



Postsecondary Education Success: Stories of Three Students with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

While graduation from high school may be common for students with learning disabilities, successful completion of a four-year degree program at the postsecondary level is not as common. This article contains the stories of the first three high school students with learning disabilities taught by the author who successfully graduated from postsecondary institutions. The students share their perceptions of their academic strengths and weaknesses with the author and identify personal goals and skills as well as the accommodations and modifications used in high school needed for success at the postsecondary level. The article discusses services used at the secondary and postsecondary levels, the importance of self-advocacy, and recommendations for students with learning disabilities as they transition from high school to postsecondary education.

Keywords

Postsecondary Education, transition, learning disabilities

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Effective special education enables students with disabilities to dare to dream, to realize they are people of worth and have much to offer the world. Another aim of special education is to empower students with skills by which they can reach their goals for the future. This article presents the stories of three young men with learning disabilities (LD). The challenges they encountered and successfully navigated while in high school and their perspectives of the skills they possessed that contributed to their successful completion of postsecondary education are shared. Differences as well as common themes and recommendations that are foundational in preparing students with LD for postsecondary education are also included.

According to Getzel (2005), students with disabilities need a set of skills to successfully make the transition to, adjust to, and remain in college. Her encouragement for students motivated to pursue postsecondary education is outlined in a set of personal or interpersonal skills. The list includes the following:

1. Accepting one's disability and its academic impact;
2. Understanding and identifying needed support services;
3. Ability to describe the disability and the needed service supports to service providers, instructional faculty, and staff;
4. Self-advocacy skills;
5. Determination to overcome obstacles such as time management, study skills, decision-making, and independent-living skills.

By the time students with disabilities reach high school, they should demonstrate understanding of their disabilities and be aware of the accommodations and modifications they need for academic success.

Thoma and Wehmeyer (2005) state that a focus on acquiring specific self-determination skills leads to postsecondary success. The authors believe that self-determination skills coupled with learning to set realistic goals for the future better ensures postsecondary success. These skills can be introduced in a variety of settings and can be learned in high school or taught at home prior to the transition. By the time students with disabilities reach high school, they should demonstrate understanding of their disabilities and be aware of the accommodations and modifications they need for academic success. "Students who understand themselves and their disability and have confidence to act in their own best interests can then make choices with full knowledge and understanding of those choices" (deFur, Getzel & Trossi, 1996).

A model for successful employment, developed for individuals with learning disabilities, has proven to be very successful in bridging the gap between school and beyond (Gerber, Ginsberg, & Reiff, 1992). The model can also be applied to successful completion of postsecondary education. According to Gerber et al. (1992), the model for success first addresses internal decisions including desire, realistic goal setting, self-assessment and planning related to the individual's desire; and reframing, or working through stages of setting goals and understanding individual drive. These stages are basic to productive outcomes in self-awareness, self-determination, self-advocacy and success in employment and other areas of adult life. Second, the model includes the following external manifestations: persistence;

proper fit, matching strengths with probable positive outcomes; creativity for effective problem-solving; and possessing social skills necessary to know where help is needed and being able to elicit help (Gerber et al., 1992). Educators, parents, and service providers need to encourage the development of these skills in all students, but especially in students with LD.

It is crucial for teachers, students and their families to be made aware of programs that support educational options beyond high school. Sometimes, this knowledge comes best when experiences are shared by students with LD who have successfully completed postsecondary degree programs.

Background

After 1973, with the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, not only did schools with programs for students from kindergarten through grade 12 (K-12) plan for education of individuals with disabilities, but postsecondary institutions did as well. By the early 1980s, many colleges and universities had established programs to assist with the education of students with disabilities by providing reasonable accommodations. In 1985, *Peterson's Colleges with Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities or Attention Deficit Disorders* was published for the first time. A publication by The College Board (Mangum & Strichart, 1998), listing college programs throughout the world and giving a brief synopsis of the programs, including services for students with LD, was also published around this time. Accommodations for taking the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and the ACT made possible in 1984 and other services of this type made it possible for students with LD to participate in postsecondary programs. The *Individuals with Disabilities Education Act* (IDEA) in 1990 and 1997 pro-

vided requirements for more specific language regarding transition services and documentation in the Individual Education Program (IEP). However, unless students with LD are made aware of these resources and programs, little effort is made to attend college for fear services will not be available at that level.

