Bridging the Gap Between High School and College: Strategies for the Successful Transition of Students With Learning Disabilities

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ABSTRACT: The authors discuss strategies for school personnel to implement when preparing students with learning disabilities (LD) for a successful transition from high school to college. The authors provide a brief discussion of the characteristics of students with LD as they make the transition into college.

Key words: learning disabilities, postsecondary education, transition

Meghan stood with mixed emotions at the doorway into University Hall where she was to attend her first class as a college freshman. She was excited because she had successfully completed what was for her an arduous journey through high school. Despite her reading disability, she had successfully completed the college preparatory program of study, passed the state exit examination, and performed reasonably well on an untimed administration of the SAT. She had made it. Her mother worked at a local newspaper as a reporter and a columnist. Meghan set her sights on a communication major and was looking forward to following in her mother's footsteps.

But all was not eager anticipation for Meghan. She chose to attend the largest university in the state, and she found herself frequently feeling lost, both geographically and socially. She had to take a campus bus to get to some of her classes on time. Most of her classes were large with well over 100 students; one class had 250 students. She was used to smaller class sizes in high school with support from her resource teacher. Although she arranged for support through the university's Office of Disability Services, Meghan realized that she would have to approach the professors to describe her learning problems and request accommodations. These tasks were taken care of for her in high school by her counselors, parents, and teachers. In fact, Meghan was even unsure as to the exact nature of her academic disabilities. During high school no one had explained Meghan's disabilities to her, and she had never read one of her psychological reports. Furthermore no one in high school discussed with Meghan the laws that apply to students with disabilities in college. Meghan also felt disorganized. Although her roommates had purchased their texts, yearly organizational calendars, and other materials, Meghan had no idea where to begin. She did not even have a notebook for her first class. Meghan's visions of a Pulitzer Prize seemed to be fading fast; her fear of failure was increasing by the moment.

Meghan's story is a common one. Students with learning disabilities (LD) are attending colleges and universities in increasing numbers. During the 1980s, for example, the number of students with LD self-identifying in college settings increased tenfold (Learning Dis-

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ability Update, 1986), resulting in a prevalence figure of approximately 1.3% of college freshmen (Profiles of Handicapped Students in Postsecondary Education, 1987). As of the 1997–1998 academic year, an estimated 428,280 students with disabilities were enrolled in colleges in the United States, almost half of whom were diagnosed as LD (U.S. Department of Education, 1999). Reasons for the increase of students with LD enrolling in postsecondary institutions include the recognition that the disability continues throughout the life span, increases in the high school population with LD involved in college preparatory curricula, formalized transition plans, an increase in compensatory technologies, and the legal mandates of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973.

School personnel now find themselves providing college support to larger numbers of college-bound students with LD. To meet these students' needs, it is imperative that teachers, counselors, administrators, and other relevant instructional and support personnel develop an awareness of the unique issues these students bring to the college preparatory process. In this article we provide strategies based on research and resulting best practices for school personnel to implement when working with college-bound students with LD. To put our suggestions in context, we initially provide a brief discussion of the characteristics of students with LD making the transition to college and factors that the existing literature identifies as predicting success for these students.

Learning Disabilities: A Life-Span Issue

Early research relating to learning disabilities focused almost exclusively on children (Gajar, 1992; Mercer, 1997). Parents and professionals often assumed that learning disabilities were remediated in elementary and secondary special education programs. However, research and experience have demonstrated students who are diagnosed with specific learning disabilities during childhood will probably experience the same difficulties later in life. Furthermore, adolescents and adults with LD (i.e., students typically entering postsecondary education) are more likely than their nondisabled peers to demonstrate: (a) deficits in study skills such as test preparation, note-taking, and listening comprehension; (b) problems with organizational skills; (c) difficulties with social interaction; (d) deficits in specific academic areas, with reading and written composition being the most frequent; (e) low self-esteem; and (f) higher school dropout rates (deBettencourt, Zigmond, & Thornton, 1989; Deshler & Lenz, 1989; Kish, 1991; Mercer, 1997; Omizo & Omizo, 1988; White, 1992). With the increased demands of the adolescent and adult world, such as postsecondary education, the problems often become more complex to diagnose and treat (Mercer, 1997; Polloway, Smith, & Patton, 1984; Skinner, 1998).

