

Tips for Understanding Learning Disabilities

Introduction

The information in this document is intended to enhance the faculty member's understanding of specific learning disabilities and to assist the professor in working successfully with students with learning disabilities. Familiar terms might include "dyslexia," which affects reading/print disability or "dyscalculia," which impacts mathematics. Students with LD are one of the highest number of students served by SSWD.

Using the Learning Disabilities Label

OR Impact of the Learning Disabilities Diagnosis

The label "learning disabilities" is misleading because it implies that the student is unable to learn. However, students with Learning Disabilities (LD) possess average to very superior intelligence. Despite average learning potential and traditionally successful instructional methods, a student with LD experiences significant learning and memory difficulties. To be successful, a student with LD must use alternative ways of learning, storing, and retrieving information.

Learning disabilities often remain hidden or unrecognized for years with students puzzled and frustrated by failure despite persistent motivation and effort. Sometimes the student may be falsely perceived as lazy or lacking motivation when in reality the student may work harder and longer than their non-LD peers. Many students are not diagnosed until they reach the university or community college level when high demands are made on complex language and mathematical skills.

The diagnosis of the learning disability is the first step in a process of self-understanding and a renewal of self-confidence for the student. The diagnostic assessment provides the student with an in-depth knowledge of learning strengths and limitations. The student then has the opportunity to change unproductive behaviors and to discover more effective ways of learning. Because learning disabilities cannot be "cured," accommodations, support services and aids may be necessary to help the student bypass or overcome the effects of the learning disability.

Often, after diagnosis, emotional issues arise. For example, some students become angry that the learning disability was not recognized earlier by parents or teachers. Many are afraid that they will be discriminated against by instructors or employers. Other students are too embarrassed to ask for accommodations and, due to fear of humiliation, will refuse to reveal the disability to instructors, families, or friends.

Students with LD learn that they must, at times, face the skepticism of others. Since learning disabilities are nonvisible with no observable disability, it can be difficult for others to accept the disability as real.

Therefore, a student with learning disabilities is doubly challenged: first, in coping with the disability and second, in confronting attitudes of disbelief or doubt. The faculty member plays a critical part in assisting the student with LD to realize his potential for success. The support of the instructor is crucial in helping the student to meet the challenges imposed by the learning disability. Working together, staff, faculty, and student can build the necessary bridges that will span the obstacles in learning and lead to greater opportunity for academic achievement.

A specific learning disability is considered to be caused by neurological disorders which interfere with the reception, retention, and expression of information. The brain might be compared, on a simplistic level, to a television set with its various stations that receive and relay information. If the station is not functioning properly causing a disturbance in the transmission, the brain receives distorted and inconsistent information. The communication may be incomplete or incorrect and information can get lost. Memory functions can fail. The brain then will have difficulties assimilating patterns and integrating systems that are required for reading, writing, listening, and mathematical skills.

Types of Learning Disabilities

Abstract Reasoning

Even though the student may have average to superior intelligence, the processes of non-language based analysis and conceptualization may be impaired which affect the following areas, particularly as related to mathematics or science:

- Analysis of differences and similarities
- Drawing inferences and conclusions
- Transference and generalization
- Retention of facts, formulae, problem solving steps

Auditory/Perceptual Processing

Even with normal hearing, the student demonstrates deficits in auditory discrimination, sequencing and memory, which affect the following skills:

- Listening and writing simultaneously
- Memory of orally presented information
- Oral pronunciation
- Reading: phonetics and word attack
- Spelling

Language Comprehension (Oral and Written)

Even though the student may be a native speaker, deficits occur in the ability to comprehend and retain linguistic concepts, which affect the following areas:

- Grammar and syntax
- Organization of thoughts/ideas into logical format

Short and Long Term Retrieval

Deficits in associative or rote memory may occur in the following areas:

- Auditory memory
- Visual memory
- Both auditory and visual memory

Visual Perceptual/Processing

Even with normal or corrected vision (with prescription lenses), the student demonstrates deficits in visual discrimination, sequencing, and memory, which affect these areas:

- Mathematical concepts, visual-spatial information
- Reading comprehension and vocabulary
- Speed of processing written or graphic material
- Spelling

Visual-Spatial and Motor Coordination

The visual-spatial-motor systems can be impaired which causes difficulties in the following areas:

- Directionality: left, right, north, south, east, west
- Fine motor control: handwriting, typing, copying, drawing
- Gross motor control: sports, dance, movement
- Spatial awareness: judging distance and depth
- Visual tracking, scanning, focusing
- Speed of reading and writing
- Vocabulary

Responsibilities Of Students

While students have rights to reasonable accommodations, they also must act responsibly in consulting with staff and faculty. **Students need to understand their disability and appropriate processes for receiving SSWD approved accommodations and services:**

- Students should have a clear understanding of their learning disability and its effects on learning style and need.
- The students should know that among the post-secondary systems, the level and type of support services vary.
- Students need to make timely arrangements for support services and accommodations by requesting an SSWD accommodation letter each semester and making sure faculty have been provided the letter in a timely manner, as accommodations are not retroactive.

