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THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS OF
LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENTS

By
Robin D. Waltman

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the
Master of Arts Degree
of
The Graduate School
at
Rowan University
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Approved by
Dr. John Klanderman Dr. Roberta Dihoff

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ABSTRACT

Robin D. Waltman
THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ACADEMIC SUCCESS
OF LEARNING DISABLED COLLEGE STUDENTS

2002/03

Dr. John Klanderman and Dr. Roberta Dihoff
Master of Arts in School Psychology

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges faced by college students with learning disabilities from their own perspective. Interviews were conducted with four first-year students with learning disabilities and five sophomore, junior, and senior students with learning disabilities. The subjects attended Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. The subjects were varied in race, socioeconomic backgrounds, and majors. They all attended college full-time. Qualitative data analysis was performed in order to construct thematic categories from recurring patterns. It was found that college students with learning disabilities have difficulties in college that are unique. They not only have academic difficulties, they also have social difficulties and they lack the support systems necessary to succeed. Many of the subjects did not have enriching academic experiences as children. Because of this, they find the college transition challenging. It was found that the single most important aspect to the success of these students was support by parents and faculty members.

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Chapter 1 The Problem

Need

What is it like to be a first-year college student with a learning disability? What challenges do first-year students with learning disabilities often face in adjusting to their new environment? Making the transition to higher education, a formidable challenge for many students is even more difficult for students who have learning disabilities, who must also overcome the obstacles they face due to their disorders. The difficulties that these students encounter, such as problems with writing, word retrieval and memory problems, attention problems, and reading difficulty illustrate some of the reasons why it is imperative to conduct research in order to study and assess their experience so that programs which will aid in their academic success can be implemented.

While many new programs are developed every year to address the needs of college students with learning disabilities, few colleges as yet have specific learning disabilities services. Success in college for students with learning problems requires a working partnership between the student and the personnel at the college.

Mentoring programs have begun to receive considerable attention in colleges for all types of students. These programs could be invaluable for those students with learning disabilities; however, in order to implement a mentoring program which best suits the needs of the learning disabled, it is necessary to understand those needs. The best way to do this is by assessing the problems these students face through a study that

allows them to explore their needs through their own perceptions. It is difficult for individuals who are not learning disabled to determine the needs of those who are learning disabled. Each individual is unique in that each has a different view of reality based on their own experiences, their interactions with others and their culture. Because of this, it is necessary to determine the needs of a group through patterns found in each person's perspective. Once this has been accomplished, programs can be implemented which will utilize social construction with the goal of academic success.

The idea of social construction involves looking at all aspects of an individual; their relationships with others, institutions, and society as a whole. The perspective of the individual in these areas is then integrated into a program that addresses their needs.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the challenges faced by college students with learning disabilities from their own perspective. The study will include their experiences in high school and in college, how they define their problems and what mechanisms they have developed for overcoming their disabilities in the learning process. The study will also compare the perceptions of the first-year students with the experiences of college sophomores, juniors, and seniors who have overcome these challenges. How these students have learned to cope with their disabilities will also be explored. This study will enable the researcher to obtain the subjects' own perception in order to understand their social construction of reality. Each individual's perception of their reality is unique because it is malleable, affected by internal and external influences. This study will attempt to find patterns in the social construction of reality in learning

disabled students. Although the sample size is small, the information from each subject will be substantial. This will allow the researcher to glean a great deal of in-depth information. A search of the literature has indicated a lack of research in this area. For this reason, it is critical that an in-depth study be performed and added to existing research before programs are implemented. The information and comparisons that are received can then be used to implement a mentoring program that will address the needs of these first-year students.

Research Questions

The following questions will address the perceptions of first-year students.

- How do the students perceive themselves as learners?
- Do they perceive that they will encounter any problems in college?
- Do they perceive themselves as different than students who are not learning disabled?

The following questions will address the perceptions of students who are sophomores, juniors, and seniors.

- How did they perceive the first-year experience as learners?
- How do they perceive themselves as learners now?
- Did they encounter any problems in college? If so, how were they resolved?
- Did they perceive themselves as different than students who are not learning disabled during their first year?

- Do they perceive themselves as different than students who are not learning disabled now?
- How have they grown throughout the years, academically, socially and emotionally?

Theory

The field of learning disabilities is relatively new. Attention to the subject began in the early 20th century with studies conducted by scientists to determine if neurological dysfunction was the cause of reading difficulties. No conclusions could be drawn from these studies and learning disabilities were not recognized as a separate scientific field until the late 1960s (Knox, 1989). As interest in the subject of learning disabilities began to grow, so too did the number of children who were being diagnosed as learning disabled.

In 1973, Federal Law 94-142 recognized learning disabilities as a handicap and mandated that every school in the United States provide education appropriate to the needs of learning disabled students (Knox, 1989). It was at this time that the field of learning disabilities grew rapidly because teachers could now identify a disability in a common existing problem (Knox, 1989). Many children fell into this category of disability as it encompasses several unique problems. Children who displayed symptoms of hyperactivity, dyslexia, and slowness-to-read, to name just a few, met the criteria for learning disabled.

With all the attention that learning disabilities have received recently, there remains much to be explained. Doctors, scientists and educators do not always agree on

the subject. There is still uncertainty in how best to diagnose this condition and symptoms are sometimes difficult to differentiate from developmental delays.

There is also disagreement about the treatment of learning disorders. Techniques such as medication can be effective; however, which type of drug is most effective and at what dosage is disputed. Some believe that therapy and different teaching methods are more effective. These issues lead to more questions. Should disabled students have to meet the same requirements for graduation as other students? Is special education better placing the child in a regular classroom? Who should pay for any special services that the child receives? All these questions are confusing for both laypeople and professionals to sort through.

In addition, the exact causes of learning disabilities remain unknown. Recent evidence has shown that it is likely that there are variations in the arrangements of brain cells, or neurological differences in the brain (Knox, 1989). This is a major breakthrough in the field of learning disabilities. However, external factors such as environment must also be taken into consideration when looking at causes.

It is estimated that 20% of American children have been diagnosed as having a learning disability. This equates to 1.8 million cases, 127% increase since 1976 (Knox, 1989). This does not mean, however, that there is a significant increase in cases. It is due to awareness of the symptoms by parents and professionals, which in turn leads to better diagnoses.

One area that has not received as much attention is adults with learning disabilities, including college students. There are problems that are unique to college students with learning disabilities. At the same time, there are increasing numbers of

students with these disabilities graduating from high school and entering postsecondary institutions, many of which are not fully prepared to accommodate them. The percentage of first-year college students with learning disabilities increased from 25% in 1991 to 41% in 1998 (Sweener, Kundert, May, & Quinn, 2002). The number will probably continue to increase. In fact, students with learning disabilities are one of the fastest growing segments in the population of college students with disabilities (Sweener, et al., 2002). Because of this, colleges must implement programs that will best service these students so that they may complete their college education. Unfortunately, colleges have not been successful in this area.

According to Sweener, et al. (2002), there have been limited studies which investigate issues relevant to these disabilities as well as inconsistent perceptions regarding those with learning disabilities. Because of this, it is generally felt that much more research is warranted.

Definitions

Affective Characteristics- those characteristics that represent emotional or feeling states.

Attention Deficit Disorder- a learning disorder that inhibits those afflicted with it from focusing on a single task, concentrating for an extended periods of time, or screening out distracting information.

Dyslexia- a learning disorder that involves written or spoken language. It is characterized by extreme difficulty with learning and remembering letters, written or spoken words, and individual letter sounds. Bizarre spelling and illegible handwriting are common symptoms.

Learning Disabilities- includes a wide range of disabilities, from mild and barely detectable learning problems to severe handicaps that require constant attention.

It usually interferes with the capacity to master a skill such as speech, writing, and calculation with numbers.

Pedagogy- the science of teaching.

Social Construction of Reality- the idea that reality is malleable. Each group or culture hold completely different beliefs about what is “real”. Subjective realities that are created and maintained are the product not of isolated individuals but of relationships, communities, groups, institutions, and whole cultures (O’Brien, Kollock, 1997). This interaction creates a reality which is unique to each individual.

Assumptions

One assumption is that the subjects and the researcher will develop rapport that will enable them to be completely forthcoming in their responses regarding their experiences. It is also assumed that the students in this study are representative of the population of learning disabled students who are classified.

Limitations

A limitation of this study is that the sample size is small; therefore, no inferences can be made to the entire population of college students with learning disabilities. Also, this sample is not representative of the population of individuals with learning disabilities as this sample consists entirely of college students who have been able to complete high

school and gain admission into postsecondary institutions. Also the range of learning disabilities studied will be extensive. Because of this, subjects will have needs that are unique to them and will not fit into any pattern.

Another limitation is that the sample in this study consists of only students who have been classified by the college as learning disabled. All students seeking assistance must be reassessed upon entering the college and the student must absorb this expense; however, not all learning disabled students can afford to pay for a new assessment. Therefore, while the students may meet all the criteria for a learning disability, they may not be classified by the college.

