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College students' perceptions about seeking help for their learning disabilities at a competitive university

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College Students' Perceptions about Seeking Help for Their Learning Disabilities

At A Competitive University

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Abstract

With nearly 98% of public institutions reporting enrollment of students with a disability, requests for services, supports, and accommodations is increasing (Gordon et al., 2002; National Council on Disabilities, 2003). However, certain barriers and/or perceptions get in the way of students' mobility in seeking and acquiring necessary accommodations. While disability services and accommodations are available, it appears that many students do not take advantage of them in a timely manner. While it is not required for a student to disclose information about a learning disability, the student will not be able to acquire any accommodations. Students should be prepared and equipped with the self-determination and self-advocacy skills to find and use available resources in college. The current research attempted to determine if selected students with a learning disability at James Madison University are able to advocate for themselves by seeking services and/or accommodations upon entering into post-secondary education in relation to his or her knowledge and understanding of the learning disability, degree of transition services, and perceptions about seeking help. The results indicated that those students who came to Disability Services during their freshman year had more preparation in high school for the transition to college; however, it appears that those students who sought services early may have had more serious academic difficulties (e.g., they were still receiving services during their senior year of high school and were more likely to have comorbid attention and anxiety-related concerns). Overall, getting to Disability Services early does seem to make a difference in a student's academic achievement. Implications for school psychologists, suggestions and feedback regarding the development of a transition protocol within the schools, and future research are discussed.

I. Introduction

Statement of problem

According to reports issued by the Department of Education, the number of students receiving special education in the United States continues to grow each year. The largest increase has been in the categories of learning disabilities, comprising almost two-thirds of students receiving special education services in secondary schools. Data taken from the U.S. Department of Education in 2004 indicates that nearly 2.9 million students, ages 6 through 21, are identified as having a specific learning disability and receive some form of special education support. In accordance with the increase in children identified as having a learning disability, the number of students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities is also on the rise. However, graduation and employment rates for students with disabilities are behind those for students without disabilities (Anctil et al., 2008; Horn et al., 1999; Wagner & Blackorby, 1996).

Students with a learning disability tend to perform less well than their nondisabled peers, have a higher dropout rate, obtain lower GPAs, are more likely to take time off from college, and tend to change to an easier program of study (Murray et al, 2000). While disability services and accommodations are available, many students do not appear to take advantage of them in a timely manner (Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). Learning disabilities do not go away as a person matures. An individual does not grow out of a learning disability when he or she becomes an adult, but difficulties continue to manifest themselves in both academic and social areas.

II. Literature Review

IDEA versus ADA

Until the mid-1960s, learning disabilities were not recognized as a separate category of students with disabilities in special education. In the following years, millions of children have been identified as having a learning disability, and placed in special programs aimed to remediate deficits in learning. The Individuals with Disability Act (2004) defines a specific learning disability as a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using language, spoken or written, which the disorder may manifest itself in the imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations.

The passing of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, which mandates that institutions of higher education that receive federal funds are not allowed to discriminate on the basis of disability, brought forth increasing awareness among students, educational institutions, and guidance counselors. Specifically, Section 504 prohibits any program or activity receiving federal assistance from discriminating, excluding, or denying benefits to an otherwise qualified handicapped individual solely by reason on the handicapping condition. Additionally, the Americans with Disabilities Act also outlined that qualified students with disabilities must receive 'reasonable accommodations' in their college program (Gordon et al., 2002; Stracher, 1993). Unlike IDEA, the goal of ADA is not to ensure privilege to academic success, but to provide equal access to programs, services, and facilities (Gordon et al, 2002).

Because of Section 504 and the ADA, many colleges have adopted a more open and lenient admissions policy for students with learning disabilities. Efforts made by

postsecondary institutions to provide more support and services have also led to an increase in the number of students with learning disabilities attending colleges and universities (Beale, 2005). However, many students who have received special education services may not be aware of the change in laws once they turn 18 and graduate from high school. Major differences between IDEA in secondary school and ADA in college include:

- Under IDEA, school districts are responsible for identifying a student's disability while the students themselves must self-identify their needs under ADA.
- School districts provide free testing and evaluations under IDEA whereas ADA mandates students to provide current and appropriate documentation as defined by the college they are attending. In addition, if documentation from high school is not adequate, the student pays for additional testing at his or her own expense.
- In high school, IDEA includes transition planning and timelines that help to clarify the students' goals, identify programming choices and coordinate appropriate coursework options. Students make all coursework selections themselves in college.
- IDEA requires school districts to develop an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) to define educational supports and services under special education. There is no IEP or special education in college, rather service delivery is worked out on a case-by-case basis with the institution's disability services office.
- In IDEA, the IEP team collaborates to determine what supports and services will be provided. Under ADA, the student is responsible for contacting faculty and advocating for services.

- Access to the general curriculum, necessary modifications, and a variety of appropriate accommodations are available to students under IDEA. There are no fundamental alterations to the curriculum required under ADA; only accommodations are made. Academic accommodations are available based on the student's documented disability.
- Parents are granted access to student records in high school and can participate in the IEP process. In college, parents do not have access to student records without the student's written consent. While parent permission to receive services is required under IDEA, once the student turns 18 they are a legal adult and parent permission is not required under ADA. Students must advocate for themselves.

Understanding learning disabilities

In a study conducted by Troiano (2003), the time of diagnosis proved to be a factor in how well students understood the impact their learning disability had on their academic careers. Students who were identified with a learning disability in elementary school were able to talk about their learning disability at great length and depth. These students understood the impact on their learning abilities and were able to develop ways in which to work around and compensate for their difficulties. Because these students had an early diagnosis, they had the advantage of more time to better prepare themselves for college. Troiano found that the early diagnosis helped these students become more aware of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as more accepting of their learning disability. Johnson et al. (2008) outlined some predictors and enhancers that likely help promote success of learning disabled students at the college level. Among those factors discussed was early identification and proactive support.

