Students with Learning Disabilities’ Perceptions of Self-Determining Factors Contributing to College Success

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study identified the factors that contributed to the success experienced by students with learning disabilities in their first year of college. The primary factors that emerged from student interviews were their attitudes about higher education, and their personal attributes including motivation, maturity, and persistence. Additionally, students’ adjustment to academic and campus life, and their use of supports and skills, such as college tutors, studying, managing time, and advocating for their needs were factors that led them to college persistence. Practical implications are proposed for secondary educators, postsecondary support staff and educators, students, and families.

KEYWORDS

Attitudes, Attributes, College Students with Learning Disabilities, College Success, Self-Advocacy, Self-Determination

INTRODUCTION

*College is pretty much commitment in my opinion. Like it’s more of a commitment than actually studying. It proves to you that you’re committing into all this work…. I want to succeed in life…. College is pretty much a test in life to show and prove how far you can go (John).*

Successful college students with learning disabilities can provide crucial insights regarding the personal factors needed to meet the demands of higher education faced by young adults with disabilities. Although some researchers have begun to unravel the complex amalgamation of the attributes that contribute to success, there is still more to be learned specifically regarding self-determination and related factors. To provide necessary background information, the federal definition of learning disabilities is used to depict the common challenges students encounter. “A disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself as the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations” (U.S. Office of Education, 1977, p. 65083). How these deficits affect an individual pursuing postsecondary education is as follows.

Much has been written about the challenges students with learning disabilities encounter while pursuing their college educations that limit their academic and social success (e.g., Bennett-Kastor, 2004; Coleman, Gregg, McLain, & Bellair, 2009; Davis, Nida, Zlomke, & Nebel-Schwalm, 2009; Li & Proctor, 2010; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003; Smith, English, & Vasek, 2002; Trainin & Swanson, 2005; Warde, 2005). Such problems often cited in the literature include a combination of reading,
writing, and math deficits; metacognitive, executive functioning, and memory difficulties, and social-emotional issues of anxiety, low self-esteem, and self-concepts. However, other challenges that are common in this population of students are directly associated their lack of self-determination skills (e.g., Brinkerhoff, McGuire, & Shaw, 2002; Grigal, Neubert, Moon, & Graham, 2003; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Madaus, 2005; Smith et al., 2002). For example, many students enrolled in postsecondary education have a limited understanding of their specific learning disabilities that prevent them from accurately explaining and advocating for their academic needs to faculty and disability service personnel (Brinkerhoff, et al., 2002; Skinner & Lindstrom, 2003). One reason for this is that at the secondary education level, many students do not have to practice advocacy skills, including disclosing their learning disabilities, because this role is generally assumed by parents and teachers (Madaus, 2005; Smith et al., 2002). Other examples include making decisions about their education and accessing the supports they need to complete their academic programs (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Additionally, for those students with learning disabilities who are familiar with the skills leading to self-determination, few of them have had sufficient opportunities to practice these skills in their secondary school environments (Grigal et al., 2003).

In recent years, researchers have identified some of the self-determining behaviors used by students with learning disabilities that lead them to success and persistence in college (e.g., Field, Sarver, & Shaw, 2003; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Jameson, 2007; Morningstar et al., 2010). Specifically, the skills and attributes that these successful college students use are problem-solving, goal-setting, self-awareness, self-management, and persistence (Field, et al., 2003; Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Jameson, 2007), as well as self-advocacy and high levels of empowerment, locus of control, and hope (Morningstar, et al., 2010). These findings reinforce the importance of using self-determining behaviors considering that approximately 39% of college students enrolled in some form of postsecondary education have disabilities (Wagner, Newman, Cameto, Garza, & Levine, 2005), including those students with learning disabilities.

Researchers such as Field et al (2003), Getzel and Thoma (2008), and Morningstar et al (2010) posit that teaching these students about and encouraging them to use self-determining behaviors can positively influence the success they experience in postsecondary education. This perhaps accounts for one reason why some students with learning disabilities are highly successful, persist, and graduate from college. However, perhaps their attitudes about education, and their skill levels, use of strategies, and access to available supports may be additional reasons why some college students with learning disabilities persist. To address these suppositions, the purpose of this article is two-fold. One is to identify the self-determining factors that lead students with learning disabilities to academic success and college persistence, and the second, as recommended by Getzel and Thoma (2008) and Morningstar, et al. (2010), is to add to current research pertaining to the self-determination skills used to enable students with disabilities to persist in and graduate from college.

**METHOD**

**Participants**

Data was gathered through interviews with successful first year college students participating in a remedial and support-based program for students with language-based learning disabilities in the Midwest. Success was defined as students earning a cumulative grade point average (cgpa) of 2.0 or better. The participants in this study had an average cgpa of 2.68 (range 2.20-3.55) and were comprised of four males (mean age of 18.5) and three females (mean age of 19.0). The sample population was purposefully selected based on the characteristics that they shared (Bogdan & Biklen, 2006; Creswell, 2007) that included the presence of learning disabilities, their status as college freshmen, and their participation in the remedial and support-based summer transition program. The students chosen for this article were part of a larger study that included 12 participants,
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