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AUTHOR	Glimps, Blanche E. Jackson
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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses issues in the provision of educational services to first year college students with learning disabilities. The literature is reviewed, showing the persistence of learning disabilities into adulthood, the numbers of such students attending postsecondary institutions, and the incidence of disabilities (about 9 percent) among first year students enrolled in colleges and universities. Studies comparing students with disabilities and other students are reviewed, noting that students with disabilities were more likely to be male and older, to be out of high school longer, to feel they would need a longer time to complete a degree, and to select a college based on some special program offering. First year students with learning disabilities were as likely as others to aspire to graduate with professional degrees; more likely to be enrolled in a 2-year college; and more likely to experience problems in reading comprehension, spelling, written expression, math computation, problem solving, organizational skills, time management, and social skills. Requirements concerning "reasonable accommodations" of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act are summarized. Guidelines for facilitating faculty involvement are offered as are general teaching suggestions. (Contains 17 references.) (DB)

Reasonable Instructional Accommodations for College Students with Learning Differences or Disabilities"

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by

Blanche E. Jackson Glimps, Ph.D.
Associate Professor
Marygrove College
8425 West McNichols Road
Detroit, Michigan 48221

What does Thomas Edison, Woodrow Wilson, Albert Einstein, and Nelson Rockefeller have in common?

Answer: They are each notable people who were reported to have had a learning disability.

Goal 5 of the National Education Goals addresses the issue of Adult Literacy and Lifelong learning. It states: "By the year 2000, every adult American will be literate and possess the knowledge necessary to compete in a global economy and exercise the rights and responsibilities of citizenship." There are over 40 million Americans with disabilities (Worklife, 1990) and includes adults with learning disabilities. In the past, it was believed that learning disabilities affected only school age children and was cured by the time students completed their schooling. However, it is now generally understood that learning disabilities persist into adulthood, may affect an individual in social, employment and postsecondary settings.

Growing numbers of students with disabilities are graduating from high school. Over 220,000 students with disabilities left the special education system in 1989-90. More than four in ten students with disabilities, age 14 or older, graduated from high school with a diploma. Students with learning disabilities represented the largest (129,000) number of the "exiting" population. Slightly more than half of them were reported to have earned diplomas (United States Department of Education, 1992).

Data from the National Longitudinal Transition Study of Special Education Students (Wagner, 1993) indicates that students with disabilities who graduate from high school may pursue postsecondary training. Within two years after exiting high school, 15 percent of students with disabilities had attended postsecondary school during the preceding year; three to five years after leaving school, 56 percent of students without disabilities had attended a postsecondary school during the preceding year; three to five years after leaving high school, 68 percent of students with disabilities had enrolled in postsecondary education.

Many students with and without disabilities who did not enroll in postsecondary education immediately after high school do attend at a future date. Among the disability categories, there is a great deal of variation in postsecondary education participation rates. Two years after leaving high school, the participation rate for students who are hearing impaired was the highest, followed by students with speech and visual impairments. Three to five years after leaving high school, the participation rates in postsecondary education were still highest for students who with hearing impairments, followed by students with visual impairments (Wagner, 1993).

In general, the percent of first year students with disabilities is increasing. About nine percent, or one in 11 full time first year students enrolled in colleges or universities in 1991 reported having a disability. This is a dramatic increase in numbers from the 2.6 percent in 1978, the 7.4 percent in 1985, and the 7.0 percent in 1988. College students with learning disabilities is the fastest growing disability group with an increase from 14.8 percent in 1985, 15.3 percent in 1988, and 24.9 percent in 1991. Students with visual impairments closely parallel this frequency of appearance with an increase of 28.3 percent in 1985, 31.7 percent in 1988, and 25.2 percent in 1991 (National Clearinghouse on Post secondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities, 1992).

How do first year students with disabilities compare with their peers without disabilities? Data from "College Freshmen with Disabilities: A statistical Profile" provides an answer to this question as responses from the two groups of students were compared. In many categories, there were more similarities than differences. Across most major fields of study both groups expressed similar expectations. In comparison to their peers who were non-disabled, students with disabilities were more likely to be male and older, out of high school longer, felt that they would need a longer

time to complete a degree, and selected the college based on some special program offering.

Women with disabilities had more in common with other women than with men who were disabled. Women were more likely to have sight and health related disabilities; to need tutoring in math and science; to be influenced in selection of a college by specific criteria such as the size of the institution, availability of special programs, and financial assistance.

First year students with disabilities expected to take longer than normal to complete their degrees and to select a college based upon special program offerings. They were more likely to come from lower-income families and were less likely to have received financial assistance from their families than students who were nondisabled. In addition, first year students with disabilities were less likely to have contributed savings from summer work the previous summer.

First year students with visual impairments were more likely to have had an "A" average in high school and to have been a member of a high school honor society. Those with health-related disabilities were more likely to be women than men, to have tutored other students in high school, and to project that they would be successful in finding jobs in their chosen field.

