

Providing Access for the Disabled: It Won't Be Cheap or Easy

New federal rules require colleges to make all programs available to handicapped students; officials familiar with the problems say it can be done, but it will take money and hard work

By Cheryl M. Fields

WASHINGTON

Officials of colleges and universities that have been leaders in opening their doors to students with physical handicaps don't envy the work that faces their less foresighted colleagues. Providing real access for handicapped students requires money, hard work, and vigilance, they say.

Providing such access can mean having at least one person who has checked every classroom on campus and rated its accessibility for students with physical handicaps.

It can mean, on large campuses, providing bus service with vehicles especially outfitted to accommodate wheelchairs.

It can mean establishing a corps of volunteers trained to quickly evacuate disabled students from high-rise buildings in case of fire.

It can mean cajoling professors into modifying their teaching practices—for example, not talking to the blackboard while they're writing on it if they have a deaf student who needs to lip-read.

Those steps and many others are facing college administrators now that the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare has issued regulations telling institutions that if they receive federal aid, they must make all their programs and activities accessible to handicapped students and employees within 60 days of the date the rules take effect—June 3.

Three Years to Make Changes

The regulations are designed to carry out Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which bans discrimination against persons with physical, mental, or psychological disabilities.

The rules stipulate that if programs cannot be made accessible through lesser alternatives such as re-assigning classrooms or providing auxiliary physical aids or tutors, necessary structural changes must be made within three years.

Many persons who counsel handicapped students or who direct programs providing special services to them say that almost any program can be made accessible—although it will take planning, attention to detail, and willingness to make changes for one or a handful of students. Structural changes—such as the addition of ramps and elevators—are one way to provide access. But if such changes can't be accomplished immediately, they say, other short-term means can be found.

"I'm a firm believer that if you get reasonable people together, you can work things out," says Kent B. Klopping, director of the Specialized Services Program in the University of Arizona's College of Education, which has been under way for seven years.

"If you want to develop services for handicapped students, don't go out and get a counselor for the handicapped," says Mr. Klopping. "You have to . . . have someone who knows the particular university."

'A Horrendous Job'

In addition, he says, every academic and staff unit must be involved in the process of planning access, from the registrar's office to faculty members to the maintenance personnel.

"I know it is a horrendous job to know every room in the university. But if a student wants to sign up for a class that we know is in an inaccessible room, we call the department and ask if they can move it. If they can't, you get cases of people having to be carried up stairs. This might not be the best solution, but sometimes you have to get it right down to the individual case," he says.

Although well-established programs aiding disabled students vary considerably in the size of the full-time staff and the specific services they provide, most provide a similar

core of services. Generally, they include screening applications or counseling disabled applicants before registration, to determine what their special needs are, arrange accessible housing, give them priority at registration time, and provide any physical assistance they need.

The programs also either employ counselors or work closely with campus counseling centers to help students overcome their adjustment problems. Special arrangements for students to take tests are often made, and many programs also attempt to provide career counseling.

Most provide liaison between students and state vocational agencies, which often provide financial assistance to blind, deaf, or other disabled students.

Volunteer Assistants

Many programs either employ student assistants or maintain lists of volunteers willing to provide extra help, such as reading for blind students, interpreting for deaf students, or obtaining material from inaccessible library stacks.

Many institutions also keep lists of persons willing to serve as attendants if students with severe limitations need help in dressing. Specially modified vans or buses are often used on large campuses to transport students; special parking areas are designated; and attendants to help students from their vehicles are provided.

Although directors of well-established programs typically estimate that their campuses are between 50 and 95 per cent physically accessible, most have lists of structural changes they are seeking funds to correct. Many emphasize that while the populations of disabled students on their campuses may range from 30 to as many as 400, once the most important structural modifications of the campus are completed, a much smaller percentage requires continuing assistance.

Special Services Offered

Besides the basic services offered, many institutions have developed other kinds of special assistance.

For example:

► Several, including Ramapo College of New Jersey and Eastfield College of the Dallas County Community College District, offer physical-education classes specifically tailored to the abilities of disabled students.

► The University of Illinois has a long-standing program of wheelchair sports.

► Ramapo, the University of California at Berkeley, and the University of California at Los Angeles boast wheelchair repair services.

► U.C.L.A. has a reading room for blind students in one of its libraries, equipped with tape recorders, Braille typewriters, and Braille publications.

► Eastfield has held workshops to sensitize faculty members to the needs of disabled students and offers faculty members free tutoring in sign language by deaf students.

There are, apparently, no definite figures on how many colleges and universities have made extensive efforts to eliminate physical barriers and provide supportive services for disabled students and employees.

Ron E. Blosser, coordinator of Specialized Student Services at Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, has compiled a list of about 225 institutions that either have a formal program or offer some services for students with physical handicaps.

Abt Associates, Inc., a Cambridge, Mass., social-science consulting organization, surveyed several hundred institutions on their accessibility to disabled persons and has published *The College Guide for Students with Disabilities*. It lists accessible institutions and describes their programs and services.

At institutions that have not done

much to accommodate disabled students and employees in the past, there is wide concern over the cost of making buildings and programs accessible.

Directors and coordinators of programs for disabled students are divided, however, on the importance of the money question.

Timothy J. Nugent, director of the Rehabilitation Education Center at the University of Illinois, says that "the purpose and intent of the law are excellent," but adds that "the *carte blanche* approach" of the federal government in requiring all institutions to make their programs accessible to severely disabled students "is the most ridiculous damn thing I ever heard."

