

Learning Disabilities in Graduate School: Closeted or Out in the Open?

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Generations ago, disabilities on campus were associated with wheelchairs and canes. Now disabilities at universities and colleges include psychological impairments, mental illnesses, medical conditions, and learning disabilities. The National Center for Learning Disabilities (NCLD) describes a learning disability (LD) as a specific kind of learning problem that can cause a person to have trouble becoming proficient at certain skills (NCLD, 2006). The skills most commonly affected by an LD are reading, writing, listening, speaking, reasoning, and arithmetic.

Learning disabilities are becoming more manifest in professional and academic settings. People now have an increased awareness of what learning disabilities look like, making LDs no longer “invisible” in daily life. It is estimated that as many as 2.9 million school-age children (approximately 5 percent of the population) in the United States have a specific learning disability and receive some kind of support (NCLD, 2006). Other reports estimate that one out of every five public schoolchildren in the United States has a learning disability. A recent National Longitudinal Transition Study (NLTS) reported that only 13 percent of students with learning disabilities have attended a four-year, post-secondary school program (NLTS , 2006). An even smaller percentage of these students continue on to graduate school.

LDs in Graduate School

Life as a graduate student encompasses many academic skills that may be affected by learning disabilities. Stressful environments, like academia, often hinder students with an LD. For some graduate students, accommodations can be seen as an admission of weakness, failure, or uncontrolled difficulty. Fortunately, most major universities and colleges now provide campus-wide disability centers that offer confidential discussion about possible accommodations, guidance, and support groups. (Students who believe they might have a learning disability should contact a school counselor or visit their university’s disability center. It is a safe place to ask questions and possibly get professionally tested.) Many graduate students might need to build their own support network by developing working relationships with non-LD students if their school’s learning disability center lacks these resources.

Even at schools with adequate resources, some students would rather struggle on their own than reveal their diagnosis to professors or others in their department. Though there are often fewer services available as a student climbs up the education ladder, graduate students should not shy away from being open with their professors about their strengths and limitations.

People like to think that negative judgments are not made about individuals with learning disabilities, but it does happen. Current colleagues, as well as future employers, might see a graduate student’s differing abilities in a negative light. In the competitiveness of graduate school, students with learning disabilities often feel less confident of their abilities than do their non-learning-disabled counterparts. For this reason, many universities are developing LD support groups for students and centers like those discussed above. However, often graduate students with learning disabilities are still not included in

their school's statement of diversity, leading to continued stigmatization. How can universities, faculty members, and fellow students overcome stigmatization and encourage graduate students with learning disabilities to be comfortable and open in their environment?

There is no easy answer because of the many individual differences in students with learning disabilities. Many people do not realize that a number of graduate students face the challenges and stigmatism of learning disabilities. It is important for both faculty and non-LD students to realize that a fellow graduate student may be dealing with the challenges of a LD without it being widely known. Many students have already figured out how to work around their educational challenges by the time they reach graduate school, allowing them to hide the disability from others.

Adjustments, such as the possibility of flexible work hours and other accommodations, would be easier if academics were more educated about LDs in the graduate student population. The key for graduate students is to advocate accommodations for their learning disabilities. If academic communities are made aware, in time more students with learning disabilities will be comfortable in the graduate environment. Many organizations offer helpful information on learning disabilities (see the Resources section at the end of this piece). Many of these groups specialize in linking affiliates to promote a network of LD advocates through teachers, students, and professionals. Our advice to students with learning disabilities and their instructors: Be educated and be open about your strengths and weaknesses!

In the end, divulging personal information of a learning disability is an individual decision. However, it is important to recognize that the skills students develop in dealing with a learning disability can often help to overcome future problems. If students with learning disabilities continue to educate others and break down barriers, people will learn to understand and appreciate this addition to campus diversity.

Resources

The Learning Disabilities Association of America supports people with learning disabilities of all ages. It offers support for parents, teachers, and professionals by providing helpful resources and suggestions. For more information, please visit <http://www.ldanatl.org>.

The National Center for Learning Disabilities has developed fact sheets that are based on reliable research, as well as information on effective teaching practices. For more information, visit <http://www.ncld.org/content/view/445/389/>.

References

National Center for Learning Disabilities (2006). Retrieved August 26, 2006, from <http://www.ncld.org/content/view/445/389/>

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