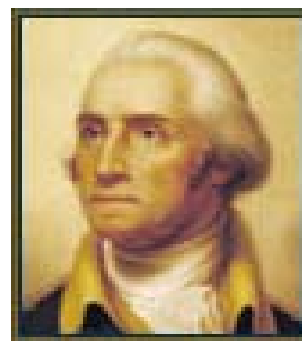


A POSTSECONDARY RESOURCE  
GUIDE FOR STUDENTS WITH  
PSYCHIATRIC DISABILITIES



*By Pamela M. Ekpone, Ed.D. and Rebecca Bogucki, Ed.D.*

Each year, up to fifty million people in the United States (more than one in every five individuals) have a clearly diagnosable mental disorder (The National Institute of Mental Health, 2001). Although individuals of all ages are affected, mental illness is particularly challenging for students in late adolescence and early adulthood, many of who are making plans for employment and higher education. The onset of mental illness at this critical stage of life can severely disrupt other important developmental processes, such as developing relationships, forming a social network, choosing a mate, and fostering needed self-determining skills. Additionally, the primary focus of students with mental illness can shift from academic achievement and life planning to coping with psychiatric symptoms. The demands of a mental illness may also cause educators, family members, and counselors to neglect the necessary steps toward successful college and career planning. Establishing vocational and educational goals beyond high school—and striving to achieve them—may help students with psychiatric disabilities to reintegrate into their communities, to gain much needed self-esteem, to avoid debilitating cycles of underachievement and underemployment, and help to lessen the disabling effects of psychiatric disabilities.

According to the United States Department of Education, more than nine percent of undergraduates enrolled in the 1999-2000 school

year reported having a disability, and approximately 17 percent of these reported having some type of mental impairment (National Postsecondary Student Aid Study: 2000).

Students with psychiatric disabilities and their families should know that higher education institutions are required to provide all students equal opportunities for effective participation, regardless of disability. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by recipients of federal financial assistance (nearly all colleges and universities receive such assistance), and, more recently, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA), prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability by public entities, including public colleges and universities.

Higher education substantially increases employment rates and is, therefore, a powerful tool for enhancing the life quality and independence of people with disabilities. A National Organization on Disability survey concluded that college graduates with disabilities were 63% more likely to be employed than their counterparts without degrees (NOD/Harris, 1998). This statistic reflects the importance of postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities, and suggests that students with

psychiatric disabilities might similarly benefit from higher education.

### Definition

The terms *mental illness*, *psychiatric disability*, and *psychiatric disorder* are often used interchangeably in research and academic literature. For the purposes of this guide, however, the following definitions and distinctions for the terms mental illness and psychiatric disorder will apply:

*Mental illness* refers to a wide range of behavioral, emotional, or psychological conditions. If and when these conditions interfere significantly with any major life activity (or activities), such as a person's ability to work, learn, think, care for oneself, or interact with others, they are referred to as *psychiatric disabilities*.

Each student's experience with psychiatric disability is unique. The impact of any psychiatric disability may be further influenced by a variety of factors including history of the illness, age at the time of diagnosis, associated symptoms, side effects of medications, personality and temperament, and available support systems at home, on campus, and in the community. Although many individuals with psychiatric disabilities benefit from treatments that include and frequently combine medication and psychotherapy, symptoms and their accompanying impact may reoccur at regular intervals. Thus, the unpredictable nature of mental illness and disability can make consistent school patterns difficult to maintain. Consequently, some students require only occasional support, and others more substantial and continual support to thrive academically and socially.

### Functional Limitation

Symptoms associated with psychiatric disabilities impact each individual differently and can impact many areas of functioning. Traveling to classes on crowded public transportation systems, standing in lines in book stores and dining commons,

initiating social interactions, contributing to classroom discussions, and perceiving social cues are all potential challenges for students with psychiatric disabilities. Psychiatric disabilities can directly or indirectly interfere with thinking skills, pace of learning, judgment (e.g., choosing how many courses to take or when to withdraw from classes), short-term memory, processing of information, concentration, reading, writing, organization and study skills, and motivation.

