



Honors College Theses

11-19-2018

Perceived Effects of Learning Disabilities on College Students

Samantha E. Penta
Georgia Southern University

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/honors-theses>



Part of the [Disability Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Penta, Samantha E., "Perceived Effects of Learning Disabilities on College Students" (2018). *Honors College Theses*. 369.

<https://digitalcommons.georgiasouthern.edu/honors-theses/369>

This thesis (open access) is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors College Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Georgia Southern. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@georgiasouthern.edu.

Perceived Effects of Learning Disabilities on College Students

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in the School of Nursing.

By
Samantha Penta

Under the mentorship of Dr. Marian Tabi

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceived effects of learning disabilities on college students, as well as the barriers faced during the transition into postsecondary education. The sample was composed of 37 undergraduate students reporting a learning disability diagnosis. A questionnaire was distributed to explore several factors; including university accommodations, barriers to academic success, and perceived stigma on campus. Participants over the age of 18 reporting a learning disability were included in the study. Approximately one-quarter of participants reported the presence of a learning disability, however, the majority of these students denied receiving academic accommodations from their university. These results indicate the need for increased awareness and decreased barriers regarding the attainment of resources for college students with a learning disability.

Thesis Mentor: _____

Dr. Marian Tabi

Honors Director: _____

Dr. Steven Engel

November 2019
School of Nursing
University Honors Program
Georgia Southern University

Acknowledgements

I would like to begin by expressing my gratitude to Dr. Engel, Erin Martin, Dr. Desiderio, and the Georgia Southern University Honors Program as a whole. This program has provided numerous opportunities to facilitate growth, leadership, and confidence in all endeavors. It has also provided a group of peers that I can rely on and develop meaningful friendships with. I am incredibly grateful to the University Honors Program for providing one of the most supportive atmospheres I have experienced throughout my undergraduate career.

Additionally, I would like to thank the School of Nursing and my faculty mentor, Dr. Marian Tabi, for their support in my research. Dr. Tabi provided the expertise that allowed me to fully develop my research and confidently pursue my thesis as a whole. Her encouragement and guidance helped me immensely throughout my thesis development.

Finally, I would like to include my family. I could not be where I am without their endless love, support, and guidance. They have remained by my side through all of the ups-and-downs of my undergraduate experience. The encouragement that I have received from them throughout the last few years is what truly pushed me to work harder than I ever had. I could not be more grateful for the wonderful support system that I am lucky to call my family.

Perceived Effects of Learning Disabilities on College Students

Support for students with learning disabilities is emphasized greatly during elementary school throughout high school. Although these individuals still suffer with learning disabilities throughout their college education, accommodations for students with learning disabilities is not required in post-secondary education (Essex, 2012). These students were accustomed to receiving academic accommodations from Kindergarten through high school, and may face barriers when having to seek out accommodations in college on their own.

There are many accommodations available to assist students with learning disabilities in college, but it is up to the student to develop the sense of autonomy to self-report their disability. Students with learning disabilities in college struggle with academic success as well as psychological well-being. Therefore, it is imperative for these students to have access to accommodations during a stressful transition. Social interactions, as well as academic interactions, play a large part in the likelihood that students with learning disabilities will remain enrolled and successful in their college experience.

Background

A learning disability (LD) is a disorder affecting the psychological ability to understand or utilize spoken or written language. A LD can hinder an individual's verbal, spatial, or mathematical abilities (Gartland & Strosnider, 2017). Learning disabilities are growing more prevalent in postsecondary education. In a 2012 study by Essex, 17% of college students self-reported a LD, and 40% of high school graduates planning to attend a university, also reported a LD. According to Gartland and Strosnider (2017), about half of disabled students in the United States have a learning disability. This can make academic achievement frustrating and difficult.

Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), students are required to receive

support for learning disabilities from Kindergarten through high school. According to Pullen (2016), instruction for these students should have a system, be explicit and intense, and include positive reinforcement and feedback. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), students with learning disabilities in high school qualify for an individualized education plan (IEP) outlining goals for their education (DaDeppo, 2009). However, because this support is not required in postsecondary education, students may struggle with receiving a college education.

Transitioning to Postsecondary Education

In order for a student to receive support for a LD in a college setting, they are required to self-report their disability and take an assessment to prove the presence of a LD. However, required assessments for students to qualify with a LD in postsecondary education is usually not financially covered by the institution (McGregor et al., 2016). The cost of college is a factor that all students must take into consideration when attending a university. However, this additional out-of-pocket cost may hinder the student's ability to attend college if they cannot afford it.

