

## Characteristics and Accommodations for College Students With Learning Disabilities

Melinda Pierson  
Barbara Glaeser

California State Polytechnic University, Pomona  
California State University, Fullerton

More and more students with learning disabilities are enrolling in college-level programs. It is imperative that university professors are educated regarding the characteristics and accommodations for this diverse group of students.

### Introduction

The most commonly accepted definition is that endorsed by the federal government:

“Specific learning disability” means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in an imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or to do mathematical calculations. The term includes such conditions as perceptual handicaps, brain injury, minimal brain dysfunction, dyslexia, and developmental aphasia. The term does not include children who have learning problems which are primarily the result of visual, hearing, or motor handicaps, of mental retardation, of emotional disturbance, or of environmental, cultural, or economic disadvantage.

(Federal Register, 1977, p. 65083)

There are many different types of learning disabilities. Some of the terms which describe specific learning disabilities include the following:

Dyslexia: language disorder interfering with the spoken or written word

Dyscalculia: disorder affecting mathematical concepts or computation

Dysgraphia: writing disorder affecting production of the written word graphically or syntactically

Dysphasia: disorder affecting word retrieval or fluency in speaking or understanding

Figure-ground perception: inability to see an object from a background of other objects

Visual discrimination: inability to see the differences between objects

Auditory figure-ground perception: inability to hear one sound among others

Auditory sequencing: inability to hear sounds in the correct order

### Common Characteristics of Students with Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities may exhibit problems in several areas. These areas may include study skills, writing skills, oral language, reading skills, math skills, and social skills.

Students who have difficulty with study skills have an inability to organize and budget time, have difficulty taking notes or outlining course material, demonstrate difficulty following directions, and have difficulty completing assignments on time.

Writing skill deficits encompass the following areas: frequent spelling errors, incorrect grammar, poor penmanship, difficulty taking notes while listening to class lectures, and problems with organization, and the development of ideas or transition words.

Students who have difficulty with oral language skills typically show deficits in the following areas: (1) poor vocabulary and word recall, (2) difficulty understanding oral language when lecturer speaks quietly, (3) difficulty attending to long lectures, (4) problems with correct grammar, (5) difficulty remembering a series of events in sequence, and (6) difficulty with pronouncing multi-syllabic words.

It is also common for students with learning disabilities to have difficulty in the area of reading. These students may have a slow reading rate, inaccurate comprehension, poor reaction, poor tracking skills (skipped words, lost place, missed lines), difficulty with complex syntax on tests, and incomplete mastery of phonics.

Students with math skill deficits commonly have computational skill difficulties, difficulty with reasoning, difficulty with basic math operations, number reversals, confusion of symbols, difficulty copying problems, and difficulty with the concepts of time and money.

Many students with learning disabilities may have difficulty in the area of social skills in addition to their academic skill deficits. Examples of social skill deficits include spatial disorientation, low or high frustration level, low self-esteem, impulsivity, disorientation in time, and difficulty with delaying problem resolution.

### Accommodations for Students with Learning Disabilities

Students with learning disabilities may need some accommodations throughout their college career. In fact, instructors are required by law to provide these accommodations, although it is unlikely that a student would need all of the accommodations listed here.

Registration: reduced course load, priority registration

General: extended time to complete assignments, course substitution for nonessential course requirements in the student's major

Notetaking: tape recorders, copies of classmates' notes

Testing: extended time; proctored testing in a quiet, separate area; test taped or read to student; student responds orally to essay test; alternative type of exam; scribe, word processor, or speech recognition program; blank card or paper to assist in reading; calculator; test responses read back to the student for clarification

Reading: taped texts, reader, used of Irlen (specially colored) lenses or colored transparencies

Writing: extended time for in-class assignments to correct spelling, punctuation, and grammar, word processor with spell check

Math: calculator for a student with a disability in the area of math processing (The SAT and CBEST currently allow students to use a standard four-function calculator as an accommodation.)

## Guide to Providing Accommodations

To be eligible for accommodations, a student must first be legally identified as having a disability. In the CSU system, this is done through the Office of Disabled Student Services (DSS). There are two types of students served by this office: those who are already identified as having learning disabilities and those who need to be tested for disabilities. Most students with learning disabilities are identified in elementary school, but in many cases, this can occur in junior or high school as well. These students must bring their records to the DSS Office, where they will receive counseling and guidance on what accommodations will be beneficial for them in the classes for which they are currently taking.

Although it is rare, some students with learning disabilities are not identified until they reach the university level. These students are usually of above average intelligence and have found ways to cope with their learning difficulties. However, university coursework is more challenging and; thus, they may now qualify for services.

If students are identified as having learning disabilities, they must bring the list of accommodations to the instructor during the first week of class. It is beneficial for every instructor to ask students on the first class meeting if they have this paperwork. The student is responsible for keeping the instructor informed of their needs.

## Conclusion

The more knowledgeable one is about disabilities and their accommodations, the more likely that a student with disabilities will not be discriminated against. This is a primary concern at the university level.

## References

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