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## **First-Year Performance: Students with Disabilities Transitioning to College from High School**

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*Laws such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (Amendments Act), and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504) govern the responsibilities of both secondary schools and postsecondary institutions in regards to students with learning disabilities. With an approximate 34.5% of students with learning disabilities in secondary schools within the United States transitioning into higher education in 2005, the transition from secondary school to a college or university can be a time full of stress, new experiences, and confusion for students with learning disabilities. The purpose of this literature review was to determine what factors lead some first-year students with documented learning disabilities to not seek reasonable academic accommodations from an institution's disability services office. Research indicated that approximately 11% of students enrolled at postsecondary institutions have disclosed having a disability to their institution. Prior to leaving a secondary school, developing proper transition skills, such as self-advocacy or self-determination, are critical for a successful transition. To enhance the transition process, secondary schools and postsecondary institutions should work together to educate students and their families on the student responsibilities for being eligible to receive academic accommodations. Through the collaboration and the development of transition skills, students with learning disabilities will be more likely to seek services and be more academically successful.*

*Keywords: Americans with Disabilities Act learning disability, Individuals with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, transition from secondary school to a postsecondary institution*

Transitioning from secondary school to a postsecondary institution can be a stressful situation, however, for students with learning disabilities, it can become a very taxing experience. Secondary schools and postsecondary institutions are impacted by a number of laws pertaining to students with disabilities. These laws are the *Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA)*, *Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA)*, the *Americans with Disabilities Act Amendments Act (Amendments Act)*, and *Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (Section 504)*. While the *IDEA* applies exclusively to secondary education, requiring schools to identify students potentially in need of academic accommodation, in accordance with the *Amendments Act*, students with disabilities at institutions of higher education must self-identify and request services

before the institution can provide accommodations or services. Without developing proper transition skills prior to entering colleges and universities, students with learning disabilities may encounter difficulties when trying to obtain services from their institution in order to be academically successful.

The purpose of this literature review is to address the research question: what factors lead some newly enrolled first-year college students with documented learning disabilities to not seek reasonable academic accommodations from an institution's disability services office. This literature review is significant to both student affairs practitioners and researchers because it reviews the level of preparation students with learning disabilities obtain prior to leaving secondary school. This will allow for strategies to be developed to better provide students with learning disabilities the knowledge they need to successfully transition into postsecondary education. It is also critical to understand the decision-making process students experience when deciding whether to register with an institution's disability services office.

### **Definitions of Terms**

The term *disability* refers to an impairment that is either physical or mental causing a significant impact on a minimum of one major area of an individual's life while the term *learning disability* refers to the significant difficulties one may have with learning and using skills with listening, spelling, reading writing, reasoning, or mathematics (Southeast ADA Center, 2016; Yang-Tan Institute on Employment and Disability, 2016).

Disability services are programs within higher education designed to provide reasonable academic accommodations for students with documented disabilities (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016a). The term reasonable academic accommodation refers to the adjustments made to academic courses in order to allow equal access for individuals with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). While disability services in secondary schools are mandated by the *IDEA*, colleges and universities must follow policies outlines in the *Amendments Act* and *Section 504* (National Center for Education Statistics, 2016b). The *Amendments Act* is a federal law designed to provide equal access to individuals with disabilities through the use of reasonable accommodations (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Title II of the *Amendments Act* is the portion of the law that requires public entities to comply with providing equal access to all services and programs offered by a public entity (Southeast ADA Center, 2016). *Section 504* is the federal law requiring any organization receiving financial assistance from the U.S. Department of Education to ensure protection from discrimination for individuals with disabilities (U.S. Department of Education, 2013). Both the *Amendments Act* and *Section 504* prohibit institutions from seeking out students that may have a disability, requiring students to self-identify prior to receiving reasonable academic accommodations (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005).

## **Theoretical Framework**

As students with learning disabilities are transitioning from secondary schools to institutions of higher education, it is important to review Schlossberg's transition theory to learn more about what they are experiencing (as cited in Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010). The types of transitions experienced may take the form of many different events or non-events (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). Non-events include what is anticipated but does not end up occurring. There are four factors in Schlossberg's transition theory individuals need to navigate in order to successfully complete their transition. These factors are situation, self, support, and strategies (Goodman et al., 2006).