Students who did not receive the adequate support for a LD in high school, may have a negative perception of their overall educational experience. This negative perception has the potential to become a barrier for students that are deciding whether to attend college. Individuals with positive high school experiences, related to the support and resources offered to them, may feel more inclined to pursue a college education.

Accommodation Barriers

Accommodations available to students with learning disabilities have a large impact on their overall success. However, in order to receive supportive accommodations in a college setting, the student is required to report their LD to the university. This shift towards self-

reporting requires students to have awareness of their LD and overall condition, understand their individual rights, and advocate for themselves in order to receive the appropriate support (DaDeppo, 2009). Lacking these skills may hinder an individual from receiving the support that they require. This complicated transition from secondary education to postsecondary education has a huge impact on individuals with a LD.

College Success

Once enrolled in a college setting, there are many aspects that affect the experience of a student with a LD. According to a study by Showers and Kinsman (2017), overall academic performance by students with a LD was impacted by an impairment in understanding certain written and verbal communication, organization, and time management. Additionally, McGregor et al. (2016) discussed that college students with a LD revealed that they did not have adequate knowledge of the available support, were skeptical about how helpful the accommodations were, and did not want to identify as having a LD.

College students with a LD struggle with academic success as well as psychological well-being. These students reported a significantly lower academic self-concept and greater disengagement from academics (DuPaul, Gormley, Laracy, Pinho & Pollack, 2017). Due to the perceived challenges associated with having a LD in a college setting, many of these individuals are discouraged from continuing their education. DuPaul et al. (2017) emphasized that higher stress associated with academia, deficits in learning, and limited social integration amongst students with learning disabilities, leads to a negative college experience.

Purpose of Study

Due to the difficulty for some students to come forward regarding their disability, they may not receive the necessary support to be successful. Therefore, they are often held at the same

standards as other students. Although difficulties in the classroom setting have a large impact on college success, external factors also hold great importance. Learning disabilities can affect more aspects of the individual outside of academia. These individuals usually identify with having low self-esteem, increased levels of anxiety, and poor social and interpersonal skills (DaDeppo, 2009). These skills are all necessary for success in a college setting.

Determining the effects of learning disabilities on college student success is imperative in increasing awareness and support for these students during the complicated transition to postsecondary education. The purpose of this study is to analyze how learning disabilities affect college student success, as well as to determine if students with LD are receiving the support that available to them by their university. The research questions explored are: (a) what are the perceived barriers for students, with learning disabilities, transitioning into postsecondary education, and (b) is there a stigma present against learning disabilities in a college setting.

Methods

The research utilized a descriptive design, consisting of qualitative and quantitative factors. The study was conducted on 143 undergraduate students at Georgia Southern University. Participants were recruited from six majors on campus. Questionnaires were distributed in classrooms across campus, following the approval from each professor. Additional data was collected with the Qualtrics online survey program. The research questionnaire aimed to address the presence of a learning disability diagnosis, the utilization of disability accommodations, overall academic satisfaction, as well as additional demographic data.

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board prior to the collection of data. Participants were provided with informed consent prior to their completion of the survey. Data was excluded from the research if the participant was a minor or if a LD was not present. The

questions aimed to analyze the participants' type of LD diagnosis, university accommodations, stigma presence, as well as academic and social factors. The questionnaires included 10 multiple choice questions, 13 Likert-style scale questions, and six fill in responses.

Data Analysis and Results

A total of 98 surveys were collected in classrooms on campus, and 45 were completed online, through Qualtrics. However, only data from participants' meeting the inclusion criteria were utilized in the study. Of the 143 undergraduate students who completed the survey, 37 students (26%) self-reported a LD. Only data from the group of students that reported a LD was included in this study. The survey responses were coded, then analyzed, with the IBM SPSS 21.0 software.

Demographics

Data from 37 participants, reporting a LD, was included in the study. However, only five of the participants reported receiving accommodations from the university, as shown in Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the participants' demographic data was analyzed in Table 2. There were 22 females and 15 males, with a LD, included in the study. However, 60% of participants' receiving accommodations from the university were male. Approximately 81% of participants with a LD were Caucasian, and the remaining 21% were African American, Latino, Asian, or Pacific Islander.

