Self-Reported Barriers to Enrollment and Retention of Students with Disabilities at Institutions of Higher Education in the State of Florida

Prepared for:

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DEDICATION:

This study, prepared on behalf of Florida’s children, is dedicated to the late

Eunice Kennedy Shriver, 88, Founder of the Special Olympics
&
Senator Edward M. Kennedy, 77, Co-author of the Americans with Disabilities Act

September 9, 2009
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In the United States, a wide variety of postsecondary education options exist for high school graduates including vocational training or public and private higher education. In 2004, 17.2 million students enrolled in public and private institutions of higher education to obtain either an undergraduate or graduate degree. For many, a college degree is the beginning of a better life; the ability to pursue a chosen career and the documented economic and social benefits associated with obtaining a college education (Porter, 2002). However, the state identifies many groups that are underrepresented in higher education. Students with disabilities are included in these underrepresented student groups. Not only are students with disabilities underrepresented but disabled students who are enrolled in institutions of higher education often do not successfully complete their degree program due to multiple risk factors. Risk factors include delayed enrollment, part-time attendance, financial independence, and being a single parent (U.S. Department of Education, 2002).

The state of Florida published the Access and Diversity in Florida Higher Education: Report of the Governor’s Access and Diversity Commission and the Board of Governors Student Affairs Committee in 2006. One of the recommendations of this report was to increase the number of degrees earned
by students who have disabilities. The report further outlined recommendations to increase disabled student opportunities in higher education. These recommendations include rigorous academic preparation in early childhood and pre-K-12 education, increased financial assistance, retention support, and accountability of state universities programs and policies.

While the committee’s recommendations are sure to assist in the increased enrollment of disabled students, the committee and report did not collect data or make recommendations to increase the success rate of disabled students who are already enrolled in institutions of higher education. The enrollment and retention of students with disabilities is essential for their success in higher education.

According to the most recently available data from the U.S. Department of Education’s *Profile of Undergraduates in U.S. Postsecondary Institutions: 1999-2000*, the report indicates that 9% of undergraduates are considered to have a “limiting condition.” However, only 4% of these students identified themselves as having a disability. Disabilities include orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, hearing impairments, specific learning disabilities, and attention deficit disorder. In pre-K-12 education, it is estimated that 15% of the general student population are identified as having a disability and receive special education services. During the 2004-2005 school year, 6.7 million students aged 3-21 received special education services in the United States (U.S. Department of Education, 2006). Comparing these statistics illustrates a disparity in the enrollment of students with disabilities.
Although national data are available, the disparity of enrollment in higher education of students with disabilities in Florida has not yet been documented. After discussing the lack of data with representatives from the Division of Community College and the Board of Governors Office of Academic and Student Affairs, data collection efforts or reports regarding the overall enrollment of students with disabilities were not identified by either office. Data regarding the barriers faced by students with disabilities enrolling and persisting in higher education do not exist for the state of Florida.

In response to this, the author proposed the collection of such data in the state of Florida. The project proposed to make policy recommendations based on the results of data to answer the following research questions:

- Does a disparity of enrollment at institutions of higher education exist between students with and without disabilities in the state of Florida?
- What are the demographics of students with disabilities enrolled in institutions of higher education in the state of Florida?
- What additional retention risk factors exist for students with disabilities in the state of Florida?
- What are the self-reported barriers to enrollment and retention at institutions of higher education for students with disabilities in the state of Florida?
Data Collection

Data were collected through the use of multiple methods. First, data files from the Florida Department of Education Data Warehouse for the state-wide high school graduating class of 2005-2006 were analyzed. Students who received ESE services in pre-K-12 were sorted and information regarding enrollment in 2 year and 4 year institutions of higher education were analyzed; comparisons will be made to students who did not receive ESE services in pre-K-12.