In terms of this literature review, the situation serving as a stressor for students with learning disabilities is the transition from secondary school to higher education. In accordance with the Amendments Act and Section 504, students with learning disabilities must self-identify to the disability services office at their college or university to receive reasonable academic accommodations (Eckes & Ochoa, 2005). Through gaining a sense of self, the second factor, students with learning disabilities need to develop self-advocacy skills, in addition to understanding the impact of their learning disability on their academics. The third factor, support, involves students having knowledge of the services available to them. Students with learning disabilities must be aware of and understand the purpose of the disability services office to receive reasonable academic accommodations. Accomplishing the fourth factor, strategies, involves utilizing the resources available. Students with learning disabilities would achieve the fourth factor when they self-identify with the disability services office and utilize their academic accommodations.

Schlossberg's transition theory can be utilized to measure student progress through the transition process, enabling staff to work with students on the stressors they may be encountering. Gaining knowledge of various situations that may be causing stress, students will be able to work to develop strategies allowing easier navigation. Over time, the goal of students would be to work on measuring their personal and psychological characteristics in relation to the stressors and their perceived ability to navigate the situation.

Students who understand their perceived ability to be successful in their academics will be better able to determine which services and staff are available to assist them with navigating their transition. Progressing to the fourth factor, students will be knowledgeable of the situation causing their stress, the perceived ability to navigate the situation, and the services available to them, they will utilize the support to successfully complete their transition into a postsecondary institution.

## **Methods**

This literature review was conducted using the following databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC (EBSCOhost), ProQuest, and JSTOR. Search terms used for discovery of information included combinations of the following keywords: learning disabilities, disability, higher education, high school, secondary school, postsecondary

institutions, transition, Individuals with Disabilities Act, Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and transition from secondary school to a postsecondary institution. The reviewed literature was narrowed to articles published within the last 10 years. Studies focusing on disabilities not related to learning disabilities were excluded from the literature review. The reviewed research provided insight into the reasons a percentage of students with learning disabilities decide not to register for reasonable academic accommodations with their postsecondary institution's disability services office.

### **Review of the Literature**

An SRI International study in 2000 found that approximately 6% of students in secondary schools had a learning disability (Milsom & Dietz, 2009). Approximately 11% of students enrolled at postsecondary institutions registered to receive services in accordance to the *ADA* and *Section 504* (Lombardi et al., 2016).

Statistics from the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) showed that by 2005, the number of students with learning disabilities transitioning into higher education from secondary schools had risen to 34.5% from the 11.4% in 1990 (Lightner, Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice, 2012). While there is an increase in the number of students with disabilities attending colleges and universities, many students are often not aware of the services that the institutions provide or how to access them (Gil, 2007). Although enrollment has been on the rise, approximately 70% of students with learning disabilities leave their institution (Lightner et al., 2012). It has been found that most students with disabilities not seeking services immediately upon entering an institution of higher education felt they did not have enough time available to go through the process (Lightner et al., 2012).

### **Challenges Faced Transitioning to Postsecondary Education**

Students with disabilities face different processes for receiving academic services between secondary schools and higher education (Burdge, 2012). The literature indicated that when transitioning from secondary to postsecondary, a portion of students with learning disabilities avoided seeking reasonable academic accommodations for a variety of reasons. The reported reasons included feeling no longer impacted by their learning disability, not wanting others to find out they received services, or not having enough time to seek the services (Burdge, 2012).

Peters (2011) suggested students with disabilities may not have the skills needed to advocate for themselves, hindering them from receiving the services they need. Many students with disabilities must face the challenge of learning the difference between IDEA in secondary schools and the Amendments Act and Section 504 in postsecondary institutions, requiring students to self-advocate in order to receive services (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). Students that do not fully realize the differences between the process for obtaining reasonable academic accommodations may begin to struggle, resulting in low academic performance (Adreon & Durocher, 2007; Gil, 2007).

Novakovic and Ross (2015) explained that many students do not realize they must disclose their disability and request services before the institution can work with them. Preparation for higher education often focuses solely on the curriculum and not preparing students with disabilities to develop skills needed to be successful (Burdge, 2012). The skills needed may include the ability to self-advocate, explaining to disability support staff what academic accommodations are necessary for successful academic performance. Many students with learning disabilities lack the self-determination needed to effectively advocate for themselves at colleges and universities in order to obtain the reasonable accommodations they need (Boyd-Bradwell, 2014).

