

Students with learning disabilities transitioning from college: The importance of self-determination skills

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Abstract

Students with learning disabilities represents a population of college students that is continuing to transition to college campuses. This research is from the shared experiences of a group of 10 students with learning disabilities during their junior and senior years as they prepared to transition from college. Over the progression of the 2015-2016 academic year, the students shared their experiences about transitioning and adjusting to the college setting and their thoughts about transitioning from college through the lens of student development theory. Hadley's (2009) updated version of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) stages of *developing purpose* and *establishing integrity* that focuses on the experiences of students with learning disabilities provides the perspective of the students' described experiences. *Developing purpose* assesses how the student conceptualizes and prioritizes their career goals. *Establishing integrity* examines how the student's beliefs and values guide their career plans and goals (Hadley, 2009; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; and Chickering, 1969).

Introduction

Increasing numbers of students with learning disabilities are enrolled in colleges and universities each academic year (Association on Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD 2012). Gargiulo and Bouck (2018) defined learning disabilities as a difference between the student's academic performance and his or her academic ability. The learning discrepancy usually shows in the student's oral expression, listening comprehension, written expression, basic reading skills, reading comprehension and mathematics skills. Also attention disorders, hyperactivity, information-processing problems, memory difficulties and/or social/emotional issues may accompany the learning disability. While in the secondary school system, students with learning disabilities are provided

services required by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement (IDEIA) Act of 2004 which mandates that secondary schools offer extended services to students with learning disabilities. A multidisciplinary team of professionals that includes teachers, counselors, and parents oversee the services and monitor the student's academic progress. When students transition to college, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 determine the limited services colleges and universities are expected to provide. These laws require that students with learning disabilities self-identify at the campus Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) for needed accommodations and practice self-determination behavior. The purpose of this study is to hear the views of ten junior and senior students

with learning disabilities share about their readiness to transition from college and the ways self-determination practices have assisted them.

Review of the Literature

Hamblet (2014) and Scott (1996) found that colleges and universities typically offer several types of programs for students with learning disabilities. Campuses that have an Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) that provide more structured programs often have multiple staff with various areas of disability expertise, faculty training and outreach, and transition services. Campuses that provide coordinated services typically have an office with a coordinator with knowledge of disabilities and offer many different accommodations. And colleges or universities that have limited funds and/or resources may only have a part-time person available on campus to respond to student inquiries. Although campus services might not be as extensive as high school services, students with learning disabilities transitioning from college to employment might not find any services available. According to Getzel and Thoma (2008) practicing self-determination skills is an important component of the transition process for students with learning disabilities moving to employment. Field, Sarver and Shaw (2003) defined self-determination as a blend of skills, knowledge and beliefs that allow a student to engage in goal-directed, self-monitored, independent behavior. They further state that the student's understanding of his/her strengths and limitations along with a belief in his/her self as able to accomplish goals is essential to self-determination. Field and Hoffman (1994) stated that opportunities for choice in career interest was an important subject for students to practice self-determination skills.

Theoretical Framework

Field and Hoffman (1994) further specified that the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and other campus supports is important in the long-term development of students with learning disabilities after college life and career development. Students with learning disabilities can learn and practice self-determination skills in preparation for after graduation life. Additionally, OSD should be the prime support for assisting students in developing after graduation independence. It is important that colleges and universities provide students with learning disabilities the opportunity to develop the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that lead to self-determination. Hughes et al. (2013) highlighted the role of self-determination in promoting positive academic, social and post-school outcomes for students with learning disabilities.

The theoretical basis of this study is that as students with learning disabilities transition from college, their self-determination skills might better help them plan for

graduation and understand how their values might influence their career goals. Hadley's (2009) updated version of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) developmental theories provides the theoretical context for the study. Evans et al. (2010), noted that Hadley's (2009) study of students with learning disabilities through the theory of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) stages of development supported the assessment of the transition phases in the college setting of students with learning disabilities. The developmental stages of growth for this one-year study were: *developing purpose* and *establishing integrity*. *Developing purpose* assesses how the student conceptualizes and prioritizes their career goals. *Establishing integrity* evaluates how the student's beliefs and values guide their career goals. The developmental theory frame was an instrument that supported the researcher's efforts to bring together the students viewpoints into a set of concepts that offer profound understanding and applicable meaning to the research findings (Cresswell, 2009). Additionally, developmental theory can provide a specific organization for discerning issues students with learning disabilities may face as they transition from one phase in their development to another (Hadley, 2009). Through sharing in focus group and semi-structured individual interview sessions conducted over an academic year, the same group of 10 students responded to the research questions related to their views on preparing to graduate and transition from college.

