

A Need to Succeed: Helping College Students With

By Elizabeth Anderson

The cricket's song had a new sense of urgency. A bright orange leaf caught my eye in the maple above the path as I hurried across campus to my 8:00 class, Skills for College, which had been added to the curriculum to help students on academic probation learn to be successful. They were an interesting group!

- Al would never participate in any group activities. He quietly worked on his own, occasionally throwing in an insolent remark under his breath. But he relaxed and focused intently on the weekly Thinkanalogy assignments. He flew through them and he received an almost perfect score on every one.

- Agatha submitted every assignment on time. Each was wonderfully creative and accompanied by her own taped ver-

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sion. She clearly had a gift for creative writing, despite her challenging spelling.

- Sergei amazed me when I assigned

a musical presentation of the *1100 Words* vocabulary list. He wrote an historical ballad of his country that included all of the assigned words.

- Auguste always wanted to have a relay race by matching words with definitions that had been placed on tables at the opposite end of the room.

- Sometimes Leo would show his flash cards, with amazing sketches, to the other students before class. I wasn't surprised when I checked his weekly planner. It was color- and pattern-coded. His notes in the wide left margin often had "trigger pictures" rather than trigger words.

- Nelson had already organized several study groups—and it was still September.

- George would never join any study group. However, he had asked to be al-

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Many students with special needs can learn phonics more readily when they can feel the placement of each sound in their mouths.

Special Needs

lowed to do an independent study project in place of the first unit test.¹

Would you have admitted Albert Einstein, Agatha Christie, Sergei Rachmaninoff, Auguste Rodin, Leonardo daVinci, Nelson Rockefeller, or George Patton to your college? Each of these learning-disabled individuals excelled in an intelligence. Although these famous people weren't my students, in the paragraphs above I have given their names to actual students of mine who have excelled in similar intelligences.

Welcome Students With Special Needs?

Should colleges admit students with

special needs, including those who can't do basic math or read five-letter words? Does this mean watering down the validity of a college diploma? I believe Rosalie Fink would say "Welcome them!" Ms. Fink did a case study of 12 American students with basic fluency problems.² These people went on to become significant contributors in their fields. Even though some symptoms of dyslexia persisted in adulthood, they all became skilled readers of large amounts of tech-

nical material. They succeeded in fields as diverse as immunology, biochemistry, law, gynecology, physics, neurology, theater set design, graphic arts, special education, and business. Although learning to read had been a struggle for them, seven have authored textbooks or scholarly articles and have contributed new knowledge to their fields.³

This certainly doesn't sound like a watered-down educational product! Why are we so frightened by uniqueness in

learning style? Adapting our teaching to the student with special needs does *not* mean making allowances for “partiers” or the non-motivated. When a student struggles in earnest to circumvent a learning problem, we need to jump to the rescue—at all costs—or we are shutting out some of our most gifted, people with the potential to become productive, empathetic citizens.

What are colleges doing about this problem? Books on the market summarize current trends. Peterson’s *Colleges With Programs for Students With Learning Disabilities* lists more than 800 schools that offer specific help for students with learning disabilities.⁴ Academy teachers and college admissions offices need to make students aware of this type of resource. The article on page 22 describes what SDA colleges and universities in North America are doing in this area.

Any student who is motivated, self-disciplined, and has the study skills to successfully meet course requirements is a good candidate for college—even if he or she has a learning disability. Colleges should carefully consider letters from high school guidance counselors and learning specialists that summarize students’ strengths and weaknesses when determining whether a student is likely to succeed in college. Students with learning disabilities may not have good GPAs or score well on standardized tests. As Christian educators, we should especially avoid making value judgments based only on standardized assessments.

Helpful Resources

For the past 15 years, the HEATH Resource Center, at the National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals With Disabilities, has guided colleges and universities through the process of integrating students with disabilities into their academic programs.⁵ HEATH’s Rhonda Hartman says that students who have primarily taken regular classes in high school and managed their assignments with the help of adaptations will adjust well to college. However, students who have worked only in a resource room will need special adaptations and assistance.⁶ Administra-

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tors should budget for materials and training to ensure success for such students.

Tools for Transition is an excellent program published by AGS to prepare students for postsecondary education.⁷ It helps them to understand their learning styles, acquire good study strategies, plan classroom accommodations, and choose and apply to a postsecondary school. It includes an excellent training video of students role-playing self-advocacy and assertiveness, accepting criticism, asking professors for help, and learning about their rights. This type of training would be an excellent addition to our academy senior Bible classes, which usually cover guidance issues. Adventist academies do not offer as much structured support in college selection and the application process as some seniors would like. Providing this type of guidance could direct more of our young people—not just those with learning differences—into appropriate postsecondary programs.

How many Adventist colleges are prepared to deal with special-needs students? (Statistics are included in Candice Hollingsead’s article in this issue.) Accepting students who require support services without providing adequately for their needs is neither good educational practice nor Christian. Are we doing as much as we could—or should?