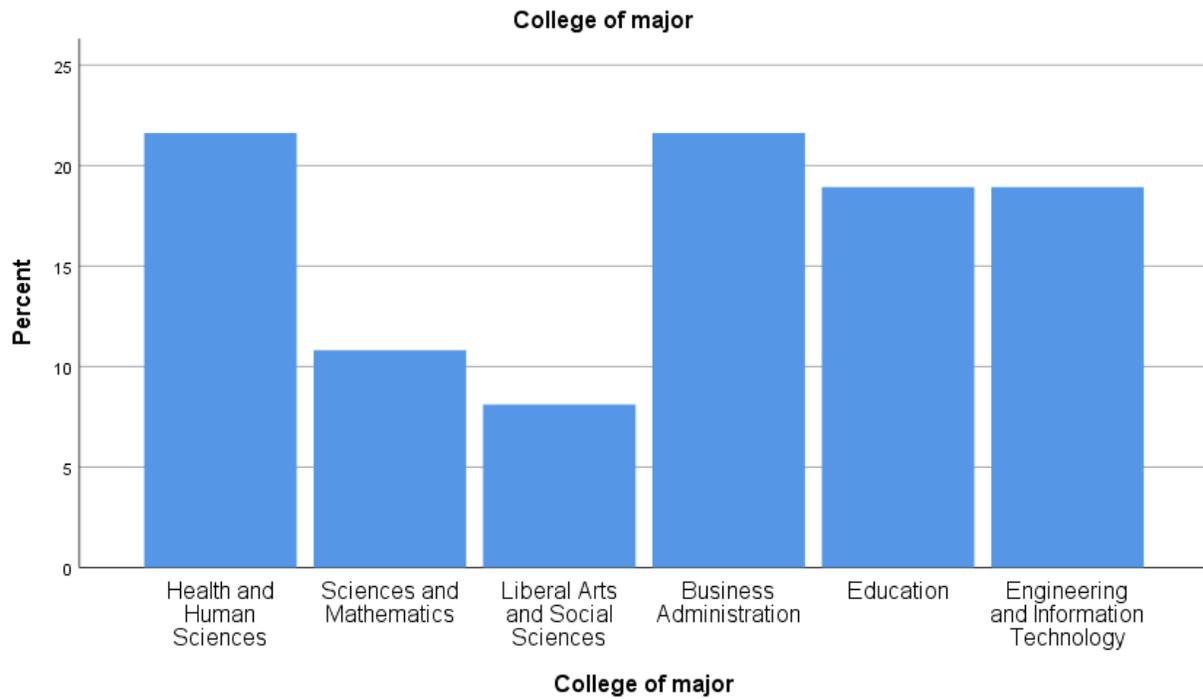
Participants were also asked about their place of residence. The findings showed 54% percent of students reported living in campus dormitories, while 41% reported living off campus. The remaining 5% of students reported living in fraternity or sorority housing as their place of residence. The participants' programs of study varied, with the majority of participants reporting majors in the Colleges of Health and Human Sciences, Business Administration, Education, and

Engineering and Information Technology. The frequency of participants' programs of study are displayed in Graph A.

	Frequency	Valid Percent
Receiving LD accommodations in college	5	14%
Not Receiving LD accommodations in college	32	86%
Total	(n=37)	100%

		Frequency (n=37)	Valid Percent
Gender	Male	15	41%
	Female	22	59%
Classification	Freshman	17	46%
	Sophomore	9	24%
	Junior	7	19%
	Senior	4	11%
Race/Ethnicity	African American	6	16%
	Caucasian	30	81%
	Asian or Pacific Islander	1	3%

Graph A



The survey included open-ended questions asking each participant to report the age that they were first diagnosed with a LD, as well as their grade-point average (GPA) in high school and college. These findings are displayed in Table 3. The age, in years, that the participants were diagnosed with a LD ranged from four to 20. The mean age that participants were diagnosed was 11 years old.

As shown in Table 3, a mean college GPA of 3.3 was found for participants receiving LD accommodations. A mean GPA of 3.33 was calculated for participants without accommodations. Additionally, one-hundred percent of participants receiving LD accommodations reported a GPA between 3.0 and 3.59, as shown in Table 4. Half of participants without LD accommodations reported a GPA between 3.6 and 3.9 and only 23% reported a GPA below 3.0.

	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
Age (in years) diagnosed with a LD	4	20	11.12
Current GPA	1.97	4.00	3.33

(n=25)	Self-reported GPA				
	1.50-1.99	2.00-2.59	2.60-2.99	3.00-3.59	3.60-3.99
With accommodations	0	0	0	3(100%)	0
No accommodations	1 (4.5%)	1 (4.5%)	3 (14%)	6 (27%)	11 (50%)

University Accommodations

A cross-tabulation comparing the utilization of LD accommodations in high school and college is displayed in Table 5. The findings showed that 56% of participants who received accommodations for their LD in high school, do not receive any accommodations in college. Additionally, participants were given a Likert scale to rate the statement, "without accommodations, I have difficulty reading, studying, or completing coursework." As displayed in Table 6, 43% of the participants who denied receiving academic accommodations from the university, agreed with the statement. Additionally, 60% of participants receiving accommodations, also agreed with the statement.