Second students with disabilities at 2 and 4 year institutions of higher education were invited to participate in an on-line survey. The survey collected several key pieces of information including:

- Demographics (disability, age, years in school, major, race, SES, employment, and marital status)
- Perceived barriers to enrollment in higher education
- Perceived barriers to successful degree completion

Third, an online survey of directors for state university student disability resource centers (DRC) and state agency case workers for individuals with disabilities were conducted. DRC directors were asked to identify instruction-perceived barriers to add to community college data collected by Division of Community Colleges. Administrators and caseworkers of state agencies, including the Florida Division of Vocational Rehabilitation and Division of Blind Services, were surveyed to identify barriers and challenges faced by their clients
with disabilities regarding enrollment and retention in institutions of higher education in the state of Florida.

**Findings**

**Students with Disabilities Enrolled in Higher Education.** At the end of the 2005-2006 school year, approximately 106,532 students without disabilities graduated from high school with a standard diploma in the state of Florida. Of these graduates, 65% (n=69,246) attended an institution of higher education, with 56% attending community colleges and 40% attending universities.

For students with disabilities, a disparity in the percentage attending higher education exists when compared to non-disabled peers. For the overall population of students with disabilities exiting PK-12 education in 2005-2006, only 18% (n=4,259) of students attended an institution of higher education. Of the high school students with disabilities who graduated with a diploma (standard, special, or GED), 24% (n=3,866) of students enrolled in institutions of higher education. For students with disabilities graduating with a standard diploma, enrollment in institutions of higher education has improved to 44% (n=2,641), with 78% enrolled in community college and 13% enrolled in a university as shown in Figure 1.
Figure 1: Total 2005-2006 High School Graduates and Enrollment at institutions of Higher Education

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2009

Demographics were available for students with disabilities who exited the pre-K-12 public school system at the end of the 2005-2006 school year (Florida Department of Education, 2009). Of the exiters, 34.4% (n=8,187) were female and 65.7% (15,699) were male. In terms of race, the following demographics were documented:
Of these students with disabilities who graduated with standard diplomas, higher education attendance rates were also analyzed by disability area. The following attendance rates were categorized; disabilities are defined in Appendix A - Glossary:

- Visual Impairments – 66%
- Orthopedic Impairments – 63%
- Deaf or Hard of Hearing – 56%
- Autism Spectrum Disorder – 56%
- Other Health Impairments – 52%
- Speech Impairments – 49%
- Specific Learning Disabled – 45%
- Hospital/Homebound – 43%
- Language Impairments – 41%
- Severe Emotionally Disturbed – 32%
- Emotional/Behavioral Disabled – 30%
- Educable Mentally Handicapped – 16%

**University Perceived Barriers.** Six of the eleven state university system (SUS) directors of disability resource centers responded to the online survey request. Of the six universities, none noted that they provided success skills training to college students with disabilities. Sixty-six point seven percent (66.7%) of respondents noted that their center provides faculty with training regarding working with student with disabilities; 96% of community colleges provided such training.

When asked about obstacles for students with disabilities transitioning from K-12 to higher education, the most frequent response was lack of knowledge about the documentation and accommodations process in colleges and universities; the same barrier was most frequently documented in the community colleges study. Other frequently cited obstacles include dependency on others for academic and personal needs, as well as lack of independent living and care skills of students.

The directors of disability resource centers in the SUS were asked to provide strategies for overcoming the obstacles they addressed. These included peer mentoring systems for students with disabilities, assistance with the application process, statewide trainings for all state colleges and universities.
regarding accommodations and ADA, and improved communication between agencies.

*State Agency for the Disabled Perceived Barriers*

A total of 20 service providers for state agencies for students with disabilities responded to the online survey. Of these respondents, 35% worked for Division of Blind Services and 65% for the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation. Thirty percent (30%) of the participants reported that their agency provided success skills training to college students with disabilities; 60% reported their agency provided training to faculty.

The agencies were asked to specify the services provided to students enrolled in institutions of higher education. For details, see the “State Agency Services to Clients” chart below. State agency service providers indicated that online applications and processes are the most frequently reported barrier to enrollment in higher education by students with disabilities. Other barriers to enrollment included the breakdown between PK-12 and adult services, provision of proper accommodations, placement test scores, and organization skills of students.

