Identifying the Needs of Adults with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education

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Abstract

Identifying the Needs of Adults with Learning Disabilities in Higher Education

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This paper presents a brief history of disability legislation including the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). An overview of learning disabilities and the educational needs of the learning disabled are also discussed. Finally, the three current models that are implemented in the postsecondary setting are described: accommodations, remediation, and Universal Design for Learning (UDL). Recommendations for effective approaches universities can employ to help students with learning disabilities find academic success and complete their degree are given.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The downturn of the United States economy, including the closing of factories, and disabled veterans returning from active duty, has led to an influx of applicants to technical colleges and universities across the country. Between 2000 and 2009 enrollment of students 25 and over rose 43% (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). This influx has also brought with it new challenges; universities are seeing students who are ill-equipped to deal with the demands of higher education. In addition to a multitude of barriers, today's students are often unsure how to balance their education with their personal lives. These students, who have the added stress of struggling with their coursework, are more likely to drop out. For some students there is no explanation for their difficulties; for others with a diagnosed learning disability the reason is more understandable. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office of Vocational and Adult Education, as of 2006 there were 272,029 individuals with disabilities enrolled in higher education. Postsecondary institutions will have to find ways to help these students achieve success.

One such example is a young woman named Sara (name changed to protect the individual's privacy), who sustained an injury while serving in the Navy. She returned home with lofty dreams for her future, wanting to pursue a nursing degree. She began working with a Veterans Affairs counselor in Milwaukee. Testing revealed a high average IQ, but her academic achievement scores fell below what was expected, based upon her age and intellectual ability. She received the diagnosis of Dyslexia, a type of learning disability. Sara's counselor focused on what she struggled with, rather than looking at her potential, encouraging her to enroll in a technical college, even though he was aware of her career goal to obtain a nursing degree. Sara

was not about to let this discourage her. She began to advocate for herself. She knew that without some type of assistance it was likely that she would not be successful in achieving her dream. She began work in a remedial program to improve her academic abilities. Sara has now successfully completed her Associate degree in nursing and is working on her Bachelor's degree.

The category of learning disabilities gained more recognition in the educational field in 1975, when Public Law-142 first came into being (U.S. Office of Special Education Programs, 2007). For nearly four decades students in primary and secondary schools have received services in many different ways, some more successfully than others. While laws pertaining to individuals under the age of 21 provide for equal access to free and appropriate public education ("Free Appropriate Public Education," 2010), laws pertaining to adults differ. The Americans with Disabilities Act provides protection from discrimination for adults with disabilities (U.S. Department of Justice, 2009), though it does not guarantee specially designed instruction or services ("Disability Rights Education"). Postsecondary institutions have begun to realize that traditional lecture methods are not successful for all students. Even with the implementation of accommodations that have the intention of helping students with learning disabilities, institutions of higher education must continue to make appropriate changes to help all students be successful.

The Department of Education has the goal to "prepare adult learners and individuals with learning disabilities for higher education, employment, and productive lives ("U.S. Department of Education," 2007). In order to meet this goal, it is imperative for institutions of higher education to explore and implement alternative methods of instruction and assessment. Universities have already begun to explore additional ways to meet the needs of their students. Most universities now have programs to help students with special needs. For example, the University of Wisconsin at Oshkosh has Project Success, which provides remediation, tutoring

and support, and provides accommodations to those with learning disabilities ("Project Success," 2013). In addition, the University of Wisconsin System Board of Regents has designated the University of Wisconsin at Whitewater as a lead university to provide services to students with disabilities using universal design. Whitewater's Project Assist is a fee-based program offering transition services, tutoring, study groups, and workshops ("Project Assist," 2012). Other universities are employing universal design, a framework for planning lessons from their inception with all learners in mind, instead of planning a lesson and then determining how to make the lesson accessible to all students. Indeed the University of Wisconsin Board of Regents has endorsed a "white paper" on universal design ("Conceptual White Paper," 2004). Universal design not only helps those with diagnosed disabilities, it gives all students an equal opportunity to learn, even those students who are struggling for no known reason. All individuals with the desire to pursue higher education have the right to do so; it is the legal responsibility of the colleges and universities to make their education accessible through reasonable accommodations.

