

Commission offers handicapped aid

By Christy Wicker
Staff Writer

If you have a mental or physical handicap that is a barrier to gainful employment, the Texas Rehabilitation Commission may pay your tuition.

The commission has opened an office on campus in 26B Davis Hall.

Its primary purpose, according to Robert Morrow, counselor, is counseling and guidance, but diagnostic and physical restoration as well as financial aid are available.

"We are a state agency," Morrow explained, "charged with the responsibility of trying to place or return handicapped individuals to gainful employment by several means, one of which is college training."

A campus office was first opened at UT Austin three years ago on a trial basis. It proved useful, Morrow said, and offices were established this summer at Texas Tech, NTSU, West Texas State, Stephen F. Austin, the University of Houston and East Texas State.

Morrow will act as an advisor to the Handicapped Students Association.

The rehabilitation office on campus now has about 120 clients with physical and mental disabilities ranging from cerebral palsy to antisocial behavior.

"There are some blind students on campus," Morrow added, "but there is a separate commission that provides the same services for the blind."

Clients with mental problems have what Morrow calls a "behavior disorder."

"This might be someone who is an ex-convict or a drug abuser," he said.

To be eligible for aid a student must have a disability that limits

employment. He must work toward a vocational goal and the agency must be convinced that he will be employable once his training is finished. Counselors help a client get a job once he graduates.

When a person applies for aid, diagnostic services are required to "substantiate that there is a disability."

"Then once the disability is established," said Morrow, "we might provide what we call physical restoration services."

This might include surgery, he said, "or if a student in order to continue in school needs a wheelchair or an artificial limb or a hearing aid or something of this nature, then we would provide that service if they were not financially able to."

"We in some instances provide room and board for students who can't afford it."

Tuition payment and diagnostic services are available regardless of financial situation. However, surgery, physical aids and living expenses are paid only when the student is unable to pay himself.

Not all disabled students are clients of the Vocational Rehabilitation Office, Morrow said.

"Some people think of us as a welfare type agency and they don't care to apply. Others just don't like government programs. Some of them are on scholarship and therefore don't need the tuition."

Names of students receiving aid from the office are confidential.

Morrow said that while the agency is a form of welfare, it is not a giveaway.

He compared it to the GI Bill, saying it has paid for itself "many times over."

"Any student who accepts aid from the office is expected to get a job when they graduate," he said. "Many of these people might never have been employable and they will pay many taxes in their life."

"We feel that everyone more than pays for what they get from it in taxes."