Reasons University Students with a Learning Disability Wait to Seek Disability Services

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Abstract

We interviewed 42 students with a learning disability attending a large competitive state university about their reasons for seeking disability services (DS) when they did and their transition services in high school. Students who sought services earlier performed better academically than students who postponed seeking services. All but eight students first sought services in response to academic crises. Students who were more proactive received more college transition services in high school, while students who sought services later reported limited knowledge as a barrier to seeking services. A highly scheduled freshmen year, a general feeling that things were going well, and a desire to forge an identity free of a disability were also reasons given for postponing services. Implications for transition services at the high school and postsecondary levels are discussed.

Keywords: Transition, college, learning disabilities, disability services, and disclosure

The number of high school graduates with learning disabilities (LD) going on to higher education has tripled in the last two decades. For example, a comparison of the National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) and NLTS-2 found that the percentage of high school graduates with LD who matriculate to postsecondary education within four years of graduation had risen from 11.4% in 1990 to 34.5% in 2005 (Newman et al., 2010). Despite increasing enrollment, the success of these students has been limited (Gordon, Lewandowski, Murphy, & Dempsey, 2002; National Council on Disability, 2003; Palombi, 2000). Nationally, college students with LD have a dropout rate near 70%, and compared to peers without disabilities, obtain lower GPAs, are more likely to take leaves of absence, and tend to change to easier programs that prepare them for less lucrative careers (Anctil, Ishikawa, & Scott, 2008; Henderson, 1999; Horn & Berktold, 1999; Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, & Edgar, 2000; Newman et al., 2010).

Prominent among reasons proposed for this lack of success is the decision by students with LD not to disclose their disability to college personnel to receive services. In the NLTS-2, only 35.5% of postsecondary students with LD considered themselves to have a disability and had informed their institution of it. A majority (56.7%) did not consider themselves to have a disability, while 7.8% thought they had a disability but chose not to inform their schools (Newman et al., 2009).

A variety of suggestions has been presented in the literature for the decision not to seek services, many of which revolve around issues of stigma. While issues related to stigma are complex, they often involve interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of feeling misunderstood. Self-misunderstanding (intrapersonal) often manifests as beliefs of being 'stupid' (Cawthorn & Cole, 2010; Ferri, Connor, Solis, Valle, & Volpitta, 2005; Trammell & Hathaway, 2007) or experiencing the imposter phenomenon, which entails feeling inadequate as a college student (Shessel & Reiff, 1999). Interpersonal misunderstanding is also an important aspect of why students may delay or choose not to disclose their disability. For example, students with LD indicate that they fear faculty will believe them incapable of work in a course or major if they dis-

close their disability (Denhart, 2008) and that peers may view them as less intellectually able or trying to "cheat" through the use of accommodations (May & Stone, 2010).

In addition to issues of stigma, other authors (Valentine, Hirschy, & Bremer, 2009) have reviewed the value of transition services in high school. Transition services as outlined in IDEA (2004) Section 300.29 are intended to include a coordinated set of activities implemented by a transition team composed of students, parents, special education and general education teachers, other school personnel, and representatives from other service agencies. A student's transition plan goals are to be developed by age 16, reviewed annually, and include potential postsecondary education goals. Transition services are also designed to prepare students for self-advocacy and self-monitoring skills they will need in college (Joyce & Rossen, 2006). Studies suggest, however, that many such services fall short in their preparation for postsecondary education. For example, Janiga and Costenbader (2002) found that university disability services coordinators were unsatisfied with both general information students had received about differences between high school and college (e.g., differences in class size, instructional and testing methods) and in areas specific to students with disabilities (e.g., self-advocacy skills, information about their own strengths and weaknesses, and participation in developing their transition IEP). Similarly, Schreiner (2007) found that high school seniors about to transition to postsecondary education had great difficulty providing examples of how their specific strengths and weaknesses might affect their performance in college.

In summary, the literature has identified several important issues that contribute to a student's decision about whether and when to seek services at the college level. While this decision is complex and highly individualized, key issues related to stigma, knowledge of one's disability, and quality of transition services appear to be critical. In an effort to understand what influences the decision to seek services at a particular time, we conducted interviews with a group of students with LD in order to explore their reasons for first seeking services as well as reasons for not seeking services earlier. We also asked a number of questions regarding their high school preparation for the transition to college.

