

PORTFOLIO OF INFORMATIVE MATERIALS FOR PROSPECTIVE
EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY STUDENTS SEEKING ACCOMMODATIONS
FROM DISABILITY SUPPORT SERVICES

by

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A Signature Honors Project Presented to the

Honors College

East Carolina University

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for

Graduation with Honors

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May 2024

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Abstract

This project aims to address the lack of knowledge disabled high school students have about disability-related support at East Carolina University. In the United States, there is a large difference in what disability accommodations and support look like when comparing kindergarten through twelfth grade and higher education. This difference occurs due to a discrepancy in federal laws which dictate what the school is legally required to provide to disabled students. Disabled high school students are often not aware of this legal change and as a result frequently enter college with the misconception that their disability-related support will remain the same. Additionally, the vagueness of disability legislation that applies to higher education institutions results in a lack of standardization in disability support services across the United States as each institution interprets the legislation differently. To address this lack of knowledge, I designed, produced, and distributed a portfolio of informative materials containing information demonstrating the differences between kindergarten through twelfth grade and higher education disability-related support. The information contained in the materials was compiled from research papers, East Carolina University Disability Support Services, and interviews with disability support services offices at several other higher education institutions. The materials included a flier, PowerPoint presentation, and video. Finally, I distributed the portfolio to high schools known to have a large percentage of graduates that attend East Carolina University.

Keywords: disability, disability support services, accommodations, high school, higher education

Introduction

My project was inspired by my own personal experience as a high school student that received accommodations for my disability in the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) environment. During the process of touring and applying to colleges, I felt worried about the unknown of what disability support would look like in college. Having the right accommodations and support is a critical part of ensuring success and happiness for disabled college students. There was no one at my high school who could tell me exactly what disability support would look like in college, so I realized that I would need to do my own research and meet with each disability support services (DSS) office on my own. Thankfully, I thought to do this because I ended up changing which universities I was considering based on what I learned. If I had attended a college with a DSS office that did not fit my needs, my collegiate experience might not have been as successful. Other students should have the same information I was able to obtain through extensive research without having to go to such lengths to obtain it.

This project is also inspired by my time interning at East Carolina University (ECU)'s DSS office. While viewing accommodation applications, there were several instances where student applications clearly demonstrated that the student was unaware of what the DSS office does. As an example, many students requested accommodations that would have been given in a K-12 environment but would not be given in a college environment. Another example is the fact that some students were under the false assumption that their high school 504 or Individualized Education Plan (IEP) plans would directly transfer over to college. 504 and IEP plans are the agreed upon accommodations and/or services that the student will receive in school. If these students had been better informed about what ECU's DSS office does, they would not have made these assumptions and would be more prepared for what to expect in terms of disability support.

Background

In the United States, there is a large difference in what disability accommodations and support look like when comparing K-12 and higher education. This difference is due to a discrepancy in which federal laws dictate what the school is required to provide to disabled students. In the K-12 grade environment, students are covered by the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). The IDEA gives students specific education rights to help them succeed in school. Alternatively, in the higher education environment, the Americans with Disability Act (ADA) applies. The ADA does not grant students specific education rights, but instead simply civil rights to ensure that they have equal access. Many students are not aware of the change in legal coverage, which puts them at a disadvantage as they do not understand the changes in the disability support that will occur. Additionally, DSS offices around the country are not standardized in their practices, as they each interpret the vagueness of the ADA differently. As a result, prospective students must contact each school individually to determine what disability support will be available to them. If students don't contact each school they are interested in, they may enter college with misconceptions about how DSS works. Overall, disabled prospective college students are put at a disadvantage due to not having the information they need about DSS prior to attending college.