Service providers also reported that common barriers to retention in institutions in higher education by students with disabilities are lack of accommodations, poor study skills, transportation, motivation, professors’ knowledge of accommodations, amount of time needed to complete assignments, and turnover rates of student disability service center staff.
State service providers were also asked to describe observed barriers or obstacles in transitioning from pre-K-12 to institutions in higher education. Commonly noted obstacles included lack of knowledge about college systems and processes for students with disabilities, differences in the accommodations process, lack of guidance and support, dependency on others, and lack of parent understanding.

Strategies for overcoming the above noted transition, enrollment and retention barriers included statewide trainings for all colleges and universities in the higher education system, a peer mentoring system for students, assistance with the application process for students, improved communication between agencies, and training for college students regarding the application and accommodations process in higher education.

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2009
Student Perceived Barriers. A total of 74 students with disabilities currently enrolled in institutions of higher education responded to the online survey. Sixty-eight percent (68%) of participants was female and 32% male. The median age of the participants was 33 years old, with a range from 18 to 56 years. Of the participants, 22% was freshmen, 42% sophomores, 8% juniors, 18% seniors, and 10% Master’s degree candidates. No doctoral candidates responded to the survey. Almost half of the respondent (48%) was students with a learning disability, 16% an emotional disability, 12% orthopedic impairment, 8% deaf or hard of hearing, 6% traumatic brain injury, and 2% visually impaired as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Disabilities Reported by Survey Participants

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2009

The majority of students (62%; n=42) with disabilities reported a GPA of 3.0 or higher. Frequently reported majors included social sciences, education, business, arts and humanities, or computers/information technology shown in Figure 5. Sixty-four percent (64%) of students with disabilities was single at the
time of the survey, 50% of participants were unemployed, 30% held part-time employment, and 18% held full-time employment.

**Figure 5: GPA Reported by Survey Participants**

Source: Florida Department of Education, 2009

Participants were also asked if they were currently receiving any services from a state disability agency such as the Division of Vocational Rehabilitation or Division of Blind Services. Only 30% of the students with disabilities in institutions of higher education reported that they receive services. The discrepancy between what the state agencies provided and what students with disability receiving services reported was identified. It is suggested that further examination is needed to determine the reason for the low percentage.

The most frequently received accommodation was extended time (78.4%). Other accommodations reported by students included: distraction free testing (25.5%), use of computer/use of spell check (17.6%), assigned note taker during classes (17.6%), tape recording lectures (15.7%), tutors (11.8%), use of calculator (9.8%) and preferential seating (9.8%).
Self-reported barrier to enrollment & retention

In the last section of the survey, college students with disabilities were asked about the common barriers or challenges to enrollment in institutions of higher education. Common themes included entrance test scores, provision of proper accommodations, inaccessibility of applications and paperwork, and the documentation of their disability.

Students were then asked to specify common barriers or challenges to retention in higher education. The most frequently reported barrier was the additional time required to complete assignments needing accommodations. For example, if a student with a visual impairment must rely on a reader for all reading assignments, this often takes longer time due to scheduling and arrangements. Another frequently reported barrier was professors’ lack of knowledge regarding the provision of accommodations and working with students who are disabled. Similarly, some students reported the absence of accommodations they needed to succeed.

One surprising barrier was the physical inaccessibility of campuses. This is surprising due to the accessibility requirements mandated by the Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Additionally, students reported lack of transportation as a barrier if they lived off-campus or attended 2-year institutions in their local communities. This would be a challenge for students with orthopedic impairments, visual impairments, or intellectual disabilities.
Summary

Common Themes among Respondents

Common themes among the study participants were noted in the areas of barriers to enrollment, barriers to retention, and strategies to overcoming barriers or obstacles.

