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The learning disabled student in postsecondary institutions: An overview

Abstract

Historically, the focus on the learning disabled has been at the elementary and, more recently, the secondary school level. However, since the influx of so many students into postsecondary institutions, the emphasis is changing. Vogel (1982) stated that the number of programs for the learning disabled in higher education has grown significantly during the '80s as a response to concerns from learning disabled students, their parents, and professionals, and from the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. However, the number of postsecondary schools offering adequate educational and support programs to learning disabled students is still small.

THE LEARNING DISABLED STUDENT IN
POSTSECONDARY INSTITUTIONS: AN OVERVIEW

A Research Paper
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Gail Ellen West
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Historically, the focus on the learning disabled has been at the elementary and, more recently, the secondary school level. However, since the influx of so many students into postsecondary institutions, the emphasis is changing. Vogel (1982) stated that the number of programs for the learning disabled in higher education has grown significantly during the '80s as a response to concerns from learning disabled students, their parents, and professionals, and from the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. However, the number of postsecondary schools offering adequate educational and support programs to learning disabled students is still small.

Woods, Boyer, and Sedlacek (1987) stated that the increase in the number of learning disabled students entering college has forced institutions to re-evaluate existing programs. A survey by Ostertag and Baker (1984) revealed that the learning disabled college student population in California grew by more than 37 percent between the years 1982 and 1984, increasing from 7,962 to 10,869. Young and Staebler (1987) found that 14 percent of the learning disabled adults attempted to study at two-year or four-year colleges, of those, 32 percent were presently enrolled,

4 percent had graduated from junior colleges, 9 percent earned a bachelor's degree, and 8 percent were working toward postgraduate degrees. These figures indicate the need for additional programs.

In a research report by Woods et al. (1987) it was stated that the shortage of postsecondary learning disability programs was due to four basic reasons: the financial costs of learning disability programs, the apathetic view toward a college education by adolescent learning disabled students, the continuing concern for academic excellence in higher education, and the lack of knowledge and awareness by college personnel about the needs of the learning disabled. Still other reasons for the scarcity of programs are the inconsistencies and contradictions over the definition and diagnosis of learning disabilities.

The author's purpose in this paper is to review literature pertaining to learning disabled students in higher education. More specifically, definitions of learning disabilities, identifiable signs and symptoms of learning disabilities, postsecondary evaluation and screening processes, and special programs and services will be discussed.

Definitions of Learning Disabilities

LaPorta (1986) commented that many educators have voiced their misconceptions regarding students with learning disabilities. Therefore, like other students who have come into college with disadvantages, the learning disabled must be willing to defend themselves against these prejudices. Before they can do this, they must know and be able to communicate to others the complexities of learning disabilities and they must understand the true nature and inconsistencies of their own form of disability. The students should familiarize themselves with both the academic and legal definitions so they can explain their needs for special programs and services. Communication is the key to better understanding.

It was in the early 1960s that the term, learning disability, came into use (Young and Staebler, 1987). Before that, such terms as minimal brain dysfunction, brain damage, perceptual handicap, and word blindness were used as descriptors. In 1968, the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children created a definition which was used later in Public Law 94-142. A learning disability was described as:

a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.(p. 50)

Disorders include conditions such as perceptual handicaps, dyslexia, brain injury, developmental aphasia, and minimal brain dysfunction. Not included are persons with learning disabilities resulting primarily from visual, motor, or hearing handicaps, mental retardation, emotional disturbance, environmental, economical, or cultural disadvantages.

Beck (1985) presented another definition which was developed in 1981 by the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities:

Learning disabilities is a generic term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the individual and are presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction.

Even though a learning disability may occur concomitantly with other handicapping conditions (e.g., sensory impairment, mental retardation, social and emotional disturbance) or environmental influences (e.g., cultural differences, insufficient/inappropriate instruction, psycho-genic factors), it is not the direct result of those conditions or influences. (pp. 16-17)

Beck also commented that it is important to remember that learning disabled students have average to above average intelligence; their disabilities are the result of a breakdown in their learning processes which creates a gap between their potential and their performance.