Are we still telling parents the **same very old story**—you will have to send your son or daughter to a public college to receive the appropriate support services for him or her to be successful? Is it right to deny such students a Christian education?

Typical Behavior Patterns

What kinds of problems will these students have when they arrive at college? Many will have brought some avoidance behavior patterns from previous education that they use to avoid failure and ego-deflating situations. Pierangelo and Jacoby list nine of these behaviors that I have seen at the college level:⁸

1. *Selective forgetting.*

2. *Failing to write down assignments day after day.* The student doesn’t remember what the assignment is, forgets to do it, loses or can’t locate the textbook, or loses the syllabus.

3. *Taking hours to complete homework.* This is a very common problem on the college level. Some students take four or five times the average amount of time to do assignments. One student told me that she read every assignment for her literature class at least six times. The first four or five were just to read all the words correctly. The last one or two were for comprehension.

4. *Racing through homework.* These students will rush through an overwhelming assignment just to get it over with. This mindset leads to copying the answers from the key at the back of the book instead of doing the work.

5. *Can’t seem to get started with homework.* The student’s anxiety level makes him or her keep postponing getting started on the work.

6. *Frequently bringing home unfinished classwork.* This student may be so exhausted from the academic struggle that he or she doesn’t have enough energy to finish work during class. Some underlying skills deficits may be involved, such as poor reading or spelling, or problems transferring the spoken word to written form (i.e., note taking). This student may also have “learned helplessness” as a way of getting attention or as the result of poor transitional training by high school support personnel.

7. *Consistently leaving long-term assignments until the last minute.* College is the ultimate test of whether students have mastered planning and self-directed study habits. Many students—with or without disabilities—lack a clear concept of how to work backwards from due dates that are mentioned only in the syllabus, particularly when the teacher does not offer reminders about the projects in class.

8. *Complaining of feeling ill before or after school.* The high tension level of college life may precipitate problems ranging from frequent colds and flu to eating disorders. Poor sleep habits can result in skipped classes, tardiness, and inattentiveness.

9. *Exhibiting “spotlight” behaviors.* One would expect “acting up” to be limited to grade school. However, the cathartic effect of releasing tension caused by feelings of inadequacy often overrides the restraints of age appropriateness. Oliphant states that, “Teachers need to be firm with college-level reading students. Adults who lack basic skills tend to bring with them baggage from the past. Some seek attention and/or engage in power plays. Others act fearful and victimized.”⁹

How to Help

How can we help college students overcome these avoidance behaviors while creating a successful learning environment for them? First, we must have students examine their present use of various intelligences to identify their learning strengths. The student may have no idea that he or she has any strengths in such areas of art, music, interpersonal, or kinesthetic skills, or can harness them for academic use. Next, we need to pinpoint skill levels and develop specific goals and objectives to help the student acquire the desired skills.

Teachers and administrators need to understand the implications of various learning strengths in each academic area. Cronin, for example, says the dyslexic is a “concrete learner. He begins with the conclusion and works backward.”¹⁰ For such students, creating an outline before writing a paper is very difficult. However, they know where the paper is going, and may need only a little support

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in outlining the logical sequence of steps to arrive at valid and perceptive conclusions.

The student with learning disabilities sometimes shows an “inflexibility that prevents him from switching easily from one skill to another; for example, he may not be able to move easily from addition to subtraction to multiplication.”¹¹ This causes havoc in college mathemat-

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The author conducts Action Phonics and Multiple Intelligences training for classroom teachers.

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Students use a number of intelligences in the process of making charts of literary devices and discovering ways they are used. Above, Ellen Bailey (right), English Language Institute director at Atlantic Union College, South Lancaster, Massachusetts, checks one of the examples of Ambiguity that students have placed on the chart.

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Relay teams use multiple intelligences as they look over charts of literary devices and figures of speech for a literature class.

ics classes. Students with this problem will need to learn how to make a bank of operations for all subject matter that contains sequential processes. This can be done on a computer or in a well-organized and indexed notebook. The students list the numbered steps in their own words and then follow the steps as they work through an example.

Dyslexics also have *difficulty making suitable connections between information*. This is frustrating to a student because the information may be well learned, but filed in separate “pockets.” The circuitry for related information does not work, making inferential reasoning difficult. Such students require repeated exposure to clearly outlined strategies that support the transfer of information. However, this type of thinker makes an excellent addition to a debating team because side issues do not muddy his or her thinking.

Dyslexic students have to be *careful to prevent circuit overload*. They are unable to process words that come too fast. It takes an “extreme effort to hear, understand, integrate, remember, and then attempt to carry out instructions.”¹² College professors can be masters of the feared stand-and-deliver lecture. Processing lag for such students can be easily solved by slowing down the flow of words. The student tapes the lectures or has a note taker provide a copy of his or her notes. The tape allows such a student the needed processing time. On the positive side, this student may be able to help others slow down and appreciate the

beauty of whale conversation or a gaggle of flying geese.

