



**CONSORTIUM FOR CITIZENS
WITH DISABILITIES**

April 12, 2007

U.S. House of Representatives
Committee on Education and Labor
Attn: HEA Recommendations
B-346 Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Miller and Ranking Member McKeon, Chairman Hinojosa and Ranking Member Keller:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide recommendations regarding the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. We offer our preliminary thoughts in this letter and hope to participate with you in the reauthorization as you move forward.

The Consortium for Citizens with Disabilities is comprised of over 100 national organizations that promote the full participation of people with disabilities in society. The Education Task Force is made up of over 50 of those organizations that are especially dedicated to ensuring that students with disabilities have full access to education at all levels – early childhood, K-12 and higher education.

Despite significant strides in public policy, people with disabilities remain the poorest, least employed and least educated minority in America. Students with disabilities are less likely to participate in post secondary educational opportunities than their non-disabled peers. In its 2002 survey, the National Organization on Disability/Louis Harris Survey of Americans with Disabilities found that “slightly more than one out of ten people with disabilities have graduated from college, compared to slightly more than two out of ten of their non-disabled counterparts (12% versus 23%).” When they do participate, they are less likely to graduate with a degree than their non-disabled peers.

The nature and range of support services available to students with disabilities varies widely from school to school. Some colleges and universities have a wide array of individualized support services. However, poor awareness and commitment to providing for the support needs of students with disabilities (including technology support, career development and instructional support) too often result in a spotty set of services that is hit-or-miss and lacking in comprehensiveness or coordination.

However, recent research offers some encouraging news. When students with disabilities earn bachelor’s degrees they have similar early labor market outcomes and graduate school enrollment rates as their counterparts without disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, June 1999). This evidence is most compelling, as it indicates that higher education may hold a key to reducing the employment gap between people with and without disabilities.

There are six key areas where we urge the Committee to develop provisions in the Higher Education Act in relation to students with disabilities.

1. Improving access to post secondary education for students with disabilities

Ensure Gear Up includes students with disabilities. This program is designed to encourage middle and high school students to prepare early for postsecondary education. Too often students with disabilities are marginalized by low expectations of others and are not encouraged to pursue a post secondary education. Until the 1997 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, too many students with disabilities did not have access to the general curriculum. With this requirement, and the accountability provisions of IDEA, as well as the No Child Left Behind Act that requires students with disabilities to be part of the state and local accountability provisions, expectations for students with disabilities have never been higher. This program could significantly increase the number of students with disabilities who attend and succeed at institutions of higher education.

Expand the “Demonstration Projects to Ensure Students with Disabilities Receive a Quality Higher Education.” In the last reauthorization, Congress created this program to provide support to faculty and administrators in institutions of higher education to enable them to better educate and support students with disabilities in post secondary education environments. We recommend expanding this program so that more institutions of higher education can participate and more students with disabilities can be served.

Authorize a national center to provide training and technical assistance to the postsecondary institutions receiving grants under this section. The center would collect the materials developed by grantees as well as information on promising and effective practices used by the grantees and distribute it widely to post secondary institutions. The center would also provide orientation, training and technical assistance to faculty, administrators and counselors at post secondary institutions that did not receive grants under this section.

Authorize a comprehensive study on students with disabilities and access to higher education. Such a study has never been undertaken, despite the fact that students with disabilities face significant barriers to higher education. The study would address such questions as:

- What needs to occur to strengthen the relationship between high schools and post secondary programs for youth with disabilities?
- What are the barriers for students with disabilities to participating in post secondary education?
- To what extent do students with disabilities access student loans and grants?
- Are there unique barriers to that financial support?
- Are there policies in higher education that serve as barriers to the enrollment of students with disabilities?
- Why do students with disabilities drop out of post secondary education programs?
- What are the characteristics of institutions of higher education that successfully recruit and graduate students with disabilities?

2. Promoting post secondary participation for students in post-secondary programs

Permit students with disabilities taking less than full time course loads to be considered as full time. Many students with disabilities must expend much more time and effort to master academic content than their non-disabled peers. In addition, the financial burden of postsecondary education forces many students to work at least part-time. Allowing students with disabilities who carry part-time course loads to be considered full time would provide additional opportunities now unavailable.

Permit year-round study. Students with disabilities frequently need more time to complete a standard two- or four-year program of studies. Year-round attendance would increase student persistence and graduation from college among students with disabilities. Current regulations governing the Pell Grant program assume all students will enroll for just two semesters per calendar year. Congress should mandate that students who wish to study year-round receive a Pell Grant that enables them to do so.

Allow payment to students with intellectual disabilities for work when they are in a post secondary program at a college or university receiving work study funds. Students with intellectual disabilities are historically among the most un-served and underserved by post secondary programs. Access to higher education has been difficult for these individuals because most do not exit our public schools with a regular high school diploma and few programs are available to meet their needs. Yet, many of the thousands of students with significant intellectual impairments desire the opportunity to pursue more education to prepare them for employment and life in their communities. By providing students with significant cognitive disabilities access to work-study funds you would support students with disabilities in developing critical employment skills.

