

Playing to Win: Improving Support Services for Student Athletes with Learning Disabilities in Institutions of Higher Learning

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ABSTRACT

Although much has been written about the impact of learning disabilities on the performance of students of school age, only recently has the emphasis shifted to students of college age. University services and supports for these students have not kept pace with the dramatic influx of students with special needs, often because instructors and counselors are unfamiliar with their needs and requirements (Lock & Layton, 2001). Student athletes with learning disabilities may experience a multitude of difficulties throughout their academic careers. Academic advisors and faculty need to focus on addressing both the metacognitive and affective needs of student athletes with learning disabilities. The authors propose a combined approach of strategy instruction and self-advocacy which allows student athletes to not only understand their learning needs but to request the supports that will allow them to be more successful learners. This multi-faceted approach can assist students in reaching their potential.

INTRODUCTION

Learning disabilities have an impact on human behavior across the life span. In addition to affecting one's aptitude to learn, learning disabilities often have a negative effect on one's sense of self-respect and can, in certain instances, impair social judgment.

Whereas much has been written about the impact of learning disabilities on the performance of students of school age, only recently has the emphasis shifted to students of college age. This change reflects the increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities entering colleges and universities. Thus, the number of college freshmen with learning disabilities has increased tenfold since 1976, and the estimated prevalence of learning disabilities among students in higher education in general has increased to about 3% of the total higher education population (Henderson, 1999). Indeed, students with learning disabilities are the fastest growing group of college students with disabilities receiving services. Of particular interest in this discussion, according to a recent report, student athletes with learning disabilities comprise approximately 2.7% of the total population of student athletes (National Association of Academic Advisors for athletics Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2004). It should be noted that the percentage of student-athletes with learning disabilities is just less than the percentage of students with learning disabilities among all undergraduate students nationally.

Unfortunately, services and supports for students with learning disabilities have not kept pace with the dramatic influx of students with special needs. For example, students often find university programs lacking in the accommodations they need, often because instructors and counselors are unfamiliar with their needs and requirements (Lock & Layton, 2001). As a result, many students with learning disabilities are unable to successfully compete academically (Mull, Sitlington, & Alper, 2001), or simply leave before completing their planned program of study (Fairweather & Shaver, 1991; Lehmann, Davies, & Laurin, 2000).

The outlook for academic success is uncertain for college students with learning disabilities in general, but the likelihood of success for student athletes with learning disabilities may be even more tenuous. College student athletes are required to meet increasingly stringent eligibility requirements as specified by the NCAA, as well as meet the numerous demands in their chosen sport in order to maintain their scholarship. The NCAA does allow a reduced course load (as opposed to full-time enrollment) for student-athletes with documented learning disabilities. The problem is that these same students will be held responsible for maintaining degree progress despite receiving the ability to have a reduced course load. Furthermore, many athletic advisors have no background in special education, and as a result, are undereducated about the nature of learning disabilities and their effects in the classroom and beyond. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of learning disabilities and the impact this disability can have on the academic performance. In addition, given their unique position on campus, we propose an individualized, integrated approach to providing support services to student athletes who have learning disabilities to help them succeed academically. Not only would it work for student athletes but also it would be a way to improve services for all students with learning disabilities.

WHAT IS A LEARNING DISABILITY?

According to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), "Specific learning disability" means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term *learning disabilities* includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. However, it does not include learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, or emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

In short, individuals with a learning disability have adequate hearing and vision, and possess general intelligence in the near-average, average, or above-average range. Yet they have educational difficulties that do not stem from inadequate educational experiences or cultural factors. That is, such individuals do not acquire and use information efficiently because of impairment in perception, conceptualization, language, memory, attention, or motor control.

HOW DO LEARNING DISABILITIES MANIFEST THEMSELVES IN ADOLESCENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS?

Gottesman (1994) addressed the manifestation of learning disabilities in adolescents and young adults, noting that students exhibit severe deficits in basic skills such as reading, spelling, and math. Students also demonstrate deficits in work-related skills such as listening well in class, taking notes, and studying for and taking exams. Other researchers have classified these learners as passive with a pervasive lack of motivation.

As a result of the deficits listed above, students with learning disabilities usually perform well below average in their academic courses despite average or above average intelligence. To compound their problems, these students may have a hard time advocating for needed resources, exhibit poor self-concept and experience a number of social and emotional difficulties, including being less accepted by peers, interacting awkwardly and inappropriately in social situations and being socially imperceptive. To succeed, the majority of students with learning disabilities require ongoing support services that offer accommodations such as an overall emphasis on learning strategies and remediation, and more individualized accommodations such as note takers, real-time captioning, and readers/scribes for examinations.