Once the student has overcome the avoidance behaviors and settled into a functional learning environment, what can be done about his or her learning problems? Many colleges provide individual remedial work with a learning specialist to help students acquire missed skills. “Serious students with average intelligence, cooperative attitudes, and good attendance can gain between three and seven grade levels in reading in one semester.”¹³

Types of Remedial Instruction

What types of remedial work are most helpful? Study and organizational

skills, perception and memory training, visual and auditory tracking, phonics for reading and spelling, development of a variety of reading speeds for various purposes, reading comprehension, skill in recognizing authors’ organizational patterns, textbook reading, test taking, note taking, skill development in how to recognize, harness, and enhance use of multiple intelligences, long-range planning, and self-advocacy skills.

One exciting development in remedial reading work with adolescent and adult learners, including those for whom English is a second language, deserves special mention. It is the use of proprioception, or heightened awareness of speech sounds. It was initiated by Frank Lang, who discovered the power of presenting consonant sounds in groups.¹⁴ This addition to visual and auditory memory helps to keep the association firmly anchored in memory.

Other Support Services

Other support services offered to college students should include:

- help with course work, including peer tutoring;
- course modifications;
- extended time for exams, or alternative methods of test taking;
- study-skills development;
- provision of note takers;
- programs or classes to increase reading speed and comprehension;

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Bodily intelligence, one of the ways of being smart as defined by Howard Gardner, is a frequently unused area that can be tapped to help students learn a variety of subjects. Above, the author tosses a Frisbee to one of her students.

- provision of and training in use of helpful technologies;
- counseling and training for self-advocacy;
- socialization support;
- liaison work with parents, teachers, and administration;
- test-taking techniques and preparation for graduate school entrance exams.

How can we afford to provide such services when many of our colleges are already struggling to survive and are making major cutbacks in services? Administrators who are committed to providing a Christian education to everyone who wants to learn will find a way to help these students succeed. We need to network to benefit from one another's success.

One approach, outside of traditional budgeting, is to charge a student services fee to all students. This money can then be used to fund needed services. Some programs are tuition driven, with a set fee for each semester that the student uses the support services center. Others are funded by grants or scholarships.

Conclusion

What can colleges do about Agatha who cannot spell, and Al with his inso-

Are we still telling parents the same very old story—you will have to send your son or daughter to a public college to receive the appropriate support services for him or her to be successful?

lent mumblings? The statistics on students in support programs consistently prove that they can improve their scores, learn new skills, and raise their GPAs. Many unusual learners will become our leaders of tomorrow.

Is our goal to merely meet the re-

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quirements of the law? Don't we, as Christian educators, have a higher purpose—to open doors to all students who can learn, who often work twice as hard as others to learn, who have much to contribute, who love the same Lord who loves us all equally? When they were young, we told their parents to send them to public schools where their needs could be met. Now that they are at our door again—what will we do? Let's commit ourselves to opening doors for them.

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NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. Thanks to Thomas Armstrong, *Multiple Intelligences in the Classroom* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 1994), p. 137, for his nominees of people with disabilities who have excelled in each of the intelligences; and to my students for being living examples of excellence in each intelligence.
2. Rosalie P. Fink, "Successful Dyslexics: A Constructivist Study of Passionate Interest Reading," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy* 39:4 (December 1995/January 1996), p. 270.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 271, 272.
4. Charles T. Mangrum II and Stephen S. Strichart, *Peterson's Colleges With Programs for Students With Learning Disabilities* (New Jersey: Peterson's Guides, Inc., 1994).
5. Rhonda Hartman, "Foreword," *Peterson's Colleges With Programs for Students With Learning Disabilities*, n. p.
6. _____, *College: The Basics* (The National Center for Postsecondary Governance and Finance, 1990), two-tape series, "Students With Disabilities," side D.
7. Elizabeth P. Aune and Jean E. Ness, *Tools for Transition* (Circle Pines, Minn.: American Guidance Service, 1991).
8. Roger Pierangelo and Robert Jacoby, *Parents' Complete Special Education Guide* (New York: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1996), p. 36.
9. Charlotte Oliphant, "Helping College Students Who Read Poorly," *The Journal of Adventist Education* 55:5 (Summer 1993), p. 40.
10. Eileen M. Cronin, *Helping Your Dyslexic Child* (Rocklin, Calif.: Prima Publishing, 1994), p. 57.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 62.
12. *Ibid.*, p. 69.
13. Oliphant.
14. Frank Lang, *Potentials Learning Systems, Action Phonics Reading Lab, Introduction* (Thomaston, Ga.: Potentials Learning Systems, 1995), p. 2.

Making word maps and writing materials on the board help increase reading comprehension and reinforce what students have learned.