

Summary of Student Interviews on Accommodations, 2011

Submitted by Ms. Judy Johnson, Consultant for the Nebraska Department of Education
August, 12, 2011

These interviews were conducted in March, 2011.

Background of the Organization Interviewed

The NYLC (Nebraska Youth Leadership Council) began in 2009. They are a group of young leaders from all across Nebraska who want to make a difference in the lives of other students with disabilities. The organization believes that young people should have a voice in the things that affect them and hope to better the existing services provided to young people through their outreach efforts. NYLC began as a single statewide youth council, for students 14 -21, but has expanded to include regional councils too. There are councils in east, central, and northeast Nebraska with plans of a council in western Nebraska. The students interviewed were from East and/or Northeast NYLC. The group is cosponsored by the Nebraska Department of Education Vocational Rehabilitation and Special Education Offices.

The Students

Half the students interviewed were in their first year of college and half were in high school. The questions were directed to both levels and as to what they remembered from high school and what is the current situation in the college or high school they are currently attending.

Preparation

The questions were sent to the leadership sponsor to be shared and discussed by the leadership council members prior to the interviews. The questions:

1. What does the term accommodation mean to you?
2. On a personal level what experience have you had with accommodations either in your present setting or in a previous one?
3. Did you take the NeSA? (With paper or pencil or online?)

4. How did you feel you performed on the test?
5. What could have been done to make you more successful than you already were?
6. Did you participate in your IEP meeting?
7. Were you allowed to help select the accommodations that would help you be more successful in the classroom or in extra-curricular activities?
8. What did your teachers do during classes to help you be successful?
9. What was the most difficult class and the easiest, and why?
10. Overall, what could your teachers and school do that would help you be the most successful student you can be and what role do you think the Youth Leadership Council could do to help others in the area of accommodations?

Interview Information

The students have a saying that they used frequently during the interview: “what’s important now” WIN! When speaking of accommodations, they all understood what accommodations mean to each of them and gave several good examples of how the school provided some things that were needed such as extended time in a different room, the test or a book being read to them, being placed close to the teacher so they could lip read, use of Dragon on the computer, use of power points so they could take notes and listen at the same time. Their frustration is the lack of originality on the part of the staff, even though the students said they asked for various things within the IEP. The excuse was often the school didn’t have the resources or if they did, the equipment or material came at the end of the first semester...far too late to be useful. The “timing” issue was brought up frequently by the students. Since all classrooms usually have their syllabus prepared several months ahead, for example, they wondered why they couldn’t order the audio book from the library or from the Commission for the Blind so that they arrived the first day of class. When asked again about “originality” several students said that in the IEP, there was a “check sheet” of things that could be done but that the team did not seem to be able to “stray” from that check list. In fact, the student’s ask if the “law” would prevent the IEP team from going beyond the check list. An example from a high school student was that the student was able to use a computer but only in the computer room which was difficult to get to and to schedule because all classes used the room. The student asked, during the IEP, that a lap top be provided which could be used in the classroom at all times. Then power points could then be down loaded to the computer and that the information is accessible at home through a flash drive. This was denied because there weren’t enough lap tops. There were also suggestions brought up in the IEPs (by the visually impaired) if the classroom could make sure that DVD’s,

power points, even making sure the board writing is of a larger font so all could see or be captioned.

All the students interviewed said they were very vocal in the IEP meetings. Several also said that they thought that the NYLC should prepare presentations, DVD's and workshops on how to "take control" of your own IEP. A couple of the high school students said they prepared their parents as to what they needed and what should be part of the IEP. Several of the interviewees said they would be more than willing to go to a school help during the IEP. This brought up the issue of confidentiality and if an "outsider" welcomed by the parent and student could attend. This topic when will be placed on the next agenda.

The majority of the students interviewed used the paper/pencil method of taking the NeSA. The majority also had extended time to take the test. All felt they did well but no one had seen their test scores which is something they all felt would have been very helpful in preparing for their next test. Even though several were proficient in computer work, none took the tests on line.

In the discussion of the various courses that were the hardest and easiest, the students as a whole said it was because of accommodations or the lack of accommodations that made the courses something they could succeed in to the best of their abilities. If the classroom teacher provided extra "help" then the students felt they could succeed and did. The students provided positive examples of how the classroom teachers provided what they called extra help. They also said most of the things the teachers provided were not in the IEP. In history and psychology, all the lecture notes were on power point and the teacher would hand each of us a flash drive with the power point. We all had lap tops in the high school classes and everyone in the college classes has a lap top. One of the students said that in the English classes, the teacher purchased (with their own money) the audio books in the spring so that there would be time to absorb the information (instead of trying to get the book far after class started). World history was at the top of all the lists as the "worse" classes. In spite of the information on the web, the teachers did not provide visual enhancement and either lectured or read from a text. No one mentioned math in any of the discussions.

Those students in college, said it was easier to get various accommodations they needed by discussing their needs with the vocational rehabilitation workers. One student did transfer from

a large state institution to a smaller college where they felt they were better understood and that their disability was better accommodated. The colleges are also accessible, more so than the high schools so accessible classrooms are not an issue. Most of the classrooms also have white boards (with all the accommodations needed for the visually impaired). One of the students was provided an AlphaSmart, a light weight word processor. The student was able to test out of keyboarding and commented that having faith in their ability was a rewarding experience.

The students indicated that one of the most difficult times in the high school is when there is a change in the resource room teacher because they have to “re-teach” the teacher.

The students all expressed concerned about what to do when the accommodations on the IEP aren't working. They all understood that the IEP is looked over once a year, however, several said that it was difficult to get the team together between times to make adjustments. They students acknowledged that the faculty is very busy but also knew that the team needs to respond. The students said the best way to enter the IEP meeting is to make sure you bring in alternatives to what is currently being used.

Overall Observations

Each student, high school or college level, expressed full knowledge of accommodations as needed by each individual. They all expressed that the IEP team often did not think outside the box. In going over the IEPs as part of the grant, it was very evident that this is case. Many IEPs contained a check list only, and it is clearly stated in the NDE Accommodations Guidelines. page 24: “Don't check every accommodation possible on a checklist simply to be “safe”.” The group of older students interviewed had many logical and creative ideas to help them achieve grade level content standards.