Bridging the Employment Gap
FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES
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Overview

As companies expand their diversity initiatives to better include people with disabilities, they look to colleges and universities to source candidates for entry and mid-level positions. Often, however, employers have not been successful identifying students with disabilities and building a pipeline of talent. This is not due to a lack of qualified candidates, but rather a lack of access to students with disabilities.

At many institutions of higher education, the career services office, which assists students in preparing for and obtaining internships and employment and are the first line of contact for employers, lack a strong—or any—connection to the office of disabled student services, which ensures proper accessibility and accommodations on campus for students with disabilities. This disconnect leaves a gap, both for employers seeking to diversify their workforce and for students with disabilities who are not gaining access to the same services and opportunities as their peers without disabilities.

There are 1.4 million college students with disabilities (NCES, 2009), and the latest Harris Survey commissioned by the National Organization on Disability (NOD) and Kessler Foundation showed three-in-five college graduates with disabilities (60%) are
not working (2010 Kessler-NOD Survey of Americans with Disabilities, by Harris Interactive). This is an astounding number, and one that will continue to grow if we do not begin addressing employment opportunities for students with disabilities while they are still on campus.

Additionally, new regulations from the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs (OFCCP) require federal contractors to set a target of having 7% of their workforce be comprised of employees with disabilities, across job groups. This rule change—which will affect an estimated 170,000 companies doing business with the federal government—will have broad implications for university disability and career offices as employers look to them to source candidates in order to meet their hiring needs, as well as the newly expanded targets.

This paper will explore the problem of campus employment services for students with disabilities and the impact OFCCP guidelines will have on employers, colleges, universities and students with disabilities. As well, it will offer a case study example and recommendations as to what university disability offices, career services offices and employers can do to address this issue. If universities can bridge this gap by effectively addressing the “disconnect” in response to newly promulgated OFCCP regulations, they will help to improve employment opportunities and outcomes for students with disabilities and make recruiting efforts by employers more productive.
BACKGROUND

The National Organization on Disability is a 30 year-old cross-disability organization whose mission is to expand the participation and contribution of America’s nearly 56 million men, women, and children with disabilities. With a focus on employment, NOD seeks to increase job opportunities and economic self-sufficiency for the 29 million working-aged Americans with disabilities.

In 2010, NOD launched Bridges to Business, its signature employment program, to help companies diversify their workforces by including people with disabilities. Bridges to Business works side-by-side with employers to review and improve their human resources policies and diversity programs, including recruitment, hiring, and onboarding practices, internal training, talent development, and performance tracking. In addition to helping employers with their internal processes and programs, NOD also assesses the available disability employment service providers (locally or nationally, depending on each employer’s needs) and other resources to provide job candidates with disabilities. This dual assessment enables the company to understand how their existing programs benchmark against best practices and helps identify an appropriate partner to assist with expanding and evolving their disability program.

Drawing from the past three years of partnering with Fortune 1000 companies and the community organizations and universities that support them, NOD has begun to disseminate lessons learned on disability employment trends and best practices. The goal of this paper is to highlight a major issue identified from our work and offer recommendations to address it.
According to Todd Harbaugh, Executive Vice President and Chief Operating Officer of Sam’s Club North America, “one of the great obstacles faced by employers when diversifying their workforce is the difficulty in sourcing candidates with disabilities with the required skill sets necessary to fill entry-level to mid-level positions.” As employers expand their diversity initiatives to include people with disabilities, they naturally look to universities for qualified candidates. However, many have not been successful in their search for students with disabilities due to a lack of coordination and communication between the career services and disability offices, who respectively have access to “disability-friendly” employers and job seekers with disabilities.

NOD’s corporate and university partners both recognize the effects of this gap. According to Kara Leonard, former Program Coordinator, Office of Cooperative Education and Career Services at the Rochester Institute of Technology, “one of the greatest obstacles faced by career services practitioners in providing programming and services to students with disabilities is the disconnect that often exists between career services and disability services.” This is an important point and may be one of the reasons that explain why students with disabilities take twice as long to secure a job after graduation as other students.

Career service specialists are typically highly skilled in helping students explore career opportunities, develop resumes, and prepare for interviews, but lack the knowledge and capacity to assist companies that want to recruit students with disabilities. Career
offices do not have information as to which students registered with their office have disabilities. Furthermore, career services practitioners may feel that it would be unfair or illegal to try to identify or serve in a special way students with disabilities, since they are bound by confidentiality rules to protect disability-related information. In addition, career services specialists usually are not trained to offer the assistance that some students with disabilities require in order to make the transition from post-secondary education to employment. This assistance often includes more focused intervention and support in accessing career information, applying for internships, and filling out forms, assessing whether to disclose a disability to an employer, and determining whether to request accommodations. Additionally, university disability offices that do have the required expertise to address the needs of students with disabilities are often short-staffed and focus on the important accessibility needs of students while they pursue their education, versus the post-graduation employment process. When it comes to career counseling and assistance for these students, they generally recommend that the students contact their career offices.