After the 1980s, colleges and universities, both public and private, slowly began offering support services such as reading, writing, and math centers, tutoring, remediation, and reduced course loads to all students, including those with disabilities. Although the colleges and universities offered services for students with LD, in many cases these services were not specifically designed for students with LD. In the 1997 *Peterson's Colleges*, only 198 of the 1,000 colleges listed had comprehensive programs for students with LD. Comprehensive programs have staff with training or experience working specifically with students with LD (*Peterson, 1997*).

Since the level of awareness regarding transition has been raised following IDEA 1990, 1997, and the reauthorization of 2004, students are better prepared today for postsecondary education options. Their goals for the future are raised because of supportive parents and teachers. Colleges and universities have come to understand the strengths and potential students with LD have. Thus, the number of programs for students with LD has multiplied (Hartman, 1997). Students with LD that are attending college are the fastest-growing disability group (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire, 1993). It is important for these students, their parents, and special educators to have a better understanding of how to prepare for college, the available services at the postsecondary level, and academic expectations.

In 1991, three young men with LD, taught by the author, voiced a desire to attend college. During the fall of 1992, the author began investigating postsecondary educational opportunities for these students. Their stories may encourage other students with learning disabilities to attend college and be empowered with a plan by which they may be successful.

Wilton

While Wilton was in high school, he challenged himself with classes in the general education curriculum. During his junior year, he took a resource class in which he developed learning strategies that enabled him to realize his goal of attending college and playing football. Wilton took advantage of time he had in the resource room and sought help from his teachers after school. It was essential that he actively listen to all class discussions and participate by asking questions to clarify information. Spelling was also an area of weakness. He realized the importance of hand-held tape recorders and computers with spell check as essential tools for written assignments. He could read aloud flawlessly, but could not comprehend what he had read. Reading aloud each section into a tape recorder and listening to it as he played the section over, he could finally grasp the content. Recording for the Blind and Dyslexic (RBD), a program that provides recordings of texts and novels for people with vision impairment and LD, was helpful when going over the required reading material. Wilton could listen to the recordings and save time in study by not having to record himself first. He knew he would need the same kinds of help in college.

In answer to questions about self-advocacy, the young men made it clear that students have to be their own advocates.

Math was an area of strength for Wilton, and he was advised to pursue a career that was math related. He chose Computer Science as a career goal. Wilton had taken the SAT with accommodations and his scores and high school grade point average (GPA) were accepted by the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Clearing House for Division I and II college athletics. He applied to several colleges where computer science and football were a possibility. He visited the university he wanted to attend with a teacher from the high school. They discussed the resource learning center on campus with a college advisor, toured the campus, and were assured that programs were in place to assist with any and all academic needs that Wilton might have.

Jonathan

Jonathan was an auditory learner. He could retain and repeat information presented verbally; however, his reading and spelling skills were functional on third grade level materials. He needed tests to be read aloud. Readers and RBD, as well as hand-held tape recorders were a must for Jonathan as he negotiated his high school courses. The computer became an essential part of his life. He took keyboarding because of the importance of this tool in his future. Scribes helped Jonathan with written assignments. He could express himself orally, but could not put his ideas on paper. His learning disability was manifested in written language expression skills. At an early age, Jonathan developed the strategy of closing his eyes, eliminating all visual distractions, and focusing on the lectures and class discussions. With the help of readers, tape recorders, and scribes to get his thoughts on paper, the potential of

going to college became a possibility for Jonathan.

