
Postsecondary Education and Students with Learning Disabilities

Special Issue Introduction

We have witnessed a number of significant changes with regard to the education of students with learning disabilities in the last 30 years. Probably the most significant single event occurred in 1975, with the passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (now known as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act). This sweeping federal legislation brought with it a number of important improvements to the education of students with learning and other disabilities—among them, being educated in the least restrictive environment, which has meant mainstreamed or included classrooms for many students with learning disabilities, and the provision for individualized educational plans to meet each student's particular needs.

As these mandates began to change the ways preK-12 schools educated children and youth with learning disabilities, many of these students (a) achieved higher levels of academic skills and performance and (b) in the process of doing better and being educated with their nondisabled peers, developed along with their parents and teachers, heightened expectations for their futures. When the improved scholastic capabilities of and high expectations for students with learning disabilities are considered in the context of expanded legal protections afforded to college students with disabilities through federal laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American with Disabilities Act, it is not surprising that the number of individuals with learning disabilities attending postsecondary institutions has approximately quadrupled since the late 1970s.

One logical outgrowth of improvements in preK-12 education for students with learning disabilities is, then, their increased attendance at colleges and universities. Postsecondary education is indeed quickly becoming the new academic frontier for individuals with learning disabilities, replete with new opportunities and new challenges. For example, graduating from college is associated with a number of benefits, not the least of which is more highly respected jobs with greater pay. Moreover, attending college after high school graduation affords students with and without disabilities an extended transition into adult life roles, one that brings important practice in independent living and self-management. Also, the increasing numbers of students with disabilities on our college and university campuses have brought important diversity to the American collegiate student body, thereby strengthening postsecondary education as an important social laboratory within which individuals can interact with people from different backgrounds and with different perspectives than their own.

However, students with learning disabilities typically encounter a number of barriers to successfully completing postsecondary education programs. Many of these difficulties spring from the unique predicament that they represent for institutions of higher education. On one hand, these students are, by definition, of average or above average intelligence, and thus, with reasonable accommodations, might be expected to succeed in college. However, the very nature of their disability relates to problems in learning—the central activity of colleges and universities. In preK-12 school environments, the onus for identifying a disability and providing individualized education plans, accommodations, and related services is placed on the schools. In contrast, colleges and universities typically place the responsibility for learning, as well as identifying oneself as having a disability, on the student, with instructors often knowing little about effective instructional techniques and meeting the needs of diverse learners. Whereas preK-12 environments often reflect a spirit of cooperation and accommodation, post-secondary education is often typified by competition and more traditional instructional formats (e.g., lecture) that do not optimize the learning of many students with learning disabilities. As such, students with learning disabilities often struggle in college learning environments that may seem intimidating and unaccommodating

in comparison to the K-12 classroom to which they have become accustomed.

Ideally, the research literature can provide guidance in overcoming educational problems. But the literature base regarding college students with learning disabilities is in its infancy, supplying little concrete direction for students with learning disabilities, their advocates, or college and university faculty. Indeed, traditional professional groups have failed to clearly identify the post-secondary education of students with learning disabilities and other disabilities as a priority. For example, special education has primarily concerned itself with the preK to high school age range. Rehabilitation counseling has primarily focused on the needs of adults with disabilities in the community and at work rather than on college campuses. And the scholarly literature regarding post-secondary education has given limited attention to the growing population of students with disabilities.

In our view, there is a clear need for further scholarly attention regarding the postsecondary education of students with learning disabilities. The benefits of individuals with learning disabilities succeeding in college are evident, and the obstacles to them doing so are real. The articles in this special issue that are briefly summarized in the following paragraphs will, we hope, constitute resources for helping students with learning disabilities and other stakeholders to make informed decisions on a variety of pertinent topics related to postsecondary education. Hopefully, this and other research and scholarship can be used to improve the postsecondary experiences of college students with learning disabilities, which, in turn, will enrich the colleges and universities and, ultimately, benefit larger society.

Overview of Articles in This Issue

Preparing High School Students with Learning Disabilities for Success in College: Implications for Students, Parents, and Educators by Richard J. Cowan addresses a critically important developmental task for students with learning disabilities, namely, the transition into higher education from secondary schools. His composite model of transition into college and university life features a seamless blend of services and supports centered on (a) academic and career development, (b) psychosocial adjustment, and (c) orientation to the campus and off-campus community. Cowan identifies roles and functions of such key stakeholders as special education professionals, rehabilitation counselors, guidance counselors, postsecondary student services personnel, school psychologists, faculty members, parents, and students with learning disabilities themselves as they work together to promote postsecondary success for students with learning disabilities.