Another part of the disconnect NOD staff uncovered is that disability, career and alumni offices usually do not have a system to track, measure, and share information on students with disabilities, such as the total number of students with disabilities, their individual contact information, areas of study, expected graduation dates and post-graduation employment status. This is in part because disability and career offices often adhere to strict confidentiality rules and do not share information. This gap is a good example of how rules meant to protect a group of people can end up excluding them from helpful services.
Some schools have been able to identify and address the disconnect issue through the use of “cooperative education” programs. These programs or “co-ops” resemble apprenticeships where students can apply what they are learning and gain career-related experience by alternating a period of study with one of paid work, often through a semester away from school. Typically administered by the career services office, these programs have helped some schools better support students with disabilities in their career transition, as they must go through the recruitment process before graduation in order to be hired for a co-op. Schools with strong co-op programs, such as Rochester Institute of Technology, have been able to identify students with disabilities who struggle with the recruitment and application process and can therefore analyze and address the roadblocks to their success. In so doing, these schools are able to achieve better employment outcomes for students with disabilities when they apply for full-time positions after graduation.
Why the Time is Ripe for Change

New regulations that incentivize federal contractors to employ people with disabilities present a tremendous opportunity, particularly when considered in the context of the increasing numbers of college graduates with disabilities who are unemployed. The research institute SRI International reported that the number of students with disabilities attending college is rising, citing that in 2010, 46% of young adults with disabilities were attending a college or university within four years of leaving high school, compared with 26% in 1990. This statistic, paired with the high unemployment rate for college graduates with disabilities, points to a growing pool of untapped talent.

Newly released guidelines (August, 2013) from the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs of the U.S. Department of Labor require most federal contractors and sub-contractors to set a target that 7% of their workforce, across all job groups, be comprised of employees with disabilities. In addition, the contractors are encouraged to list all job openings with the nearest employment or American Job Center and enter into partnerships with providers that serve individuals with disabilities, which may include colleges and universities. Career services practitioners need to anticipate that employers who are federal contractors are going to be knocking on their doors to find qualified candidates to meet the 7% target in the near future. By preparing and acting now, universities can continue to promote on campus recruiting, particularly from government contractors.
Universities will be well served by closing the gap between students with disabilities and career opportunities—their reputation as reliable providers of diverse candidates will grow among employers, while they provide job prospects and services to an underserved population of students.
Case Study Example: Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT)

The Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), located in Rochester, NY, is the fifteenth largest private university in the United States with over 17,000 undergraduate and graduate students from all 50 states and over 100 countries. RIT is made up of nine colleges, including the National Technical Institute for the Deaf (NTID) with over 1,300 students who are deaf or hard of hearing. RIT has an additional 725 students with various other disabilities.

Key support offices for RIT students include the Office of Co-op and Career Services, which provides a broad range of job search support services to all RIT students and alumni; the NTID Center on Employment, which provides specialized job search support services to students and alumni who are deaf or hard of hearing; the Disability Services Office, which ensures students with disabilities have equal access to programs, services and physical facilities; and the Spectrum Support Program, which provides comprehensive support to students with autism spectrum disorders who are registered with the Disability Services Office.

Each of these offices has individually provided support to students with disabilities. Until 2010, collaboration among these four offices was fairly minimal, partially as a result of the previously mentioned separation that often occurs between offices that provide academic support services and those that provide career support services. The idea that these four offices could work together to support students’ career goals simply had not been considered. While representatives within each office recognized that
students with disabilities were facing more complex challenges finding employment than students without disabilities, the limited level of collaboration made it challenging to gauge the scope of the issue and to identify which students with disabilities needed career support. In 2010, representatives from these offices realized that they needed to better deploy their existing knowledge, expertise, and resources to address the career service gaps identified among RIT’s students with disabilities.

To support this crucial collaboration at RIT, a career services employee was assigned to serve as the liaison between the Office of Co-op and Career Services, the NTID Center on Employment, the Disability Services Office, and the Spectrum Support Program to ensure aligned and comprehensive support. In addition, a team representing these four offices now meets regularly to discuss the challenges students with disabilities are facing in their job searches and to share best practices on how to support this population. These collaborative efforts led to the implementation of the following:

**Voluntary Release Form**

A voluntary release form was created, which gives permission to representatives from the Disability Services Office and the Spectrum Support Program to share a student’s name with the Office of Co-op and Career Services. Career services practitioners can then provide support to these students in a much more proactive manner, including targeted outreach about events and opportunities for job seekers with disabilities. To date, over 300 students with disabilities have elected to receive these email updates from the Office of Co-op and Career Services, and those students who are struggling to obtain employment can now be readily identified for outreach.
Training for Career Services Staff
Training for career services staff has been provided to address the specific needs of job seekers with disabilities. Further, the Office of Co-op and Career Services developed a series of online resources for students with disabilities and employers seeking to hire them, addressing topics like workplace accommodations, the disclosure process, and tips on recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees with disabilities.

