

## **ESTABLISHMENT AND APPOINTMENT OF A COMMITTEE TO STUDY AND IMPLEMENT POLICIES AFFECTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

**Submitted for:** Information.

**Summary:** In August 2002, the Illinois Board of Higher Education issued a report, *Gateway to Success: Rethinking Access and Success for a New Century*, and approved the recommendations therein. One of the major conclusions of *Gateway to Success* was that it was essential to address issues surrounding the development and distribution of information in order to develop “an effective higher education disability policy.” The report, which was put forward as only “an initial step” in conceiving such a policy, focused in part on three components of information systems: 1) consumer information on institutional programs and services; 2) statewide and institutional information on the number and types of students with disabilities enrolled and receiving services, as well as persistence and post-college placement; and 3) access to information both in the form of instructional materials in alternative formats (for example, materials in audio format or large print for students with visual impairments) and Web accessibility.

Illinois higher education has undertaken a number of steps to advance the recommendations for students with disabilities contained in *Gateway to Success*. In May 2002, the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center at Northern Illinois University, in cooperation with other institutions, held a Conference on Accommodative Teaching and Assistive Technologies to address some of the Board’s recommendations. In another initiative, Illinois colleges and universities are now evaluating the effectiveness of student services in assisting students with disabilities, as part of this year’s report on underrepresented groups.

Since the Board’s issuance of *Gateway to Success*, various developments have had implications for the delivery of services for students with disabilities, as well as Board policy. Most notably, changes in funding levels and financing structures have increased fiscal constraints on institutional capabilities to provide assistance and deliver needed services. As part of the cutbacks to respond to the state’s 2004 budgetary shortfall, the Special Population Grants Program and an associated \$13.3 million in funding were eliminated. Further complicating the finance question has been the implementation of a new funding model for students receiving support through the Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS).

Given the developing state of Board of Higher Education policy on disability issues, the need to more fully implement existing policy, the importance of developments that have occurred since issuance of *Gateway to Success*, and the need to engage Illinois higher education and other interested persons in disability issues, it is recommended that the Illinois Board of Higher Education charge staff to convene an advisory committee consisting of disabilities experts to examine “issues related to the development and implementation of more effective information systems and the improvement of the transition from high school to postsecondary institutions of students with disabilities,” as well as review budgetary structures and support for students with disabilities in higher education. This Board item reviews the kind of information and issues that the committee will address, especially in regards to information systems and the transition of students from high school to college.

**Action Requested:** No action is requested.

STATE OF ILLINOIS  
BOARD OF HIGHER EDUCATION

**ESTABLISHMENT AND APPOINTMENT OF A COMMITTEE TO STUDY AND  
IMPLEMENT POLICIES AFFECTING STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES**

**Background and Recent Developments**

The purpose of this Board item is to review recent developments affecting students with disabilities in order to show the need for establishing a Board committee and to provide some sense of the range of issues that the new committee will address. In August 2002, the Illinois Board of Higher Education issued a report, *Gateway to Success: Rethinking Access and Success for a New Century*, and approved the recommendations therein. One of the main themes of the report was the need to recognize the central role that a college education now plays for Illinois' citizens. There is perhaps no group in our society for whom a college education is more important than persons with disabilities. Persons with disabilities who graduate from college hold jobs and become taxpayers. Persons with disabilities who do not receive a postsecondary education do not fare as well. Or, stated differently, society and the state have a much greater chance of incurring costs for persons with disabilities who have not attended college and who are more likely to be unemployed and poor.

*Gateway to Success* noted that while special studies indicate that the enrollment of students with disabilities is climbing across the country, the rates of college participation remain lower among this group than among other high school graduates. Also, students with disabilities who do go to college have a higher dropout rate and a lower rate of degree completion than other college students. Both failure to matriculate and lack of college success often have their roots in elementary/secondary education and inadequate pre-collegiate academic preparation. The report emphasized that "one of the most difficult barriers facing a student with disabilities is the transition from high school to college. Students with disabilities...are less academically prepared than their counterparts and likely to require remediation. Also, many students with disabilities are not ready for independent living and self advocacy once on campus."

*Gateway to Success* concluded that it was essential to address issues surrounding the development and distribution of information in order to meet the "growing need for the formation of an effective higher education disability policy." The report, which put itself forward as only "an initial step" in conceiving such a policy, focused on three aspects of information systems: 1) consumer information on institutional programs and services; 2) statewide and institutional information on the number and types of students with disabilities enrolled and receiving services, as well as persistence and post-college placement; and 3) access to information both in the form of instructional materials in alternative formats (for example, materials in audio format or large print for students with visual impairments) and Web accessibility.

