

ATTITUDES OF UNIVERSITY FACULTY MEMBERS TOWARD STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES

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Abstract: American colleges and universities are experiencing a continuous enrollment of students with disabilities, especially students with learning disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act mandates that institutions of higher education provide full accommodations and services to all students. This study was conducted to ascertain the attitudes of university faculty members toward serving students with disabilities. Seventy-one faculty members representing three broad academic areas in a university in the Southeastern Region of the United States participated in this study. Results of the data analysis revealed statistically significant differences existed between faculty members when they were grouped by academic rank and academic unit.

INTRODUCTION

A study by Fichten, Amsel, Bourdon, and Creti (1988) found that although professors are experts in their respective disciplines, most do not feel they are experts in adapting their courses to students with disabilities. Leyser (1989) found that a large majority of faculty supported the integration of students with physical and sensory disabilities; however, they were less supportive of students with learning disabilities and emotional disabilities. The Leyser study also found that less than one half of the 124 faculty members surveyed were using the resources and support services available to assist students with disabilities.

The removal of architectural barriers on college campuses has been a primary goal of most institutions. However, as Newman (1976) stated: “. . . the barriers to accessibility on college campuses to the handicapped are not only physical . . . attitudinal barriers are at least as salient.” Nathanson (1982) reported that faculty attitudes and perceptions are influenced by the amount of contact they have with students with disabilities. Nathanson found that faculty emotions, perceptions, assumptions, beliefs, and expectations all play an integral part in the faculty and student relationship. Jarow (1987) reported that research evidence indicates that attitudinal barriers are as much a matter of what we say as they are a matter of what we do; but given appropriate support, students with disabilities can be successful in pursuing a postsecondary education.

The increased number of students with disabilities who are being served in higher education and the demands of this population make it imperative that university faculty members be prepared to serve these individuals effectively. Students with disabilities need the assistance provided by a disability services office as well as accommodations in the classroom. Faculty members within each institution of higher education have a legal responsibility to provide accommodations to qualified students with disabilities. An assessment of the current attitudes of faculty members may be helpful in planning, designing, and implementing professional development programs to prepare faculty to serve students with disabilities effectively and efficiently in the regular classroom.

Statement of the Research Problem

Students with disabilities face many of the same challenges as other students as they pursue their college studies. Some students are concerned about the lack of awareness of their unique requirements by college and university faculty members. Attitudinal barriers should not be ignored when striving to provide equal access to higher education for students with disabilities. The attitudes of university faculty members may be a significant determinant in the successful completion of educational experiences for students, with or without disabilities. The lack of information related to the attitudes of university faculty toward serving students with disabilities provided the focal point for this research.

Purpose of the Study

A review of the literature revealed no studies have been completed related to the attitudes of faculty members at small, regional public teaching institutions. The purpose of this study was to investigate the attitudes of faculty members toward serving students with disabilities at a small, regional university in the southeastern region of the United States. Attitudes were examined in relation to selected demographic variables of faculty members.

Research Question

The following research question served to guide this study.

To what extent is there a difference in attitudes of university faculty toward serving students with disabilities as measured by the Survey of Faculty Attitudes Relative to Serving Students with Disabilities questionnaire when faculty are grouped by (a) gender, (b) age, (c) academic rank, (d) academic unit, (e) years of teaching experience, and (f) extent of contact with students with disabilities?

Definition of Terms

Auxiliary aids and services—the term, “auxiliary aids and services,” includes (a) qualified interpreters or other effective methods of making aurally delivered materials available to individuals with hearing impairments, (b) qualified readers, taped texts, or other effective methods of making visually delivered materials available to individuals with visual impairments, (c) acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, and (d) other similar services and actions (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Disability—the term, “disability,” means, with respect to an individual: (a) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual, (b) a record of such an impairment, or (c) being regarded as having such an impairment (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Reasonable accommodation—the term, “reasonable accommodation,” may include making existing facilities readily accessible and usable by individuals with disabilities (Americans with Disabilities Act, 1990).

Limitations of the Study

1. Only faculty members employed in one small, regional university in the southeastern region of the United States were included in this study.
2. Results were limited to the extent that faculty members responded with their honest feelings.
3. Results were limited to the extent that the research instrument measured the true feelings of the faculty members.
4. A non-response bias may have existed in the non-return rate.

Assumptions of the study

1. Responses to items on the research instrument indicated the true feelings of faculty members.
2. Faculty members had some previous knowledge of the rights of students with disabilities according to legislative mandates.
3. Faculty members had some previous experience interacting with a student with a disability in a classroom setting.
4. The survey instrument was sensitive to faculty attitudinal characteristics.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Sources of Data and Collection Procedures

The research instrument and demographic data form were administered to all 106 faculty members employed at a small, regional teaching university in the southeastern region of the United States. Useable data were collected from 32 full-time faculty members and 39 adjunct faculty members. The number of males and females were almost evenly divided, with 35 males and 36 females. The researcher administered the survey instrument and a demographic data sheet in January 1999 to the faculty during a faculty convocation session. Faculty members completed the demographic data sheet and the survey instrument during the convocation session.

