College Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities

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Learning Disabilities (LD) in Higher Education

The number of students with LD enrolling in postsecondary education has increased; but at the same time that this population has become one of the fastest-growing and most prevalent populations on campuses, these students are still proportionately underrepresented in higher education, especially at four-year colleges and universities.\(^3,5,7\) Additionally, students with LD have lower persistence rates and academic performance than their peers without LD.\(^3,7\)

Challenges for Students with LD

There are many misperceptions and stereotypes about students with LD on college campuses, namely that LD is a childhood disease\(^6\) and that students with LD are less intelligent and have insurmountable low potential for learning.\(^4\) Such stigmatization is present in peers, faculty, and staff, but is also internalized in the self-conceptions of students with LD, resulting in poor self-esteem, anxiety, and social difficulties.\(^5,7,9\)

Students with LD are supported by federal legislation, but in order to receive the reasonable accommodations outlined in the Americans with Disabilities Act, they must self-identify as having a learning disability and the burden of responsibility for seeking out support services rests on the student.\(^3,5,7\)

Students who persist and seek assistance have achievement levels relative to non-LD peers and may compensate for cognitive difficulties using other methods, including learned strategies.\(^9\) Academic and cognitive factors are not the strongest predictors of success for students with LD; rather, factors such as social integration and supportive transition to higher education are more important to postsecondary outcomes for these students.\(^3,5,7\)

Support for Students with LD at UMaine

The primary support structure for students with LD at UMaine is the Office of Disability Support Services (DSS), located in the East Annex. Students with LD who register with DSS can receive accommodations such as volunteer note takers, extended time on exams, alternative quiet testing locations, oral or computer exams, voice activated computers, and textbooks on CD. DSS also offers support to students with LD through their peer mentor program and counseling. The DSS is centrally located on campus near the Memorial Union, and a large amount of information about the office is easily accessible on their website.

DSS also educates the campus through trainings and presentations on students with disabilities at new faculty orientation and to other groups. The DSS website also directly links to the faculty handbook for supporting students with disabilities.

Other academic resources on campus are helpful to students with LD, including the Tutor Program, Writing Center, Math Lab, and computer clusters.

Students’ Perspectives

UMaine undergraduate students with LD enthusiastically expressed that the staff and services offered to them through Disability Support Services had been incredibly supportive and integral to their academic success and understanding of their disability. They had taken advantage of services such as extended test time, note-takers, readers, and peer mentoring.

When considering the support offered by the institution overall, students experienced inconsistencies among faculty members and course design. Students felt that faculty members should receive more training and education from the institution about students with LD and course design. For example, in-class essay tests, fast-moving lectures, and lengthy reading assignments have been barriers for UMaine students with LD.

Professional Perspective

A professional staff member working with students with LD reported that there are 92 students at UMaine who report LD as their primary disability, but there are many more who have another disability in addition to LD, but do not report LD as primary. The staff member noted that although many faculty members are supportive of students with LD, some are less aware of LD or how to treat students with LD. Although the staff member takes part in education, presentations are not specifically focused on students with LD. The staff member noted that UMaine’s services for students with LD are comparable to other institutions, but that greater funding and emphasis from the institution could result in important services like a professional mentoring program and greater focus overall on students with LD.

Recommendations

Based on the current literature about students with LD in higher education, the current services the University of Maine offers its students with LD, and staff and students’ perceptions of those services, the institution would better serve its students by considering the following recommendations:
- Provide more intentional opportunities for students with LD to receive social support and integration through peer groups or mentoring opportunities with trained professionals.
- Increase education and training about students with LD for faculty and staff.
- Promote faculty professional development through education on universal course design and intentional pedagogical approaches to enhance the learning experience of all students.
- Increase the assessment and evaluation of programmatic and individual success of students with LD to add to the knowledge of experiences of students with LD on this campus.

References

Figure 1. East Annex, location of DSS (Image rights: University of Maine)

Figure 2. Faculty training and course design are key to the success of students with LD.