

# Supporting Students with Disabilities

## Recruitment and Retention Super Strategies

### INTRODUCTION

**T**he term “disability” means with respect to an individual... a physical or cognitive impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such an individual, a record of such an impairment, or being regarded as having such an impairment. (The term “impairment” does not include characteristics of or predisposition to illness or disease). For the purpose of Perkins special populations, an individual with disabilities can be defined as an individual who, with or without reasonable accommodation, can perform the essential functions of the employment position (or academic program) that such individual holds or desires to hold. Consideration shall be given to the employer’s judgment as to what functions of a job are essential, and if an employer has prepared a written description before advertising or interviewing applicants for the job, this description shall be considered evidence of the essential functions of the job. (Section 3 of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 2010 (42 U.S.C. 12102)).<sup>2</sup>

When designing recruitment and retention efforts for students with disabilities, it is important to consider the wide range of students who qualify under this category and the unique barriers they face. Do not limit your efforts to removing barriers for just one type of disability and ensure you consider potential situations that may arise.

#### Did You Know?

Research has found that lack of accessibility and faculty members’ unwillingness to make accommodations were the primary reasons for student’s with disabilities’ withdrawal from postsecondary education. In fact, this sample of students with disabilities reported that “laboratory instructors” were the least accommodating of all faculty and students with disabilities believed they were seen as an “inconvenience” in laboratory settings.<sup>1</sup>

This study illustrates the importance of seeking the support of the larger college community in serving special populations. Training faculty and staff on disability services and the value of accommodations for students with disabilities is a useful strategy for fostering this support.



## Recruitment Super Strategies | RECOMMENDATIONS

**M** yths and stereotypes held by instructors, parents, and even learners themselves about the ability of individuals with disabilities can make recruiting learners with disabilities into Career and Technical Education (CTE) programs challenging. These preconceptions can lead to the belief that students with disabilities belong in CTE programs ONLY if they have the “talent.” When recruiting for CTE programs, it is critical to first consider each learner as an individual with unique strengths and interests, and then proceed to providing appropriate academic support, self-advocacy, and skill development instruction. Simply having and advertising support services is not sufficient to effectively recruit students with disabilities. Effective recruitment requires a multilayer approach to identify students with disabilities, reach them with your message, reduce barriers to their postsecondary enrollment, and meet the needs of other stakeholders who can assist in recruitment and retention of those students.

### Seek assistance from potential recruiting partners.

#### Secondary schools

- Develop strong relationships with school administrators, staff, and faculty to avoid confusion of multiple “gatekeepers”.
- Use students’ word-of-mouth as a mechanism for spreading the recruitment message.

#### Parent groups

- Reach out to major organizations and support groups either in-person or online.
- Include parents in recruitment and career exploration activities to encourage word-of-mouth recruitment.
- Participate in professional conferences for secondary education and special education professionals in order to engage with industry professionals with access to students during their decision-making and transition periods.

#### Current Students with disabilities

- Use students as advocates in recruiting efforts, either formally or informally. Students with disabilities can provide a first-person assessment of potential students and serve as an example that all students can succeed in CTE programs.

#### Adult Education (AE) programs

- Develop partnerships with AE programs at your institution and in your community. Students with disabilities are statistically more likely to drop out of high school, and these partnerships can help identify students who can be funneled into the CTE recruitment pipeline.
- Provide AE programs or organizations with information about the disability services provided.



### Create targeted recruitment materials.

- Design content that reinforces that students with disabilities belong in CTE because they are capable and have the necessary talent, not that “if they have talent...then they belong.”
- Use media that potential students are most likely to access when disseminating marketing that supports CTE programs. Social media, email, and website marketing can be very effective with this audience, but ensure that content is designed in accessible formats. However, don't ignore more traditional media such as TV, radio, and newspapers.
- Include images of individuals with disabilities engaging in CTE programs and activities in recruitment content whenever possible. Ensure that any needed releases (especially for minors) have been secured. Quotes from CTE participants and personal testimonials can also be very effective.
- Provide materials to members of your recruitment network.
- Publicize support services and presence of disability resource centers.
  - ✓ The presence of disability services is a key factor when students with disabilities consider postsecondary institutions.
- Encourage all students to explore CTE fields and make decisions separate from stereotypes or preconceived notions.
- Establish a center with flexible hours where learners may access computerized career information software to assist them in determining their interests and aptitudes.
- Present a realistic picture of the skills involved to work in a field. Assumptions about skills needed for a career can act as a barrier even if they are untrue.



#### Did You Know?

Research has found that the determining factors in the college selection process for students using wheelchairs were the academic majors available at the university, the physical accessibility of the campus, and a strong disability services office. Independence was key to successful transition to college environment. Self-advocacy was also highlighted as a key factor in college success.<sup>3</sup>

## Retention Super Strategies | RECOMMENDATIONS

**R**etention efforts for students with disabilities can be divided into two broad categories: providing support services and using accessible instructional strategies. Specific approaches must be adaptable based on the disabilities encountered; however, using recommended strategies may provide benefits for all students, including those with disabilities that are undisclosed.

- Examine the possibility of using alternative instructional strategies to increase learner persistence in the program. Examples include Direct Instruction, Universal Design, and Strategy Instruction.
  - ✓ Direct Instruction: ensure equitable standards and accessible options for all students.
  - ✓ Universal Design: a method in which the instructor
    - uses multiple means of representation to provide varied means of acquiring knowledge,
    - uses multiple means of expression to allow students to demonstrate their knowledge in various ways and formats,
    - uses multiple means of engagement to make use of student's interests.
  - ✓ Strategy Instruction: a method that teaches students about learning strategies and increases their ability to self-regulate, self-monitor, and self-evaluate.
- Create a welcoming, safe, challenging, and non-stigmatizing learning environment that meets the individual learner's needs.
- Provide learner support programs such as group discussions, individual meetings, active mentoring, core academic support, and other community service activities.
- Implement comprehensive retention initiatives including orientation and peer-mentoring programs to target at-risk CTE learners.
- Send introductory letters to all learners and inform them of available support services (i.e., childcare, transportation, and disability services).
- Engage in the interactive process of determining what other accommodations are needed to achieve successful retention.
- Offer support services that include: counseling services, reading remediation, tutoring, attendance monitoring, or after-school clubs.
- Provide professional development for instructors and advising staff to allow them to provide better service to students with disabilities.
- Accommodations need to be individually selected and matched to students' needs.

### Sources:

<sup>1</sup> Hill, J. L. "Speaking Out: Perceptions of Students with Disabilities Regarding Adequacy of Services and Willingness of Faculty to Make Accommodations." *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 11, no. 1, 1-13.

<sup>2</sup> Strengthening Career and Technical Education for the 21st Century Act H.R.2353, 115th Cong., (2018) (enacted).  
<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/2353/text?r=2>.

<sup>3</sup> Wessel, Roger, Darolyn Jones, Christina Blanch, and Larry Markle. "Preenrollment Considerations of Undergraduate Wheelchair Users and Their Post-enrollment Transitions." *Journal of Postsecondary Education and Disability* 28, no. 1 (2015): 57-71.