Amend Title IV federal financial aid programs to allow students with intellectual disabilities who are enrolled in higher education programs and their families to be eligible for federal financial loans and grants. Currently, students with intellectual disabilities do not have access to such financial support, making enrollment cost prohibitive for their participation.

Create additional demonstration authority to develop and strengthen inclusive post-secondary programs for people with intellectual disabilities and/or intellectual impairments. A number of colleges and universities throughout the nation have developed innovative programs that could be replicated. In addition, new models need to be developed to meet the unique needs of this population.

3. Training of special education K-12 teachers and related services personnel

Target Title II funds to address critical teacher shortage areas, such as special education.

The shortage of special education teachers is chronic and persistent and now surpasses that for teachers of math and science. In their final report, "A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education," President Bush's Commission on Excellence in Special Education noted an alarming shortage of special education teachers with 98% of school districts reporting special education teacher shortages. The No Child Left Behind Act requires that special education students participate in statewide assessment and average yearly progress mandates. Highly qualified special education teachers and related services personnel are critical to the success of students with disabilities.

4. Ensuring that general educators are skilled in educating students with disabilities

Expand Title II accountability measures to ensure that teacher preparation empowers general education and administrators to be proficient in working with students with disabilities.

President Bush's Commission on Excellence in Special Education report "A New Era: Revitalizing Special Education," reported that most public school educators do not feel well prepared to work with children with disabilities. In 1998, only 21% of public school teachers said they felt very well prepared to address the needs of students with disabilities. One of the key recommendations of this report was to "Consider children with disabilities as general education children first." Since approximately 80% of students with disabilities are served in general education classrooms 40% of the time, it is critical that general educators are skilled in instructing students with disabilities and in working collegially with special educators.

Currently, Title II requires states to ensure that graduates of teacher education programs are skilled and competent in a number of ways. Congress must ensure that all teacher preparation programs and early childhood educator programs (including alternative routes) train all general educators and administrators to be proficient in working with students with disabilities.

5. Addressing the critical shortage of special education faculty in institutions of higher education

Target financial aid packages, both loans and grants, to attract more students into special education and related services doctoral programs. Our nation produces 30% fewer doctorates in special education than we did 20 years ago. Fewer of those with doctorates are becoming faculty at institutions of higher education. One third of special education faculty openings remain unfilled every year with 20% of those positions being eliminated eventually, thus diminishing the nation's training and research infrastructure. If every special education faculty slot were filled, about 3000 more special education teachers could be trained annually. These newly qualified teachers would serve about 48,000 students annually.

President Bush's Commission on Excellence in Special Education recommended recruiting and training through the doctoral level a "new national cadre of fully qualified special education teacher educators and researchers...fluent in research-based best practices of instruction and assistive technology...diverse with regard to gender, race and ethnicity."

Congress should also develop incentive packages, including loan forgiveness, for those who become special education faculty at institutions of higher education. The Title VII program, Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need, should prioritize graduate students preparing to become special education or related services faculty for funding.

6. Improving access through Universal Design of Learning (UDL)

Include authority to develop and utilize UDL in in curriculum, teaching methods, instructional materials and assessments in higher education classes in the Title VII Demonstrations Projects for Students with Disabilities. All learners, including students with disabilities, need an education that provides access, participation, and progress in the general education curriculum. The 2004 amendments to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) promote the idea of universal design by requiring education agencies to support the use of technology, including technology with universal design principles. It also requires State Education Agencies (SEAs) to use universal design principles in administering standardized assessments.

Broadly defined, UDL means teachers need to customize their teaching to address individual differences. This may include such things as:

- *multiple means of representation* to give learners various ways of acquiring information and knowledge;
- *multiple means of expression* to provide learners alternatives for demonstrating what they know; and
- *multiple means of engagement* to tap into learners' interests, challenge them appropriately, and motivate them to learn.

A comprehensive approach to UDL applies these alternative approaches to different aspects of education, including the development of objectives/benchmarks, instructional materials, teaching methods and assessments. (Source: <http://www.cast.org/research/udl/index.html>)

Universal design in educational settings must focus on those aspects of accessibility that meet the needs of the widest range of individuals. Consequently, UDL goes beyond physical and sensory access to address specific aspects of the curriculum. Students must be able to understand assignments; plan how to approach and execute tasks; use materials effectively; understand information when presented using different formats and media; organize their work; process and utilize feedback; and express their ideas effectively. (Source: <http://www.castlorg/research/faq/>)

We appreciate the opportunity to provide this input and look forward to working with you. If you have questions, or would like additional information, please contact us.

Sincerely,

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