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Transition for Students with Disabilities: A Case Study

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This case study is intended to help student affairs professionals understand what their responsibilities are in assisting postsecondary students with disabilities who are facing transition issues. An overview of the K-12 and postsecondary laws are outlined to inform readers of these transition issues, particularly the responsibility of a postsecondary student to self-advocate. Information is also provided on Autism Spectrum Disorders, which are prevalent in college-aged students today. Overviews of a fictional institutional setting and disability office are provided to give context for analyzing the given case scenario. The responsibilities of key stakeholders, including the disability office, the student, the parents, and faculty/staff are outlined. Questions are provided to prompt readers.

Keywords: Autism Spectrum Disorders, disability, postsecondary, self-advocacy, transition

Contextualizing the Case

Disability Related Law

In 1975, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) was passed by Congress to ensure all children with disabilities have a free appropriate public education (Gothberg, Peterson, Peak, & Sedaghat, 2015). Public elementary and secondary school systems are regulated by IDEA, which outlines specific mandated accommodations and services for children ages three to twenty-one (Disability Rights Education & Defense Fund, 2016). However, colleges and universities operate under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990, amended in 2008 (Gil, 2007). The ADA of 1990 was modeled after the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and is an “equal opportunity” law for persons with disabilities (United States Department of Justice Civil Rights Division, n.d.).

According to the U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights (2011), students with disabilities must understand the difference between the laws and the implied responsibilities that affect their high school to college transition. For example, elementary and secondary schools are responsible for the identification and evaluation of a student’s disability. However, in postsecondary education, the student must self-identify and provide appropriate documentation at their own expense (Gil, 2007). Individualized Education Programs (IEP) are required and put into place by teachers,

parents, and students to act as a guideline for accommodations and services through the entirety of a student's elementary and secondary education. In college, students with disabilities are expected to register with a disability office (disclose their disability), request a disability service, and notify their professors of their specific accommodations (Gil, 2007).

Upon entering postsecondary education, students with disabilities can no longer rely on their parents or the school to advocate for their accommodations. They must take on the responsibility of being their own advocate. Many times, students with disabilities do not have, or are not prepared, with the proper skill set to take on this responsibility. A lack of knowledge of the differences between the laws, services provided, and the necessary steps, including self-disclosure, to take in order to receive accommodations results in many students with disabilities not receiving services while attending college (Gil, 2007).

Autism Spectrum Disorders

“The term *autism spectrum disorders* refers to a group of neurodevelopmental disorders that affect development in the areas of social interaction, communication, and behavior” (Adreon & Durocher, 2007, p. 272). Examples of developmental issues in social interaction include difficulties understanding others perspectives, facial expressions/body language, and making eye contact. In the area of communication, students may exhibit monotone speech and difficulties staying on topic. Additionally, students often exhibit an intense interest in one or more specific topics/activities (i.e., video gaming, math, science, technology). While these interests may be typical of their age group, “the intensity with which these interests are pursued sets them apart from their peers by preventing them from engaging in social activities” (Adreon & Durocher, 2007, p. 273).

Autism is referred to as a spectrum disorder due to the range and intensity of the above characteristics differing with each individual. Some individuals experience intense levels of the previously mentioned characteristics, which can negatively affect their day-to-day functions. Others may have a less severe experience allowing them to have a higher ability to function (Adreon & Durocher, 2007). In 1996, it was estimated that one in 125 children were diagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder. Today, that number has increased to one in 68 children (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2016).

Overview of Institution

For the purposes of this case study, imagine a fictional institution located in the Midwest. The institution is a large, four-year, public institution with 20,000 students enrolled. It offers 70 different undergraduate degrees, and 30 different graduate degrees. The institution employs 1,400 faculty members and 1,300 support staff members. The mission of the institution is to “educate students using a theory to practice model, and to prepare students to be civically engaged, multiculturally competent, and lifelong learners.”

Overview of Disability Support Office

The fictional disability support office's mission is to "provide support services and accommodations to students, faculty, and staff to create an equitable, accessible university environment for individuals with disabilities." This office offers the following services: advising for accommodations, alternative format textbooks, alternative testing, assistive technology, documentation to professors, learning and study skills, note-taking assistance, and transportation. Currently, there are 1,000 students and 120 faculty/staff members registered with the disability support office.

Stakeholders

Disability Support Office – The disability support office must comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act [ADA] as amended by the ADA Amendment Act (2008), Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and other applicable federal and state laws that prohibit discrimination of individuals with disabilities. Reasonable accommodations will be provided to qualified individuals with disabilities upon request.

Students with disabilities – It is the responsibility of students with disabilities to self-identify their disability status to the disability support office in a timely manner, provide disability documentation that is not more than five years old, and request necessary accommodations from the office. A student who has self-identified their disability with the disability support office and has approved documentation of a disability must present a memorandum from the disability support office to their professor(s) stating approved classroom accommodations. Students are responsible for coordinating all alternative testing (i.e., extended time and/or alternative format exams/quizzes) with their professor(s).

Parents – In the K-12 setting, parents act as advocates for their students (Gil, 2007). However, at the postsecondary level, parents are responsible for allowing their students to self-advocate.

Faculty/Staff – Faculty/staff should keep students with disabilities in mind when making special class arrangements (e.g., field trips). Faculty/staff should provide an accommodation statement on their syllabi to ensure that students' needs are met in a timely manner. When a student discloses a disability, faculty/staff should ask what they can do to facilitate learning for the student. Faculty/staff members may not discourage students from specific fields of study if the student meets/maintains admission requirements/qualifications.

Case Scenario

John is a first year student that lives in a residence hall at the fictitious institution. John has Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and exhibits the following characteristics: utilizing morning and afternoon free time for sleeping, gaming late into the night, leaving garbage bins to overflow, and allowing laundry to pile up. In middle school and high school, John's parents regulated his schedule (i.e., monitored the amount of time he spent doing homework, gaming, and sleeping), and they did not require him to do household

chores (e.g., take out the trash, wash and fold laundry, mow the yard), as they felt John already had enough to do navigating life as a student with ASD. With John's parents living four hours away from the institution, they are no longer able to be as intrusive with managing John's schedule.

Staff in the residence hall are becoming agitated with John's behavior. Resident assistants have received multiple complaints from floor community members, including John's roommate, Sam, concerning cleanliness and quiet hours. John was recently documented by one of the resident assistants for "excessive trash in the room". This is a violation of the university housing policies.

You are a staff member working in the housing department at the institution. During your community standards meeting with John, he appears confused about his "excessive trash in room" violation. You ask John what his plans for the future will be to ensure proper room cleanliness. John throws his arms in the air and yells, "I don't know, ok? I just moved in! I have ASD for crying out loud! What do you people want me to do?"

Questions for the Reader

1. What are the steps/initiatives you would take to help John in his transition?
2. What are the most important resources that you could offer John?
3. What biases do you have that might impact your interaction with John?
4. How would you help your staff and the residence hall community members, including Sam, become more understanding of ASD transitional issues?
5. How would you handle this situation if John's parents became involved?

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