How are Community Colleges Serving the Needs of Older Students with Disabilities?

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Postsecondary education is increasingly important for older job seekers' reemployment. Yet, they may face potential challenges in accessing and completing education and training due to their greater likelihood of having acquired an age-related disability. To examine these issues, research was conducted to learn how colleges — in particular, community colleges — can better support the education and training needs of older students with disabilities.

Introduction

In the aftermath of the Great Recession, research has demonstrated that older workers continue to face challenges with employment and are more likely than younger workers to face difficulties with reentering the labor market. As of April 2012, more than half (56.2 percent) of older job seekers were in the ranks of the long-term unemployed — unemployed for 27 or more weeks as officially defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Rix, 2012). Since many may need to upgrade their skills or change occupations and careers, education and training at community colleges may offer an affordable and more easily accessible way to help older workers become reemployed after a job loss or as a means to maintain and/or upgrade skills necessary in today's labor market. For individuals who have lost a job, community colleges can provide access to a wide range of education and training programs that may lead to these individuals finding employment in new fields or industries (Jacobson, LaLonde, & Sullivan, 2011).

The nation's 1,132 community colleges are increasingly considered to be the "backbone" of the public workforce system with a track record for serving older students. They provide high-quality academic and occupational training, including a wide range of degree credentials that prepare job seekers for the labor market (Oates, 2010). In the fall of 2009, community colleges enrolled 13 million students — 8 million in credit programs and 5 million in noncredit programs (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.). Community colleges have a history of serving a diverse array of students, including many minority, low-income, and first-generation students as well as "nontraditional" students, including working adults. At 29 years of age, the average age of a community college student is older than the traditional 18-year-old student entering college immediately after high school (American Association of Community Colleges, n.d.).

Despite the promise of community colleges for improving older workers' reemployment prospects, many unemployed older workers have age-related issues that affect their ability to pursue and succeed in education and training. In particular, they may have age-related physical or mental disabilities, as well as undiagnosed disabilities that may affect their ability to succeed in community college and complete the education and training needed to be successfully reemployed in today's challenging labor market. Prior research has documented that disabilities, including work-limiting disabilities, increase significantly with age, and thus, pose real challenges for the older population (Burkhauser, Daly, & Tennant, 2010).

Community colleges are more likely on average to have more experience than other postsecondary institutions serving older students and students of all ages with disabilities, though their experience varies by college. Many older students who pursue postsecondary education enroll at community colleges. According to an analysis conducted by the John J. Heldrich Center for Workforce Development of data from the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) for this brief, in 2009, 42 percent of students age 40 and above pursing postsecondary education were enrolled at community colleges.

Students with disabilities have also been more likely to enroll in community colleges versus other postsecondary institutions. Among students with disabilities, an estimated 54 percent were enrolled at community colleges (Raue & Lewis, 2011), compared to 36 percent in the student population as a whole (Knapp, Kelly-Reid, & Ginder, 2011). Likewise, a recent study of young adults with disabilities indicated they were more than twice as likely to have attended a two-year college at some time after leaving high school (44 percent) than young adults in the general population (21 percent) (Newman et al., 2011). However, the enrollment of students with disabilities at community colleges varies by college. According to the Heldrich Center's analysis of 2009 IPEDS data, nearly three-quarters of community colleges reported very few students with disabilities enrolled (less than three percent of their student population had a disability), whereas other colleges reported much higher enrollments of students with disabilities — up to 15 percent of their student population. Since these numbers reflect the percentage of students who are identified as having a disability by the college, this variation may be partially associated with how students with disabilities are identified or self-identified, rather than reflecting the actual incidence of disabilities among students.

Among community college students, the most common disabilities reported are learning disabilities, emotional or psychiatric conditions, orthopedic or mobility impairments, attention deficit/hyperactivity disorders, and health impairments (Barnett & Jeandron, 2009; Raue & Lewis, 2011). Many of these more frequently reported disabilities fall into the category of "hidden disabilities." In some instances, such as learning disabilities, these are not always readily apparent to the individuals themselves or to others in their social/academic networks. At the same time, these types of disabilities have a higher chance of negatively affecting academic success unless identified and supported through services and accommodation.

Among older students, the issue of how disabilities are identified by colleges may be particularly important. Unidentified disabilities may be especially common among older students who did not have the benefit of better identification of disabilities, particularly for learning disabilities, which occurred in recent decades in the secondary education system (McCleary-Jones, 2007). Many of these older students were not covered by either the protections of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 during their secondary school experience and would not have been assessed for a learning disability, as younger students have received.[1] Thus, they do not have the awareness or identity of disability, nor the documentation of it (McCleary-Jones, 2007).

