

# **LD Students in Your Class: Who Are They And What Do We Do With Them?**

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*A learning disability is "...a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or in using language, spoken or written, which may manifest itself in imperfect ability to listen, think, speak, read, write, spell, or do mathematical calculations."*

*– Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (1997)*

More people with learning disabilities are choosing college than ever before. According to Vogel, Leonard, and Scales (1998), the number of college freshmen with a learning disability tripled between 1985 and 1995.

As graduate teaching assistants we are often expected to be solely responsible for teaching undergraduate courses. As novice teachers, most GTAs have little or no experience dealing with learning disabled students. Here are some tips, based on our experiences, on how to properly recognize a learning disability in your students, how to get these students help, and to explain what you can do for learning disabled students in your classroom.

There are behaviors to look for if you suspect a student may have a learning disability. These students have difficulty understanding what they read, solving math problems, spelling, understanding language, and writing. These types of problems can affect their ability to complete reading requirements, take tests in the time allotted, complete math requirements, take notes, and process information presented in lectures. Look for academic performance differences between timed assignments and non-timed assignments. Often students will display high marks on assignments that do not have time limits and disproportionately low marks on timed assignments. In addition, monitor classroom behavior to see if students are struggling.

Once you recognize students with a disability, you can suggest that they seek help from the disability resource center (DRC) at your institution. This center helps students make a plan on how to improve or seek testing. Some DRCs do learning disability testing and others have sites at the university that provide this service. Forewarn the student that there may be a cost associated with the testing. The consultation with the DRC and the testing is completely confidential and the DRC will suggest certain instructional and classroom accommodations.

After a student is diagnosed with an learning disability, it is the student's responsibility to provide you with a list of approved accommodations. If the accommodations do not fit with the structure of the class, you should work out an alternative with the student and the DRC. However, you must provide an accommodation to fit the student's needs. Typical accommodations are extended testing time, the use of a computer to type essays, a computer program that reads the text, a note taker, a spell checker, a person who reads the test to them, and a reduction in choices on multiple-choice tests. The DRC will help you

provide these services.

As a proactive instructor, you can provide some easy accommodations for people with a certified learning disability. One of the easiest things to provide for students is a copy of your class notes before class. The majority of college lectures are now on PowerPoint. Providing the lecture before class frees up students to listen rather than constantly taking notes. Instructors should also be cognizant of students that need extra time during tests. Another simple accommodation is to provide a study guide for the tests. If you do not want to take the time to make one, have the students do one as an assignment. Take the three best guides and give them to everyone.

These accommodations will have a lasting impact on your students. Remember, as teachers, our goal is for students to learn information for future use. If a learning disabled student needs something to access this information, why would we not give it to them and achieve this goal?

## References

- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Amendments of 1997. 11 stat 37 (20 USC 1401 [26]).
- Vogel, L., Leonard, F., & Scales, W. R. (1998). The national learning disabilities postsecondary data bank: An overview. *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 31(3), 234-247.