

The Transition and Adjustment to Academic Expectations of First-Year Students with Specific Learning Disabilities: The Initial Follow-Up Study

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Students with learning disabilities are attending higher education institutions in increasing numbers (Brinckerhoff, 1993; Gajar, 1992; HEATH, 1995). However, the college environment does not provide the level of attention students with learning disabilities are accustomed to receiving in the kindergarten through twelfth grade (K-12) setting. Even though postsecondary institutions are required by law to provide accommodating services such as peer tutors, alternative test formats, note takers, and additional time to complete exams, students with learning disabilities are not likely to find planning and intervention teams regarding their learning disability (LD), resource room instruction, and professional LD tutors. In the original study reported in an earlier issue of the *Journal of College Orientation and Transition* (Hadley, Twale, & Evans, 2003) data indicated that in transitioning from the secondary to the postsecondary educational system, students struggled to develop the necessary competence level, to manage their emotions appropriately, and, to develop new relationships through the first three vectors of student development theory that Chickering (1969) theorized first-year students experience: *developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy*. This follow-up study continued to examine the same students' experiences, now in their junior year, through Chickering's next two vectors of *establishing identity and freeing interpersonal relations*. The purpose for conducting the study was to continue the original inquiry of college students with specific learning disabilities, who are now juniors, as they seek to clarify their sense of self and come to appreciate individual differences through their interaction with their professors and classmates.

Background of the Study

Definition of Learning Disabilities

A learning disability is a disorder in one or more of the basic processes involved in understanding spoken or written language and may show up as a problem in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, or spelling or in a person's ability to do math, despite at least average intelligence. Individuals with learning disabilities encounter difficulty in one or more of seven areas: receptive language, expressive language, basic

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reading skills, reading comprehension, written expression, mathematics calculations, or mathematics reasoning. According to the National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities (NJCLD, 1997) learning disabilities are intrinsic to the individual, are presumed to be due to central nervous system dysfunction, and may occur across the life span.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework of this study is that the intellectual adjustment for all college students is challenging (Tinto, 1993), but transitioning from high school to college becomes more difficult for students with learning disabilities (Brinckerhoff, 1996) because of their previous educational experience (Hadley, Twale, & Evans, 2003). Throughout elementary and secondary school, it is the responsibility of the school system to identify students with learning disabilities and to provide with needed services. Although college students with learning disabilities are guaranteed accommodations under Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), once they have been admitted to the college or university, they are expected to practice more active behavior (HEATH, 1995) by understanding their disability and requesting accommodations. Chickering's (1969) college student development vectors of *establishing identity* and *freeing interpersonal relations* provide the major theoretical framework for this follow-up study. His theory supports the concept of student integration development into postsecondary education, a concept widely supported in the literature (Hamrick, Evans, & Schuh, 2002; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991) about high school students transitioning to college. Chickering theorized that individual development involved the accomplishment of a series of developmental tasks. He argued that mastering these tasks was a process and specific conditions in the college environment influence that process. *Establishing identity* has to do with the student's growing awareness of personal competencies, emotions, individuality, and a growing openness toward others. *Freeing interpersonal relations* addressed the student's experience in learning to respond to others as individuals, as opposed to stereotypes. During this vector, students focus on developing greater levels of trust, independence, and comfort in interacting with their professors and classmates. Due to the increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities in postsecondary classrooms (Scott, 1997), studying their adjustment to postsecondary education would seem helpful both to secondary and postsecondary educators. Through Chickering's theoretical framework, university personnel can better assist students with learning disabilities in their access, integration, and persistence in the postsecondary setting. As a result, the following research questions were posed: How do students with dyslexia or reading problems perceive themselves as students? And, how do students with dyslexia or reading problems relate and interact with their professors and classmates?

Methods

Population and procedures

This follow-up study was conducted on the campus of a private, selective, coeducational, four-year college in the Midwest. The total student enrollment at the institution was 10,315, and the first-year student enrollment was 2,106, of which, 100 students with learning disabilities were identified in the 2000-2001 academic year when the study began. Dyslexia or reading related issues were reported to be the nature of the learning problems for the majority of students with learning disabilities, and this is not unexpected and is often first identified in the college setting (Hadley, Twale, & Evans, 2003; Reiff, 1997; Runyan, 1991). Although dyslexia can be diagnosed in childhood, this condition persists into adulthood (Bruck, 1990). The researcher interviewed and chose the first ten students who responded to a letter from the Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities to participate in the study, met the criteria of entering the university directly from high school, and possessed documentation defining their learning disability as dyslexia or reading related issues.