Identifying students with disabilities and connecting them with the supports they might need can be an important factor affecting their ability to succeed in college. Research has found that students with disabilities are more likely to persist in college if they have been effectively accommodated (Dunn, Hanes, Hardie, Leslie, & MacDonald, 2008). According to Horn, Berktold, and Bobbit (1999), students with disabilities are less likely than their fellow students without disabilities to stay enrolled or earn a postsecondary degree or credential within five years. But, when appropriate support services are provided to students with learning disabilities, they are more likely to be retained and graduate than students without learning disabilities (Kavale & Forness, 1996).

Students with disabilities, however, may not necessarily access the supports available to them at college. A 1996 survey conducted by the American Association of Community Colleges found that only half of community college students who reported having a disability used disability support services that were available (Barnett, 1996).[2] Young adults identified with disabilities in high school are unlikely to report their disability and seek accommodations from postsecondary institutions (Newman et al., 2011). Other research has noted that students with disabilities often feel uncomfortable approaching faculty for accommodations and often find faculty unaware or insensitive to disability issues (Izzo, Hertzfeld, & Aaron, 2001; Wilson, Gertzel, & Brown, 2000). Many researchers have found that faculty lack awareness of disability issues, and openness to accommodation can be an obstacle to effective accommodation for students (Dowrick, Anderson, Heyer, & Acosta, 2005; Salzberg, Peters, Debrand, Carsey, & Johnson, 2008; Wolanin & Steele, 2004). And, older students, in particular, may be unaware of their disability or the availability of accommodations or the services available to them, and thus face obstacles to gaining important support services.

Prior research has focused on several important issues for students with disabilities at community colleges, but not the specific issues facing older students with disabilities. For example, research has examined how colleges support students with disabilities transition to work regardless of age (The National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth and Workforce Strategy Center, 2009), how community colleges provide accommodations for students with disabilities regardless of age (Hawke, 2004), and how students with disabilities transition from high school to community college (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Understanding the specific issues of certain populations of students with disabilities, such as older students, is a key recommendation for future research in Quick, Lehmann, and Deniston's (2003) review of prior research on students with disabilities at community colleges. Given the important role of postsecondary education for older job seekers' reemployment and the potential challenges that they may face due to their greater likelihood of having acquired an age-related disability, it is essential to understand how community colleges can meet their education and training needs. To explore these issues, this brief examines the question: how do community colleges serve the needs of older students with disabilities?

Methodology

Heldrich Center researchers identified community colleges with greater levels of experience working with students of all ages with disabilities. Researchers examined national data reported by colleges to IPEDS from 2009 on the number of students with disabilities enrolled in community colleges. These data reflect the number of students with disabilities of all ages as reported by the colleges.[3] Heldrich Center researchers then ranked community colleges based on the percent of students in the colleges with a disability and selected the colleges with the highest percent of students with disabilities (eight percent or higher) for further analysis. These colleges were selected because they are likely to have the most experience identifying and serving students with disabilities, including older students with disabilities.

In December 2011, the Heldrich Center research team reviewed the Web sites of disability services offices at the 44 community colleges reporting that eight percent or more of their students had disabilities. Researchers examined the Web sites for information on disability services staff and their contact information, as well as in some cases the disability services offered, such as the process for self-reporting and assessing disabilities, and the accommodations available for students with disabilities.

Heldrich Center researchers then conducted interviews with college staff in January and February 2012. Researchers invited staff from the disability services offices at these 44 community colleges via e-mail to participate in telephone interviews about their approach to serving students with disabilities. Table 1 lists the community colleges that participated in the research. The research team conducted semi-structured telephone interviews with staff from disability services offices at 20 community colleges. The interviews explored in depth how colleges identify and serve students with disabilities, with particular attention to the implications for older students. Older students were considered to be nontraditional students approximately 40 years and older because they comprise a sizable part of the community college population (42 percent) and they are likely to begin to face age-related health and/or disability issues. However, because most community colleges do not specifically target students by age, staff responded based on their estimates of age in the student population.

