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Article 87

From Modification to Accommodation: High School to College Transition Issues for Students with Learning Disabilities

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Leaving high school and attending college can be overwhelming for all students. According to Conley (2008), success at college is dependent on the use of coping skills and learning strategies different from the ones used in high school. Considering challenges are faced by all incoming students at a university, it is understandable that students with learning disabilities would encounter increased obstacles (Prevatt, Johnson, Allison, & Proctor, 2005; Rothman, Maldonado, & Rothman, 2008). A recent surge in the numbers of students with disabilities pursuing higher education (Barnard-Brak, Lechtenberger, & Lan, 2010; Cook, Rumrill, & Tankersley, 2007) has led to a renewed focus on accommodation strategies for these students.

Smith, English, and Vasek (2002) identified several factors impacting students with learning disabilities and their success at college. A few of these issues include: (a) being overwhelmed by the rigor of collegiate academics, (b) developing a peer support group, (c) disclosing disability status, (d) falling behind in classes, (e) lacking focus, and (f) understanding the effects of the disability on their academic goals. Additionally, students with disabilities may have lower self efficacy and self esteem, making interactions with faculty difficult as well as impacting their ability to build and maintain a peer support system (DaDeppo, 2009). Thus, in addition to competency in the traditional content areas, students need to be successful in related areas such as study skills, time management, stress management, and prioritization of one's tasks to be successful at

college. Collectively, issues faced by all college students can be particularly difficult obstacles for students with learning disabilities.

DaDeppo (2009) suggested that difficulties for college students with learning disabilities “may manifest in difficulty with written or spoken language resulting in a lower level of academic performance than would be expected” (p. 122). Therefore, DaDeppo recommended students with learning disabilities focus on improving their test taking, note taking, and time and stress management skills. Note taking is considered an academic skill necessary for survival in college, and dependent on self-regulation as well as certain cognitive processing abilities. Maydosz and Raver (2010) extensively reviewed the literature on note taking and determined that it is indeed an essential skill which students with learning disabilities will need to master to better enhance their academic careers.

In addition to the aforementioned skills, Abreu-Ellis, Ellis, and Hayes (2009) documented that “more must be done to bridge the gap and to smooth the transition from high-school to college/university for these students” (p. 36). In order to effectively reduce this gap, a brief explanation of the differences in services students with disabilities can expect from secondary school versus the post secondary setting is warranted.

Differences Between High School and College

When students are in high school, they fall under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. This federal law entitles a student to an individualized education plan which is very specific in outlining services needed, goals, and modifications to hopefully ensure students’ success in the public school setting (DaDeppo, 2009). Typically, there is a high level of interaction between the students and their families with many trained professionals at the school.

However, at a college or university, individuals no longer have the support of a K-12 system, and “there is a sharp reversal of parent and student responsibility” (Chiba & Low, 2007, p. 40) in their relationship with the institution. Upon arrival at college, students with disabilities become eligible for protection under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (Madaus, 2005). “The educational challenge is to create collegiate environments for first-year students that meet not only the letter but also the spirit of these legal requirements” (Schuh, 2005, p. 440). Colleges and universities are mandated to provide appropriate services and programs so that students with disabilities will have equal access to higher education. “After equal access is provided, it is the student’s responsibility to progress in his or her classes” (Hadley, 2007, p. 10). College students enter an arena of eligibility where they not only have to self-identify, but have to become self-advocates for services and accommodations that are available to them. In essence, the legal emphasis of service to students with disabilities shifts from being an education law to a civil rights law (Janipa & Costenbader, 2002). This need to provide students with disabilities access to higher education has been recognized for quite some time. According to Crissman Ishler (2005), “the first attempt to provide a postsecondary education for students with disabilities began over 135 years ago when Abraham Lincoln signed legislation to provide funding for Gallaudet, an institution for students who are deaf” (p. 20).

In more recent years, the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD; 2007) advocated for students with learning disabilities, noting the gap between documentation requirements of disability in the public school setting and the college setting. They purported that communication between secondary and post secondary institutions is crucial. The NJCLD identified three main areas where there is confusion as to what constitutes a learning disability in college as compared to high school. The concepts addressed include: (a) inconsistency in depth and content of documentation requirements, (b) discrepancies in the laws that govern secondary and postsecondary institutions, and (c) the fundamental differences in programs and services offered by each of these entities. While all three issues identified by the NJCLD can impact students, an area of major confusion is related to documentation (McGuire, Madaus, Litt, & Ramirez, 1996).