Conversely, students who were diagnosed in high school expressed regret that their disability had not been identified earlier (Troiano, 2003). These students did not have the time to truly understand their strengths and weaknesses prior to beginning college and were still learning how to respond to their diagnosis. Finally, Troiano found that students who were diagnosed after graduating from high school had to work hard in order to gain a sense of acceptance and understanding of their learning disability. Madaus et al. (2008) looked into adults with learning disabilities as they emerged in the workplace. The article discussed the importance of being able to clearly define personal strengths and weaknesses as well as the ability to talk openly about specific ways in which the learning disability affects them. Further, successful adults were able to avoid letting their learning disability influence them negatively and felt control over their future outcomes. The concept of self-understanding traces back to the need for the students' ability to recognize their strengths and weaknesses surrounding their learning disability, and should not be ashamed or embarrassed. Rather, students should be prepared and equipped with the self-determination and self-advocacy skills to find and use available resources in college.

Barriers to seeking help

With nearly 98% of public institutions reporting enrollment of students with a disability, requests for services, supports, and accommodations has created a market for psychoeducational evaluations in order to provide accurate and up-to-date documentation of a disability that impacts learning (Gordon et al., 2002; National Council on Disabilities, 2003). However, certain barriers and/or perceptions get in the way of students' mobility in seeking and acquiring necessary accommodations. College students

with learning disabilities can benefit from academic support services, but only a small portion of students use available services. This occurrence is concerning because college students with learning disabilities demonstrate significantly poorer academic adjustment to the college setting than their non-learning disabled peers (Bursuck et al., 1989; Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002; Hughes & Smith, 1990).

Among the problems contributing to poor academic performance of students with learning disabilities are organization, comprehension, written and oral communication, poor academic and personal self-concept, and low tolerance for frustration (Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). With the continued presence of academic problems paired with years of frustration and failure, students with learning disabilities may begin to feel a lack of confidence in their ability to learn. Some students may become passive learners and develop a sense of learned helplessness, or have little assurance in their own abilities. Giving up quickly if a task is too difficult and feeling that their successes are due to external factors such as luck are also some thoughts that may be held by students with a learning disability. Because of their history with repeated failure or having established negative feelings and self-doubts, it may be difficult to motivate many students with learning disabilities when it comes to academics.

Denhart (2008) discussed three themes that consistently appear in qualitative data regarding students in labeled with a learning disability who are in post-secondary education. Students with a learning disability spoke of being viewed as intellectually inferior, incompetent, lacking effort, or attempting to cheat or use unfair advantages when requesting accommodations. Not only do students feel intrapersonally misunderstood, but interpersonal feelings also lead to devaluation and marginalization.

These feelings of being misunderstood lead to a direct impact on whether a student will request accommodations. Students requesting accommodations have been told that they are taking advantage of the situation, fear being perceived as cheaters, and have experienced negative attitudes from professors regarding the use of services (Sarver, as cited in Denhart, 2008).

A second theme that emerges from research on perceptions among college students with a learning disability is the notion that they will have to work harder than their nondisabled peers are. Along with the fear of stigma and being misunderstood, college students with a learning disability often will avoid using their legally mandated accommodations that could ease their workload (Denhart, 2008). In addition, findings show that these students are often regarded by professors as being lazy or not trying hard enough, and are using their disability as an excuse to get out of work (Lock & Layton, 2001).

Finally, a third theme surrounds the process of securing proper documentation of a disability that significantly impacts learning (Denhart, 2008). Students struggled with seeking empowerment strategies for practical and emotional needs. Many students who wish to receive accommodations must first ensure proper documentation, including an updated assessment. Students described the process of evaluation traumatizing and violating, while also noting that testing is expensive. The criteria for most current policies for post-secondary education require the most recent testing to have been completed within the last three years.

Aside from attaining academic accommodations, many students with a learning disability also seek strategies to empower their emotional and psychological needs. By

reframing their disability, students may be able to focus more on their unique strengths and abilities allowing them to take control of their lives and view themselves in a more positive light (Anctil et al, 2008). These students are more likely to be persistent, find work that maximizes their strengths, develop unique ways to accomplish tasks by compensating for their weaknesses, and engage in a social network that provides support as opposed to encouraging dependence (Kerka, 2002 as cited in Anctil et al, 2008).

While individuals with a disability do form positive self-perceptions, they also use strategies aimed toward reducing negative evaluations by others. Many people with disabilities may choose to use passing, a strategy in which they may seek to control the perceptions of others to avoid negative stereotypes associated with having a disability (Olney and Brockleman, 2003). Strategies used to manage information about them may include sharing information on a need to know basis, demonstrating their competence, or waiting until they feel safe to tell others about their differences.

Olney and Brockelman (2003) found that participants in their study provided several reasons why they chose to conceal their impairments. Reasons given include concern others would not believe they truly had a disability, feeling that others would view them as less competent, wishing to be seen as consistent and trustworthy, and worrying others will see them only as needing help rather than as a peer who can engage in a give and take relationship. Individuals with a disability appear to engage in a process of deciding when and where they will reveal information regarding their disability. Most college students must make the decision about whether or not they wish to disclose their learning disability (Joyce & Rossen, 2006). While it is not required for a student to disclose information about a learning disability, the student will not be able to acquire

any accommodations. In college, it is the student's responsibility to notify the institution of his or her disability status and register with the office of disability services in order to receive accommodations.

Considering the many barriers to a successful college experience for students with learning disabilities, it is important to look into the factors that may lead to a more positive transition from secondary to post-secondary education (Anctil et al, 2008). Often it is assumed by educators and families that high school students with learning disabilities can successfully transition to adult life without any general transition planning or support services. However, studies have shown that a large proportion of students with learning disabilities are less successful in post-secondary education and living independently than their nondisabled peers.

Availability of Accommodations

Generally, services vary depending on the size of an institution, available resources, and pedagogical practices (Joyce & Rossen, 2006). Free or reduced cost psychoeducational evaluations, tutoring, workshops on study skills, career counseling, and mental health centers are offered by some colleges and universities. Typical services found in K through 12 schools, such as special classrooms and curriculum programs, are not applicable.

