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Demystifying LD at College and in the Workplace



In an online survey in 2011 the Adaptech Research Network asked three groups of individuals with various disabilities about their school and work related experiences: current college and university students, recent graduates, and students who recently dropped out of postsecondary education. Here we report on the responses of 117 individuals with learning disabilities (LD) to a question which asked them to write about "any issues related to your education and/or job search experiences that are important to you." Participants' academic programs ranged from first semester Cegep to doctoral studies.

So what did they say? By far the most positive element concerned disability related academic supports. In particular, they noted the campus-based services they received, including adaptive information and communication technologies (ICTs) and extended time for exams. This suggests that registering for campus disability related services is likely to help students with LD succeed.

The absence of needed disability related supports was the most frequently mentioned negative element. Concerns included lack of awareness of the obstacles that students face and professors who did not allow adaptations that could facilitate academic work. For example, a participant referred to the lack of appropriate environment that could be helpful, "I don't have a quiet place to do my exam." Another wrote, "One of my professors refused to allow me to use the laptop." Finally, "... the continuing explanations I have to give to each professor".^[1]

Course load and time management issues were also problematic. These include the number of courses students had to take as well as keeping up with the pace of their courses. In particular, participants noted difficulties with reading speed. For example, one student linked this with the lack of accommodations: "...this makes things very difficult for me to show professors my ability to understand material." Another said, "I learn best by listening. When it comes to all the readings, I find myself having to struggle to an extreme to keep up. Programs that will read text books to you are available but are in no way affordable."



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Moreover, like their peers, participants with LD also juggled coursework, paid employment, and other responsibilities. While this is a reality of postsecondary student life, for students with LD jobs added extra pressure since many read more slowly and since professors were often not aware of or responsive to their needs.

Job-related concerns were also frequently mentioned, "Job search is very difficult because of my lack of experience due to devoting all of my time to school work." Two participants summarized their job-related concerns as follows: "Interviewers' ignorance" and "When we have an invisible disability and start talking about it, we can feel people becoming stiff. Then there is nothing we can do." Participants suggested that sensitization of professors, employers, and program' coordinators could help.

Although most respondents were students, they were aware that the obstacles they face as students may pose problems in the job market as well. The labor market needs to be sensitized and prepared for the diversity of future workers. In the 1970s wheelchair ramps were added to many workplaces. In the 1990s ICTs facilitated telecommuting and helped workers with visual impairments and LD access printed materials. The next challenge is to understand the diversity of work styles, time management, and organizational styles. In particular, professors and employers need to understand "true diversity" in learning skills and work. That what is important is that people learn the skills needed to carry out the required tasks. How they learn it, whether by reading a book or by listening to a recording, and how they demonstrate what they have learned should not be a barrier to their success.

In spite of the difficulties they encounter, students with LD are succeeding in colleges and universities. Our findings show that they get good grades and that they graduate at the same rate as nondisabled students, although they often take an extra semester to do so. After graduation, they get jobs.

Is college worthwhile for a person with an LD? For sure. Can students with LD succeed in academe? Yes. Will it always be easy? No. Is it worthwhile? Absolutely!

Par Maria Barile, Catherine Fichten, Mary Jorgensen, Mai Nhu Nguyen

[1]Free translation of French citations.

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