Additional functions that may be impacted by psychiatric disabilities include:

- Screening out environmental stimuli
- Maintaining stamina
- Handling time pressures and multiple tasks
- Interacting with others
- Receiving and responding to negative feedback
- Reacting to change

(Soydan, 1997).

In order to meet the academic and social challenges of a college or university setting, students need a detailed understanding of the nature of their disabilities and an awareness of the general impact that their disabilities have on learning. The more that students know about their illness, the more effectively they can self-advocate, and the more likely they are to achieve their educational goals. Familiarity with the characteristics of a particular disability and the associated functional limitations are also crucial to obtaining any needed support in a postsecondary program. Students should be particularly mindful of any limitations posed by their disabilities in order to set attainable goals for education and employment.

In addition to recognizing a student's limitations resulting from psychiatric disabilities, college level coordinators of disability support services also may wish to consider the correlation between various psychiatric disabilities and functional

limitations when designing and implementing academic adjustments and supports.

### **Academic Adjustments**

Section 504 and the ADA prohibit discrimination on the basis of disability against people with disabilities. Each student who applies for admission to a postsecondary institution must meet the institution's *essential* admission requirements and may not be denied admission on the basis of disability.

Section 504 and the ADA require that academic adjustments be made available to ensure that schools do not discriminate on the basis of disability. Academic adjustments include modifications to academic requirements and auxiliary aids and services. Examples of such modifications and services include priority registration, reduced course load, course substitution, note takers, recording devices, sign language interpreters, and extended time for testing.

The appropriate academic adjustment(s) are determined based upon each student's disability and individual needs. The following is a list of academic adjustments that may be warranted depending upon a particular student's needs and disability:

- Priority registration
- Assistance completing registration materials and financial aid applications
- Extended time for exams
- Change of location for exams/private test setting
- Priority parking
- Elevator key to access campus facilities
- Access to a lounge for composure and stress reduction
- Note taker or tape recorder
- Seating arrangement modification
- Beverages allowed in class (e.g., for thirst resulting from medication)
- Textbooks on tape

- Test accommodations
- Alternative formats for students to demonstrate course mastery
- Use of computer software programs or other technical assistance
- Flexibility in determining full time status
- Assignment assistance during hospitalization

(Brinkerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002; Taymans, West, & Sullivan, 2002; Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation, 1997).

When providing academic adjustments, postsecondary institutions are not required to lower or substantially modify the essential requirements of the program. For example, although a school may be required to provide extended testing time, it is not required to change the substantive content of a test. In addition, postsecondary programs do not have to make modifications that would fundamentally alter the nature of a service, program, or activity or would result in undue financial or administrative burdens. Finally, postsecondary programs do not have to provide personal attendants, individually prescribed devices, readers for personal use or study, devices or services of a personal nature, such as tutoring and typing.

Specific adjustments are not mandatory; instead, they should be discussed, selected, and arranged in consultation with the student, the instructor, and DSS or similar personnel. Further, any request for specific academic adjustments should be made in a timely manner, preferably early in, if not before, the quarter or semester. Thus, working together and following established procedures, faculty members, DSS personnel, and students can ensure that appropriate academic adjustments are identified and administered.

There may be instances when appropriate academic adjustments are not sufficient to meet the particular needs of a student with a psychiatric disability. A serious intensification of symptoms may require a student to withdraw, if only

temporarily. However, despite possible intermittent interruptions in schooling, with encouragement from family, school personnel, and peers, students with psychiatric disabilities can achieve their postsecondary educational goals.

### **Documenting the Need for an Academic Adjustment**

To establish that an individual in postsecondary education has a psychiatric disability and is covered under Section 504 and the ADA, the documentation must meet two criteria: first, it must establish that a disability exists, and second, it must demonstrate that academic adjustment is necessary. A disability necessitating such an academic adjustment is characterized by a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. Such activities include functions such as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning and working.

