Life Adjustments of College Freshmen with and without Learning Disabilities

Ann Grasso Ryan

University of Saint Thomas
Saint Paul, Minnesota

This paper reports the results of a study comparing college freshmen with learning disabilities (LD) and freshmen with no learning disabilities (NLD). Four data collections over one academic year were completed on a total of 72 students (LD n = 39; NLD n = 33). Results of the study indicated differences between groups in their initial choice of living accommodations and in the changes made over the year: the overall trend was for students with LD to become more dependent on their families, while students with NLD were becoming less dependent on their families. With regard to academics, students with LD reported spending significantly less time in study and course preparation, as well as greater pessimism about success in coursework. Despite their pessimism, the actual GPA attainment of students with LD was similar to that of NLD peers. Whereas both groups initially predicted it would be easy to adjust to the academic and social nature of college, students with learning disabilities ultimately reported being dissatisfied with the social climate on campus. No differences were found between LD and NLD students regarding their motivation for attending college, or their plans for final degree attainment.
In 1986 it was reported that students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities comprised approximately 1.2% of the total freshmen class entering higher education, a ten-fold increase in one decade (HEATH 1986). In 1991, 10.5% of all college freshmen with disabilities identified themselves as having learning disabilities (Henderson 1992). Not surprisingly, this increase in enrollment and in an awareness of learning disabilities among postsecondary adults has raised a host of new questions and issues (Brinkerhoff, Shaw, and McGuire 1993; Vogel 1985, 1986). The academic and psycho-social adjustment of young people with learning disabilities is of particular concern as they leave high school and enter adult life (Ryan and Price 1992).

More than a decade ago, Blalock (1981), Deshler and Schumacher (1983), and Schumacher et al. (1983), among others, provided evidence dispelling the myth that adolescents and young adults with learning disabilities were merely older versions of children with this same disorder. It has become apparent that their needs are often different and, increasingly, these needs are being addressed. More and more students applying for admission to higher education inquire about academic accommodations and other services. Manuals and other aids are now available to assist these college-bound students in selecting the college or university best suited to their needs. These materials can help students become familiar with the types of services available in higher education in general as well as those available at individual colleges and universities (Mangrum and Strichart 1988; Staughn and Colby 1985).

To accommodate the accelerating demand for services, increasing numbers of colleges and universities are striving to meet and/or exceed the guidelines established under section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973. This is evidenced by the variety of student support services including note-takers, individual tutoring, counselling, study skills instruction, support groups, and reading and learning disabilities specialists (Adelman 1988; Vogel 1987) available at many postsecondary institutions.

While progress has been made regarding the acknowledgement of students with learning disabilities at many colleges and universities, some continue to offer minimal assistance and require students with dyslexia and other learning disabilities to fit within the traditional mold of the institution (Bursuck et al. 1989; Nelson and Lignugaris/Kraft 1989; Sedita 1986). More information is needed before students with this disability are appropriately accepted, advised, counselled, and understood. For example, even though it can be demonstrated that students...