

SELF-ADVOCACY SKILLS FOR STUDENTS WITH LEARNING
DISABILITIES TRANSITIONING FROM HIGH SCHOOL TO COLLEGE

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Statement of the Problem

The problem presented in this paper is to identify the self-advocacy skills that students with learning disabilities need to develop in order to make a smooth and successful transition from high school to college. Another objective was to discover when and how to effectively implement self-advocacy skill development into the educational programming of students with learning disabilities.

Methods and Procedures

A brief review of literature on the changes in laws and regulations that occur from secondary to postsecondary education regarding students with disabilities was conducted. A second review of literature relating to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence of self-advocacy and transition skills and their impact on college success rates of students with disabilities was conducted.

Summary of Results

Through a review of the literature, it becomes evident that more research must be conducted on the development of self-advocacy skills and the effects they have on the success of students with disabilities in postsecondary education. Although there are a great deal of reasonable recommendations and insight for developing

self-advocacy skills among students with disabilities, there is little research available to prove their effectiveness.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The transition from high school to college can be difficult for students due to changes in structure and other unique challenges that college life entails.

However, students with learning disabilities tend to have an even more difficult time making the transition to postsecondary education and being successful at the next level of their educational career (Blackorby & Wagner, 1997). The Beginning Postsecondary Students Longitudinal Study (1996-2001) found that students with learning disabilities had an eleven percent lower rate of success in college as their non-disabled peers (U.S. Department of Education, 2000).

As the number of students with learning disabilities enrolling in postsecondary education continues to increase, the need for appropriate transition skills has become a hot topic for debate and research. Federal legislation requires all colleges and universities that receive federal funding to provide reasonable accommodations to students with learning disabilities. However, the accommodations that institutions should provide are not very well defined and vary from one institution to the next.

As a result, much of the focus has been placed on high school special education teachers to assist students with learning disabilities in developing the skills necessary for postsecondary success. The areas of needed development appear to

be agreed upon by experts in the education field, college professors, and college service coordinators. They tend to agree that students with learning disabilities need to develop an understanding of their disabilities, how they affect their learning, which accommodations can assist them in overcoming their disabilities, and how to communicate their needs to their college professors (Brinckerhoff, 1996).

Statement of Problem

The problem to be addressed is: “What self-advocacy skills should students with disabilities develop in order to make a successful transition from high school to college?” In order to address this question, it is imperative to identify the legal, structural, and personal changes that take place as a student transitions from high school to postsecondary education. Experts in the education field, college professors, and college service coordinators tend to agree upon what skills are necessary for students with disabilities to be successful in postsecondary education; however, what does the research say?

Purpose of the Research

Both educators and non-educators perceive that students with learning disabilities are ill-prepared for the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Anecdotal evidence seems to indicate this. The purpose of this research paper is to determine whether fact-based research, short-term studies, and longitudinal research support the need for self-advocacy skill development in order to prepare student with learning disabilities for the challenges they will encounter in college.

Significance of the Problem

In recent decades, the number of students with learning disabilities attending college has increased dramatically. However, many of these students have not developed the skills necessary to be as successful as their non-disabled peers at the next level of education. As the number of college students with learning disabilities continues to increase, it is essential to determine which skills they must develop in order to be successful.

Assumptions

For the purpose of this paper, it was assumed that all research and review of the current literature was accurately reported. It is also assumed that the literature will make recommendations on how best to use the research available.

Delimitations of the Research

The research will be conducted in and through the Karrmann Library at the University of Wisconsin-Platteville, over two (2) semester courses. Primary searches will be conducted via the Internet through EBSCO host with ERIC and Academic Search Elite as the primary sources. Key search topics included “students with disabilities and college success”, “students with disabilities and transition skills”, “self-advocacy and college success”, and “self-advocacy and students with disabilities.” Research on special education law was limited to Federal laws and regulations and does not take state laws and regulations into consideration.

Method

A brief review of literature on the changes in laws and regulations from secondary to postsecondary education regarding students with disabilities was conducted. A second review of literature relating to research, studies, and anecdotal evidence of self-advocacy and transition skills and their impact on college success rates of students with disabilities was conducted. The findings were summarized and recommendations were made.

Definition of Terms

Transition. A change in one's behaviors and relationships due to an event or non-event that affects one's beliefs about oneself or the world (Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002).