Moss and Fox (1980) felt it would be very difficult, unless there is agreement on a definition for learning disabilities, to receive the financial and administrative support necessary to develop the institutional services which will provide comprehensive assessment, treatment, counseling and evaluation programs for learning disabled students. Therefore, he developed the following definition of a learning disability: "Anything that interferes with an adult individual's ability to receive, organize, store or

transmit information would constitute a learning disability for that person" (p.9).

In California community colleges, the definition for learning disabled has gone through major revisions during the past few years (Ostertag and Baker, 1984). The schools no longer follow the identification and assessment models used in K-12 programs. Instead, colleges operate learning disability programs according to the definitional guidelines of the California Association of Post-Secondary Educators of Disabled, Learning Disabilities Division.

A specific learning disability refers to disorders in which an individual exhibits a significant/severe discrepancy between the current level of developed intellectual abilities and academic performances despite regular instruction and educational opportunity, as currently measured by professionally recognized diagnostic procedures. Academic performance refers to achievement in the following areas: listening comprehension, oral expression, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension, mathematical calculation and reasoning. Specific Learning Disabilities are

often due to constitutional, genetic and/or neurological factors and are not primarily due to: visual or auditory sensory deficits, motor handicaps, severe emotional disturbance, environmental or economic disadvantage, cultural/language difference, or mental retardation. (p.2)

Lesnick (1987) was concerned with those who were excluded from Public Law 94-142 and Section 504 of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973; specifically, those whose conditions were primarily a result of environmental, economic or cultural disadvantages. Although some of these disorders result from intrinsic causes, it is apparent that much behavior is caused by extrinsic factors such as inadequate educational and developmental experiences. Lesnick felt that deprivation of experiences can create disorders. In short, experience molds biology.

Identifiable Signs and Symptoms

Kranes (1980) remarked that learning disabled students often appear normal, with no outward signs of any problems. They are said to look and sound just

like any other college student. This emphasizes the necessity, according to Woods et al. (1987), for the college faculty and staff who are required to understand, direct, and counsel these students to be able to recognize learning disabilities.

Because there still remains such a void of knowledge concerning learning disabilities, Cohen (1984) wrote that it is likely that educational personnel may not be able to recognize the role learning disabilities may play in a work or learning disorder. Crank (1985) described the differences between high school settings, in which teachers work directly with students, and the relatively impersonal environment of many colleges. College instructors need to be more aware of the problems students are having and should learn the signs and symptoms of a learning disability in the college student. Cohen (1984) stated that the most commonly affected areas of academic functioning were language-related processes (e.g., reading, writing, learning a new language) and mathematics related processes. With adequate knowledge of the symptoms of learning disabilities, instructors should be able to recognize the problem and work with learning disabled students in meeting

their needs.

Clary (1984) described several characteristics of learning disabled students. They are unable to use time constructively for the completion of tasks, limited in their ability to recognize and analyze problems and select realistic alternatives, rigid in their habits, unproductive because of poor time management skills, unable to look at a situation from another's perspective, and they set unrealistic goals. Cruickshank, Morse, and Johns (1980) offered a comprehensive list of specific problems which learning disabled students exhibit in areas such as attending, with accompanying symptoms in the auditory, visual, and physical modes. A sampling from this list would include such behaviors as unable to concentrate during lectures and/or discussions, cannot identify important detail from complex visuals (graphs, charts, and maps), and exhibits extremely restless behavior. The authors also described ten major problems occurring in regular classrooms: inability to follow either oral or written directions, unable to copy down assignments, unable to copy actual work from the chalkboard, difficulty in structuring a response to the assignment, inability to formulate questions and request clarification,

lacks the skills necessary for the task (reading, writing, spelling), unable to estimate time, lack of confidence, self-consciousness, and difficulty in sequencing at all levels.

