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What encourages college-going among students with disabilities? The key roles of messaging and support

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Issue Brief: Disability in Higher Education

What encourages college-going among students with disabilities?

The key roles of messaging and support

Since the passage of the ADA in 1990 and its amendments in 2008, rates of college-going among students with disabilities have increased steadily. Improvements in PK-12 school quality for students with disabilities in response to the IDEA in 1990 and IDEA in 2004 have ensured that more high school graduates with disabilities are prepared to go to college than ever before. However, not all well-prepared high school graduates with disabilities go to college, and in fact, they are significantly less likely to go to college than peers without disabilities (Kimball, Wells, Ostiguy, Manly, & Lauterbach, 2016). Why?

The results of our recent multi-institutional case study of college-going for students with disabilities in Massachusetts offers several important answers based on interviews with students, parents, and higher education staff. Higher education researchers typically use college-going models that include three stages: predisposition, search, and choice (Hossler, & Gallagher, 1987). However, we also found that students with disabilities experience the stages a bit differently than their peers without disabilities and that two additional stages are important for understanding their college-going: transition and enrollment. Across all five of these stages, we found that effective messaging and support encourages college-going, while ineffective messaging and support inhibits it.

Figure 1 shows our model for college-going among students with disabilities. We selected a subway map as our metaphor for this process because it clearly conveys that it is possible to navigate the route to college in a linear fashion but also that outcomes that move a student away from successful college-going are also possible.

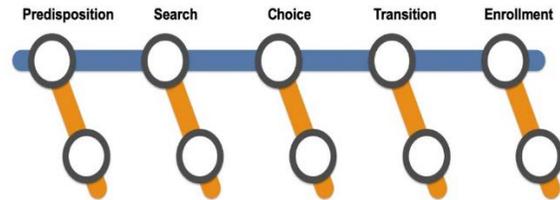


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of College-Going for Student with Disabilities

By showing predisposition, search, choice, transition, and enrollment as part of a linear continuum, but also acknowledging that the college-going process can veer off-track at any step along the way, this model makes clear how difficult the process can be for students with disabilities without effective messaging and support. We summarize each stage of the model subsequently.

Predisposition. At the predisposition stage, students with disabilities consider messages about college-going that they have received from friends, family members, and teachers throughout their lives. Students in inclusive classrooms are more likely to have received ongoing messages about college-going as a normative assumption than those in special education classrooms. Many students with disabilities may also have internalized social messages that suggest that people with disabilities—particularly intellectual or emotional-behavioral disabilities—do not pursue postsecondary education. It is possible to counter these messages, but it takes intentional support to do so.

Search. In this search phrase, students with disabilities search for information about their postsecondary options. This process includes considering alternatives to higher education such as employment or joining the armed service. Students with disabilities may also consider the on- and off-campus availability of disability-related supports as part of their search process, but colleges and universities do little to assist in this process. Better information from school counselors or more proactive outreach from postsecondary institutions would help ensure equitable access to information.

Choice. When students with disabilities make college-going choices, they weigh the information that they have about their disability as well as the postsecondary institutions that they might attend. Their decisions sometimes seem very similar to those of peers without disabilities and sometimes are predicated on disability-specific considerations such as availability of medical resources or proximity to family support networks.

Transition. During the transition phase, students with disabilities begin the concrete activities of participation in postsecondary education. For example, they might select classes, attend orientation, or figure out how to pay their tuition bill. As they do these things, they receive messages about how welcome (or unwelcome) students with disabilities are on campus. Institutions likely do not intend to send many of these messages, but how they structure support for students with disabilities has profound influences on their transitions.

Enrollment. At the stage of enrollment, students arrive on their new campus and attend classes for the first time. All students are at increased risk for dropout during their first few weeks of college, but this risk is greater for students with disabilities. Many may leave college and never return while others end up transferring or enrolling later in life. For students with disabilities, finding supportive peers, faculty, and staff members help make the enrollment process more successful.

Summary

College-going is not an easy task for any student. Many aspects of the process have to align in order for it to go well. Students must meet academic standards, navigate

a variety of entrance exams, figure out how to apply for financial aid, find a college or university that is a good fit, solve institutional obstacles to enrollment, and display persistence once enrolled. For students with disabilities, that is even harder. Not only do they receive less messaging about the college-going process than their peers, but they also get different information about where to apply and the process for doing so. *Families would be well-served by beginning college-going discussions early with children with disabilities; high schools should think about how to reach all students—including those with disabilities—with messages about college-going; and colleges and universities should recognize that college-going is a process that needs to start in high school and should extend well into college enrollment for students with disabilities.* By recognizing the complexity of the college-going process and being intentional about the messaging, support, and communication they receive, it is possible for families, high schools, colleges, and universities to work together to help facilitate the college-going of students with disabilities. Doing so will help produce more equity in college attendance.

References

Hossler, D. and Gallagher, K. (1987) Studying student college choice: A three-phase model and the implications for policymakers. *College and University*, 62, 207-221.

Kimball, E., Wells, R. S., Ostiguy, B., Manly, C., & Lauterbach, A. (2016). Students with disabilities in higher education: A review of the literature and an agenda for future research. In M. Paulsen (Ed.), *Higher Education: Handbook of Theory and Research: Volume 31* (pp. 91-156). New York: Springer.

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