First year students with physical impairments tended to be older than others, more likely to have finished high school some years before, and to rank themselves above average in leadership traits. Of students with hearing impairments, half were enrolled in four-year colleges, more interested in the field of nursing, and ranked themselves as high as others in the skills of writing, math, mechanical, leadership, and understanding of others. Students who reported speech impairments were most likely to be male, members of culturally diverse ethnic groups, least likely to be either a citizen of this country or a native English speaker, and most likely to have additional disabilities. They were the most likely of the groups to say that difficulty in finding a job influenced their decision to enroll in college.

Those with learning disabilities were just as likely as others to aspire to graduate with professional degrees although they were more likely than others to expect to need tutoring to succeed. First year students with learning disabilities were most likely to be enrolled at two-year campuses, while another two-fifth were enrolled at universities and four-year colleges. One percent were enrolled in historically Black colleges and universities (National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities, 1993).

Learning disabilities is defined as an impairment of people who have average (or above average) intelligence, but who have specific difficulties with one or more of the basic psychological processes which affect their ability to acquire competence in reading, spelling, and writing (Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, 1990). It is a permanent impairment which affects the manner in which individuals take in, retain, and express information. College students with learning disabilities appear to have many of the same educational and social difficulties of the K-12 population of such students. Specifically, subject areas such as reading comprehension, spelling, written expression, math computation, problem solving, organizational skills, time management, and social skills are among problem areas. The effects of the learning disabilities may be inconsistent, presenting problems at certain times, at selected ages, and/or in specific academic areas. For individuals, the learning disability can be most frustrating.

Many of their specific deficit areas of college students with learning disabilities are basic survival skills in higher education. As an example, taking notes during lectures, absorbing orally presented information, writing papers, reading, managing time, organizing, and other study habits are all expectations of successful

students in higher education. In order to acquire these skills, many students with learning disabilities must secure resources within the college to strengthen and support their learning effort.

For some time, it was widely assumed that so few students with learning disabilities were interested in going to college that special programs for them were not needed. Data from the 1970's and 1980's counteracted this assumption. After that, it was speculated that students with learning disabilities could not survive in college even with special help. This view was bolstered by figures showing how few of those who began college actually graduate. To rebut this argument, it has been emphasized that even when special programs are offered, the tendency is to promise more than is delivered; thus, students are not getting the support services necessary for success.

Bursuck et al (1989) conducted a survey of 197 community and four year colleges. Ten percent of the schools responded to the item on the survey which asked for the number of students graduating or completing a course of study. A completion and/or graduation rate of 30 percent was reported. Vogel and Adelman (1990) conducted a longitudinal study on the four year degree completion and failure rate of 110 students with learning disabilities when

compared with their peers who were non-disabled and who attended the same college. Results revealed similar graduation and failure rates between the two groups of students. Interestingly, the researchers identified several factors which contributed to positive outcomes: self-referrals made at the time of admission; screening of aptitude, severity of the impairment, and motivation towards learning; and requests for, and use of, comprehensive support services.

That special programs at the college level are costly and difficult to set up is also a fact that tends to cause resistance. The issue is one of priorities. Given that only so much money is available, should it be used to bolster existing, regular programs-or should it be used to create additional services for these who need special help to survive in college?

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is available to assist students with learning and other disabilities secure reasonable accommodation on the campus settings. Passage of this law has been responsible for the increased numbers of such students who attend college as institutions of higher education receiving federal assistance are required to make accommodations for the physical or mental limitations of applicants. Persons who

are handicapped are defined by Section 504 in the following manner:

1. Physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities;

2. Record of such an impairment; or

3. Regarded as having such an impairment.

"Major life activity" generally refers to such basic functions as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working. To the extend that major life activity is substantially impaired or is perceived as being so impaired, that person is entitled to the protection of Section 504. As a result of this broad definition, many conditions may qualify persons as handicapped under Section 504 including learning disabilities.

The Americans with Disabilities Act or ADA defines a person with a disability in a manner that is consistent with Section 504 (Wodatch, 1990). Title II of ADA extends the prohibition of discrimination in federally assisted programs established by section 504 to all activities of state and local government. Title III of ADA extends the prohibition against discrimination to services operated by private

agencies. Included among such services are nursery, elementary, secondary, undergraduate, or post graduate private schools, or other places of education.

ADA and Section 504 require agencies to make "reasonable accommodations" which may include the following:

a. Making existing facilities used by employees readily accessible to and usable by individual with disabilities; and

b. Job restructuring, part-time or modified work schedules, reassignment to a vacant position, acquisition or modification of equipment or devices, appropriate adjustment or modifications of examinations, training materials or policies, the provision of qualified readers or interpreters, and other similar accommodations for individuals with disabilities.

Institutions may need to change to match students' individual needs through program modifications necessary to ensure that requirements do not discriminate or have the effect of discriminating, on the basis of handicap, against qualified applicants who are disabled. Modifications can significantly assist students with disabilities in achieving success in college. Modifications may include changes in the time permitted for the completion of degree

requirements, substitution of specific courses required for the completion of degree requirements, and adaptation of the manner in which specific courses are conducted. Course examinations and other methods of evaluating students' academic achievement must be conducted in a way that will reflect the students' achievement rather than impaired sensory, manual or speaking skills (except when such skills are the factors which are being measured).