Overview

In Chapter 1, the need, purpose, research questions, and theory explain the importance of studies on the needs and perceptions of learning disabled students. In Chapter 2, learning disabilities will be explained in greater detail, and the appropriate literature is reviewed. In Chapter 3, the design of the study is described, as well as the sample and analysis. In Chapter 4, the results of the study will be explained, including order of presentation, organization of analysis chapter, interpretation of results, and statement of significance. Finally, in Chapter 5, summaries and conclusions are made and implications for future research are presented

Chapter 2 Review of Literature

Introduction

This literature review provides a discussion of the needs and perceptions of college students with learning disabilities. There has been extensive research done in the area of children with learning disabilities; however, there are very few studies on adults with learning disabilities, especially those in postsecondary institutions.

Learning disabilities is a relatively new term that is used when describing a variety of difficulties that people have with learning. This term was introduced by William Cruickshank and Samuel Kirk in the early 1960s and brought to the attention of educators and psychologists (Mangrum & Strichart, 1984).

Learning disabilities are a heterogeneous group of disorders manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking, writing, reasoning or mathematical abilities (The Faculty Room, 2001). These disabilities can range from mild to severe and because of this, it is difficult to address the needs of individuals as a group. Specific types of learning disabilities include: Dysgraphia which affects handwriting, Dyscalculia which causes difficulty in working with symbols, Dyslexia which causes difficulty with reading and spelling, Dyspraxia which causes difficulty with speaking. The most commonly seen learning disability is Attention Deficit Disorder or ADD. Attention Deficit Disorder is the second most common developmental disability in

college students, affecting 3% to 5% of people in the college age group (Faigel, 1995; Bastiens, n.d.). Attention Deficit Disorder may be accompanied by other learning disorders or a specific learning disability, such as math disability (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994).

There is a distinction between a disorder and a disability. The disabilities are a subset of a disorder. The disabilities impair specific abilities such as math, language or spelling. The disorders, on the other hand, are not so specific as they affect cognition in general (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994).

Because of the uniqueness of the various disabilities and the relative recent emergence of recognition, there is much that still needs to be learned, especially in the area of college students. Not a great deal is known about the characteristics of learning disabled students who attend college or about the needs of these students. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (1994) found that many students with learning disabilities do not consider a postsecondary education an option because they are not prepared or assisted to do so.

It is imperative to study the needs of these students along with their perceptions in order to be prepared to assist them successfully. There are some studies that have attempted to address these needs. It has been found that learning disabilities persist into adult life to varying degrees and with different outcomes; however, adults are usually more capable of controlling behavior and masking difficulties that can make it difficult to recognize problem areas (Medlineplus, 2001). Also, once an individual has reached college age, self- disclosure of a disability is necessary in order to implement programs that will assist them. This is because, at the college level, the prescriptive Individuals

with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is not applicable (Shaw, Scott & McGuire, 2001), although the American Disabilities Act (ADA) does apply throughout an individual's lifetime. Sometimes individuals are reluctant to seek assistance, as they do not wish to disclose their disability due to the attitudes of some in the society and institutions. This makes it difficult to identify and study this age group.

This review will explore the literature on the nature and characteristics of learning disabled individuals, the perception of society regarding learning disabled individuals, the individuals' perceptions of themselves and others, and what is needed in any program implemented for learning disabled college students.

Characteristics of Learning Disabled Students

The number of postsecondary students reporting a disability has increased dramatically, climbing from 2.6% in 1978, to 9.2% in 1994, to nearly 19% in 1996. Students with learning disabilities are the fastest growing group of disabled students entering college (Henderson, 2001). Nonetheless, the enrollment of people with disabilities is still 50% lower than enrollment among the general population (Stodden, 2001).

Social and cultural factors play a major role in discouraging students with disabilities from pursuing higher education. Expectations that a student with disabilities will achieve any job skills after high school are low and persons with disabilities are poorly represented among faculty, staff, and educational administrators, thus depriving students with role models. These factors can create powerful psychological obstacles to the pursuit of higher education (Stodden, 2001).

Even when students with disabilities manage to enter postsecondary schools, they encounter more obstacles. Students experience difficulty staying and completing their programs of study. Failure to provide adequate educational supports causes these students to achieve low grade point averages. This clearly shows that students with disabilities need more and better services both to access postsecondary settings and to be successful (Stodden, 2001).

Current research regarding the qualitative and quantitative effects of various accommodation services and supports on long-term outcomes, such as retention, is almost nonexistent (Stodden, 2001). Gajar (cited in Stodden, 2001) found that studies need to be conducted on the characteristics and needs of the students with disabilities in postsecondary settings. Through a review of different studies, it was found that the majority of research has been in the area of Attention Deficit Disorder.

Attention Deficit Disorder is the most common psychiatric disorder of childhood and persists into adulthood (Szymanski, 2001). It accounts for the majority of learning disabled students enrolled in postsecondary settings. The predominance of co-morbidity of learning disabilities seen with ADD allows it to be included in the category of learning disabilities.

Assessment of the needs of college students with learning disabilities can be difficult as there are so many disorders, such as ADD, with the co-morbidity of learning disabilities. A number of studies conclude that language and verbal disabilities are common in the subjects with ADD and affect reading skills (Maynard, 1999). It is believed that these co-morbid learning disabilities, affect academic achievement, not the inattention common in ADD.

In contrast, Marshall and Hynd (1997) performed a study in which 24 students were tested on math achievement. This study found that math achievement scores for students with ADD were low due to inattention, which interfered with the students' ability to master abstract symbol systems. This finding has serious implications for those individuals who are in a college setting in terms of needs.

In addition, there have been studies that have found that there are several subtypes of Attention Deficit Disorder and Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (Neuman, 1999; Marks, 1999). Four subgroups have been defined in these studies. These consist of a primarily inattentive subgroup, a combined type of AD/HD, a hyperactive-inattentive subgroup, and an impulsive- inattentive subgroup. This further delineation of disorders, along with associated learning disabilities, makes it even more difficult to group individuals into categories in order to study characteristics.

Hansen (1999) found in a longitudinal study of 52 adult males with ADD that young adults overcome many of the difficulties that they experienced in childhood. However, they continue to experience greater psychological difficulties, which can affect them in the areas of education. Bain (1991) suggested that, as individuals with ADD reach adulthood, hyperactivity may decline, while impulsivity and inattention take on new significance as the pressures of adulthood change. Therefore, while some of the problems that individuals experience in their youth dissipate, there are still difficulties that they will endure for their entire adult life.

Some studies have attempted to focus on the variables that lead to achievement in students with learning disabilities. Others have attempted to isolate the students' problems areas through a comparison with students that have other disabilities.

The first study was conducted by Lancaster, Mellard, and Hoffman (2001). Student questionnaires were administered to 61 students with disabilities enrolled in colleges in Kansas, Minnesota, and California in 1999. The majority of students participating were identified as learning disabled, which led to a separate analysis on these students. The results indicated that “the students’ major difficulties were with concentration, distraction, frustration, test anxiety, remembering, and mathematics. The students also identified several issues in selecting and using accommodations as very important, such as the amount of training required, task appropriateness, personal cost, availability, independence, and disability specificity” (Lancaster et al., 2001).

In another study, Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, and Herman (2002), attempted to isolate the variables that lead to success in students with learning disabilities. It was hoped that this study would enable professionals to “predict” those students who may succeed. This would be of tremendous value in helping students with learning disabilities reach their full potential (Raskind et al., 2002). This study was a twenty-year follow up to an initial study of students and was designed to identify the various factors that were present in the lives of successful students. The variables, which were found to be statistically significant, were self-awareness, proactivity, perseverance, goal setting, the presence and use of effective support systems, and emotional stability (Raskind et al., 2002).

These findings can be helpful in the implementation of support systems for learning disabled students. If the variables that lead to success can be identified, then programs that would foster these variables in students should have a high level of success.

A similar study was conducted by in 1999 by Synatschk (cited in Paul, 2000). This study also attempted to isolate variables that lead to success in postsecondary education. Synatschk conducted a qualitative case study of 5 college students with learning disabilities who successfully completed their degree program. It was found that “the interaction of the perceptions of life-event stressors, individual abilities, and disabilities influenced the types of actions taken by successful college students with learning disabilities. The students expressed a conflict between their desire to be independent and their desire to use services and accommodations available to them (Paul, 2000). This seems to be a major obstacle in the desire to help learning disabled students. As they have been identified and labeled all their lives, they seem to want the anonymity once they become adults; however, they still need assistance in order to achieve.

Mangrum and Strichart (1984) identified several characteristics of learning disabled college students. Even though a student may have some of these characteristics, all of the characteristics do not apply to any one learning disabled students. Each individual has a different pattern of characteristics.

