# Experiences of College Students With Disabilities and the Importance of Self-Determination in Higher Education Settings

Elizabeth Evans Getzel
Colleen A. Thoma
*Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond*

Although the literature is clear that self-determination is an important component of the transition planning process for students with disabilities preparing for postsecondary education, further studies are needed to explore what self-determination strategies these students use to remain in college and successfully meet the challenges in postsecondary education settings. This article describes a study conducted with postsecondary education students in 2- and 4-year college settings to (a) identify skills that effective self-advocates use to ensure they stay in college and obtain needed supports and (b) identify the essential self-determination skills needed to remain and persist in college. Findings from the study and implications for postsecondary education and secondary education are discussed.

*Keywords:*    *college students with disabilities; postsecondary education; self-determination; transition*

Approximately 25% of youth with disabilities participate in postsecondary education after exiting high school (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005). In spite of the increasing number of students with disabilities entering college (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005), these students remain less likely to pursue postsecondary education when compared to individuals without disabilities (Stodden, 2005; Wagner et al., 2005; Whelley, 2002). Although the gap for high school completion is closing between individuals with and without disabilities, this trend is not the case in higher education. In fact, completion of some college course work declined from 30% to 26% from 1986 to 2001. Earning a college degree dropped during this same period from 19% to 12% (National Organization on Disability, 2001). Contributing to the lack of persistence and retention of college students with disabilities is the issue of adapting to an entirely new set of challenges in managing their academic program (Brinkerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002; Gil, 2007; Getzel & McManus, 2005). These students now become some of potentially hundreds of students seeking services through a disability support service (DSS) office on campus. They are responsible for requesting their supports and services, providing documentation to receive these accommodations, and interacting with faculty to implement their supports.

Adjusting to a college environment presents challenges for all students; however, for students with disabilities, the responsibility of managing their accommodations along with their academic course work presents a set of challenges unique to these students. Often, students with disabilities enter college unprepared to disclose their disability or lack the understanding of how to access services on campus (Brinkerhoff et al., 2002; Getzel & McManus, 2005; Wagner et al., 2005). Students with disabilities must self-identify to the university to request accommodations and supports. Some students decide for varying reasons not to self-disclose. These students may be anxious for a "new beginning" in an educational setting by not having to deal with being labeled. Others decide to wait to disclose until they are experiencing academic problems (Getzel & Briel, 2006; Getzel & McManus, 2005). In too many instances, students are made to feel that they do not belong in advanced degree

programs because of their need to self-identify for specific services (West et al., 1993; Wilson, Getzel, & Brown, 2000). These attitudes by faculty and other university staff could result from their lack of understanding of students' needs or familiarity with campus services (Getzel & McManus, 2005; Scott, 1996). As a result, students may elect not to disclose their disability to the university to avoid being labeled (Burgstahler & Doe, 2006; Getzel & McManus, 2005; Gordon & Keiser, 1998; National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports, 2000). Perhaps what is most troubling about the issue of disclosure by students with disabilities is that more than half of students enrolled in postsecondary education believe they do not have a disability by the time they transition into college (Wagner et al., 2005).

Several services and supports are essential to the retention of students with disabilities in postsecondary education, such as developing self-determination skills, developing self-management skills, exploring technology, and obtaining internships or other career-related experiences (Briel & Wehman, 2005; Burgstahler, 2003; Burgstahler & Doe, 2006; Getzel & McManus, 2005). Students with disabilities need self-determination skills to successfully transition to, adjust to, and remain in college. These skills are a set of personal or interpersonal skills that include acceptance of a disability and how it affects learning, understanding which support services are needed, knowing how to describe one's disability and the need for certain supports to service providers, and having the determination to overcome obstacles that may be presented (deFur, Getzel, & Trossi, 1996; Eaton & Coull, 1999; Getzel, Briel, & Kregel, 2000; Getzel, McManus, & Briel, 2004). There is a great deal of literature describing the importance of and critical need for self-determination skills during the transition process of students with disabilities from secondary to postsecondary settings (e.g., Getzel & Briel, 2006; Halpern, 1994; Stodden, Galloway, & Stodden, 2003; Thoma & Wehmeyer, 2005; Wehman, 2001). However, there is a need to increase research efforts on the experiences of students with disabilities attending postsecondary programs to identify effective strategies that enable them to remain in these settings (e.g., Brinkerhoff et al., 2002; Burgstahler, 2003; Getzel et al., 2004; Getzel & McManus, 2005; Getzel & Thoma, 2006; Thoma & Getzel, 2005).