A qualified professional must document the disability. A qualified professional is one who can conduct the necessary assessments, determine a diagnosis of a psychiatric disability, and make recommendations for academic adjustments. The professional's qualifications should include comprehensive training, expertise in differential diagnoses of psychiatric disabilities, and appropriate licensure or certification. A report from an educator who is qualified to address the instructional needs that arise from the diagnosis or symptoms might also be included.

For the purposes of academic adjustments for students with psychiatric disabilities, documentation may include the following:

- Diagnosis by a licensed professional, date of the current diagnostic evaluation, and date of the original diagnosis. The report should appear on professional letterhead, and be dated and signed.

- Description of the diagnostic criteria including present symptoms and diagnostic tests used.
- Description of how the psychiatric condition interferes with or impacts the student's ability to participate in the education process.
- Treatment and medications currently prescribed or in use that relate to the student's ability to participate in all aspects of the academic environment.
- Suggestions of academic adjustments that might be appropriate in an educational environment and that are supported by a disability-related rationale. (Brinkerhoff, 2002; Lissner, 2002; Office of Disability Policy, 2001; AHEAD, 1997.)

Disability-related information must be treated and handled as medical information (Jarrow, 1997). Such information should be collected and maintained on separate forms stored in secure files with access limited to members of the DSS office. The information is not to be shared with people outside the school, and can be accessed only with the student's permission (Family Education Rights and Policy Act, Amended 1996). At the student's request, a letter from the DSS office verifying a disability and listing appropriate academic adjustments may be provided to his/her professors. Further details about the nature of the disability are not required.

### **To Disclose or Not to Disclose**

There is no legal requirement for students to disclose their disabilities, nor can institutions make inquiries to determine whether an individual has a disability. Institutions are required to provide accommodations only for the *known* disabilities of a student. If a student with a disability needs support services or academic adjustments, he or she must request such supports or adjustments through the appropriate campus procedures. Thorough and complete

documentation, as described above, must be provided to support the request.

While students are free to choose whether or not to disclose their disabilities, they must also be aware that colleges and universities are not required to provide academic adjustments if they have not been notified of a student's need for accommodation. Students and their families should also remember that accommodations are designed not to guarantee success but to ensure equal access. Thus, students who have been appropriately accommodated may not hold institutions accountable for poor or failing academic performance.

Of course, there are many reasons why students with psychiatric disabilities may not wish to disclose specific information about their disability. Such disabilities are frequently hidden—or unseen—and therefore may encounter misunderstanding and even skepticism from individuals who don't understand them. For example, a student with disabling anxiety who misses class due to strong side effects from medication or an elevation of symptoms may encounter frustration from faculty and students who think the student is being lazy or irresponsible. Some students may be in denial about their disabilities or, because of social stigma, may avoid conveying their concerns or need for help to others. Others may find it demeaning to ask for help or not recognize the impact of the disability on their lives. Disclosure can be especially problematic in academic settings where students feel their worth is measured by intellectual ability.

### **Disability Support Services Office (DSS)**

To assist students with disabilities in obtaining services and benefits, many universities have established offices of disability support services. Before contacting the Disability Support Services office, students need to understand that postsecondary services are not a continuation of special education services from secondary school programs. As adult consumers of higher

education, postsecondary students are expected to take full responsibility for their educational experience.

Making the decision to connect to campus resources is a good indicator of self-advocacy and responsibility. Since there is no automatic referral from Admissions or other campus offices, students are encouraged to contact the DSS office directly prior to or upon admission. Registering with DSS will ensure that students receive appropriate services, including accommodations necessary for orientation programs or required placement exams. A copy of the eligibility guidelines can be obtained from each college or university prior to application or registration from the DSS.