Self-advocacy. The student understands his/her disability, is as aware of the strengths as of the weaknesses resulting from the functional limitation imposed by the disability, and is able to articulate reasonable need for academic or physical accommodations (Hartman, 1993).

Self-determination. According to Field and Hoffman (1994, p. 164), self-determination is the "ability to identify and achieve goals based on a foundation of knowing and valuing oneself."

Legal Changes. The discrepancies in Federal laws and regulations governing special education at the post secondary level compared to high school.

Structural Changes. The discrepancies in support systems and services for students with special needs at the post secondary level compared to high school.

Personal Changes. The changes in students' attitude and self-image that occur as they transition from high school to post secondary education.

CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Legal Changes

One of the greatest changes students with learning disabilities face when they transition from high school to postsecondary education is their legal rights and responsibilities under the law. The laws governing the way students with learning disabilities are served are different in postsecondary education than in high school. Not knowing and understanding the changes in the laws can limit one's access to the services and accommodations that institutions provide (Madaus, 2005).

Special education programming in the United States was made mandatory in 1975 with passage of the Education for All Handicapped Children Act (EHA) Public Law 94-142. The United States Congress passed EHA in response to discriminatory treatment of students with disabilities by public educational agencies. Prior to 1975, the majority of children with disabilities in the United States were denied access to public education. In fact, only twenty percent of children with disabilities were offered public education. In all, over one million students were refused access to public schools and over three million other students received little or no effective instruction. Laws in many states openly excluded children with certain types of disabilities, including children with obvious physical disabilities, children labeled emotionally disturbed, and children

labeled mentally retarded (Special education in the United States, 2008, September 10).

In 1990, the EHA was modified and renamed the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). IDEA ensures that every student is entitled to a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) in the least restrictive environment (LRE). To accomplish this, a team of school professionals and parents “meet to determine the student's unique educational needs, develop annual goals for the student, and determine the placement, program modifications, testing accommodations, counseling, and other special services that the student needs through the development of an Individualized Education Program (IEP)” (Special education in the United States, 2008, September 10).

IDEA also requires the development of transition services to address the student's needs with regards to movement from high school to post-school activities, including education, training, employment, adult services, and independent living. The 1997 reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act requires school districts to create an Individualized Transition Plan (ITP) for all students with disabilities that includes the transition service needs of the child (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). The student's ITP is to be included in his or her IEP beginning no later than the student's fourteenth birthday and updated annually thereafter (Collet-Klingenberg, 1998). In order to make this plan as comprehensive as possible, not only are the guidance counselor and special

education coordinator involved, but also regular education personnel, parents, and the student (Smith et al., 2002).

In high school, students with a learning disability are guaranteed services under IDEA through the development of an IEP. However, once a student graduates from high school, the IEP ends. Therefore, services and protections under IDEA legislation do not govern postsecondary institutions. IDEA contains a child find clause which makes it an institution's responsibility to find, through ability and achievement testing, students in need of special education services. By law school officials must locate and provide appropriate services for students in need of special education at the elementary and secondary school level. This is not the case in postsecondary education law (Hadley, 2006).

Postsecondary institutions that receive federal funding are governed by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 (ADA). These two laws "set expectations for colleges and universities to provide reasonable modifications, accommodations, or auxiliary aids which will enable qualified students to have access to, participate in, and benefit from the full range of educational programs and activities which are offered to all students on campus" (Hadley, 2006, p. 10). However, what constitutes a reasonable level of accommodation is not as clearly defined postsecondary education law as it is in IDEA legislation (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

Furthermore, Section 504 and ADA forbid institutions from seeking information on disability status. Therefore, the student is responsible for providing documented proof of a learning disability and subsequently requesting appropriate modifications and accommodations. Knowing in advance what documentation is expected and how to seek academic accommodations will make the transition to postsecondary education less frustrating. Colleges and universities are likely to ask for assessment documentation that shows the student's disability and the functional limitations it entails, thus verifying the student's need for academic accommodations. If the postsecondary school asks for special or additional documentation, it is once again the student's responsibility to acquire and present the information (Planning for postsecondary education takes time and information, 2007). Once the postsecondary institution is notified of a student's disability status, the school must make accommodations and modifications that are needed to guarantee an opportunity for the student to fully participate in all programs and activities (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). However, what constitutes a reasonable level of accommodation is much less defined in ADA than in IDEA legislation (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002).

