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Immigrant Students Can Have Disabilities:

We Just Don't Know About It

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A recent Canadian survey demonstrated that completion of a higher education degree is a determinant factor in employment. The survey revealed that the link between completing a higher education degree and employment was strongest for immigrants (Statistics Canada, 2015). It is therefore very important to help immigrant students, including immigrant students with disabilities, complete their studies. However there are barriers to overcome.

Research by the Adaptech Research Network established that immigrant students are less likely than Canadian-born students to declare having a disability or to register for disability services (Catherine Fichten and Mary Jorgensen, 2015, personal communication). Similar findings were reported in a study of elementary school children (Morgan et al., 2015), with immigrant students being less likely to be identified as having a disability.

Part of the problem with not declaring that one has a disability is neglecting to register for campus-based disability-related services. Data show that among college students, students with disabilities who were registered for disability services were

as satisfied with their college experience as students without disabilities. Least satisfied were students with disabilities who had not registered for access services (Jorgensen, Fichten, & Havel, 2012). In addition, the research has demonstrated that satisfaction with college experience is related to academic persistence.



Since registration for disability services, if there is a need, seems to be an important contributor to satisfaction with college life and with academic persistence, making sure that immigrant students register for the necessary disability services, if they need to, is crucial. These services can include preferential registration, extended time for exams and assignments, and note-takers. A question then arises: How can we, as professionals, ensure that immigrant students with disabilities get access to the services they need to be successful in academe?

There are many reasons why few immigrant students with disabilities declare having a disability and register with their school's disability center. Disabilities, in general, can be seen as a taboo, or in some cultures having a label related to disabilities is seen in a negative light. Furthermore immigrant students may hide their disabilities to prevent being a hindrance to their families. Another reason for immigrant students with disabilities not to register for needed disability services is lack of knowledge about disabilities and about the useful disability services that can be made available to them. They may view the disability as a permanent sentence without hope.



In the optics of a systematic approach, involving the family of the immigrant student with a disability in the educational process can be beneficial. The first thing to address is language. Language is one of the main obstacles to family involvement in the immigrant student's educational process (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). Language not only prevents the family of the immigrant student from understanding the documentation required by the school, it also prevents the family from communicating effectively with the establishment (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). One way for the professional to bridge the language barrier is to have an interpreter present at meetings between the immigrant student and their family and the professional, if language is thought to be a potential issue. Professionals should also provide information both orally and in a written form to the immigrant student and to their family to ensure that information is accessible (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002).



College experience satisfaction by gender as a function of condition (Disabilities registered with Service Center, Disabilities not registered, and no disabilities)

Professionals should inform parents about their rights and their role in their child's education so that they know that they have power inside a system that can be intimidating for newcomers (Al-Hassan & Gardner III, 2002). For many immigrant families, the concept of family involvement in the educational process of their young adult child is new and can be disorienting (Lai & Ishiyama, 2004). Making sure that the family understands that they may be a part of their child's educational process is crucial. Also remember to be careful with word choice when informing immigrant students and their families about the possibility of a disability, since this is a topic that is taboo in some cultures. Instead of opening the conversation with the topic of disability, talking about unusual behaviours and difficulties, and services available to assist students would be preferable.

It is not always easy for professionals to work with students with disabilities, nor is it to work with immigrant students. But when the two are combined, the challenge can seem overwhelming. It is by understanding the particularities and challenges associated with both situations that professionals will ensure the best possible outcome for such students.

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