Using a mixed methods approach, the present study examined the narratives of students with LD regarding their decisions to seek disability services early or later in their college careers. The first part of the interview, in which student narratives were obtained through open ended questions, addressed two research questions. First, why did students postpone seeking services from the Office of Disability Services (ODS)? Second, what were the precipitating causes for students seeking services when they did? Quantitative data were gathered in the second part of the interview to address the third research question: What kinds of preparation, formal transition services, and knowledge of disability regulations impacted their decision to seek or postpone seeking disability services? We expected to find that those who disclosed their disability and sought disability services earlier would report more preparation for college in general, have more specific knowledge about their own disability status, and express less concern about stigma than those who postponed seeking services.

Method

Participants

Forty-two students who had received IDEA services for a specific learning disability while in secondary school were interviewed during the spring semester at a competitive admissions (mean combined SAT scores = 1150) state university of 19,000 students. There were 23 men and 19 women in the sample, including 15 second year students, 14 third year students, and 13 fourth year students. Students were recruited through three procedures: an e-mail soliciting participation from those registered with the ODS (N = 14), recruitment of students taking an Introduction to Psychology course (N = 11), and from those volunteering in a peer mentoring program (N = 17). The diagnosis of a learning disability and time of initial contact with the ODS were confirmed confidentially by ODS staff. Table 1 provides a description of participant demographics including their year in college, recruitment source, diagnosis and co-morbidity, semester when they first disclosed, and precipitating event for disclosure.

Procedure

Students individually participated in a semi-structured interview using questions that were developed from a phenomenological perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003; Patton, 2002). The interview protocol

Table 1

Participant Demographics

#Sex	Year	Source	Diagnosis	Co-Morbid	Semester Arrived	Event
1M	2nd	ODS	Read		Summer	--
2M	2nd	ODS	Rd/Wr	ADHD	Soph1	Prob
3M	2nd	ODS	Math		Late Fresh 1	GPA*
4M	2nd	Psych	Read	Depress	Early Fresh 1	--
5M	2nd	Psych	Proc		Soph 1	Time
6M	3rd	ODS	Reading		Soph 1	Prob
7M	3rd	ODS	Memory		Soph 2	GPA
8M	3rd	ODS	Read	ADHD	Junior 1	Prob
9M	3rd	Psych	Mem		Junior 1	Prob
10M	3rd	MENT	Math		Fresh 2	F-test
11M	3rd	MENT	Writ		Junior 1	F-test#
12M	3rd	MENT	Mem	ADHD	Fresh 2	GPA
13M	3rd	MENT	VisProc		Junior 1	Time
14M	3rd	MENT	Read	TBI	Fresh 2	F-test
15M	4th	ODS	Writing		Junior 2	Prob
16M	4th	ODS	Writ		Late Fresh 1	F-test
17M	4th	MENT	Re/Wr	Anxiety	Junior 2	F-test#
18M	4th	MENT	Math		Fresh 2	GPA
19M	4th	MENT	Memory		Summer	--
20M	4th	MENT	Math		Soph 1	Prob
21M	4th	MENT	Re/Wr	ADHD	Soph 2	GPA
22M	4th	MENT	Writ		Junior 1	GPA@
23M	4th	MENT	Read		Fresh 2	GPA
24M	2nd	ODS	Read		Soph 1	F-test
25M	2nd	ODS	Read		Fresh 2	GPA
26M	2nd	PSY	Writ	Depress	Summer	--
27M	2nd	PSY	Math		Soph 1	GPA
28M	2nd	PSY	Process		Early Fresh 1	--
29M	2nd	PSY	Read	Depress	Fresh 2	GPA
30M	2nd	PSY	Read		Late Fresh 1	F-test
31M	2nd	PSY	Read	Anxiety	Soph 1	GPA^
32M	2nd	MENT	Writ	ADHD	Soph 1	Prob
33M	2nd	MENT	Math		Summer	--
34M	3rd	ODS	Mem		Soph 2	GPA@
35M	3rd	ODS	Read	ADHD	Junior 1	F-test#

(Table 1 Continued)

36M	3rd	ODS	Process		Soph 1	GPA
37M	3rd	PSY	Math		Early Fresh 1	--
38M	3rd	PSY	Mem		Summer	--
39M	4th	ODS	Read		Junior 1	GPA
40M	4th	MENT	Re/Wr	Depress	Junior 2	Time
41M	4th	MENT	Math		Fresh 2	GPA
42M	4th	MENT	Read		Soph 2	Prob

