

## **Advocate: Disabled students don't get exceptions at college**

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When students with disabilities enter college, they may be in for a shock.

In grades K-12, an advocate for the disabled told Lynchburg College faculty Thursday, everything is worked out between the parents and the school through conferences and Individual Education Plans.

Not so in college.

There, the onus is on the student to declare and prove a disability, said Richard Harris, a founder of AHEAD, the Association on Higher Education And Disability, and recently retired director of Disabled Student Development at Ball State University in Muncie, Ind.

"The IEP is not related to what we do here," he said.

If special help is needed, then the student must set that system in operation to get accommodations.

For example, a student can't wait until term's end to ask for extra time on a final or a chance to take it again like he could in high school because he has a learning disability. He should have raised that issue earlier.

"The law does not require you to be a mind-reader," Harris said to the LC faculty attending the morning session of the program.

The numbers of students with disabilities is increasing - disabilities that are visible such as wheelchair use or blindness, as well as those that are not apparent such as learning disabilities, autism or mental illness.

Since the 1970s, federal laws have required colleges to provide an accessible environment to college students with disabilities.

Those students "need to be empowered, not rescued," Harris said.

Being disabled does not qualify a student for anything, "unless you are otherwise qualified."

For example, if the college has established a minimum SAT score of 1350 for entry, "900 plus blind doesn't equal 1350," he said.

Colleges can require that students meet the essential components of a course, but they have to be able to defend the requirements. "Courts have paid a lot of deference to post-secondary institutions if they've done their work properly," said Harris.

A faculty member who lowers standards for a student with a disability "has actually demeaned the person," said Harris.

In career counseling with a student, he said, it's important to avoid getting into restrictions.

"It's not our job to determine employment prospects," he said.

Take, for example, a student with a learning disability who wants to become a teacher.

Help them think about the needs, he said. A teacher must not put misspelled words on the board, or send misspelled notes home to the parents. A student with a learning disability can become a super teacher, he said, "but the work they have to put into it is enormous."

At Lynchburg College, Shawn Arnold, support services coordinator, works with students who have any type of disability that's documented. She helps evaluate what kinds of adjustments they might need to be successful.

"The commitment is not new for Lynchburg College, but the numbers have just increased," she said in an interview. "The kinds of disabilities have really changed."

These students grew up under the ADA, said Arnold. "They know they have the right to accommodations, but they have to learn how to do it in college, because the responsibility lies with the student."

Last year about 12 percent of the LC freshman class disclosed a disability, and this year it was about 11 percent.

"Not all will require accommodation," she said. "Most will set up a file because they don't know what to expect in college."

In an interview, Harris said that to make the transition into college more easily, high school students with disabilities should visit college campuses a year earlier than the usual end of the junior year or beginning of senior year.

"They have to have an image, a picture and a goal in their heads," said Harris.

Although it's hard to do, they also need to ask their high school to make sure that their curriculum has the same challenges as that of non-disabled high school students going to college.

"They often have a lesser curriculum, less challenges, less demands," said Harris. "And it's totally unfair to have these two different systems."

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