Training for Students with Disabilities
A training course for students with disabilities on successfully navigating the job search process, with particular emphasis on soft skill development and ways to effectively disclose a disability to an employer, has been developed and jointly taught by representatives from career and disability services and autism support offices. Seven of the nine students who participated in the course in 2012 have since obtained employment, including positions with the U.S. Department of Defense, Johnson & Johnson, and Tyco Electronics.

A Team-Approach Model
A team-approach model has been implemented to support students with disabilities facing significant challenges with their job searches. With this model, appropriate representatives from the Office of Co-op and Career Services, the Disability Services Office, the Spectrum Support Program, academic advisors from the student’s department, and other applicable representatives meet to determine what supports are needed and how each party can best provide them. All seven students who participated in the 2012 pilot group obtained employment.
RECOMMENDATIONS

This case study provides an example of how the employment gap for graduating students with disabilities manifests itself and offers some ways it can be addressed. To overcome the disconnect, university career and disability offices throughout the country can take the following steps:

**COLLABORATION AND COMMUNICATION**

Career and disability service offices at colleges and universities should establish a working relationship based on the principles of collaboration and communication.

- **APPOINT A LIAISON** from the career services office who is specially trained and understands the needs of students to work specifically with the disability office. This will ensure a comprehensive approach to addressing the job search needs of students with disabilities, as well as employers looking to recruit students with disabilities.

- **CREATE A VOLUNTARY RELEASE FORM** for students to sign when registering with the disability office that gives permission to share the student’s name with the career services office.

- **IMPLEMENT A TRACKING SYSTEM** to retain students’ contact information (for those who have disclosed a disability and given permission by signing a release form), to measure their progress towards employment and to facilitate employer recruitment efforts. Such a database can provide career offices with...
an effective tool to quickly and easily identify students and post-graduate candidates with a specific skill set or area of study, giving employers a real-time talent assessment and a ready pool of qualified candidates. This can level the playing field for students with disabilities by allowing better access to employment opportunities, which are typically directed through career offices.

- **Establish cooperative education programs** to give students and school administrators the opportunity to test pilot the recruitment and application process before graduation. By identifying early on the hurdles faced by students with disabilities, universities have been able to address many barriers to entry, resulting in better employment outcomes for their students.

### Information Sharing

Employers and career and disability service offices should integrate disability-focused messaging into all recruitment outreach.

- **Use mass emails and text messages** to announce job openings to all students and create a special listserv to target students registered with the disability office.

- **Create an employer e-card** or electronic postcard, which companies can send to the university’s career and disability offices to announce job openings and highlight that their organization is “disability-friendly.”

- **Create an online job board** on both the disability and career offices’ websites and ask “disability-friendly” employers to announce that within their posting.
**Education and Awareness**
Public discussion to increase education and awareness is essential to promoting the inclusion of people with disabilities in all aspects of life, especially the workplace.

- **On Campus Education:** Share statistics with all students, faculty and staff about the number of students on campus with a disability. Be sure to provide information on apparent and non-apparent disabilities and disability disclosure. Ensure that students are aware of the job resources available through the career and disability offices and remind them of the companies that promote “disability-friendly” working environments. This kind of outreach can be especially important for students with disabilities who have not disclosed their status and may encourage them to do so without fear of exclusion.

- **Recruitment Education:** Ensure employers have an on campus presence at recruiting events and workshops. Encourage them to identify themselves as “disability-friendly,” possibly through a symbol, e.g., a colored ribbon on a representative’s lapel or a sticker badge.

- **Policy Awareness:** Stay abreast of OFCCP regulations and the implications of the regulations for employers, as well as the opportunities they will provide for students with disabilities and the career offices that serve them. For more information visit [www.dol.gov/ofccp](http://www.dol.gov/ofccp).
# Acknowledgments

The National Organization on Disability thanks the organizations who made this paper possible:

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About

The National Organization on Disability (NOD) is a private, non-profit organization that promotes the full participation and contributions of America’s 56 million people with disabilities in all aspects of life. Today, NOD focuses on increasing employment opportunities for the 79 percent of working-age Americans with disabilities who are not employed.

Founded in 1982, NOD is one of the oldest cross-disability organizations in the country, and remains one of the few organizations committed to representing all Americans with disabilities, regardless of their particular condition or circumstances.

Learn More

More information about our disability employment programs is available at www.NOD.org.

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Contact Us

National Organization on Disability
77 Water Street, Suite 204, New York, NY 10005
646-505-1191 | info@nod.org