningful, reciprocal, and responsive relationship” (Magolda, 2005, p. 18). By embracing and understanding the different strengths and weaknesses within the partnership, effective collaboration can be accomplished.

Katherine Stolz (2010) interviewed housing professionals working with students with disabilities about the successes or difficulties they faced in forming partnerships across divisions. Participants identified size and decentralization of a university, organizational hierarchy on campus, involvement in multiple initiatives, understanding the needs of students with disabilities, and the demand of keeping up with daily tasks as barriers to forming meaningful partnerships. These hindrances encompassed time constraints and the perceived authority of individuals wanting to form partnerships. However, aspects that helped them partner included being able to share a vision, joining committees, having a point person for the collaboration, and understanding an institution’s history. Individuals who were more involved on campus and were able to relate to different departmental needs were able to form successful partnerships. The participants of the study witnessed the benefit of their partnerships through the success of their students due to the added support that was fostered across campus.

Collaboration has the potential to benefit individuals working in higher education, and the impact can be seen through student experiences. Pursuing a partnership takes careful consideration and strategy. Best practices can inform successful collaborations, and many practitioners can follow the steps to build beneficial relationships across campus.

Disability Services Practitioner/Faculty Model

Disability Services professionals can form meaningful partnerships to support the success of students with disabilities. Forming partnerships with faculty members can not only enhance support for students with disabilities on campus, but significant research can be conducted to inform best practices and revitalize policy and procedures for student success. A partnership fostered between a disability services educator and

a faculty member at Ball State University, in Muncie, Indiana, serves as a case study for creating impactful collaborations across campus.

Educators at Ball State University have experienced a successful collaboration between Disability Services, housed in Student Affairs, and academic faculty who are members of Academic Affairs (Scott, 2015). The Director of Disability Services and a faculty member from the Department of Educational Studies began collaborating in 2004 to compare persistence to graduation data for students with disabilities and other students on campus (Wessel, Jones, Westfall, & Markle, 2009). Although this collaboration started with a specific task in mind, this partnership has continued to focus on Disability Services and related research. For faculty members, especially those on the tenure track, these partnerships provide excellent opportunities for scholarship and service. For Disability Services professionals, who are working directly with students with disabilities, these partnerships provide best practices based on research and experience.

Roles

Successful partnerships exist when interest in contemporary issues are combined with an understanding of the research to complement best practices for working with students with disabilities. Creating distinct roles is an imperative first step. At Ball State partnering a faculty member with a Disability Services professional allowed a topic to be approached from two unique and specific vantage points. The Disability Services professional effectively identified a topic to be studied, assisted with access to data or study participants, and discussed implications. The faculty member was more equipped to formulate the purpose and research question(s), conduct the literature review, and design the method and statistical analyses of the project. Through their varying perspectives and administrative homes, these partners were able to approach a research project from multiple dimensions that foster enrichment in both of their lives and data that can enrich policy and practice.

However, it is necessary to recognize the different focus and needs of practitioners and faculty members. Disability Services educators often spend their days working directly with students to identify barriers to their success and negotiating reasonable accommodations. Often, conducting research is not a part of the regular routine for practitioners who are consumed with other daily duties. The benefits for faculty members, who are expected to be scholarly, are an enhanced research agenda. The primary benefits for the Disability Services professional are equally rewarding.

Disability Services educators work with faculty daily addressing student needs, and this creates a necessity to foster relationships with faculty members and build credibility with them. Understanding faculty needs and actively working with them is critical to the work in Disability Services and ensuring academic success for students with disabilities.

Additionally, it is important to understand the balance of roles between Disability Services and Academic Affairs educators. Disability Services practitioners do not always have the flexibility to partner with faculty members on their desired research topics (Scott, 2015). Practitioners must be accountable to their supervisors; the Office of Disability Services often determines the primary focus or projects and the ability to collaborate. If a project does not contribute to work of Disability Services, or the experience of students with disabilities, it is likely not a beneficial collaboration to pursue.

These are a few of the key characteristics in building the relationship for a successful partnership. Identifying defined roles within the collaboration and having a shared vision within separate departments are critical factors for success.

Benefits and Challenges

This partnership at Ball State between offices embedded in separate divisions of the university has developed scholarship related to postsecondary disability. For example, partnerships have included research studies on implications for performance based outcomes related to graduation rates for students with disabilities (Knight, Wessel, & Markle, in press); attendant care for students with disabilities (Burwell, Wessel, & Mulvihill, 2015); pre-enrollment considerations of undergraduate wheelchair users and their post-enrollment transitions (Wessel, Jones, Blanch, & Markle, 2015); faculty mentorship and transition experiences for students with disabilities (Patrick & Wessel, 2013); and the experiences of students using power wheelchairs in a collegiate athletic club (Wessel, Wentz, & Markle, 2011). Additionally, the partnership has benefitted Ball State University by sharing results of research projects at multiple professional conferences. Also, this partnership was the impetus behind the receipt of a United States Department of Education demonstration grant that focused on a student-faculty mentorship program ensuring a smooth transition to college for students with disabilities. The Director of Disability Services served as co-principal investigators of this grant with faculty members.

However, as with any collaboration, there are challenges to overcome. In order to address research

questions, there needs to be pertinent data to analyze. The partners must work together to develop a research agenda and obtain archival data. In cases where data does not exist, collaborators must gather data. Furthermore, sometimes Disability Services professionals must convince supervisors that conducting research is an important part of the job in a field when research is not part of everyday practice. When partners are able to overcome challenges like these, rewarding partnerships can be formed to enhance the effectiveness of a Disability Services office.

Lessons Learned and Suggestions

By combining interests and specialties, Disability Services educators and faculty members are able to produce scholarship that may have not been able to be completed without the partnership. Disability Services has access to a population of students and data that may be difficult for a researcher to obtain. Through a practitioner/faculty model, combining interests and resources has the ability to produce rich insights in the postsecondary disability field.

Research has the potential to play a significant role in the work of Disability Services practitioners. By engaging in research, policy and practice can be revised to enhance the quality of Disability Services everywhere. Through networks and professional connections, Disability Services professionals can easily share their findings and encourage other professionals to seek out opportunities to contribute to the field and student experience.

Similarly, faculty members can benefit from partnering with practitioners. Faculty can sometimes become isolated on college campuses through their individual research endeavors, and with the addition of readily available technology, some faculty do not even need to come to campus. This can be a lonely profession. However, when faculty members partner with practitioners not only do they gain the benefits of collaborating and learning from others, their own research and teaching can be informed by best practices.

Relationship building is a key component to fostering successful partnerships across university divisions. Disability Services needs to get to know the faculty and learn of their research interests. There are often many ways Disability Services and faculty members can collaborate if they are willing to reach out and form relationships.

Conclusion

Collaborating with other educators outside of their own administrative area can be a meaningful practice for Disability Services professionals. The ability to partner with faculty members not only contributes to the Disability Services literature, but it also improves practice on their campus, and creates a broader support for students with disabilities on campus and enhances their experiences. Disability Services educators may personally and professionally benefit from partnering with faculty members, and students with disabilities on college campuses may benefit as well.

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