Instrumentation

The Survey of Faculty Attitudes Relative to Serving Students with Disabilities instrument was used for this study. This is a 30-item instrument to which participants responded using a Likert-type scale with a range from 5 for "Strongly Agree," to 1 for "Strongly Disagree." Some items are written with positive connotations and some with negative connotations. Sample items include statements such as, "Inclusion of students with disabilities will require significant changes in classroom procedures" and "Inclusion of students with disabilities will necessitate extensive retraining of faculty." A score could range from 30 to 150, with a higher score indicating a more favorable attitude toward students with disabilities.

Procedures for Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using the Statistical Packet for the Social Sciences (SPSS). A one-way analysis of variance statistical procedure (ANOVA) was used to test for differences in mean scores between groups for each of the six independent variables. The .05 level of significance was used. Differences in mean scores were tested between groups when data were grouped as follows: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) academic rank, (d) academic unit, (e) number of years of teaching experience,

and (f) extent of contact with students with disabilities. Minimum and maximum scores, mean scores, and standard deviations were computed for the demographic data.

Results

No statistically significant differences were found for the following variables: (a) gender, (b) age, (c) years of teaching experience, or (d) previous contact with students with disabilities.

The F-ratio of 4.138 indicated statistically significant differences between mean scores for academic rank. Faculty members who did not hold academic rank (instructor and adjunct) had higher mean scores (Mean Score=86.69; SD=6.19) than faculty members who held academic rank (Mean Score=83.50; SD=6.80). The lowest score for the non-academic ranked faculty was 77 and the highest score was 105, whereas the lowest score for faculty who held academic rank was 71 and the highest score was 98.

The F-ratio of 4.337 indicated statistically significant differences between mean scores for academic unit. The mean score for the College of Arts and Sciences (Mean Score=88.16; SD=7.94) was higher than the mean scores for the School of Business (Mean Score=84.48; SD=5.11) and the School of Education (Mean Score=82.96; SD=5.17).

The mean score for all participants was 85.30 with a standard deviation of 6.61. The minimum score for all participants was 71 and the maximum score was 105.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, faculty members held generally positive attitudes toward serving students with disabilities; however, academic rank and academic units were indicated as statistically significant variables related to faculty attitudes. It appeared that faculty members who did not hold academic rank had more positive attitudes toward serving students with disabilities than faculty members who held academic rank. In addition, faculty members in the College of Arts and Sciences appeared to have more positive attitudes than faculty members in the School of Business and the School of Education. Results of this study suggested that the attitudes of faculty members in this study were similar to faculty attitudes reported in similar studies at other higher education institutions (Fonosch & Schwab, 1981; Schoen, Uysal, & McDonald, 1987). In the Fonosch and Schwab study, results indicated that most faculty members held positive attitudes toward students with disabilities. Faculty members who used more than the lecture method had more positive attitudes toward serving students with disabilities than those who used the lecture method only. Schoen et al. reported that faculty members generally held positive attitudes toward students with disabilities in relation to classroom management issues and compliance with legislative mandates.

Faculty members in the School of Education held the least positive attitudes of serving students with disabilities. This may have been due to the professional stress these faculty members have experienced in recent years. For example, changes in university leadership, increased use of technology, changes in curricula, transition requirements from the quarter to semester system, renewal of accreditation, and lack of faculty input for many of the changes. The combination of countless changes may have taken away some of the concern normally shown to students. In addition, faculty members with academic rank may have answered more frankly due to the fact that they typically are tenured and may feel more secure than their non-ranked, non-tenure track counterparts. Many students transfer into the university from two-year postsecondary institutions; therefore, faculty members who do not hold academic rank may have limited contact with these students due to the fact that they usually teach entry-level courses.

Finally, faculty members in the School of Education may have indicated the least positive attitudes due to doubts that they may have relative to the ability of students with disabilities to master new material and to use assistive technology effectively.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Data for this study included faculty members at only one small, regional university campus; therefore, caution should be taken in generalizing the results beyond institutions similar to the one in this study. Additional research could be conducted at other similar universities to provide a larger data base. A larger data data base may provide a more comprehensive view of faculty attitudes.

Nathanson (1982) suggested that the attitudes of college faculty might have a profound impact on the educational and social integration of students with disabilities. Fichten, Goodrick, Tagalakis, Amsel, and Libman (1990) suggested that faculty attitudes might translate into behaviors that could either facilitate or impede the college experience for students with disabilities.

Additional research may be helpful in assessing the professional development needs of university faculty toward serving students with disabilities. For example, special training programs may help faculty members to increase their knowledge relative to the nature of various disabilities and appropriate accommodations, compliance with legislative mandates, and the use and incorporation of assistive technology into their instructional programs.

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