The Necessity of Academic Accommodations for First-Year College Students with Learning Disabilities

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Introduction

The number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in colleges and universities is increasing each year. Learning disabilities, defined as discrepancies between a student's ability and his or her achievement or performance (Lovett and Lewandowski, 2006), are neurological deficits that interfere with a student's capability to store, process or produce information (McDermott et al., 2006). High school students with learning disabilities are assured services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA). This legislation mandates that schools provide multidisciplinary teams and programs to assist students with their academic progress (Hadley, Twale and Evans, 2003). Teams typically include the student, parents of the student, teachers of the student, a counselor or school psychologist, and the school principal.

In graduating to the higher education environment, students with learning disabilities are assured services by Section 504 of The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). These laws, however, require students to self-advocate—relating to the student's understanding of the disability and being able to articulate reasonable need for academic accommodations (Taylor, Richards, and Brady; 2005)—for academic accommodations and be placed in inclusive classrooms with other college students who do not have learning disabilities, and compete academically (Hadley, 2005). Because of this, university administrators and faculty should be testing the established system to ensure the effectiveness of resources and programs meant to support students' integration into the campus community.

Background

Students with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education

High school students and their parents generally find college choice to be a difficult decision (Boyer, 1987). Moving on to higher education means achieving a new level of responsibility and independence, especially for students with learning disabilities, who must view their prospective college in terms of services and programs that best meet their individual needs (Hadley, 2005): This is the beginning process of the student's responsibility to self-advocate. Institutions of higher education are required to provide "reasonable" services so that qualified students with learning disabilities will have equal access to academic programs. After equal access is provided, it is the student's responsibility to progress in his or her classes. Decisions about the exact accommodations provided are made on an individual basis, and the college or university has the flexibility to select the specific service as long as it is effective and appropriate to the disability. Examples of accommodations that may assist students with learning disabilities include, but are not limited to, the use of readers, note-takers, extra time to complete exams, course registration, and/or alternate test formats.

Additionally in their transition to college, students with learning disabilities may need the services available from the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) to accommodate their needs, to facilitate their self-advocacy process with faculty, and to feel that they fit in. After being accepted to the university or college of his or her choice, procedurally, the student generally is required to provide documentation of his or her disability to the director of the Office for Students with Disabilities; such documentation is often a copy of an assessment or Multifactored Evaluation (MFE). The documentation should validate the need for services based on the student's current level of functioning in the educational setting (Thomas, 2002).

Theoretical Framework

Affirming effectiveness of resources and programs meant to support students' integration into the campus community involved multilayered research, because the subjects must be self-advocating to get the full advantages the resources and programs provide. To test the development of these students, the researchers looked at the programs through students' success in three design vectors—developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy.* Arthur Chickering (1969), a psychosocial theorist who studied college student development at length and created these vectors, theorized that individual development involved the accomplishment of a series of developmental tasks and suggested that mastering these tasks was a process and specific conditions in the college environment influences that process.

  *The concept of developing competence is defined as attaining essential academic skills. Managing emotions refers to the correct conduct in particular circumstances. Disengagement from familiar support networks occurs as students develop autonomy.

Methods

Population and Procedures

Because reading disabilities were reported to be the nature of the learning problem for the vast majority of the students with

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learning disabilities, students identified as having dyslexia or reading problems were selected after responding to a letter from the director of the Office for Students with Disabilities inviting participation. (This preponderance of reading disabilities often occurs in college settings). This study was conducted on a private, selective, coeducational, four-year college campus in the Midwest. Researchers used qualitative design to make interpretations about the individual student experiences, feelings, attitudes and perceptions (Finn, 1998).

Students represented all four of the academic units on campus: Arts and Sciences, Business, Education, and Engineering. The students participated in an initial focus group to discuss their academic experiences as they moved from high school to college. Ten students, eight females and two males, began the study in the winter semester after they had completed one semester of course work.

