Exploring College Students’ Perceptions of Their Peers With Disabilities

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Background

An increasing number of individuals with disabilities are pursuing higher education, making disability a growing area of diversity on college campuses. Roughly 11% of all college students have a disability and the most common disabilities are learning disabilities, ADHD, and mental health disorders (NCES, 2011-018). The college/university campus climate surrounding disabilities plays an important role in the success of students with disabilities and can be shaped by factors such as peers’ and faculty members’ attitudes toward disabilities. More specifically, the attitudes of classmates and faculty are likely to affect the decisions that students with disabilities make about self-disclosure and/or requesting accommodations, as well as their overall satisfaction with their higher education experience (Baker, Boland, & Nowik, 2012; May & Stone, 2010).

Previous research indicated that individuals with and without disabilities share the belief that others feel nervous, uncomfortable, or awkward around individuals with disabilities. Further, individuals with disabilities are likely to believe that they are devalued and their disabilities are seen as signs of personal failure (Green, 2007). These beliefs and attitudes contribute to the stigma of disability. This stigma, in turn, can lead to decreased acceptance of college students with disabilities.

The current study examined college students’ perceived stigma associated with learning disabilities (LD) and major depressive disorder (MDD). Our specific research questions were:

1. Does the perceived stigma of LD differ between students with disabilities and students without disabilities?
2. Does the perceived stigma of LD differ across academic majors?
3. Does the perceived stigma of MDD differ between students with disabilities and students without disabilities?
4. Does the perceived stigma of MDD differ across academic majors?
5. Do students with and without disabilities have different attitudes towards academic accommodations?

Method

Participants:
A total of 238 UWEC students (212 females; 77 freshmen, 55 sophomores, 56 juniors, 50 seniors) participated in this study.

Majors: The most commonly reported major was Psychology (n = 50), followed by Communication Sciences and Disorders (n = 42), Education (n = 37), Kinesiology (n = 22), and Nursing (n = 18). The remaining participants represented a variety of other majors (e.g., biology, history, social work).

Disability Status: 41 student reported having a disability. The most commonly reported disability was psychological/psychiatric disorder (n = 20), followed by ADHD (n = 16), and learning disability (n = 12).

Materials:
Participants’ perceived stigma toward LD and MDD were measured using a modified version of a scale by Green (2007). Eight items assessed participants’ perceived stigma of LD and eight items assessed participants’ perceived stigma of MDD. An additional 4 items assessed participants’ attitudes toward academic accommodations. All items were rated on a 5-point Likert-scale with “1” referring to “strongly disagree” and “5” referring to “strongly agree.”

Procedure:
Participants were recruited through email and the survey was completed via an online survey program (Qualtrics).

Conclusions

• Overall, participants reported low to moderate levels of perceived stigma of LD. The current study examined college students’ perceived stigma of LD and major depressive disorder. Our specific research questions were:

1. Does the perceived stigma of LD differ between students with disabilities and students without disabilities?
2. Does the perceived stigma of LD differ across academic majors?
3. Does the perceived stigma of MDD differ between students with disabilities and students without disabilities?
4. Does the perceived stigma of MDD differ across academic majors?
5. Do students with and without disabilities have different attitudes towards academic accommodations?

Perceived Stigma of LD:
• Overall, participants reported lower levels of perceived stigma of LD than MDD.
• Students with disabilities reported a significantly higher level of perceived stigma of LD than students without disabilities.
• Students across the majors represented in this study did not report significantly different levels of perceived stigma of LD.

Perceived Stigma of MDD:
• Overall, participants reported moderate levels of perceived stigma of MDD.
• Students with disabilities reported a significantly higher level of perceived stigma of MDD than students without disabilities.
• Students across the majors represented in this study did not report significantly different levels of perceived stigma of MDD.

Perceived Stigma of LD vs. Perceived Stigma of MDD:
• Overall, participants reported a significantly higher level of perceived stigma of MDD than LD.
• Participants reported higher levels of stigma for specific aspects of MDD compared to LD such as:
  - The likelihood of feeling sad when meeting someone with MDD.
  - The perception of MDD as a sign of personal failure.
  - Participants reported a lower likelihood of wanting to work with someone with LD on a group project.

Attitudes Towards Academic Accommodations:
Participants reported relatively positive attitudes towards accommodations, although students without disabilities reported more negative attitudes than their peers.

References