



ADA Live!

EPISODE 11: POST-SECONDARY EDUCATION AND STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Presenters: Diana Katovitch, Taishoff Center on Inclusive Higher Education at Syracuse University

Host: Sally Weiss, Southeast ADA Center

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: Welcome to WADA ADA Live Talk Radio, brought to you by the Southeast ADA Center, your leader for information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act. And here's your host.

SALLY WEISS: Good afternoon and welcome to WADA, ADA Live! On behalf of the Southeast ADA Center, the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University, and the ADA National Network welcome to the 11th episode of ADA Live!. The topic of today's show is post-secondary education for students with disabilities. In this episode, we will discuss what students with disabilities and their families need to know about access to higher education and the kinds of supports and services that are available to them when they enter college or university.

ADA Live! listening audience, you can submit your questions about inclusive higher education at any time on ADALive.org.

My name is Sally Weiss, and I am the Director of Knowledge Translation at the Southeast ADA Center.

Our speaker today is Diana Katovich. Dee is the coordinator of the Peer-to-Peer project and the Assistant director of the Lawrence B. Taishoff Center for Inclusive Higher Education at Syracuse University. She has a Bachelor of Science from the Syracuse University School of Education, and a Master of Science in Reading from SUNY Cortland. And she also has a Certificate of Advanced Study, in Disability Studies from Syracuse University.

Dee worked for 21 years in special education in New York state public schools. Her interest in post-secondary education for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities resulted in her book, "The Power to Spring Up: Post-Secondary Education Opportunities for Students with Significant Disabilities."

Dee, we are delighted to have you with us today.

DIANA KATOVICH: Thank you for having me, Sally.

SALLY WEISS: Let me start by asking, what are the most important things for students with disabilities and their families to know about access in higher education?

DIANA KATOVICH: First of all, you hit it exactly right with the word "access." Access is what is required under the ADA and Section 504 regarding students with disabilities in higher education. Now, let me just clarify here, too. I'm going to be using the term "college," to describe any institution of higher education: that means a four-year university, a two-year community college, or a technical college, where students earn either an associate's degree or a technical certificate. I'll just use "college" to cover all those institutions.

In special education in kindergarten – K through 12 - the real emphasis is on students with disabilities having success. When you move from 12th grade into college, the emphasis is on access.

It's an anti discrimination policy that the colleges and universities need to pay attention to. The other big difference is -- rather than the parents or the special education teachers or school administrators -- the student is the one who is in charge of their education. There are actually laws that protect a student's right to privacy -- privacy over their grades and privacy over what sorts of accommodations they're getting or not getting. The student is the one who is charge of approaching the Office of Disability Services, we call [it] ODS, in order to get services and to access their services, and they have control over their information. That's a really big change between K12 education and higher education and it takes a lot of families by surprise.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you, Dee. How can students with disabilities start preparing for college while they're still in high school?

DIANA KATOVICH: Probably the number one recommendation I would give, is for students to, if they haven't already done so, is for students to begin attending their IEP meeting. That is a great source for students to really hear about, and to get other people's wisdom about academic accommodations that they need to be successful in school. They really need to know their disability. What the name of their disability is,

how it affects them in the classroom, and in the school environment, and the accommodations that they're going to need to be successful in higher education. It's also a time when students can be really looking at their strengths and their interests. What are those things that they really want to do? And what do they need to be aware of? How is their disability going to impact them? What sort of accommodations are they going to need to be successful and show what they know about a particular topic? And how will that later on translate into the workplace?

And if a student is intimidated by the thought of attending an IEP meeting? Some students I know have been attending since they were in kindergarten or maybe even before. At least the student should sit down with a special education teacher, guidance counselor, or with their family, and really have that conversation. Who am I? What is the name of my disability? What are the names of my accommodations, and how do they help me? That's the kind of preparation that almost can't begin too soon.

But if a student is going into their senior year of high school, it's also not too late to start having those conversations. So by the time they enter college, they really have a good idea of who they are and what they need to be successful.

SALLY WEISS: Our next question has two parts. Is the student's most recent IEP or Section 504 plan sufficient documentation to support the existence of a disability, and the need for an academic adjustment? And if it's not, what can high school personnel do to help students get the documentation they need?

