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Disability Services for Students in Postsecondary Education: Opportunities for Occupational Therapy

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Credentials Display

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If someone asked me the question, “who is the best professional to do a job that requires creative solutions for people with disabilities?”, my answer would be “an occupational therapist, for goodness’ sake.” The phrase “for goodness’ sake” is from Shakespeare, and the sentiment means “of course,” but its literal interpretation is “for the goodness of those involved” or, in terms of occupational therapy (OT), for the goodness of those we serve. There are many areas of society that have unmet needs that could be addressed by occupational therapists, for goodness’ sake. One of those areas is in disability services for students (DSS) in postsecondary education.

Two years ago, I received a campus-wide email stating that our university’s DSS program was looking for a faculty member who was interested in being the inaugural faculty fellow in the DSS department in a part-time position. I was honored to receive this fellowship. Now in my second year of service, I am realizing the depth of opportunity for occupational therapists to work in this expanding area with students in postsecondary education and the many aspects of DSS that could benefit from the perspective of a full-time occupational therapist.

Although not all postsecondary students with disabilities enroll in DSS, the number of students who identify as having a disability has grown in recent years. In 1978, fewer than 3% of college freshman reported having a disability; by 1988, that number had grown to 7%, and by 1999, it had grown to 9.4% (Hunter, Reid, & Nishimura, 2014). Current estimates are that 11.1% of undergraduate and 7.6% of graduate students enrolled in postsecondary education throughout the United States have a disability (Meeks & Jain, 2018). This number has been bolstered by the broadening of the definition of disability that extends beyond physical and sensory impairments to include cognitive, psychological, and chronic health conditions.

Because of legislative mandates, such as the Education of All Handicapped Children Act (1975) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), most students with disabilities are provided OT services in elementary school settings and some students are provided OT services in middle and secondary school settings (Spencer, Emery, & Schneck, 2003). Far fewer students with disabilities receive OT services in postsecondary education settings. Although fewer postsecondary students with disabilities are provided OT services, there are laws that guide services for these students, such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which protects students with disabilities against discrimination and exclusion, and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (Title II for public postsecondary schools and Title III for private postsecondary schools), which protects these students from discrimination during the recruitment and admission process or maltreatment once admitted (Hunter et al., 2014). Both of these laws also mandate that postsecondary institutions provide accommodations that are necessary for the student to have an equal opportunity to succeed.

Transition services from secondary to postsecondary education are also legislatively regulated. One fifth of students with disabilities who graduate from high school enroll in a two-year college, and approximately 14.6% of students with disabilities enroll in a four-year college or university within 6 years of graduating from high school (Hunter et al., 2014). The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2014 regulates transition services by entitling these students to have individual summary of performance documentation that details the student’s academic and functional performance and includes recommendations on how to assist the student in meeting his or her postsecondary goals (Berg, Jirikowic, Haerling, & MacDonald, 2017; Hunter et al., 2014). This law mandates that transition services begin for the student by 16 years of age.

Barriers to Success in Postsecondary Education

When students graduate from high school and seek to transition to postsecondary education settings, myriad issues can arise related not only to learning, but also to broader areas, such as accessible housing, independent living skills, and time-management. The barriers to their success may be academic or non-academic and physical or non-physical. Academically, students with disabilities may encounter faculty, staff, and administrators who are unwilling to provide the reasonable accommodations that are required by law (Hunter et al., 2014). Students with disabilities, especially those with disabilities that are not physically apparent, may encounter faculty with prejudicial attitudes toward them and limited knowledge about their disabilities (Sniatecki, Perry, & Snell, 2015). In addition, the students encounter an entirely new physical challenge regarding mobility and accessibility and face an unfamiliar and complex bureaucratic system, all requiring skillful navigation (Berg et al., 2017).

In the non-academic realm, these students may have lost their day-to-day structures and support system of family, teachers, and friends, who provided assistance with activities of daily living (ADLs), instrumental activities of daily living (IADLs), and socialization (Burwell, Wessel, & Mulvihill, 2015). Students with disabilities may experience higher levels of stress and isolation than other students (Smedema et al., 2015), and students with mental health issues, such as anxiety and depression, have lower self-esteem and life satisfaction compounded by this reduced support from family and friends (Dong & Lucas, 2014).

Potential barriers for students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education include:

- Physical mobility on campus among buildings (especially in changing climates)
- Orienting to the campus topography and transportation systems
- Navigating postsecondary systems and bureaucracies
- Financial management
- Loss of structure and guidance from parents and teachers
- Difficulty developing relationships with roommates, fellow students, and faculty
- Stress and isolation
- Challenged social skills in less structured environments
- Impaired ADLs and IADLs in new environments
- Loss of established support systems
- Attitudes of faculty, staff, administrators, and fellow students

Role of OT in Postsecondary Education

The American Occupational Therapy Association (AOTA) published a fact sheet that addresses the role of OT in postsecondary education, including assisting with transition programs from secondary to postsecondary education, teaching and fostering independence, providing adaptive equipment and assistive technology, and advocating for accommodations through disability services for students (AOTA, 2013). According to this fact sheet, OT educators can also help by developing campus support programs for students with disabilities and by providing information to administrators and other educators about inclusion strategies and universal design for learning (UDL).