Data Collection

To investigate how traditional-aged, first-year students with specific learning disabilities make the transition and adjust to collegiate scholastic requirements, the following research questions were asked: 1) What types of academic experiences challenge students with dyslexia or reading problems on a selective, residential college campus as they transition from K-12 to higher education? 2) How do these traditional-age, first-year students with dyslexia or reading problems adjust to specific expectations to complete academic assignments such as homework, term papers, and other writing assignments? 3) What services do students with dyslexia or reading problems need to meet the academic requirements of the university environment (Hadley, Twale and Evans, 2003)?

Researchers collected data through individual student artifacts, focus groups and semi-structured individual interviews, ensuring triangulation, which required data to be gathered from multiple sources and through multiple methods (Newman and Benz, 1998).

The student artifacts included class schedules, copies of written assignments for their classes (which included grades and faculty comments), class syllabi, and any tutoring reports. The primary researcher collected a portfolio of writing assignments from each student and comment sheets that professors used to provide students feedback on their writing. From these, the researcher gleaned information about students' discerning relevant information from class lectures and taking effective notes in class (Hadley, Twale and Evans, 2003).

The focus group questions were based on Chickering's (1969) first vector of developing competence. Students shared how they perceived themselves developing the skills they needed for college level work. The second focus group addressed the third vector of developing autonomy. Students discussed their feelings about the challenges presented to them in the college setting and the services they needed. (Two focus groups were conducted during the second semester of the students' first year and during fall semester of their sophomore year. The individual interviews were conducted during the second semester of the students' first year. The focus group discussions and individual interviews were audio-taped and transcribed for analysis.)

During the semi-structured interviews, students responded to Chickering's second vector—managing emotions—in individual interview sessions. The students discussed their communication with their professors regarding their assignments.

Data Analysis

Researchers used Patton's (1987) inductive analysis process to interpret the data and coded transcripts through a method that gives meaning to words, phrases and scenarios that continually emerge. The primary researcher selectively attached tags to words, phrases, events, and situations to identify items potentially important to the study's findings (Krathwohl, 1998). The coding scheme required that the researchers go through the transcripts and color code each meaningful word, phrase and scenario. Those highlighted themes were then transferred to note-cards where the researchers attached meaning to those themes (Crewell, 1994; Preissle Goetz and LeCompte, 1984). The researchers then theorized if the answers to the three research questions fit with Chickering's vectors.

Results
Developing Competence

The students indicated that they found it necessary to continue using academic services in their transition from high school, and in accessing and integrating into the postsecondary educational environment. All the students reported feeling challenged by college writing expectations as compared to high school. To integrate into the institution, students sought support for their writing assignments by requesting extra time for tests, writing assistance and assistance from note-takers. As a group, the students were critical of the level of accommodations available in the college environment and reported feeling challenged to meet the academic expectations with such limited services. Most of the students said they tried getting support on several occasions, specifically from the university writing center. The students expressed dissatisfaction with the center because it was staffed by

upper-classmen, rather than learning disabilities professionals with the level of expertise necessary to assist them with their writing issues. All the students reported using the extra time accommodation for testing on a regular basis and underscored its importance. Several of them found it particularly helpful during essay exams or in-class writing assignments. The male Business major confessed he would be "a lot more stressed without it" and that "when [he] feel[s] rushed, [he] let[s] a lot of things slip and the results of the testing aren't good." One of the female Business students added that although she did not always like to use the accommodation of extra time because she viewed it as a "crutch," she too found it necessary for responding to essay exams.

Managing Emotions

The students seemed exceptionally dependent upon the support services they had grown accustom to while in high school. Several of the students said they could not imagine being successful in college without the same services. Nearly all the students labeled themselves with test anxiety and described a sense of comfort in knowing that they could take their time to finish a test, particularly one that required extensive writing. Both the males, an Engineering and Business major, spoke passionately about the necessity of services and accommodations. They talked about accommodations and services as essential to their ability to respond to class work. In discussing the possibility of any changes in the accommodations received as he attempted to integrate into the postsecondary setting, the male Engineering major said, "Just with the loss of extended time, I probably would fail a good half of my classes."

