

Learning Disabilities: Issues in Higher Education

By: National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1999)

College and university presidents understand the benefits of educating a diverse student body. Students with learning disabilities represent a significant segment of this group. This paper addresses emerging issues relative to students with learning disabilities on college and university campuses. The intended audience for this paper includes college and university presidents, administrators, faculty, and professional support staff.

Because of the wide variance in postsecondary institutions in such terms as size and mission, there is little consistency in the way that institutions provide services to students with learning disabilities. As students with learning disabilities pursue not only undergraduate education but graduate and professional education as well (Henderson, 1995), it is becoming increasingly critical for institutions to review both their mission and philosophies as they work toward an integrated model of service provision.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) have articulated the rights of individuals with learning disabilities in higher education. The laws mandate that postsecondary institutions provide equal access to programs and services for students with learning disabilities. Given their interpretation of such legislation, individual colleges and universities are at various stages in the development and integration of policies and procedures for providing accommodations to students with disabilities.

Previous papers from the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD) have addressed learning disabilities across the life span (1990) and transition services for students with learning disabilities (1994). These papers serve as a prelude to this paper, which focuses on programming for undergraduate students enrolled in 2 and 4-year colleges and universities, graduate students, and students in professional schools. This paper articulates the impact of college and university missions and their policies and procedures on students with learning disabilities. The paper concludes with recommendations for creating a responsive campus environment.

College and university students with learning disabilities

The NJCLD defines learning disabilities as "...a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span..." (1990, p. 65).

Successful individuals with learning disabilities tend to be goal-oriented, determined, persistent, and creative (Reiff, Gerber, & Ginsberg, 1993). Persons with these characteristics are often an asset to the university community. Many students with learning disabilities are aware of their disabilities before matriculation. Some students, such as nontraditional and returning students, are not diagnosed with learning disabilities until after their admission to college. Once diagnosed, it is the student's responsibility to disclose his/her learning disability and the extent to which it affects academic access (Lynch & Gussel, 1996). A student's eligibility for services, and the particular type of service he/she needs, must be based on appropriate documentation (Larson & Aase, 1997; Brackett & McPhearson, 1996). With appropriate accommodations it is more likely that students with learning disabilities will experience a successful college career. Witte, Philips and Kakala (in press) in their study at a major university found that students with learning disabilities were competitive academically with their peers and graduated with grade point averages not significantly below the control group. This study also found that students with learning disabilities on average took only one semester longer to graduate.

Institutional mission

Presently, institutions are establishing learner outcomes for all programs. While students with learning disabilities should be expected to meet the institution's academic standards, they should be given the opportunity to fulfill learner outcomes in alternative ways. The process by which students with learning disabilities demonstrate mastery of academic standards may vary from that of the larger student body, but the outcomes can and should remain the same. Accommodating students with learning disabilities need not jeopardize the academic standards of the institution.

While the Americans with Disabilities Act and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act require institutions to make academic adjustments to provide equal access, they do not require postsecondary institutions to make changes to essential elements of the curricula and therefore do not compromise curricular standards (Scott, 1994). The courts and the Office of Civil Rights (OCR) have been clear that postsecondary institutions can and should establish policies that identify and maintain those essential components of the college curriculum [Guckenberger, et al. v. Trustees of Boston University, et al., 974 F. Supp.106 (D.Ma, 1997); Rancho Santiago Community College (CA), 3NDLR52 (OCR, Region IX, 1992); Bennett College (NC) OCR Case No. 04-95-2065 (Region IV, 1995)]. A team approach to reviewing the institution's mission and its policies for evaluating its essential programmatic elements results in a balanced and integrated plan for both academic integrity and educational access. Faculty and staff from the various programs can work to outline essential program components in relation to the institution's mission. Collaboration among administrators, faculty members, and disability service professionals should ensure that academic standards are delineated and maintained.

Although the team approach to policy design may involve a number of administrative offices, it is highly recommended that services for students with disabilities, including those for students with learning disabilities, be housed within the administrative structure that promotes a strong academic focus and shared faculty responsibility for providing

accommodations. For some campuses that office reports directly to the president or provost; for others, disability issues may be under the purview of the academic or student affairs offices.

Policy issues

It is essential to have written policies that ensure that students with learning disabilities receive the same high-quality education as their peers. These policies should address the issues of admission, documentation of a learning disability, accommodations, and curriculum modifications. It is important that students be made aware of the existence of an appeal process which is set forth in writing. Students should have easy access to all written policies and procedures including the appeal process. Such documents should be available in a variety of formats, in all appropriate campus literature, and through available technology, such as a Web site, which all students can access.

Admission policy

Colleges and universities vary in their admission requirements and policies; some have open admissions, while others have rigid entry requirements. Most students with learning disabilities meet the standard admission criteria and will not be readily identifiable during the admission process. However, some students with learning disabilities may appeal the standard entry requirements because of the effects of their disability on their academic performance or test scores. Within the appeal process for admission, available to all students, a mechanism is needed to consider the impact of a student's learning disability on his/her academic record. During the appeal process, it is important to recognize that inconsistencies in the student's academic record may reflect the presence of his/her learning disability. It is recommended that the admission appeal process for students with learning disabilities involve a team approach to decision making. It is imperative that the team consist of institutional representatives who are knowledgeable about learning disabilities.

Documentation policy

As noted in the NJCLD definition, learning disabilities occur throughout the life span. Whether a college or university accepts a student's documentation as adequate or requires additional information before providing services, accommodation decisions should be addressed on an individual basis. The campus learning disability professional, in conjunction with the student, should evaluate the effects of the student's disability in relation to the curriculum and academic standards. During this process, faculty and other campus representatives may be consulted to review the academic environment and its relationship to the student.