- Students are responsible for making arrangements for accommodations and support services with SSWD and the instructor in a timely manner. Some accommodations may require office procedures that the student must complete before services can begin. In some cases, accommodations may take a week or more to arrange.
- The Access Coordinator will provide a letter to the student to give to their professors verifying what accommodations will be necessary. The student should meet as early as possible with each instructor and make arrangements for approved accommodations, as the faculty may require a week or more to arrange the services. Since accommodations are not retroactive, this conversation with the faculty should be held as early as possible. It is recommended that the student meet with faculty during their office hours to review course requirements and accommodations that may be required.
- Testing accommodations plans should be confirmed with the instructor and Testing Center or Departmental Office at least one week before the test date and at least three weeks prior to final exams, as spaces fill fast.
- For best assurance of having accommodations in place, students should not expect staff and faculty to arrange accommodations or services with less than a week's notice.

Students need to understand legal and privacy rights:

- Students are provided information regarding the laws that protect the rights of disabled individuals. Furthermore, students are advised that any accommodation must be reasonable and appropriately based on individual diagnosis and need.
- Professors must respect the student's right to confidentiality and refrain from discussing the student's disability or needs in front of others without the student's permission.
- The Access Coordinator respects the student's confidentiality when discussing their needs with faculty but may disclose academic accommodation needs and general nature of the disability to faculty, as appropriate.

Responsibilities Of Faculty

The rights of students with disabilities, including those with learning disabilities, are protected under two major laws: Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the American with Disabilities Act of 1990. Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and ADA address the issue of program access stating that "no otherwise qualified handicapped person shall on the basis of the handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal assistance." California State University, as a public institution of higher education under Title II of ADA, is legally required to provide academic adjustments and reasonable accommodations to students with learning disabilities.

Equal Access and Accommodations

The purpose of these laws is to ensure that students with disabilities have equal access to educational opportunities. Faculty members are not required to lower academic requirements or to change essential academic requirements.

One of the most commonly used accommodations for students with learning disabilities is extended time for examinations. Normal time limits do not usually result in a fair evaluation because a learning disability often affects the speed of processing, accessing, and producing information. The purpose of providing alternate testing arrangements is to ensure that a fair measurement is made of the student's achievement, not the functional limitations caused by the disability.

The CSU Office of the Chancellor has given the responsibility of determining eligibility for services and appropriateness of accommodations to the students with disabilities office at each university. At Sacramento State, students with disabilities are referred to the Office of Services to Students with Disabilities (SSWD) which then makes individual eligibility and accommodation determinations based on the specific disability-related needs of each student.

Instructors with questions or concerns regarding the recommended accommodations should contact the SSWD Access Coordinator if further clarification is needed.

Helpful Instructional Approaches

Teaching strategies that work well for LD students can be highly beneficial to other students in the class as well. To plan ahead to prepare a course curriculum accessible to all students would be incorporating universal design pedagogy.

Syllabus

- Provide students with a detailed course syllabus, available prior to registration.
- Clearly spell out expectations at the beginning of the course (e.g. grading, material to be covered, due dates) in writing.
- Faculty should have a statement at the bottom of their syllabus indicating that all requests for accommodations, not normally provided by the instructor, must be approved by SSWD. If a student asks for an academic adjustment without an Accommodation Letter from SSWD they should be referred to SSWD. A recommended syllabus statement is as follows:

“Sacramento State is committed to ensuring an accessible learning environment where course or instructional content are usable by all students and faculty. If you believe that you require disability-related academic adjustments for this class, please immediately contact Services for Students with Disabilities (SSWD) to discuss eligibility. A current accommodation letter from SSWD is required before any modifications, above and beyond what is otherwise available for all other students in this class, will be provided. Please be advised that disability-related academic adjustments are not retroactive. SSWD is located on the first floor of Lassen Hall 1008. Phone is 916-278-6955 and e-mail is sswd@csus.edu. For a complete listing of services and current business hours visit <https://www.csus.edu/student-affairs/centers-programs/services-students-disabilities/>.”

Accommodations

- Announce during the first class sessions that any student needing course accommodations should meet with you PRIVATELY during your office hours. It is also helpful to place this announcement in writing in your syllabus.
- Since students with LD often have either a visual or auditory processing/memory deficit, provide course content in both visual and auditory formats; i.e., lectures accompanied by written outline or notes. Tape-recording or notetaker services may be also necessary. Alternative formats may also include electronic text, computer programs or other technology.

Study Guides/Techniques

- Provide a well-organized study guide for the text and lecture notes. Study questions and review materials are also very helpful. Refer students who appear to have inadequate study skills to available learning study skills tutoring or workshops on campus.
Vary Activities
- Provide different ways of learning and educational experiences; i.e., group and team projects, videos and movies, visual and graphic representations and illustrations, experiential activities, oral presentations, dramatic role plays, learning games, etc.
- Instead of timed exams, consider whether student progress may be measured by using a variety of alternatives such as hands-on student projects, reports, demonstrations and portfolios. Such activities can be engaging, motivational and lead to the development of course mastery.
- If there are any questions or concerns associated with the SSWD accommodation letter, faculty are encouraged to contact the Access Coordinator who signed the letter or send an e-mail to sswd@csus.edu.