Impact of Academic Support Centers on Students with Disabilities in Postsecondary Institutions

Luann Walker

Master's Program in Developmental Education,
Texas State University

Abstract

Students with disabilities are attending institutions of higher education at an increasing rate. This trend leads to questions concerning academic success, institution responsibility, and the impact of academic support centers. Unfortunately, faculty and professional staff often do not have sufficient knowledge to address the ever-changing needs of their student population. Therefore, professional development is needed at regular intervals to work more effectively with students with learning disabilities (LD). As for academic support centers, an inclusive model was found to be more effective and accommodating. This improves the overall student accessibility and addresses student needs both inside and outside of the classroom.

Each year, students with disabilities represent progressively more of the population in institutions of higher education. Likewise, research on students with disabilities in higher education has increased considerably over the past several decades, yet even with this rise in matriculation, many students with disabilities fail to successfully complete their degrees. Institutions of higher education continue to seek high academic standards regardless of the hindrances students encounter.

Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this article is to provide insight to

professionals in the field of academic support in higher education. Two questions were identified to guide this article:

1. What responsibility does the faculty and administration hold to ensure success of disabled students?
2. In what ways are academic support centers meeting the needs of disabled students?

Previously conducted research was gathered to reveal the growing need for support to postsecondary students with learning disabilities. Academic support is often necessary for all students. However, additional inspection reveals that although students may not have formal documentation for a learning disability (LD), inclusive support from trained professionals is essential. This topic is specifically relevant as the struggles that students with LD face are substantial. By bringing awareness to more administrators, faculty and staff, supplementary aid can be made available to those students who need it.

Statement of Terminology

The following terms were identified to clarify their use in the context of this article. Postsecondary students are those who have graduated from high school and attend post-secondary institutions, regardless of course level or span of time between completing high school and entering post-secondary institutions. Learning disability is defined as any condition that makes learning difficult (e.g., Dyslexia, Autism, ADHD, and Asperger Syndrome). Academic Support refers to activities or programs offered to support students outside of traditional instruction (e.g., Tutoring, Mentoring, Supplemental Instruction, and Communication Advocates).

Review of Literature

Two distinct areas were focused on: (a) the responsibility of the faculty and administration offices of academic success for students with disabilities; and (b) the ways academic support centers satisfy the needs of students with disabilities.

Faculty and Administration Offices

High academic standards can be achieved if support is available to the diverse student populations. Couzens et al. (2015) report

the efforts of one Australian university to support students with hidden learning disabilities (LD). The university's disabilities services programs targeted LD students to (a) transition into university; (b) develop self-advocacy; (c) perfect independent time management; and (d) transition from university to employment. The case study results, based on interviews, revealed the participants found informal support networks most effective, followed by informed and caring teaching staff. Results direct universities to "build on and strengthen peer and family networks" (Couzens et al., 2015, p. 33).

In an attempt to reach students at the core of their needs, Lechtenberger, Brack, Sokolosky, and McCrary (2012) hypothesized a process that would enable more holistic support. Lechtenberger et al. developed a case study to observe one participant, a 33-year-old graduate student with cerebral palsy, David, and his path to achieve academic goals and independence in a postsecondary environment. The wraparound planning process is a program that incorporates multiple aspects of an individual's life to be present at planning meetings to achieve specified goals. The program required a series of steps: (a) create a team (i.e., case worker, faculty members); (b) understand strengths (i.e., determination, problem solving skills) and challenges (i.e., poor oral/written skills, limited funding); (d) prioritize needs/goals; and (e) gain support from collaborative partners (advocates investigated grants for off-campus housing). David and his team met multiple times over a two-week period to evaluate all phases of the planning process.

This article, like Couzens et al., emphasizes the need for support. In this instance, David's support was more structured and professional in nature because those in his support network were directly affiliated with the university. Overall, the practical significance is present for individuals or care givers to utilize when seeking to achieve large, multifaceted goals. The focus was very narrow due to the individualized needs of a person with cerebral palsy; however the premise of the wraparound system could be easily applied to other populations. In this instance, the administration's support was apparent because many of David's team members were employed by the university. Unfortunately, not all universities are able to afford to dedicate so much of their workforce to an individual student.

Therefore, it is difficult to see such a program used on a large scale. However, by utilizing a modified form of the wraparound method institutions could use small teams and evaluate the impact.

