



**Psychiatric Disabilities & Higher Education**  
*The Challenge*

*Patricia Schwaiger Willig, M.Ed., LPCCC*

## *What is the Law?*

- *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (1973) is the first law that addressed individuals with disabilities and students with disabilities in a post secondary setting.*

*No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States, shall, solely by reason of his or her disability be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.*

# The Law

- *The Americans with Disabilities Act (1990) upholds and extends standards for compliance set forth in Section 504 to employment practices, communications and all policies, procedures and practices that impact on the treatment of students with disabilities and mandate universities to have a process in place for securing reasonable accommodations for all eligible students*

## ***IDEA***

- **Requires K-12 schools to seek out students with disabilities and provide whatever help they need to be successful**
- **Students are tested at no charge**
- **If a disability is suspected, an individualized Education Plan (IEP) is developed and support given as dictated by the IEP**
- **If special education services are not needed, a 504 Plan is developed**

## ***ADA/504***

- **Civil right legislation designed to provide equal access to programs**
- **Modification or adjustment**
- **Student must support request with appropriate documentation –**
- **Documentation must provide adequate information on fundamental impact so effective accommodations can be identified**

# Some Facts

- High school graduation rates have risen nearly 31% since 1975
- 428,280 students with disabilities enrolled at 2 and 4 year institutions. Over 33,000 of this population are students who report having a mental illness
- Many mental illnesses first manifest between the ages of 18-24

U.S Department of Education, 1999; Wolf, 2001

# Psychiatric-Related Concerns of College Students

- 14.9% of college students surveyed reported a previous diagnosis of depression
- 43% reported difficulty functioning due to depression
- Depression, anxiety and Seasonal Affective Disorder among top ten health impediments to academic performance
- 9% of respondents had serious suicidal thoughts (suicide second leading cause of deaths among college students)

- 7.4% reported negative impact on academic performance due to ADHD
- 13.2% reported Anxiety Disorders
- 3.9% reported Eating Disorders
- 31% of college students ages 18-24 meet criteria for substance abuse and 6% meet criteria for substance dependence

National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism,(2007)

ACHA Spring 2008 Survey

# Who has a Disability?

- A person who:
  - Has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits a major life activity
  - Has a record or history of such an impairment
  - Is regarded as having such an impairment

## *Misconceptions*

**Mental Illness: A Hidden Disability**  
*Students with mental illness may experience symptoms that interfere with academic performance and connecting socially.*

Educators or peers may perceive students who self-disclose a psychiatric illness as:

- “crazy” , violent or otherwise uncontrollable
- Not able to handle academic program
- Not belonging

As a result, many student are hesitant to discuss their illness with supervisors and teachers; therefore go without proper accommodations.

# Primary Mental Illnesses seen as Psychiatric Disabilities

- ***Depression:*** *Loss of energy and interest; develop feelings of guilt, hopelessness, worthlessness; difficulty concentrating, making decisions; loss of appetite, insomnia; suicidal thoughts; psychosis*
- ***Anxiety Disorders:*** *Overwhelming feelings of panic and fear, uncontrollable obsessive thoughts, painful, intrusive memories; recurring nightmares, nausea, sweating, muscle tension and other physiological symptoms*

•**Schizophrenia:** *Delusions, hallucinations; disordered thinking; social withdrawal, extreme apathy, diminished motivation, blunted affect*

•**Bipolar Affective Disorder:** *Alternating periods of extreme moods swinging from being overly elated or irritable (mania) to sad and hopeless (depression) with normal moods in between cycles*

- ***Personality Disorders:*** *Disturbances in self-image; inability to have successful interpersonal relationships; inappropriate range of emotion or ways of perceiving themselves, others; difficulty possessing proper impulse control.*
- ***Substance Abuse and Acquired Brain Injury:*** *May have associated psychological symptoms marked by anxiety, erratic behavior, panic attacks, attention deficit, fluctuating motivation, disorganization*