Cognitive

Learning disabled college students typically have difficulty with the following:

- Acquiring a fund of information about the world
- Sequencing events and ideas
- Understanding abstract concepts
- Spontaneously employing cognitive strategies
- Switching strategies as appropriate
- Distinguishing important from unimportant information

- Reasoning in a deductive manner
- Perceiving cause-and-effect relationships
- Remembering things seen and heard (short and long term)
- Sustaining attention to tasks
- Organizing ideas and information
- Generalizing skills from one task and situation to another

Language

Learning disabled college students typically have difficulty with the following:

Spoken Language

- Grasping what others say to them
- Using mature syntactical patterns
- Using an appropriate range of vocabulary
- Retrieving the appropriate word for a situation
- Using words in their appropriate context

Written Language

- Expressing themselves precisely and clearly
- Using a variety of sentence structures
- Using mature syntactical patterns
- Using an appropriate range of words
- Using long and/ or difficult words
- Organizing thoughts
- Using punctuation correctly
- Using a sufficient number of verbs, adjectives, and adverbs

- Writing compositions of sufficient length for the purpose

Perceptual-Motor

- Perceiving the correct orientation of complex visual figures
- Perceiving spatial attributes
- Dealing with three-dimensional figures and arrays
- Discriminating complex visual designs and configurations
- Forming a visual Gestalt
- Locating specific information on a page
- Discriminating complex sounding words
- Performing tasks requiring fine motor coordination

Academic

Reading

- Applying phonics rules and generalizations
- Decoding unfamiliar words
- Understanding what was read
- Determining main ideas
- Maintaining an efficient rate of reading
- Adapting reading rate to specific reading purposes

Spelling

- Maintaining the correct sequence of letters when spelling words
- Perceiving sound-letter correspondence when spelling words
- Spelling irregular words

- Spelling complex words

Handwriting

- Establishing a comfortable style of writing
- Maintaining an efficient rate of writing
- Writing in cursive
- Forming legible letters
- Forming letters of appropriate size
- Forming letters of consistent size throughout the same paper
- Producing neat papers
- Keeping writing within the margins
- Gripping the pencil properly
- Using upper case letters correctly
- Maintaining writing quality when time limits are involved such as during timed tests or taking notes from lecture

Mathematics

- Doing computations
- Mastering the multiplication tables
- Reasoning mathematically
- Solving mathematical problems
- Recalling the sequence of an operational process
- Understanding and retaining terms representing quantitative concepts

Work and Study Habits

- Organizing and budgeting time
- Completing work when due
- Getting work started
- Sustaining effort on a task
- Establishing short-and long term goals and objectives
- Identifying the essential requirements of a task
- Integrating information from various sources
- Using library resources
- Using the dictionary and other reference tools
- Taking complete and accurate notes
- Outlining important information in a text
- Controlling test anxiety

Social

- Establishing good relationships with others
- Making friends
- Working effectively with others
- Maintaining appropriate family relationships
- Reading body language and facial expressions
- Manifesting appropriate social behaviors
- Saying what is thought or felt
- Avoiding saying or doing things that are later regretted
- Knowing what to say in a situation
- Understanding humor and sarcasm

- Engaging in “small talk”
- Developing and maintaining hobbies and interests
- Maintaining appropriate personal appearance
- Relating to authority figures such as professors and advisors

Affective

- Maintaining motivation
- Establishing a positive self-concept
- Establishing a sense of security
- Establishing a sense of competence
- Developing self-confidence
- Avoiding over-dependence on others
- Accepting criticism by others
- Adjusting to the feelings of others
- Tolerating frustration
- Viewing their life prospects optimistically
- Trusting others
- Acting maturely
- Clarifying their values about life
- Meeting responsibilities
- Curbing impulsive behavior
- Subordinating their own welfare to that of others
- Controlling anxiety

- Interacting with others in a non-defensive manner

These characteristics show that any program implemented for students with learning disabilities will need to address numerous concerns. Additional time for tests and help with notes will not be enough. The program will have to address not only academic issues, but also social and interpersonal issues.

Extensive longitudinal studies have shown that, although there is some improvements in social skills as individuals with learning disabilities grow up, there are still deficits. Furthermore, these deficits appear to be behavioral rather than cognitive (Weiss, 1992). Weiss and Hechtman (1993) found no significant correlation between various social skills tests and self-esteem tests. It was believed that this finding was influenced by a small sample size; however, when the tests were re-administered after five years, a correlation was seen.

In addition to this finding, Rojewski (cited in Williams, 1998) found that individuals with learning disabilities have problems in social skills areas that affect decision-making and career development. This lack of skills leads to low self-esteem and low self-concept. Rojewski suggested that because of low self-esteem and self-concept, “learning disabled individuals have a low social status compared to non disabled peers, and are at risk of being socially isolated in the postsecondary education setting” (Williams, 1998).

All these findings suggest that social implications are as important as academics in achieving success in college.

Views of Society and Students with Learning Disabilities

Another area that affects students with learning disabilities is society and the views held by individuals and institutions. The social construction of a person's beliefs is directly related to the society's views. In the past, students with learning disabilities have been faced with a myriad of conflicting ideas regarding their disabilities while attempting to seek the assistance they so desperately need. This can result in a stigma that can lead to a spoiled identity.

From the time students first enter elementary schools, they begin the process of socialization. Schools are given the task of shaping children's behavior and thinking while attempting to give the children identities that fit cultural norms (Mooney & Cole, 2000). For children, school becomes a place that instills conformity and discipline. Along with this comes enforcement, which usually is a punitive system of punishment for incorrect behavior and rewards for correct behavior.

School is also charged with socializing the thoughts of children, how to engage with the world, how to think and how to express those thoughts. Schools use "objective" means to ensure learning. This is accomplished by identifying intelligence and supporting it. However, intelligence is varied and subjective, and is frequently misused by schools. Children are identified by the ability to learn and intelligence is defined by those who can learn best (Mooney & Cole, 2000). Therefore, the means used to assess learning is measurable, quantifiable and standardized. These methods put learning

disabled students at a disadvantage. In this environment, these children begin to perceive themselves as inadequate and lacking and these feelings continue into adulthood.

Students with learning disabilities find that they cannot learn along the very narrow paradigm set forth by our society. This inevitably leads to a label of pathology. By the time these individuals reach adulthood, they have lost the opportunity to be educated in the manner that was appropriate for them. They have also lost the opportunity to develop the intuitive, emotional, and creative parts of their minds, which had previously been identified as irrelevant (Mooney & Cole, 2000).

This notion of different parts of a mind is consistent with a theory developed by Howard Gardner (cited in Mooney & Cole, 2000) that individuals have multiple intelligences. He asserted that no one has a single intelligence; instead there are eight different modes of representation. Gardner believed that “schools support the development of only a narrow set of intelligence. In this light, vast parts of our selves, the creative parts, intuitive parts, and emotional parts, go undeveloped” (Mooney & Cole, 2000).

Along with this idea of school creating a parts of a person’s identity is the idea of academic grades. Success at school is dependent on good grades and good behavior. This in turn becomes a person’s identity through the socialization process. Academic success, which is supposed to be about learning, becomes a need for identity. As school teaches individuals what their worth is, those who do not achieve academic success are made to feel as if they are not truly whole. This leads to the sense of failure that follows individuals with learning disabilities throughout their lives.

According to Sternberg and Grigorenko (2001), learning disabilities have intrinsic and extrinsic components. The intrinsic component is biological, while the extrinsic component is the education system and the society in which the individual is born. It is believed that the societal labeling of learning disabled is used in place of understanding. “A child is labeled in order to pretend that somehow the label gives an understanding when it does no such thing” (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2001). In addition, labeling is used as an excuse for failure to obtain the desired educational outcomes. The blame is put on the label, rather than on the education system’s failing to reach the child (Sternberg & Grigorenko, 2001). This difficulty felt by children will continue to haunt them into their college years.

Learning disabled is not the only label attached to these individuals. Labels such as “stupid,” “lazy,” “retard,” and the like are also used in conjunction with learning disabled individuals. The moral bias in our society that allows for these judgments also prevents diagnoses from being made. “A streak of Puritanism runs deep within American society. Permissive and pioneering as we may be on the one hand, we are strict and conservative on the other. As much as we may be a country of mavericks and entrepreneurs, we are also a country of finger wagers and name callers. As much as we may be a country of compassion for the underdog, we are also a country that believes in self-reliance” (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994). This is very apparent in our educational system when dealing with learning disorders. The smart will excel; therefore, if children do not excel, they must not be smart. Following this logic, a student with a learning disability may not excel because of the narrow teaching methods; therefore, this student must be dumb. This is why some children do not want to be labeled as learning disabled.

Even if they are labeled, they will attempt to shed the label when they reach the postsecondary education setting. Although it is understandable why they would not want this label, it is needed in order to receive the help that is necessary.

While learning problems exist within the context of our society, particularly in the education system, the blame cannot be placed completely on the educational system. Society also shapes the laws that govern education. Tax-paying voters make decisions on education too. The demands for better student services, greater protection of student rights, more specific accountability for outcomes, and reduced financial outlay, along with the increased number of students with learning disabilities requiring assistance have gone far beyond the resources available to them (Adelman & Taylor, 1983).

While the learning disabled label can stigmatize a child, it can also serve useful functions. It enables the child to receive the help needed and also help others realize that the child is not “dumb”. In addition, the child can understand the reasons behind why performance in school is not always as expected (Bain, 1991).

Once students begin to attend college and the demands are very different than what they have been used to, they find that they now must endure an entirely new set of problems.