The summer before his senior year in high school, Jonathan had a desire to learn to read. Knowing Jonathan's strength was learning by listening, the author began teaching him decoding skills using phonics. Jonathan knew all the phonetic sounds, all the rules dealing with decoding unfamiliar words and was able to apply that knowledge to the letters of the alphabet, quickly improving his reading skills. Senior year found him reading and comprehending on a seventh grade level. Additionally, instead of closing his eyes when someone was reading from a book, he started following along. His sight vocabulary improved. Excellent factual recall and a love for science and athletics led Jonathan into a science and sports-related field. He majored in kinesiology. Good SAT scores and GPA in high school, coupled with a determination to achieve, afforded Jonathan the opportunity to study and play football at a Division I university. The university had an established program for students with LD. Personal tutors, note takers, and professors that had training in working with students with LD were available. An added bonus was the additional individualized tutoring and testing, note takers, and study groups Jonathan received as an athlete.

Ryan

Ryan focused all his efforts on his studies. He realized the extra time he needed to be successful in the classroom. He challenged himself while in high school with general education classes. Excellent verbal skills and a desire to gain knowledge of words and their meanings created a great foundation for Ryan in his quest for academic success. However, Ryan frequently forgot what he wanted to write because of the focus on spelling

which was an area of academic concern. This is similar to a student being so focused on decoding words they miss their own comprehension. In the tenth grade he started using a tape recorder to verbally record his written assignments and later transposed them into written manuscripts using the computer with spell check. He struggled with numbers, geometric shapes, and spelling. Ryan learned coping strategies that involved note cards and use of spatial integration techniques to grasp the concepts of geometry.

Ryan took two years of data processing at the nearby vocational education center and a lot of business classes to prepare for a career in Business Management and Computer Information Systems. Ryan wanted to attend a Historically Black University; however, his school of choice did not have resources specifically allocated for students with LD. The university offered tutoring and writing and math centers where students could get assistance. Because his mother had instilled in him these words, "Never give up and never let others put you down" (personal communication, July 9, 1999), Ryan was determined to succeed at all levels of life. Ryan felt he would find the help he needed at the college level. He was confident that he would one day realize his dream of becoming a viable member of his community as well as a role model for future generations of African-American males.

Common Themes

When interviewed about what they would have done differently in high school to prepare for college, Wilton, Jonathan and Ryan agreed they would have taken more rigorous classes to better prepare for college. Taking general curriculum classes also would have increased the opportunities to experience a variety of teaching techniques. Learning to

value the use of a planner in managing their schedules and assignments would have been beneficial at the high school level as well.

In answer to questions about self-advocacy, the young men made it clear that students have to be their own advocates. Ryan said, “I was taught at an early age that no one can represent you better than you” (personal communication, July 9, 1999). Confidence in his abilities and acknowledgment of his weaknesses empowered him to be his own advocate. Jonathan shared, “Learn all you can learn about your disabilities because those disabilities will be with you all your life. They are part of you. Accept your learning disabilities and you can make life a positive experience” (personal communication, July 15, 1999). Knowing one’s academic strengths and weaknesses better ensures appropriate accommodations and modifications.

Each of the men pursued academic excellence. If support services were not available, they surrounded themselves with peers that shared common goals for success. They

became part of study groups in order to succeed. They took advantage of tutoring and resource center supports. They encourage students when they say anything worth having is worth the hard work.

When questioned about being athletes and having learning disabilities, Wilton and Jonathan shared that they had to prove they were in college for an education, and their athletic scholarships were the way to realize their goals. They took advantage of the supports afforded them and maintained a grade point average (GPA) that ensured participation in athletics and completion of their degrees.

Other common themes shared by the men were to sit at the front of the class, get to know the professors, and research colleges by looking for specific information on services for students with LD. They saw the need for more collaboration between special educators and general educators and inclusive classroom settings at the high school level.

Figure 1: Recommendations at a Glance.

Wilton

1. Write your questions down so you will not forget them while the professor is lecturing. Ask for clarification.
2. Challenge yourself. Take general education classes in high school.
3. Study with a group of students that are focused on studying.
4. Sit in the front of the class and participate in discussions.
5. Talk with your professors about your disability and learning styles.
6. Never get discouraged. Keep trying no matter how hard it is.
7. Do the best you can and try from the first day of class, not after you get behind. Do not let anything interfere with your learning. Remember, you only have a few years to concentrate on your degree.