Interestingly, at the postsecondary level, institutions of higher education respond to a request for reasonable accommodations only if students inform the agency of the existence of disabling conditions (Shaw, 1991; Brinckerhoff, Shaw and McGuire, 1992). Consequently, the responsibility for the planning and placement phases of identifying, assessing, programming, decision-making, and transition planning are each assumed by individuals with disabilities. This is dramatically different from the special education experience where the school system is responsible for the previously listed phases.

Ultimately equal access for individuals with disabilities must be realized within the college classroom. In a survey of postsecondary programs, conducted by Beirne-Smith and Deck, 1989, four-year colleges and universities offering services for students with learning disabilities were found most often to provide basic

tutoring, then a reader for students, and then note taking assistance. Woods, Setlacek, and Boyer (1990), found similar services in a survey of thirteen large state universities identified by the Disabled Student Service National Data Bank. These institutions provided comprehensive services to at least twenty students with learning disabilities. Primary support services provided by all included tutoring, test administration service, consultation to faculty on classroom accommodations, reader service, extra time for exams, and testing in alternate formats.

Students with disabilities depend on faculty willingness to meet individual needs for access to education, training, and ultimately to careers. National Clearinghouse on Postsecondary Education for Individuals with Disabilities (1987) offered these guiding principles for best facilitating faculty involvement in responding to requests for reasonable accommodations.

Faculty are more likely to utilize access strategies if they help develop them.

Faculty members working as a team with a student who is disabled are best able to develop appropriate adaptations.

Faculty who have taught students with disabilities usually have the most positive attitudes towards improving accessibility.

Students with invisible disabilities, such as learning disabilities present the most problems to faculty.

Attitudinal barriers to access can be harder to remove than physical ones.

Faculty should never be expected to water down or lower standards, but should use flexibility in making adaptations.

It is important to remember that the similarities of students with disabilities to other college students is significant. First and foremost, they are students. They are in college for the same reasons as others and they bring to campus the same range of intelligence and scholastic skills. General considerations for teaching students with disabilities, which were gleaned from a review of the policies of selected institutions of higher education are listed below:

1. Identify the student with disabilities.

   This may not always be a simple process. As an example, learning disabilities is considered a

hidden disability which is not readily apparent. The process of identification can be faculty initiated by making an announcement at the beginning of the term inviting students with disabilities to schedule individual appointments. At that time, both a phone number and an address could be obtained for specific students in case the information is later needed. Secondly, invite students with disabilities to make known the special considerations or arrangements which are required to satisfy course requirements.

2. Encourage students with disabilities to practice self-advocacy.

   To the extent manageable, students with disabilities bear the primary responsibility, not only for identifying their disabilities, but for making necessary adjustments to the learning environment (e.g., reading and taking notes). However, for testing arrangements and the use of department resources, the collaboration of faculty members is vital. Dialogue between students and faculty is essential for success, should occur early in the term, and should involve follow-up

meetings. Students' own suggestions, based on experience with the disability and with school work, are invaluable in identifying effective accommodations.

3. A well designed instructional support program is essential.

Some examples of types of instructional assistance which could benefit students with learning or other disabilities are described below.

Provide students with a detailed course syllabus before registration week.

Start each lecture with an outline of material to be covered and, at the conclusion of class, summarize key points.

Give assignment using a combination of sensory input channels.

Provide study questions for exams that demonstrate the format and content of the test.

Allow, if necessary, students to demonstrate mastery of course materials using alternative methods.

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-using designated readers to give the regular test. Readers may be the faculty member, peers, counselors, etc. In any such instance, standards established by faculty for the regular test should be followed.

-recording the test on tape and allowing oral or typed answers to the questions.

-extending the time to take the regular test.

-modifying the test format or providing a take home exam.

Students bring a unique set of strengths and experiences to college, and students with disabilities are no exception. Students with learning or any other disability are people who can lead productive adult lives. Achievements may not be accomplished without considerable work, but the outlook for students with learning and other disabilities can be very promising.

In summary, the idea that the presence of a disability need not be a barrier to achieving academic objectives for students should be advanced upon campuses of college and universities. Students with disabilities could greatly benefit from being made aware of the range of available college support services, how to access information about programs, what to do if they suspect that they have a disability, and

what is involved in their rights to reasonable accommodations.

College students with learning and other disabilities need respect, patience, and a knowledge of their disabilities by administrators, faculty, staff, and the general public. While many learn in different ways, these variances do not imply inferior capabilities, the need to dilute curriculum, or reduce course requirements. However, special accommodations, may be needed, such as modifications in the way information is presented and in the methods of testing and evaluation. Faculty will be aided in these efforts by drawing upon the students' prior experiences, and using available college and department resources.

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