



College Students With Learning Disabilities

8.3

Amy Ellis, Psy.D.

College students with learning disabilities have average to superior levels of intelligence and are talented and capable individuals. Most have developed a variety of strategies to compensate for some of the academic struggles they've experienced over the years. At most colleges, students with learning disabilities must go through the same competitive process of admission as students without learning disabilities. Further, most students disclose their learning disability only after they have been admitted.

A learning disability affects how a person takes in, retains, and expresses information. Learning disabilities are a result of nervous system dysfunction, usually genetic in nature, and are present throughout life. However, the problems associated with a learning disability can change, depending on the demands for learning and the setting. Further, a learning disability might manifest itself in only one academic area (such as math or foreign language) or affect an individual's performance across a variety of subjects and disciplines. The degree of severity varies from individual to individual (Duane & Leong, 1985).

There are over 100 different types of learning disabilities. Typically, a person displays a cluster of learning disabilities rather than just one. Most common learning disabilities occur in the areas of reading skills, reading comprehension, written expression, listening comprehension, mathematics, problem solving, oral expression, visual-motor processing, and speed of processing. In addition, many students with learning disabilities also struggle with attention/concentration and time management. Frequently, students with learning disabilities become frustrated because their disability is not visible. Faculty, parents, and peers often are unaware of the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities.

Most students with learning disabilities coming into the university setting are already cognizant of their learning disability from assessment in a previous academic setting. However, it is becoming more common for diagnosis of learning disabilities to take place at the college level. It is important that diagnosis be done either by an educational therapist or a psychologist. Assessment includes an IQ test as well as tests of academic achievement and information processing and a thorough history (developmental, academic, and familial). Some university campuses provide assessment for learning disabilities; others refer students to off-campus professionals.

Once a student receives the diagnosis of learning disability, it is important to determine the most appropriate measures for academic success. Many colleges offer study skills courses in addition to academic support services. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1990 requires universities to provide academic accommodations appropriate to the nature of a student's disability. The need for academic accommodations and services varies from student to student. Common accommodations and services can include note takers in the class to supplement a student's notes, exam accommodations, assistance with registration, priority registration, peer mentoring programs, study skills courses, and referrals to other campus and community resources.

Other suggestions for college students with learning disabilities include building on areas of academic strength, using a multisensory approach to learning (for example, using auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modalities in learning), becoming knowledgeable about describing the disability so they can advocate for themselves with faculty, sitting toward the front of the classroom, taking minimized course loads, reviewing notes as soon as possible after class to refresh memory and fill in any gaps, setting realistic goals, and linking up with campus support services.

College students with learning disabilities can be highly successful academically. Assessment is the first step toward self-knowledge and understanding of ability structure, which in turn is the prerequisite for accepting responsibility for one's own learning. Taking advantage of the necessary support services facilitates a successful college experience for students with learning disabilities.

References and Resources

- Duane, D., & Leong, C. (1985). *Understanding learning disabilities: International and multidisciplinary views*. New York: Plenum Press.

Amy Ellis, Psy.D., is a certified psychologist with Learning Development Services in San Diego. She specializes in adults with attention and learning disorders.



College Students With Learning Disabilities

Amy Ellis, Psy.D.

8.3

College students with learning disabilities have average to superior levels of intelligence and are talented and capable individuals. Most have developed a variety of strategies to compensate for some of the academic struggles they've experienced over the years. At most colleges, students with learning disabilities must go through the same competitive process of admission as students without learning disabilities. Further, most students disclose their learning disability only after they have been admitted.

A learning disability affects how a person takes in, retains, and expresses information. Learning disabilities are a result of nervous system dysfunction, usually genetic in nature, and are present throughout life. However, the problems associated with a learning disability can change, depending on the demands for learning and the setting. Further, a learning disability might manifest itself in only one academic area (such as math or foreign language) or affect an individual's performance across a variety of subjects and disciplines. The degree of severity varies from individual to individual (Duane & Leong, 1985).

There are over 100 different types of learning disabilities. Typically, a person displays a cluster of learning disabilities rather than just one. Most common learning disabilities occur in the areas of reading skills, reading comprehension, written expression, listening comprehension, mathematics, problem solving, oral expression, visual-motor processing, and speed of processing. In addition, many students with learning disabilities also struggle with attention/concentration and time management. Frequently, students with learning disabilities become frustrated because their disability is not visible. Faculty, parents, and peers often are unaware of the challenges faced by individuals with learning disabilities.

Most students with learning disabilities coming into the university setting are already cognizant of their learning disability from assessment in a previous academic setting. However, it is becoming more common for diagnosis of learning disabilities to take place at the college level. It is important that diagnosis be done either by an educational therapist or a psychologist. Assessment includes an IQ test as well as tests of academic achievement and information processing and a thorough history (developmental, academic, and familial). Some university campuses provide assessment for learning disabilities; others refer students to off-campus professionals.

Once a student receives the diagnosis of learning disability, it is important to determine the most appropriate measures for academic success. Many colleges offer study skills courses in addition to academic support services. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Act of 1990 requires universities to provide academic accommodations appropriate to the nature of a student's disability. The need for academic accommodations and services varies from student to student. Common accommodations and services can include note takers in the class to supplement a student's notes, exam accommodations, assistance with registration, priority registration, peer mentoring programs, study skills courses, and referrals to other campus and community resources.

Other suggestions for college students with learning disabilities include building on areas of academic strength, using a multisensory approach to learning (for example, using auditory, visual, and kinesthetic modalities in learning), becoming knowledgeable about describing the disability so they can advocate for themselves with faculty, sitting toward the front of the classroom, taking minimized course loads, reviewing notes as soon as possible after class to refresh memory and fill in any gaps, setting realistic goals, and linking up with campus support services.

College students with learning disabilities can be highly successful academically. Assessment is the first step toward self-knowledge and understanding of ability structure, which in turn is the prerequisite for accepting responsibility for one's own learning. Taking advantage of the necessary support services facilitates a successful college experience for students with learning disabilities.

References and Resources

Duane, D., & Leong, C. (1985). *Understanding learning disabilities: International and multidisciplinary views*. New York: Plenum Press.

Amy Ellis, Psy.D., is a certified psychologist with Learning Development Services in San Diego. She specializes in adults with attention and learning disorders.