Although the research is clear that self-determination is an important component of the transition planning process for students with disabilities preparing for postsecondary education (Agran, Snow, & Swaner, 1999; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Getzel & Briel, 2006; Thoma, Rogan, & Baker, 2001; Wehmeyer, Agran, &

Hughes, 2000), further studies are needed to explore what self-determination strategies these students have used to remain in college and successfully meet the challenges in postsecondary education settings (Brinkerhoff, 1994; Jameson, 2007; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). This article describes a study conducted with postsecondary education students in 2- and 4-year college settings to ascertain what skills they believed were essential. The specific purposes of the study were to identify (a) skills that effective self-advocates use to ensure they stay in college and obtain needed supports and (b) the essential self-determination skills to remain and persist in college.

## Method

### Participants

A purposive sampling procedure was used to select focus group participants (Morgan, 1998; Patton, 1990). In this procedure, the researchers sought to include postsecondary-level students with disabilities who were receiving supports and services related to their disability and who were identified as having self-determination skills by staff in their respective DSS office. As part of their postsecondary education experience, these students had self-disclosed that they had a disability and had requested services through their colleges or universities. This method of choosing participants was used because it offered an opportunity to learn from those students who had disabilities, who sought supports and services for their disabilities, and who therefore exercised at least some degree of self-determination skills. At the university level, there is no attempt to identify students with disabilities. Instead, students with disabilities need to self-disclose; that is, they need to identify themselves as having a disability and request the services and supports they need from the office for students with disabilities at the college or university. The DSS staff members were asked to identify students with disabilities who self-disclosed their disability and were using their accommodations and other campus supports to meet their educational needs. The researchers requested that the students selected for the focus groups were in good academic standing with their college or university. Choosing participants who had self-disclosed ensured that all participants had some basic self-determination skills and therefore had experiences to use to answer these questions.

In all, 34 students were involved in the focus groups. Their ages ranged from 18 to 48 years, with 80% of the students between the ages of 18 to 23. Of the participants, 53% were female and 47% were male. Participants came from a variety of cultural backgrounds and had a variety

**Table 1**
**Participant Characteristics**

| Participant Characteristic | Variable | $n$ | % |
|---|---|---|---|
| Ethnicity | Caucasian | 21 | 61.8 |
| | African American | 12 | 35.3 |
| | Asian | 1 | 2.9 |
| Disability | Visual | 2 | 5.8 |
| | Orthopedic | 8 | 23.5 |
| | Other health impairment | 13 | 38.2 |
| | Deafness | 1 | 2.9 |
| | Specific learning disability | 8 | 23.5 |
| | Emotional disturbance | 2 | 5.8 |
| Year | Freshman | 5 | 14.8 |
| | Sophomore | 8 | 23.6 |
| | Junior | 14 | 41.1 |
| | Senior | 6 | 17.6 |
| | Graduate | 1 | 2.9 |
| College type | 2 year | 13 | 38.0 |
| | 4 year | 21 | 62.0 |

of disabilities. Table 1 lists the ethnic backgrounds of participants, the types of disabilities that participants identified, participants' year in school, and the type of college.

## Focus Group Interview Process

The research study used a semistructured interview process within a focus group format. Krueger (1998) described a number of reasons for the use of focus groups. He reported that focus groups are an effective way to obtain results from a small group of individuals, and they also provide an atmosphere for collecting information that is more relaxed and natural. Focus groups are more socially oriented, with a structure that allows the facilitator the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues that emerge during the discussion.