Statement of the Problem

The problems this paper is addressing are: what are the educational needs of adults with learning disabilities in higher education and how colleges and universities can effectively meet these needs.

<center>**Definition of Terms**</center>

Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (ADA)

The ADA prohibits discrimination based on disability in: employment, State and
local government, public accommodations, commercial facilities, transportation, and
telecommunications. It also applies to the United States Congress. To be protected by the
ADA, one must have a disability or have a relationship or association with an individual
with a disability. An individual with a disability is defined by the ADA as a person who
has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life
activities, a person who has a history or record of such impairment, or a person who is
perceived by others as having such impairment. The ADA does not specifically name all
of the impairments that are covered (US Department of Justice, 2005).

IDEA 2004

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) is the federal law that secures
special education services for children with disabilities from the time they are born until they
graduate from high school. The law was reauthorized by Congress in 2004, prompting a
series of changes in the way special education services are implemented (WETA, 2010).

Learning Disability (LD)

Learning disabilities is a general term that refers to a heterogeneous group of disorders
manifested by significant difficulties in the acquisition and use of listening, speaking,
reading, writing, reasoning, or mathematical abilities. These disorders are intrinsic to the
individual, presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across
the life span. Problems in self-regulatory behaviors, social perception, and social interaction

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may exist with learning disabilities but do not by themselves constitute a learning disability. Although learning disabilities may occur concurrently with other handicapping conditions (for example, sensory impairment, mental retardation, serious emotional disturbance), or with extrinsic influences (such as cultural differences, insufficient or inappropriate instruction), they are not the result of those conditions or influences ("National Joint Committee," 1990). Learning Disabilities will be referred to as LD in this paper.

Section 504

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 is a national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability. The nondiscrimination requirements of the law apply to employers and organizations that receive financial assistance from any Federal department or agency, including the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS). These organizations and employers include many hospitals, nursing homes, mental health centers and human service programs.

Section 504 forbids organizations and employers from excluding or denying individuals with disabilities an equal opportunity to receive program benefits and services. It defines the rights of individuals with disabilities to participate in, and have access to, program benefits and services (US Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

Delimitations of Research

The references used for the review of literature were collected over a period of 91 days using the resources of the Karmann Library at the University of Wisconsin – Platteville and Golda Meir Library at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. The several search engines provided by EBSCOHOST were used. The key search terms were "adult learner", "learning disabled", "higher education", "postsecondary education", "accommodations", "remediation" and "universal design".

Method of Approach

A brief review of the history and legislation regarding special education was conducted. A review of literature relating to research, studies, delivery models, and anecdotal evidence was conducted. Another review of literature on related research was conducted. The findings were summarized and synthesized, and recommendations made.

Chapter Two: Review of Related Literature

Brief History of Special Education Legislation

The early part of the 20th century was an abysmal time for individuals with disabilities. They faced life without access to public education and services; those with disabilities were often institutionalized, homeschooled, or received no education at all. The first to be recognized were veterans with disabilities, who pressured the United States government to provide them with rehabilitation and vocational training services. This initial legislation still did not grant access to public services or prevent discrimination.

The 1970's were a time of hope, bringing about legislation to protect individuals with disabilities from discrimination and grant access to free public education. The Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) provided equal opportunity employment in the federal government or federally funded programs (Longmore, 2002). Public Law 94-142, the Education for All Handicapped Children Education Act (EAHCA) of 1975 established the foundation for all future legislation. The Education for All Handicapped Children Education Act was reauthorized in 2004 as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) focusing on children, and ensuring them access to an appropriate free public education and services to meet their individual needs (Vaughn, Bos & Shay Schumm, 2006).

The passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in 1990 granted the broadest rights to individuals with disabilities. The Americans with Disabilities Act mandated equal access and reasonable accommodations for those with disabilities, giving them the opportunity to use public services and programs receiving federal funding, such as postsecondary institutions. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ensures free and appropriate public education to every student with a disability through the twelfth grade, however; no legislation entitles students

to postsecondary education. Universities and colleges are required to provide reasonable accommodations and aids on an individual basis, but they are not required to alter the education to meet varying learning needs.

Overview of Learning Disabilities

A consensus is lacking when it comes to the diagnosis and even the definition of a learning disability. There is variability in professional diagnosis, definitions, and eligibility criteria across disability agencies and educational institutions (Gordon, Lewandowski, Murphy, & Dempsey, 2002). This fact makes it rather hard to homogenize eligibility requirements at the postsecondary level.

Dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia are three disorders that most commonly represent the over-arching category of learning disabilities. Each of these three disorders associated with learning disabilities manifests itself in different ways. Dyscalculia is defined as a "severe disability in learning mathematical concepts and computation" (Vaughn, Bos & Shay Schumm, 2006, p. 39). Dysgraphia is a "severe difficulty in learning to write, including handwriting" (Vaughn, Bos & Shay Schumm, 2006, p. 39). The final disorder and the most prevalent is dyslexia.

Dyslexia is a language-based learning disability. Dyslexia refers to a cluster of symptoms which result in people having difficulties with specific language skills, particularly reading. Students with dyslexia usually have trouble with other language skills such as spelling, writing, and pronouncing words. Dyslexia affects individuals throughout their lives; however, its impact can change at different stages in a person's life. It is referred to as a learning disability because dyslexia can make it very difficult for a student to succeed academically in the typical instructional environment, and in its more severe forms, will qualify a student for special

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education, special accommodations, or extra support services ("Frequently asked questions," 2007).

Whether the individual has Dyslexia, Dysgraphia or Dyscalculia, these three disorders together are known as learning disabilities (LD). Learning disabilities are the largest group of disabilities in postsecondary education. Students with LD have average or above intelligence. A discrepancy exists between their intellect and their actual academic performance. These factors mean that often when speaking with someone with LD, one may be unaware of the struggles the person could be experiencing academically because they seem intelligent. Learning disabilities last a lifetime; adults can exhibit the same struggles that children diagnosed with learning disabilities do and these struggles can continue (Belzer & Ross-Gordan, 2011).

In addition to the academic impact, there is a socio-emotional component. Those with LD can have low self-esteem, feel incompetent, and lack self-determination. As students transition from the guidance they receive during high school into the unfamiliar territory of college, they face the new demand of setting their own goals and developing the organization needed to accomplish them. This plays a role in the stress that Learning Disabled individuals face in post-secondary education. The lack of structure can be detrimental to an unprepared student. It would be beneficial if universities would offer support, teaching students how to be self-advocates and autonomous (Belzer, & Ross-Gordan, 2011).

Even with the multitude of challenges, LD has some positive attributes as well. Development of resiliency, adaptive strategies, and creative thinking are just a few. Individuals with LD have the ability to persevere in spite of challenges. Having faced academic struggles, some still find the drive to try. Average or higher intelligence allows them to find ways to cope and to develop their own ways to learn. Individuals with LD are often described as outside-the-

box thinkers; they have the creativity to look at things from a unique perspective. The key in education is to find ways to play to their strengths (Belzer & Ross-Gordan, 2011).

Educational Needs of Individuals with Learning Disabilities

Learning disabilities vary from one individual to the next and can influence various different aspects of learning. Expressive or oral language, receptive language or listening comprehension, reading, written expression, math, and reading comprehension are all areas that can be affected. Deficits in any of these areas make learning in the traditional setting difficult for those that experience them. Thirty-nine percent of students with LD drop out of high school without a diploma. Only 13% of students with LD (compared to 53% of non-disabled students in the general population) attend a four-year post-secondary program within two years of leaving high school (Horowitz, 2006). Individuals with LD may need assistance in both academic areas and with socio-emotional growth to ensure successful completion of postsecondary education.