Common Obstacles to Enrollment

- Students and parents lack of knowledge regarding the documentation and accommodations in institutions of higher education
- Students and university personnel lack of knowledge of students and universities regarding providing appropriate accommodations
- Non-acceptance by colleges and universities of reports and evaluation regarding disability documentation from pre-K-12
- Inaccessibility of online application processes and paperwork or forms
- Breakdown of responsibility between pre-K-12 education and adult services during the transition process
- Accommodations used by students with disabilities are often not approved and provided by entrance examination (SAT, ACT, GRE) test sites

Common Obstacles to Retention

- Lack of accommodations approved and/or provided by the university disability resource center and faculty
• Faculty lack of knowledge regarding the proper provision of accommodations

• Extra time required to complete assignments by students with disabilities using accommodations

• Physical inaccessibility of campuses

• Lack of study and organization skills of students with disabilities

• Transportation

Common Strategies for Overcoming Obstacles

• Establishing a peer mentoring system for students with disabilities enrolled in institutions of higher education

• Assistance to students with disabilities during the application process to institutions of higher education

• Improved communication between all state agencies working with students with disabilities enrolling in institutions of higher education including PK-12 and adult services

• Establishing statewide training on the ADA and on working with students who are disabled for all state universities and community college administrators and staff

Conflicts with State and Federal Law

Several obstacles and barriers to enrollment and retention noted by universities, state agencies for those with disabilities, and students with
disabilities enrolled in higher education may be in violation with state and federal law, especially the ADA.

Inaccessibility of higher education institutions’ websites could be a violation of Section 508 of the ADA. It has been determined that ADA accessibility standards apply to online/electronic materials, as well as physical spaces. Several participants noted that the application websites or documents were not accessible to those using assistive technology specific to individual with disabilities. For example, individuals with visual impairments might use screen reader programs to access web and document content. Without proper creation of websites and documents, the accessibility software cannot function. The inability to access application materials is a clear barrier to enrollment. Additionally, websites used by pre-K-12 students in Florida to prepare for the transition to higher education have been reported to be inaccessible, such as FACTS.org which is maintained by the Florida Department of Education.

Policy Implications and Recommendations

Policy implications of the research findings include:

- A loose connection between pre-k-12 eligibility and institutions of higher education eligibility procedures exist regarding the documentation of students’ disabilities. Pre=k-12 documentation is not accepted by the majority of institutions of higher education.
  - K-12 documentation such as existing and current medical, educational, evaluation, and eligibility reports should be accepted.
Students in K-12 do not pay out of pocket for evaluations necessary for eligibility as a student with a disability. Students at institutions of higher education are responsible to cover the cost of requested eligibility documents and evaluations. The cost of some documentation is covered by state agencies for individuals with disabilities.

A uniform set of documents/evaluations required by state institutions of higher education does not exist, thus creating additional challenges for students transferring between institutions.

A lack of student and parent knowledge regarding eligibility documentation/evaluations, accommodations, and the higher education disability center processes exists. It is also perceived as a barrier to enrollment and retention by students with disabilities.

Inaccessibility to FACTS.org has been reported; ADA compliance of this website should be ensured as specified in Section 508 of the ADA.

The ePEP system should include the unique, additional information needed by students with disabilities; ADA compliance of this system should be ensured as specified in Section 508 of the ADA.

Inaccessibility of online application forms and processes exists on many community college and university websites.
Institutions of higher education must comply with rules and regulations of ADA and provide students with disabilities as specified in Section 508 of the ADA.

Increased knowledge of institutions and their web designers would help facilitate this need.

➢ Students have reported challenges with testing accommodations for various entrance exams including SAT, ACT, or GRE.

➢ The state department of education representatives should make contact with national testing agencies to ensure that test sites provide appropriate testing accommodations requested in advance.

➢ State agency services are being accessed by students at a low rate.