Table 1. Community Colleges in the Research Study

State	College Name
Arkansas	University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton
California	Cabrillo College
California	College of the Siskiyous
California	Copper Mountain College
California	Foothill College
California	Santa Barbara City College
Georgia	Lanier Technical College
Massachusetts	Berkshire Community College
Massachusetts	Holyoke Community College
Massachusetts	Springfield Technical Community College
Nebraska	Northeast Community College
New York	Tompkins Cortland Community College
New York	State University of New York College of Technology at Canton
New York	Fulton-Montgomery Community College
North Carolina	Fayetteville Technical Community College
Ohio	Cuyahoga Community College
Pennsylvania	Thaddeus Stevens College of Technology
South Carolina	Greenville Technical College
Tennessee	Pellissippi State Technical Community College
Wisconsin	Southwest Wisconsin Technical College

Findings

Older students are less likely to identify themselves as having a disability than younger students, but are more likely to self-report than younger students.

Interviewed staff at several community colleges noted that younger students were more inclined to identify themselves as having a disability prior to attending college, compared to their older, nontraditional counterparts. The majority of interviewed staff at the colleges stated that older nontraditional students were most at risk for not being identified as having a disability, since many of them went through the K-12 system before either IDEA or Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act protections were in place. From the colleges' perspective, older students may possess a range of "hidden disabilities," including mental health disorders, learning disabilities, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and attention deficit disorder, which are likely to warrant accommodations.

However, more than half of the college staff interviewed stated that older or nontraditional students were most likely to self-report their disability than younger students, but only if they identified with having a disability and had exhibited strong self-confidence. Interviewees felt that nontraditional students gained more perspective and self-confidence with age — especially for students attending college for the second time around — making them more willing to report their disability than their younger counterparts.

Since many older community college students may not identify themselves as having a disability, they may not take advantage of services available through campus disability services offices.

Many services to identify and support students with disabilities occur either in connection with high schools or through the college disability services office. Older individuals who might benefit from a range of targeted support services from these offices, however, went to high school before such services existed. Since many do not think of themselves as having a disability, they are unlikely to consider visiting the community college disability services office. This highlights the importance of other strategies at the colleges to identify and serve older students with disabilities who may be unaware of the resources available.

Education and awareness is essential to help faculty and staff identify and better serve older students with unidentified disabilities.

Given their important roles in identifying students with disabilities, disability services office staff noted that networking with faculty and staff was a strategy to increase awareness of various disabilities that may affect learning success and promote greater identification of students at risk of not achieving success because of an unidentified disability. Some college disability services office staff reported they had close relationships with a variety of staff members on campus that helped raise awareness of disability issues and allowed the staff members to feel comfortable enough to reach out to them if they believed a student had an unidentified or undiagnosed disability. One disability services office staff member stated, "I am very social on campus, so many faculty members feel comfortable approaching me if they are worried about a student." Disability services office staff reported interacting with faculty members and staff in a range of ways, which in turn served to increase the size and depth of their support networks. Lanier Technical College formalizes faculty awareness of disability services by requiring new faculty members to visit the disability services office and receive a tour as part of getting acquainted with each department on campus.

According to the interviews, three topics in particular were helpful for faculty members: how to identify students with disabilities, how to appropriately and legally refer students to the disability services office, and how the students' disabilities may affect their learning. To provide faculty members with better knowledge about students with disabilities, many community college staff reported they offered education and training on the behavioral clues or signs and symptoms of "hidden disabilities." Half of the interviewees reported that faculty members were hesitant to refer a student because they were unsure how to appropriately approach a student whom they believed could benefit from the resources of the disability services office. Thus, providing faculty with this education and training was crucial to make them feel confident to intervene when they suspect students may be struggling with their education due to an unidentified disability. Additionally, half of the community college disability services staff felt that it was important for faculty to understand the learning difficulties students with various disabilities experienced, and some trainings revolved around realization simulation exercises that displayed what it was like to have a disability. Copper Mountain College even brought in a panel of students with disabilities to share their perspectives with faculty members.

Community colleges' disability services offices offered information about students with disabilities in a variety of ways, allowing faculty to access the information in the form that made the most sense to them. Many community colleges offered presentations or workshops for faculty and staff. For example, Cuyahoga Community College offers workshops, orientation trainings, and "lunch and learns" to educate faculty members on various disability topics. Greenville Technical College makes its training material available to faculty and staff online or as a DVD or video. Its online training is especially helpful for adjunct professors who are usually the hardest to reach with professional development on campus. Some schools reported periodically e-mailing disability etiquette tips. Several schools created a faculty disability handbook. One notable example is Cabrillo College's detailed handbook for faculty and staff on working with students with learning disabilities. This handbook includes information on the common characteristics and the emotional impact of learning disabilities, as well as information on academic accommodations, instructional tips for students with learning disabilities, tips for personnel and administrators, and legal issues. This handbook is in addition to college efforts to promote the use of universal design among faculty.

