

Coming of Age— Learning Disabilities at the Postsecondary Level

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Increasing numbers of learning-disabled students are attending postsecondary institutions. According to the *American Freshman: National Norms for 1985*, the number of learning-disabled college students has increased 300 percent in less than a decade.

Who Are These Students?

Why are we seeing such a large increase in the number of learning-disabled students in college? In part this is due to the "coming of age" of those elementary and secondary students identified as learning disabled. Presently, one percent of all college freshman describe themselves as

learning disabled. These young adults have received diagnostic and remedial services that have enabled them to experience academic success. As they now enter college, they are as a group more articulate about their cognitive capabilities and the support services they need to achieve academic mastery. These learning-disabled students, in short, have begun to believe in and to demonstrate their abilities to achieve.

A second portion of the postsecondary learning-disabled population consists of students who have experienced difficulty in elementary or secondary schools. Despite their lack of formal diagnosis or intervention they have devised survival-level compensatory strategies. Many former academy students fall within this category. The unofficial accommodations and modifications made by sympathetic faculty and administration, and the personal coping mechanisms developed by the students themselves, provided an environment that guaranteed at least minimal academic success. These students

do not self-report as different learners. Instead, they enter college with an underlying layer of uncertainty about their abilities as students, and often with a behavioral overlay designed to mask this insecurity.

A third group of learning-disabled college students includes nontraditional learners. Societal and cultural changes currently demand that many people obtain increased education and/or training. This places great pressure upon a heretofore noncollege group. The requirements of postsecondary studies, coupled with an increased public awareness of learning disabilities, have led to a marked improvement in diagnostic services for the adult learner.

This group does not generally self-report as educationally handicapped or request special services; indeed, few may be aware of the appropriateness of a learning-disabled "label." Nonetheless, diagnostic evaluations often confirm the presence of a learning disability.

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What Do We Know About These Students?

Although the learning-disabled college population is highly diverse, certain broad generalizations can be made about such students:

- Learning-disabled postsecondary students are capable of mastering academic content.
- Alternative methods for learning and/or demonstrating this mastery may be needed.
- Instructors, counselors, and ad-

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ministrators must be sensitive to the personal/social and self-esteem issues often affecting learning-disabled college students.

- Support and resources must be available to these students without stigmatizing them.
- Support and resources must be available to faculty and administration as they learn how to deal effectively with learning-disabled students.

Definition

In practical terms, how do we define a learning disability at the college level? Learning disability can be diagnosed in individuals who exhibit a disorder in one or more of the central nervous system processes involved in perceiving or understanding concepts through verbal (spoken or written) or nonverbal means.

This disorder manifests itself in problems with listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling, or performing mathematical calculations. *Learning disability* has evolved as the general term for a variety of specific disabilities including minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, sequential memory disorder, and other problems. Since these factors impair information processing, they affect the person's ability to assimilate information through the senses and interpret or interrelate the knowledge. Because the

information does not always reach the brain accurately, the brain does not store it effectively for easy recall.

Necessary Skills for Academic Success

Teachers usually assume that by the time students reach the postsecondary level, they have mastered the basics of acquiring information: reading, writing, spelling, arithmetic, and language proficiency. In addition, postsecondary curricula also demand a much broader set of higher-level skills. These include listening, thinking, research, abstract reasoning, and speaking, as well as literacy in science, the ability to comprehend difficult technical material,

and competence in personal and social relationships.

Unfortunately, we cannot assume that all students have mastered these skills. Learning-disabled students, while capable of learning, may lack the strategies for doing so efficiently. Learning centers or special tutoring can help fill in the gaps to assure academic success.

Adaptations for Success

Learning-disabled students often do not thrive in the traditional college classroom. They struggle through lectures and panic when required to express themselves in writing. Such

students need to receive and transmit information in a form or modality that works best for them. Some are unable to communicate effectively through printing or cursive writing (dysgraphia). In this case, oral exams and reports offer a more valid evaluation of their learning than essay examinations. Others are, for all practical purposes, "lecture deaf" (aural receptive dysphasia), and benefit from the use of visual aids such as charts, maps, graphs, and diagrams.

Difficulties with sequential memory tasks involving letters (spelling), numbers (mathematics), and following step-by-step directions are commonplace. Often learning-disabled students will spend an inordinate amount of time on their assignments, even to the extent of depriving themselves of sufficient sleep.

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quently disorganized. Notebooks and class notes may be disheveled, time perception may be skewed, resulting in tardiness for classes and difficulty meeting deadlines. Often these students lack effective study skills and test-taking strategies.

Added to their cognitive difficulties, learning-disabled individuals may suffer from emotional problems. They may seem to lack motivation and reflect a poor self-image due to constant failure. They may feel panic-stricken and overwhelmed.

Strategies for Success

Unfortunately, many learning-disabled students come almost to the point of despair before they discuss their problems with their instructors. Of course greater benefit could be realized if the student were diagnosed and treated early. Even so, discussions born out of desperation can help personalize the student-teacher relationship and suggest possible instructional accommodations for that student. The following list provides some examples

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of accommodations/modifications:

Give clear written instructions.

Supplement oral directions with written guidelines.

Encourage the use of assignment books with periodic review by the instructor.

Use handouts to supplement note-taking.

Provide opportunities for students to clarify instructions or assignments.

Offer assistance in structuring long-term assignments into monitored sub-tasks.

Give assignments one at a time.

Encourage the use of tape recorders.

Permit time for verbal responses.

Provide alternatives, such as:

oral representatives of written work;

tape recorded responses in place of written work.

Allow ample time for reading assignments.

Consider reducing the amount of required reading.

Provide a vocabulary list of specialized words for reading or class activities.

Provide the correct spelling as you mark spelling errors.

Deemphasize spelling, from a grading point of view.

Use as many multisensory approaches as possible, such as:

overhead projectors combined with lecture;

films, pictures, graphs, charts, etc.;

demonstrations, concrete illustrations of abstract concepts.

Face students while talking.

Be flexible—look for alternatives.

Work with students' counselors.

Ask students for help in devising accommodations.

BE PATIENT AND ACCESSIBLE!!

Simply modifying instructional techniques, however, is not enough. Special services must be available for learning-disabled college students that diagnose and help to solve their basic learning problems. This assistance must be presented in nonthreatening

ways, in an environment that stresses differences rather than deficiencies. Counseling, study skills workshops, student support groups, writing labs, reading labs, and individualized approaches to the completion of course requirements are essential.

Teachers Need to Be Educated Too

Just as students need to learn about and overcome their disabilities, so do faculty and administrators need help in understanding more about how to solve the problems of these students. Understanding the definition of learning disability, identifying the characteristics, and above all, recognizing the human being underneath the label will help reduce some of the apprehension about teaching "different learners." Resource books, work texts, and videotapes on the subject should be required study materials for college personnel.

Staff development workshops are vital. An ongoing program of education can provide a substantive basis for faculty awareness. Cooperative interchange among administration, faculty, and counseling staff is essential; once this relationship is established, guidance personnel can serve as ongoing, onsite consultants for individual teachers as well as groups.

Every learner should have the opportunity to move toward higher levels of academic achievement and to develop his or her potential. This philosophical stance underlies a commitment to all students at the postsecondary level, including those who are "different learners." These students can develop and achieve academically. They simply must work within a somewhat different perceptual framework.

If we understand learning disabilities, we will come to see the learning-disabled individual as a potentially successful student. We must provide resources and accommodations for both students and faculty. We can thereby help guarantee the success of all students who can benefit from postsecondary education. □