In public schools, assessment and corresponding documentation is initiated by the school with clear federal guidelines. Conversely, in the post-secondary setting, “institutions are under no obligation to provide assessments for students, nor to pay for the cost of an evaluation” (Madaus & Shaw, 2006, p. 275). Additionally, McGuire et al. (1996) noted that the lack of clear documentation guidelines makes it difficult to determine appropriate academic adjustments for students with disabilities. However, the Association for Higher Education and Disability (n.d.) has proposed seven elements for high quality documentation. These are summarized as follows: evaluator credentials, diagnostic statement, diagnostic methodology, functional limitations, progression of disability, past accommodations, and recommendations for accommodations.

In discussing changes in academic requirements for students with disabilities, Barr (1993) and Mellard (2005) noted three types of possible alternatives: waivers, substitutions, and accommodations. Waivers are the least likely to occur because this action changes the essential nature of a degree in an academic program (Rath & Royer, 2002). Course substitutions occur more frequently than course waivers, but are not common occurrences. Generally course substitutions are “considered major decisions in that they are not decisions made by the individual instructor alone. Substitutions involve decisions at the departmental and institutional levels” (Mellard, 2005, p. 14).

Modification of courses and coursework is the terminology used at the high school level whereas accommodations is the terminology for services received by students with disabilities in a post secondary setting. Typical accommodations that a student can expect at college include such services as use of readers, note takers, and extra time to complete tests or homework assignments. If appropriate, alternate formats of tests may be available, as well as services extended in the course registration process (Hadley, 2007). Additionally, counseling and self-advocacy training may be available (Troiano, Liefeld, & Trachtenberg, 2010). Other interventions provided to students with learning disabilities may include: tape recordings of lectures, use of computers and calculators, quiet locations for tests, and copies of outlines or notes from faculty (Kravets, 2006). The most requested accommodation is reported to be extended time in taking exams (LaFrance Holzer, Madaus, Bray, & Kehle, 2009; Rath & Royer, 2002). However, accommodations are dependent on appropriate documentation of the disability and will often vary between institutions (Hamblet, 2009; Madaus, 2005; Prevatt et al., 2005).

Success at College

Students with documented learning disabilities are considered one of the fastest growing sub-groups of students in postsecondary educational settings (Barnard-Brak et al, 2010; Murray, Wren, & Keys, 2008). According to Madaus and Shaw (2006), students with disabilities who complete a college degree have greatly improved employment options when compared to their counterparts who have not pursued postsecondary training. Madaus and Shaw noted that students who obtain a college degree will have equal opportunity for employment with comparable earnings to students without disabilities in their peer group. In fact, Ponticelli and Russ-Eft (2009) contended that “improved employment status for students with disabilities who have completed a college education increases even more sharply than for those without disability” (p. 164). Given that higher education is potentially a key factor for their futures, it becomes integral that students with learning disabilities transition from high school to college as seamlessly as possible. Institutions of higher education provide a variety of approaches to assist students with disabilities in this transition process. Typically, these include first year experience courses, summer bridge programs, orientation conferences, and ongoing academic support services.

Chiba and Low (2007) evaluated the perceptions of students enrolled in a course designed to help them transition to college. Content of the course ranged from topics regarding the diagnosis and acceptance of the learning disorder, to knowing the laws and resources available for self advocacy, and developing a support system. They identified the constructs of accepting the learning disorder and the emotions attached to it, and relating to others in the course as crucial in determining its success. This type of pass-fail class could be offered as a transition course in a proactive approach rather than waiting until students have a need for remedial services because they were afraid, or didn’t know how, to ask for assistance at the college level.

Noting the students’ prior dependence on a close knit support system in high school, Dalke and Schmitt (1987) investigated the inclusion of a summer bridge session for students with disabilities. Students enrolled in a summer course that focused not only on academic content areas such as math and reading, but also values clarification and small group interaction, study skills, and time management, provided the bridge for success. The program was very effective in introducing the students to life at college. Similar success was noted by Rothman et al. (2008) as they described that “participation in this one-week summer transition program apparently increases the likelihood of academic (college completion) and career success” (p. 79).