Research

East Carolina University Disability Support Services

To begin my research, I spoke to my co-mentor Katherine Krieger as she is the Associate Director of East Carolina University (ECU) Disability Support Services (DSS). Through her work, she often meets with incoming students who received disability-related support in high school and are now pursuing disability-related support in college. This means that she has first-

hand knowledge of what high school students understand about the differences between disability-related support at the K-12 level compared to the higher education level. Krieger shared that students often arrive with various misunderstandings of what their disability-related support will be like in college. Some common misconceptions she noted are the belief that high school documentation like 504 Plans or IEPs transfer directly to college and that coursework can be modified to ensure their success as it was in high school. Krieger also provided me with access to ECU DSS's database of materials, which include past presentation materials for high school counselors, parents, and new faculty.

Interviews

To widen my understanding of the knowledge gap disabled high school students have when pursuing disability-related support in college, I decided to reach out to disability support services offices at other higher education institutions. I spoke to Ellen Bunn at Appalachian State University's Office of Disability Resources, Tina Vires at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Office of Accessibility Resources and Services, Sabrina Saucier at The University of Florida's Disability Resource Center, and Lisa Kelley at Pitt Community College's Office of Accessibility Services. Everyone I spoke to agreed that at their institutions, many incoming students who received disability-related support in high school have a lack of understanding regarding what their disability-related support will be like in college. One of the student misconceptions they shared was that the school would pursue the student as opposed to the student being responsible for self-advocating. Another misconception shared was that the student can present their high school accommodations directly to their professors and expect to be accommodated without ever registering with the DSS office. Similarly at ECU, the people I interviewed also shared that many students falsely believe that their 504 Plans and IEPs from

high school directly transfer to college and that course work or admissions criteria can be modified to ensure their success. Some students are even under the impression that the institution will provide or arrange auxiliary services similar to the special education services they received in high school. During these interviews, I asked what is currently being done at each institution to address this knowledge gap. Some of the responses I received included giving information to high school counselors to share with students, hosting information events at their institution's new student orientation, having information on their website specifically addressing the transition from high school to college, and hosting a summer webinar for high school students and their families.

Materials and Methods

After completing the research phase of my project, I began mapping out what information I wanted to include in my portfolio of materials. I created information categories based on the key areas of knowledge that I found students lacking from my research. These categories included: applicable laws, required documentation, responsibility, accommodations vs. modifications, auxiliary services, ECU accommodations, and ECU accommodations approval process. All categories aside from ECU accommodations and ECU accommodations approval process contained information side by side comparing the K-12 environment and ECU. I added the appropriate information in these categories and compiled it into a concise flyer.

As this information is meant to aid disabled students, I aimed to make it as accessible as possible. This led me to create a portfolio that presented the information in a variety of formats to fit the access needs of many. In addition to creating the flyer, I put the same information in a slide show presentation and then recorded a video where I presented the slide show. Following the creation of the three different materials in the portfolio, I ensured each was as digitally

accessible as possible with the help of Brian Stanford, ECU DSS's Assistive Technology Specialist. Both the flyer and slideshow presentation had reading order tagging and image descriptions to ensure their accessibility to those using screen readers. Open captions were added to the video to ensure accessibility to those that are deaf, hard of hearing, or have other auditory-related disabilities. All three of these formats, the flyer, slideshow presentation, and video, were put into a Google Drive folder and published so that they can be easily shared digitally by link and in-person by QR code. Information on how to access the portfolio can be found in the section titled, Portfolio Access.

Distribution

Following the creation of my portfolio, I sought to distribute it so that potential future disabled students of ECU could have access to the information while still in high school. I selected known feeder high schools to ECU based on data from ECU's Disability Support Services, Honors College, and Undergraduate Admissions. The schools included: Apex Friendship High School, Apex High School, Ardrey Kell High School, Ayden-Grifton High School, D.H. Conley High School, Farmville Central High School, Holly Springs High School, J.H. Rose High School, Leesville Road High School, Millbrook High School, North Pitt High School, Panther Creek High School, and South Central High School. I then shared the portfolio by email with the counselors at each high school so that they could distribute it to the appropriate students. In addition to distributing through email to school counselors, I also joined ECU's DSS office at J.H. Rose High School's curriculum night to distribute my flyer in-person to parents and students in attendance.

