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Embracing self-sufficiency

University disability services encourage students to be their own best advocates after flying the nest

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Gavin Steiger, coordinator of disability services at Trinity University, is one of the many local higher education professionals who help students with disabilities navigate the physical and mental challenges of college. "It's something students need to learn because they'll be doing this the rest of their lives," Steiger says.

Growing up in Seattle, Renae Goettel thought attending a boarding school for blind students would help prepare her for life in "the real world." It wasn't until she enrolled at San Antonio's Trinity University that she realized just how unprepared she really was.

"Going to a high school for blind kids was good in a way, but it held me back in another," Goettel says. "They taught me how to read Braille, use a cane, navigate through a city and how to use public transportation -- everything they thought a blind person would need. But then when I left there, I didn't have everything a blind person could need. I had to adapt to life on my own without all those specialized facilities."

The transition from high school to post-secondary education is jarring for any teenager; for Goettel, it was doubly nervewracking. Not only did she have to master the coming-of-age lessons of all college freshmen; she also had to make the leap from blending in as one of many blind students to standing out as the only blind person in her school.

Goettel is one of a growing number of young people with either physical, emotional or learning disabilities who are entering post-secondary educational institutions. The reason for that increase, according to Loraine Harrison, director of Disability Services at the [University of Texas at San Antonio](#) (UTSA), is a change of attitude among both

students and the public. Currently, there are more than 400 students with disabilities enrolled at UTSA.

"I think there's more awareness of educational opportunities for students with disabilities," Harrison says. "More of them are stepping up. There used to be an attitude about going to college with a learning disability. People used to think, 'What's the point? I can't succeed.' Now, they're getting over that. Students with disabilities can be successful in higher education institutions."

Collegiate services

Another reason the number of students with disabilities is swelling: Any post-secondary institution receiving federal funding is now required to have a disability services office where students with special needs can register to receive reasonable and appropriate accommodations for their disability. The Office for Civil Rights (OCR) in the U. S. Department of Education enforces Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Title II), which prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability. "Practically every school district and postsecondary school in the United States is subject to one or both of these laws, which have similar requirements," the OCR states.

There is a shift of responsibility, though, that occurs between high school graduation and college.

Unlike high schools, which are required to identify students with disabilities and accommodate them, colleges are required only to have the services available. It's up to the student to make the institution aware of his or her disability and ask for an accommodation.

Enter professionals like Gavin Steiger.

As the coordinator of disability services for students at Trinity, Steiger's job is to help students with disabilities make that jump from high school to college. There are currently more than 100 students with disabilities at Trinity, a number that has nearly doubled in the last five years. Steiger, formerly the assistant director for compliance and disability services at [Purdue University](#) in West Lafayette, Ind., joined Trinity in August 2007. Like other professionals in his field, Steiger is active in the Association of Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD).

Students with disabilities must register with Steiger's office to receive a letter which explains their disability and the need for specific accommodations that can be presented to faculty and staff members.

Steiger acts as a counselor, but doesn't make the arrangements for students. The onus is on the students to address their needs themselves.

"One thing that I try to educate students about is being an advocate for themselves," he says. "If they need something, we teach them not to be afraid to step up and ask for it. They need to be comfortable with their identity and realize that, yes, they are a person with a disability and therefore they may have to approach situations differently than other people might. It's something they're going to need to learn because they'll have to do this throughout the rest of their lives."

Goettel, now a senior majoring in communications and sociology, can make out shapes and faces during the day, but can see only light and dark at night. As a result, she needs accommodations to complete her coursework including a room without a roommate so she has space for her guide dog, Lucy, a 7-year-old yellow Labrador retriever, and textbooks either on CD or digitized so they can be read aloud by her computer.

"Overall, my university experience has been a good one. There have been some challenges," she admits. "I can honestly say that I haven't had one semester where I've had all my books when classes started, but that's to be expected. It kind of prepares me for the real world. There are going to be challenges."

Goettel embraced every opportunity available to her -- writing and reporting for her college newspaper, The Trinitonian, writing features online for the Spurs Sports and Entertainment group and interning in the media services department of the WNBA Silver Stars -- all with faithful Lucy by her side.

"I'm going to start applying at NBA and WNBA teams in January in the hopes that I could land a job in the sports communication world," Goettel says.

Owning the disability

Not all disabilities are as easily identified as Goettel's. Hannah Rinn, a Trinity senior majoring in sociology, has a learning disability that affects her reading and spelling. Trinity accommodates her by allowing extra time on tests, something Rinn views more as a safety net.

"I don't always use the extra time, but it's nice to know it's there. It takes some of the pressure off and lets me concentrate," she explains. "The disability office placed me with an academic adviser who helped me with everything. They've always encouraged me, but they've never babied me. It was always my responsibility to manage the process. This is the first time I've ever been in charge of my own destiny. It's a whole new level of responsibility and they were there to help me make that transition."

Ann Robinson, executive director of the Learning Disabilities Association of Texas, says that well-meaning parents can often sabotage the effort to teach college students to become their own advocates.

"I talk to a lot of parents who are totally thrown by the difference between high school and college," Robinson says. "These kids tend not to speak up for themselves so the

parents try to be their advocate. Colleges don't want to hear from mom and dad. They want to hear from the student. This can be a problem if the student is used to having a parent step in and ease the way for them. The student has to become self-aware of their disability so they can speak up to the disability office staff."

Students with learning disabilities often are not willing to admit to them.

"They don't want to be different. They were a special ed kid in high school, and they want to make a fresh start in college," Robinson says. "That's a big problem. They'll wait until the bottom just absolutely drops out. Instead of going out first and seeking accommodations, they'll try to tough it out and it's just so tough."

The ADA established minimum access standards for those with disabilities that all businesses must adhere to. The "minimum" is only the beginning.

"I encourage people to look at the ADA guidelines as the floor, not the ceiling," he says. "There's nothing that says you can't go above and beyond that."

Facts About Learning Disabilities

- Fifteen percent of the U.S. population, or one in seven Americans, has some type of learning disability, according to the National Institutes of Health.
 - Difficulty with basic reading and language skills are the most common learning disabilities. As many as 80 percent of students with learning disabilities have reading problems.
 - Learning disabilities often run in families.
 - Learning disabilities should not be confused with other disabilities such as mental retardation, autism, deafness, blindness, and behavioral disorders. None of these conditions are learning disabilities. In addition, they should not be confused with lack of educational opportunities like frequent changes of schools or attendance problems. Also, children who are learning English do not necessarily have a learning disability.
 - Attention disorders, such as Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and learning disabilities often occur at the same time, but the two disorders are not the same.
- Source: Learning Disabilities Association of America

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