Students with LD need assistance with goal setting and planning. They need not just supportive faculty, but testing accommodations, encouragement, and advocacy. This is especially important for college students, as a transition occurs from high school to postsecondary education. Previously, parents often acted as advocates for their student. As the students begin their postsecondary careers, they must learn to self-identify and become their own advocate. This new role can be a challenge; with uncertainty over what it is, they need and are entitled to. It is the job of disability specialists to assist them and lead them. Nonacademic assistance is an area that could be overlooked, but is equally important to academic support.

Academically there is also a change when students enter higher education. They become more independent and in charge of their own learning. Students need to be aware of their own strengths and weaknesses and how to work with them. Due to weaknesses in reading, students

benefit from having extended time to process what they are reading and demonstrate what they have learned. If weaknesses are in the area of written language, it can be beneficial to the student with LD to demonstrate knowledge either orally or through performance. Many individuals with LD benefit from the use of assistive technologies such as reading and dictation software.

Instructional Models

There are three common methods for meeting the needs of individuals with learning disabilities in post-secondary education: accommodation, remediation, and universal design. They all have their benefits and shortcomings; finding an appropriate balance to assist the most students possible is the goal.

Accommodation

Historically, students with learning disabilities have been responsible for disclosing their disability and seeking out the accommodations and adjustments that must be made in order for them to succeed (Vaughn, Bos & Shay Schumm, 2006). They are entitled to these accommodations and adjustments. Currently, students with disabilities are required to identify themselves as such to the school they are attending or looking to attend in order for the school to determine eligibility. The criteria to determine what services or even if a student is eligible for services are not consistent between requirements during secondary school and university guidelines. That means that just because a student received services during their early years of schooling, they may not be granted access to services as an adult learner. Without proper documentation, students need to obtain private testing, which they have to pay for out of pocket, in order to determine if they are eligible for disability services. Disability service professionals then must meet with individual students to determine appropriate accommodations based upon the student's eligibility criteria. Adults have the choice of whether or not they identify

themselves as having a disability. Often these individuals do not consider themselves to have a disability or do not want to stand out from their peers and therefore do not seek services. "Although access to accommodations is guaranteed under law, it is often a frustrating, embarrassing, unpleasant, stigmatizing, and unending process for students with disabilities" (Field, Sarver & Shaw, 2003).

Accommodations that are offered are generic at times; extended time, quiet testing environment, note taker, or electronic texts are commonly offered. Accommodations do have their place, however, on their own do not offer adequate support to ensure success nor is there research to back up the effectiveness. Professionals at universities and colleges are often lacking appropriate knowledge pertaining accommodations for adults with LD and often on the disability itself, this factor can contribute to the dismal statistics on their success in post-secondary education. The important thing to remember with accommodations is that they should match both the learner and the requirements of the task. They can be made to influence how the material is presented, how the learner responds or demonstrates the knowledge or the time or setting of the learning. Instructors should consider providing access to notes or presentations used in class and selecting books that offer electronic texts, allowing students to follow along as the material is orally presented. The way in which a student responds can also be changed. For instance, students could make oral presentations versus written ones, or use speech-to-text software to prepare papers and written tests. Allowing extended time or breaks during testing are also effective. Lastly, accommodations to the setting may be made. A private room or study area may be beneficial for testing, and small group learning environments may aid studying. The individual should have the ability to have some say in the accommodations that are allowed to ensure that it is helpful to them.