A U.S. Department of Education survey conducted in 1998 found that ninety-eight percent of all postsecondary institutions that enrolled students with learning disabilities provided at least one support service. Alternative test formats or extended time was provided at eighty-eight percent of these institutions; tutors were provided at seventy-seven percent; readers, note takers, or scribes were

available at sixty-nine percent; and assistance with class registration was provided at sixty-two percent of these institutions. Other services included adaptive equipment/technology (fifty-eight percent) and texts on tape (fifty-five percent) (U.S. Department of Education, 2000). Based on this research, students with disabilities are able to receive many of the accommodations and modifications they need to be successful. However, students must advocate for themselves and follow the proper steps in order to obtain the services they need.

Structural Changes

The transition from high school to postsecondary education brings about a vast number of structural changes that students are not aware of, not accustomed to, and not prepared for. Students with learning disabilities tend to be accustomed to a more comprehensive system of supports and services than their non-disabled peers. As a result, they are affected even more by the structural changes that take place during this period of transition.

The most dramatic structural change for students with learning disabilities is the move from a high school environment, where the responsibility for student success is often perceived to lie with teachers and one in which the student plays a passive role; to a college environment, where the responsibility for success lies with the student and in which the student must play an active role (Hadley, 2006). As a result, students with learning disabilities are leaving behind a support system they have developed some degree of dependency on in high school. In high

school, students with disabilities are closely monitored and supported by special education teachers; however, in college they must be able to self-monitor and develop a new support system. According to Smith (2002), students with disabilities face the challenges of being unprepared for responsibility, being unable to manage free time, being overwhelmed by work load, and missing the support network on which they have grown accustomed.

According to Lenz, Ellis, & Scanlon (1995, p. 234), students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education must make several adjustments “and most universities have some kind of orientation program for their incoming population. However, though adequate for the majority of students, this limited support is not sufficient for students with learning disabilities since adjusting to new situations is especially difficult for them”. Another structural change at the university level is that there is often limited staff and funds resulting in a large staff-to-student ratio (Schutz, 2002). Typically, the university setting offers less student-teacher contact and larger class sizes, which makes it less likely that students with disabilities will receive the level of support and monitoring that they have become accustomed to in high school. Furthermore, college courses generally call for long-range projects and intermittent evaluations, in contrast to the short-term assignments and frequent grading practices experienced in high school (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). In general, students with disabilities are not accustomed to and are not as successful in an education environment with large class sizes, limited student-teacher contact, and long-range, all encompassing evaluations.

Finally, according to Eckes (2005), college professors have very limited, if any, formal training in working with students with disabilities. Therefore, many professors are unable to address the wide range of services and accommodations that their students with learning disabilities require. Professors are often unable to allow for flexibility in their teaching style and the timeline of their courses. Furthermore, many professors assume that their students have developed the skills and strategies necessary to be successful in the lecture delivery format. This can prove to be a major adjustment for students with disabilities, who in high school, are closely monitored and supported by special education teachers who have had a great deal on formal training in working with and addressing the needs of their students.

Personal Changes

Many personal changes typically take place as students transition from high school to postsecondary education. Experts in the field agree that some changes in attitude, self-image, and self-determination are necessary and fruitful during this transition period. However, some students undergo personal changes that can be unproductive and even self-destructive. Finding a healthy balance in this web of personal changes is critical to the success of students, especially students with learning disabilities.

Learning disabilities are hidden disabilities, because they are not physically evident in general contact with the student. Therefore, the needs of students with

learning disabilities are not as easily understood and acknowledged as the needs of students with more noticeable disabilities. As a result, students with learning disabilities must make their needs for services and accommodations known to their professors in order to receive the support and assistance they need in order to be successful (Field, 1996; Patton & McMahon, 1999). Students with learning disabilities often deny their learning difficulties, wanting to distance themselves from the special education label that is typically attached in high school. As a result, these students often do not take advantage of the services and accommodations they need in order to be successful in college (Field, 1996).

