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Registering for access services in college: A focus on immigrant students with disabilities

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Transition from high school to college can be stressful for everyone, but especially for students with disabilities. However, many students adapt and flourish in their new academic environment. The challenge is to assist those who struggle in college.

An Adaptech Research Network study found that, in general, students are satisfied with college life. Surprisingly, students with disabilities who had registered for disability-related services at their college's access center were the ones most satisfied with their college experience. College access centers ensure that students' needs are met and that essential accommodations are in place. At different colleges these can include preferential registration, extended time for exams and assignments, and note-takers. Ranking second in satisfaction with college life were

the students without disabilities. Students with disabilities who had not registered for access services at their college reported the lowest satisfaction with college life.

The goal is for all students to enjoy their time in college and to learn and grow from it. Who are these students with disabilities that do not register for campus-based disability-related services? How can they be assisted?

A partial answer to this question is provided by another Adaptech Research Network study. Here it was found that immigrant students were less likely to report having a disability than Canadian-born students and, thus, less likely to register with their college's access center. Since registration for services is an important contributor to satisfaction with college life, it is necessary to make sure immigrant students with special needs register.

There are many reasons why few immigrant students with disabilities declare a disability. Disabilities as taboo is one reason that immigrant students may not seek assistance. In some cultures, a label related to disabilities is seen in a negative light. Others believe taking any action that makes someone "stand out" should be avoided. Some immigrant students may deny having a disability to prevent being a hindrance to their family. Another reason for not registering for access services is lack of knowledge about disabilities and available services. For example, a disability might be perceived as simply difficulty integrating into a new culture or environment. A disability might also be seen as a permanent sentence - without hope.

There are several ways to help immigrant students with disabilities register with their college's access center. One possibility is to have an interpreter present if language is an issue. Another method is to be careful with word choice when informing immigrant stu-

dents - or their parents - about the possibility of a disability. 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.

Making sure that all students, including immigrants with disabilities, feel comfortable and satisfied with their college experience is an ambitious but essential goal.

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