Faculty and staff members, particularly tutors, can have a critical role in identifying older community college students with disabilities who might benefit from targeted support services.

Building a support network among the disability services office and other staff members on campus was the most commonly cited and successful approach to identifying students with disabilities, outside of students simply self-reporting. Faculty members, particularly developmental faculty members (i.e., faculty who teach pre-college-level, remedial courses in such areas as reading, writing, and math), were especially capable of identifying students who could benefit from services from the disability services office. For example, Fayetteville Technical Community College's disability services office works with developmental faculty members, teaching them to highlight disability services to their students in a structured way that urges them to seek help if they think they could use support services. Since students with low placement test scores are automatically enrolled in developmental education, these faculty members have an increased likelihood of working with students who could benefit from identifying themselves as having a disability.

In addition to faculty, tutors can also play an important role in identifying students who could benefit from the services of college disability services offices. Nearly all interviewed community colleges provided tutoring services on campus and some used this as a forum to better serve students with disabilities. Since tutors work with a range of students, they need to be knowledgeable of the wide spectrum of learning needs of students with and without disabilities, as well as the signs expressed by students who may not have identified themselves as having a disability. Santa Barbara City College's tutors are trained by the disability services staff members

who enable them to work with all types of students with disabilities. The disability services staff members help the tutors learn assistive technology as well, and work with the tutors on specific learning strategies that are especially helpful for students with disabilities.

"Early alert" systems enable faculty to identify and refer struggling older students who may have an unidentified disability to the disability services office.

To capitalize on these important allies, community colleges offered education, training, and early alert systems that allowed faculty to identify students who may have a disability that could benefit from accommodation or other services. The early alert detection systems allow faculty members to write a note about students they feel are struggling in their classes due to poor behavior, missed classes, or weak academic performance. The faculty members select the appropriate department to where they want the note to be sent, including the disability services office. The disability services office gets notes on current students with disabilities, alerting them that they may be falling behind or struggling with certain coursework that semester. This gives the disability services office the opportunity to intervene early on, and help the students get back on track with their classes. This process also assists students who have not been previously identified as having a disability, since the disability services office can follow up with the referred students to ask questions that might identify if they have a disability that may be interfering with their educational progress.

SUNY College of Technology at Canton has an early identification system that faculty can use to refer students if they believe they may have a disability. They can also refer students if they are behind in their assignments, doing poorly academically, or absent from class. The disability services office gets a daily report listing any new referrals. The office then immediately sends an e-mail to the student asking if the student needs help. The office maintains a spreadsheet that tracks all the referrals. Faculty members use this system to alert the disability services office if they observe that students are having trouble or withdrawing from the class, so the disability services office staff can intervene and improve student outcomes. Greenville Technical College introduces its early alert system during its "identification and referral faculty training" so the faculty are aware of how they should use the system.

Since placement tests are required of all students, they present a unique opportunity to identify older students with unidentified disabilities.

Many community colleges require students to take placement exams as part of the admissions process, and their scores are used to place them in the appropriate level for core classes, such as math and English. Three of the community colleges interviewed — Cuyahoga Community College, University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton, and Foothill College — reported they use scores from the placement exam as a way to "flag" students with disabilities that might affect their academic success. If students received placement scores below a certain threshold, then these community colleges automatically send letters to those students inviting them to visit the colleges' disability services offices to see if they may benefit from their services. This broad-based strategy reaches all students applying to the community college.

Older students may benefit from efforts to raise awareness about different "learning styles" that could help them identify potential learning disabilities.

Some community colleges encourage students to discover their own learning styles, either by integrating this topic into other courses or offering a stand-alone class on study skills. In some cases, the colleges address this

topic with the entire student body. In other colleges, it is directed to students with learning disabilities. For example, Springfield Technical Community College has a general course called "College Study Skills Seminar," which offers training on self-assessment, study habits, time management, scholastic motivations, learning styles, and thinking skills. This course can help some students with unidentified learning disabilities identify potential challenges.

Once older students identify as having a disability, strategies to help them access costly assessment services are important.

Older students face limited resources for disability assessment at community colleges, especially since much assessment occurs at the high school level. Given the high cost of assessment, this can be a challenge for older students who may not be aware that they have a learning or other disability. The majority of the interviewed community colleges could not offer students free disability assessment testing of any type (with California being the exception to the rule), although half of the community colleges found a way to subsidize the cost of the tests or help students access low-cost assessments.