One important factor in whether course substitutions at the college level are permitted is the degree chosen by the student. Course substitutions are sometimes allowed; however, they are typically limited to content that is not critical to the chosen field of study. An example from Joyce and Rossen (2006) outlines how a student who is pursuing a math degree with a documented speech disability may be allowed to substitute

a different course for their foreign language requirement. However, a student with a math learning disability wishing to pursue a mathematics degree may not be allowed to substitute elective courses for a math requirement. The ADA guidelines do require reasonable course substitutions for graduation requirements as long as the substitution does not amount to a fundamental change in the degree program's core knowledge base. Table 1 gives a sample listing of the possible college accommodations for students with learning disabilities. In order for specific accommodations to be approved, the psychological report must justify that the students' learning is impacted by a documented disability and that reasonable accommodations are necessary to promote academic success.

Table 1 Possible college level accommodations	
Area of Need	Accommodations
Testing	Extra time on tests, preferred time of day testing, exam delays (for medical treatment), alternate answer format (e.g., oral, computer, no scantron), separate quiet room with proctor
Classroom	Priority seating, change of classroom, environmental changes (e.g., equipment, furniture), frequent instructor feedback, course reviews, longer response time for questions
Instructional	Providing copies of lecture notes or PowerPoint slides, enlarged print, advanced copy of syllabus, books or handouts, alternatives to fine motor manipulation
Assistive Technology	Tape recorded lectures, textbooks on tape, computer software (e.g., text-to-speech, speech synthesizers, phonetic spell checker), typed rather than handwritten assignments, assistive listening devices
Personal Assistance	Note taker, scribes, sign language interpreter, readers
Administrative Accommodations	Priority registration, reduced course load per semester, course substitutions, extra course

	drops or withdrawals, flexible attendance for medical procedures
Additional Services	Tutoring, workshops (e.g., study skill, time management, learning strategies), mental health support (e.g., test anxiety groups, ADHD coaching), vocational counseling

Hypotheses

The current research attempted to determine if selected students with a learning disability at James Madison University are able to advocate for themselves by seeking services and/or accommodations upon entering into post-secondary education in relation to his or her knowledge and understanding of the learning disability, degree of transition services, and perceptions about seeking help. Based on a review of literature, this research explored the following two questions:

1. Will students who seek help early be aware of and understand their learning disability? Encompassed under the first hypothesis is the belief that these students are aware of their ability levels and what services they need in order to succeed, were prepared for the transition from high school to college, and/or are not confident in their abilities unless they have accommodations.
2. Will students who wait to seek help after their first semester of their freshman year be unaware of and not understand their learning disability?" Included under the second hypothesis is the belief that these student are not aware of what implications their learning disability has on their academic success, were not prepared for the transition from high school to college and thus are not aware of the services available to them at the college level, and/or want to try succeeding on their own by not disclosing their disability.

III. Method

Participants

The sample for this study comprised male and female students who have had a previous history and identification of a Specific Learning Disability and are registered students at James Madison University. Students were recruited from a peer mentoring program at James Madison University as well as the Screening and Assessment Center. A total of thirty students were interviewed, sixteen male students and fourteen female students. There was one freshman student (female), ten sophomores (five female; five male), ten juniors (three female; eight male), and nine seniors (five female; four male). Seven of the total students reported having comorbid anxiety or attention-related concerns (two female; five male).

Out of these participants, 12 students sought services and/or accommodations during their freshman year (six female; six male); 18 students waited until after the completion of their freshman year to seek services and/or accommodations (eight female; ten male). Of the students who sought services during their freshman year, six came to Disability Services first semester and six waited until their second semester. Of the students who waited after their freshman year, sixteen sought services during their sophomore year and two students came to Disability Services during their junior year.

Materials

Supplemental questions. The supplemental questions to the Screening Interview used at James Madison University's Screening and Assessment Center was developed by the primary researcher to assess students' level of understanding and awareness of his or her learning disability, prior experience with transition services, and knowledge of

available services and accommodations at the post-secondary education level. The first two questions address the two groupings of students, those who sought services during their freshman year and those who waited until their sophomore year and beyond.

Subsequent questions measure the student's previous experience with psychoeducational evaluations and school psychologists; sharing and understanding of evaluation results; an ability to describe his or her learning disability and its implications on their learning; knowledge of and experience with Individualized Education Plans; any transition services provided prior to beginning college; and knowledge of the rights as an adult regarding his or her learning disability. All questions were open ended questions, allowing students to answer freely. Students' responses provided information that helped to understand each of their unique experiences, the meanings they attributed to them, and the significance within the students' personal narrative. See appendix.

Procedure

Participants were recruited through a method of convenience sampling. Participants were recruited during the fall 2009 and spring 2010 semesters from a peer mentoring program recruitment process at James Madison University and then interviewed by the committee chair. Additional students were recruited from the Screening and Assessment Center at James Madison University and interviewed by the graduate assistant. When a student was deemed eligible for this study, he or she was offered the opportunity to participate. Each student was given the chance to read over the informed consent and, once their questions have been answered satisfactorily, decide whether to participate. Participation was completely voluntary, and had no impact on the

student's eligibility to receive services and/or accommodations through Disability Services.

For the current study, the supplemental questions to the Screening Interview lasted approximately 45 minutes, and there was no identifying information included in the interview. The interview included ten questions. The transcribed interviews were coded in order to identify the gender of the student, the student's current academic year, and the academic year in which the student initially sought services and accommodations at James Madison University. All interview forms were stored and locked in the committee chairs university office.

IV. Results

Qualitative Data

All interviews were documented and transcribed for analysis. The overall analytical approach followed a thematic analysis where the researcher produced a list of codes representing themes and patterns identified in the textual data (King, 2004). The thematic analysis method involved grouping together different instances of data under an umbrella term or phrase that allowed them to be regarded as similar or of the same type. From these patterns, themes were developed based on the responses provided by the students in order obtain a comprehensive view of the information. The themes and subthemes were organized in a way that represented the relationship between themes and how they relate to each other within the data. Quotes were grouped by identifying themes and subthemes based on the college transition literature, repetition of common words, or the meaning of the whole quote.