Six locations for the focus groups were chosen from across Virginia: three community college sites and three college or university sites representing different geographic areas of the state (rural–southwest, urban–central, and suburban–tidewater). Two of the universities participating in the focus groups were historically Black universities. We asked staff in the office for students with disabilities in these institutions to identify 6 to 8 students who received services from their office.

Students who were willing to participate gave permission for research staff to directly contact them. Telephone calls were made inviting participation in the focus group, and the researchers gave the individuals information about the purpose of the focus group and the date, time, and location of the meetings. The staff also identified whether accommodations would be needed for the participants to fully participate in the groups. Follow-up letters and phone calls were made to ensure their participation. The typical group size of a focus group is 6 to 10 participants, and researchers generally find that three to five groups allow the emergence of recurring themes (Morgan, 1998). Group size in this study ranged from 4 to 10 participants.

Individuals who agreed to participate signed a consent form for the study and received a stipend of $25. Participants were paid for their time to increase the likelihood that they would attend the focus group session. To maintain consistency across the six groups, questions and probes were developed for focus group facilitators and scribes. The researchers met with the focus group facilitators and scribes to answer any questions and to review the questions and probes. The researchers developed an introduction that explained the purpose of the focus group and defined *self-determination* for the participants for each facilitator to use. The researchers defined self-determination for the focus groups as "being able to advocate for what you need, understanding your disability and how it impacts your learning, having self-confidence, being independent, and adjusting your schedule to make sure things get done." Focus group questions were followed by specific probes. For example, when participants were discussing how they came to understand their disability and the impact on their learning, facilitators asked, "What experiences were critical to understanding your disability?" Another example of a probe used for understanding one's disability was, "Did you review your own documentation to understand your strengths and limitations?" Facilitators were asked to provide information to the group on self-determination skills to facilitate the discussion. The specific skills were drawn from the literature and included such examples as problem solving (identifying barriers and the steps needed to address them), setting goals (figuring out what to do and deciding how to get there), or self-management (organizing time, meeting deadlines, etc.).

Two staff members facilitated each group, with one member serving as the group moderator and the second individual serving as scribe, taking notes on the focus group session by summarizing key points, verifying with participants that the points were representative of the discussion, and offering another opportunity to add to the dialogue. Following each focus group, the moderator and scribe debriefed the session, capturing the first impressions and the main themes that seemed to have emerged. This process occurred each time after a focus group to look for repetition of themes that emerged. The results were then further analyzed using the scribes' notes.

## Data Analysis

Data analyses were conducted using information from the scribes' notes (Benz, Johnson, Mikkelsen, & Lindstrom, 1995; Krueger, 1998). A summary of each focus group was developed, which included demographic information, location and setting for each of the groups, responses to questions posed by the facilitator, and information obtained through follow-up questions to obtain additional information from the participants during the focus group sessions (Benz et al., 1995). After each of the summaries was developed, the information was analyzed and systemically coded for emergent themes. The themes were then compared and integrated across the major themes that emerged from the data analysis across all groups.

## Results

*Question 1:* What do you think an effective advocate does to ensure he or she stays in school and gets the supports needed?

Focus group participants clearly identified self-determination as important to their success in postsecondary education. Many shared experiences of not self-disclosing (not advocating for services), failing, and then choosing to disclose their disability and request the supports they needed. Each of the focus groups identified many of the key component skills of self-determination as outlined by Wehmeyer and colleagues (Wehmeyer, 1999; Wehmeyer & Palmer, 2003) as being essential for their success, including problem-solving skills, learning about oneself (and one's disability), goal setting, and self-management.

*Problem solving*. Problem-solving skills were identified as necessary. Participants described the need to have time to organize and think about what needed to be done to solve a problem. Others discussed determining what worked for them in helping to get around problems. These participants described learning their limitations, setting priorities, and focusing on achieving them. Participants also described the need to work through problems one step at a time. One student commented that when he had academic problems, he felt it was important to "form relationships with instructors as a means of dealing with issues in class."