### **Importance of Developing Transition Skills in Secondary Schools**

A successful transition from a secondary school to a postsecondary institution is key when it comes to graduation rates for students with disabilities (Novakovic & Ross, 2015). To ease the stress of transitioning into higher education for students with disabilities, and to better assist those unfamiliar with the process for receiving services, Geller and Greenberg (2009) placed an emphasis on developing self-advocacy skills prior to enrolling. Self-advocacy skills ease the transition process when students with disabilities feel comfortable seeking out disability services and explaining the academic accommodations they feel are necessary. Developing self-advocacy skills prior to entering a college or university is important so students will potentially self-disclose a disability and request the services needed without encountering stress or anxiety. Self-determination is a factor in whether students with disabilities are successful when compared to students without disabilities (Burdge, 2012).

A 2009 study from the National Secondary Transition Technical Assistance Center explored factors that lead to success for students with disabilities transitioning from secondary schools to postsecondary institutions (Moore & McNaught, 2014). The study found self-determination was a key factor needed to transition effectively and be successful. Self-determination is the behavioral characteristics that are made up of “decision-making, problem-solving, goal setting and attainment, self-advocacy, self-awareness, and self-regulation” (Moore & McNaught, 2014, p. 247).

### **Transition Programs for Students with Learning Disabilities**

With research indicating self-determination is a beneficial characteristic for students with learning disabilities to develop prior to transitioning into postsecondary education, Moore and McNaught (2014) created a program called “I’m Determined” to help support them. Through this program, students completed tasks where they had to identify their goals and determinations. Once they completed this process, they worked with program staff to identify ways to accomplish their goals. Through their research, utilizing an “I’m Determined” project, Moore and McNaught found building self-determination in secondary school can potentially aid students with disabilities when facing barriers that hinder their access to higher education.

During mentoring workshops for students with disabilities, Milsom and Dietz (2009) found in addition to explaining the process for receiving services at a

postsecondary institution, working with students during their transition to build "confidence, persistence/ perseverance, resilience, self-determination skills, and self-discipline/self-regulation" would aid in overall performance and benefit all students as they enter a college or university (p. 6). Garrison-Wade and Lehmann's (2009) study indicated students with disabilities would benefit most from a three-part framework. The first part of the framework suggested postsecondary institutions maintain communication with secondary schools to reduce any confusion regarding the process for obtaining services (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009). The second part involved establishing a set of goals for the student as they navigated the transition. The final part of the framework consisted of establishing goals for the student to engage in once they began at a postsecondary institution (Garrison-Wade & Lehmann, 2009).

Novakovic and Ross (2015) held a program, "College Student for a Day," allowing students with disabilities the opportunity to visit a postsecondary institution's campus and learn about what the institution had to offer and what they needed to do to receive services (p. 230). By attending the College Student for a Day program, Novakovic and Ross believed students with disabilities would be more likely to enroll in higher education and have greater ease during their transition. Patrick and Wessel (2013) found by utilizing faculty mentors during the transition process, students with disabilities were more likely to have an easier transition and to be more successful with their academics.

The transition programs highlight ways for institutions of higher education to assist students with learning disabilities in navigating through their transition into postsecondary education through Schlossberg's transition theory. Inviting students with learning disabilities to visit the college or university prior to their leaving secondary school creates an opportunity for students to learn about the services and resources provided at the institution and the process required for obtaining and utilizing those services before they apply. Through this process, institutions would facilitate learning about supports available and strategies students with learning disabilities could use, potentially reducing the amount of stress caused by their transition.

## **Recommendations**

The literature provided many different recommendations for institutions of higher education to consider to enhance the support provided to students with learning disabilities. Milsom and Dietz (2009) stressed the importance of working with students with disabilities during the transition process due to an evident gap in the number of students proceeding to and completing higher education when compared with students without disabilities. Staff from disability services offices should collaborate with secondary schools to ensure students with learning disabilities are knowledgeable on the services available at institutions of higher education and the processes required for obtaining them (Burge, 2012; Gil, 2007; Hemblet, 2014). Prior to transitioning out of secondary school, it is important for students with learning disabilities to develop self-advocacy skills (Burdge, 2012). Through improving these skills, students with disabilities will potentially be more likely to seek out reasonable academic accommodations and request the services they feel are needed (Kimball et al., 2016).