To optimize their postsecondary opportunities, students with learning disabilities and other related stakeholders need to be aware of their legal rights. In *Legal Protection Against Discrimination for Students in Higher Education: Four Leading Issues*, Mark C. Weber provides a review of four legal issues designed to protect students with learning disabilities from discrimination at post-secondary institutions based on recent legislation and court cases: (a) who is protected by the statutes, (b) what deference is accorded to colleges and universities in issues such as providing reasonable accommodations, (c) what are reasonable accommodations related to testing, and (d) what actions must universities take to prevent the harassment of students on the basis of a learning disability. Many college students with learning disabilities do not readily identify themselves as having a disability after leaving high school and therefore may not recognize that they have legal rights that will help them succeed in college. Weber's article will acquaint students and other stakeholders with these rights (and their limitations).

Although appropriate transition services and legal mandates are important to *set the stage* for success in college for students with learning disabilities, many will continue to struggle if traditional lectures persist as the primary mode of instruction. *An Approach for Inclusive College Teaching: Universal Design for Instruction* by Joan M. McGuire and Sally S. Scott provides (a) an introduction to and (b) students' perceptions of Universal Design for Instruction (UDI). UDI, which is designed so that the needs of diverse learners are addressed in the design of instruction (thereby obviating the need for most accommodations), appears to hold great promise for

enhancing the postsecondary learning of students with learning disabilities, as well as a variety of other learners with and without disabilities who experience difficulties with traditional instruction.

Elizabeth Evans Getzel and Colleen A. Thoma in *Voice of Experience: What College Students with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorders Tell Us Are Important Self-Determination Skills for Success* then report the findings of a series of focus group interviews with college students with learning disabilities regarding what aspects of self-determination have been most important in their successes. Given the dramatic differences between preK-12 and postsecondary environments, it appears critically important that students with learning disabilities become self-determined in their pursuit of success and graduation. Getzel and Thoma report that students with learning disabilities found (a) understanding one's disability, (b) learning to compensate, and (c) setting and achieving academic goals to be critically important self-determination skills for college success. They recommend that transition programs begin focusing on these skills early in high school to facilitate successful transition to postsecondary education.

G. W. White and Yen T.H Vo report in *Requesting Accommodations to Increase Full Participation in Higher Education: An Analysis of Self-advocacy Training for Postsecondary Students with Learning and Other Disabilities* on a multiple-baseline investigation with three college students with disabilities (one of whom had learning disabilities) to determine the degree to which they could learn to successfully request accommodations from university personnel. Unlike preK-12 school environments, students with learning disabilities do not receive accommodations unless they self-identify themselves as having a disability and request the accommodation from their instructor. Oftentimes, they must also deal with instructors who are less than willing to provide the requested accommodations. College students with learning disabilities are often reluctant to self-identify their disability and to request accommodations. As such, this training, which resulted in all participants achieving high levels of proficiency with the various steps involved in requesting and negotiating an accommodation, can be of particular benefit to students with learning disabilities.

The article, *Career Development Needs among College and University Students with Learning Disabilities and Attention Deficit Disorder/Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder*, by Mary L. Hennessey, Phillip D. Rumrill, Richard T. Roessler, and Bryan G. Cook describes key findings from a tri-regional survey of the career-related concerns of 110 postsecondary students with learning disabilities and ADD/ADHD. Results indicated that areas of perceived strength included expectations (of students themselves and of others), job-seeking and technical skills, and access and accommodations. In general, respondents were confident that their colleges and universities had prepared them for the rigors of competitive careers after graduation. However, respondents were less confident in their knowledge of and preparation regarding such disability specific concerns as health insurance coverage and portability, implementation of the employment provisions of the Americans with Disabilities Act and Social Security disability programs. Suggestions made by students with disabilities and other stakeholders regarding how to maintain strengths and remedy weaknesses are presented.

The final article in this special issue, *The Impact of a Professional Development Institute on Faculty Members' Interactions with College Students with Learning Disabilities* by Bryan G. Cook, Phillip D. Rumrill, Jane Beckett-Camarata, Pamela R. Mitchell, Sara Newman, Kim P. Sebal, Gertrude A. Steuernagel, Lysandra Cook, and Mary L. Hennessey focuses on one method for involving faculty members in issues related to college students with learning disabilities. Although most of the research and professional literature on the postsecondary education of students with learning disabilities focuses on the students, the other side of the equation, that of university faculty, seems equally important. Cook and colleagues describe an intensive week-long professional development institute in which university faculty members became acquainted with a variety of educational and societal issues facing people with disabilities, and learned effective instructional procedures (e.g., UDI) to address the needs of their students with learning disabilities. The reflections of a number of participating faculty members are presented to illustrate the impact the institute had on them, their teaching, and their students with learning disabilities.

Conclusions

Serving as guest co-editors for this special issue has been a wonderful learning experience for us largely because of the kind and hard-working individuals involved. We wish to thank all of the contributing authors for their diligent scholarship. We also need to thank the co-editors of *Learning Disabilities: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, Janet Lerner and Frank Kline, for their support throughout the entire process. Finally, we are indebted to Lynne Cannon, the managing editor for the journal, for her enthusiastic and skillful assistance.

Bryan G. Cook
Phillip D. Rumrill
Guest Editors