*Self-awareness*. Learning about oneself, particularly about one's disability, is directly related to the self-determination core component skills of self-knowledge and self-understanding. All participants across the focus

groups believed that learning about themselves was critical to their success at college. In fact, they emphasized that the individual with the disability understands his or her strengths and needs better than anyone else. For instance, one student reported that "no one understood my disability, and I was told that I could not attend college." When asked how she then made the decision to go to college, she said that "I gathered information everywhere I could: the Internet, doctors, and support groups. Then I had to explain it to others and ask for accommodations." Another participant shared that she was not able to accept her disability until she was a junior in high school when she realized, "If I wanted to succeed, I had to accept it. I worked with my IEP team to learn my strengths and weaknesses."

Several of the participants reported they used the Internet to learn about their disabilities or to understand how others with the same disability succeeded in life. Others felt that acceptance or learning about one's disability was something that just had to be done. Participants commented, "I have no choice but to accept my disability" and "[I was] faced with the decision to keep on living or become a hermit."

The use of trial and error to understand one's disability was another theme that emerged across the focus groups. This was especially true when learning how to learn and retain information. One student had to retake a class with another instructor who was a better match for the student's learning style. The need to find out how a professor or instructor teaches prior to taking the class was emphasized. Another student commented that he learned his strengths and weaknesses through experiences with different study techniques. This participant learned he needed to study with another person so he could hear the information, see it, and write it. Participants across the focus groups echoed similar comments. Several commented that they did not feel they were prepared enough in high school to really understand their disability and how it affected their learning.

*Goal setting*. The importance of goal setting was a strong theme across all focus groups. Participants described the importance of both short-term and long-term goals. Participants discussed setting short-term goals that are realistic and help to build to their long-term goals of careers, graduate school, living on their own, and so on. One student commented, "I think goals need to be precise with steps and breaking it down. Take it one step at a time; once you accomplish the goals, you move on to the next one." When setting long-term goals, participants discussed the need to set career goals that reflected what they wanted to do and enjoy in life.

High expectations when setting goals was a theme that emerged from participants. A number of participants reported that their parents assisted them in setting high goals. Others stated the importance of believing in oneself when others might not believe something can be done. One student stated, "Being told I couldn't do it made me more determined to set and meet my goals." Last, a student summarized his feelings and those of the group when he said, "Self-determination is what it's all about. I want to do these things."

*Self-management*. Self-management was also listed as an important skill by the participants. Some participants scheduled their classes so they were not back-to-back, allowing time for studying or completing assignments. Others commented on the use of day planners or other methods of writing tasks down to help plan ahead for assignments that might take extra time. Organization of class materials and books to assist students in studying and keeping up with all aspects of class, including class notes, handouts, assignments, quizzes, and so on, was also mentioned.

> *Question 2:* What advocacy or self-determination skills do you think are absolutely essential to staying in college and getting the supports you need?

Focus group participants were asked to identify the self-determination or self-advocacy skills they believed were essential for staying in college and obtaining needed supports. The major themes that emerged from students in 2-year and 4-year colleges and universities across the state were (a) seeking services from the DSS office and college services available to all students; (b) forming relationships with professors and instructors; (c) developing support systems on campus with friends, support groups, and the DSS office; and (d) gaining a self-awareness and understanding of themselves to persevere.

*Seeking services on campus*. Participants spoke about the importance of learning about all of the services available to them on campus and utilizing them to assist them in staying in school. The students commented on the importance of disclosing their disability to the DSS office on campus to obtain accommodations. They also stressed the importance of utilizing services available to all college students, for example, writing or math labs, study sessions, and so on. One student commented, "I didn't let my pride undermine me. I knew I needed assistance and sought help from the disability support services office."

*Forming relationships with professors and instructors*. A second theme that emerged to help students remain in college was forming relationships with professors and instructors. Participants discussed meeting with professors and instructors on a regular basis as a means of dealing with issues in class or helping the faculty obtain a better understanding of what they needed in terms of support in the class. The participants came to understand that not all faculty or staff members understood their disability and the accommodations they were eligible to receive. As one student stated, "Going to see your professors is very helpful."