The significance of this study provides the explanation of how wraparound differs from the traditional Individual Education Plan (IEP) and how wraparound can be impactful for others outside of the intended market (i.e. children and adolescents at risk in institutional care). The researchers reported additional unintended benefits for the faculty and service professionals that facilitated the reaching of David's goals, and I believe these are key components for providing additional resources (i.e., professional development) to active faculty and service professionals. One addition, I would recommend to future researchers, would be insight into how team members are selected or to propose an alternative if a consensus is not reached. Therefore, additional research using this method would still need to be developed and explained.

Students are multifaceted, and often have many predisposed hindrances (i.e., underprepared, low socio-economic, first generation, learning disabled) present. Therefore, Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes (2012) conducted a cross-sectional survey studying the challenges associated with having a disability and being a first-generation (first-gen) college student. The researchers analyzed 197 undergraduates who self-disclosed disabilities and qualified to receive services from the Disability Services Office (DSO).

The data were obtained by administering several measures, the College Self-Efficacy Inventory (CSEI), the Financial Burden subscale, and the College Students with Disabilities Campus Climate (CSDCC) survey. Additional demographic data were obtained from the university's system to include gender, ethnicity, disability type, and cumulative GPA. A statistically significant difference was found, the first-gen students with disabilities had lower GPAs than did continuing-generation students. First-gens also exhibited lower levels of family support and peer support, and they reported greater levels of financial stress, and greater utilization of accommodations.

Despite, the low percentage of the DSO population—not even half (38%) were used in this study (Lombardi, Murray, and Gerdes)—a noted strength was the use of a hierarchical regression analysis documented in several charts. This supports the firm

foundation that indicates additional research is needed in regards to crossectional populations.

Woodcock and Vialle (2011) surveyed elementary Australian preservice teaches using vignettes and Likert-scale questions to ascertain their responses to students (i.e., with/without LD, effort, ability). Overall, there was statistical significance shown from the multivariate analysis of the feedback given to the students with and without LD, with greater positive feedback given to the students with LD. This indicates that preservice teachers were already aware of the needs of students with LD and addressing them. This underlines the need for continued education for professionals. By studying preservice teachers the implication is that these professionals have been (or are currently) engaged in knowledge development (e.g., graduate classes, conferences, book studies) and that more seasoned professionals might not be as current due to lack of engagement as students themselves.

Taken as a whole, the research points to both the positive impact of disability awareness among university faculty and administration, as well as the importance of making this awareness more widespread. While collaboration among knowledgeable, supportive staff has been shown to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, unfortunately, such support is not yet universal.

Academic Support Centers

Few universities offer all students—regardless of disability status—scholastic support in service centers. Recent research advocates for more inclusive learning support. For instance, Sparks and Lovett (2013) examined 336 postsecondary students in a correlational study with the purpose of determining accuracy of LD diagnostic criteria. Their objective was to determine if there was a mutually exclusive relationship between having a documented LD and needing academic support; the results indicated there was not. Based on the parameters of the data set, various diagnostic models, and prior investigation, the research design is appropriate. Sparks and Lovett (2013) used multiple instruments including: (a) Wide Range Achievement Test-Revised (WRAT); (b) IQ-Achievement Discrepancy; (c) DSM-IV, and (d) Dombrowski, Kamphaus, and Reynolds's (2004) model. The researchers provide a variety of

definitions of LD as deficit of skills, or a disorder(s) in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved with academic skills (i.e., reading, writing, and math). However, the parameters of each diagnostic model did not infer predetermined outcomes on the other models.

The pilot was conducted at a smaller college, which was the most prominent strength of the study. As a failsafe, the researchers opted to use the lowest score in each model to provide a uniform perspective of each student. Limitations of this study centers on the number of diagnostic tools, which proved to represent only a small portion of data collection methods.

The outcome of the study shows that LD diagnosed students are not distinguishable from other students. Likewise labeling students either directly or indirectly can inflict an unnecessary and often negative stigma on students (Arendale, 2007). The best way to remedy this is for more colleges to open their academic support programs to any interested students, regardless if the student has a documented disability. "Many support services (e.g., tutoring) are beneficial for nondisabled students, it is unclear why we view these as 'disability' services" (Sparks & Lovett, 2013, p. 239).

Despite the quantitative data presented, the researchers used only univariant statistics, providing no statistical significance. LD diagnoses range from the first to the 88th percentile for the population; this suggests that a LD diagnosis may, independently, say little about students' college-relevant skills, thus underscoring the importance of individualized counseling and decision-making regarding accommodations and other services.