Six of the community colleges cited that they partnered with on-campus faculty members who provided reduced rates on disability assessment testing for the students. Greenville Technical College has a staff member who is affiliated with an agency in the community that conducts learning disabilities testing. The disability services office refers students there since this agency offers learning disabilities testing for much lower than the typical cost of such testing. Cuyahoga Community College has a faculty member who operates a testing practice and offers students reduced rates, including re-testing students who need "current" documentation as well. Other community colleges use outside community agencies to connect students with subsidized assessment tests, such as a neighboring state university. Springfield Technical Community College sends students with a suspected mental health disability to the neighboring University of Massachusetts, which has a clinical psychology program that does subsidized testing for the students.

Given the common use of assistive technology as an accommodation for students with disabilities, staff with specialized knowledge on the use of assistive technology may be particularly important to ensure its availability to older students with disabilities.

Since older students may have less knowledge of technology, strategies to help them use accommodations that are based on technology may be particularly important to their successful use of these accommodations. More than half of the community colleges employed a technology specialist within their disability services department. A technology specialist carries many benefits to a disability services team by training students with disabilities and faculty alike, on assistive technology equipment and software that are offered at the campus. Examples of commonly used assistive technology software are speech recognition programs such as Dragon Naturally Speaking or Kurzweil, and JAWS (Job Access with Speech), a screen-reading program. Using assistive technology greatly increases students' abilities to function independently, because they do not need to rely on human readers or note-takers. Cabrillo College stated that technology training or courses are especially helpful for older students with disabilities because they are more likely in need of getting help to improve their basic computer skills that allow them to use the newer adaptive technology.

At Santa Barbara City College, the disability services office has an assistive technology counselor who spends about half of her time helping students decide what accommodations might be beneficial for them. The other half of her time is dedicated to an on-campus faculty resource center, where she guides the faculty on the use of assistive technology and on techniques faculty can use to help their students with disabilities.

Springfield Technical Community College's adaptive lab provides individualized training on adaptive technology from a technician by appointment. The technology specialist does an evaluation and training for assistive technology. The college's disability services office also provides instruction to faculty on how assistive technology works so they can better aid their students.

At Cuyahoga Community College, students have access to full-time technology specialists at the school's District Technology Learning Center. The center encourages the use of technology that promotes independence and the ability to function independently after college and into the workforce. For example, if a student comes in and needs a reader, the center encourages the student to use software that reads for him or her, versus getting a personalized reader or note-taker who might not be available to the student after he or she leaves school.

Finally, several schools reported that they include their assistive technology specialists on faculty committees that review new software purchases to ensure they are compatible with the needs of all students, including those with disabilities. For example, Berkshire Community College has a disability services staff member serve on the college's newly formed academic technology advisory committee. The disability services staff member encourages that any technology purchased for the college should be inclusive for all students and helps the faculty members identify possible remedies for technology or software that is not compatible with the needs of students with disabilities, especially those students who are blind or visually impaired or deaf or hard of hearing.

Conclusion

Older students with disabilities at community colleges may not receive the support they need because their disabilities are less likely to be identified than other younger students. Thus, they are in particular need of attention in community colleges' strategies for serving students with disabilities. When addressing the needs of older students with disabilities, universal strategies targeted at the entire student body, such as faculty identification, placement test screening, early alert systems, and classroom discussions of learning styles, may be important ways to identify disabilities that may hinder academic success among these students. Once older students with possible disabilities are identified at community colleges, they benefit from college strategies to provide access to assessments at lower costs. Finally, they benefit from additional support in accessing accommodations, especially those that are dependent on technology.

To better serve older students with disabilities, the community colleges in this study offer some practices for consideration. Many of these practices do not require large transformations in community colleges' practices. Rather, they require greater awareness of the issues facing these students among college staff so that this knowledge may be integrated into the ongoing operations of the college and, thus, potentially make a difference in the ability of older students to succeed in college and ultimately in the labor market.

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Endnotes

1. IDEA is a federal law that ensures children with disabilities, including eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities, have access to services provided by states and public agencies such as early intervention, special education, and related services. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is a federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education. It requires school districts to provide a "free appropriate public education" to each qualified student with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability. More information on IDEA and Section 504 can be found at: *http://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html.*

2. It is not known how many of these students actually needed an accommodation.

3. These numbers are likely lower than the actual population of students with disabilities, since they only include students who have self-identified or were otherwise identified by the community college as having a disability.

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