# *Asperger's Syndrome*

- *500,000 people diagnosed*
- *Often have above average intelligence; high level of vocabulary and formal speech*
- *Struggles to make or sustain friendships*
- *Socially awkward*
- *Literal interpretations*
- *Unaware of multiple meanings*
- *Misinterprets meanings*
- *Struggles to make small talk; engage in conversation*

# Asperger's Syndrome

- *Difficulty expressing needs*
- *Difficulty with word retrieval, might use gestures instead of words*
- *Repeats words or phrases in place of typical responsive language*
- *Unable to read body language or facial expressions*
- *Inability to modulate volume in specific settings*

# What is Adequate Documentation?

- Diagnosis by a qualified licensed professional
- A clear statement of illness, including DSM-IV diagnosis, summary of treatment and prognosis
- Must be current
- Medical information regarding medication and/treatment
- Suggestions of appropriate accommodations supported by disability related rationale
- **Responsibility to produce documentation is the student's**

Reasonable  
Accommodations

- *Student's responsibility to fulfill requirements of the course*

Access

- *Instructor's responsibility to provide accommodations*

not

- *Respecting privacy of student important*

Outcome

- *Review accommodations to assess and adjust*

# Transitioning

- “Often college-bound students with learning disabilities fail to understand that they will face a different set of demands within a postsecondary setting. They soon become overwhelmed by the amount of assigned material as well as the fast pace of instruction. Many lack the skills and strategies that are necessary for managing and self-monitoring their learning in a variety of contexts.”

» McGuire (1991)

# **In Transition: Classroom Accommodations to Consider**

- Preferential seating
- Notetaker or photocopy of classmates notes
- Beverages permitted
- Prearranged or frequent breaks
- Tape recorder use
- Early availability of syllabus and textbooks
- Availability of course materials on disk
- Private feedback on academic performance

# **In Transition: Examination Accommodations to Consider**

- Exams in alternate form
- Use of adaptive computer software
- Extended time
- Exams individually proctored, including in the hospital
- Exam in a separate, quiet, and non-distracting room
- Increased frequency of exams

# **In Transition: Assignment**

## **Accommodations to Consider**

- Substitute assignments in specific circumstances
- Advance notice of assignments
- Permission to submit assignments handwritten rather than typed
- Written assignments in lieu of oral (or vice versa)
- Assignment assistance during hospitalization
- Extended time

# **An Accommodation is NOT Reasonable When:**

- Making the accommodation poses a direct threat to the health or safety of others
- Making the accommodation changes substantially the essential element of the curriculum
- Making the accommodation significant alteration of course objectives
- Making accommodations would impose an undue financial or administrative burden to the institution

# Tips for Transitioning

- Educate students on their rights and responsibilities as a student with a disability
- Encourage students to research the support services offered at the colleges they are researching
- Emphasize the importance of planning ahead



# Resources

College Survival Skills

<http://www.washington.edu/doi/Brochures/Academics/survival.html>

College Preparation Resources for Students

[http://www.washington.edu/doi/Resources/college\\_prep.html](http://www.washington.edu/doi/Resources/college_prep.html)

Fitzgerald, M., Harpur, J. and Lawlor, M (2004) *Succeeding in College with Asperger's Syndrome: A Student Guide*. London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Kadison, R. and DiGeronimo, T (2004) *College of the Overwhelmed: The Campus Mental Health Crisis*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

# References

- AHEAD: Association on Higher Education and Disability; retrieved on October 31, 2010 from <https://www.ahead.org/frequently-asked-questions-0>
- American College Health Association Spring 2008 Survey
- American Psychiatric Association. *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual on Mental Disorders, fourth edition (DSM-IV)*. Washington, DC: American Psychiatric Press, 1994.
- Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, updated 2007
- How does mental illness affect my school performance? Boston University. Retrieved November 2, 2010 from <http://www.bu.edu/cpr/jobschool/funcned.htm>
- National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, 2007
- U.S. Department of Education <http://www.ed.gov/>
- WOLF, L. E. (2001), College Students with ADHD and Other Hidden Disabilities. *Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*, 931: 385–395. doi: 10.1111/j.1749-6632.2001.tb05792.x