WHAT DOES THE LAW SAY ABOUT STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

All civil rights laws that relate to persons with disabilities apply to students who have learning disabilities, from the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (especially Section 504) to the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). Coverage under the ADA is particularly relevant to the college education of students with learning disabilities.

Under the ADA, the term disability means a physical or mental impairment that limits a person in a major life activity. Thus, students with learning disabilities are covered under ADA if a major life activity (e.g., learning) is substantially limited or impaired. One negative aspect of the law is the fact that in an educational setting students with learning disabilities must meet the standards of the program of study they are entering. That is, the law states that a qualified individual with a disability is one, who, with or without reasonable accommodations, can meet the entry criteria for the educational program. Once students are admitted, the institution must provide "reasonable accommodations" for their disabilities. Reasonable accommodations are adaptations that allow students to reach their goals, such as extended time on tests, use of note-takers, assistive technology, and so on.

WHAT ARE THE BARRIERS TO SUCCESS IN HIGHER EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES?

Traditionally, success in higher education is measured by a demonstration of mastery of course content rather than developing an understanding of the complex principles and concepts that underpin the content. (Gardner & Singh, 1991). Lock and Layton (2001) suggest that instructors often attribute student failure to an inability to master the core content without considering the impact of the learning disability. Thus, college students with learning disabilities often have difficulty processing information and lack efficient strategies for learning both content and the underlying principles. In addition,

many are unable to advocate for the accommodations that would make them more successful academically and that are offered more automatically in high school programs. This is particularly unfortunate, as evidence suggests that students who access these services are more successful both academically and socially (Hartmann-Hall & Haaga, 2002).

Further, in a summit to determine what college students with learning disabilities say about barriers to success in higher education, Lehmann et al. (2000) found that these students with learning disabilities often encounter a lack of acceptance and understanding both in students and faculty. An even bigger barrier was the lack of adequate services to assist them in tackling academic as well as nonacademic challenges. As a result, many of the participants in the summit perceived that college educators and college-services staffs need information, training, and ongoing support to effectively teach students with disabilities.

This conclusion was echoed in a recent synthesis of the literature on postsecondary education for students with learning disabilities (Mull et al., 2001). Mull and his colleagues found that little information is available to guide postsecondary program planners in developing student support services. Therefore, more emphasis needs to be placed on training of staff at the postsecondary level to work with all students with learning disabilities, including student athletes.

STUDENT ATHLETES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Student athletes who have learning disabilities represent a group of students who face not only the pressures of academic life, but also the added performance expectations on the athletic field. Toogood, Miller, Kaff, and Hill (2004) suggest that student athletes are in a unique situation on campus, where they are perceived as heroes in one arena and less capable in another. This contradiction may be magnified if the athlete has a learning disability. They go on to suggest that unfortunately, these students are often seen as problematic given that they demonstrate poor graduation rates and are often targeted as being unmotivated and unable to complete their academic classes.

Etzel, Ferrante, and Pickney (1996) indicated that student athletes with learning disabilities face a range of unique barriers, which include adjustment to the competing demands of athletic vs. the academic world, response to negative stereotypes, needs for unique support services, and coping with learning disabilities.

Student athletes with learning disabilities may experience a multitude of difficulties throughout their academic careers. For example, Simons and Van Reenen (2000) found that student athletes fail to make the connection between the behaviors necessary for athletic success and those necessary for academic success. This disconnect often results in poor academic preparation and low academic self-worth. Further, like all students with learning disabilities, student athletes with learning disabilities often experience limitations in strategic knowledge and self-monitoring that can negatively impact academic performance (Borkowski, 1992).

There is great diversity among student athletes with learning disabilities. An individual can have a specific problem or a constellation of learning problems. Primary characteristics of student athletes with learning disabilities can include problems in academic areas such as math and reading, writing, and other language-based domains. Secondary characteristics may include social and emotional issues such as low self-esteem, lack of motivation, and poor self-concept (Barton & Fuhrmann, 1994).

Student athletes with learning disabilities who are successful in their chosen sport understand the expectations of their chosen sport, believe in themselves, have a high level of self-esteem, and are often highly motivated to do well in the playing field. Through effective coaching, physical training, and years of success, these students excel on the playing field but many do not succeed in the academic realm. Many report being unaware of their own strengths and weaknesses in terms of their academic functioning. In addition, they often report encountering a complete lack of understanding and acceptance of their disabilities by fellow students, faculty, and staff.

