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## Addressing the Needs of Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Students With Disabilities in Postsecondary Education

By David Leake and Margarita Chohymay

### Introduction

Persons with disabilities usually must overcome a variety of challenges not faced by their peers without disabilities in order to gain entry to and succeed in postsecondary education. These challenges are likely to be especially difficult for persons with disabilities of culturally and linguistically diverse (CLD) heritage. Compared to non-CLD students with disabilities, CLD students with disabilities are more likely to face language and social barriers, the negative effects of having grown up in poverty, and difficulty processing “standard English” oral and written information, all of which may contribute to their risk of school failure (Greene & Nefsky, 1999). It has also been argued that persons with disabilities comprise a minority group whose members, like members of other minorities, are often stereotyped and subjected to negative perceptions and low expectations. From this perspective, many CLD persons with disabilities face a double burden of discrimination (Fine & Asch, 1988).

In view of the multiple challenges faced by many CLD persons with disabilities, it is not surprising that the initial National Longitudinal Transition Study found that, compared to non-CLD persons with disabilities, they achieve significantly poorer transition outcomes, including lower employment rates, lower average wages, and lower postsecondary education participation rates (Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Low postsecondary education participation rates are reflected in **Table 1**, which shows that the proportion of college students reporting a disability is considerably lower for each of the CLD groups (with the exception of American Indians/Alaskan Natives) compared to Whites. This brief will outline the major challenges that tend to be faced by CLD persons with disabilities in postsecondary education and how to address these challenges.

### Challenges

The following challenges tend to be especially great for students with disabilities who also come from CLD backgrounds.

#### Social Inclusion and Natural Supports

Most postsecondary students know few people when they first arrive on campus, yet most of them develop social support networks with peers, faculty, and others. Some CLD students, however, have a harder time and may develop a sense of social isolation due to a “basic mismatch” between their home and community culture and the educational culture commonly found in schools (Carey, Boscardin, & Fontes, 1994). This challenge is likely to be compounded for CLD students who also have disabilities. However, most support programs for postsecondary students with disabilities focus on academic issues,

**Table 1. Percentage of 1995-96 Undergraduates Who Reported a Disability, by Race-Ethnicity**

Race-Ethnicity	Percentage of students reporting a disability	Disability Type					
		Visual impairment	Hearing impairment or deaf	Speech impairment	Orthopedic impairment	Learning disability	Other disability or impairment
White, non-Hispanic	6.2%	15.8%	17.1%	1.8%	22.6%	31.3%	20.6%
Black, non-Hispanic	3.4%	11.7%	11.3%	1.7%	31.3%	18.0%	34.2%
Hispanic	4.1%	19.1%	17.5%	16.3%	17.3%	23.7%	14.6%
Asian/Pacific Islander	1.9%	—	—	—	—	—	—
American Indian/Alaskan Native	13.4%	—	—	—	—	—	—
All students	5.5%	16.3%	16.3%	3.0%	22.9%	29.2%	21.2%

— sample size too small for a reliable estimate.

*Note.* Percentages will not sum to 100 because some students reported multiple disabilities.

Adapted from: Horn, L., & Berkold, J. (1999). *Students with disabilities in postsecondary education: A profile of preparation, participation, and outcomes* (NCES Report #1999-187). Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education (Table 2, p. 8).

despite the fact that having a social support network is often essential to maintaining academic progress and graduating.

#### **How to address this challenge:**

Postsecondary disability support programs should include a social component to promote inclusion in activities and events involving nondisabled peers. For some students, especially those with more severe disabilities, additional efforts may be needed to address difficult challenges such as low self-esteem, depression, or undeveloped social skills. One promising approach is the creation of “circles of support” around individuals, consisting of significant persons in their lives (friends, family, faculty, etc.) (Cotton et al., 1992). An example of this approach is provided by the Solutions Through Advocacy and Resource Teams (START) Project at San Francisco State University, demonstrating how a problem-solving team model can build supportive peer mentoring relationships that can help fill gaps in the lives of students with disabilities. Ideally, circles or teams are established during high school and follow the student into the postsecondary setting, helping to ensure a smooth transition.

#### **Self-Advocacy**

A major challenge for many students with disabilities is the change in how services and accommodations are planned and provided as they move from high school to postsecondary set-

tings. According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), which applies to students until high school graduation with a standard diploma, schools are responsible for identifying students with disabilities, and a team creates an Individualized Education Program (IEP). By contrast, postsecondary institutions are subject to the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), under which students themselves must inform school officials of their disability, provide documentation, and propose viable options for accommodations. Such self-advocacy is often especially hard for CLD students due to cultural values against disclosing personal challenges and/or asking for help, a lack of experience or confidence in dealing with persons perceived to be of higher status, and other CLD-related factors.