Method

Participants and Sampling Procedures

This qualitative study was conducted at a public research university in the Midwest. Creswell (2009) asserted that focus group and semi-structured individual interviews with the participants allows the researcher to collect data while focused on learning the meaning the participants have about a particular problem or issue. The Director of the OSD served as the gatekeeper for the study (Newman & Benz, 1998). Students were invited to participate in the study through a letter developed by the researcher and sent to them by the Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). Students needed to meet the standards of entering that university directly from high school and submitting diagnostic testing results describing their learning disability. The first 10 students who met the research conditions were chosen by the researcher to participate in the study (Vaughn, Schumm, & Sinagub, 1996). The students represented arts and sciences, business, education, engineering and the health and human services academic units on campus. Participants included 7 females and 3 males. Table 1 lists the student participant demographic data.

Table 1: Student Participant Demographic Data

<i>Student Name</i>	<i>Class Rank</i>	<i>College/School</i>	<i>Major/Minor</i>
Jimmy	Junior	Arts & Sciences	Bio-Sciences
Jay	Senior	Arts & Sciences	Com-Arts
Sally	Junior	Arts & Sciences	Com-Arts
Nikki	Junior	Health & Hum Services	O-Therapy
Jamy	Junior	Education & Hum Dev.	Special Ed
Kris	Senior	Business	Marketing
Issie	Junior	Health & Hum Services	O-Therapy
Konner	Senior	Business	Marketing
Kelly	Senior	Arts & Sciences	Psych/Phil
Brie	Senior	Arts & Sciences	Bio-Sciences

Data Collection

During the 2015-2016 academic year, the 10 students participated in focus group and semi-structured individual interviews where they discussed their plans for graduating and transitioning from the university. Focus group interviews were two hours long and the semi-structured individual interviews were one hour long and both were audio-taped (Krathwohl, 1998). The focus group interview brought together the particular student population to discuss a general overview of the specific topic (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018). Semi-structured individual interviews permitted the researcher to ask questions that go beyond the focus group questions (Krathwohl, 1998). Also allowing the students to offer information they did not

want share in the focus group and/or possibly thought of later (Creswell, 2009). Wise and Hatfield (2016) affirmed the importance of using the students' perspectives to give expression to the data. They further assert that in qualitative research, the influence of a single view sited in a larger context allows the students perspectives to, possibly, generalize to other students in other universities. Tables 2 list the research questions asked in the focus group interview which had to do with the students' *developing purpose*. Table 3 shows the research questions asked in the semi-structured individual interviews that have to do with the student's *establishing integrity*. Both the focus group and semi-structured individual interviews were held in the conference room of the campus Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD).

Table 2: Research Questions Asked in Focus Group Interview

Developing Purpose

1. As students in your senior year or close to graduating, describe the academic plans you set for this school year?
2. How did your plans compare to actual occurrences of the academic year?
3. Do you envision graduate school or the workplace to be a different challenge for you than college has been? If so, in what ways?
4. What plans do you have in place or are you putting in place to contend with obstacles you might encounter in graduate school or in the workplace in relationship to your disability?
5. What are your ultimate career goals, have they remained consistent and how has your time in college influenced those goals (for example, have you worked with career counselors, participated in career exploration courses and/or workshops, participated in internships or co-op programs and/or discussed future plans with your professors)?
6. What do you envision yourself doing a year from now to enhance/encourage your career goals and your future?

Table 3: Research Questions Asked in Semi-Structured Interviews

Establishing Integrity

1. Describe some of the major changes you have made in your work ethic since your freshman year.
2. How do you think those changes have influenced your career plans and goals?
3. Describe the beliefs and values you hold regarding your work ethic.
4. How does your learning disability shape your thinking about and planning for your career future?