INCREASING NEED FOR POSTSECONDARY ACCOMODATIONS: PROMOTING SUCCESS FOR STUDENT ATHLETES WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES

Many postsecondary educators and academic advisors have little if any training in working with students with disabilities. Indeed, only 31% of faculty and 6% of academic advisers in college and university settings have received any preparation in special education (Yocum & Coll, 1995). As a result, many students with learning disabilities, including student athletes, receive merely typical accommodations to help them cope, including use of a tape recorder, tutoring services, and extra time for test taking, rather than individualized plans to meet their unique needs (Thomas, 2000).

Academic advisors and faculty need to incorporate more in-depth programming options to help all students with disabilities, including student athletes. These options should focus on addressing both the metacognitive and affective needs of student athletes with learning disabilities as outlined below.

Integrated Model

Borkowski and his colleagues (Borkowski, 1992; Borkowski, Carr, Rellinger, & Pressley, 1990) developed an integrated model of achievement focusing on two dimensions: metacognition and affective factors. Metacognition refers to an individual's knowledge of how he or she learns. Effective learners understand the demands of various kinds of academic tasks, employ useful strategies to learn and complete the tasks, and understand their strengths and weaknesses (Butler, Elaschuk, & Poole, 2000). Additionally, effective learners are confident of their ability to control and direct their learning (Bandura, 1993).

Students with learning disabilities often have strong beliefs about their learning. Many think they are cannot learn. They believe that school tasks are too hard. Many times, they attribute any academic success they experience to getting lucky. Students with learning disabilities do not see a connection between what they do, the efforts they make, and the likelihood of academic success. These beliefs tend to become stronger as the students progress through school. As a result, students with learning disabilities often are overwhelmed, disorganized, and frustrated when trying to learn.

The affective component focuses on feelings of self-efficacy, including motivation and personal attributions. A bidirectional relationship exists between these factors, and a low perception of self-efficacy and negative attributions frequently undermine academics (Butler et al., 2000). The combined approach of strategy instruction and self-advocacy allows student athletes to not only understand their learning needs but to request the supports that will allow them to be more successful learners.

Case Study

To illustrate the application of an integrated metacognitive-affective model, let us look at the case of Marcus, a very articulate and persuasive young man who is also a student athlete. Marcus struggles to maintain a GPA of 2.0 but with considerable effort is able to do so. When he studies, he often wanders from the work, and has to be reminded to get back on track. He has been identified as having a learning disability in written language. He can read and comprehend the material in his classes, but has a great deal of difficulty organizing his work and putting his thoughts on paper. He loves being a student athlete but because academic work is hard for him, he often puts off writing papers and then becomes despondent and skips class. His coach has repeatedly told Marcus to take care of business on the field and off the field. Nevertheless, Marcus is close to losing his eligibility due to poor academic grades.

Marcus would benefit from a multi-faceted approach to address his learning needs. Such an approach would include three elements:

1. An individualized accommodation plan
2. Individualized strategy instruction
3. Training in self-advocacy

Individualized accommodation plan

When Marcus came to campus, a team consisting of the learning disabilities specialist, his athletic advisor, and Marcus developed an individualized accommodation plan. The plan is designed to meet the specific needs of the individual student based on the results of evaluation data and learning preferences expressed by the student. Implementation of such a plan will help to “level the playing field” for the student athlete and thereby increase the likelihood of success in the academic arena by identifying needs and matching them with corresponding accommodations and strategies. Provided with his individualized academic accommodation plan, Marcus’ instructors would have a clear idea of what they can do to assist him in improving his academic performance.

Figure 1. Sample individual accomodation plan for Marcus

Test Taking	Assignment Completion	Study/Class Preparation
Provide test proctors to clarify test items	Provide word processing services on transcribers	Provide subject area tutors
Mark answers on test copy rather than answer sheet	Allow student to dictate or or audiotape papers rather than write them	Allow preferred seating
Allow extra time	Allow students to give oral presentations rather than turn in written projects	Provide copies of lecture notes
Provide test readers	Arrange for frequent communication w/professors to discuss projects	Provide note taker in class
Provide amplified test directions in written form	Have students submit drafts for feedback before handing in paper	Allow students to audiotape class lectures
Provide training in study strategies	Provide proofreaders to error-monitor written papers	Convert lecture notes to audiotape for studying
Make available objective test items rather than essays	Provide strategy checklists for completing projects	Provide computer interactive study guide for textbooks

Individualized Strategy Instruction

As proposed by Borkowski (1992), Borkowski et al. (1990) and Butler et al. (2000), learning strategies designed with the individual learner in mind increase a person's ability to control and direct his or her learning and therefore lead to enhanced learning. Using this approach, students develop an understanding of their unique learning based on personal experience. This knowledge, in turn, can help instructors shape students' problem-solving approaches to construct better more efficient approaches to learning.