➢ The reason why 70% of the students in the study do not access state agency services needs to be further examined through continuous funding and monitoring.
References


Appendix A: Glossary

*The following definitions are from the Florida Statutes and State Board Rules, 2008*

**Students with Autism Spectrum Disorder:** Autism Spectrum Disorder is defined to be a range of pervasive developmental disorders that adversely affects a student’s functioning and results in the need for specially designed instruction and related services. Autism Spectrum Disorder is characterized by an uneven developmental profile and a pattern of qualitative impairments in social interaction, communication, and the presence of restricted repetitive, and/or stereotyped patterns of behavior, interests, or activities. These characteristics may manifest in a variety of combinations and range from mild to severe. Autism Spectrum Disorder may include Autistic Disorder, Pervasive Developmental Disorder Not Otherwise Specified, Aspergers Syndrome, or other related pervasive developmental disorders. (6A-6.03023)

**Students who are Deaf or Hard of Hearing:** Students who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. A student who is deaf or hard-of-hearing has a hearing loss aided or
unaided, that impacts the processing of linguistic information and which adversely affects performance in the educational environment. The degree of loss may range from mild to profound. (6A-6.03013)

**Students who are Dual-Sensory Impaired:** A student who has dual-sensory impairments affecting both vision and hearing, the combination of which causes a serious impairment in the abilities to acquire information, communicate, or function within the environment, or who has a degenerative condition which will lead to such an impairment. (6A-6.03022)

**Students who are Homebound or Hospitalized:** A homebound or hospitalized student is a student who has a medically diagnosed physical or psychiatric condition which is acute or catastrophic in nature, or a chronic illness, or a repeated intermittent illness due to a persisting medical problem and which confines the student to home or hospital, and restricts activities for an extended period of time. The medical diagnosis shall be made by a licensed physician. (6A-6.03020)

**Students with Intellectual Disabilities:** An intellectual disability is defined as significantly below average general intellectual and adaptive functioning manifested during the developmental period, with significant delays in academic skills. Developmental period refers to birth to eighteen (18) years of age. (6A-6.03011) Includes the terms Educable, Trainable, and Profoundly Mentally Handicapped.
**Students with Orthopedic Impairments:** Orthopedic impairment means a severe skeletal, muscular, or neuromuscular impairment. The term includes impairments resulting from congenital anomalies (e.g. including but not limited to skeletal deformity or spina bifida), and impairments resulting from other causes (e.g., including but not limited to cerebral palsy or amputations). (6A-6.030151)

**Students with Other Health Impairments:** Other health impairment means having limited strength, vitality or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that is due to chronic or acute health problems. This includes, but is not limited to, asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, Tourette syndrome, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and acquired brain injury. (6A-6.030152)

**Students with Specific Learning Disabilities:** Specific learning disabilities refers to a heterogeneous group of psychological processing disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of language, reading, writing, or mathematics. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and may occur across the life span. Although specific learning disabilities may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions or with extrinsic influences, the disabilities are not primarily the result of those conditions or influences. (6A-6.03018)
**Students with Speech and Language Impairments:** Speech and language impairments are defined as disorders of language, articulation, fluency, or voice which interfere with communication, pre-academic or academic learning, vocational training, or social adjustment. (6A-6.03012)

**Students with Traumatic Brain Injury:** A traumatic brain injury means an acquired injury to the brain caused by an external physical force resulting in total or partial functional disability or psychosocial impairment, or both, that adversely affects educational performance. The term applies to mild, moderate, or severe, open or closed head injuries resulting in impairments in one (1) or more areas such as cognition, language, memory, attention, reasoning, abstract thinking, judgment, problem-solving, sensory, perceptual and motor abilities, psychosocial behavior, physical functions, information processing, or speech. The term includes anoxia due to trauma. The term does not include brain injuries that are congenital, degenerative, or induced by birth trauma. (6A-6.030153)

**Students with Visual Impairment:** Students who are visually impaired include the following: (a) A student who is blind, has no vision, or has little potential for using vision. (b) A student who has low vision. (c) The term visual impairment does not include students who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual perceptual and/or visual motor difficulties. (6A-6.03014)