Note: Year = academic class at the time of the interview; Group = method a recruitment (ODS, psychology subject pool. Or mentoring program (MENT); Diagnostic categories = reading disability (Read), writing disability (writing); mathematics disability (math), reading and writing disability (Re/Wr), memory (Mem), visual processing (VisProc); Comorbid diagnosis = none (blank); semester arrived at ODS = if prior to matriculation the category is summer; reason given for seeking services, F-test indicates failing a test, prob = being placed on academic probation.
*mid-term GPA; #failed critical test in major; ^GPA too low to pledge sorority; @ low GPA for major.

was designed to allow the participants to tell their stories as they subjectively experienced them with a minimal number of leading questions from the researcher. The phenomenological perspective attempts to maximize understanding of an individual's constructions of experiences (Mertens, 2010). This was selected as the most appropriate approach for this study in order to gain information that could shed meaningful light on students' decisions to seek ODS services in a timely manner. The interviews included prompts in seven areas: (a) when they first went to ODS, (b) why they went at that time (and not before), (c) their knowledge of and involvement in the IEP process in high school, (d) their recollection of the nature of their school-based transition programming, (e) other sources of information about the transition to college, (f) special education services they had received in high school, and (8) their understanding of the laws that govern college services. Students also brought a copy of their college transcript to the interview. The interviews were audio taped and verbatim transcripts were made with two exceptions: names of individuals, schools, and school districts were omitted and two participants preferred that only notes be taken. Interviews lasted between 15 and 45 minutes. The interview questions are included in Appendix A.

Analysis

We used a mixed methods approach to analyze the data in this study. Most of the information was compatible with quantitative analyses (e.g., when they had first gone to ODS, GPA, whether they had been to an IEP meeting), while the narratives of their decision to seek assistance from ODS (questions 2 and 2b) were treated qualitatively. Each response was independently coded by two individuals. The data that were treated quantitatively were scored according to predetermined themes. For individual items the rates of agreement ranged from 89% to 100%. Differences were resolved by conference among the raters and the fourth author.

An iterative process was used to code the two questions that provided the narratives for the students' decision to go to ODS. Most of the responses to question 2 (What prompted you to go to ODS?) were short and over 90% involved academic problems. The raters agreed that a classification based on individual test performance, overall GPA, and being placed on academic probation captured these data sufficiently. Agreement on classifications was 98%. A set of themes drawn from the literature review on barriers to seeking service were used to code the responses to question 2b (Why did you not go to ODS before that?). These

themes included: (a) lack of knowledge of services, (b) desire to establish an identity independent of disability status, (c) feelings that ODS assistance would be regarded as "cheating," and (d) feelings of shame. The first coding iteration used only these categories and an "other" category. Agreement at this point in coding at the level of sentences was 95%, but 41% of the 658 sentences were coded as "other."

The second iteration used four additional themes that emerged from the data: lack of time, the hassle of being assessed, having conflicts with ODS scheduled hours, and a general feeling that things were going well enough. A second coding produced a 96% agreement, with only 1% of the responses coded as "other." In a discussion among the coders, it was decided to break down the category of "lack of information" into three subcategories (see below). These subcategories resulted in a 98% agreement.

Results

The first survey question was used to categorize participants into three groups based on when they first sought assistance from ODS. Eight students (19%) registered with ODS before classes began or during the first weeks of their first semester (early group); 11 (26%) sought services later during their freshman year, most during the second half of the first semester or at the beginning of the second semester (later freshman group); and 23 students (55%) waited until after their freshman year (late group).

The GPA differences among the three groups at the end of their first semester were non-significant, with those in the early group earning a mean GPA of 2.20 (SD = 0.34), those in the later freshman group earning a mean GPA of 2.04 (SD = 0.57), and those in the late group earning a GPA of 2.09 (SD = 0.41). By the end of the first semester of the sophomore year, however, the effectiveness of participation in services from the ODS is suggested by the mean cumulative GPAs of 2.64 (SD = 0.37) for the early group; 2.30 (SD = 0.45) for the later freshman group; and 2.18 (SD = 0.29) for the late group, $F(2, 39) = 5.41$, $p = .01$. Those in the early group had earned an average of 35.9 credits (SD = 3.47); those in the later freshman group 33.8 credits (SD = 3.90), while those in the late group had earned only 30.2 (SD = 4.14) credits during their first three semesters, $F(2, 39) = 5.05$, $p = .02$.