Marcus in our case example would benefit from tailored strategy instruction designed to help him to take a more active role in his learning. An instructor trained in strategy instruction would help Marcus generate strategies to achieve his learning needs. Specifically, the instructor would assist him in analyzing task requirements and evaluating his current approach to learning. Marcus would then be taught to select, adapt or create strategies that meet task demands as well as monitor their effectiveness, modifying strategies as necessary. Over time Marcus would be supported to construct strategies that are expressed in his own words to meet his individual needs.

The plan in action. Marcus enrolls in freshman English. The primary purpose of this class is to read, respond to and engage in expository writing. Marcus has been assigned to an instructor trained in strategy instruction. The instructor begins by asking Marcus to write an essay. As she and Marcus talk about the writing process, it becomes clear that Marcus knows what a good essay should look like but does not understand the demands of particular writing assignments. Further, Marcus often has a hard time analyzing the writing task. Many times, he is unclear about the assignment requirements. The instructor also discovers that Marcus does not understand text structure and has a hard time judging the quality of his writing.

Marcus' instructor helped him to develop knowledge about text structures while working on his initial essay for the class. Together they read several essays by noted authors to learn to identify the elements that make a good essay. Over the next few weeks the instructor also helped Marcus identify how good writers organize their work. For example, he learned to identify how text is organized and the purpose of different types of expository text. He identified text structures that assist readers in determining and understanding the main idea of a work and learned how writers connect ideas through transitions and elaborations.

Based on his newly acquired knowledge, Marcus developed his own strategy for writing an essay. He worked from an outline that involved the use of text structures that signaled the type of article he was to write as well as a section-by-section organizer. He also developed a checklist to help him as he worked through the writing process. Over time, Marcus used his writing strategies to help himself in other subjects, particularly his American history class. By increasing his understanding of text structures, Marcus was able to preview his American history text, thereby increasing his understanding of the material. He was also able to use his writing strategies to help him with homework assignments, preparation for essay exams, and writing his research paper for the class. As Marcus became more confident of his abilities, his grades began to reflect his efforts and he was able to retain his academic eligibility.

Self-advocacy training

Many students with learning disabilities have a hard time asking for the services they need to increase their likelihood of academic and social success. Research indicates that many college students have little understanding of the accommodations or effective ways to advocate for their needs (Carroll & Johnson-Brown, 1996). Simons and Van Reheem (2000) found that student athletes with learning disabilities are also prone to this problem.

Fortunately, studies have shown (e.g., Palmer & Roessler, 2000) that college students with disabilities who completed training in self-advocacy and conflict resolution were able to request needed classroom accommodations and clearly communicate their needs to their professors. As students became more effective advocates, their accommodations were more effectively implemented and their academic achievement increased.

Marcus participated in an eight-week program offered by Counseling and Student Support Services to improve his self-advocacy and conflict resolution skills. This course is offered as a one-hour credit course. In the process, Marcus received information about his learning disability and its impact on his learning. He also learned about his rights as well as his responsibilities in requesting reasonable accommodations. Finally, he received training in how to advocate for himself and learned and practiced situational conflict resolution strategies. In Marcus' case knowledge is power, and in subsequent semesters, Marcus met with his professors early in the semester to inform them of his learning disability and the kind of modifications he would need to be successful.

CONCLUSION

As increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities, including student athletes, enroll in higher education, it is imperative that these institutions are prepared to offer students the accommodations they need to succeed academically and socially and receive their due rights under ADA and other relevant legislation.

Recent studies show that most faculty and academic advisors in postsecondary institutions are not adequately prepared to offer the support many of these students need. To level the playing field for students with learning disabilities, training and campus wide support of services must be offered, including a multi-faceted approach such as the one presented here. Only with such efforts will students be able to reach their potential.

Figure 2. Sample Expository Essay Checklist for Marcus

Steps in Constructing an Expository Essay	Timeline
Is the audience informed or uninformed about the topic	
Decide on the tone of the article	
Title the essay	
Write a formal sentence definition that defines your subject by item, class, and differentiation.	
Define unknown terms related to the subject or process.	
Use a step-by-step process for instructions. Number steps if appropriate	
Use commands as sentences when appropriate.	
Use parallel structure.	
Avoid redundancy	
Use illustrations where appropriate to support directions or explanations, but never substitute an illustration for written text when or if text is necessary or preferable	
Troubleshoot difficult steps in a process; use comparisons to explain difficult concepts or ideas; use helpful hints that ease the completion of a process or task	
Leave plenty of white space on your paper for easier reading comprehension.	

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