*Developing support systems on campus*. Establishing friendships with peers, seeking out service support staff members on campus, and joining support groups or other group activities were just some of the ways that the focus group participants created their own support systems. One student commented, "I needed to learn how to open up to people so I had someone to lean on when I needed help." Another student stated, "I keep going back to the disability support services office to continue receiving the support and assistance I need." Finally, one student commented, "I have a mentor that is a friend. This person helps by giving me constructive criticism when I need it." It should also be noted that a number of students in the focus groups identified their parents or family members as part of their support system. Participants believed that parents maintained an important role in their lives by encouraging, supporting, and understanding them and the issues they face in college.

*Self-awareness*. The theme of self-awareness, or knowing oneself, emerged again as students discussed the critical skills or behaviors that helped them to stay in school and pursue their course of study. Students discussed how they educated themselves about their disability, their strengths, and their limitations. Others talked about concentrating on what they needed and focusing on getting services and supports. As one student stated,

> I had to become aware of myself and the reality of my situation to know what I can and can't handle at any point in time; identify resources, determining who I needed to talk with and getting the supports I needed.

Another student commented, "I would say it is hard at first, but it gets easier to self advocate." And finally one student summarized the importance of knowing herself and the need to persevere when she stated, "Perseverance. Just stick with it, believe in yourself."

## Discussion

Results of the focus groups provided insight into the postsecondary experiences of 34 college students with

disabilities concerning their self-determination skills and the importance of these skills in postsecondary education settings. The findings are a beginning step toward better understanding what students with disabilities believe are the critical self-determination skills or behaviors needed in higher education settings. Research on the experiences of college students with disabilities and factors that contribute to their success, particularly the role of self-determination skills, is limited (Jameson, 2007). Although the current literature has primarily focused on the role of self-determination in facilitating transition planning and services, very little is known about the impact of those supports and services from the students' perspective once they are in postsecondary settings. As these students reported, current efforts are insufficient and/or offered too late to have the desired result. Most of these postsecondary education students with disabilities reported that they would prefer that efforts begin earlier and focus on strategies to learn to solve problems and identify resources. This is in contrast with their reported experience of learning by trial and error and learning while in the college or university setting.

Further research is needed to determine whether their recommendations do indeed result in increased self-determination skills and whether these improved self-determination skills affect success in the postsecondary setting. This is broader than the current focus on the point of transition from K-12 school to postsecondary education (e.g., Brinkerhoff et al., 2002; Burgstahler, 2003; Getzel et al., 2004; Getzel & McManus, 2005; Getzel & Thoma, 2006; Thoma & Getzel, 2005). This research should investigate questions such as the following: (a) Are students with disabilities able to put into practice skills or behaviors learned while in secondary education (and if so, how)? (b) What do the experiences of college students with disabilities tell us about the importance of the skills or behaviors as they use them outside of the secondary education environment? (c) How will this information affect programs that are used for students with disabilities transitioning to postsecondary programs? and (d) What role should the postsecondary setting play in strengthening or supporting self-determination of students with disabilities to ensure their success?

Research on the impact of self-determination on students' experiences in college is also needed. Preliminary research findings point to the importance of self-determination skills on students' perception (positive or negative) of their overall college experience (Jameson, 2007). By understanding what self-determination skills or behaviors assist students to remain and persist in college, further insights are gained on how to better address issues of self-disclosure to receive supports, assisting students with disabilities to better understand and articulate their learning support needs, and setting goals to progress toward career goals.

Although this study has sought to learn more about the experiences of students with disabilities in terms of the self-determination skills they believe are essential to their success in college, some limitations should be noted. This research study used self-report as the primary source of data on self-determination. Self-reports are useful in gaining an understanding of a phenomenon from that individual's (or group of individuals') perspective. There is some inherent bias that can occur when an individual reports what he or she thinks the interviewer wants to hear. Our focus group started with a definition of self-determination, which could have led the participants to think about those influences on their success and minimize other supports or experiences that might have equal importance. This method also focused on the preferences of the individuals, which may or may not be linked with the most effective strategies. Follow-up research should use strategies that collect data on the effectiveness of strategies and the preferences of the individuals receiving those services.