Moss and Fox (1980), in describing the learning disabled student in colleges and postsecondary institutions, cited these characteristics: a developmental lag in both learning and learning rate; stress, anxiety and embarrassment in educational settings; skills deficits in reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, etc.; attention disorders, including short attention span; memory and thinking disorders in academic environments; speech and hearing disorders; emotional instability and poor adult and behavioral adjustment; excessiveness and hyperactivity; non-goal directed behavior; impulsiveness; limited knowledge of sexuality; low academic achievement and grades in higher educational settings; poor motivation; low self-esteem and poor self-concept; and soft neurological signs (e.g., attention lags, occasional temper tantrums caused by anger and frustration, slurring of words, lack of coordination).

Symptoms of learning disabilities may also be recognized by learning disabled students. Hannah

(1987) reported complaints registered by learning disabled students in a study of 22 junior colleges. The complaints included: not understanding what the teacher was saying, unable to understand what test questions were asking for, the necessity for so much extra time to complete assignments, and the inability to pass the required all-university English examination.

Postsecondary Evaluation and Screening Processes

Unfortunately, observation alone cannot determine whether or not a student is learning disabled. Complicated evaluation and screening procedures are often necessary requirements for special learning disability programs. Cohen (1984) felt that the first step for student affairs professionals to take with students who are experiencing academic difficulty is to rule out specific learning disabilities as the cause of the problem. The best way to do this is through a preliminary screening process which gathers data from four areas: work or learning related, difficulty learning a foreign language, the students' medical histories, and a review of their present level

of functioning in social, psychological, and educational settings. The initial reports of difficulty generally come from the academic area, but all areas provide the evaluators with an insight into the students' needs. If a learning disability is suspected, a more detailed evaluation will take place.

Hannah (1987) listed the primary assessment devices utilized to determine learning disabilities in her study of 22 junior colleges. They were the Woodstock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery, the CELF, the Listening Grammar subtest of the TOAL, the Detroit Test of Learning Ability Absurdities subtest, and the Proverbs Test. Samples of oral and written work were evaluated for linguistic expansion, syntax, weaknesses in narration, and usage errors. The scores of the learning disabled students and of normal students were then compared and evaluated.

In a follow-up study of learning disability programs in California community colleges, Ostertag and Baker (1984) reviewed identification and assessment tools. They found that learning disabled students were referred by faculty, counselors, high schools, the Department of Rehabilitation, parents and

relatives, and by the students themselves. As part of the identification process, intake interviews were given. The results of assessments from other agencies, such as the Department of Rehabilitation and high school counseling departments, were reviewed and used in determining the need for placement in learning disability programs. Eighty-nine percent of the schools gave standardized assessments. The four most widely used tests were the Wide Range Achievement Test, the Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised, and the Weschler Adult Intelligence Test-Revised. Some informal tests in areas such as written language, reading, spoken language, spelling, and arithmetic were also given for identification purposes. Some of the responding schools required multidisciplinary team conferences when admitting students into the special programs. The teams were comprised of learning disability specialists, enabler/college specialist or school counselor, medical doctor/health services rehabilitation counselors, and college administrators. In determining the eligibility of students whose label were questionable under the exclusionary clause, clinical judgment was the most frequently used means

of determining the extent of the discrepancy.

Fischer and Page (1984) described the procedures constructed around a specific diagnostic prescriptive model used at the University of Colorado at Boulder. The process included informal and formal testing in which the key to the process is the sharing of test results with the students; this assists them in developing an understanding of their specific need areas. Special activities are derived from the test results. A case study illustrated the use of formal testing in the determination of a student's strengths and weaknesses. Included were the Bender Visual Motor Gestalt Test, the Visual Matching subtest of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability, the Wide Range Achievement Test, the Blending Test of the Woodcock-Johnson Tests of Cognitive Ability, the Goldman Fristoe Test of Auditory Discrimination, the Auditory Attention Span for Unrelated Words, a subtest of the Detroit test of Learning Aptitude, the Spelling Subtest of WRAT, the Detroit Test of Visual Attention Span, Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, the DTLA Verbal Opposites Test, and, the DTLA Test of Likeness and Differences.