For analysis, participants were categorized into two groups based on the semester during which they sought help in the form of services and accommodations for their learning disabilities. Out of the thirty participants, 12 students were categorized into the 'early group' which indicates they sought services during their freshman year. Within the early group of students, only five of the 12 came directly to Disability Services during their first semester at James Madison University by way of a school psychologist, parents, or flyers on campus. These students indicated that they decided to identify their disability and seek services as a result of preparation by a school psychologist, parental suggestion, or panic following a test.

The remaining 18 students who were interviewed waited until after their freshman year before seeking services, and were categorized in the 'late group'. Table 2 represents theme names, which are general descriptors of the themes, and subtheme names, which are specific aspects of the themes, in response to the second question. The question asked what led the students to seek services, how it was for them to not use accommodations, and what changed their mind. The theme and subtheme names are arranged in order based on the number of quotes in each pile. Themes and subthemes listed first include the most common quotes. Unnumbered themes and subthemes are arranged in alphabetical order and indicate that there are an equal number of quotes.

Students in the early group indicated by their responses to question 3 that they were told by a regular education teacher or special education teacher (2 students), a parent (2 students), a counselor (1 student), or a school psychologist (1 student) about their learning disability; six of the students could not recall who it was that informed them of their learning disability. Students in the late group reported being told by a regular education or special education teacher (5 students), a counselor or school psychologist (2 students), outside psychologist or psychiatrist (2 students); five of the students could not remember who told them about their learning disability and one student indicated not being informed until a reevaluation was completed at James Madison University. Table 3 represents themes in regards to students' feelings associated with being told they had a learning disability. Similar to Table 2, themes listed first indicate the most common quotes.

Table 2 Question 2 themes and subthemes			
	Themes	Subthemes: Early Group	Subthemes: Late Group
Question 2a.	1. Waited to seek services	1: Procrastination 2: Attempted without accommodations	1: Didn't think they would need accommodations 2: Procrastination 3: Attempted without accommodations 4: Don't know Did not know accommodations were available Embarrassed to reveal learning disability
Question 2b.	2. Performance without accommodations	1: Did okay 2: Panicked, but was able to cope 3: Experienced a multitude of difficulties Didn't notice any changes	1: Did okay 2: Had great difficulty 3: Still do not use accommodations Avoided certain classes Dropped classes Hoped to get used to the pressure Low GPA Not sure Used informal accommodations
Question 2c.	3. Reasons to change their mind	1: Low GPA Low test grades	1: Low GPA, including academic probation 2: Don't know Reevaluation

Table 3 Feelings associated with having a learning disability	
Early Group	1: Don't remember
	2: Singled out or different
	Confused
	Relieved
Late Group	1: Don't remember
	2: Curious or excited
	3: Anger or resentment
	Embarrassed
	Less capable

For question 4, responses from students in the early group were split; five students indicated they were told why they were being evaluated in grade school, five students were not told, and two students reported having informal discussions. Of the students who were informed regarding their testing, responses as to how test results were explained included attendance at various meetings with parents, teachers, school psychologists, or principals, and transition programs. Eleven students in the late group reported having been told why they were being tested, while only six reported not having been told. Students in the late group indicated that their test results were explained in general terms such as only what their weaknesses were and that they learn differently; furthermore, these students indicated that only test results were explained, not the impact of their learning disability or any specifics regarding their learning disability.

Table 4 represents themes in regards to the students' ability to describe their learning disability and what implications it has in relation to their academic success. All students in the early group were able to describe their learning disability and how it impacts their learning, while four of the students in the late group could not describe their learning disability and what implications it has on their learning.

Table 4 Learning disability defined and academic implications		
Theme	Subtheme: Early Group	Subtheme: Late Group
1: Classes	Choose certain classes or program of study to compensate for weaknesses	Choose certain classes or program of study to compensate for weaknesses Adjust personal expectations Already in the wrong major
2: Work or Learning Style	Produces outcomes differently Rereads information Proofreading by other individuals	Takes longer to complete assignments Unorganized Poor handwriting Use of a tape recorder for class notes Start studying earlier Visual learner/auditory processing difficulties
3: Attention difficulties	Takes medication	Takes several breaks

For question 6 of the interview, all of the students in the early group knew what an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was and nine of the twelve students had attended at least one for their IEP meetings. In the late group, sixteen of the students knew what an IEP was; however, only half of the students had attended at least one of their IEP meetings.

Question 7 addressed the degree of transition planning each student received as they were preparing for college, specifically who prepared them for the transition and what adjustments they had to make upon entering college. Eight of the twelve students in the early group were informed about the availability of services and accommodations in college, while only six of the eighteen students in the late group were aware of services and accommodations available at the college level.

In addition, all twelve students in the early group participated in a transition program in high school; however, only five of the twelve students participated in a transition program specific to their learning disability. Seven of the students in the late group received no transition program upon graduating from high school. Of the remaining eleven students in the late group, only two of the students participated in a transition program geared specifically towards their learning disability. Overall, only seven out of the total thirty students who participated in this study received transition services in high school that addressed their needs as a student with a learning disability who is preparing for college.

When asked about whether anyone had prepared the students for what it would be like in college, all students in the early group indicated that they were prepared by someone while three students in the late group reported having not been prepared for college. Table 5 represents an ordered list comparing what individuals prepared students in both groups for college. Table 6 represents themes in regards to what adjustments were made by the students upon entering college.

Table 5 Individuals providing college preparation	
Early Group	Late Group
1: Teacher	1: Family member
2: Parent or family member	2: Teacher
3: Counselor	3: No one
4: Friend	School psychologist
High school in general	Transition counselor
School psychologist	

Table 6 Adjustments made in college	
Early Group	Late Group
1: Get used to college location	Controlling excessive social life
2: More personal independence	E-mail communication
3: Independent learning of information	Harder courses
Challenge to receive 'A's	Larger class sizes
Don't know	More studying, reading, and writing assignments
Give up sports	No adjustments made
Medication changes	Roommates/living conditions
Romantic relationship changes	Seek services on own
Seek help yourself	

For question 8, seven out of the twelve students in the early group reported having met with a school psychologist. Only six out of the eighteen students in the late group had met with a school psychologist prior to beginning college. Question 9 asked the question, "What services did you receive in high school?" Nine of the twelve students in

the early group were still receiving services in high school; ten of the eighteen students in the late group received services in high school. Table 7 lists the various services and accommodations students reported having during their high school years.