Illinois higher education has undertaken a number of steps to advance the recommendations for students with disabilities contained in *Gateway to Success*. On May 31, 2002, the Faculty Development and Instructional Design Center at Northern Illinois University, in cooperation with other institutions, held a Conference on Accommodative Teaching and Assistive Technologies to address some of the Board's recommendations. Funded through a grant from the

Higher Education Cooperation Act (HECA), the conference was intended not only to identify promising assistive technologies but also to explore the implications of such technology for pedagogy and the interactions of faculty and support staff. The conference enabled participants to meet leaders in the field, learn about accommodative teaching techniques, view demonstrations of assistive technologies, and share ideas on how to most effectively accommodate the needs of students with disabilities. Faculty and staff from academic institutions, vendors of assistive technologies, and staff at state agencies serving students with disabilities attended the conference.

In another initiative, Illinois colleges and universities are now evaluating the effectiveness of student services in assisting students with disabilities, as part of this year's report on underrepresented groups. In their reports to the Board, institutions have been asked to respond to the questions below. The Board's 2004 report will offer information and analysis on the public university and community college submissions.

- 1) Is the institution providing a full range of services to students with disabilities and offering the services this population needs? How does the institution know that the existing range and level of services are appropriate and adequate?
- 2) Is the institution providing the right outreach services so that students with disabilities in high school know that, if they go to college, needed services will be available to them? How does the institution work with high schools to facilitate the transition to college of students with disabilities?
- 3) Is the institution providing the right climate or context so that students with disabilities know that they will be supported and their needs responded to in a proper and timely manner, if they do seek services?

Since the Board's issuance of *Gateway to Success*, various developments have had implications for the delivery of services for students with disabilities, as well as Board policy. Most notably, changes in funding levels and financing structures have increased fiscal constraints on institutional capabilities to provide assistance and deliver needed services. As part of the cutbacks to respond to the state's 2004 budgetary shortfall, the Special Population Grants Program and an associated \$13.3 million in funding were eliminated. Administered by the Illinois Community College Board, many community colleges had used this funding source to aid students with disabilities. In order to better understand the consequences of this program elimination, as well as to evaluate institutional capacity, the Illinois Community College Board has distributed a survey to the state's community colleges to collect information on matters such as the delivery of services and use of assistive technology, the allocation of resources, and transition support for students with disabilities.

Further complicating the finance question has been the implementation of a new funding model for students receiving support through the Office of Rehabilitation Services (ORS). Historically, ORS has provided support for the delivery of services to some students with severe disabilities. However, the Rehabilitation Act of 1998 made changes in federal law which now specify that cost-sharing agreements are to be negotiated at the regional or local level to support ORS funded students. In Illinois, agreements between ORS and individual higher education institutions have been adopted that identify both the types of services and portion of funding for these services that the two entities will support. For example, interpretative services might be funded 60 percent by ORS and 40 percent by a local institution. In Illinois, many higher education institutions have negotiated three-year cost sharing agreements with ORS under the federal funding model.

A number of Illinois higher education institutions have expressed concern about the equity of this new shared funding policy and its underlying premise whereby ORS funds certain services or a certain proportion of those services at one institution but different services or a different proportion of the same services at another institution(s). There is also concern about the long-term stability of these funding arrangements since many agreements specify a declining level of ORS support for some services over the life of the three-year agreement.

In September 2003, in anticipation of federal reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, the National Council on Disability (NCD) issued *People with Disabilities and Postsecondary Education*. Among other recommendations, this report calls for Congress to support the development of a postsecondary technical assistance network and longitudinal research to identify and disseminate best practice information that would serve to: 1) increase the enrollment of students with disabilities at colleges and universities, 2) optimize access to effective disability support services and resources and, 3) increase post-graduation employment prospects of students with disabilities. In September, Board Chair James Kaplan wrote to members of the Illinois Congressional delegation and other state leaders asking them to support the recommendations in the NCD report.

At the state level this past year, the Interagency Coordinating Council (ICC) issued *The Status of Transition Services for Secondary Students with Disabilities in Illinois*. The ICC is a coordinating body composed of representatives from state agencies and educational organizations that seeks to ensure that persons with disabilities continue to receive effective services as they make major life transitions from high school to college or school to work. The ICC report contains seven recommendations including one that applies to the transition of students from high school to college which reads, “ICCB, IBHE, and ISBE must develop a mechanism to ensure that all high schools make a concerted effort to ensure that all high school graduates who have disabilities meet the specifications that colleges and universities need to provide complete and full services during the students’ post-secondary experience.”

## **Developing an Action Agenda**

Given the unfinished nature of the Board’s policies on students with disabilities first formulated in *Gateway to Success*, as well as subsequent activities since the issuance of that report, there is a strong need to review policy development and implementation. In recent months, the Chair and staff of the Board have had a number of conversations with experts in the accessibility field. These discussions have focused on identifying key statewide policy issues, as well as thinking through strategies, priorities, and processes that might prove effective in implementing statewide policy. The following section of this paper discusses some ideas and approaches articulated in these conversations. As presented here, they are intended to serve a starting point or framework for the work of the Board’s committee.