The usefulness of the Woodcock-Johnson

Psychoeducational Battery in measuring learning disabilities was assessed by Hoy and Gregg (1986) in an experiment involving 41 learning disabled students. The Woodcock-Johnson Battery is a highly acclaimed, frequently used assessment tool "which purports to measure cognitive ability, scholastic aptitude, academic achievement, and interests in both scholastic and nonscholastic ability" (p. 489). The results suggested that careful analysis must be made before interpreting the scores and that evaluators can gather valuable clinical information from the performance of students on individual subtests.

Crank (1985) discussed testing done at the University of South Dakota and the University of Kansas to determine the reading ability levels of freshmen and sophomores. He used cloze reading passages (a cloze reading passage is one in which key words are missing from the text and must be filled in by the students), the Stanford Achievement Spelling Test, and Raven's Progressive Matrices Test to evaluate and compare the level of reading ability of normal students and learning disabled students. He found the results of the learning disabled group very similar to those of students enrolled in developmental English

courses. These results support the contention that there are a large number of skill deficient students attending college.

Lamm, Fisch, and McDonagh (1982) claimed that the best way to approach learning disabilities is to have a team meeting medical personnel, remedial education specialists, social workers, and educational evaluators to develop a complete diagnostic program for each student in need of assistance. Tindall (1984) suggested that the appropriate assessment and evaluation of students with learning disabilities can help instructors develop individualized educational programs and to establish the appropriate curriculums and support services. Tindall further stated that learning disabled students are a heterogeneous group and that no single testing instrument can provide the answers to the questions asked by those making the evaluation. Learning disabled students suffer from many problems which can act as barriers to education, and recent evaluation batteries and techniques can be useful in identifying these problems and some possible solutions.

Special Programs and Services

In the opinion of Lamm et al. (1982), one of the most concrete examples of concern for the learning disabled on a national scale was the enactment of Public Law 94-142. This legislation sharply increased the commitment by the Federal Government to ensure all handicapped children the right to comprehensive, appropriate educational programs. Efforts at the federal level usually channel funding through state educational agencies. These agencies are required by law to have comprehensive plans, including specific methods for providing special education programs for the learning disabled.

As Crank (1985) stated, "This leads to the question of what must be done in order to allow these students to perform adequately in their college studies" (p. 7). Crank discussed learning strategies that will facilitate the acquisition of information and the abilities to manipulate, integrate, store, and retrieve this information in various situations and settings. Some of the strategies defined are the textbook reading strategy, the self-questioning strategy, paraphrasing strategy, the visual imagery

strategy, and strategies for interpreting visual aids, storage of information, expression and demonstration of competence, assignment completion strategies, and test-taking strategies. Crank also discussed teaching strategies which will aid the instructor in providing adequate instruction to learning disabled students.

Woods et al. (1987) made some pertinent suggestions: instructional modes should fit the students needs, different kinds of courses require specific kinds of skills, the need for modification in the course pace should be considered as an alternative, instructors who are best suited to teaching learning disabled students should be selected, more professional training and staff development are needed, employing learning disability specialists might be an alternative, and more planning of individual programs must be planned at the administrative level. Once students' needs are clearly identified, the specific academic programs can be developed to meet those needs.

According to the California community college study by Ostertag and Baker (1984), learning disabled students' needs were met through a variety of methods. Programs included special classes, tutorial support,

counseling and other support services. The tutorial services were generally on a one-to-one basis with an aide, a specialist, or a peer tutor. Counseling was provided on a one-to-one basis for academic and personal needs under the direction of the learning disability or external programs. There was support provided in the areas of registration services, notetaker services, class schedule modification, time extensions to complete course requirements, reader services, lecture reproduction, and learning center availability.

Strategies suggested by Lesnick (1987) for students with dyslexia are special language classes which are designed to meet the needs of students with language learning deficits, a language curriculum focusing on encoding and decoding, multisensory phonics work, explicit instruction in the meaning and function of words used to express structural relationships, coordination of reading and writing instruction, and the study of paragraph organization, beginning with the reading of simple paragraphs.