The students represented each of the four academic units on campus: arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering. Ultimately, nine students participated and included seven females and two males. Seven of the original nine remained a part of the study, and this follow-up study was conducted during the 2002-2003 academic year, the students' junior year. Two of the students in the original study departed from the university at the end of their first year.

The study was designed using qualitative methods so that the student's experiences and feelings could be offered in response to the researcher's open-ended techniques of inquiry. Qualitative methods are especially appropriate in an effort to understand the meaning the students have constructed to make sense of their world (Schuh, 2002). According to Merriam (1998), among the features of qualitative research are small sample sizes, inductive analysis, descriptive findings, and data collected through interviews. Very little research exists that provides the point of view of students with learning disabilities by the student themselves (Dunn, 1995; Finn, 1998; Hughes & Smith, 1990), thus reinforcing the selection of methodology.

The students continued with the follow-up study by participating in another set of focus group and semi-structured individual interview sessions to discuss their academic experiences and their academic experiences from first-year to their junior year of college. Focus groups are small in size and the goal of a focus group is to elicit the students' perceptions, feelings, attitudes, and ideas. Stewart and Shamdasani (1990) and Vaughn, Schumm, and Sinagub (1996) agreed that through participation in a focus group, a student might find comfort in the fact that personal feelings are not greatly different from those of peers. Individual interviews allow students with different views a comfortable forum for sharing their feelings (Krathwohl, 1998).

Data Collection

Data were collected through three methods: individual student artifacts, a focus group interview, and individual semi-structured interviews in order to ensure triangulation, which requires data to be gathered from multiple sources and through multiple methods (Glesne & Peshkin, 1992; Newman & Benz, 1998). Since students can have setbacks that impede their progress (Chickering, 1969), it was necessary to revisit the vectors that were studied in the original study of *developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy* to understand how students were progressing along those vectors. The focus group and the individual interviews were conducted during the second semester of the student's junior year.

Student artifacts. The student artifacts collected for the study included class schedules, copies of written assignments for their classes (which included grade and faculty comments), class syllabi, and any tutoring reports. The researcher also collected a portfolio of writing assignments from each student and "comment sheets" that professors used to give students feedback on their writing. In addition to collecting information about the student's style and mechanics of writing, the researcher hoped to gather information about student's responding to verbal directions, remembering information presented in class, taking notes in class, identifying main ideas in their papers, and/or understanding important concepts in a given assignment.

Focus groups. Focus groups provide a comfort to participants and encourage candid responses (Finn, 1998; Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). Questions for the focus group were based on revisiting Chickering's (1969) first vector of *developing competence* and third vector, *developing autonomy*, which had been investigated in the original study, to understand if and how the students were acquiring the appropriate skills necessary for successful movement through the college environment and how the students were developing their independence. The fifth vector of *freeing interpersonal relations* was introduced and students discussed issues around interacting with others in their classes, working on group assignments, and communicating with their professors. The focus group was conducted early in the second semester after the students had completed their first semester of classes during their junior year. The focus group interview was two hours long and audio-taped. Five of the seven students participated in the focus group interviews. Two of the seven students were out of the country for the semester studying abroad in Australia and Ireland. E-mail and telephone interviews were conducted with the two of them.

Semi-structured interviews. Individual interviews allowed a forum for students to offer opinions and feelings that were different than the group (Krathwohl, 1998). The researcher conducted a one-hour audio-taped, semi-structured individual interview with five of the students, and e-mail and telephone interviews were conducted with the two students studying abroad. Students responded to questions reviewed from Chickering's second vector of *managing emotions*, which had been studied in the original research, to understand if students had made growth along this second vector, and questions gleaned from an understanding of Chickering's fourth vector of *establishing identity*. Students

responded to questions relating to their ability to react appropriately in difficult situations when they were working with others on class assignments and how they view themselves as students. The individual interviews were conducted over a two-week time frame following the focus group interviews, prior to midterm exams.