Data from participants that reported receiving university LD accommodations was analyzed in Table 7. One-hundred percent of the participants agreed that the accommodations provided by the university had a positive influence on their academic success. Sixty percent of these students agreed that they would be performing poorly in their academics without the

accommodations from their university. As displayed in Table 8, 43% of participants referred themselves in order to receive disability accommodations from their university.

College LD accommodations	High school LD accommodations		Total (n=37)
	Yes	No	
Yes	4 (80%)	1 (20%)	5 (14%)
No	12 (38%)	20 (63%)	32 (86%)
Total (n=37)	16 (43%)	21 (57%)	37 (100%)

	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree	Total (n=28)
Receiving LD accommodations	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	0	0	5
Not receiving accommodations	3 (13%)	6 (26%)	2 (9%)	5 (22%)	7 (30%)	23
Total (n=28)	4 (14%)	8 (29%)	4 (14%)	5 (18%)	7 (25%)	100%

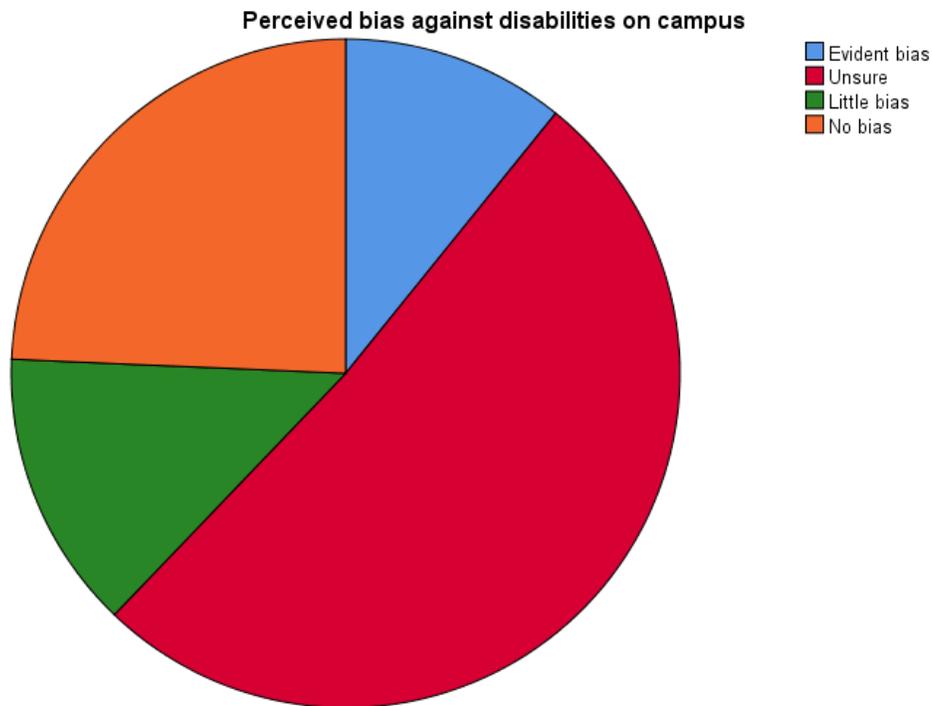
(n=5)	Strongly agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
Difficulty completing coursework with accommodations	0	2 (40%)	0	3 (60%)	0
Positive influence on academic success	1 (25%)	3 (75%)	0	0	0

Positive influence on social life	0	2 (50%)	2 (50%)	0	0
Without accommodations, I would be performing poorly academically	1 (20%)	2 (40%)	2 (40%)	0	0

Table 8 Method of Referral for Participants with University Accommodations		
(n=7)	Frequency	Percent
Self-referral	3	43
Physician	4	57
Professor	0	0

Stigma and Bias

Presence of a bias against learning disabilities on campus was assessed by asking the participants to rate the degree in which they perceive bias against disabilities on their campus. Participants were given a Likert scale to rate the degree of perceived bias. The Likert scale consisted of five choices ranging from “evident bias” to “no bias.” As displayed in Graph A, more than half of respondents reported that they were “unsure” about the presence of a bias on campus.