Table 7 Services received in high school	
Early Group	Late Group
Extra time on tests	Answer bank or fill-in-the-blanks on tests
Power points for notes	Class notes
Psychological counseling	Help with college applications
Pull out services	Extra time on tests
Recorded lectures	Meetings with IEP case manager
Testing in separate room	Transition program
Transition program	Work proofread by others
Tutor	
Use of a calculator	

The final question on the interview was in reference to the students' knowledge of the change in laws regarding disabilities once you reach the age of eighteen, specifically what the difference is between the Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA) and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). All students participating in this study indicated they were not aware of the change in laws and do not know the difference between IDEA and ADA. Table 8 provides a list comparing what the students did know about what changes had taken place upon entering into college as far as having a learning disability.

Table 8

Changes in rights

Early Group	Late Group
Accommodations are not automatic	Have to speak with professors to get accommodations
Different accommodations	More personal control of rights
More personal control of rights	No IEP
No IEP	No parental control of rights
No parental control of rights	No school psychologist to complete paperwork
	Seek services on own
	Testing needs to be completed before getting accommodations

V. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to determine if selected students with a learning disability at James Madison University are able to advocate for themselves by seeking services and/or accommodations upon entering into post-secondary education in relation to his or her knowledge and understanding of the learning disability, degree of transition services provided in high school, and perceptions about seeking help. The results of the current study support the research that many students do not appear to take advantage of accommodations in a timely manner (Hartman-Hall & Haaga, 2002). Research indicates that students with learning disabilities can benefit from academic support services, but only a small portion of students use available services. In the current study, less than half of the students sought accommodations during their freshman year. Out of the twelve students who did, only five students came directly to Disability Services during their first semester. This finding is concerning considering college students with learning disabilities demonstrate significantly poorer academic adjustment to the college setting than their non-learning disabled peers. A number of themes emerged from the responses students gave for the interview questions regarding preparation for the transition to college, what implications their learning disability has on their ability to learn, and perceptions about seeking accommodations for their learning disability.

In an effort to determine what led students to seek help for their learning disability, this study explored the relationship between the amount of transition preparation students received prior to graduating from high school and the students' ability to openly discuss and describe their learning disability in terms of strengths and weaknesses related to academic performance. Overall, students who sought services early did receive more preparation in high school for the transition; however, students

who came to Disability Services early were more likely to have still received services and accommodations in high school as well as have comorbid anxiety or attention related concerns. Students in the early group indicated that school psychologists had put together booklets of information to take with them to college, or their parents took them directly to Disability Services during their freshman orientation. One reason for this finding may be that students who sought services early had more individuals involved in their transition and had attended at least one of their IEP meetings. Therefore, it appears that these students were more knowledgeable about their learning disability and how it affects their learning. However, these responses only account for a very small number of participants in this study.

Many of the students who waited to seek services after their freshman year were less informed about their learning disability, received informal transition services geared towards general college preparation, and had not attended any of their IEP meetings. One student stated, when asked about whether he had received any transition services upon graduating high school, “No, when I graduated high school I already had all D’s and they were just ready to get rid of me”. When this same student began college, he reported having to use trial and error as a method to find ways to do things his own way and make things work for him academically. While this student in particular was very knowledgeable about his learning disability, his lack of preparation for the transition to college resulted in several dropped classes and needing more time to fulfill his major’s requirements. This suggests that many learning disabled students are at a disadvantage when first beginning their post-secondary education to no fault of their own due to a lack of transition preparation and informing regarding available services.

The current data found minimal evidence that students who sought services early lacked confidence in their ability to succeed without the use of accommodations. The study did find that many of the students who waited to seek services did not think they would need the accommodations or wanted to try to succeed on their own without the use of accommodations. One student in the late group stated in reference to why he waited to seek services, “I guess I was kind of embarrassed that I still needed to get special things that everybody else didn’t get”. Another student stated, “I was interested to see whether I still needed extra time and stuff like that. I’d hoped that I didn’t”. Several students who waited to seek services indicated that they wanted to try to succeed without using accommodations, but soon realized that they did need help in order to achieve what they are capable of achieving given their learning disability.

While it is positive to find that students are not lacking in their confidence to perform well, it is concerning that these students have not been adequately informed about their strengths and weaknesses well enough to understand that their learning disability will likely not disappear upon beginning college. Therefore, these students were not encouraged to take advantage of the available resources that would promote their academic success. Thus, it is important for transition programs to include an informing with the student about their learning disability as well as counseling sessions geared towards building skills necessary to provide assurance in their capabilities and comfort in seeking appropriate services.

In addition, the study found that only seven out of the total thirty students who participated received transition services in high school that specifically addressed their needs as a student with a learning disability. This study supports the conclusion that

students who sought services early did receive more preparation for the transition in high school and could better identify what implications their learning disability has on their learning. Whereas students who waited to seek services were less prepared for the transition and could only describe their learning disability in terms of overall weaknesses. In fact, one student stated in response to being told she had a learning disability, “It really wasn’t until I went to ODS last year that anyone used the term “learning disability” to describe what I have. I was always told when I was in a special class that I was in “reading development”, which is probably one reason it took me so long to go to ODS”.

Other students in the late group also indicated that, when told they had a learning disability, many times individuals ‘sugar-coated’ their explanations of the impact their learning disability has on their learning. Still more students did not recall ever being told they had a learning disability or given a detailed explanation. However, when looking at the responses given by students in the early group regarding explanations of their learning disability and evaluation results, many students reported having attended IEP meetings, participating in a transition program that helped understand the student’s diagnosis on the IEP and how that might affect college performance, and meeting with a school psychologist to review test results. When looking at the responses provided by the participants regarding whether or not they met with a school psychologists about transitioning to college, more than half of the students in the early group reported they did. Only six out of the eighteen students in the late group met specifically with a school psychologist. This highlights the importance of utilizing school psychologists as integral participants in transition services for students with disabilities preparing for higher

education given their training in understanding different learning styles, communicating test results, identifying disabilities, skill building, and prevention/intervention.