Ryan

1. Know your academic strengths and weaknesses.
2. Visit the college you plan to attend, and research the services offered students with learning disabilities.
3. Talk with students who already attend the college of choice.
4. Introduce yourself to your advisor and professors immediately. Knowing your professors is half the battle.
5. Take advantage of the resource center to receive all the help you need.

Figure 1 (continued). Recommendations at a Glance

Jonathan

1. Use a planner.
2. Work on assignments the minute you get the course syllabus.
3. Balance your course load with a few difficult courses and a few easier courses each semester.
4. Read over your notes every night.
5. Set appointments with teachers in advance, especially when a test is coming up.
6. Remind teachers that you need accommodations on tests before the day of the test. Arrange the best testing situation for you and your professor.
7. Remember, anything worth doing is going to take time and effort on your part.
8. Ask questions about the college program that interests you. It could be the best program in the nation, but if it does not meet your needs, it is not the best program for you.
9. Make sure the program is personable. Talk to students that utilize the services for students with learning disabilities. Ask questions about the manner in which assistance is given.

Recommendations

Jonathan, Wilton, and Ryan focused on their goals to successfully complete their postsecondary education. They each made recommendations of strategies that helped them realize their goals. While these young men developed their own lists of recommendations for success, they are proven to be highly supported by the findings reported by Getzel (2005) and Gerber et al. (1992).

Dreams Become Reality

These highly motivated young men successfully completed their four-year programs at the postsecondary level. One is employed by IBM as an Information Technology Specialist, another works as a financial analyst for a major conglomerate, and the other is the assistant strength coach for a Division I university football team. All three of these men desire to see students with learning disabilities be successful academically. Jonathan and Ryan have volunteered at their former high school; Jonathan assists with football conditioning and Ryan has tutored students with LD in computer language (Williams, 1999). Wilton receives release time from

work to return to his alma mater and share his experiences with students with LD.

Conclusion

These three young men demonstrated many of the internal and external elements reported by Gerber, et al. (1992) that lead to success. Desire, goal orientation, persistence, learned creativity, and social ecologies all played a big part in their postsecondary education success (Gerber, et al., 1992). Additionally, having knowledge of one's strengths and concerns contributes to success for adults with LD. Obviously these young men were armed with knowledge of their disabilities, strengths and concerns and coupled that knowledge with personal creativity for proactive approaches leading to success at the postsecondary level.

Research identifying self-determination skills necessary for success in post secondary education is supported by the experiences of the young men interviewed by the author (Dowick, Getzel, & Briel, 2004). First is understanding one's disability; second is understanding strengths and concerns; third is learning to succeed despite the impact of the disability; fourth is setting goals

and how others can help them reach their goals; and fifth is acquiring problem-solving and self-management skills (Thoma & Wehmeyer, 2005; Gerber, Ginsberg & Reiff, 1992).

Self-advocacy skills are crucial to early academic development. Students with LD need to know and understand their particular learning preferences and their needs for accommodations and modifications. Current trends toward student-led IEPs can foster positive transition toward more obtainable career goals and self-advocacy skills. This can only happen when teachers, parents, and students work together collaboratively in developing transition goals and in understanding individual learning disabilities, career goals, and student preferences and how they impact academics.

Recommendations and common themes presented by Jonathan, Wilton, and Ryan emphasized areas of consideration when a student's career goals include transitioning to postsecondary education. Being armed with knowledge of one's particular disabilities and the educational impact of the disability empowers students to make informed decisions about postsecondary choices. "More services" do not guarantee the services will be appropriate. Each college/university has its own system of assisting students. It is important to research postsecondary programs and find one that will match the needs and career goals of each individual.

There can be success at the postsecondary level for students with LD. Jonathan, Wilton, and Ryan share their stories because they believe others can realize educational success if they are empowered with the tools for success while still in high school. Students with learning disabilities can dare to dream and be successful at the postsecondary educational level.

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