In high school, teachers are informed of their students' learning disabilities and needs. However, in college, professors are unaware of their students' needs for services and accommodations, unless the student discloses this information to their professors. Therefore, students must take steps to overcome any anxiety in disclosing their disability to their professors. An unwillingness or inability to do so makes it very unlikely that the student will receive the services and accommodations they need in order to be successful in their classes (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

One component of The National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (2001) revealed that two-thirds of postsecondary students with disabilities who were interviewed were not receiving accommodations because of lack of self-disclosure. Approximately one-half of these students did not consider themselves to have a

disability, although they received services in the K-12 system. An additional seven percent of the students surveyed classified themselves as having a disability but chose not to disclose it to the institution they were attending (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005).

CHAPTER 3

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Through a review of literature, it is evident that experts in the education field, including college professors, scholars, special education practitioners, and administrators agree that students transitioning from high school to postsecondary education experience difficulty adjusting to the various changes that college life entails. Furthermore, they agree that students with learning disabilities tend to have an even more difficult time making a smooth and successful transition from high school to postsecondary education. Despite the consensus, “there are very few models or paradigms for students and other individuals involved in the process to follow” (Schutz, 2002, p. 46) due to the multifaceted and complex changes that occur during this stage of transition. However, based on the abundance of information that is available, a wide range of recommendations and suggestions can be formulated to help prepare students with learning disabilities for the next stage of their educational career. It is recommended that steps be taken at both the high school and university levels to address the challenges that students with disabilities face as they transition from high school to college.

At the high school level, students need a comprehensive transition plan that addresses the legal, structural, and personal changes they encounter during the transition from high school to postsecondary education. Furthermore, students need assistance in developing self-advocacy skills. Student participation in the

IEP process is crucial to enhancing self-advocacy skills. Students with disabilities who participate in the IEP and transition planning meetings can develop a better understanding of their needs and play an active role in planning for their future (Gil, 2007).

Although a student's IEP team may develop a transition plan, there is typically little or no communication with service providers at the university level (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). When possible, a representative from the college a student is planning, or even considering, to attend should be invited to participate in the meeting. As an alternative to attending the meeting, the university's disabilities office can provide literature and contact information to share with the student and parents at the meeting (Gil, 2007). The information given should help students and their parents to understand the steps they must take in obtaining services and accommodations at the university level and inform them of the documentation requirements of their college or university. When a meeting with a college or university representative is not possible, information can be obtained by contacting the disability services office or the institution's website.

Once this information is obtained, the student should submit the necessary documentation and an application for services to the university. Students should then set up an intake meeting with the disabilities office in order to obtain information on the services and accommodations that are available to them. At this meeting, students should request that the disabilities office provide letters

which can be used to notify their professors of the accommodations they are eligible to receive. The student is then responsible for following up this meeting by initiating contact with each of their professors (Gil, 2007). It is imperative that the student be proactive and disclose his/her disability at the start of the semester when their professors and support office have ample time to arrange for needed accommodations, instead of waiting for issues to arise such as poor grades (Siperstein, 1988).

Another suggestion is for the school district's transition specialist, or other team member to host a workshop that provides students and their parents with information about the transition from high school. This could also be done in conjunction with having a guest speaker from one or more local colleges visit the high school to provide information on services they provide and address any questions or concerns students or their parents may have (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Furthermore, any college program that allows students with learning disabilities to experience the campus, meet with professors, attend college lectures, and live in the residence halls might be an enriching opportunity (Hadley, 2006).

At the university level, further actions and programs are recommended to assist students with disabilities in the transition from high school to postsecondary education. University administrators and legislators need to address the inadequacy of college professors with regards to working with and attending to the needs of students with learning disabilities. As the number of students with

learning disabilities attending postsecondary institutions continues to increase, colleges and universities need to provide students with enlightened professors of special education etiologies and pedagogies. It may be plausible that the traditional, lecture-based, teaching style of the university level is unjustified for the changing face of the student population on today's campuses. This could ultimately be done through university wide in-services, which address various learning disabilities and how to accommodate students' needs in the classroom, or on a more universal scale through federally required licensing programs at the university level (Hadley, 2006).

The number of students with disabilities attending postsecondary institutions continues to increase steadily. As a result, actions and programs must be implemented to address the various service and accommodation needs of students. Although it is not feasible to believe that the necessary changes will transpire overnight, professionals and experts at the high school, postsecondary, and even governmental level need to take steps to address these concerns. However, until comprehensive changes are implemented at the high school and university levels, students must advocate for themselves to obtain the services to which they are entitled. Students with disabilities can experience a smooth and successful transition from high school to postsecondary education by being proactive and self-advocates.

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