DIANA KATOVICH: Okay. This is a mistake that I've heard from lots of disability services or ODS personnel that families and students will frequently make. The IEP, or Section 504 accommodation, 504 plan in high school, has an expiration date and the expiration date on those documents is when the student graduates from high school.

Now this is not to say that the same accommodations couldn't still apply in college. But I have heard stories of students and their parents walking in holding a 504 plan or walking in holding an IEP and the ODS staff saying, "I'm sorry. This isn't sufficient documentation for the accommodations that you're going to need," unless that document has attached recent documentation of recent evaluations. Some districts in the student's junior year of high school will repeat academic testing that will indicate a need for academic accommodation. It will have very valuable information of how that accommodation or aid will help a student in school. It can be an important helping document, but many colleges will not accept that as sufficient documentation.

The second part of your question is -- what can high school personnel do to help students get the documentation they need? They can immediately go online onto each

school's website. Don't go to just one school's website and assume that documentation requirements are going to apply across the board. You need to go to the specific college where the student is going to be attending and search for ODS or search for -- even under "students with disabilities" or "disability accommodations," and that will take you to a page. I've done this search many times for different college websites. And it should have listed there -- based on the student's disability, whether they have a learning disability, visual impairment, deaf or hard of hearing, physical impairment that requires a student to use a wheelchair -- what documents are necessary to prove the need for a disability accommodation.

And colleges and universities are very up front about that. The information they will accept and how old that documentation can be. Generally speaking, they want to have documentation from no longer than three years before the student is applying and coming to campus.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you. And now we pause for a word from our sponsors.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: The Taishoff Center is committed to inclusive higher educational opportunities for students with disabilities, particularly students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Partnered with Syracuse University, the Taishoff Center offers support, research and training to individuals, families and college campus communities looking for strategies to foster and support college students with disabilities. The Center also provides information on students' rights in higher education, universal course design, disability-specific accommodations and other disability resources. For more information call 315 443 1288.

SALLY WEISS: Welcome back to the second part of our program. Our topic today is post secondary education for students with disabilities. And we're talking with Dee Katovich from the Taishoff Center at Syracuse University. Dee, can you tell us what kind of supports and services are available to students with disabilities?

DIANA KATOVICH: There are a wide variety of supports and services available to students with disabilities on college campuses. Generally, and I say generally, the same sorts of academic accommodations and adjustments that were present for students when they were in high school. It's actually easier to tell what supports and services are not provided directly by the college.

Some students when they were in high school, students with disabilities while they were in high school had one to one support staff or a personal care attendant who attended school with them and those individuals sometimes were paid for directly by the school district. That's not true in college. If a student has a need for a one to one support person or for a personal care attendant to help them with their needs while

they're on campus, the Office of Disability Services is not going to hire or pay that individual. However, they can put students in touch with local agencies that can help a student hire a personal care attendant or a one to one support staff.

They also cannot provide academic accommodations that are going to fundamentally alter the requirements for a degree program. For example, some students with language-based learning disabilities may have been exempt in high school from a foreign language requirement. If a student is going on and wants to get an international diploma [in] international services or international relations, it may be required by that particular program for that student to study a language other than English. And to exempt the student from that by allowing them to take a cultural class as opposed to a language class would fundamentally alter the requirements of that program and ODS is not going to provide that service, and colleges are not going to provide that service.

However, accommodations like note taking. Accommodations like priority registration for classes, extended time. Information on alternative formats, whether that's Braille or whether that is a digital style where students use screen reading software to read their required course information or textbooks, or information that a professor has posted. All of those things can be made available to a student. And environmental accommodations can be made, as well. An accessible dorm room.

At Syracuse University, we obviously have quite a bit of snow. One of the environmental accommodations for students who use wheelchairs are given information about certain pathways on campus that are plowed first so that students can travel from building to building. They're also given a number to call if an area of the campus that they need to reach has not been plowed and they can call environmental support services and have that area cleared of snow so that they can get to class.

There are really so many accommodations and technologies that made providing accommodations really, really easy. It's also important to know, though, that colleges are required to provide access. That access might not always be in a student's preferred mode. When I was teaching back a few years ago, students who had tests read to them, had reading support, frequently were assigned a reader. A human reader, a teacher, a teacher's assistant who would read tests aloud to them. A lot of students preferred that. However, colleges would frequently use digital means to do the same thing. They would scan a test. They would scan a piece of information and the student could listen to that information during a test. The student may not prefer it, but the college can say well, but we provided access. There is some negotiation of

accommodations that will go on. And that's sometimes a surprise to students and their families when they come to campus.