When students were asked what changed their mind about seeking accommodations, all students who participated indicated it was due to failing grades or low GPA. However, by the time students were able to receive appropriate services and accommodations some had already dropped classes or were placed on academic probation. One student stated, “I got an F on a psyc[hology] test. A psychology test. It’s the easiest class on campus and I made an F on the first test”. Another student explained that during a conversation with a campus counselor regarding being placed on academic probation, he mentioned he had a learning disability and was then referred to Disability Services. This suggests the importance of encouraging students to turn in the appropriate documentation of their disability and seek services at the beginning of their college education to prevent academic struggles or failure. Regardless of whether or not a student intends on using services or finds it necessary to use the accommodations, at least the services are readily available should a student find themselves in a difficult course in need of help.

School Psychologists

School psychologists are ideal persons to implement transition programs. In addition to the school psychologist’s training in social/emotional development, needs assessment, learning styles, skills building, and prevention/intervention, an understanding of learning disability criteria for postsecondary education is also important (Joyce & Rossen, 2006). Specifically, school psychologists provide evaluations that include transition planning goals. The school psychologist’s evaluations are often reviewed by

colleges when determining if students are eligible for services and accommodations. Unlike child study teams in high schools, students are responsible for initiating and monitoring their own educational services. Well-designed transition plans in high school can begin to foster the self-advocacy and self-monitoring skills students will need in college.

In addition to a transition program, school psychologists can ensure that students attend their own IEP meetings in order to learn about their own personal strengths and weaknesses and educational needs (Joyce & Rossen, 2006). Transition IEP goals can include increased student responsibility for their own interventions, such as self-monitoring their own work completion, practicing organizational skills, or attending study skills training.

School psychologists also need to familiarize themselves with the core principles of transitions and some of the recent changes in approach. Specifically moving away from general transition orientations focused solely on school policies, procedures, and geography to a more preventive approach that allows students time to truly adjust and build skills necessary to succeed in their new educational environment, such as independent work and organizational skills. Research indicates that students should be prepared and equipped with the self-determination and self-advocacy skills to find and use available resources in college (Anctil et al., 2008).

Practical Suggestions

Numerous recommendations have been made regarding effective ways for schools to provide transition services to students with disabilities who wish to pursue post-secondary education. Research indicates that implementation of transition programs

that address the individual needs of students based on their disability, including an understanding of their strengths and weaknesses, and the fostering of self-advocacy skills and self-reliance are most effective (Joyce & Rossen, 2006). The following are suggestions for school psychologists to consider when implementing transition programs within the schools:

- Obtain support from school administrators including the principal and assistant principal by providing information on the benefits of providing transition services to students with disabilities.
- Consider the climate of the school and how transition planning is currently being addressed at the school.
- Conduct a brief needs assessment in order to tailor the program to the individual needs of the students.
- Develop a plan for the program that clearly states why, how, when, and by whom activities will be accomplished. Connect the program to the school district's mission and goals and to the particular school's mission statement.
- Develop a protocol for the program. The protocol should include goals and measurable objectives related to the students understanding and awareness of the impact their disability has on their functioning; a counseling component geared towards increasing self-acceptance and self-advocacy skills; knowledge of the documentation required by colleges; and suggestions for strategies and accommodations with a rationale based on current needs and impacts on specific major life activity.

- Implement the program. Begin by building the students' knowledge and awareness of their learning disability (Kipps-Vaughan et al, 2009).
Following the informing component, guide the students in a conversation aimed towards increasing self acceptance and self advocacy in an effort to promote the student's ability and comfort with seeking services. Next, prepare the student with information for obtaining, storing, and sharing required documentation. Finally, help the student plan to ask for accommodations during their first semester in college by preparing them with an understanding of ADA and 504 Plans as it relates to their disability. See appendix.
- Evaluate and adapt the program. Evaluation helps to identify if changes are needed, determine if student's goals are being met, realize the effects of the transition program, and identify ways to improve the program.
- Sustain the program and maintain support from administrators by communicating regularly about the status of the transition program, and evaluating the program frequently.

Limitations of the Current Study

There were several limitations to this study that may have affected the results of the data. First, the study consisted only of students who are currently enrolled at James Madison University and were accepted into the university as a freshman, no transfer students were included; thus, the results are only applicable to those students who took part in the study. Second, the sample size was small, which also limits the generalizability of the results. Third, only students who had a documented learning

disability as their primary disability were included in this sample; other disabilities were not considered for this study.

Future Research

Future studies should recruit larger and more representative samples from various colleges and universities, which would increase generalizability of results and allow for statistical analysis of data. In addition, future studies should examine the effectiveness of transition services on increasing self-advocacy and self-determination skills in students with disabilities who are pursuing post-secondary education. Other suggestions include:

- Exploring current transition services being provided in various high schools.
- Examining the effects of school psychologists providing transition services specific to a student's documented disability to include informing, counseling, documentation requirements, and appropriate strategies or accommodations that may be helpful for academic success in the college setting.
- Exploring the differences between students who enter into a four-year college as a freshman and those who transfer from a two-year college or community college based on extent of transition services received upon graduating from high school, knowledge and understanding of the documented disability, and comfort with self-advocating for appropriate services or accommodations in the college setting.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations in this study, the results are consistent with existing literature in finding that students with learning disabilities are not taking advantage of

available services and accommodations available in the college setting in a timely manner. In addition, many of these students are receiving inadequate transition services and planning necessary to prepare them for success in post-secondary education. One of the key factors for learning disabled students' success in post-secondary education is their ability to understand the impact their learning disability has on their academic careers, as well as how they perceive having a learning disability. The current data suggest that not only is there a need for students to participate in transition programs, but the transition programs should address each student's specific disability. In addition, transition programs should include informing, counseling, documentation needs, and helpful strategies and accommodations appropriate for the college setting. After students graduate from high school, school psychologists are not directly responsible for their post-secondary education. However, school psychologists are ethically responsible to ensure that students have been prepared for and equipped with the necessary skills needed to be successful, both academically and emotionally, in the college setting. Therefore, it is essential that school psychologists assist students by ensuring the students themselves and their parents are aware of the need to register early with the college's disability services. By registering early, accommodations can be in place during the first semester of college which is a critical adjustment period for new students.