The second survey question requested information about what prompted students to make their initial contact with ODS. In response to question 2, students other than those in the early group indicated overwhelmingly that they first came to ODS in response to academic problems. Of the 11 who came later during their freshman year, four did so in response to failing tests during the first semester, while seven came in response to a low first semester GPA. Of those in the late group, four reported that it was a specific test grade that prompted them, typically a critical course in their major. In addition, 13 students in this group indicated that it was their low overall GPA, including eight who were placed on academic probation. Three students in this group indicated that it was difficulty completing assignments within time limits that prompted their decision; two students indicated that it was not having the requisite GPA to declare their intended major; while one student indicated that it was having a GPA that prevented her from pledging a sorority. In contrast, students in the early group all indicated that they had made initial contact with ODS because it was arranged for them or because they wanted to receive accommodations.

A majority of students in all three groups indicated that others were involved in their decision to seek disability services. Of the eight students in the early group, seven indicated parents played a role in that decision. Five students also mentioned the role of a high school counselor, psychologist, or teacher. Of the 11 in the later freshman group, seven named a parent and two named a course faculty member as playing a pivotal role. In contrast, a faculty member was the most predominant individual reported for those in the late group, including five course faculty and nine advisors. Additionally three friends, two fiancées, and two parents were identified. High school personnel were not mentioned by any students in the later two groups.

The reasons for students not making initial contact with ODS were varied and most students cited more than one reason. Eight themes for a delay in seeking services were identified, four themes consistent with the literature and four additional themes emerging from the narratives. Out of the eight themes, four accounted for large percentages of the reasons: (a) lack of time, (b) lack of knowledge, (c) establishing an identity independent of disability status, and (d) feeling that things were going well/lack of recognition that things were not going well.

Lack of time was mentioned by more students than any other reason. For example, a student who made initial contact with the ODS office at the beginning of the second semester of her freshman year said:

> They keep you really busy during the first semester with team-building and orientation sessions, and to be honest, I was overwhelmed with the amount of reading I had to do. And there was a certain amount of partying, too. My roommates and I really got along and we spent hours and hours hanging out, and I kept in touch with all of my friends back home on Facebook. I got involved with a church group. I didn't really track how well I was doing in my classes. I knew I had some bad grades, but I had some good ones, too. It came as a shock when I saw my first semester report card. I had two Cs, two C-minuses, and a D. That was a wake-up call and my parents' reaction was another. So I talked to my advisor and she suggested going to the Writing Center. I told the tutor there that I had a disability and she got me in touch with ODS right then and there.

Lack of knowledge was also often given as a reason for delays in seeking services. For example, a male student with a mathematics disability said:

> People told me to go to ODS to get accommodations. I didn't want any accommodations. No one told me about all the other things that they provided, like help with finding the right professor for a course I had to take.

A comment by a senior who delayed seeking services until her junior year captures a different form of lack of knowledge: lack of information about her own disability and its impact on college learning:

> I swear no one ever used the term "learning disability" to me in high school. The only advice I had was, 'Don't take too many courses with a lot of writing in them.' What's too many? What kind of writing?

We decided to divide the "lack of knowledge" category into three sub-categories: (a) lack of information about procedures that needed to be followed, (b) lack of information about services provided by ODS, and (c) lack of information about one's disability.

Table 2 reports the percentages of each of these responses for the later freshman and late groups. The percentages are quite similar across the two groups with the exception of the three categories of "lack of knowledge," which were twice as high in the late group as in the later freshman group. An example of a narrative from a male in the late group shows examples of all three forms of lack of knowledge.

> I thought that it was a lot of hassle just to get a few minutes extra time on tests, and most of my professors freshman year were willing to give me that without my telling them I had an LD or providing a letter of accommodation. I went to the Writing Center for help on papers, but anyone can do that. Then second semester of my sophomore year I had a professor who wouldn't give me extra time. I told him I had an LD and he told me to go to Disability Services. I thought he was a jerk. Then I found out to get services at ODS I'd have to get tested. I almost didn't do it. When I did, I found out they could help with a lot of issues. Early registration is a great help. I wish I had known I could have had that from the get-go. Tutoring for a specific class by a student with issues similar to mine is a life-saver. And they were able to help me with a dorm situation that was interfering with my getting work done.