Those difficulties frequently make achieving success in postsecondary settings challenging. Several studies have identified factors that influence success (typically defined as graduation) for college students with LD (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Hartzell & Compton, 1984; Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, & Herman, 1999; Skinner, 1999; Vogel, Hruby, & Adelman, 1993). These include: (a) the extent of student knowledge of the nature of their disability and compensatory strategies; (b) how able a student is to manage a disability in a proactive manner (e.g., self-advocacy, goal setting, knowledge of disability law, selection of an appropriate college, self-identification, organizing for living and learning, etc.); (c) the availability of emotional and academic support; (d) the severity of the disability (e.g., a diagnosis of Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) concomitant with LD); (e) strength of the student'smotivation; and (f) how willing he or she is to persevere under adverse conditions. The guidelines for successful transition discussed below are based on this body of literature.

Strategies for Successful Transition

The ability of educators to influence attributes, such as the severity of a learning problem and willingness to persevere, is limited. However, the research cited previously suggests several strategies that, when implemented in educational settings, increase the probability of a successful transition for college-bound students with LD.

Teach students about their disability and compensatory strategies. Students should understand the nature of their learning problems. Specifically, they should be aware of their academic strengths and weaknesses, accommodations that allow them to circumvent their learning problems, and other strategies. Unfortunately, evidence indicates that high school students with LD often enter postsecondary settings with little knowledge of their disability and how that disability affects their learning (Aune, 1991; Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McQuire, 1993; Dalke & Schmitt, 1987; Skinner, 1998). School personnel can take the lead in teaching students with LD about their learning limitations and specific strategies that serve to circumvent these weaknesses. Some students, for example, may benefit from using texts on tape, whereas, others may require additional time to complete tests. Still others may need intense instruction in keyboarding and word processing skills.

Teach students to self-advocate. Despite adequate compensation for academic learning disabilities, many students with LD experience problems succeeding because they have social skill deficits. Students with LD are more likely than students without disabilities to experience problems with interpersonal relationships with peers and faculty (e.g., Deshler & Lenz, 1989; Deshler & Schumaker, 1983; Mercer, 1997). As Kish (1991) stated: "The adolescent, . . . having experienced years of frustration in the learning environment, may become (disabled) more by poor social skills and inadequate psychosocial adjustment than by poor academic skills" (p. 22).

Increasingly, high school and college instructional and support personnel who work with students with LD are acknowledging the importance of social skills for successfully navigating postsecondary settings (e.g., Shaw, Brinkerhoff, Kistler, & McGuire, 1991; Skinner, 1998; Spector, Decker, & Shaw, 1991), especially the ability to self-advocate. As Meghan's story highlights, students in college are no longer under the auspices of the par-

ent/school-driven Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). They must advocate for themselves to ensure that they receive accommodations and services as mandated by laws such as Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (1990). Students become self-advocates when they (a) demonstrate an understanding of their disability; (b) are aware of their legal rights; and (c) can competently and tactfully communicate their rights and needs to those in positions of authority (Skinner, 1998). Direct instruction by counselors, special education teachers, and general education teachers is often required to enable students to do this.

Teach students about the law. The transition from high school to college results in a change in legal status and in educational rights and responsibilities for students with LD (Scott, 1991). At the college level, an appropriate education plan—an Individualized Education Plan (IEP)—that meets the student's individual needs is no longer required. Access to educational opportunity now becomes a civil rights issue, a matter of providing equal opportunity to an educational program without discrimination. It is no longer a matter of promoting academic advancement but of assuring equal access.