Data Analysis

The inductive analysis process of going through the transcripts and giving meaning to words, phrases, and scenarios that continually emerge out of the data (Creswell, 1994; Patton, 1987) was used for interpreting the data. The researcher selectively attached meaningful tags to words, phrases, events, and situations, naming what is potentially important to the study's findings (Krauthohl, 1998; Preissle Goetz & LeCompte, 1984). The coding scheme required that the researcher go through the transcripts and color code each meaningful word, phrase, and scenario with a different color. Those highlighted themes were then transferred to note-cards where the researcher attached meaning to those themes. The researcher then theorized how the answers to the two research questions fit with Chickering's vectors of *establishing identity and freeing interpersonal relations*.

Results

Question 1

One of the themes that emerged regarding the first question about *establishing identity* was how students viewed themselves as still having to work very hard in their classes because of their learning disability. Students also seemed to think that their professors and fellow students viewed them as hard workers. As in their first year of classes, students complained that while they tended to put a lot of time and effort into their schoolwork, their grades did not always reflect their commitment. In sharing conversations she had with several of her professors about the amount of work she put into her classes as compared to her classmates, a female business major said one of her professors commented, "You give so much and there are other students in the class who do the bare minimum to get by." The student seemed proud that she was not willing to "give up" or "give in" when work seemed demanding, but she was frustrated that it required so much energy and time from her to get assignments done.

A second theme that evolved from the data was that students usually entered classes feeling a lack of confidence in their ability to earn grades at the top of their classes. Nearly all of the students reported reserving any expectations for classes until they had a chance to experience the class and get some sense of how the professor structured the learning environment. Students reported that variables such as knowing something about the course content and liking the course had more impact on how they performed in the class than their work ethic. A female education major noted that because she was an "active-visual learner" she had to switch to a different section for her physics class

because her original class was a lecture format. Because of this she was falling behind in the class, and transferred to another section where the professor used "work sheets," "study guides," and more "hands on approaches" to the class material, resulting, in her opinion, to a more successful course for her. A male engineering student said, in describing the necessity for getting a sense of the class,

I don't really set expectations for myself. I kind of say, ok, knowing what this class is about, given my liking for that class, the professor, how tough it is, I will say yeah I'll probably end up with a 'B.' I won't say oh my goal is to get a 'B.'

One of the female Business majors added, "I don't really set high expectations, I do what I can do."

The third theme prevalent in the data was that students seemed to think that their learning disability was more of an issue than their gender. Although students did not seem to have strong perceptions about differentiation in the treatment of male students as compared to female students with learning disabilities, all of them reported feeling that in their total educational experience they have always been treated "differently" because of their learning disability. Several of the students agreed that they could recall a situation in which their professors treated them differently because of their disability. Only one of the students said she felt any of her professors showed favoritism to a student because of gender. Most of the students in the study admitted to keeping their disability private, but several mentioned that because of the circumstances around their learning disability (extra time on exams, etc.) that other students recognized the difference in treatment. The male engineering student pointed out that his junior-level engineering courses required a lot of group work both inside and outside the classroom setting. He went on to say that although having a learning disability was not something he "wears on his shirt," his "poor writing and organizational skills" were noticed by his classmates.

Theme four indicated that the students viewed their disability as more of an issue in certain classes than others. Students talked about symptoms of their disability surfacing more in classes where they felt less comfortable with the course content and did not feel as confident in their skill level related to the course. A female arts and sciences student gave the example of taking a publication design course, which is basically all computer work and very little writing assignments, and she said her disability hardly surfaced except for grammatical errors on writing assignments. One of the other female business students admitted that she really struggled with reading and disliked reading for class so much that she moved from her "easiest to hardest classes" or from what takes the "shortest time to the longest time" to complete. Students elaborated by sharing that a "welcoming and more comfortable" class is one in which they have friends in the class and professors that know students by their name. Another female business student insisted that she gets "distracted," "can't concentrate," and "can't learn as well" if she is in a class she does not like and where she does not like the professor. Most of the students agreed that when the professor knows their names, they "feel like you can ask

them anything.” Several of the students acknowledged that when their class was a smaller one, it “frustrates” them when the professor does not learn the students’ names.