Two reasons were found to be common in both the later freshman and late groups: a feeling that things were going well and wanting to establish an identity without disability status. The following example combines the two issues in a student from the later freshman group who was also diagnosed as having ADHD:

> I'd read somewhere that LDs go away in some students when they reach adulthood. I was crossing my fingers that I was one of those people. I was really tired of taking tests in a room by myself at a special time, usually during study hall. I thought, "Well, I'll give it a shot." My mom encouraged me to do that. I wasn't sure how I was doing. My English papers would come back with comments, but no grades. I made grades in my courses all over the place, but people kept telling me, "Don't worry, you're a freshman. Have a good time." So I didn't worry, and I did have a good time.

Table 2

Percentage of Reasons Given for Postponing Registering with ODS in the Later Freshman and Late Groups

Reason	Later Freshman (N=11)	Late (N=23)
Lack of Time	64	70
Lack of Knowledge		
a. Procedures	27	57
b. Range of Services	27	52
c. Own Disability	18	61
Identity	36	39
Things Going Well	36	26
Cost/Hassle of Testing	0	39
"Cheating"	27	9
Shame	18	17
Scheduling Conflicts	18	17

Concerns about the expense and hassle of assessment were reported as another concern of the students in the late group. This category was less common than the lack of time, lack of knowledge, identity, or things going well category. A student who waited until being placed on academic probation gave this narrative of her continuing delay:

> When I finally got around to going, the first time, I was told that I'd have to take a bunch of tests and that it was going to cost me a lot of money. I made an appointment to start the testing, but then I blew it off. The crisis has passed. Next semester I went back. This time I was told I could get temporary accommodations until the testing was over. Maybe they told me that the first time, but I sure didn't hear it. I don't think you should have to pay for this out of your own pocket.

Other themes included feeling that ODS assistance would be regarded as "cheating," shame, and scheduling conflicts. These were the least frequently mentioned reasons in both the later freshman and late groups.

In response to question 3 asking, 'Can you tell me what an IEP is?' all but two students in the late group had basic knowledge of what an IEP was. While more than 90% of students mentioned that the IEP listed accommodations and that it was legally binding, less than a quarter of the students in any group mentioned that it contained a diagnosis. All of the students in the early group recalled attending at least one IEP meeting; seven of the 11 in the later freshman group did so, while only 10 of the 23 students in the late group recalled an IEP meeting.

High school orientations to college and ODS services were clearly different among the three groups (Question 4). Students in the early group all were able to recall general programs about the transition to college. All could recall being told about ODS;

six of the eight recalled individual meetings in which the nature of their disability and its impact on some aspect of college had been discussed. For example, one student reported:

> Yes, I met with my case manager and she explained some things about my writing disability and told me to try to limit the number of classes I registered for each semester that had long writing assignments in them. She told me to go to the writing center for every paper and to go to ODS as soon as I got on campus.

Students in the later freshman group recalled less college orientation. Two of the 11 stated that they had no preparation for college; four did not recall being told about ODS; only six had individual meetings about their disability. For example, one student from the late freshman group described his orientation to ODS in this way:

> I was told if I ever needed extra time on tests, there was an office on campus that could help me out. The person who told me that gave me her card and told me that there were documents that she would have to send in.

Students in the late group recalled even less transition orientation. Seven of the 23 remembered no college transition provided by the school; 12 did not recall ODS being mentioned; only seven recalled an individual meeting about their disability status and college. The following three responses are instructive. A student who arrived with an Honors Scholarship stated "I had something called a transition class. We just worked on writing job applications, resumes, and practiced for job interviews. I guess no one thought about any of us going to college". Another student who postponed seeking services until late in his sophomore year and had a reading disability reported, "No one ever used the term 'learning disability' to me, ever, in high school, so I certainly never discussed how my learning disability would affect me in college." Again, indicating the lack of college preparation, a student who first sought services after being placed on academic probation at the end of his freshman year stated, "I didn't hide that I had a reading disability in my application to college. I thought that would be it. No one told me that I would have to send information from my school and do it all myself."

Question 5 asked students to identify the individuals who prepared them for the transition to college. The combined results of this question and information from the preceding questions are reported in Table 3. While there is a modest decline in the percentage of those reporting learning about college from transition programs, counselors and school psychologists, and teachers in the later groups, these changes did not reach statistical significance. The most commonly mentioned source of information is fellow high school students. A quote from a student with a mathematics disability in the later freshman group is representative of the majority of students:

> We had some workshops in school about choosing the right school. I don't remember anything about them, except that we had them. My parents basically told me what they would pay for and what they wouldn't. They didn't want me to go to the community college, and private colleges and out-of-state universities were out of the question. So I looked at five in-state universities. I couldn't make up my mind, so I talked it over with my buddies. Three of them were going to [university]. So that's where I decided to go. We talked a lot about what it would be like and whether we wanted to room together and what we were majoring in. I remember that we'd hear things and tell each other. I remember one friend told me not to take English my first semester. "It's a killer," he said. We worried more about having the right clothes than anything about courses and class sizes and finding our way to the Office of Disabilities.