Three laws directly affect students with disabilities. These include (a) PL 94-142, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA); (b) Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973; and (c) the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). IDEA, which provides a free and appropriate public education tailored to students' individual needs, affects students in preschool through Grade 12 or until age 21 if the student has not graduated with a diploma. Once students graduate from high school, however, IDEA no longer applies. At the postsecondary level, students' rights are protected by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990. These are basic civil rights laws that ensure accessibility and nondiscrimination and protect only those deemed *otherwise qualified* (Jarrow, 1992). At the college level, "otherwise qualified," means that the student has met the admission standards of an institution. It does not ensure an appropriate education that meets the student's individual needs such as that mandated by IDEA. Section 504 and ADA ensure equal access by identifying and providing accommodations to reduce the effects of the disability as much as possible.

Under Section 504 and the ADA at the postsecondary level, students need to know that it is their responsibility to self-identify. Furthermore, they must provide documentation supporting their need for accommodations that is sufficient to meet their school's criteria. They must request necessary accommodations, be familiar with college requirements, make programming decisions with the assistance of an adviser, monitor their own progress, request assistance when needed, and meet the same academic standards as all other students.

Help students select postsecondary schools wisely. Although choosing the right college is important for any student, it takes on added significance when the student has a learning disability. Although Section 504 and ADA require postsecondary institutions to provide reasonable accommodations, the level of service and the system for providing it will differ among institutions.

Several resources exist to assist teachers, counselors, students with LD, and parents in the college selection process. For example, HEATH Resource Center, a national clearing house on postsecondary education for individuals with disabilities, located in Washington, DC, suggests that the following factors be considered when selecting a postsecondary school for a student with a disability (American Council on Education, 1986):

1. *Academic programs:* Does the school offer programs of study or majors in which the student is interested?
2. *Admission requirements:* Is it reasonable for the student to apply to a college that is selective and in which the student must meet the same admission criteria as all other students? Will the student need to consider schools that have a separate admission process for students with learning disabilities, or will the student need to consider a nonselective school in which a high school diploma, certificate of attendance, or GED meet the entrance requirements?
3. *Cost:* Are the cost and opportunities for financial aid consistent with the needs of the student?
4. *Size:* Can the student function on a large university campus, or will a smaller, self-contained campus provide a better fit?
5. *Location:* Will the student thrive in an urban area with stimulating activities, or would that type of environment overwhelm the student? Does the student need a campus in a small town or rural area with few distractions?
6. *Social climate:* Are the social interests and abilities of the student consistent with those of the institution?
7. *Extracurricular activities:* Are there opportunities to pursue hobbies or sports in which the student is interested? In high school, these activities provided structure while enhancing self-esteem and creating a healthy outlet for reduction of stress symptoms. They will provide the same benefits in the college setting.

Institutions differ in the extent and quality of provisions for students with learning disabilities (Scott, 1991). Once students have identified potential colleges, school personnel can assist them in obtaining information about the disability services provided by each institution. Questions which should be asked of directors of disability programs include:

- Do you have services which fit the specific needs of the student of interest?
- What policies and procedures do students follow to obtain services?
- What specific documentation is required?
- What specific accommodations are provided to qualified students? and
- How many students are currently participating in the program?

Responses to these questions will allow informed choices of institutions that will fit the learning strengths and weaknesses of the students.

Work with students and parents to develop a timeline. Whereas serious college preparation activities may start in tenth or eleventh grade for typical students, students with LD should start earlier. Arnold

(1990) suggests that students with LD begin planning in the ninth grade and incorporate these plans into the Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) required in the IEP. Furthermore, Arnold proposes organizing postsecondary preparation activities into a timeline arranged by year in school. In the freshman year, for example, she recommends that students

- Plan a college preparation program of study,
- Consider career options by shadowing, visiting, and talking with people involved in a variety of vocations,
- Participate in IEP (and ITP) planning,
- Carefully consider course selections to maximize later options, and
- Work on a plan to develop study skills. (p. 3)

Arnold also cites specific activities for completion during each high school year. Rogan, Branson, Hameister, Kalicki, Lowrey, and Skolnick (1993) developed 44 preparatory activities, dispersed over four years of high school, for college-bound students with LD.