A final theme for the first question was that students reported feeling their learning disability as a positive motivator. Even though students continuously voiced frustration about their learning disabilities, the sentiment among the group was their struggle to manage and compensate because of their learning disability made them a stronger individual. In describing her determination to contend with her learning disability, the female arts and sciences major said,

I almost think it makes me almost more confident because it does influence my personality because I am one of those kind of people that will take a bad situation and try to make it better. I try not to let things bring me down; I always try to conquer something.

Even as juniors, students still voiced dissatisfaction about the amount and level of help they were able to get while in the college environment. Again, comments about services in the writing center, for example, continued to be an issue for these students. As they did in their first-year, they viewed writing courses as the ones that were the most challenging to them and the ones that required the most “effort.” The male engineering major pointed out that the writing center is facilitated by peer tutors who assist with grammatical concerns, not the structural issues of writing. But because a “term paper” requires “a lot of writing,” which does not come easy for him, he was pleased that he was doing things at the same level that everyone else, since according to him, “I have got an extra hurdle to go over.”

Question 2

The first theme that was evident regarding the question about *freeing interpersonal relations* was the student reports of needing to feel confident in their knowledge in the course content and a comfort level in the course before speaking up in classes or participating in class discussions. The students viewed participating in class discussions as ‘risky behavior’ since they were always questioning their skill level in certain classes and struggling to integrate into their classroom setting. Because of this, they usually reported keeping a low profile and trying not to draw any unnecessary attention to themselves. In discussing her willingness to take risks by speaking up, the female arts and sciences major shared that she was sometimes willing to give her “opinion” on a topic, because she viewed that as different from giving an “answer” to a problem. The female education student noted that her major was unique because education courses are offered in limited blocks of time, with certain professors teaching the courses starting freshmen year. By the student’s junior year, she was familiar with certain professors and their teaching styles and knew practically all of her classmates. According to her, that familiarity with professors and classmates made communicating in class easier.

On-going communication with professors was essential to understanding and

completing academic assignments was the second theme that the data revealed for the second question. While explaining how he got a sense of the professor's tolerance level for stopping the class to address questions, the male engineering student explained, "after a couple of days in class you can see how the teacher reacts to questions." The other students agreed as he explained that the professor's willingness to accept questions during class lectures determined his willingness to ask questions in class. He added that if the professor did not seem open to questions, he would "take a nap" in class and later "figure it out from the book." Several of the students spoke passionately about the professor's role and responsibility to them as students. The female arts and sciences student insisted that professors are "paid to teach," and when she had a question she was "going to ask it!" One of the female business students said that when one of her professors was not open to questions in class and she was not able to speak with him after class, she said, "I would just work with study groups and tried to teach myself."

Theme three indicated that students viewed using e-mail as a useful tool for on-going communication with their professors. The students agreed that e-mail was a convenient option as a means for communicating with professors about attendance in their classes, turning in assignments, and communicating with fellow classmates. E-mail, the students reported, however, was only a helpful choice for class projects or assignments when classes were smaller. When describing an e-mail group session set up for one of her classes, the female education major said that because the group was so large the e-mails "cluttered up" her mail box and found trying to respond to her classmates' comments as "confusing." The male engineering student countered that he had numerous group projects to do for his classes and because the group size was small, it was convenient to e-mail group members a section of a paper. In terms of communication with their professors, students seemed to think e-mail supported constant communication, and provided a means for interacting with professors when they cannot get into see them. Additionally, several of the students reported that their professors were more responsive to e-mail than voicemail. Students did not seem to correlate using e-mail as an avoidance tactic or an obstacle to face-to-face communication with their professors or fellow classmates.

The final theme that emerged was that students felt they benefited from studying in a group, but did not like participating in assigned group projects where there would be a group grade. The interviewed students talked about struggling so hard to achieve the grades they receive, and shared that the thought of another student influencing their grade felt uncomfortable. A couple of the female students described themselves as needing so much control in the process when they are working in groups that they often found themselves taking a lot of responsibility in the group. They revealed worrying about the quality of work submitted, whether each group member was doing their part, and if the assignments were finished in a timely manner. The same females discussed experiences working in a group setting where each group member "did not do their fair share," and because of this, they did not like group work.