SALLY WEISS: How do students request these aids or services?

DIANA KATOVICH: This is very important. When students are applying to college, and they know they're going to need academic adjustments, as soon as the student decides to enroll in a particular college, they should immediately contact the office of disability services and register the student with a disability. What will happen at that point is the student will be assigned a counselor, will be assigned a staff person to meet with them, to go over their documentation, to listen to their particular accommodation needs and they will talk to the student about what those will be and how those will be arranged. The ODS staff person then will provide the student with a letter, with documentation, from their office that they give to their professor on the first day of class. The student's disability is not disclosed to the professor. But the professor is told this student needs extended time. This student needs copies of notes. This student needs information in alternative format so the professor knows what his or her responsibilities are toward that student.

And the ODS office can also help to negotiate that with students if they have a professor who is not familiar with academic accommodations and has questions. The office can also help to advocate for the student. And those people are assigned to the student and will follow the student throughout their academic career. So it's very, very important for students to contact ODS as soon as they send the check to confirm that they're going to be attending that particular college. It really is important to do that early. Don't wait until you arrive on campus to contact ODS.

SALLY WEISS: Another question we often get. How long do I have to wait to get my auxiliary aid or accommodation?

DIANA KATOVICH: It really depends on the particular aid or accommodation. Some of the accommodations such as copies of notes are so common they can be set up very, very quickly.

Not to say you should wait until the day before the test to request a particular accommodation. Again, start early. Separate location for testing. Again, those are things that colleges are very used to providing. But many ODS offices are, have very few staff members and some smaller colleges may only have one individual. If there's an accommodation that takes a long time set up, for example, if a student is blind or visually impaired and needs their textbooks provided in Braille, that's going to take a long time. Even a textbook in an alternative format that needs to be scanned, so the

student can listen to a textbook over an MP3 player, or something like that. That takes time. Somebody has to physically take the textbook apart and scan all of those pages.

Sign language interpreters also will require time to set up. So colleges and universities will do the best they can. They know their requirements under the law. They know they have to provide these accommodations but some accommodations that require time to set up may take a little while. Going to ODS saying hey, I need an interpreter for a lecture that I'm going to in 15 minutes, that's not going to be enough time. Students really need to make sure they're on top of that. If they know they need an interpreter for a separate lecture, they need to call ODS or contact ODS as soon as they know about that requirement so those accommodations can be provided in a timely manner.

SALLY WEISS: What if these supports and services aren't enough for me to be successful?

DIANA KATOVICH: Okay. And this is a really important question. And again it goes back to the student now taking charge of his or her academic performance. If a student is failing courses, if a student has been placed on academic probation, colleges are not required, actually they are forbidden to contact the student's parents, unless they have explicit written permission from the student to share that information with their families.

The student really needs to monitor. In a college class you may or only have three or four grades a semester. If you take the first test and fail it, you really need to take an honest look at what you're doing in the class. Meet with the professor. Go to the professor during office hours. If you're really falling behind as far as understanding the information, colleges have tutoring centers that are available to all students, not just students with disabilities. They have writing centers where students can go to get help in creating better term papers. All of those options are available.

Students may need to go beyond just what ODS is providing them. Take advantage of whatever sorts of supports are there on a college campus.

Colleges are starting now in a lot of ways, Syracuse has done very well with this, to go beyond just the compliance of the law, and may provide for an additional fee in many cases, additional support for students who have difficulty with time management or students who have difficulty socializing to provide that additional support. But students really have to take the maximum responsibility. If things are starting to fall apart, don't wait until midterm exams and say "Oh well. I'll just do better." Students need to be very aware of their performance and communication with their professors about what they can do to improve.

SALLY WEISS: Thanks, Dee, for all this information. We will pause now for a word from our sponsors and be right back.

VOICE OVER ANNOUNCER: The ADA Center is your leader in providing information, training and guidance on the Americans with Disabilities Act and disability access tailored to the needs of business, government and individuals at local, state and regional levels. The Southeast ADA Center, located in Atlanta, Georgia, is a member of the ADA National Network and serves eight states in the Southeast region. For answers to your ADA questions, contact the ADA National Network at 1-800-949-4232.