Perceptions of Individuals with Learning Disabilities

It is important to understand how learning disabled individuals perceive themselves and others. Any program implemented to assist them will not be successful unless it is tailored to the perceived needs of students with learning disabilities. An understanding of perceived needs will also be beneficial in obtaining the necessary assistance from the individuals. If students do not believe that others understand their

concerns, they will not want to subject themselves to possible humiliation and no program can work without the joint effort of administrators and students.

One concern of many students with learning disabilities is that they cannot find anyone who understands what it is like to have a learning disability. They feel as if they are “different” and alone. It is also difficult to decide whom they should tell about their disability and how to describe it. Students feel as if some people may think that they are making an excuse for being lazy (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994).

One of the biggest concerns of students with learning disabilities is that they cannot come forward and talk about it because of feelings of shame and embarrassment that have lingered since childhood from the messages of our society. People tend to stigmatize any condition that affects the brain; therefore, many individuals have grown up with thoughts of inadequacy that they feel would be unacceptable at the college level (Hallowell & Ratey, 1994).

This perception by students with learning disabilities may be justified. While postsecondary institutions are willing to make physical accommodations for students with learning disabilities, the attitudes of the faculty were not positive. Some students may encounter a less than positive classroom climate. Beilke (1999) conducted interviews with ten students with disabilities at a Midwestern college to investigate the students’ perceptions of the faculty’s attitudes. It was found in the study that, while each student was able to speak positively about a faculty member who made a difference in their experiences, this was the exception rather than the rule.

Students with obvious physical impairments had more positive experiences than others, although they did encounter a great deal of negative encounters. The students

with obvious physical disabilities perceived the classroom as an unwelcome place. The students with learning disabilities faced an even greater challenge. They not only have a disability, but because it is invisible to the eye, they also have to convince the skeptical faculty of that fact (Beilke, 1999). “It is not surprising that students with visible (apparent) physical disabilities reported a more rewarding classroom environment than students with ‘hidden’ disabilities. This is because easily verifiable, physical disabilities do not place faculty in the position of compromising academic integrity or being duped into ‘believing’ students who only claim to need special assistance” (Beilke, 1999).

Studies by Hall and Sandler (cited in Beilke, 1999) found that success in postsecondary institutions is dependent upon “the institutional atmosphere, environment or climate” with the classroom. They found that three categories of behavior created an unwelcome climate for students with disabilities; devaluation, evaluation and doubt. The behavior included: overlooking students’ mistakes rather than correcting them, encouraging students to switch to a less rigorous major, and condescending and patronizing behaviors. Beilke (1999) found that the students cited incidents which correlated to these categories.

While universities often profess to encourage a diverse student population, in actuality, the reality experienced by students is very different. The institutional mission of colleges is partly to blame for this difference. The priorities of the faculty center on scholarship and research, not the provision of social services (Deshler, Ellis, & Lenz, 1996). While the majority of faculty seems willing to accommodate students with visible disabilities, those with hidden disabilities are viewed suspiciously. This may be because it has only been recently that students with learning disabilities have been entering

postsecondary institutions in record numbers (Beilke, 1999). The perceptions that students have regarding faculty may be justified. For example, a letter published in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* contained the following analogy: “Giving a learning disabled student extra time on exams is like letting a blind person qualify for a pilot’s license with the aid of a seeing eye dog in the cockpit. I don’t think any of us want to fly in an airplane with such a pilot, or to find in the emergency room a doctor who owes his medical-school admission to extra time on exams” (Katz, 1998).

A study conducted by the National Center for the Study of Postsecondary Educational Supports (2000) resulted in similar findings. Ten focus groups that included all types of disabilities and ethnic backgrounds participated in this study. The findings indicated that disability support providers are committed and supportive and students long for a partnership between disability services on campus, university administration, and the students themselves. However, students also perceived that the disability policy at postsecondary institutions does not reflect practice, and students still need to fight for basic accommodations. In addition, students feel that their lives are micromanaged by support services and peers often question the accommodations given to students with disabilities. Finally, students are reluctant to self-disclose the nature of their disability to faculty because of how they will be perceived.

Strategies for Academic Success and Postsecondary Educational Supports

In order for students with learning disabilities to succeed in college, it is necessary for strategies to be implemented into support programs. Although there are a number of supports and services in place at postsecondary institutions across the country that are used to accommodate the needs of students with disabilities, understanding which

specific accommodations are appropriate and effective to the student and under what conditions they may be applied are unknown (Stodden, Dowrick, Rupnow, & Kelly, 2001). There is a great need to assemble a plan of research focused on the study of postsecondary supports for students with disabilities. Currently; however, “insufficient information exists regarding the availability and use of educational supports and how such supports might affect successful access and performance within postsecondary educational and subsequent employment environments. Further, existing information is often piecemeal and unorganized making it difficult to draw conclusions or to propose policy, procedure, or practice recommendations (Stodden et al., 2001).

There have been studies conducted on different strategies needed to succeed in college, to be used by the institution and the student. The problem, as stated above, is when to use them and by whom. What may work for one student will not work for another. It is difficult to implement one program that will address the needs of each unique individual. Because there are many unique characteristics for each learning disability and individuals have different combinations of these, there are many different approaches that can be taken depending on the type of course that the student is taking.

A study was conducted by Ruzic (2001) that investigated successful reading and studying strategies for college students with reading-related learning disabilities. These strategies included: developing a plan for effective time management that includes doing a little work each day; finding and using mentors; and finding and using a supportive peer group. Many of these strategies that were found in this study share a common theme that crosses all boundaries of learning disabilities. While the list of strategies is overwhelming, there are some basic ideas that apply to most learning disabilities,

although individual adjustments must be made. Some are institutional responsibilities, while others are the responsibility of the student. Nadeau (1994) suggested several strategies that can be implemented by the student with the assistance of the institution.

Individual strategies

The general strategies that can be utilized by individuals with learning disabilities include: Arranging to have exam schedules altered so that there is no more than one exam per day; choosing classes that offer small discussion groups rather than a lecture format and; Arranging for proctored, extended-time examinations through the professor or the Department of Specialized Services (DSS).

Strategies for individuals with learning disabilities who experience problems with writing include: Arranging for easy, frequent access to a word processor with spell and grammar check; Explaining the nature of the language disability to the professors and requesting that they not discount grade for spelling and punctuation errors on in-class writing assignments; Requesting oral examinations for severe writing problems; Having a peer or tutor routinely review all writing assignments before preparing a final draft and; Using a lap top computer for taking notes in class and in the library.

Strategies for those experiencing word retrieval and memory problems include: Requesting of the professor that no fill-in-the-blanks or other brief answer questions be used; Requesting more frequent quizzes and take home exams when there is a tendency to do poorly in classes that have only heavily weighted midterms and finals and; Working with a tutor in order to develop memory skills.

Strategies for those with attention problems include: Tape recording lectures or having access to a complete set of lecture notes provided either by the professor or by a

fellow student; Signing up for small classes in order to achieve better concentration and fewer distractions; Sitting away from windows and doors that may be distracting and; Actively participating in class discussions.

Strategies for students with learning disabilities who encounter reading difficulties include: Having texts and reading assignments recorded; Avoiding multiple choice exams by requesting questions that require a short answer instead and; Forming study groups where comprehension of reading materials can be checked through discussions with other students (Nadeau, 1994).

These strategies, while being the responsibility of the student, cannot be implemented without the assistance of the institution. The role of the institution is much more complex and far-reaching in the role of educating students with learning disabilities. Not only are specific accommodations necessary, but also, a reevaluation of the ideology of higher education is needed.

Institutional Role

Assistance to students with learning disabilities must begin before the student even enrolls at the institution. The National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1994) identified information that postsecondary personnel must disseminate to prospective students. To contribute to successful transition planning, postsecondary personnel should:

- Provide linkages to high schools through outreach efforts;
- Inform secondary school personnel of the prerequisites for the transition to postsecondary options;

- Disseminate information about college preparation and the expectations associated with various postsecondary settings;
- Offer “LD college nights” at local high schools and at state conferences;
- Provide opportunities for campus visits for prospective students and their families, educating them about the unique features of the specific postsecondary program;
- Help students to effectively negotiate postsecondary settings;
- Offer summer orientation programs on the admissions application process, admissions requirements, and general postsecondary education program survival skills;
- Clarify the roles of the student and the service provider in a postsecondary setting;
- Offer comprehensive orientation programs to students with learning disabilities who have elected to attend a given institution;
- Teach students how to advocate for themselves in the postsecondary setting;
- Negotiate “reasonable academic adjustments” with faculty and administration that will maintain the integrity of the curriculum;
- Establish written policies and procedures concerning admissions, diagnosis, accommodation, curriculum requirements, and service delivery to students with learning disabilities;
- Work closely with admissions officers to ensure that students with learning disabilities are fairly considered;
- Act as a liaison to the greater college community, and inform them about serving students with learning disabilities; and

- Provide faculty and staff development on learning disabilities.

Once students have enrolled in a postsecondary institution, there are more obstacles they will encounter, beginning with the ideology of postsecondary institutions. Traditionally, many college professors have emphasized content over pedagogy, raising concerns about their knowledge of effective instructional strategies, especially for students with disabilities (Shaw, Scott & Mcguire, 2001). Recently, there has been an increased emphasis on pedagogy in higher education that is creating improvement in instruction for students with learning disabilities. Effective instruction by faculty is now viewed as a critical element in the accessibility of learning environments (Shaw et al., 2001). “In many colleges a major role of Disability Services personnel is to collaborate with faculty to help students become self-determined, independent learners” (Shaw & Dukes, 2001).