Research is needed to further validate the information provided by these students. The selection of the participants was not based on measuring their self-determination skills prior to joining the group. The selection was based on two assumptions. First, self-disclosing to a DSS office was one criterion used as exhibiting self-determination. Second, the DSS staff members at these various colleges and universities were asked to select students who they believed were self-determined individuals; therefore, the study was dependent on the judgment of other individuals.

Another limitation is the number of students with disabilities who participated in the focus groups. The results in this article were based on the opinions of 34 college students with disabilities. A greater number of students need the opportunity to voice their experiences and ideas to achieve a greater cross-section of students with disabilities attending postsecondary education programs.

In spite of these limitations, the results present important strategies and approaches. Participants identified (a) problem solving, (b) understanding one's disability, (c) goal setting, and (d) self-management as critical skills that students need to be effective advocates for themselves to secure needed supports and services. This same set of skills has also been identified in the literature as essential for college students with disabilities (Aune, 1991; Bursuck & Rose, 1992; deFur et al., 1996; Durlak, 1992; Eaton & Coull, 1999; Getzel et al., 2000; Getzel et al., 2004).

The focus group participants clearly illustrated how self-determination skills "act as the primary causal agent in

one's life" (Wehmeyer, 1996, p. 302) as students worked to secure the services and supports needed in college. Participants described how being self-determined meant that actions needed to be taken to seek out services and secure supports. These actions took different forms as students assessed what they needed and how to secure those services and supports. One critical theme that emerged in both questions and probes posed to participants was the need to understand oneself, in terms of not only what one's disability is but also how it affects one's learning.

Unfortunately, all too often students with disabilities enter postsecondary programs lacking understanding of how their disability affects their learning (Getzel & Briel, 2006; Getzel & McManus, 2005). As a result, these students are not able to effectively articulate the services and supports needed to meet the academic challenges in college. The focus group participants continually emphasized how they took responsibility for their education, sought out services, developed support systems, understood how they learned best, developed problem-solving skills to overcome barriers, and worked to strengthen and build a set of skills that enabled them to remain in college and achieve their goals. As one student stated, "Don't be afraid of hard tasks and take the challenges. . . . Take them at a molehill size and take small steps."

## Conclusion

Research on the importance of self-determination in the transition planning process is well documented (Agran et al., 1999; Eisenman & Chamberlin, 2001; Getzel & Briel, 2006; Thoma et al., 2001; Wehmeyer et al., 2000); there remains little comprehensive research on what self-determination activities or strategies are helping students with disabilities to remain and persist in college (Harris & Robertson, 2001; Jameson, 2007) or on the perspectives of the individual students with disabilities in college. This study was an initial step to gaining a better understanding of the experiences of college students and the self-determination skills they believe are essential for remaining in school. Although increasing numbers of students are entering postsecondary education, issues and challenges that prevent these students from successfully completing their degree programs remain. Further research is needed on the effective self-determination strategies and approaches to increase the retention rate of students with disabilities enrolled in postsecondary education programs. As part of this effort, the voices of college students with disabilities are essential to enhance and expand the knowledge and information on effective self-determination methods and strategies to

not only assist students in entering postsecondary education programs but also assist students in meeting the demands in the college environment to remain in school and complete their degree programs.

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**Elizabeth Evans Getzel**, MA, is director of postsecondary education initiatives with the Rehabilitation Research and Training Center on Workplace Supports at Virginia Commonwealth University.

**Colleen A. Thoma,** PhD., is the director of doctoral studies in the School of Education and an associate professor in the Department of Special Education and Disability Policy at Virginia Commonwealth University. She conducts research on student self-determination in educational planning, teacher education practices, and applications of universal design to transition planning and services.