Articulating one’s needs and making informed decisions about necessary supports to meet those needs are essential survival skills for postsecondary students. For students who are deaf and hard of hearing, four important elements - knowledge of self, knowledge of rights, communication skills, and leadership skills – are central components of self-advocacy.

**Fostering Self-Advocacy Skills:**

**Essential components include:**

- **A strong team:** The student, parents, teachers, vocational rehabilitation counselors, and other disability service providers are part of a collaborative effort. A team better ensures that the student has a variety of opportunities to learn and practice requesting accommodations.

- **An early start:** Positive self-awareness and self-determination provides a strong foundation for successful self-advocacy. When self-advocacy skills are acquired early in life at home and in school, a student is better prepared to become an effective self-advocate.

- **An understanding of one’s own hearing loss:** Students who are deaf or hard of hearing must understand their own hearing loss and how it impacts communication in different environments so they can effectively explain their communication and accommodation needs, and contribute creative solutions.

- **Flexibility to explore what “fits”:** Students who are deaf or hard of hearing can be encouraged to explore and experiment with different accommodations to increase their familiarity and find out what works best for them.

- **An understanding of legal rights:** Students should recognize how laws related to accommodations apply in a variety of settings so they can educate others about “equal access under the law.”

**Practicing Self-Advocacy Skills:**

**Students have several opportunities to practice by:**

- **Participating in relevant meetings.** Individualized Educational Planning (IEP) meetings are good opportunities for high school students to showcase their self-advocacy skills. Similarly, adults who have VR support can participate in their Individualized Plan for Employment (IPE) meetings. Articulating and justifying one’s choices in an IEP or IPE meeting allows the person to take a lead role in the development of a plan that fits with his or her educational and/or employment goals, while offering an opportunity to practice the art of seeking accommodations.

- **Gaining work experiences:** Appropriately requesting accommodations is critical to successful self-advocacy. Students can practice this skill by participating in volunteer and school-sponsored work experiences, allowing them to experiment with various communication strategies in myriad settings. They’ll be able to try out their skills in a lower-stakes setting.

- **Enjoying social activities and family outings:** Social activities are often overlooked as opportunities to develop self-advocacy skills. Many deaf and hard of hearing students were raised in environments where well-meaning family and friends try to ‘take care of them.’ This denies the student an opportunity to request accommodations and learn strategies to navigate bureaucratic systems.

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