With more students with learning disabilities attending college and a mixed level of pedagogical expertise among faculty, expecting faculty to make individual modifications and accommodations can be problematic. Because of this, other more systematic methods are needed to address the needs of these diverse groups of learners (Shaw et al., 2001). One model that has been used is the Universal Design for Instruction (UDI).

The general concept of the Universal Design (UD) includes a specific set of principles to systematically incorporate accessible features into a design instead of retrofitting changes or accommodations. Building on the framework of UD and its principles, UDI anticipates the needs of diverse learners and incorporates effective strategies into curriculum and instruction to make learning more accessible. By focusing

on methods and strategies that promote learning for all students, UDI embraces an inclusionary approach that enables students with disabilities to overcome some of their barriers to learning (Shaw et al., 2001). UDI provides a conceptual framework for thinking about access and inclusion for diverse individuals.

Principles of Universal Design for Instruction

The UDI framework, adapted by Shaw, Scott and McGuire (2001), consists of nine general principles to guide faculty in thinking about and developing instruction for a broad range of students.

1. **Equitable use-** Instruction is designed to be useful to and accessible by people with diverse abilities. It provides the same means of use for all students, identical whenever possible, equivalent when not. Example: Using web-based courseware products with links to on-line resources so all students can access materials, regardless of varying academic preparation, distance from campus, etc.
2. **Flexibility in use-** Instruction is designed to accommodate a wide range of individual abilities. It provides choice in methods of use. Example: Using varied instructional methods (lecture with a visual outline, group activities, use of stories, or web-based discussions) to support different ways of learning.
3. **Simple and intuitive instruction-** Instruction is designed in a straightforward and predictable manner, regardless of the student's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. It eliminates unnecessary complexity. Example: Providing a grading scheme for papers or projects to clearly state performance expectations.

4. **Perceptible information-** Instruction is designed so that necessary information is communicated effectively, regardless of ambient conditions or the student's sensory abilities. Example: Selecting text books, reading material, and other instructional supports in digital format so students with diverse needs can access materials through print or by using technological supports.
5. **Tolerance for error-** Instruction anticipates variation in individual student learning pace and requisite skills. Example: Structuring a long-term course project with the option of turning in individual project components separately for constructive feedback and for integration into the final product.
6. **Low physical effort-** Instruction is designed to minimize nonessential physical effort in order to allow maximum attention to learning.
7. **Size and space for approach and use-** Instruction is designed with consideration for appropriate size and space for approach, reach, manipulations, and use regardless of a student's body size, posture mobility, and communication needs. Example: Using a circular seating arrangement in small class settings to allow students to see and face speakers during discussions- important for students with attention problems.
8. **A community of learners-** The instructional environment promotes interaction and communication among students and between students and faculty. Example: Fostering communication among students in and out of class by structuring study and discussion groups, e-mail lists, or chat rooms.
9. **Instructional climate-** Instruction is designed to be welcoming and inclusive. High expectations are espoused for all students. Example: Creating a statement

on the syllabus affirming the need for students to respect diversity, underscoring the expectation of tolerance, and encouraging students to discuss any special learning needs with the instructor.

These principles can be incorporated into academic ideology of institutions and may be modified to allow for course content. An institution that incorporates this framework would go a long way in improving the perceptions of students with learning disabilities toward postsecondary institutions and accommodations. While some colleges offer minimal learning disability support services and others offer highly structured learning disability programs, the majority of institutions have little assistance in place and leave it up to students to be their own advocate in arranging test accommodations and other services (Harris & Robertson, 2001). The institution is assuming, of course, that student have been teach and are familiar with an advocacy system.

Luna (2002) asserted that the instructional and assessment practices utilized by most universities are not appropriate for all students. When diverse learners cannot succeed under these particular ways of thinking dictated by cultural values, these non-mainstream individuals and cultural groups are defined as illiterate and deficient. Since college should be an empowering experience for diverse learners, it is felt that the standardization of traditional academic practices should be challenged (Luna, 2002). Instead of labeling, remediating, or accommodating students with learning disabilities, the institutions should evaluate and change the academic context so that all diverse learners can meet their potential. Models should be implemented which focus on independence and self-reliance.

Launey and Carter-Davis (2001) found that the asset model was successful in accomplishing these goals. This model was based on students' assets, not deficits, and was offered with the approach that would assist students in becoming self-reliant. This model extends services beyond accommodations to include pedagogical responses to learning issues. The students in this study "developed quality relationships, demonstrated a growing self-efficacy and created a learning environment" (Launey & Carter-Davis, 2001).

Summary

In recent years, an increasing number of students with learning disabilities are entering postsecondary institutions. The range of problems each individual has makes it difficult to address the needs of the individuals as a group. This is especially true in the area of college students with learning disabilities. The characteristics of different learning disabilities are diverse and manifest themselves in many ways.

The characteristics are not the only area which needs to be examined in order to determine the needs of these individuals. In addition, the perceptions of students with learning disabilities towards themselves and others, and the perception of society and institutions are also instrumental in determining the best way to address the needs of students with learning disabilities.

Society sets a very narrow paradigm for learning. Students with learning disabilities find very early that they are unable to compete and succeed within this context. When they enter postsecondary institutions, these students find the emphasis on

content impossible to work within. The moral bias and feelings of having to explain their disability makes it difficult for students with learning disabilities to seek assistance.

Students with learning disabilities must be taught how to use strategies which will enhance their performance. This cannot be accomplished without the assistance of society in changing the views of individuals with learning disabilities. In addition, postsecondary institutions must reevaluate their ideology and make changes which emphasize pedagogy of learning over content. Only in this way will students with learning disabilities be able to become self-reliant and succeed.

Chapter 3 Design of the Study

Sample

This study included two groups of participants who were college students. The first group of subjects consisted of 4 first-year students with identified learning disabilities. There were 3 males and 1 female. All but one resided on campus.

The second group of subjects in the study consisted of 5 students, ranging from sophomores to seniors with identified learning disabilities. There were 4 males and 1 female. Four of these students resided on campus.

All of the participants attended Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey. The participants were varied in race, socioeconomic backgrounds, and majors. Also, they all attended college full-time.

The following tables show the statistical information collected on each student as of the end of the fall semester of 2002.

Table 3.1 Study Group Information I-First Year Students

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Diagnosis</u>
1	20	M	Processing Speed
2	18	M	ADD Dyslexia
3	18	F	ADHD
4	18	M	ADD

Table 3.2 Study Group Information II-First Year Students

<u>Subject</u>	<u>GPA 12/02</u>	<u>IQ</u>	<u>SAT V</u>	<u>SAT M</u>	<u>SAT Total</u>
1	3.056	118	520	610	1130
2	1.50	117	570	680	1250
3	2.14	N/A	480	610	1090
4	2.540	N/A	520	560	1080

Table 3.3 Study Group Information III-Sophomores to Seniors

<u>Subject</u>	<u>Age</u>	<u>Sex</u>	<u>Diagnosis</u>
5	22	M	Written Expression
6	21	M	Dyslexia-Reading Comprehension
7	21	M	Processing Speed Working Memory
8	25	F	Auditory Memory Perceptual Impair
9	20	M	ADD Social Issues

Table 3.4 Study Group Information IV-Sophomores to Seniors

<u>Subject</u>	<u>GPA 12/02</u>	<u>IQ</u>	<u>SAT V</u>	<u>SAT M</u>	<u>SAT Total</u>
5	1.875	124	530	650	1180
6	2.732	N/A	500	530	1030
7	2.591	91	310	370	680
8	3.457	N/A	480	400	880
9	3.609	129	680	760	1440

Design

The Office of Disability Services at Rowan University submitted a list of 14 students with a variety of learning disabilities. A letter was sent to these students by the Vice President of Student Affairs, the Director of the Office of Disability Services, and the Director of the Center for the Study of Student Life to inquire if they would be interested in participating in the study. After two weeks, there had been only one response to the letters sent. Because of this, follow up phone calls were made to the students to arrange interview times. An average of four calls were necessary to obtain a response from the students. A total of nine subjects were willing to participate out of the total list of fourteen. Seven on the list were first year students and seven were sophomores, juniors and seniors. Five of the students who participated in the study were sophomores, juniors, and seniors, and four were first year students.

Before the interview process began, each subject signed an informed consent agreement. A brief description of the study and the questions were given to the subjects, along with assurance that their answers would remain completely anonymous. The interview process took from thirty minutes to one and a half hours. The interviews were conducted in the Center for the Study of Student Life at Rowan University.

The study followed all guidelines and procedures set forth by the Institutional Review Board (IRB). Authorization and approval for this study was obtained.

The research design used a narrative approach known as qualitative interviewing. Interviews allow the power of the personal narrative to come through. It enables the researcher to understand alternate constructions of social reality by hearing it from the perspective of the learning disabled student. The difficulties encountered in college by these students were the focus of the study.