The role of OT for students with disabilities seeking a postsecondary education should begin with transition programs. There is research that supports the need for OT services in transition programs in secondary (Angell et al., 2018; Shea & Giles, 2016; Spencer et al., 2003) and in postsecondary

education settings (Lawson, Gould, & Conley, 2016; Schindler, Cajiga, Aaronson, & Salas, 2015). This preliminary evidence supports the effectiveness of postsecondary OT transition programs that address issues such as time management, organization, study skills, writing skills, social skills, healthy living, residential life, and leisure time (Schindler et al., 2015). Occupational therapists are also able to provide assessments, promote realistic goal setting, and guide occupational interests (Shea & Giles, 2016).

Because students with disabilities may experience a loss of structure and higher demands for independence, OT services also could be invaluable in postsecondary educational settings and make a difference between success and failure by addressing issues related to the person, task, and environment. Occupational therapists can address underlying issues, such as sensory modulation, executive functions, self-awareness, depression, anxiety, loneliness, and addiction that impact the students in all areas of their lives (Schindler et al., 2015; Shea & Giles, 2016). The tasks in the classroom can be modified via reasonable accommodations, and the environment can be addressed through modifications of both physical and attitudinal barriers. Occupational therapists can develop partnerships with faculty members to provide instruction on how to implement accommodations (Scott, Markle, Wessel, & Desmond, 2016) and UDL in the classroom. During and toward the end of postsecondary education, occupational therapists can foster needed job-seeking and employment skills (Oswald, Huber, & Bonza, 2015).

Mental health should also be a focus of occupational therapists in postsecondary education. Because the students with disabilities in postsecondary education may have lost their support systems in the transition, mental health groups that support the student, and provide education to other students who form support systems, can help ameliorate the isolation of postsecondary students with mental health issues (Chiu & Graham, 2017; Smedema et al., 2015). Systemically, occupational therapist can work to address perceptions and attitudes toward students with disabilities in the campus setting by providing education about disabilities and consulting with university administrators about their images on university websites, promotional materials, and campus bulletins (Hartley, Mapes, Taylor, & Bourgeois, 2016).

The following is a list of potential roles for occupational therapists in postsecondary education:

- Develop or consult with transition or orientation programs
- Teach self-advocacy
- Teach study skills
- Teach strategies for cognitive deficits, such as attention and memory
- Address self-awareness issues and disclosure strategies
- Teach social skills and self-regulation
- Consult on the use of assistive technology
- Provide life skills training
- Teach time management skills
- Develop or assist with mentoring or coaching programs
- Develop support groups for psychosocial skill development (self-esteem and coping skills)
- Consult on needed accessibility—physical, visual, auditory
- Address accommodation provisions
- Assist with guidelines for service animals (Isaacson, 2013)
- Teach job-seeking and employment skills

- Provide faculty training, disability education, and brain behavior relationships
- Develop an inclusive culture and address perceptions and attitudes
- Address stigma reduction
- Provide training in UDL
- Serve as a consultant to DSS
- Form a DSS advisory committee with members from the faculty, staff, and students

Conclusion

Despite the laws mandating services for students with disabilities, the barriers these students continue to face, and the clear role for OT in this area, there are very few occupational therapists working with students in postsecondary education and in university DSS programs. There is clearly a need to develop these positions for occupational therapists and to research the effectiveness of OT interventions in these settings. The development and expansion of clinical doctorate programs offers one potential avenue for initiating OT involvement in already established DSS programs and may open the door to more opportunities.

In *The Open Journal of Occupational Therapy*, we have published two articles that describe and support the role of OT in transition programs to postsecondary education: “The Experience of Transition to College for Students Diagnosed with Asperger’s Disorder” (Schindler et al., 2015) and “Goals and Expectations of Continuation High School Students Transitioning to Postsecondary Education” (Shea & Giles, 2016). Published in this issue, the article “An Occupational Therapy-Based Supported Education Program for University Students with Various DSM-5 Diagnoses: Program Description and Academic Outcomes” (Schindler, 2019) describes and provides support for a program that assists students with disabilities who are enrolled in undergraduate, postsecondary education with needed academic, social, and psychological skills. It is my hope that these articles and this letter from the editor start a conversation that leads to the development of more OT services in postsecondary education, for goodness’ sake.

Diane Powers Dirette, Ph.D., OTL, FAOTA is the cofounder of OJOT and has served as Editor-in-Chief since the first issue was published in the fall of 2012. She is a professor in the Department of Occupational Therapy at Western Michigan University and was inducted into the American Occupational Therapy Association Roster of Fellows in 2016. Her areas of research include self awareness after acquired brain injury, evidenced-based practice, visual disorders, and cognitive rehab. She has extensive experience with scholarly writing, editing, and publishing.

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