"We've been working to make our campus accessible for 30 years, long before there was any legislation," he says.

"There is no reason now at any institution for any building to be built or program started that does not include the disabled, but it is different to demand that all institutions spend the money" to make themselves accessible, he says. "Taxpayers will be paying for something that is not necessary."

Mr. Nugent says students could be guaranteed "a full, reasonable choice" of programs by allowing a small group of selected institutions in a state or region to make themselves accessible to disabled students.

In issuing the Section 504 rules, the Department of Health, Educa-

tion, and Welfare said it had rejected suggestions that only certain designated institutions be made accessible.

Agency officials said that solution "would discriminate against qualified handicapped persons by restricting their choice in selecting institutions of higher education."

Directors of programs for disabled students acknowledge that structural modifications of buildings are costly and suggest that increased government funds will be necessary over the next several years if institutions are to comply with the federal requirements.

One-Time Expenses

"I don't think the 504 regulations are going to be that hard to implement. It is reasonable for people to be concerned about money when they think about architectural modifications, but they should remember that they are one-time expenses."

"I also think there is no physical modification that doesn't benefit society at large."

Ramps, less cumbersome entrance doors, lowered drinking fountains, elevators, enlarged bathroom facilities, and the like are things "that will benefit the aged, children, and others," Ms. Brower says.

"Even faculty members carrying large piles of books can get up ramps easier," she says.

Although many officials believe extra financing will be necessary for institutions to carry out the government's regulations, a number note that they have had some assistance in the past from the Office of Education's Bureau of Education for the Handicapped and the Social and Rehabilitation Service in H.E.W.

Administrators also should realize, add the program coordinators, that although they may not cover the costs of all special services students may require, state vocational rehabilitation agencies often offer financial support to disabled students—including money for tuition, room, and board—as well as funds for readers, interpreters, and attendants.

Campus-Wide Planning Committee

Asked what advice they would give to institutions just beginning to make themselves accessible to disabled persons, several administrators familiar with the field suggest that a planning committee with representation from handicapped students or disabled persons from the local community be set up.

Such a committee should include representatives from major campus administrative units such as the admissions office, counseling service, housing office, campus architect, dean of students, and director of the physical plant, they say.

People confined to wheelchairs "are your best resources and your only accurate judge of what they need," says Laurie S. Potter, special services counselor at Ramapo College of New Jersey.

"We gathered our students during the planning stages of our almost-completed library. They pointed things out to the architects that these professionals overlooked because they are not properly trained or living in wheelchairs," she notes.

"There has to be an assessment, building by building, as to its accessibility and frequency of use," adds Boston University's Mr. De Graff.

"Priorities have to be set. The frequency of use, type, and number of activities have to be weighed," so the institution can decide where students most require access, says Mr. De Graff, who is co-author of *Architectural Accessibility for the Disabled of College Campuses*.

The book, published by the State

University of New York Construction Fund, gives technical advice on how to build ramps, entrances, residence halls, cafeterias, laboratories, restrooms, and other campus facilities so they will be accessible to students with all types of physical disabilities.

"I'm concerned that institutions plan an integrated program of access for handicapped students. Often planning is not done until after the students are there and that can cost more money," says Patricia Marx, director of Handicapped Student Services at Wright State University.

If a sprawling, residential campus realizes it needs to provide some kind of transportation service for disabled students, she says, "the first thought usually is to get special buses or vans."

"That can be an immediate solution, but it could be more expensive in the long run. It might be less costly to renovate existing equipment so you don't have to pay two sets of bus drivers," she says.

Ms. Marx is hosting an invitational "state-of-the-art" conference in Dayton in August, at which representatives of institutions with well-established programs and some institutions just beginning the process will discuss current techniques and philosophies involved in providing special services to disabled students.

Pre-Admission Inquiries Barred

Even at institutions with established programs for aiding students with handicaps, there is some concern over a few provisions of the Section 504 regulations.

Although the regulations say that pre-admission inquiries about whether a student has a handicap can be made only if an institution is trying to attract handicapped students to make up for past discrimination, directors of programs for such students insist that they must know in advance about severe physical disabilities so that adequate arrangements can be made for housing and class scheduling.

The Section 504 rules bar discrimination against otherwise-qualified students with mental or emotional disabilities or problems of drug addiction or alcoholism.

Since most coordinators of special services have centered the programs and counseling around physically disabled students, they hope the regular campus mental-health services will be given responsibility for dealing with students with the other types of disabilities.

Many directors acknowledge that institutions just beginning to plan for disabled students have valid concerns because they don't know how many students they should prepare for.

Impact in the Future

"I think the biggest impact may come 15 to 18 years from now," because many children with handicaps previously have not received the kind of elementary and secondary-school education that prepares them for college, notes Barbara Hummel, director of handicapped-student services at the University of Missouri at Columbia.

"I would anticipate that the Section 504 regulations will result in some increase, though," she says. "The only thing institutions can do is to start planning. Even if they only get five students with handicaps, it's going to create the need for as many adaptations as if they got 20."

The guidelines for constructing architecturally accessible facilities are available from Alfred De Graff, Disabled Student Services, Boston University, 775 Commonwealth Avenue, Boston 02215. Enclose 35 cents for postage.

The guide for disabled college students costs \$18.50 and is available from Abt Associates Inc., 55 Wheel-er St., Cambridge, Mass. 02138.



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