Encourage students to self-identify and seek appropriate assistance during their freshman year. Many freshmen consider college a new chapter in their life—a fresh start—and make a decision that their learning disabilities will no longer be an issue for them. As Skinner and Schenck (1992) stated:

> These students are determined to handle their own academic problems without calling attention to their learning disabilities. Reluctance to admit the existence of a learning disability and to request help often result in a promising academic career being placed in serious jeopardy. (p. 371)

As emphasized earlier, learning disabilities are life-long entities. Students who try to "go it on their own" and not seek assistance from disability services in their freshman year are frequently setting the stage for failure. Students are best served when they identify their specific learning disabilities as freshmen to the appropriate institutional office (usually, an office of disability services) and continue to use the academic, medical (if applicable), and emotional support strategies that produced a successful high school experience.

Teach students how to organize for learning and living. The structure provided by the high school schedule, extracurricular activities, educational personnel, and parents is no longer available to the college student. If students have not learned how to organize themselves for life and learning in high school, they are likely to experience difficulty at the college level. Students with LD are much more likely than their nondisabled peers to demonstrate deficits in organizational skills (deBettencourt et al., 1989; Deshler & Lenz, 1989; Kish, 1991; Mercer, 1997; Omizo & Omizo, 1988; White, 1992). High school teachers and counselors can help make sure that students acquire the organizational skills imperative to success at the college level. Specifically, students should be taught to (a) manage and organize their time; (b) read a syllabus—noting attendance policy, due dates of assignments, and dates of tests; (c) use daily and weekly planners; (d) make "to-do" lists; (e) take notes; (f) divide long-term assignments into manageable tasks; and (g) schedule study time and visits to college learning centers for tutoring.

Students should know strategies that facilitate long and short-term memory (e.g., mnemonic techniques) and facilitate retrieval of information. It is also important for students to become familiar with how they acquire and use information, a process commonly referred to as metacognition. Students should be assisted in answering questions such as, What is my preferred method of learning? What study techniques will work best for me considering my unique learning characteristics? and How can I best organize my time?

Some students will benefit from taping lectures, while others may draw diagrams or information maps containing information to be learned (Feldman, 2000). Many students find that studying for tests in groups or with another student is productive. Organizational charts posted on dormitory room walls may assist some students. Providing an opportunity for students to develop and practice these skills in high school will enable them to arrive at college knowing which methods work best for them. Many excellent books exist that educators can use to provide students with strategies to organize and manage their academic and personal lives. For example, *Keys to Success: How to Achieve Your Goals* (Carter, Bishop, & Kravits, 2001) provides discussions and exercises related to areas such as goal setting, time management, making use of resources, self-awareness of learning strengths and weaknesses, studying, note-taking, strategies for remembering, test-taking, interpersonal skills, money management, and career management.

Facilitate a support network. Research consistently highlights the importance of support in the adjustment of people with LD throughout the life span (e.g., Adelman & Vogel, 1993; Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995). Vogel (cited in Scheiber & Talpers, 1987), founder of the LD program at Barat College, stated: "It is so important for learning disabled students to have an emotional support system—a home base, someone who can listen to the hurts and frustrations, and who can say, 'I know you can get it together again, I have faith in you'" (p. 172).

Although support for students with LD bound for college comes from many people—including parents, significant others, and friends—teachers, school counselors and other school personnel can play significant roles. Support activities provided at school can include individual counseling and support groups. School counselors may want to meet with students individually to discuss college planning and to develop self-advocacy and other personal and academic organizational skills. Counselors may also want to organize support in a group format, which allows students to share concerns and problems with others who have had similar experiences. These sessions are often more productive than individual counseling formats. Scheiber and Talpers (1987) describe a support group for students with learning disabilities at Brown University that met bimonthly to discuss issues of importance to students. They published a unique document, *Dyslexics at Brown: A Student's Perspective*, which was dis-

tributed to faculty members and advisers. With appropriate modification, a similar program might be implemented in a high school.