APPENDIX A

Participant Cover Letter

Consent to Participate in Research

Identification of Investigators & Purpose of Study

You are being asked to participate in a research study conducted by Kirsten Burley, M.A. that is a component of her graduate thesis for Educational Specialist degree in School Psychology. The purpose of this study is to assist the investigators in exploring college students' knowledge and perceptions about seeking help for their learning disabilities in order to assist the investigators in determining some possible components of a successful transition from high school to post-secondary education for students with a learning disability. This project is being supervised by Ashton Trice, Ed.D. of the Department of Graduate Psychology.

Time Required

Participation in this study will require approximately thirty minutes of your time.

Potential Risks & Benefits

The investigator does not perceive more than minimal risks from your involvement in this study. Participation in this research will have no impact on your eligibility for evaluation and accommodation services. The potential benefits from participation in this study include providing information that may result in the development of transition programs and services from high school to post-secondary education to better serve students who have been identified as having a learning disability and wish to pursue higher education.

Research Procedures

Should you decide to participate in this research study, you will be asked to sign this consent form once all your questions have been answered to your satisfaction. This study consists of an interview that will be administered to individual participants in Wilson Hall, room 105. You will be asked to provide answers to a series of questions related to an understanding of your learning disability as well as your perceptions about seeking help, in the form of accommodations, for your learning disability.

Confidentiality

The results of this research may be submitted for publication in a professional journal and/or presented at a psychology conference. The results of this project will be coded in such a way that the respondent's identity will not be attached to the final form of this study. The researcher retains the right to use and publish non-identifiable data. While individual responses are confidential, aggregate data will be presented representing averages or generalizations about the responses as a whole. All data will be stored in a secure location accessible only to the researcher and Graduate Assistant for Screening and Assessment Services, a division of the Learning Resource Centers at James Madison

University. Upon completion of the study, all information that matches up individual respondents with their answers will be destroyed.

Participation & Withdrawal

Your participation is entirely voluntary. You are free to choose not to participate. Should you choose to participate, you can withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind.

Questions

If you have questions or concerns during the time of your participation in this study, or after its completion or you would like to receive a copy of the final aggregate results of this study, please contact:

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Graduate Psychology
James Madison University
burleykl@jmu.edu

Dr. Ashton Trice
Graduate Psychology
James Madison University
Telephone: (540) 568-8189
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Question about Your Rights as a Research Subject

Dr. David Cockley
Chair, Institutional Review Board
James Madison University
(540) 568-2834
cocklede@jmu.edu

Giving of Consent

I have read this consent form and I understand what is being requested of me as a participant in this study. I freely consent to participate. I have been given satisfactory answers to my questions. The investigator provided me with a copy of this form. I certify that I am at least 18 years of age.

Name of Participant (Printed)

Name of Participant (Signed)

Date

APPENDIX B**Thesis Questions – Supplement to Screening Interview**

1. If a student has come to Screening and Assessment Services early in the semester (freshman):
 - a. What led you to come to Screening and Assessment Services and identify your disability?

 - b. How did you find out about Screening and Assessment Services?

2. If a student has waited to come to Screening and Assessment Services (sophomore, junior, senior):
 - a. What led you wait to come to Screening and Assessment Services?

 - b. How was it for you to not use accommodations?
 - i. What changed your mind?

3. When were you told you had a learning disability?
 - a. Do you remember who told you?

 - b. How and/or when were you told you had a learning disability?

 - c. Do you remember specific feelings associated with that experience?

4. Were you told why you were being tested?

- a. Has anyone ever explained your test results to you? If so, what was that like for you and what does that mean to you as an adult?

5. How would you describe your learning disability now?
 - a. Describe one implication it has for you.

6. Do you know what an IEP (Individualized Education Plan) is?
 - a. Were you ever able to go to one of your IEP meetings?

7. When you were graduating from high school and transitioning to college, did anyone speak with you regarding availability of services at the college level or what documentation is required to receive services in college?
 - a. Did anyone prepare you for what it would be like in college?
 - b. If any, what kind of adjustments did you need to make once in college?

8. Do you know what a school psychologist is? If so, what do you believe is his or her role?
 - a. Did you ever meet with a school psychologist?

9. What services did you receive in high school?
 - a. Was there a time when you did not use accommodations? What changed your mind?

10. When you turned 18, did your view of having a learning disability change? (i.e., once a legal adult and not having to follow parents or school's wishes, did your perceptions of having a learning disability change?)
 - a. Do you know the difference between Individuals with Disability Act (IDEA or special education) and Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA or 504 plans)?

 - b. Are you aware of the change in laws that cover your rights regarding your learning disability? Tell me what you do know.

APPENDIX C

PROTOCOL FOR SCHOOL PSYCHOLOGISTS:

**TRANSITION SERVICES FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES PLANNING
FOR HIGHER EDUCATION**

To be used only with permission of the authors: Kipps-Vaughan, Schulte, & Trice, 2009

Student's Name _____ Grade _____

Identified Disability _____

Future Higher Education Goals

INFORMING: The goal of this component is to increase the student's understanding of the disability and awareness of the direct impact on the student's functioning.