Remediation

Peter Cowden, assistant professor at Niagara University, asserts that students with moderate learning disabilities must be involved in early and effective remediation programs to correct deficiencies for future academic success (2010). Providing remedial classes to help students gain the skills that they are lacking, or in which they are experiencing weakness, is important. Such classes provide a more solid academic foundation to make future success more likely. Universities and colleges often administer placement testing to determine the academic abilities of the future students. According to the US Department of Education, in 2000, over one-fourth of all entering students were required to take at least one remedial course.

Supporters of remedial education remind us that turning our backs on the needs of students who lack basic skills is a sure-fire way of increasing under- or unemployment, welfare dependence, and criminal activity. However, such programs involve expense to the postsecondary institution. Therefore, programs must provide evidence supporting their effectiveness. Unfortunately, there is little or no compelling evidence that the current remedial interventions prevent students from dropping out (Handel & Williams, 2011). Rather than scrapping the current system, new instructional methods are worth exploration.

Students frequently might have strengths in some subject areas and weaknesses in others. For learners with learning disabilities this is especially true. While they might face struggles in writing or math, they may have exceptional intelligence and succeed in the arts or sciences. Rather than letting their weaknesses stand in their way, offering courses to boost their skills at either a community college or within the university is imperative. Remedial courses can teach the basic skills that students are lacking to build a college education on.

Universal Design

Some schools are moving towards the practice of Universal Design to overcome the obstacle of students needing to self-identify and seek out the proper routes to receive accommodations. Universal Design (UD) is a set of principles originating in the world of architecture and design; universal design is the "design of products and environments to be usable to all people, to the greatest extent possible, without the need for adaptation or specialized design" (Connell, Jones, Mace, Mueller, Mullick, Ostroff, Sanford, Steinfeld, Story & Vanderheiden, 1997). There are seven principles of UD pertaining to Universal Design for Learning that are applicable to the postsecondary environment:

1. *Equitable use*. The design is useful and marketable to people with diverse abilities. Example: A professor's website is designed so that it is accessible to everyone, including students who are blind and using text-to-speech software.

2. *Flexibility in use*. The design accommodates a wide range of individual preferences and abilities. Example: A museum, visited as a field trip for a course, allows each student to choose to read or listen to a description of the contents of display cases.

3. *Simple and intuitive use*. Use of the design is easy to understand, regardless of the user's experience, knowledge, language skills, or current concentration level. Example: Control buttons on science equipment are labeled with text and symbols that are simple and intuitive to understand.

4. *Perceptible information*. The design communicates necessary information effectively to the user, regardless of ambient conditions or the user's sensory abilities. Example: A video presentation projected in a course includes captions.

5. *Tolerance for error*. The design minimizes hazards and the adverse consequences of accidental or unintended actions. Example: Educational software provides guidance and background information when the student makes an inappropriate response.

6. *Low physical effort*. The design can be used efficiently, comfortably, and with a minimum of fatigue. Example: Doors to a lecture hall open automatically for people with a wide variety of physical characteristics.

7. *Size and space for approach and use*. Appropriate size and space is provided for approach, reach, manipulation, and use regardless of the user's body size, posture, or mobility. Example: A flexible science lab has adequate workspace for students who are left- or right-handed and for those who need to work from a standing or seated position (Burgstahler, 2011).

Universal Design for learning (referred to as UDL) is beneficial to all learners, as it allows everyone the same benefits. It is a proactive approach to meeting the needs of students, both those with learning disabilities and those without. Rather than requiring those with disabilities to seek out the accommodations they need, UDL has variances for all learners built-in.

Students with learning disabilities face a number of obstacles in order to have a successful educational experience: cost of diagnostic evaluations, needing to self-identify, and needing to seek out services they are entitled to being just a few. Utilizing UDL would be a way to remove such barriers. Universal Design is a way to equalize opportunities and give all learners, whether they have a formal diagnosis or not, the same access. Students no longer would feel the stigma

associated with taking a course with accommodations. This would also be a way to deal with the variability in eligibility requirements. All students could benefit from Universal Design for learning.