Similarly, Troiano, Liefield, and Trachtenberg (2010) piloted a quantitative, correlational study to predict college success as a result of frequent attendance to an academic support center. This method was well-selected because a third party, the Learning Resource Center (LRC), independently collected the data. The authors hypothesized that students who regularly attended academic support center appointments would achieve higher academic success than those students who attended infrequently or not at all. Calculations were made using a discriminant function analysis to evaluate the extrapolative effect of learning support center use and gender on

college student success. Based on the results, the relationship of attendance at the Learning Center is more statically significant than the implications of gender on student success.

Unfortunately, threats are present that undercut the results of this study. The student subject group was the entire population that used the LRC. The researchers state the LRC is only available to students with diagnosed and documented LD or Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). In addition, all participating students were eligible for educational accommodations as a result of their LD documentation. The practical significance of the study is limited due to the participants having documentation for unspecified learning disabilities or ADHD. It would be difficult to apply these findings to other LD populations as the specific disabilities were not charted. In addition, it would be difficult to infer that similar results would be valid in non-disabled populations. Additionally, an ecological generalizability threat is also present. The researchers state that 9% of college students are reported to have a disability (Troiano, Liefield, & Trachtenberg, 2010, p.35). However, the institution participating in this study reports that 30% of its population have LD documentation. In addition, based on the numbers the entire population of a small, private, liberal arts college in the eastern US is less than 875 students. Schools of similar size are rare; therefore, these findings are arguably not likely to be generalized to larger populations.

Furthermore, this study has identified the historical understanding of relationships between students and staff, which can strengthen a student's desire to succeed. Based on the findings, recommendations specify that academic support increases college success for students with documented learning disabilities and ADHD. At present only the title indicates that the findings are directly reported on LD students. Additionally, creating a unique criteria for data collection (to include additional factors, i.e., major, specific LD, etc.) at a larger public institution would prove to have improved population and situation generalization.

McLachlan and Davis (2013) steered a phenomenological study, which developed and implemented the Enhanced Learning Support Assistant Program (ELSAP). ELSAP provides professional

development for academic support assistants to support adult students with LD in England. The design of this study is appropriate because of the nature of students with LD and the need to observe them to gain a holistic (i.e., observations, interviews, field notes, reflective diaries) understanding of their experiences. The 25 academic support assistants were invited to participate; unfortunately only nine volunteered. This poses a threat to selection data as those participants might not be a representative sample. Analytical induction was used to identify themes, which poses a possible researcher bias as a third party was not brought in to validate the findings. The strength of the research was that the inclusion of direct quotes from the students' interviews provides real accounts of experiences and perspectives.

The practical significance is apparent in the responses from the participants. The participants reported that the program increased their knowledge of support strategies, and they learned how to review their own practices. Recommendations would be to further the research by administering a longitudinal study incorporating other schools or countries into the program.

Murray, Lombardi, and Wren (2011) conducted a quasi-experimental survey study on exempt and non-exempt staff at a university. The purpose of the study was to examine the attitudes and perceptions of university staff regarding students with LD, and to explore how prior LD-training contributed to their attitudes and perceptions. The researchers evaluated the differences between the two groups on the eight attitude/perception factors (e.g., willingness to advocate, insufficient knowledge) using a Multivariate Analysis of Variance (MANOVA). The MANOVA identified several areas to be statistically significant and practically significant as those without training indicated insufficient knowledge and desire for additional training, whereas those with training indicated high general knowledge and increased sensitivity. The appropriateness of using a survey to collect this data is questionable; perhaps a focus group or an in-person interview might provide greater insight to the findings. A weakness from using a survey is the limited depth of responses. Strength of this study was the use of a previously tested survey based on identified themes in the literature.

Murray, Lombardi, and Wren stated that they hard-copy mailed all 300 staff of the university and they requested that the surveys be completed and returned; therefore, there was no oversight to prevent collaboration, or even ensure the survey was completed by the intended individual. Also, the small percentage (37%) of responses might reflect a skewed perspective of the overall climate toward students with LD.

The data points strongly to a need for learning support centers to become more inclusive. Students with a variety of disabilities, as well as students without documented disabilities, benefit similarly from learning support services. This universal benefit, coupled with the inherent inadequacies in current disability diagnostic procedures, means that colleges ought to open their learning support services to a wider population.