Analysis

Qualitative data analysis involves descriptive accounts and the construction of thematic categories that emerge from the data. In this study, the data was condensed and linked together in a report that presented findings derived from the research. Thematic categories were constructed using recurring patterns of data. It is believed that the categories that will emerge from the data will reflect the purpose of the study and provide answers to the research questions.

During the interview, the student told their story from their perspective. The interview was informal and allowed for flexibility in a relaxed environment. Transcribed notes were used in the data collection process. This allowed the researcher to capture

important parts of the interview and aided in the data analysis. A control group of ten first year students who are not learning disabled were used in order to compare experiences. In this way, it enabled the researcher to discern which experiences are unique to the study group.

Summary

This study included two groups of participants: 1) first year college students with identified learning disabilities, and 2) sophomore, junior, and senior college students with identified learning disabilities. All the subjects were full-time students attending Rowan University in Glassboro, New Jersey.

The subjects participated in an interview that allowed them to express their views from their own perspective. The information gathered was then be analyzed in order to present a narrative and construct thematic categories that enabled the research questions to be answered.

Chapter 4 Analysis of Results

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges faced by college students with learning disabilities from their own perspective. Specifically, the narratives from the nine students answered the following questions.

First Year Students

- How do they perceive themselves as learners?
- Do they perceive that they will encounter any difficulties in college?
- Do they perceive themselves more different than students who are not learning disabled?

Sophomores, Juniors, and Seniors

- How did they perceive the first year experience as learners?
- How do they perceive themselves as learners now?
- Did they encounter any problems in college? If so, how were they resolved?
- Do they perceive themselves as different than students who are not learning disabled now?
- How have they grown throughout the years, academically, socially, and emotionally?

Each of the narratives provided a unique look at the experiences of learning disabled students with regard to their college experiences and how they view themselves

in this context. The personal narratives of each student became the data used in this study.

After reviewing each narrative, patterns and recurrent themes emerged that allowed the researcher insight into the multiple perspectives of learning disabled college students on their experiences while in college. The recurring themes that emerged were in the areas of academic issues, social issues, support systems, and disability management. Collectively these themes represented the unique range of experiences of the students. These themes were presented in the light of socially constructed experiences and no attempt was made to measure the impact of them.

There were several areas where the experiences of learning disabled students reflected those of other students; however, when the experiences were taken as a whole, the difficulties in the transition to college were magnified for those students with learning disabilities. Also, many of the perspectives of the students overlapped between themes. Which theme they were included in reflects the decision of the researcher.

The patterns that were found in all the areas were the experiences of the first-year students as well as the upperclassmen in their first year. Therefore, unless otherwise noted, the themes included all the students interviewed.

In general, all the students except one have accommodations of some type in college. Six of them are allowed time and a half on tests and may take tests at an alternate test site. One is allowed to tape record lectures and two are allowed to use hand-held electronic devices in the classroom. One of the students has accommodations but has never followed up with the Office of Specialized Services in order to implement them.

The researcher found that two of the first-year students and one of the upperclassman were introverted in that they do not seem to do well in social situations and could be described as shy. Two first-year students and two upperclassmen seem to be less shy and more talkative and two upperclassmen would be considered extroverted and proactive in their views and needs.

It was also discovered that all the males in the study described themselves as good at math; whereas, the females did not feel that they did well in math.

Themes

- Academic Issues
- Social Issues
- Support Systems
- Disability Management

Academic Issues

This area was where students encountered the most difficulties in their first year. The students were ill prepared for the rigors of college academics. Almost all of them reported high grades in high school. However, many of the students encountered difficulties in their first semester of college.

They found it very difficult to adjust to the schedules in college. After attending high school where they went to school all day and then did their homework, the adjustment to taking classes one or two times a week at all different hours was daunting. The students found it difficult to determine when their school work should be done. In

high school, they were told when to do an assignment; however, in college they found that they were expected to know when to do the necessary work.

All of the students felt that high school did not prepare them for college. Many did not know how to do the quality of work that was now expected of them. All through high school, allowances had been made for areas like writing. They found that when they entered college, they were now expected to write in a way that had never been taught to them.

Most of the students had difficulty with writing and organization. Because of this, the transition to the schedule and school work of college was daunting to them. All but two of the students felt that the schedule that they were given their first semester was too demanding considering the adjustment problems they were experiencing. They felt that five classes were too difficult, especially the College Composition I class.

Only four of these students were able to have their schedules changed. The others did not know that this option was available to them. The students that did manage to change their schedules only found out about this option through their parents who called the college and made the arrangements.

Many students reported that they would like to be able to take fewer classes every semester; however, they feel it was important to graduate on time with the rest of their class. The researcher found that none of the upperclassmen were still graduating with the rest of their class. It would seem that although these students first attempt to keep up, they eventually find after their first year that they must take fewer classes in order to do well.

Three of the students chose Rowan University because of the small size of the campus and classes. They felt that this environment would be more conducive to the type of structure they need with their disabilities. They reported that once they began school they found the class sizes too large, with between twenty-five and thirty-five students per class, and that made it difficult for them to succeed.

One student reported that he began in engineering and did quite well there because the engineering department was in one building. Also the students always had the same group of professors who got to know them and that the classes are extremely small, with about ten students. Therefore, it was possible to receive the individualized attention needed. When this student transferred to computer science, he found it much more difficult to do well, as there were so many different professors and the classes were so big.

Eight of the students took College Composition I their first semester at Rowan. All of them also reported having difficulty with the writing in this class. Four of the students either failed or received scores that were barely passing. Those who passed the course with a B received help from their parents in completing the written assignments

Many of those who did not do well attempted to get help from the Tutoring Center; however, there were not enough tutors available to assist them. Some of the students did better than others because they felt that the professor helped them and went over every detail of the assignments. They stated that they did better in classes where professors gave detailed lectures and went over what they expect. Others stated that many professors did not give them much direction in the classes.

One student expressed it in the following way:

“I had been struggling in class since the beginning. I had given the letter of accommodation to the professor (for extra time on tests) and I told him that I was having problems. I asked him for some extra assistance, like say I bring something I have done and he looks it over and gives me suggestions. That’s when he told me that if he were to do that for me, then everyone in the class was going to expect extra help. I knew then that he was not going to help me, that I was on my own.”

Eight of the students did not feel comfortable approaching the professors because of how they might be perceived by the faculty. Most of them would give the professors their letters for accommodation but did not feel comfortable doing it. Some never follow up to make sure they get the accommodations because they don’t like to have to remind the professors. Four of them had bad experiences like the one mentioned above and those experiences made it even more difficult to feel comfortable asking for help.

Many of the students also felt that the climate of the classroom did not encourage asking for accommodations. Many did not want the other students to notice that they were not there on test days. They also did not know when to approach the professors, whether it should be before class or after and they definitely did not want to do it in front of the other students. Many of the professors would take the letters in front of the class and tell the students to let them know when they need something. It made students feel uncomfortable that others could hear this conversation. All of the students felt like the

professors and other students would think they were just trying to receive special treatment. One student conveyed difficulty knowing when she should ask for the alternate test site.

“A lot of the professors give quizzes with little or no notice. A lot of times I feel weird asking for an alternate test site for a quiz or asking for extra time when they state that the quiz should only take fifteen minutes. You feel petty asking for accommodations in that situation.”

Another student said:

“I really don’t want to go to the professors or Specialized Services for help because I feel I would be pushing my luck. I don’t want to ask for too much and get a reputation as a troublemaker.”

Some of the students felt that the professors did not like the idea of students asking for accommodations. They felt most comfortable with the adjunct professors. The full time professors were perceived as not as willing to help.

All of the students used the priority registration that they are allowed; however, they even had problems with this accommodation. Some had difficulty finding an advisor who would work with them. Many advisors did not want to advise first-year students until after the seniors were advised. The students attempted to explain that they register with the seniors; however, they reported that it was difficult to reach the advisors. They did not seem to know that these students receive priority registration. Another

problem the students encountered was that they were unable to register for the classes they needed as they are filled by the time they registered because of the athletic teams receiving first registration.

Social Issues

All students agreed that they have not engaged in any social activities since entering college. After their first year, some of the students reported that they did start to do some social activities; however, not to the extent of the other students on campus. The students had such a difficult time with their workload that they had no time to do anything except school work. The upperclassmen had accepted this fact but wish they could spend less time on school work. One student with reading difficulties stated the following:

“I have a hard time doing all the writing I need to do while everyone else in the dorm is going out. Sometimes they think that I’m stuck up because they can’t believe I really spend so much time on my work. I really don’t want to have to tell them why I have to work so hard. Most of my professors want us to read a chapter a week which is impossible when I have to have my electronic reader read it to me a few sentences at a time. I wish the college would get a person to read to me but they say that they can’t.”

Three of the first year students found it difficult to live in the residence halls. They were unable to concentrate with the constant noise from all the other students. It

was more difficult when a student has a roommate. Almost all first-year students had at least one roommate. In some cases, learning disabled students have been able to secure private rooms with the help of the Office of Specialized Services. Many of the students expressed that they are at their wits end trying to concentrate in the dormitories; however, they did not know who they could speak to about the situation. They felt that they would be able to do better if they could have a room to themselves.