While ODS verified that all participants received some sort of special education services during high school, few students initially reported that they did (29%). When followed up with a question about testing accommodations, students only reported information about receiving testing accommodations and no specifics about their qualifications for testing accommodations or types of test situations. All students in the early group indicated that they received testing accommodations, while 78% of those in the later freshman group and 61% in the late group indicated they were receiving testing accommodations in high school.

The final question was asked to determine students' understanding of the legal differences between IEP services under IDEA and services available under Section

Table 3

Percentage of Students by Group Utilizing Various Sources of Information About College

Resource	Groups		
	Early	Later	Late
Transition Program	100	63	70
Counselor/School Psychologist	50	36	17
Teacher	25	27	30
Parents	67	45	61
Current College Students	25	18	26
High School Peers	100	72	87

504 and ADA. Students were asked to describe how they were affected by the differences in laws governing students with disabilities as they transition from IEP services to college. With the exception of one student in the late group who was a special education major, no student was able to explain the differences in the legal regulations governing services. Students in all groups were generally aware of some changes, such as the fact that there were no IEPs in college and that the range of services was larger.

Discussion

This study examined the reasons for and the impact of postponing seeking disability services at a competitive state university by students with a learning disability. We found evidence that receiving disability services made a significant difference in GPA and hours earned by the middle of the sophomore year. That no difference in GPA or credits earned was found immediately after the first semester between those receiving services and those not receiving services could be interpreted as there being few academic differences among the groups. More than likely, however, the lack of difference is due both to a floor effect (39 of the 42 students were in the lowest GPA quartile) and to a period of discovering what the ODS could provide, as evidenced by the following statement by a woman with both reading and writing disabilities who registered with ODS before starting her freshman year:

> My parents and I visited ODS during my college visit. I went to ODS during my first week of classes and got my letter telling my professors I might need extra time on tests. It was later in the semester when I first started reading the emails ODS sent. I didn't really start going there until my second semester. The reading and writing requirements in my history and lit classes were the real reasons I started going.

We found that, in students' narratives of why they sought services when they did, the primary reason for first seeking services in both the later freshman and late groups was academic failure or levels of academic performance that prevented other activities. If we want students to seek services early in college, before an academic crisis occurs, then transitioning students need to be provided with information about the range of benefits provided by ODS and parents need to be enlisted by transition personnel to get them to ODS. Parents played key roles in getting students in the early group involved with ODS.

Students reported that the primary reason for delaying seeking services was time constraints. With so many students reporting a lack of time to seek services once classes begin, high school personnel may want to consider urging contact with ODS prior to the beginning of classes. Also, the ODS may need to find ways of competing with the deluge of information and orientation programming received by freshmen. A male student in the later freshman group who earned a 0.80 GPA his first semester commented:

> When you arrive on campus, everyone is after you. You get about fifty emails a day from every group on campus. You have meeting after meeting, activity after activity. I guess it's supposed to keep you from getting homesick or something. I didn't want to be a Young Republican or do an internship in Costa Rica. I wasn't interested in information about teacher education. Someone needed to tell me – Get to ODS now! But it was hard to pick out that call.

Insufficient knowledge about the costs and logistical difficulties of being assessed, however, appeared to differentiate those who proactively sought services from those who sought services later. Students' lack of knowledge was far ranging, including an accurate awareness about available services, the nature and impact of their own disability, and procedures for utilizing campus supports. A male student with a reading disability who delayed seeking services until his sophomore year commented:

> It was hard for me to get my head around the fact that in order to get services, it was up to me, and that there were some hoops I had to jump through first. In high school, when I needed help, it kind of magically appeared. Now I know there were a lot of people involved behind the scenes making that happen. And I didn't know if the problems I was having were because I wasn't studying enough or just right or because of my disability. I didn't know where to go to find out.