Chapter Three: Conclusions and Recommendations

In summary, learning disabilities vary in severity and manifestation. Current legislation prevents discrimination against individuals with learning disabilities and provides reasonable accommodations; the laws do not however guarantee access to postsecondary education. Dyslexia, dysgraphia, and dyscalculia are the three disorders that make up the category of learning disabilities. Each of the three disorders has strengths and weaknesses; the key is to minimize the deficit and accentuate the strength. Current models have limited research to back up their efficacy in meeting the diverse needs of a changing college population with or without disabilities. Universities need to explore the options to meet the changing needs of a diverse college demographic. Three approaches to meeting the needs of students with LD are present in postsecondary education: accommodation, remediation, and universal design for learning. Accommodation provides tools such as extended time on assessments, note takers, or electronic texts to qualified individuals. Remediation is the approach of providing instruction in basic educational areas where individuals struggle such as math or writing. UDL is an approach borrowed from the world of architecture and design that proactively works options into a course curriculum to allow for varying learning styles and abilities. Changes are necessary to help ensure success of students with LD in postsecondary institutions.

The existing literature leads to the following conclusions. Existing legislation was not always in place to protect those with disabilities. There was a time when the LD individual experienced a world of discrimination and lack of education. The broad legislation in existence now grants rights and protections, allowing access to federally funded programs and reasonable accommodations. There is a growing number of students with learning disabilities entering

postsecondary institutions. The population of college campuses is evolving; as the population evolves, the campus needs to evolve as well. Learning Disabled students have different needs, both academic and nonacademic. Traditionally, they were responsible for self-identifying and seeking out the proper assistance to gain accommodations at the university level. Typical accommodations were not always successful and there was debate as to whether they influenced the quality of the education. The individual learner should have a voice in the accommodations that are put in place. Many universities are offering remedial courses to boost the basic academic skills that may be lacking; these courses are open to all students. Universal Design began in the world of architecture and design, offering aids that are utilized by both those with and without disabilities. The principles of UD have been adapted for the educational world and some universities are making use of them. UDL is a proactive approach that limits the need for traditional accommodations.

Based on these conclusions, the following recommendations can be made. As the college population continues to diversify, changes will be necessary to meet the varied needs of the students. In-services should be set up to educate the staff of universities and colleges on methods of instruction that would be beneficial to all students. For instance, college professors are experts in their areas of study; however, they often are not experts in teaching methods. University disability specialists need to develop programs for the education of the faculty and staff on effective and appropriate teaching methods for individuals with learning disabilities. It is also important for disability specialists to aid in educating those they serve with proper ways to be advocates for their own education, as well as on proper goal setting and organization. While no one model is a cure-all, a blend of approaches may meet the needs of most students.

Many students with disabilities resist self-identifying for fear of being judged or discriminated against. If universities employ a combination of UDL, remedial courses, and accommodations on an as needed basis they will help students find success.

There are still some in the adult population with undiagnosed learning disabilities or who lack the proper documentation to receive accommodations. Creating a more user-friendly educational setting will make success more likely. It will also benefit all the students, not just those with disabilities. It will not solve the documentation problem. The universities should be paying for screening at least. In this technological age, course websites, online texts, online notes, and both online and face-to-face course options are just a few examples of accommodations that could be made available to all students.

In addition to the importance of technological advances, meeting the socio-emotional needs of students is also important. The adjustment to large lecture style courses is a difficult one for some students, one that seems daunting and unfriendly at times. Showing a level of care and understanding is important. A singular student's success is more likely when he or she feels that someone cares about them and wants them to succeed.

Students in the modern age come to the educational table with full plates, between work responsibilities and family. Adding school to the mix only heightens the stress. By employing UDL, any student who needs assistance, no matter the reason, would have it available to them. In conclusion, universities should works toward employing a combination of the three methods, educate the staff on effective teaching strategies, and help students become more independent to ensure success for students with LD.

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