Similar to a course, but not as extensive, is the offering of orientation type programs which focus on transition issues for this population. Kato, Nulty, Olszewski, Doolittle, and Flannery (2006) provided an example of a one day conference that was co-sponsored by a high school and a college. This program included a variety of topics from documentation to study skills, as well as course registration. This type of activity demonstrates collaboration between high school and college personnel. Communication between these groups is a key component in helping students with learning disabilities to develop their potential to earn a baccalaureate degree (Janipa & Costenbader, 2002).

Many colleges and universities offer academic support services to all students, but some also offer instructional enhancement services specifically to those with learning

disabilities. Troiano et al. (2010) examined the attendance at, and use of, an academic support center by students with learning disabilities. It was discovered that the students' use of these support services greatly improved their likelihood of graduating from college, and also improved students' grade point averages.

Implications for Counselors

Not a new issue, in 1992 Skinner and Schenck addressed the role of counselors as they helped students with learning disabilities transition to college. Vogel (as cited in Skinner & Schenk, 1992) noted that students with learning disabilities should be encouraged to seek institutions where racially and ethnically diverse and heterogeneous populations are supported. Today this is an extension of social justice in the counseling field. Learning disabilities have sometimes been referred to as invisible or hidden disabilities, perhaps making self acceptance and acceptance of the disability more difficult, and leading the individuals into a cycle of denial, anxiety, and low self esteem (Livinch, Martz, & Wilson, 2001). Kravets (2006) purported that "it is true that these students present cognitive deficits in areas necessary for college success. However, they are succeeding, and they are a population deserving encouragement, support, acceptance, and respect" (p. 25). It has been found that students with high levels of self awareness and self knowledge regarding their disability are able to identify their needs and communicate them to others. These students are the most successful in navigating the changes in the transition from high school to college (Levinson & Ohler, 1998).

Many issues faced by college students fall outside of the classroom arena. Hall and Webster (2008) specifically addressed the affective factors impacting students with learning disabilities. The self monitoring, self esteem, and motivation issues that students face can be as debilitating to the academic progress of students with disabilities as are the academic challenges. For example, test anxiety is often a huge source of stress for students with learning disabilities (LaFrance Holzer et al., 2009), and is an area in which counselors could help through relaxation, guided imagery, or other therapeutic modalities.

With independence and self advocacy as crucial factors related to the college success of students with disabilities, it is imperative that counselors help individuals acquire a higher level of self awareness, self acceptance, and a better understanding of their own disability (Rothman et al., 2008). Reiff (1997) postulated "perhaps the single skill necessary for most students with learning disabilities revolves around self-advocacy, predicated on an understanding of one's own strengths and weaknesses and the ability to communicate this information" (p. 435). Hence, counselors are the perfect professionals to assist students with the disclosure process, and assist students with interpersonal skill building strategies. Developing these skills will help students better relay their needs to faculty (Cook et al., 2007), staff, and peers.

In addition to providing direct counseling services for students with learning disabilities, counselors can also facilitate the creation of peer support groups for members of this population (Rath & Royer, 2002). These groups provide students both a place to feel safe with other students who understand their needs, as well as a place to further develop "strategies for navigating the college or work environment" (Rothman et. al., 2008, p. 75).

Another area where counselors have an opportunity to intervene with students with disabilities is at the end of their college career. It is a disservice to the students to have them graduate from college, then not be able to utilize their new skill set. According to Madaus (2006), it is essential that students rely on the self awareness and independence gained from their college experience, and that they be transitioned into the workplace just as they had been from high school to college. Madaus (2006) posed a challenge to those who provide services to students with learning disabilities (e.g., community counselors, career counselors, college counselors) to help students understand the differences they will face in the workplace, just as they found differences when they transitioned from high school to the postsecondary setting.

Conclusion

In sum, it is imperative that counselors become involved with students with learning disabilities to help lessen their anxieties and increase their coping skills. This will enhance their chances of success in college, as well as assist their entrance into the professional arena after they receive a degree. As stated by Katsiyannis, Zhang, Landmark, and Reber (2009), it is simply an ethical mandate that colleges and universities “identify and apply best practices in providing reasonable accommodations and effective instructional strategies that better meet the learning characteristics and needs of students with disabilities” (p. 43).

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