Results

This project consisted of three phases. First, I researched and compiled the information disabled high school students need to know about the transition in disability-related services from the K-12 environment to ECU. Then, I created a portfolio of material that address this knowledge gap. Finally, I distributed the portfolio to counselors at high schools that feed into ECU, so that they may share the materials with those that need them. As this project concluded with my distribution, I did not study the results and impact of the distribution of my portfolio. However, I have several desired results for my project. I believe that high school students will have an increased understanding of disability-related support available at ECU. I also want high school students to be able to make a more informed decision when choosing a higher education institution. Finally, I expect my project will decrease the time ECU DSS spends explaining how disability-related support at ECU differs from the K-12 environment with individual students.

Discussion

Limitations

When I originally decided on this project, I wanted to address the problem of the lack of knowledge disabled high school students have about disability-related support at all higher education institutions in the U.S. However, after doing some preliminary research, I realized that due to the many discrepancies in disability-related support at higher education institutions in the U.S. it would not be possible for me to create materials that could apply to every institution. As a result, I was forced to limit my portfolio of materials to only apply to prospective ECU students.

Another limitation in my project is the distribution method I chose. My distribution method relied on high school counselors to distribute my materials to the relevant people at their school such as students, parents, administrators, and teachers. This distribution method did not

allow me to deliver my materials directly to students, my target population. This limitation occurred because of privacy limits that protect disabled people from being outed. However, this method allowed me to distribute my materials quickly and efficiently to a large group.

Recommendations

This project focused on distributing general information about the differences in disability-related support between K-12 and ECU. If I were to continue this project, a great next step would be incorporating the perspectives and stories of current ECU students receiving accommodations from the DSS office. This could be done in the form of a video or written piece and would help give a more personal touch to the office's information.

During this project, I handled the distribution personally. Although I was advised by ECU's DSS office, they were not involved with the distribution of my portfolio. In the future, I would like to work with the office to distribute my portfolio with them. Some avenues include adding the materials to their website, including them in the office's new student orientation session, and adding them to the university's admissions sessions.

Conclusion

This project was an eye-opening experience in which I learned a lot about the many misconceptions and general lack of knowledge disabled high school students have about disability-related support in higher education. I found that some disabled high school students lack knowledge on the laws that govern disability support, the documentation required to obtain accommodations, and who is responsible for advocating for them. Additionally, they also often lack understanding on the difference between accommodations and modification, and which is allowed in higher education. Auxiliary services are not provided in higher education and some students do not know this. Many disabled high school students are unfamiliar with the many

different types of accommodations ECU offers that may be available to them as well as ECU's accommodation approval process. Beyond just lacking knowledge about the overall transition in disability-related support from K-12 to higher education, many students also do not know that disability-related support is unstandardized at higher education institutions across the United States. It is important that students understand this so that they may choose the institution that will best support them. Due to this lack of standardization, my portfolio of materials aims to inform students simply on disability-related support at ECU and not higher education as a whole. Overall, I hope that my portfolio of materials aids disabled high school students in making a smoother transition from high school to higher education.

Acknowledgements

Special thanks to Dr. Amy McMillan for serving as my faculty mentor and overseeing my work during this project. I could not have completed this project without the guidance I received from my co-mentor Katherine Krieger. I am grateful to East Carolina University's Disability Support Services for allowing me access to their resources for my research. Thank you to Brian Stanford for helping ensure the accessibility of my materials. Lastly, I would like to recognize the following people for taking the time to talk to me about their offices: Ellen Bunn at Appalachian State University's Office of Disability Resources, Tina Vires at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro's Office of Accessibility Resources and Services, Sabrina Saucier at The University of Florida's Disability Resource Center, and Lisa Kelley at Pitt Community College's Office of Accessibility Services.

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Portfolio Access

The portfolio can be accessed through the following link or QR code:

<https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1hiEqz7MgcHdHyOGPNfDIRDX6mEUPEDIE?usp=sharing>