Appropriate accommodations

A learning disability is not static; its effects may change in relation to a number of student, environmental, and curricular factors. Such factors as the student's abilities, the classroom setting, methods of instruction, or task demand may entail the need to provide differing academic adjustments. These accommodations, to be requested by the student, must be made on a case-by-case basis to ensure the integrity of the academic program and the educational experience. Requests for accommodations must be responded to in a timely fashion. The decision-making process for academic adjustments may involve the faculty member, the student, and the learning disabilities professional. Identifying and selecting appropriate accommodations require an analysis of the task, the student's disability, course objectives, and faculty input. Examples of accommodations may include but are not limited to the following: alternative test formats, extended time, alternative access to oral and written material, and course substitutions (see Journal of Learning Disabilities, 1996).

There are a number of new technologies and software options available that foster access to academic materials, such as text-to-speech, speech synthesizers, visual outlineurs, reading programs, textbooks on tape, print enlargers, visual tracking, phonetic spell checkers, and other emerging technologies. It is critical that technology on campus be reviewed and made accessible to students with disabilities [Riley, 1997; letter to the Chancellor of the California Community College System (from Region IX OCR Regional Director, January 22, 1998)].

Curriculum adjustments

The federal laws and subsequent court decisions make it clear that colleges are not expected to make changes in the curriculum that compromise essential components of a program. In certain well-documented cases, a student may be unable to meet all of the requirements of a degree program. For example, a student seeking a bachelor's degree in nursing must complete all required courses in the program. However, if such a student had a history of poor performance in the acquisition of a second language that was directly linked to a learning disability, that student might then petition for substitution of a different requirement in place of the foreign language requirement.

Before course substitutions are considered, an evaluation of the course's purposes and outcomes should be conducted. Alternatives to course substitutions might include alternative testing, alternative evaluation of performance, and course audits. Because both the integrity of the academic program and the educational experience of the student are at stake, policy of this magnitude should be established and implemented through shared decision making. A team including the faculty member, disability service provider, student, and a learning disability specialist constitutes a balanced forum for decision making.

Acceptable course substitutions to be considered by college personnel include the following: culturally oriented courses, anthropology courses, or sign language in place of foreign language courses; logic, philosophy, or computer science courses as an alternative for a math requirement. The team making this decision should consider the

individual's disability in relation to the student's chosen academic program (Tucker, 1996). It should be noted that proportionately very few students with learning disabilities petition for course substitutions (Sparks, Philips, & Ganschow, 1996).

Recommendations for creating a responsive campus environment

In recent years many questions have emerged during the development of services for students with learning disabilities: What documentation is necessary to determine eligibility for which services? What are the institution's responsibilities to modify a curriculum? What constitutes true access to education? Kroeger and Schuck (1993) give specific directives for creating a responsive environment. The authors call for organizing and structuring services, further defining access to higher education, clarifying of available sources and allocations of funding for services, and consistently evaluating services and the model for collaborating with faculty. Following are recommendations for building a responsive campus community to provide appropriate services to students with learning disabilities.

- A. Review the structure of the institution
 - Ensure that written college and university policy statements regarding services for students with learning disabilities are consistent with the mission of the institution
 - Review all campus literature for statements of equal access and the procedures students with learning disabilities must follow to request services
 - Consider housing the office for disability services in academic affairs or a similar administrative office for effective reporting and support
- B. Establish Policies
 - Ensure confidentiality of student information
 - Develop written policies and procedures, including the appeal processes, regarding students with learning disabilities in the areas of admission, documentation, academic accommodations and curriculum adjustments
 - Make policies and procedures available to the entire campus community via student handbooks, catalogs, and course schedules in alternative formats
- C. Promote Awareness
 - Establish mechanisms for dissemination of information about learning disabilities to students, administration, faculty, and service professionals
 - Disseminate information to the campus community about available services
 - Familiarize faculty, staff, administration, and students with laws governing accommodations for students with learning disabilities
 - Clearly designate the individuals who make the decisions regarding accommodations so that intrafaculty or staff disputes are minimized
- D. Collaborate

- Build campus expertise through collaboration and consultation
- Establish a team of service providers and faculty members for decision making in regard to admission, documentation, academic adjustments and program accommodations for students with learning disabilities
- Remain current regarding disability issues
- Provide cost effective, reasonable accommodations for students with learning disabilities

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper is to provide recommendations related to institutional mission, policies, and accommodations for students with learning disabilities in higher education. Building an academic community responsive to diverse student populations, including students with learning disabilities, benefits the college community as well as society. Students with learning disabilities have individual strengths, weaknesses, and academic needs--as do all students. While it is important to consider individually the status of students with learning disabilities, it is critical that academic institutions plan for the admission and consequent education of these students. When colleges and universities examine their mission, develop policy, and work together as a campus community, education of individuals with learning disabilities can be greatly enhanced. Policies should address the issues of admissions, documentation of a learning disability, accommodations, and curriculum modifications.

Ensuring the education of students with learning disabilities is a campus-wide responsibility. Bringing the campus community together for shared decision making requires campus-wide awareness of students with learning disabilities, an understanding of the legal requirements for access, a review of essential program components, and a structuring of service delivery that is compatible with the school's mission. This institutional commitment and planning will allow students, faculty, and administration to work together toward their common goal: successful higher education for students with learning disabilities.

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This report has been approved by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJLCD). The member organizations of the NJCLD are:

Association of Educational Therapists (AET)
Council for Learning Disabilities (CLD)

Division for Communicative Disabilities and Deafness (DCDD), Council for Exceptional Children

Division for Learning Disabilities (DLD), Council for Exceptional Children

International Dyslexia Association (IDA)

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Learning Disabilities Association of America (LDA)

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