College as a Realistic Option for Students with Learning Disabilities

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Students with learning disabilities (LD) represent the largest cohort of all students with disabilities served in special education programs throughout the United States (National Center for Education Statistics, 2009). Recent statistics indicate that access to postsecondary education continues to grow for this group. For example, the number of full-time, first time freshmen with LD in American colleges and universities increased from .05% of all freshmen in 1983 to 3.3% of all freshmen in 2008 (Pryor et al., 2008). According to the National Longitudinal Transition Study 2 (NLTS-2; Newman, Wagner, Cameto, & Knokey, 2009), 47.3% of all students with LD are attending postsecondary education, with most (35%) attending two-year or community colleges, 22% attending vocational, business, or technical school, and 16% attending a four-year school.

Reasons for the Growth in Numbers

Postsecondary education is now a primary goal for 80% of secondary students with disabilities (Newman et al., 2009). As a result, larger numbers of students with LD have taken academically challenging plans of study and are therefore more competitive in the college admissions process. Parents, advocacy groups, and secondary personnel are increasingly aware of college options for students with LD and concurrently, some colleges and universities recognize students with LD as an important group to recruit for admission (Brinckerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002).

Additionally, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) mandates that postsecondary education must be considered as a goal for all students. As part of their state performance plans, state education agencies must report the percentage of students with disabilities who are enrolled in postsecondary education one year after high school graduation/completion (Madaus, Banerjee, Merchant, in press). These requirements compel secondary special education teams to carefully consider postsecondary education as a realistic goal for more and more students with LD.

Another reason for the increased emphasis on transition to postsecondary education is awareness of the importance of postsecondary education on future employment rates and earnings. According to the Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education (U.S. Department of Education, 2006), individuals

with a bachelor's degree earn an average of $2.1 million dollars over their lifetime, which is almost twice that of workers with only a high school education. Adults with a high school degree or less are unemployed at nearly twice the rate of those with a bachelor's degree or higher (College Board, 2006). The importance of college is also highlighted by research on 500 college and university graduates with LD that demonstrated levels of employment and earnings that were consistent with the American workforce in general (Madaus, 2006).

Issues that Remain

Despite these developments and the clear importance of postsecondary education, much still needs to be done. Students with disabilities still lag behind their peers in regard to college access (45% compared to 53%), and retention of students with disabilities in college remains problematic. Only 18% of students with disabilities who enrolled in a two-year college and only 7.6% enrolled in a four-year program completed their studies (Newman et al., 2009). Students with disabilities are more likely to attend college part-time, or for part of the year (Government Accountability Office, 2009). Many students, including those with learning disabilities, enter college unprepared for the demands of college level work, despite having met high school graduation requirements. In 2003-2004, 36% of all undergraduates nationally needed to take a remedial college course, most often in mathematics. Unfortunately, students with disabilities typically take more remedial courses than their non-disabled peers, which lengthens the time and cost to complete a college degree (College Board, 2006).

The Importance of Transition Planning

Under the IDEA 2004, transition planning must begin no later than the student's 16th birthday. However, the law also allows this planning to begin earlier, if deemed appropriate by the Individual Education Program (IEP) team. Clearly, beginning transition planning at age 16 is too late to be truly effective. Indeed, decisions made as early as 8th and 9th grade related to coursework, the development of learning and self-determination skills, and taking standardized exams could have long lasting implications. For example, well-intended special education teams may determine that a student with LD should not take a foreign language, or should take a lower level math course. Such decisions might ultimately restrict the options that the student has when searching for a college. If college is a goal for a student, every effort should be made to enroll the student into a plan of study that features the most competitive courses reasonable, particularly in math, English, and science (Shaw, Madaus, & Dukes, 2010). Significant documentation of attempts to complete competitive courses (e.g., letters from teachers and learning specialists discussing the student's efforts) should be compiled and kept by the student and his or her family. Such documentation may become very important in future years.

One practical way to gauge the student's preparation for a college level curriculum is for secondary teams to develop collaborative relationships with community colleges in their area. In some states, such as California and Connecticut, high school students take the college's placement test during the junior year of high school. This provides the student, the family, and the team with solid and realistic data related to the student's preparation. For example, it might become clear that a student would need to take two semesters of remedial mathematics in college. Or, it might become clear that a student is ready and can take more competitive courses while in high school and

then be better prepared in college. These data could clearly guide the selection of courses and support needs for the junior and senior years.

Change in Legal Mandates and Status

In addition to the increased academic rigor that students with LD encounter upon arriving in college, they also face a change in the laws related to their legal rights and responsibilities. Upon graduation from high school, the mandates of the IDEA are no longer in effect. As such, the requirements and modifications in the student's IEP, the team of professionals and parents who often make decisions for the student, and the access to evaluations to describe the impact of the LD are no longer available. The applicable laws in college have dramatically changed with the Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act, which took effect in January of 2009. This law changes the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), and as a result, Section 504. These changes have broadened the definition of disability so that the focus of college disability documentation is on the functional impact of the disability and whether it justifies the need for providing appropriate accommodations (Shaw, Keenan, Madaus & Banerjee, in press).

Traditionally, such documentation came from evaluations done at the secondary level and contained information on levels of aptitude and achievement. However, changes in the IDEA 2004 related to the diagnosis of LD have significant implications for students in transition. The shift away from the discrepancy model towards a response to intervention model, and elimination of mandatory 3-year re-evaluations and exit evaluations has resulted in students leaving school with documentation that might not meet typical college documentation guidelines (Madaus & Shaw, 2006; Madaus, 2010).