Suggestions by Peirce and Peirce (1986) concerning a college preparatory curriculum included a highly structured environment, because it is imperative for

learning disability students to know what is expected of them and when it is expected; a rotating schedule of classes, allowing varying experiences and conditions for both the instructor and the student,; flexibility in the staff hired to teach the learning disabled; a distinction made at the onset between the remediation of the students and the instruction of specific content of college preparatory courses; and the curriculum should be designed to meet the strengths and weaknesses of the learning disabled students. Drake, in a 1986 article, described the Landmark School in Prides Crossing, Massachusetts, which was founded originally to help elementary and high school level students only. But, in response to the needs of older students, a pre-college program was created. The latter program concentrates solely on skills such as reading, writing, note-taking, research techniques, outlining, composition, and mathematics. It includes a full year of instruction in the basic skills, plus one-to-one tutoring and work in small classes. The instructors are credentialed in their subject matter; there is one tutor for every three students, and one instructor for every six students.

Young and Staebler (1987) identified a number

of services which they felt should be provided for learning disabled students. These services included individualized assessment of skills and processes, tutoring, new instructional strategies, independent living skills, advocacy, advising, career counseling, and social skills training.

At the University of Colorado at Boulder, according to Fischer and Page (1984), admissions policies were established to evaluate learning disabled students more individually. Special procedures were developed to allow learning disabled students more flexibility in meeting the foreign language requirement, a link was created between learning disability programs and other on-campus student services programs, there is a new program with group interaction classes being developed, and the positive interaction between the faculty and the university is a continual process.

Conclusion

Moss and Fox (1980) stated that definitions of learning disabilities have been developed for use with students in primary and secondary learning

disabled programs, but no satisfactory definition for the learning disabled student at the postsecondary level has been agreed upon by professionals. Nor have the instruments used in evaluating and assessing learning disabilities been agreed upon. Until educators concur, the number of programs for learning disabled students in postsecondary institutions will be severely limited due to financial and administrative constraints. Without these programs, learning disabled individuals will not be able to continue their education beyond the high school level.

According to Boyer (1987), there is a belief in America that colleges have the responsibility to enrich the lives of their graduates, that some element in the undergraduate experience leads to more competent, more compassionate, fulfilled human beings. There are more than 12 million students now enrolled in postsecondary institutions, many of whom lack skills in reading, writing, and computation which are considered mandatory for self-fulfillment and success. Kranes (1980) stated that the American culture has two, sometimes conflicting, philosophies. One is the belief in the full development of every individual to the limits of his/her abilities, and the other

is selection based upon merit or achievement. Frequently, the full development of the individual is neglected in favor of an elitist selection based purely upon academic achievement. From early grade school on, merit is defined as the ability to learn quickly and proficiently relative to other students. For the learning disabled students, this attitude has caused years of crippling self-degradation and guilt resulting in the waste of human potential. In order for the learning disabled to have a better opportunity to become fulfilled human beings, institutions will have to adjust entrance requirements, curriculum structure and organization, and evaluation and screening procedures.

Beck (1985) stated that we, as educators, must be keenly aware of the crucial values and attitudes which are contributive to the growth and success of learning disabled students.

Placing students in neatly labeled cubby holes and excusing ourselves for not being able to teach them is "copping out." If we call ourselves humanists, our approaches must be humanistic. We must assess and respect individual differences,

for we are dealing with unique human beings (p. 17).

The future of millions of learning disabled individuals rests in the hands of America's educators. Before we can begin to educate these learning disabled students, we must acknowledge their existence and understand their needs. As Cohen (1984) stated:

Most universities, and most student affairs professionals, faculty, and mental health professionals, have not yet come to grips with what it means to identify, diagnose, teach, and counsel the learning disabled student. To do so is not only important because of recent laws that guarantee equal educational opportunity for these students, but also because a learning disability, whether overt or covert [sic], can profoundly affect the person's educational and psychosocial development.

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