## **Information Systems**

### **Consumer Information System**

The Americans for Disabilities Act specifies that institutions must provide “reasonable accommodation” to meet the needs of persons with disabilities. In keeping with this federal law, colleges and universities now provide a changing variety of services to accommodate shifts in student enrollments. In addition, many institutions historically have enrolled a large number of students with a particular disability, such as a learning disability or mobility impairment, and thus offer a wide range of ongoing services for those populations. From a student perspective, it is

educationally beneficial to make students with disabilities aware of the full range of services available to them, as well as the types of services available for specific disabilities, at various colleges and universities. From a statewide and campus perspective, of course, efficiencies and qualitative benefits also result by facilitating student and institutional compatibility.

One of the principal aims and benefits of a Web-based consumer information system is to provide information to prospective students and their parents. While full development of such a system will require in-depth review, preliminary analysis permits the identification of key attributes. First, the Web site should feature links from individual colleges and universities that present information about types of services, including clinical services; campus organizations for students with disabilities; accessible housing and transportation; hardware and software technologies; and policies and processes for requesting various services. Second, the Web site should contain general information about student rights and responsibilities under federal and state laws so that entering students are prepared to assume a more active and independent role in managing the services that meet their needs. Third, a separate section of the Web site should contain information addressed to staff and faculty concerning the delivery of services. Finally, the consumer information system should be featured and linked to the Illinois Board of Higher Education's home page.

Funding will be needed, possibly through a HECA grant, to develop a consumer information Web site for students with disabilities. For its initial implementation, and periodically thereafter, the Board should convene an advisory council of students, parents, and institutional administrators, faculty, and staff to identify the kind of information that would be most appropriate and useful for placement on the Web site.

#### Information for Analysis and Accountability

As the rising participation in higher education of students with disabilities suggests and as countless individual success stories have demonstrated, providing the right kind of institutional support and services can be critically important to the disabled population. Yet, are such testimonies the norm or the exception? Unfortunately, the Board of Higher Education lacks the information to address this and other basic questions, such as:

- What percentage of students with disabilities graduate from high school and what percentage of these graduates are going to college?
- Do high school graduates with disabilities have the academic preparation that they need to attend college and achieve academic success?
- How many students with disabilities are enrolled at each Illinois college or university?
- What percentage of students with disabilities is receiving institutional services and what services are they receiving?
- What is the level of satisfaction among students with disabilities with the services provided? What services are most important to student success and what services are not provided?
- What is the academic achievement of students with disabilities and what is their rate of persistence, degree completion, and time to degree?
- What is the employment rate and post-graduate employment experience of students with disabilities? Do graduates with disabilities obtain employment in fields comparable to their peers without disabilities?

Periodic national studies have offered relevant information on the above and other questions. However, Illinois colleges and universities, and higher education institutions in most other states, do not routinely collect the type of information that will allow campus administrators and staff, as well as statewide agencies, to address such questions and, thereby, assess and respond to the evolving needs of the disabled student population. In part, the absence of such information is a consequence of federal law that states that institutions cannot require students with disabilities to identify themselves. In fact, many students with disabilities, perhaps afraid of being stigmatized, often choose not to self identify at time of registration or in other institutional processes.

For many years, the Illinois Board of Higher Education has asked public community colleges and public universities to provide information on students with disabilities through the annual underrepresented groups report. In response to this request, most institutions provide a count of the number of students receiving services at their institution. Recently, it has come to staff attention that the manner by which institutions collect this information varies among some campuses. Also, as shown above, institutions do not know what percentage of students with disabilities are not receiving services, or whether an increase or decrease in student services is even a positive or negative result (as institutions become more accessible the hope is that fewer students may need to make service requests).

As explained, the Illinois Board of Higher Education is now gathering information for the upcoming 2004 underrepresented groups report that will offer insight on some of the above questions, especially on the adequacy of campus services. It can be anticipated, however, that this current effort will not produce the kind of informational system needed to manage the delivery of services to students with disabilities, although it may be helpful in making some general conclusions, as well as pointing out future directions for development of information. It is quite possible that there are researchers at Illinois colleges and universities who could develop the needed data and informational structure, if funded by HECA or a federal grant support. It is suggested, therefore, that the Board, in coordination with Illinois colleges and universities, undertake an effort to assess the feasibility of such a project.

#### Access to Information

Increasingly, access to information turns on the strengths and weaknesses of new technology. Nowhere, perhaps, are the promises and limits of new technology more in evidence than on the World Wide Web. In the past decade, tremendous growth has occurred in the number of Web sites created by educational institutions; their various colleges, departments, and administrative units; and faculty and students. As a result, the Web has become a ubiquitous and indispensable component of postsecondary education. The Web also is a resource of great promise for students with disabilities because of the direct access to instruction and services that it offers.