Results

Developing purpose

The stage of Hadley's (2009), Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) *developing purpose* was the context for the focus group interview. During this stage of growth, students begin to make connections between their college experiences and career goals. The students began the focus group by introducing themselves, their class rank, major, and why they were willing to participate in the study. Students discuss some general experiences about self-identifying with the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD), requesting accommodations and interacting with their professors regarding their learning disability. The students are expectant as they looked forward to graduation and transitioning from college, but not firm about "what they plan to make happen next." They seem to think because they continue to "work hard" in their classes, that work ethic would take care of everything else. Jay the male, arts and sciences major says he wants to be a "public speaker," but is not sure what kind of "job that looks like." He says that because of his dyslexia he understands "concepts" but has a hard time "reading questions on test correctly." He admits that as a senior he still relies on accommodations from OSD and that he is not sure what he plans to do once he transitions to employment.

Konner the senior business major chimes in that he also has dyslexia and attention deficit-disorder (ADD) and the OSD has been "super helpful and they only want to be helpful." Konner describes himself as "that annoying student" because he likes to ask his professors "a bunch of questions." Issy seems distracted in the interview and notes that she has both dyslexia and ADD. She complains that she always feels rushed in her reading assignments and worries that she might have struggles in the workplace. She says her high school did not offer many accommodations and did not see learning disabilities as a "big thing." She says that while here in college she has had to meet with professors during office hours to get help for her courses. Nikki, the junior health and human services major also shares that her high school did not acknowledge her learning disability because they thought I "graduated from getting a learning disability when I left elementary school." She states that they thought she "did not have dyslexia anymore." She announces it has been "nicer in college because I get more time during exams." She says "that is very nice because I need to like take time to reread the questions and make sure I'm actually getting what they're asking me." When asked how she thinks she might manage in the workplace, she said she was not sure.

Jimmy, the junior arts and sciences major reveals that he gets "testing accommodations for my dyslexia" and I also "use Communication Access Realtime Technology (CART) for my hearing disability so, I kinda have like, multiple things going on." He describes his professors as "pretty good this semester, but I've kind of had the not so good to the very good, so kinda of just depends on the

teacher." Jamy the junior arts and sciences discloses that she was diagnosed in the second grade with "learning disabilities with reading, writing, and spelling." She shares that she really struggled in elementary school, but graduated with honors from high school. She describes herself as an "auditory learner, so I get my books on my computer so I can listen to them." She does seem concern when we discuss how she plans to transition to the workplace with such needs. Brie the senior arts and sciences major says her learning disability is called "auditory process disorder." She tells that group it is like "dyslexia but instead of to the eyes it's to the ears." She says she could be having a conversation and the message that she might be saying will "get mixed or lost in the process of my brain."

Establishing integrity

Hadley's (2009), Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) stages of *establishing integrity* was the framework for the semi-structured interviews. During this developmental stage, students begin to understand how their personal beliefs and values shape their career goals. As a group, students share various work experiences and interests. They seem both positive and nervous in their outlook about what is next after transitioning from college. Brie the senior arts and sciences major seems frustrated when she describes the amount of time reading for her classes takes her. She admits she does not know what that could mean for the workplace. She reveals that "on average I probably spend 6 to 8 hours on homework a day, just to get the grades that I do." Kris, the senior business major discloses that she has struggled with exams for her classes because her professors would not provide her with their notes. She says she would "really like to have the notes for her finals." Kelly, the senior arts and sciences major volunteers in the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) and she generally discloses her learning disability and encourages students to do so. She says because her learning disability is so "blatantly obvious," that for example when she text-messages someone, it looks like "I am intoxicated, but I am not!"