Assist students in obtaining a comprehensive psychoeducational evaluation in high school. Support personnel such as counselors and school psychologists can assist parents, teachers, and students in obtaining psychoeducational evaluations that are not limited to diagnosing academic weaknesses. To be useful in documenting specific learning disabilities for disability services offices at postsecondary institutions, these evaluations should also focus on specific processing problems (auditory, visual, etc.), which often lead to justification for accommodations and academic alternatives. The traditional aptitude/achievement discrepancy model of diagnosing a learning disability frequently does not adequately diagnose a specific LD in adolescents and adults. Many high school students with LD who are college-bound have compensated for their disability so well that their performance on standardized achievement tests is comparable to their estimated ability levels, not demonstrating an aptitude/achievement discrepancy. Diagnosis of learning disabilities in adolescent and young adult learners is typically complex, requiring in-depth evaluation of processing abilities in addition to traditional IQ and achievement measures. For example, a bright student with an auditory processing disability will likely experience significant problems mastering a foreign language. Although the disability will show up on cognitive processing tests such as the *Woodcock-Johnson Psychoeducational Battery-Revised* (Woodcock & Johnson, 1989), other assessment data may not support the traditional achievement/aptitude discrepancy required by IDEA.

School counselors and psychologists can also help parents seek out professionals who know how to identify learning disabilities in adolescents and young adults and relate the results of their evaluations specifically to college programming. This is even more important in light of recent research that indicates that students with LD who graduated from college were more likely to have qualified for and taken academic alternatives to the language requirement than students who did not graduate (Skinner, 1999; Skinner, Lindstrom, & Kitchin, 2000). Although most colleges make provisions for alternatives to language requirements, students must provide supporting evidence, typically in the form of a comprehensive psychological evaluation.

Evaluations aimed at determining the existence of a specific learning disability should also include screenings for ADD/ADHD. Skinner and Lindstrom (1999) found that students with dual diagnoses of ADD/ADHD and LD were less likely to graduate from college than students with LD only. If the screening for ADD/ADHD is positive, specific accommodations and treatment can be provided on a proactive basis, which will likely increase the student's chances for academic success.

Encourage participation in postsecondary preparation programs. School personnel can take the lead in offering programs that prepare students with LD for the rigors of postsecondary education. As stated previously, commercial programs exist which are designed to facilitate this transition. Spartanburg (South Carolina) County School District No. 7, as a part of the School/Community Integration and Transition Grant funded by the South Carolina Developmental Disabilities Council, created *I Can Do This! An Instructional Unit in Self-Advocacy for Students with Disabilities* (Bresette et al., 1994) and *Transitions to Postsecondary Learning* (Coull & Eaton, 1998). The *I Can Do This!* materials provide students with a comprehensive program to prepare them for success in postsecondary settings. Units covered in the curriculum include the following:

- What is transition?
- Identifying strengths, weaknesses, and accommodations
- Advocacy, the law, and postsecondary schools
- Asking for accommodations
- What do you want in a postsecondary school?
- Selecting a postsecondary school

The program provides detailed lesson plans with objective, materials, procedures, and evaluation strategies. The program also includes a comprehensive packet for students titled *Handbook for Transition Into Postsecondary Schools* (Whitaker, 1994).

Conclusion

Reconsidering Meghan's story in light of the preceding discussion, several factors predictive of problems adjusting to college are evident. First, Meghan chose a big institution with large class sizes and high teacher-student ratios. Second, self-advocacy appears to be lacking in her repertoire of social skills. Third, she lacked awareness of her specific disability and its implications for academic survival. Fourth, she knew very little about the laws that applied to her as a college student with a disability. Finally, Meghan, as is true of many students with learning disabilities, lacked the ability to organize herself for learning.

Clearly, Meghan's chances for a successful transition to postsecondary education are threatened, at least in part by her lack of preparation in high school for the demands of college. By increasing their knowledge of the needs and characteristics of adolescents and young adults with LD, school personnel become more effective facilitators of the transition from high school to college. Meghan's story does not have to be a common one. Effective school-based programs can bridge the transition from high school to college for Meghan and other students with LD.

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