Careful transition planning requires awareness of this documentation "disconnect" (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 2007). Without adequate documentation, students may not be eligible for services, or may be required to seek updated and comprehensive documentation at personal cost. Students and secondary personnel should research the documentation requirements of several colleges of interest to the student during the junior year. During the senior year, assessments that match these requirements could be conducted as part of the individually appropriate transition assessment mandates of the IDEA (Connecticut State Department of Education, 2009; Madaus, 2010). Under the IDEA, local education agencies are also required to provide a student with disabilities who is graduating with a summary of the student's academic and functional performance as well as recommendations related to helping the student to meet his or her postsecondary goals. This requirement is commonly referred to as a summary of performance (SOP). Although there is state-to-state and district-to-district variation in regard to the format and content of the SOP, a comprehensive SOP can serve as a mechanism to help provide the necessary information on functional impairment and history of need for accommodations that students can present to disability service offices. Active student involvement in the development of the SOP can also promote student self-determination, a critical skill at the college level (Shaw et al., 2010).

The Range of Available Services

Under the IDEA, students and families work with the IEP Team to develop individualized academic programs that meets the specific needs of the students. These special education services end at graduation and are not required under Section 504 or

the Americans with Disabilities Act. It is now up to the student to self-disclose his or her LD to the proper person at the college, to submit documentation that meets the college's requirements to demonstrate a current and substantial limitation to learning, and to self-advocate to faculty and other college personnel as appropriate. Importantly, the process for self-disclosure and specific documentation requirements can vary from college to college (Government Accountability Office, 2009, Madaus, 2010).

Colleges offer a range of services to students, depending upon their mission and other institutional specific factors. At a minimum, colleges must provide a disability contact person who can help the student arrange basic accommodations such as extended test time or auxiliary aids (e.g., notetakers). Other colleges offer specialized services that include trained staff to work with students and faculty and services such as counseling, coaching, and workshops in study skills (Government Accountability Office, 2009). However, it is important to understand that such services go beyond the requirements of Section 504 and the ADA, and as such colleges are allowed to charge additional fees (Government Accountability Office, 2009). Careful transition planning requires that the specific needs and functional skills of the student be assessed through individually appropriate transition assessments. This information should then be matched against the type of specific services offered at a range of institutions of differing characteristics (e.g., size, competitiveness, location, residential versus commuter). Banerjee and Brinckerhoff (2010) and Elksnin and Elksnin (2010) offer more specific guidance and tips for helping to search for an appropriate college and to navigate the specific support systems and admissions process.

Technology Needs

Under special education law, the assistive technology needs of students must be considered for all IEPs (Banerjee, 2010). These technologies can serve as important equalizers for students to access the curriculum and demonstrate their knowledge. It is important to understand that assistive technology services provided at the secondary level may not be required or available at the postsecondary level. Careful transition planning must assess the student's needs in this area and collect data (e.g., related to availability, skill in using, ownership of equipment and software) related to how these needs might be met in the postsecondary environment (Banerjee, 2010). Additionally, postsecondary education requires computer skills that go well beyond assistive technology. Instructional technology is increasingly being used to deliver and assess learning, and concurrently, students are using technology as part of social networking. However, research indicates that students with LD are less comfortable with instructional technologies (Parker & Banerjee, 2007), which could create new barriers to learning. Transition preparation must therefore consider skills in the area of instructional technology (Banerjee, 2010).

Psychological Needs

Students, families, and transition teams should also be aware of the student's psychological needs during the transition process. A recent study of college counseling centers reported that 90% of respondents are seeing increasing numbers of students and increasing severity of disorders (Franklin, 2009). It is estimated that these students make up from 13% (Harbour, 2008) to 24% (Government Accountability Office, 2009) of students with disabilities on college campuses. Students with LD are more likely to experience psychological stress in

adjusting to college and are more likely to seek counseling than students without disabilities (Pryor et al. 2008). Although not all students with LD face these issues, it may be important to become aware of the range of psychological supports available on various college campuses and how the disability support office collaborates with these services. Additionally, if a student is under the care of a particular physician or therapist, it is vital to consider how such supports will continue or will be transferred to another professional if the student moves away from home to attend college.

The development of self-determination skills are important for all young adults, but this is especially so for students with LD. At the college level, it becomes the responsibility of the student to self-disclose and explain the nature of his or her disability, self-advocate for needed services, and to set personal and academic goals. Self-determined individuals are more likely to adjust their behaviors, learning strategies and necessary support systems to achieve their goals. There is also a strong link between self-determination skills and academic success (Martin, Portley, & Graham, 2010). Clearly, this is a vital area to be developed and fostered throughout high school and the transition process.

Summary

Postsecondary education is an increasingly vital and viable option for students with learning disabilities. Great strides have been made over the past 20 years to improve access to postsecondary education and to improve the range and quality of services available at the postsecondary level. Careful and comprehensive transition planning is essential for a successful transition. This planning should start as early as possible. Importantly, it should take a long-range perspective. While gaining admission to college is an important step, the true measure of a successful transition is eventual graduation and movement into independent adult life. Transition planning should focus on the development of the skills necessary to accomplish this goal.

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