The students said they would also get more done if they were allowed to bring their cars on campus the first year. First-year students are not allowed to have cars; however, exceptions have been made for those who need them. Once again, the students were not aware of who they should talk to about the situation.

Some students believed they needed to be able to drive to some place quiet to study. They said that even the library on campus was too distracting. One student said that she just needs some time to herself. She feels like she can never be alone and it makes her very anxious. Another reason students gave for wanting their cars is to be able to go home as much as possible. These students felt that they needed to be able to see their parents in order to receive moral support and also assistance with their schoolwork. However, because their parents were not able to pick them up all the time, they felt trapped on campus and isolated from their families.

The majority of the students reported that they did not have a lot of friends and did not make friends easily. These students expressed difficulty in relating to their peers. They did not want their peers to know about their disabilities because they were afraid of how their peers would perceive them.

Seven of the students said that they lack good social skills because of their experience as children. Many of them were in special education classrooms and were not able to social with their peers. They were also bullied as children because of their disabilities. These students distrust the intentions of their peers and believe that if their peers found out about their disabilities, they would pick on them too. All the students felt that they would rather fail in school than to be viewed as different. This appears to be a cumulative effect from a childhood of abuse.

Support Systems

Parents

Eight students stated that their parents were involved in their education. They all had varying degrees of involvement. Some parents were supportive and gave advice through telephone conversations. Some students went home every weekend so that their parents could help them with their schoolwork.

Four students reported that their parents called the college when they are having trouble to find where they could go for help. Seven students sought assistance through Specialized Services because their parents found out about the office and took them there. They stated that, without the assistance of their parents, they would not have known about it. Two students were referred to Specialized Services by someone at the college who noticed the difficulty they were having.

Parents were also crucial in the adjustment to the first semester. The students' parents were instrumental in every case where the first semester's class schedule was

changed. They stated that they would not have known about changing the schedule if their parents had not inquired for them. They did not feel comfortable attempting to locate the department where changes are made and they also did not really know their way around campus.

Peers

Three of the four first-year students had not made many friends at college. They had difficulty meeting new people because of their social deficits and also because of the academic demands placed on them. The upperclassmen stated that, while they had made some friends in their years at college, they still did not have much time to socialize with the academic demands placed on them.

Without exception, the students did not like to discuss their disability with their peers because they did not want to be perceived as different. They were also fearful of the reaction of their peers. The negative experiences they had as children made them fearful that peers may reject them. The students realized that they were different from their peers in many ways; however, they desperately wished to hide these differences. They knew that this was difficult; therefore, they were selective in choosing which students they associated with, tending to become friends with those individuals that resemble themselves.

College Support Services

All students conveyed that there were not enough support services at the college to assist them. They believed that the departments do attempt to help them but there is a lack of personnel. They also had difficulty knowing which departments would be able to assist them.

The tutoring labs only offered tutoring in certain subjects and it was difficult to find an opening with a tutor. Three of the students did not even know about the tutoring center and what services they offered.

All of the students were registered with the Office of Specialized Services and received assistance from that department. Many of the students believed that this department was understaffed and unable to help them although the faculty did make every effort. One student felt that it came down to communication:

“There seems to be a lack of communication between the Office of Specialized Services and the rest of the faculty. I’ve found that in all aspects of the campus. The lack of trading of communication between the Office of Specialized Services and the departments and between all the departments is great. You cannot go to any department and expect that they will know what is going on in Specialized Services. Communication of students needs is really lacking here. I don’t know whether it’s that way at every university or just this one but I see it as something of an issue.”

None of the students interviewed were aware of the Office of Specialized Services when they first arrived on campus. Seven students found out through their parents and two went without services for at least a year before a member of the faculty suggested that they go there for assistance.

Only one first-year student and two upperclassmen knew when they went to the Office of Specialized Services what kind of accommodations they needed. The other

students, once referred to the department, had no idea what accommodations they needed or what they could ask for in the way of assistance. These students let Specialized Services determine what accommodations they needed.

The majority of students have not returned to the Office of Specialized Services once they received their letters of accommodation. Only three upperclassmen regularly check in with this office. The rest of the students did believe it was important to stay in contact with Specialized Services; however, they either believed this will label them as disabled or they could not find the time.

Disability Management

Two of the first-year students were diagnosed as having ADD and were on medication for it. The difficulty they encountered was, not only dealing with the symptoms of their disability, but also the timing of the medication. They were allowed to take a certain amount of their medication every day and they were attempting to determine at what time they should take it.

These students tried to schedule all their classes during the day and needed their medication to control their symptoms during this time so they can concentrate. However, they found that in order to complete their schoolwork in the evening, they needed more medication. However, they could not take the medication too late or their sleeping patterns would be affected. Also, too much medication could cause adverse effects. Therefore, these students found themselves in the position that they had to choose whether to do well in class or be able to complete their assignments.

Without exception, all the students interviewed said they could best manage their disability if they received some monitoring by the faculty. They believed with some

guidance, motivation, and help with organization they would be able to manage their disabilities in college. This monitoring should be frequent and last throughout their years at college until graduation.

Summary

The interviews with learning disabled students provided an insight into the perceptions of these students. While each student had unique experiences and perceptions, recurring patterns emerged, which enabled the researcher to combine certain experiences into themes. This was done after a thorough review of the data that included not only the words of the students, but also the tone and the body language of these individuals.

The themes that came from the experiences of the students were academic issues, social issues, support systems, and disability management. The students experienced difficulties in not only academic areas but also in social areas. Support from family and faculty was found to be necessary in order to succeed and it was felt that there were not enough resources at college to assist them.

Tables 4.1 and 4.2 are a compilation of the results found in this study broken down by subject. The patterns found in these tables show a correlation between the areas.

Table 4.1 Research Results-Parent Involvement and Social Issues

Subject	Grades for Comp I	Parent Involvement	Self-Esteem	Labeled and Bullied in the Past
1	A	Very	Somewhat Extroverted	Yes
2	B	Very	Extroverted and Proactive	No
3	F	Little	Introverted	Yes
4	Incomplete	Little	Introverted	Yes
5	Not taken	Moderate	Somewhat Extroverted	No
6	B-	Very	Introverted	Yes
7	F	Little	Introverted	Yes
8	B-	Very	Somewhat Extroverted and Proactive	Yes
9	B-	Very	Somewhat Extroverted	No

Table 4.2 Research Results-Academic Issues

Subject	1 st Class Scheduled Changed	Found out about Specialized Services through:	Accommodations	Major
1	Yes	Family	Extra Time and Alternate Test Site	Computer Science
2	Yes	Family	Extra Time, Alternate Test Site, and Hand-Held Device	Elementary Education
3	No	Faculty	Extra Time and Alternate Test Site	Political Science
4	Yes	Family	Extra Time and Alternate Test Site	Accounting
5	Yes	Family	Extra Time	Accounting
6	No	Faculty	Extra Time and Alternate Test Site	Secondary Education
7	No	Family	Extra Time and Alternate Test Site	Communications (Radio/TV/Film)
8	Yes	Family	Extra Time, Alternate Test Site, and Hand-Held Device	Communications (Radio/TV/Film)
9	Yes	Family	Extra Time, Alternate Test Site, and Hand-Held Device	Communications (Radio/TV/Film)

Chapter 5 Summary and Conclusions

Summary

Making the transition to college is a difficult one for many students. It can be a formidable challenge for those individuals with learning disabilities as they must also overcome the obstacles they have faced all their lives due to their disabilities.

These difficulties include writing, word retrieval and memory problems, attention problems, and reading difficulties. Sometimes the lack of social skills can also create problems for these students.

While there has been increasing attention given to this area, there has been little research done on the experiences of college students with learning disabilities. Many new programs are developed every year to address the needs of these students; few colleges have specific learning disabilities programs. These programs are necessary in order for the students to be successful in college.

It is necessary that any program include a working partnership between the students and the personnel at the college; however, what services are needed is not known. It is important to understand the experiences of the learning disabled students from their perspective as each student is unique in their view of reality. This view is based on the students' perceptions of their interactions with others and with their culture.

Any program implemented should be based on the group's needs, through patterns found in each person's perspective. The programs will utilize social construction with the goal of academic success.

The purpose of this study was to examine the challenges faced by college students with learning disabilities from their own perspective. The study compared the perceptions of the first-year students with the experiences of college sophomores, juniors, and seniors who have attempted to overcome these challenges.

Four first-year students and five upperclassmen were interviewed and the narratives were analyzed in order to find recurring patterns and themes. A control group of ten first-year students that did not have learning disabilities was used in order to determine if the experiences of these subjects were unique. It was found that, while some transitional difficulties were experienced by all students, these difficulties were magnified for those with learning disabilities.

The themes that were found in this study were academic issues, social issues, support systems, and disability management. The students experienced unique difficulties in academic and social areas. They also lacked the necessary support systems needed to be successful.

Based on the patterns found in the preceding chapter, certain conclusions could be made about the experiences of learning disabled students. These conclusions were based not only on the words of the students, but on their tone and body language. These themes, when put into the appropriate context, will enable institutions to implement programs that will teach students strategies that will enhance their performance. This will be accomplished when postsecondary institutions consider the experiences and

perceptions of learning disabled students and make changes that emphasize pedagogy of learning over content and address the social needs of the students.