SALLY WEISS: Welcome back to our broadcast on post-secondary education for students with disabilities. Dee, I know you have a particular interest in the newest group of students to access higher education. These are students with intellectual and developmental disabilities. What can you tell us about this trend and what are some of the newest developments?

DIANA KATOVICH: I'm really excited about this particular trend, Sally. Now the reason for the trend for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, IDD for short, to attend college is because we've done such a good job with including students with IDD in kindergarten through 12th grade. The students were coming to the end of their high school career and in the senior year of high school, students are asking each other what are you doing next year, where are you applying to college? Students with IDD are going to their teachers and their families and saying -- I want to do what my friends are doing, I want to do what my brothers and sisters have done which is attend college.

Now accessibility in college has developed a long way. Obviously, we still have a ways to go. But the thing with students with IDD is they didn't meet the "otherwise qualified" designations under ADA, which means that even with accommodations they were not able to meet the entrance criteria for college. Whether that was SAT or grades or their particular diploma that they would receive when they finished with 12th grade.

So what colleges began to do, frequently with the urging and sometimes under the guidance of families of individuals with IDD, was create programs that were connected or actually part of a college specifically for students with IDD, and those programs took many forms.

Some of the classes were specialized and taught just to students and program participants with IDD, but frequently students would also access other services and opportunities on campus including starting to take part in typical undergraduate

courses. A lot of those programs still exist. I think the last count, it was something like 200-plus across the United States.

What -- the newest trend is something that the Taishoff Center and Syracuse University is working very hard on, and we're also connecting with likeminded individuals across the United States is looking more at the process of how would a non-traditionally enrolled student -- say you, or say me -- who wanted to take a college course or maybe audit a course. All the student would need to do is fill out the registration forms, pay the course fee, and get permission to audit the course that's usually gotten from the professor and then participate as any other student would on a college campus.

Well, this is true for someone who is just hired or someone who just wants to increase their personal information. If that was available to those students, well, why not to a student with IDD?

So what we're trying to do now -- through some of our initiatives and other colleges are starting to do, too -- is to make that process more clear and more transparent so that a student with IDD can go to the college of his or her choice. We're not just talking about community colleges, incidentally. This is also a possibility at four year colleges. You just have to look at the infrastructure that already exists for non traditionally enrolled students to take courses on a college campus and expand those options to students with IDD, to communicate with families and with agencies and with individuals and show them how to do this.

And that's really very, very exciting because that's really the true inclusion that we're looking for in college.

SALLY WEISS: You're right, Dee, it's very exciting. We have just a few minutes left. I have one last question. What is the most important message you want our listening audience to know about post secondary education for students with disabilities?

DIANA KATOVICH: Increasingly, Sally, we're finding that engaging our minds past high school and even past college is very, very good for us. For all individuals, whether they have a disability currently or whether they don't. Life long education is essential for everyone because the world just changes so quickly. Colleges also have a real investment these days in diversity -- diversity of race, diversity of gender, diversity of sexual orientation or sexual identity. Disability is another diversity element that colleges have not always been aware of, and yet they're very, very important. It's very important to look at how do we educate the most number of people in the best way possible? And the accommodation that has been used and the technology that

has been used historically for students with disabilities are also benefitting students who don't have disabilities.

Students with disabilities need college, but colleges also need students and staff and faculty with disabilities because they bring with them a sense of innovation. Ways that education will benefit the most number of people. And when we hear stories about students who have not had good experiences on college campuses with the accommodations or a welcoming culture, or a welcoming atmosphere, I've been known to say "Well, that college doesn't deserve any students with disabilities." And they are missing out, because everyone benefits. It's not just the student or staff or faculty with a disability, everybody benefits from that sense of innovation and accommodation that students and staff with disabilities bring to college campuses.

SALLY WEISS: Thank you, Dee. And thank you, also, to our ADA Live! listening audience. The Southeast ADA Center is grateful for your support and participation in this series WADA ADA Live! broadcasts. Remember, you may submit questions about any of our ADA Live! topics by going to ADALive.org. A resource section is also available. If you have questions about the Americans with Disabilities Act, please contact your regional ADA center at 1 800 949 4232. All calls are free and confidential.

Please join us next month on September 3rd for our broadcast on web accessibility, when we will be talking to Celestia Ohrazda of the Burton Blatt Institute at Syracuse University and Marsha Schwanke of the Southeast ADA Center. See you next month on WADA ADA Live!

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