Services offered by DSS might include: consideration for a range of academic adjustments, accommodations from faculty members, consultation with faculty and staff, referral to other campus programs or professionals within the community, and referral for disability-related housing needs. Such services are designed to eliminate competitive disadvantages in an academic environment while preserving academic integrity. In addition, DSS personnel typically are active within their college or university communities, providing presentations, consultations, and written material to educate faculty and staff on psychiatric disabilities, functional limitations, and appropriate academic adjustments.

### **Managing the Postsecondary Experience**

Achieving success in higher education for students with psychiatric disabilities not only requires an ability to manage academic challenges, but also the challenges presented by the illness. The following are suggested services and strategies for students who are balancing the demands of higher education and psychiatric disability.

#### *Peer Support Groups*

Start or join a support group in which members are students facing similar challenges. This membership will help expand social contacts. Students who have adjusted well to the college or university atmosphere can become mentors to new members on campus and provide extra support during difficult times.

### *Family Support*

Family members can provide important financial, emotional, and social support, such as encouragement to persevere, willingness to discuss problems and act as “sounding-boards”, refuge whenever a break is needed, and relief from the added stress of financial worries.

### *Mental Health Professionals*

Mental health professionals play an important role in assisting students with psychiatric disabilities to function effectively on campus. DSS or campus health staff should be able to provide students with names or referrals for mental health professionals in the surrounding community. If necessary, contact with the therapist at home could be arranged on a regular basis for continuing support. It is important for students to distinguish between the education-related support they receive on campus and the more intensive, treatment-oriented support they receive in the community.

### *Inner Resources*

To manage the academic and social demands of higher education, students need to understand their disabilities, develop effective coping strategies to manage their symptoms, accept strengths and limitations, and have access to, and seek when needed, supports on and off campus.

### *University Resources*

Students with psychiatric disabilities may need to access campus supports for encouragement or for referrals to outside agencies and services.

Students should maintain and keep close by a folder or file with important information, such as a list of required courses and the total number of required credit hours, a list of the names and direct phone numbers for DSS personnel, copies of any accommodation requests, names of effective medications, and phone numbers for campus mental health services, community-based professionals, and pharmacies.

Project management and study skills are also important tools for students with psychiatric disabilities. Students are encouraged to take advantage of any seminars or tutorials that teach skills such as long-term and advanced planning and breaking down projects and tasks into smaller, more manageable parts. Also, many campuses have learning centers where such skills are taught and where tutoring services are made available.

College-level learning is demanding in and of itself. Add to it the social and personal developmental challenges that students are likely to encounter, and it's easy to become quickly overwhelmed. Students with psychiatric disabilities will need to become their own, best advocates if they are to succeed. That includes understanding the limitations presented by their disability and adjusting goals accordingly, as well as maintaining open communications with faculty members and DSS personnel when academic difficulties arise. It also requires determination to persevere.

If students must leave their programs temporarily, they should officially withdraw to avoid failure by default, or arrange to have an “incomplete” recorded so that the option to complete the requirements at a later time remains available. In short, students should be encouraged not to give up. They should become familiar with the resources available on campus and use them whenever the need arises.

### *Self-Advocacy*

Effective self-advocacy requires that students understand their rights and responsibilities as students with disabilities on campus. In other words, they must assume responsibility for their education and for their disability, learn about any available support services, register with the DSS office, if they need support, and have complete documentation of the disability on hand. These students also must actively tend to their own wellness by practicing a program for managing symptoms and by maintaining a support network of friends, family, and professionals.

### *Financial Assistance*

Contact the college or university's financial aid office for information about any sources of financial assistance, including federal Pell Grants, assistance from the state office for vocational rehabilitation, and any state-based and campus-based prizes and awards. Such assistance can help to reduce the debt burden of students with disabilities who may be challenged to meet their loan obligations. If at any time the psychiatric disability prevents repayment of student loans, contact the lender immediately and request a medical deferment. Note that granting deferment of payment is not automatic. Students should continue to make payment until they are notified that the deferment has been processed and approved. If not, the loan may be in default, a status that can be very difficult to reverse.