Students who sought services in a timely fashion were more likely to have participated in IEP meetings in high school, could recall more general school-based transition programming to college, received more orientation to disability services, and received individually-based preparation specific to their disability than those who postponed going to ODS. The first group's preparatory experiences increased their understanding of their disability and the impact it may have on their postsecondary education. Exposure to information about disability services provided students with a better sense of how ODS could support them academically. If these recollections are accurate, then students without exposure to postsecondary services may lack knowledge of disabilities and services. This informational gap may account for differences between the late and later freshman groups. All students in this study showed some lack of knowledge about how learning disabilities are diagnosed and how services for students with disabilities change between high school and college.

The existing literature on why students do not seek services from disability services has tended to focus on feelings of shame and the fear that, by seeking accommodations, students will be viewed as lazy or getting an unfair advantage by faculty and fellow students. These reasons emerged as only minor themes from these interviews. Only six students specifically mentioned embarrassment or shame. For example, a female student in the late group said:

> I guess I was kind of embarrassed that I still needed to get special things that everybody else didn't get. I hoped that things had changed-- my brain or whatever-- and that I could just slip in and be like everyone else. Anyway, it's kind of a hassle. I don't usually use my accommodation letter, unless the course has essay tests.

The decreased emphasis on shame and stigma in these students' narratives may be a result of changes in their experiences with support services in public schools. Today's students with disabilities report much more satisfactory secondary experiences than those of two decades ago (Newman, et al., 2010) and, therefore, may have diminished expectations for negative evaluations of his or her status. Greater importance in addressing deterrents to students seeking services is indicated for providing students with knowledge about procedures, range of disability services, and understanding one's own disability.

Implications for Practice

Students who registered with the ODS early recalled more transition programming in their high schools, focusing on postsecondary education, compared to those who waited to register later. Later registrants often stated that college was not addressed in high school, although they were able to recall details in their employment-focused transition programming. That some students report no college transition programming and many reported very little underscores the call for more deliberate transition programming aimed at college and an end to the practice of assuming that students with disabilities need only transition to work programs. Not only are more students with LD going to 2- and 4-year institutions, much of the training in the skilled trades is now being offered at community colleges, with many of these training programs requiring regular postsecondary academic coursework in addition to job-specific training (Reesem, 2001; Torraco, 2008).

This research has specific implications for transition programs that include the parents of students with disabilities. Parents were noted to be a primary source of influence in seeking services in the students who sought support services early in college. High school staff should prioritize sharing information with parents about the process of seeking services through ODS and the range of services available at postsecondary educational settings. Parents need to be informed about the importance of students registering with ODS when they enroll in college so they can encourage and promote a successful college experience. Parents can play a significant role in approaching services from ODS in a proactive, rather than passive manner, if they are equipped with information from high school support staff.

Another avenue for enhancing transition services is the inclusion of students in IEP meetings. Since all of the students in the early group for seeking services reported attending an IEP meeting and less than half of the students in the late group reported attending one, participation in IEP meetings may have an influence in helping students gain knowledge about their disability and their role in seeking help. High school staff responsible for IEP meetings should consider the value of involving students in IEP meetings as not only an opportunity for increasing the student's role in their education, but also as preparatory in building the student's self-advocacy for future educational needs.

Many of the students' narratives included statements of surprise at the range of services provided by universities as well as statements of dismay about not having been made aware of them. Huge lecture courses, strategic sequencing of courses, preferential enrollment, or alternative housing are not considered by most high school personnel, and many of the transition team members we have worked with seem genuinely unaware of the options afforded students. Postsecondary staff needs to make their high school counterparts aware of these options so that they can make their students aware of them. Many of the students' narratives included statements that began, "If I had known that I could have received…," then they would have contacted the ODS earlier and avoided problems of inappropriate schedules, classes, and living conditions. High school counselors and school psychologists can also assume some responsibility in contacting local postsecondary institutions to learn more about the range of services available there. Increasing communications between high school transition staff and ODS offices on nearby campuses can facilitate the flow of information students need for decision making.

While colleges may fault high schools for underpreparation, there is a limit to which high schools can prepare students for the demands of specific institutions. Transition courses at the college that are specific to the needs of students with learning disabilities have been tried with success (Chiba & Low, 2008). Class size, degree requirements, add/drop policies, residential requirements, advising systems, honor code limitations on academic assistance, social rules, and access to faculty vary widely from campus to campus (e.g., two students complained they had not been told where the ODS was located as a reason for not seeking services earlier). Postsecondary institutions are in a unique position to provide information specific to their institution for students to access services. Students would have to disclose their disability status to their universities, however, for this approach to be implemented.