Statement of Conclusions

The review of literature revealed the positive impact of disability awareness among university faculty and administration, as well as the importance of making this awareness more widespread. While collaboration among knowledgeable, supportive staff has been shown to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, such support is not yet universal. Furthermore, the data point strongly to a need for learning support centers to become more inclusive. Students with a variety of disabilities, as well as students without documented disabilities, benefit similarly from learning support services. This universal benefit, coupled with the inherent inadequacies in current disability diagnostic procedures, means that colleges ought to open their learning support services to a wider population.

Statement of Recommendations for Further Research

Unfortunately, there is a lack of formidable research from and about academic support centers. Ideally, academic support centers could conduct longitudinal research depicting students with and without learning disabilities academic progress during the duration of their studies. In addition, professional development programs can collect feedback from students by way of electronic surveys or incorporating selected questions into existing course evaluations.

Encouragement for universities and institutions of higher education to offer professional development to faculty can provide additional tools and insight regarding the needs of LD students, regardless of documentation. Also, having researchers use mixed method design longitudinally would provide more concrete criteria for which to measure the approaches used and the overall outcome. This would provide additional feedback to educators, setting a benchmark for further research.

Statement of Implications

The research problem presented in this study is necessary to better understand the impact that academic support centers have on the academic success of students with learning disabilities (LD) in higher education. However, the few researchers in the field suggest that faculty and professional staff need professional development to work more effectively with students with LD, and must provide inclusive environment for students.

Professional development equips faculty and staff with the tools to more readily address the needs of their students. Specifically, it offers skills, awareness, knowledge, and strategies to better support students with LD. As a result, faculty and staff have better perceptions of students with LD and are more able to encourage them to reach their highest potential. It is important for educators to understand the impact of their actions on the academic success of students' with LD. In addition, with the proper enhancement of their existing skillset, faculty and learning support professionals are able to achieve a more integrated support structure.

As faculty and staff become more aware of the needs of students with LD, the need to offer inclusive services becomes more apparent. Limiting support to only students with LD creates the misconception of preferential treatment; and, as a result, at some institutions students without LD become disgruntled. Therefore, academic support centers should permit all interested students, regardless of LD documentation, access to learning support services (e.g., tutoring, SI, skills training). An inclusive model was found to be more efficient and accommodating than non-inclusive approaches at a variety of institutions. An inclusive and universal model improves

overall student accessibility. By addressing the needs of every student, both inside and outside of the classroom, improves their level of knowledge. That increased knowledge base will ultimately contribute to their personal and professional development in the future. An inclusive system must be supported by faculty and staff who are aware of the specific needs of students with LD, and provide the most direct aid to their students.

References

Arendale, D. R. (2007). A Glossary of Developmental Education and Learning Assistance Terms. *Journal of College Reading & Learning, 38*(1), 10-34.

Couzens, D., Poed, S., Kataoka, M., Brandon, A., Hartley, J., & Keen, D. (2015). Support for students with hidden disabilities in universities: A case study. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education, 62*(1), 24-41. doi:10.1080/103491 2X.2014.984592

Dombrowski, S. C., Kamphaus, R. W., & Reynolds, C. R. (2004). After the demise of the discrepancy: Proposed learning disabilities diagnostic criteria. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 35*, 364–372.

Lechtenberger, D., Brak, L. B., Sokolosky, S., & McCrary, D. (2012). Using wraparound to support students with developmental disabilities in higher education. *College Student Journal, 46*(4), 856-866.

Lombardi, A. R., Murray, C., & Gerdes, H. (2012). Academic performance of first-generation college students with disabilities. Journal of *College Student Development, 53*(6), 811-826.

McLachlan, B., & Davis, G. (2013). Educating the educators: Developing those who support learning for students with additional learning needs. *Support for Learning, 28*(4), 173-180.

Murray, C., Lombardi, A., & Wren, C. T. (2011). The effects of disability-focused training on the attitudes and perceptions of university staff. *Remedial and Special Education, 32*(4), 290-300.

Sparks, R. L., & Lovett, B. J. (2013). Applying objective diagnostic criteria to students in a college support program for learning disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 36*(4), 231-241.

Troiano, P. F., Liefeld, J. A., & Trachtenberg, J. V. (2010). Academic support and college success for postsecondary students with learning disabilities. *Journal of College Reading and Learning, 40*(2), 35-44.

Woodcock, S., & Vialle, W. (2011). Are we exacerbating students' learning disabilities? An investigation of preservice teachers' attributions of the educational outcomes of students with learning disabilities. *Annals of Dyslexia, 61*(2), 223-241.