- Ask the student to describe their specific disability. (Write in their response). _____

- Provide an appropriate description of the disability in as much detail as needed and check for understanding.
- Describe the student's specific strengths and weaknesses.
- Discuss how this may impact the student's learning and success in school.
- Ask the student to explain back to you what their disability is and how it impacts him or her. Provide the student with an opportunity to write out their description:

- **Rate their level of understanding of the disability and strengths/weaknesses.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

- **Rate the student's level of understanding and awareness of how the disability impacts his or her learning.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

- Provide feedback to the student about the ratings and make a plan for increasing understanding and awareness as needed. This may include readings, talking with other professionals, parents, or students, or additional review of student's records.

Note any specific plans for follow-up:

COUNSELING: The goal of this component is to increase self acceptance and self advocacy in an effort to promote the student's ability and comfort with seeking services. This component must honor the student's needs and pace for processing this information. This will most likely require several sessions.

- Open with a discussion about what it has meant for the student to receive special services.
- Discuss what has been hard and what has been helpful about receiving special services in the school.
- Guide your discussion by the responses from the student. Possible areas for investigation may include:
 - How does the student think the disability reflects on them as a person?
 - Use reflective listening and empathy to help the student move toward self acceptance.
 - Initially it is important to understand and validate his or her feelings and thoughts. Do not provide contradictory information until the student feels validated.
 - It may be helpful to explore what they have experienced as losses throughout their experience in school.
 - Introduce ways to reframe the student's experiences as strengths, opportunities to understand what he or she has gained from this experience in school. Proceed with this at a pace that is helpful for the student.
 - Discuss what the student's expectations are for college, what excites them about going to college, and what fears the student has about going to college.

- When the student is ready, begin to have conversations about how he or she feels about getting accommodations in college.
- Discuss what the challenges will be in seeking help in college. What does the student think will happen if he seeks services, and what will happen if the student does not seek services.
- Ask the student to rate himself/herself on the following:

Student: I am accepting of my disability as an important part of who I am.

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Student: I have confidence that I can be successful in school by acknowledging my disability.

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Student: I may not like having a disability, but I can deal with it.

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Student: I am comfortable with seeking services for my disability in college.

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Student: I feel capable of asking for help.

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Student: I feel that I can express my learning needs to others.

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

- Discuss the ratings as indicated with the student and develop a plan for continuing counseling or seeking additional resources as needed for any areas of difficulty. This may include professional counseling in the community, a family meeting, journaling, or investigating lives of prominent individuals with disabilities.

Note any specific plans for follow-up:

DOCUMENTATION: The goal of this component is to prepare the student with information for obtaining, storing, and sharing required documentation. (Psychological reports, storing of records, seeking assessments)

Review with the student the most recent psychological evaluation.

- **Rate their level of understanding of the various components of the psychological evaluation.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Ask the student to identify specific services they might need at the college level.

-Testing taking needs

-Reading needs

-Written language needs

-Math needs

- **Rate their level of understanding and awareness of which specific accommodations they may need at the college level.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

If most recent psychological evaluation is more than 3 years old, review with the student community resources for obtaining updated psychological testing.

- **Rate their level of understanding of how to obtain updated psychological testing.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Review with the student their most recent IEP

- **Rate their level of understanding of the current IEP**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Review with the student the most recent 504 plan.

- **Rate their level of understanding of their 504 plan.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

If the student has a transition plan, review the transition plan with student.

- **Rate their level of understanding of their transition plan.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

Review with student school policy and procedures for obtaining records.

- **Rate their level of understanding of school policy for obtaining and sharing their information with their college.**

1	2	3	4	5
Very low	Low	Fair	High	Very High

STRATEGIES AND ACCOMMODATIONS: The goal of this component is to prepare the student with an understanding of ADA and 504 Plans as it relates to their disability.

- **Help the student plan to get their credential to the Office of Disability Services before school starts.** Even if they choose not to use the services of the Office, their credentials will be there in case they change their mind. If the student waits until he/she needs help urgently, it may take weeks to get their information to the proper office.
- **Instruct the student to plan to ask for accommodations during the first semester in college. The student can ask for any accommodations they received during the last year in high school.** Discuss with the student how there are usually fewer tests and papers in a college course than in high school on which to base a grade. Often there are only three or four. If the student waits until they have done poorly on several tests, they may have compromised their GPA. List accommodations they are now receiving that may apply to courses in college:

- **See whether the college allows those registered with Disability Services to register for classes early.** Students with reading, learning, and attention problems do better in smaller classes; classes that meet for only 50 minutes at a time; and classes with moderate reading requirements. The student may also do better taking several different kinds of classes during a semester (one with a lot of reading; one with a good deal of math; one that requires a lot of specific memorizing, one that requires physical activity). Being allowed to register early will help the student get into helpful classes and planning a good overall schedule.
- **Discuss with the student how to talk with their academic advisor about the challenges that have affected academic performance in the past.** This does not mean the student handing him an old IEP or a set of test results, but explaining the challenges from the student's perspective: "I read slowly" or "I have a hard time paying attention in class for the full 50 minutes because I get stuck thinking about what the professor said" or "I've always made many more errors in math than my classmates" will be helpful for the advisor. Explain to the student that their academic advisor is their main ally on campus.

Have the student explain their learning challenges in their own words (in a manner they could inform their academic advisor):

- **Discuss with the student how to use their knowledge of their specific learning strengths and weaknesses to make educational choices.** In college, most decisions will be entirely up to the student.. What the student hears about courses from others may not apply to them. For example, if the student finds writing very difficult, a course taught over the internet where you have to write many more papers than usual may not be a very good choice, even though some students like that way of learning. Two different professors may teach the same course in very different ways. If they have difficulty with remembering specific facts, they may want to take a class with essay tests rather than multiple choice tests and fill in the blanks tests.
- **Discuss with the student how to use their knowledge of their specific learning strengths and weaknesses to advocate for themselves.** Providing for accommodations may take time away from other things the professor would like to do. Some faculty will try to talk students out of getting extra time on tests or taking tests in a quiet setting. If the student can strongly tell that professor why the accommodation is needed, the student is more likely to get results. Moreover, a "quiet setting" might turn out to be a room in which a lot of students are coming and going for tests. The student needs to be able (and willing) to advocate for a truly quiet setting.

CLARIFY any additional needs or follow-up for preparing for transition to college: _____

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