#### **How to address this challenge:**

CLD students with disabilities should be supported to gain self-advocacy skills during high school. A number of self-advocacy programs and curricula have been developed and demonstrated, such as the *Can I Make It? Project* of the University of Illinois Transition Research Institute, (<http://www.ed.uiuc.edu/sped/tri/makeit.html>) featuring a 20-hour curriculum during which each student creates a “self-advocacy portfolio.” Further, Roessler, Brown, and Rumrill (1998) describe a training program targeting 17 specific self-advocacy behaviors.

## Role Models and Mentors

Persons with disabilities, especially those of CLD backgrounds, are still poorly represented among both postsecondary faculty and graduates, depriving CLD students with disabilities of role models and mentors for postsecondary success.

### *How to address this challenge:*

Postsecondary institutions need to expand efforts to increase the proportion of faculty and other personnel of CLD backgrounds, who can serve as role models and mentors for CLD students, including those with disabilities. Peer-mentoring programs are also valuable for helping CLD students with disabilities adapt to the postsecondary environment and enhance their social support networks.

## Cultural Competency

Postsecondary faculty, administrators, and support personnel often lack the awareness, attitudes, skills, and knowledge necessary to effectively support students with disabilities. This lack may be even greater with regard to CLD students with disabilities, often due to differences in guiding cultural values (e.g., conformity versus personal expression, respect for authority versus personal initiative, group orientation versus individual orientation, etc.). In addition, some CLD students lack a high level of English proficiency, although they can meet high academic standards with appropriate supports. (It is notable in Table 1 that among Hispanic students with disabilities, 16.3% report having a “speech impairment” compared to fewer than 2% for non-Hispanic Whites or Blacks, presumably due to the high proportion of Hispanic students for whom English is a second language).

### *How to address this challenge:*

When barriers to serving individual CLD students with disabilities arise, an approach that often proves effective is known as “cultural brokering,” in which an individual familiar with both cultures negotiates a middle ground acceptable to all. In addition, technical assistance or training should be available to help improve cultural competency for the main CLD groups on a campus. Increasing the proportion of faculty and other personnel of CLD backgrounds also serves to enhance the cultural competency of postsecondary institutions.

## Case Study

Fasy grew up in a small island country in the Pacific Ocean. He became paralyzed as a teenager when he fell from a cliff and suffered a serious spinal injury. Unable to walk, he began to use a wheelchair. Neither the schools nor other government services provided much in special services for people like Fasy. However, with his determination and academic capabilities, he earned entry to the University of Hawaii at Manoa. A number of support services were available to him there, although there was a delay in accessing some of them.

Due to the seriousness of his disability, Fasy required assistance to get around campus and take care of his basic needs, but extensive aide services were not available. Fortunately, in keeping with the family orientation of his Pacific Island culture, some of his family members were able to come to Hawaii specifically to support him to reach his postsecondary education goals. During much of his academic career, one or two of his brothers were always at his side, and when they were not available, other family members assisted him. With the support of his family, Fasy earned his bachelor’s degree and then two master’s degrees, one in history and the other in Pacific Islands Studies, although the challenges presented by his disability as well as cultural and language differences resulted in his taking several extra years to complete his studies. However, his own efforts, the supports provided by his family, and supports provided by the university, were successful, and now, in his late 30s, he is the director of one of the four campuses of his country’s national university.

This case study illustrates how a cultural strength (individuals giving priority to the success of the family as a whole) can be built upon to support a CLD student with disabilities to achieve postsecondary educational success. Certainly, many non-CLD parents make special efforts to support their children with disabilities. What clearly comes through in this case, however, is the ready and coordinated participation of the entire family. This “collectivist” orientation contrasts with the “individualistic” orientation of mainstream American society, and should be taken into account when addressing the support needs of persons with disabilities from collectivist cultural backgrounds.

## Conclusion

In summary, CLD students with disabilities face multiple barriers to obtaining postsecondary degrees. Postsecondary faculty and staff can have a significant influence in the success of these students by gaining awareness of supports they need, such as social inclusion, natural supports, self-advocacy, cultural competency, role models, and mentors. In some cases, elements of the student’s culture can provide some of the support needed in order to succeed in postsecondary education.

## Resources

**Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE)**

<http://www.crede.ucsc.edu>

**CLD Transition Success Research Project**

<http://www.cld.hawaii.edu>

**Institute for Urban and Minority Education**

<http://iume.tc.columbia.edu>

**National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Education Supports**

<http://www.rrtc.hawaii.edu>

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