The Use of Universal Design as a Model for Developing Effective Student Service Systems

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Abstract

A major environmental trend that is currently impacting the growth of institutions of higher learning is the number of entering freshmen with diagnosed Learning Differences who have benefited from special accommodations at the elementary and high school levels. Without these earlier provided and legislated accommodations, these students would have probably not succeeded in graduating from high school and hence become eligible for admittance to universities and junior colleges. A major problem or issue for these students is the sometimes difficult transition from an educational environment which provides these services to one which may are may not provide them. These students may then enter universities or junior college without having access to these services. In today's competitive environment with retention of all students a major goal, universities need to focus on creating a support system for students which have learning differences that will provide the necessary services which will allow them to be successful. What are the specific services or accommodations that a university should provide to students with documented learning differences? A goal of this study is to explore various approaches which universities may follow in order to create a student support structure which will assist these students achieve their educational goals.

In addition to retention as a driving force that will impact changes in the ways universities deliver services to special needs students, another one equally as important is probable impact of the legal environment; recently, the ADA of 1990 has been amended and strengthened and is expected to have a significant impact on the scope, nature, and delivery of accommodations for students as well as faculty members with documented disabilities Another objective of this paper is to research and update the legal literature in order to discern the Amendment's likely impact on institutions of higher learning What will be the changes universities will need to adequately respond to these forces at work in their external environment?

Universities will be searching for solutions to provide these services in a cost efficient and effective manner. Another goal of this paper is to explore current practices followed by various colleges and universities in order to determine whether there might be a statement of "best practices" that may serve as models to be emulated. A limited review of the literature reveals that several schools are focusing on the possibility of using a Universal Design (UD) approach to college instruction. Currently, the primary approach is based upon an accommodation model that limits inclusiveness to those students who voluntarily declare their learning disability. The UD approach is anticipatory in trying to be as inclusive as possible from an instructional design perspective. A study of the literature reveals that UD is based upon the use of a framework of

several principles of Universal Design developed by the NCSU Center for Universal Design (The Center for Universal Design, 1997). There seems to be the emergence of a consensus that these principles may serve as a framework to design instructional courses in a way based upon an instructional environment that utilizes the broad spectrum of human abilities that include vision, hearing, speech, body function, mobility, and cognition. What researchers in UD hope to achieve using these design principles is an approach which focuses on the development of an approach to college instruction that will include various learning styles and will anticipate a diverse set of students. An example of this approach is a demonstration project which was conducted at the University of Connecticut between 1999 and 2005. This project yielded results which will be discussed in this paper.