Developing Autonomy

According to the students, a learning center where students with learning disabilities could have all of their accommodations and services delivered is the ideal model to meet their academic needs. The students expressed interest in having a single place where they could go to take an exam when they needed extended time and/or privacy, individual help from tutors, or to collect notes for their classes. Several of the students noted that while in high school, as a student with a learning disability, they could go to a specific room within their high school and receive assistance from adult learning disabilities specialists with degrees in English or education. A couple of students reported that on the grounds of their high school, there was a separate building where students with special needs could go for individual assistance. One of the female Arts and Sciences majors, when commenting on her high school experience said, "In high school I had one-on-one professional tutoring and extra time to take tests." She elaborated that the tutors would actually be located in the classroom and work with the students that needed help in the classroom.

The students were all in agreement that proctors who monitor the university's testing center were not always knowledgeable

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in the course content, but should have been. This accommodation seemed to cause the students concern because most of them use a testing center to take their exams for the "quietness and privacy" it offered. The students complained, too, that oftentimes the student-proctors were not familiar with the necessary courses. Further, students repeated the complaint that the tutors working in the writing center were upper-classmen. They expected and desired individualized attention and support like they had while in high school.

Students found in their move to college that access to class notes was an essential accommodation. Students said that their professors moved through class material so quickly they could not keep up. The majority admitted that they were not clear on what to write down during class lectures. Students further discussed the desire to get class notes without bringing attention to themselves and revealing that they have a learning disability. According to the students, most found it necessary to "bring a tape-recorder to class and recording class notes themselves," "ask the professor for his or her lecture notes," or "ask classmates for their class notes." The male Engineering major revealed, "I write about half or a quarter as fast as the normal person." Students said they remember feeling frustrated in class when trying to take notes while in high school, and seemed to lack a method for gathering key information during lecture.

Conclusion

As postsecondary education professionals are encountering more students with learning disabilities in the student population, there is growing concern about their persistence and degree attainment. Chickering and Reisser (1993) agreed that as students with learning disabilities move into the postsecondary environment and are expected to develop new skills, academic accommodations might have a direct bearing on their successful integration. In order to help these students, high school counselors, parents and colleges should make sure that

students with learning disabilities understand what constitutes a comprehensive learning disability program and continually assess existing programs.

Brinckerhoff (1996) described the components of a comprehensive postsecondary learning disabilities program as diagnostic testing, academic advising, subject area tutoring, and counseling. Not every component is offered on every campus, but structured programs should be staffed by LD professionals, advisors and tutors (Kravets, 1996). Additionally, the critical aspects of learning disabilities programs are individualization, a basis in diagnostic data, and coordination by a professional with preparation in learning disabilities (Brinckerhoff, 1996). Services such as academic support programs, career development and personal counseling assist students in moving through the institution, as well as enrich their in-class experiences (Chickering, 1969; Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

University orientation programs have been developed to teach incoming freshmen about campus procedures and college life (Busby, Gammel and Jeffcoat, 2002). Typically, divisions of student affairs have responsibility for the development of college students both outside their classes and in the classroom (Miller, Dyer and Nadler, 2002). One of the major components of new student orientation programs is to support students as they access and integrate into the university. New student orientation programs in connection with the campus Admission/Enrollment Management Office and the Office for Students with Disabilities can have major implications for this student population and their acclimation to the university by ensuring that students are aware of the various accommodations available on campus and how to access the appropriate accommodations for their needs. Additionally, institutions of higher learning should be providing training for faculty, staff and students to deal with student diversity (Chickering and Reisser, 1993) so that students with learning disabilities will feel included in the campus community.

Professionals who counsel students with learning disabilities in their transition to postsecondary education should help the student choose a college or university that provides the needed services. College students with learning disabilities have to deal with the unique challenges presented by their disability, as well as the daily stressors of college life. Taking advantage of academic accommodations available to support them in their classes is one of the ways students with learning disabilities may successfully access and move through the institution. Because students with learning disabilities are entering colleges and universities in greater numbers, studying the issues surrounding their acquirement of new skills, ability to respond appropriately to their new setting, and their capacity to move away from previous services through Chickering's model of development can support academic advisers, admission recruiters, counselors, and faculty, in their work with this population as they transition to the university community.

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