Sally the junior arts and sciences major says she was not diagnosed until her junior year in high school because she was having such a hard time passing the ACT in preparation for college. Her mom got her test, she then got extra time on the ACT and was able to "bring up my scores." She shares "I have trouble reading, so I have my phone and my computer read me texts." Brie the senior arts and sciences major says that her senior year was the only time she remembers getting any sort of extra time on exams. She reveals that she was diagnosed with her learning disability at the age of 10. She says earlier in high school she had the option of doing her coursework in a resource room for students with learning disabilities and she did not want to do that. She says during junior year in high school, her mom started to encourage her to do more on her own. Konner, the senior business major says he was use to the schools doing so much for him because

that what happened from elementary school until he graduated from high school. He shares that when he got to college and found out that he had to go to OSD and identify himself and request accommodations he was “like woah, over my head!” He reveals that he did not go to OSD for three years and his grades suffered. When asked about his adjustments to employment, the workplace, Konner comments he is not sure yet how he will make adjustments.

Brie the senior arts and sciences major says her mom “always knew something was wrong” and had to question the school about why they weren’t doing anything for her. Jimmy the senior arts and sciences major says his elementary and middle school teachers “chalked it up to like being a bad student” when discussing his reading abilities. He further says that after he got to high school and was diagnosed in the summer of his freshman year, he still was not provided accommodations because he was not failing, he was a “solid B/C student.” Jay, the senior arts and sciences major says in his high school experience he received a lot of attention. For example, in high traditional classroom, there was the primary/lead teacher and also a special education teacher who would spend time with the students with a learning disability. He further shares that because of such a strong positive high school experience he did come to college somewhat “cocky.” He said he did struggle in the college of business and went on academic probation and switch to com-arts in the college of arts and sciences. He discloses that “I was thinking like, dropping out of college and never coming back.” He shares that his TAs and professors helped with his study approach and that turn things around for him.

Discussion

In discussing Hadley’s (2009) updated account of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) and Chickering’s (1969) developmental stages of *developing purpose* and *establishing integrity*, the students spent quite a bit of time sharing perspectives about their experiences with accommodations and somewhat thinking about what that could mean in their transition from college. Clearly the learning disability continues to influence their academic performance and possibly their future work endeavors. In general, the students seem to view themselves able to maneuver around their learning disability and seem to think that is possible in their careers. Transitioning from college and adjusting to the workplace might present challenges for many students. The transition might be more compelling for students with learning disabilities because of the history of supports provided in their previous educational settings. Students were mixed in their feelings about the idea of disclosing to a supervisor and/ or colleagues. It will be important for students to practice self-determination skills to successfully transition to, adjust to, and remain successful in the workplace. Self-determination and self-management skills are a set of personal skills that includes knowledge of the learning disability and how it influences the student’s performances, acceptance of the disability and the self-

determination to overcome obstacles and barriers that could present themselves.

The situational elements of timing, role change, and lack of control are important to consider as the students transition from a known and unknown environment (Goodman, Schlossberg, & Anderson, 2006). This study brings into question whether students with learning disabilities will be able to support students successful transition from college. Getzel and Thoma (2008) assert that self-determination skills and behaviors help students to transition and persist in college. Will practicing those skills and behaviors assist students with learning disabilities be successful in the workplace. Hopefully, those students with learning disabilities in college with effective self-determination behaviors can continually use them in their transition to the workplace. Field, Sarver and Shaw (2003) found that personality factors such as self-determination, good problem-solving and persistence as indicators for students with learning disabilities in their transitions from one station in life to another. They defined problem-solving as essential because students with learning disabilities always need to consider their learning disability when making decisions. Field, Sarver and Shaw (2003) determined that persistence meant that while in college students that were successful needed to continually meet with advisors, sometimes retake courses and constantly evaluate whether they could move around a particular barrier.

Conclusion

In preparing students with learning disabilities to transition from college to the workplace, the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) is a key support system. OSD through workshops and one-on-one support meetings with students with learning disabilities can help students develop and practice self-determination with staff. OSD staff can work with faculty to incorporate self-determination activities in their coursework. Also developing ways to incorporate more systemic change in the general university curriculum and teaching efforts could be a way to introduce themes of self-determination, decision-making and independent thinking. All these practices and opportunities for students with learning disabilities to work collaboratively with other students, faculty and administrative offices can be wonderful opportunities of practice for challenges in the workplace.

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