Recent research has shown that many sites are not compatible with the computer software and hardware used by some students with disabilities, thereby cutting them off or putting them at a disadvantage in accessing educational materials. Dr. Cyndi Rowland in *Accessibility of the Internet in Postsecondary Education: Meeting the Challenge* cites a study of 400 colleges and universities in the U.S. in which approximately 75 percent of post-secondary institution homepages were not found to meet the minimum Level I accessibility standards of Bobby. As described on its website, "Bobby is a comprehensive web accessibility software tool designed to help expose and repair barriers to accessibility and encourage compliance with government standards." Rowland notes "Bobby is designed to measure the objective elements of accessibility

as defined by the Web Accessibility Initiative guidelines. Bobby rates a page as *approved* or *not approved* based on accessibility and browser compatibility. Since Bobby can only evaluate objective elements within a site, evaluations using Bobby typically represent a conservative estimate of full accessibility.” In another study, *The Power of Independence*, Rowland and her co-author, T. Smith, found that, even in those cases where institutions complied with Bobby standards, only three percent of institutional pages that were accessed one level from the homepages met the Level I Bobby criteria.

Growing dependence upon the Web for educational and administrative functions combined with the lack of Web accessibility of students with disabilities present a serious and growing concern to Illinois higher education. Further study and consultation is needed to fully identify the scope and implications of this issue and to create priorities and strategies for remedying existing barriers to accessibility. At a minimum, processes created should broadly involve students, staff, and administrators from all sectors of Illinois higher education and should address topics such as standards for Web accessibility, costs of making existing sites compatible to various standards, and identification of approaches for increasing awareness of this problem within Illinois higher education and the general public. This study should also consider the problem of timely access to print-based course materials in alternative, accessible formats, and develop strategies for accommodating this need.

### **Transition from High School to College**

A major theme in *Gateway to Success* was that in Illinois lack of college access often is the result of inadequate student preparation during high school and the pre-collegiate years. Virtually all students now say that they want to go to college, even as late as their junior year in high school. Moreover, students have postsecondary programs available at a local community college and a strong financial aid system that permit them to realize college ambitions. Nevertheless, students often find that they are unable to take advantage of these opportunities because they leave high school unprepared to advance to the next educational level. This widespread problem is particularly an issue for students with disabilities whose courses of study are often more individualized during their pre-collegiate years and who must make many personal, as well as academic adjustments, in order to successfully matriculate and complete a college degree.

Increasingly, at both the federal and state levels, issues of transition from high school to college for students with disabilities are receiving greater attention as it becomes better understood that this is one of the major roadblocks to student success. This issue has considerable scope and, not surprisingly, the way in which it is approached varies with the nature of the responsibilities of those involved. That is, high school teachers and administrators tend to think about this subject in a different way than college personnel. In elementary/secondary education, the focus is more on providing services and less on understanding the nature of a student disability. In college, in contrast, prior to receiving accommodations, students must document the precise nature of their disability.

There are other major differences between the two systems, as well, foremost of which is the residential component. High school graduates with disabilities and their families must decide whether a student is to remain at home and attend a local postsecondary institution or to go away to college. If the latter, a major concern is how to prepare for the delivery of personal care that, heretofore, was the sole responsibility of the parents. Colleges and universities also often have a considerable array of assistive technology and computer software with which the student may be unfamiliar. And, of course, there is considerable variation among colleges and universities in

their approach to the delivery of services. At some institutions, for example, the delivery of services is coordinated through a single office, while on other campuses services are highly decentralized.

Because of different responsibilities and perspectives towards transition, as well as the differing traditions and modes of doing business at each educational level, it is especially important that postsecondary and high school administrators, faculty, and staff have opportunities to discuss and think these issues over together. Indeed, such wide-ranging discussion is a necessary precondition for developing an effective agenda for transition issues. Accordingly, the Illinois Board of Higher Education must look for opportunities to encourage, sponsor, and organize conferences, workshops, and other forums that address transition issues and that seek to develop common priorities, strategies, and approaches. It is recommended that the Board sponsor a conference during the summer of 2004 to begin this process.

### **Recommendation**

Given the developing state of Board of Higher Education policies on disability issues, the need to more fully implement existing policies, the importance of developments that have occurred since issuance of *Gateway to Success*, and the need to engage Illinois higher education and other interested persons in disability issues, it is recommended that the Illinois Board of Higher Education charge staff to convene an advisory committee consisting of disabilities experts to examine “issues related to the development and implementation of more effective information systems and the improvement of the transition from high school to postsecondary institutions of students with disabilities,” as well as review budgetary structures and support for students with disabilities in higher education.