Discussion

In reviewing Chickering's vectors researched in the original study: *developing competence, managing emotions, and developing autonomy*, data revealed that students with learning disabilities continued to struggle to develop the appropriate competence level for their classes, responded in the right way to issues of concern, and to expand their relationships. Chickering found that as college students seek to *develop competence, manage emotions, and develop autonomy*, they moved from a lack of confidence to a strong sense of confidence in their abilities, mastered appropriate expressions, and acquired inner direction. Although students reported feelings of being more mature and familiar with the expectations of the college environment, due to their learning disability, they continued to face challenges to their quest for growth along Chickering's vectors. Students seemed to find persisting through college to be very different than high school because of its emphasis on independent behavior.

Establishing Identity

Findings related to the first research question indicated that students viewed themselves as hard workers, unable to predict how they will perform in their classes, felt that they were treated differently because of their learning disabilities rather than their gender, felt that they struggled with symptoms of their learning disability more in certain classes than others, and were positively motivated by their learning disability. Chickering's vector of *establishing identity* was demonstrated by the student's ability to develop clarity about self, self-acceptance, and self-esteem. Therefore, students' ability to view themselves beyond their learning disability was something students with learning disabilities must continue to address. Students viewed their learning disability as a positive motivator rather than a deterrent. By coming to accept and understand their disability, these students may come to view it as a gift (Brinckerhoff, 1993). The students seemed proud when they opined about reaching their junior year in college in spite of their learning disability. This would seem to be a productive way to view this characteristic of themselves because maintaining high levels of global self-esteem was important for students with learning disabilities, as it can affect their motivation and performance in areas not directly affected by their disability.

As students in the study increasingly acquired a sense of identity and academically persisted through their junior year, as in their freshman and sophomore years, they continued to report discomfort because of and distraction by their learning disabilities. Individuals with learning disabilities that attended college are a subset of all adults with learning disabilities (Vogel & Adelman, 1992), and, according to Skinner and Schenck (1992), differ significantly from the broader population of adults with learning disabilities. Skinner and Schenck speculated that college students with learning disabilities are a sub-sample of those students with learning disabilities who have done well while in high school. Although students in the study were persisting in college, they reported entering their classes with a lack of confidence in their ability to do well in their

classes until they have had some form of confirmation. Perhaps due to the academic expectations of the postsecondary educational setting, college students with learning disabilities tended to have lower self-esteem than their peers without learning disabilities. Chickering theorized that while in college, students continue to work toward *establishing identity* through the role of a student, leader, participant, or observer in different ways, and experimenting with these roles will help the student solidify self.

Freeing Interpersonal Relations

In terms of students' relationships with their professors and classmates and how they interacted with them, the data revealed that students needed to feel confident in their understanding of knowledge of course material before speaking up in class, needs on-going communication with professors to understand and complete academic assignments, used e-mail to be a useful form of communication with professors and others in the class but not as a teaching tool, and assignments that require group work and group grades is not their preference. Chickering wrote that while mastering the vector of *freeing interpersonal relations*, the student works toward tolerating and appreciating the differences of others. Students seemed to have a difficult time thinking of themselves beyond the context of their learning disability. Because of this they tended to place many limitations on themselves in terms of their ability to take risks in their classes, how they interact with their classmates, and their willingness to challenge the authority of the professor. While in college, however, students encountered others that were different from themselves as well as peers that share common experiences. These relationships were connections that may have a profound impression on students' lives and values (Chickering & Riesser, 1993). As students with learning disabilities seek to become educationally engaged in the postsecondary environment, opening themselves up to new relationships and behaviors will be an investment they must be willing to make. Several students in the study reported feeling surprised to realize once they were on campus that there were so many other students on the campus with learning disabilities. One student mentioned that her best friend on campus for the last three years has been another student with a learning disability, and another student commented on how participating in the study for the last three years has impacted her life in a positive way.

As more students with learning disabilities view postsecondary education as a viable option, student development programs and services on college campuses will need to assist students with their transition, academic adjustment, and persistence. The academic, emotional, and sociological investment students with learning disabilities must make when transitioning to higher education can be supported through campus programs. Divisions of student affairs have responsibility for the development of college students (Miller, Dyer, & Nadler, 2002), therefore, programming within the Office for Students with Disabilities, Counseling Center, and Learning Assistance Center might work hard to assist students with learning disabilities integrate more into the campus environment.

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