Additional recommendations for postsecondary institutions to better assist students with learning disabilities include discussing with students the benefits of the various resources available at the institution and addressing any concerns students may have regarding the obtaining of services. The literature mentioned three factors that potentially prevent students with learning disabilities from utilizing services: feeling their learning disability no longer impacts their academic performance, a fear of their classmates learning about their utilization of services, and feeling they do not have enough time to obtain services. It is recommended that staff from disability services offices educate students on the importance of academic accommodations in an effort to address the factors.

When considering individuals that may feel they do not have enough time or that they are no longer in need of services, it is important to explain the benefits of having the services in place if they are needed later. Already having the services in place would potentially prevent students with learning disabilities from falling behind in their courses and experiencing stress while attempting to obtain services. In addition, it is important to discuss how students' confidentiality will be maintained. In doing so, the fear associated with others finding out about the use of services would potentially decrease.

### **Limitations**

A large amount of research exists on the topic of the transition of students with learning disabilities from secondary schools to postsecondary institutions with limited research on other types of disabilities. Another limitation is that this literature review focused on students with learning disabilities and should not be used to make inferences about all students with disabilities. There is not a sufficient amount of research into the individual reasons given by students with learning disabilities on why they made the decision to not self-identify with their postsecondary institution in order to receive reasonable academic accommodations.

In part, the largest limitation is the requirement of students with learning disabilities to self-identify for the purposes of research being conducted. The various reasons for students with learning disabilities to make the decision to not self-identify their disability for the purposes of the study could have stemmed from fear of the possibility of their disclosure not remaining confidential or simply not believing they have a learning disability.

### **Future Research**

Future studies on this topic would benefit from looking into the rate of self-identification of students with other disabilities, physical or psychiatric, in comparison to students with learning disabilities. Educators may benefit from a longitudinal study of students with disabilities, measuring their academic performance from enrollment at a postsecondary institution to their graduation. The utilization of a longitudinal study has the potential to identify trends and strategies that students with disabilities use in order to be successful in their academics.

Addressing the limitations mentioned, future studies would benefit from looking at factors that may lead students with physical or psychiatric disabilities to not seek reasonable academic accommodations. Disability staff at institutions of higher education may benefit from future research looking into the individual factors students with learning disabilities reported as reasons for not seeking reasonable academic accommodations: feeling their learning disability no longer impacts their academics, a concern about the confidentiality of services, and feeling they do not have the time needed in order to obtain services. Through obtaining a better understanding of and assessing ways to alleviate the concerns of students with learning disabilities, postsecondary institutions would potentially be able to better assist students in need of support.

## **Summary**

While there may be many different transitions and stressors students encounter when beginning their education at a postsecondary institution, this literature review applied Schlossberg's transition theory only to the transition of students with learning disabilities that do not initially seek reasonable academic accommodations. Utilizing Schlossberg's transition theory, staff at postsecondary institutions will be aware of the factors students progress through during the transition from secondary to postsecondary education. Disability and admissions staff will be able to work with secondary schools to provide students with learning disabilities with strategies to develop self-advocacy skills prior to beginning the transition to higher education. Through enhancing the self-advocacy skills of students with learning disabilities and raising their awareness of the process for self-identifying and requesting reasonable academic accommodations from an institution's disability services office prior to their transition from secondary school, they will potentially have the ability to navigate the four factors of Schlossberg's transition theory with less stress. Encountering the situation of transitioning from secondary education to higher education, students with learning disabilities will potentially maintain a lower level of stress, have an increased level of understanding of their self, be aware of where support can be accessed, and have the self-advocacy skills needed to obtain and utilize reasonable academic accommodations.

The literature indicated many factors that may lead newly enrolled first-year college students with documented learning disabilities to not seek reasonable academic accommodations from an institution's disability services office. Changes that occur during the transition from secondary schools to postsecondary institutions, moving from *IDEA* to the *Amendments Act* and *Section 504*, students with learning disabilities may begin to experience stress and confusion. Research has indicated students with learning disabilities may not realize they are required to self-identify and request services. If only 11% of students with disabilities self-identify to their postsecondary institution's disability services office, many others are not utilizing the reasonable academic accommodations that are available to students who self-identify.

To combat these statistics, research suggests secondary schools and postsecondary institutions work together to educate students on the process for receiving services at the postsecondary education level. Additionally, secondary schools should

work with students with learning disabilities to develop self-advocacy skills prior to their transition to college or university. Through these strategies, students with learning disabilities will likely seek reasonable academic accommodations and be more academically successful.

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