Graph A

Discussion

Learning disabilities are present in more than a quarter of the participants, however, the majority of participants with a LD do not receive academic accommodations offered at their university. Additionally, over half of the participants that received accommodations during high school denied receiving any accommodations in college. There is a possibility that the transition into postsecondary education and self-autonomy for accommodations has made it difficult for participants to seek out accommodations on their own.

Forty percent of these individuals without accommodations also reported difficulty with their coursework. There is a possibility that these students are not receiving the accommodations needed to be successful in their academics. Due to the majority of students with a LD who denied receiving accommodations from the SARC, a barrier may exist that is hindering students'

ability to receive support. More awareness of the SARC and the process of obtaining accommodations is necessary to ensure that students with a LD are receiving the support offered to them.

The Student Accessibility Resource Center (SARC) on campus offers a variety of resources individualized to the needs of students with a LD. All of the participants who reported receiving these resources perceived a positive impact on their academic performance. The majority of participants felt that they would be performing poorly in their courses without the accommodations provided by the SARC. In order to analyze academic difficulties for students with a LD, participants were asked whether they experience difficulty with aspects of their coursework. Almost half of the participants agreed, to an extent, that they experienced difficulty with coursework. These findings may indicate that the needs of students with a LD are not being fully met.

The researcher aimed to explore whether the presence of a bias against learning disabilities would affect students' willingness to participate in the research. This may be supported by the data exhibiting that only 37 (26%) of the 143 participants reported a LD. However, the findings may also be attributed to the smaller sample size. When analyzing the data, more than half of participants in the study reported feeling "unsure" about the presence of a bias against learning disabilities on campus. These findings may be attributed to a lack of awareness or education regarding stigmas.

Limitations

Several limitations are present in this study. The sample size of 143 students was not adequate to receive enough responses from individuals with a LD. The data from the participants reporting a LD cannot be generalized and attributed to college students with a LD. Due to the

distribution of surveys in classrooms, participants may not have felt comfortable completing the survey honestly amongst peers. Additionally, since 89% of the participants were diagnosed with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), the data may not be sufficient to generalize across learning disabilities as a whole.

Implications for Research

Future research on this topic should be done to provide additional significant findings. It is recommended to survey a larger sample to include the possibility of more students with a LD. In addition, researchers may also follow the necessary steps to survey students through the SARC, to ensure that all students participating already have a learning disability. Interviewing students with a learning disability may be valuable to gain perceptions of the barriers faced in postsecondary education. Further research should be done to analyze whether there are any barriers hindering students from seeking accommodations from the SARC.

Conclusion

The research found that most participants with a learning disability do not receive any academic accommodations. Although the barriers to seeking or receiving accommodations are not evident, it is important to emphasize the accommodations provided by the SARC. By increasing awareness of the SARC, the accommodations offered, and the process to obtain accommodations, students can be educated on the support available to them.

Stigma surrounding any form of disability has a huge impact on an individual's overall well-being. In college, this hinders the success of students possessing these disabilities. Students who feel that they are being judged by their peers, as well as by society, may feel less inclined to report their learning disability to their institution in order to receive the needed support. By increasing awareness of learning disabilities and the academic accommodations available for

college students, individuals may be more likely to report their disability and receive the support to aid in their college success.

References

- DaDeppo, L. W. (2009). Integration Factors Related to the Academic Success and Intent to Persist of College Students with Learning Disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 24(3), 122-131.
- DuPaul, G. J., Gormley, M. J., Laracy, S. D., Pinho, T. D., & Pollack, B. L. (2017). First-year college students with ADHD and/or LD: Differences in engagement, positive core self-evaluation, school preparation, and college expectations. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 50(3), 238-251.
- Essex, T. A. (2012). Special education students with learning disabilities transitioning from high school into community colleges. (Order No. 3499682, Capella University). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, 186.
- Gartland, D., & Strosnider, R. (2017). Learning Disabilities and Achieving High-Quality Education Standards. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 40(3), 152-154.
- McGregor, K. K., Langenfeld, N., Horne, S., Oleson, J., Anson, M., & Jacobson, W. (2016). The University Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities. *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice (Wiley-Blackwell)*, 31(2), 90-102.
- Pullen, P. (2016). Historical and Current Perspectives on Learning Disabilities in the United States. *Learning Disabilities -- A Contemporary Journal*, 14(1), 25-37.
- Showers, A. H., & Kinsman, J. W. (2017). Factors That Contribute to College Success for Students with Learning Disabilities. *Learning Disability Quarterly*, 40(2), 81-90.