With so many students reporting a lack of time to seek services, an indirect impact from increasing their understanding of LD and available services may be to help students prioritize a visit to ODS. Students, like all individuals, have time for what they value and consider important. Supporting the need to take time to go visit the ODS office can also be emphasized by parents, high school counselors, and school psychologists to students as a critical step in the college enrollment process. College students with disabilities may be reluctant to

seek services for various reasons. Understanding that registering with ODS may provide them with priority course registration, however, may prompt them to make contact. Regardless of the concerns for time, shame, or identity as a student, increasing the student's knowledge of range of services may facilitate the student seeking services in a timely manner.

Limitations and Future Research

Because this study was conducted at a single institution, it should be regarded as a case study rather than as representative of students with a learning disability in higher education. To gain admission to the university, the students in this study all earned consistently excellent grades in high school and scored well above the mean on SATs. The university has an undergraduate teaching emphasis and a wide variety of academic support services that are used by a large number of students, perhaps diminishing the stigma of other forms of academic support.

The study is further limited by a relatively small sample size, which did not include students with learning disabilities who never utilized disability services. Future research may want to study this difficult-to-find group, which can only realistically be done by identifying students in high school and following them into postsecondary education. This prospective longitudinal approach would also allow comparisons of known approaches to high school transition programming rather than relying on students' recollections. Further, information gained through constructed narratives may increase understanding of the phenomenon but may not be helpful in making programmatic changes. For example, the most common reason students reported for delaying their efforts to seek services was lack of time in their schedules. Although it is important to understand that students may perceive themselves as having no time to go to ODS, this finding should not be directly linked to reducing the amount of programming for freshman students.

Another limitation to this study is the lack of longitudinal data on the perceived benefit of participating in disability services. While we encourage students to register with ODS as soon as they enter college, it would be helpful to know whether most students would perceive benefit at that time. Our finding of a general sense that things were going well might interfere with becoming fully involved with ODS programs early in one's college career.

Conclusions

One of the most common issues discussed in the literature on postsecondary transition is "self-advocacy." In listening to the stories provided by these students about their sometimes slowed movement to disclosure of their disability to campus personnel and subsequent eligibility for services, we find little evidence of a lack of self-advocacy skills, but rather a lack of knowledge about what to advocate for and why. The phrase, "I wish I'd known…" occurs 31 times in these interviews. Some students wished they had known more in high school about their learning disability or what its nature was or what its impact on specific classroom behaviors would likely be. Their understanding of their learning problems increased as they experienced the challenges of college. Others wished they had known about specific services offered at their university. As one student in the late group observed:

> I wish it had all been made a lot clearer to me before I started. I wish I had known where the land mines were hiding, like the history term paper I never finished or just the impossibility of me learning to remember all those Latin words in botany. By the time I finished my [General Education] courses, I'd finally figured out what I was good at and what I stunk at. That was when I should have started all over and it would have been a breeze. But when I went to ODS, [name] was able to help me understand my strengths as well as my weaknesses, and at least I'd go into a class knowing where the problems were and having a few tricks up my sleeve to deal with them.

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Appendix

Interview Questions

1. When did you first go to ODS? (Which semester of which year?)

2. What prompted you to go to ODS? (Clarify whether it was for an individual test, individual course, or overall GPA if the reason was academic, grade or time)
    (a) Did anyone suggest that you go to ODS? Who? (Parent, teacher, advisor, counselor, friend, other?)
    (b) If students did not go to ODS early in their first semester, ask: Why did you not go to ODS before that? (i.e., lack of knowledge, identity, cheating, and shame)

3. Can you tell me what an IEP is?
    (a) Did you ever attend a meeting while you were in high school about your IEP?

4. While you were in high school, did you attend school programs about going to college?
    (a) While you were in high school did you meet with individuals at your school about going to college? Who?
    (b) In the School programs preparing you for college, did anyone tell you about the Office of Disability Services? Who?
    (c) In preparing for college, did anyone in the school meet with you individually and discuss your learning disability with you? That is, did someone talk to you about your academic strengths and weaknesses?

5. In addition to school personnel who helped you prepare for college? (Clarify the relationships; if peers, find out whether these were friends in college or classmates.)

6. What special education services did you receive in high school? (If the answer is none, ask about special testing accommodations.)

7. The laws governing students with disabilities change from high school to college. Can you tell me some ways the differences in those laws affect you?