Conclusions

After an analysis of the narratives of learning disabled students, several themes emerged which enabled the researcher to find patterns and draw conclusions about the difficulties that these students faced in achieving success in college.

Most of the students did well in high school; however, they all experienced difficulty in the transition to college. They experienced problems in several classes, especially those in which writing was necessary. They felt that high school had not adequately prepared them for postsecondary education.

Most of the students experienced differing degrees of difficulty in the areas of writing and organization. The students also reported having difficulty concentrating in order to study. Those students who lived on campus found that they were unable to concentrate in the residence halls with the loud noise and had an especially difficult time when they had a roommate. This was because another student may not be aware of the things that a learning disabled student finds distracting. In many cases, students had between one and three roommates. The first-year students wished that they were able to have their cars at school in the first year. This way they might be able to drive to a quiet place to study or go home if they live close. The students reported that it was difficult to find a place within walking distance that was quiet and they required time to themselves sometimes.

Many of the students came to Rowan University because of the small classes; however, they felt that most of the classes were too big and could not offer the individualized attention they felt they needed.

Students did well in classes and programs that were small. They were able to get to know their peers and professors and received individualized attention from the professors, especially in those programs where students regularly attend classes together.

Most students did not feel comfortable approaching the professors with the letters they are given regarding the accommodations they are allowed. They believed that the professors might perceive them as just trying “to get over”. They stated that the adjunct professors were more willing to help them than the full time professors. Many of the students had bad experiences with professors who were not willing to assist them. Because of this, they were reluctant to approach professors because of how they would be perceived.

One of the main concerns of the students was that they not be perceived as different by their peers. They felt that this is impossible when they have to speak with the professor in the class and also when they have to go to an alternate test site. The students realized that they must have extra time and alternate test site; however, sometimes they felt as if their peers perceived them differently. Therefore, they did not like taking advantage of their accommodations. In circumstances such as these, it seemed like small problems escalated to the point that learning disabled students became apprehensive about asking for their accommodations. The students reported that they would be more comfortable if someone else, such as the Office of Specialized Services, spoke to the faculty on their behalf.

Through the data analysis it was found that some of the students did poorly in the College Composition I course they were required to take their first semester. Those students who did better and passed with a grade above a C had several things in common. The students were more extroverted and proactive regarding their disability. They also had their first schedule of classes changed by their parents and received assistance on their work by their parents. Those that did not do well or failed their first semester did not have their schedules changed and received little if any help from their parents.

Students seemed to do better in college if they received assistance in their first year in all aspects of college life and thereafter in any specific area in which they had difficulty. This seems to be one of the reasons the upperclassmen were succeeding in college. All of the upperclassmen were able to go home on the weekends or they lived with their parents and received tutoring in the areas where they were experiencing difficulty. Others received assistance from upperclassmen in their first year. These upperclassmen tutored the students and gave them advice on classes.

Another reason the upperclassmen were able to succeed in college was because their parents were involved in their education. When the students had any difficulties, they were able to speak with their parents, who either intervened for them or directed them on where they should go in order to resolve problems. Finally, these students were also proactive with regard to their disability. They were not necessarily extroverted; however, they understood that they needed help in order to succeed and did not hesitate to ask for it. They also checked in regularly with the Office of Specialized Services with any questions they may have regarding their progress.

All of the students agreed that they were not able to participate in any social activities because they had spent so much time on their school work. The upperclassmen did have a few more extracurricular activities than they used to have as first-year students. Most of the time, they participated in programs that were offered in their majors. This allowed them to interact with other students. This interaction allowed them to learn many different things, from what classes were the best ones to take to what professors offered the most help.

The students also did not feel comfortable with the peers. They did not want them to know about their disabilities because the fear of how their peers perceived them and they did not like to feel different. It was obvious that, for this reason, the students did not want any more accommodations than necessary in order to succeed. They would prefer accommodations that would not single them out from other students.

Another difficulty that most of the students encountered was due to their lack of social skills. They had difficulty making friends and interacting with their peers. This was directly related to their experiences as children. Most of these students were in special education classes and did not interact with the other students. The rest of them were in mainstream classrooms with special accommodations. This caused them to be labeled as different than the other students. These circumstances led to bullying by other students which in turn caused many of them to turn inward. They did not have enriching experiences with their peers and grew up feeling different. Many of them became loners because of the treatment they received as children by their teachers and peers.

This was the most troubling aspect of the difficulties they encountered in college. Every experience they had was framed in the experiences they had in childhood. It

colored every aspect of college, from the academics to the social realm. It permeated everything they did and the way in which they perceived their experiences. By the time these students reached college, there was no way to change the way in which they interacted socially. For this reason, postsecondary institutions must be especially sensitive to the needs and mindful of the treatment of these students. Programs should address the social issues experiences.

Discussion

The field of learning disabilities is relatively new. There has been much attention given to this subject as of late and many professionals still disagree on the subject. There is debate on whether children with learning disabilities should meet the same requirements as others in order to graduate from high school, on whether a special education classroom is better than a regular one for these children from kindergarten to high school., and who should pay for the special services that these children receive.

It is known that approximately 20% of American children have been diagnosed as having a learning disability. This equates to 1.8 million cases, a 127% increase since 1976 (Knox, 1989). Many of these children will be or are entering postsecondary institutions. Individuals with learning disabilities have deficits in areas such as reading, writing, and information processing; however, these deficits should not preclude them from attending college and having the same opportunities as those without these deficits.

The problems that these individuals experience are unique and postsecondary institutions are not fully prepared to address and accommodate them. The percentage of first-year college students with learning disabilities increased from 25% in 1991 to 41%

in 1998 (Sweener, Kundert, May, & Quinn, 2002). Students with learning disabilities are one of the fastest growing segments in the population of college students with disabilities.

According to Sweener, et al. (2002) there has been limited studies that investigate issues relevant to these disabilities as well as inconsistent perceptions regarding those with learning disabilities.

This study was performed because of a need for research in the area of college students with learning disabilities. Postsecondary institutions need to implement programs that address the needs of learning disabled students; however, it is not known what those needs are. The perceptions of learning disabled students are important in knowing what their needs are and how they should be addressed.

Students with learning disabilities bring many issues that cause difficulties to college, in addition to the symptoms of their disabilities. Whether right or wrong, many have received inadequate educations as children that did not prepare them for college and caused low self-esteem and lack of social skills. When they reach college, they are not prepared academically or socially for the rigors of a postsecondary education.

Students seem to do better when they have the constant guidance and assistance of a parent or a faculty member. Colleges need to make every faculty member aware of these students and their needs, from the professors who teach them to the registrar's office where the scheduling is performed.

While it is evident from this study that learning disabled students need special assistance in college, it does not seem that the services that would need to be implemented in order to address their needs would be cost prohibitive. These students need monitoring from the time they enter the institution until they graduate. While

parental involvement is important, it is not always possible; therefore, the institution should have faculty offer guidance, motivation, and tutoring where needed.

Students with learning disabilities do not like to bring attention to their disabilities. Because of this, a faculty member who is sensitive to their needs should be able to intervene for them while guiding them so that they will feel comfortable handling situations in the future.

This study shows that students perform better when they receive guidance. These students lack the social skills to maneuver through the complexities of college life but are more than willing to learn from someone that they trust and that they feel will not judge them.

Any program implemented for learning disabled first-year students should offer tutoring, especially in the area of writing. Scheduling of classes should take into consideration the limitations of the students. Mentoring should address the social skills deficits and organizational problems that these students experience. Students should be required to check in routinely with the Office of Specialized Services so that any difficulties that they have encountered can be addressed. Faculty members should be trained in the needs of learning disabled students and should be sensitive to the feelings of these students. One on one and group meetings should occur regularly so that these students can be instructed in what they can expect and where they can go to receive assistance. In the first year a faculty member should be assigned to a student in order to intervene for them in situations where they may feel uncomfortable.

If this is done in the first year of college, the following years may go more smoothly for the students and they may find that they need less guidance. When they

graduate, they will feel ready and comfortable to enter the working world. All students, especially learning disabled students, need more than academic training; they also need to learn social skills and practical skills that they can use in the future.

Implications for Future Research

This study revealed many important and interesting patterns from the perspective of learning disabled students. Interviews with these students provided insight into how they constructed their social reality, which in turn can lead to a better understanding into areas that most people could never hope to understand.

Because this study was performed with a small group of subjects, it would be necessary to perform studies with a larger sample in order to obtain results that are reliable and valid. This study provided data and suggestions that have implications for practice and further research focusing on the needs of learning disabled students based on their own perceptions and experiences.

The aim of future studies would be to implement programs that would address the needs of the growing population of learning disabled students in college. These studies would provide useful information on the insights of these individuals, which could in turn lead to programs in college. Once programs are implemented, further studies could prove their usefulness so that changes could be made where necessary. The goal is to eventually provide an education to learning disabled individuals that will enable them to achieve the maximum learning possible and that will prepare them to compete in the job market.

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