### **Summary**

Students with psychiatric disabilities can succeed in degree granting postsecondary programs. Once the decision to attend a college or university is made, students with psychiatric disabilities should become knowledgeable about the following:

- specific information about their particular psychiatric disability and any resulting limitations
- procedures and requirements for accessing available services and support on campus

- names of personnel who can assist with program and support services
- self-advocacy skills

The challenges posed by psychiatric disabilities are many and varied, and for students whose lives are impacted, postsecondary success can depend upon the types and extent of services received. Therefore, it is imperative for the student with a disability to access services in a timely manner. When accessed early on by an informed, able self-advocate, postsecondary programs and services that facilitate and support the participation of people with psychiatric disabilities can produce positive outcomes (Unger, Pardee, & Shaffer, 2000). These supportive programs recognize that students with disabilities can benefit from higher education and can participate fully and successfully on college and university campuses.

## **RESOURCES AND LINKS**

### **Government Information and Assistance**

ADA Technical Assistance Program  
US Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20530  
(800) 514-0301  
[www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/taprogram.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/taprogram.htm)

Americans with Disabilities Information Line  
US Department of Justice  
950 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20530  
(800) 514-0301  
[www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/infoline.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/infoline.htm)

Center for Mental Health Service  
Office of Consumer, Family and Public  
Information  
5600 Fishers Lane, Room 15-105  
Rockville, MD 20857  
(800) 789-2647  
(866) 889-2647 (TTY)  
[www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs](http://www.mentalhealth.org/cmhs)

Clearinghouse on Adult Education  
Division of Adult Education  
Office of Vocational and Adult Education  
US Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20202  
(800) 227-0216  
<http://ericacve.org/>

Federal Student Aid Information Center  
PO Box 84  
Washington, DC 20044  
(800) 433-3243  
(800) 730-8913 (TTY)  
[www.fafsa.ed.gov](http://www.fafsa.ed.gov)

National Institute on Disability and Rehabilitation  
Research  
US Department of Education  
400 Maryland Avenue, S.W.  
Washington, DC 20202-2572  
(202) 205-8134  
(202) 205-4475 (TTY)  
[www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/nidrr/](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/osers/nidrr/)

National Institute of Mental Health  
Office of Communications  
6001 Executive Boulevard, Room 8184, MSC  
9663  
Bethesda, MD 20892-9663  
(301) 443-4513  
(866) 615-NIMH (6464)  
(301) 443-8431 (TTY)  
[nimhinfo@nih.gov](mailto:nimhinfo@nih.gov)  
[www.nimh.nih.gov](http://www.nimh.nih.gov)

Office on the Americans with Disabilities Act  
Civil Rights Division  
US Department of Justice  
PO Box 66118  
Washington, DC 20035-6118  
(202) 514-0301  
[www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm](http://www.usdoj.gov/crt/ada/adahom1.htm)

Social Security Administration  
Office of Public Inquiries  
Windsor Park Building

6401 Security Boulevard  
Baltimore, MD 21235  
(800) 772-1213  
(800) 325-0778 (TTY)  
[www.ssa.gov](http://www.ssa.gov)

### Related Organizations

American Psychiatric Association  
1400 K Street, NW  
11<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Washington, DC 20005  
(800) 368-5777  
(202) 682-6850 (FAX)  
[apa@psych.org](mailto:apa@psych.org)  
[www.psych.org](http://www.psych.org)

Anxiety Disorders Association of America  
8730 Georgia Avenue, Suite 600  
Silver Spring, MD 20910  
(240) 485-1001  
(240) 485-1035 (FAX)  
[www.adaa.org](http://www.adaa.org)

Association on Higher Education and Disability  
(AHEAD)  
PO Box 540666  
564 Main Street, Suite 209  
Waltham, MA 02452  
(781) 788-0003 (V/TTY)  
(781) 788-0033 (FAX)  
[ahead@ahead.edu](mailto:ahead@ahead.edu)  
[www.ahead.org](http://www.ahead.org)

Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law  
1101 15<sup>th</sup> Street, NW  
Suite 212  
Washington, DC 20005  
(202) 467-5730  
(202) 223-0409  
[www.bazelon.org](http://www.bazelon.org)

Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation  
Boston University  
940 Commonwealth Avenue West  
Boston, MA 02215

(617) 353-3549  
(617) 353-7700 (FAX)  
[www.bu.edu/cpr/](http://www.bu.edu/cpr/)

GW HEATH Resource Center  
National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary  
Education for Individuals with Disabilities  
The George Washington University  
2121 K Street, Suite 200  
Washington, DC 20037  
(800) 544-3284 (V/TTY)  
(202) 973-0908 (FAX)  
[heath@heath.gwu.edu](mailto:heath@heath.gwu.edu)  
[www.heath.gwu.edu](http://www.heath.gwu.edu)

Mental Health Resource Center  
National Mental Health Association  
2001 North Beauregard Street  
12<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Alexandria, VA 22311  
(800) 969-NMHA (6642)  
(800) 433-5959 (TTY)  
[www.nmha.org/infoctr](http://www.nmha.org/infoctr)

National Mental Health Consumers' Self-Help  
Clearinghouse  
1211 Chestnut Street, Suite 1207  
Philadelphia, PA 19107  
(800) 553-4539  
(215) 636-6312 (FAX)  
[info@mhselphelp.org](mailto:info@mhselphelp.org)  
[www.mhselphelp.org](http://www.mhselphelp.org)

### Related Monographs

*Frequently Asked Questions by Educators About  
Students with Psychiatric Disabilities: Tips and  
Resources on the Rehabilitation Act, ADA,  
Academic Adjustments, and Support*  
By Anne Sullivan Soydan  
Order From:  
Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation  
Boston University  
940 Commonwealth Avenue West  
Boston, MA 02215  
(617) 353-3549

[www.bu.edu/cpr/catalog/articles/1997/macdonald-wilson1997.pdf](http://www.bu.edu/cpr/catalog/articles/1997/macdonald-wilson1997.pdf)

*Guidelines for Documentation of Psychiatric  
Disabilities in Adolescents and Adults*  
By the Task Force on Psychiatric Disabilities  
Order Form:  
Educational Testing Service  
Rosedale Road  
Princeton, NJ 08541  
(609) 734-5410  
[www.ets.org/disability/psypley.html](http://www.ets.org/disability/psypley.html)

*Reasonable Accommodations for People with  
Psychiatric Disabilities: An On-Line Resource for  
Employers and Educators*  
Order From:  
Center for Psychiatric Rehabilitation  
Boston University  
940 Commonwealth Avenue West  
Boston, MA 02215  
(617) 353-3549  
[www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom/](http://www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom/)

*Students with Disabilities Preparing for  
Postsecondary Education: Know Your Rights and  
Responsibilities, 2002*  
Order From:  
US Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights  
C/O Education Publications Center  
PO Box 1398  
Jessup, MD 20794-1398  
[www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html](http://www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/transition.html)

### Other Helpful Websites

#### **American Psychological Association: Consumer Help Center**

<http://helping.apa.org>

Provides brochures, fact sheets and an online  
psychologist referral service for persons affected  
by mental disorders, their families, and others  
who care about them.

#### **1st Person**

[www.1stpm.org](http://www.1stpm.org)

An on-line mental health magazine devoted to the perspectives of people who have had mental health conditions. Visitors are invited to send in material for the magazine.

### **Mental Health Consumer Concerns**

[www.sonic.net/~mhcc](http://www.sonic.net/~mhcc)

Nonprofit, advocacy organization whose focus includes legal rights and self-determination of all mental health clients within communities and in treatment facilities.

### **The MentalHealth.Net Directory**

[www.mentalhealth.net](http://www.mentalhealth.net)

Offers a searchable database for locating mental health professionals. Professionals are invited to add their names or update their information in the directory.

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accom.html](http://www.bu.edu/cpr/reasaccom/educa-<br/>accom.html) (18 June 2002).