

LAWLOR

PERSPECTIVE

A SERIES OF WHITE PAPERS EXAMINING ISSUES IN HIGHER EDUCATION



ACCOMMODATING DIFFERENCES

AN INVESTMENT
WORTH MAKING

By Christine Stern

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INTRODUCTION

In 1998, three times more students with learning disabilities (LD) were admitted to colleges across the country than were admitted in 1988, according to the Higher Education and the Handicapped (HEATH) Resource Center of The George Washington University (Washington, D.C.), the national clearinghouse on postsecondary education for students with disabilities. The Institute for Higher Education Policy reports that one in 25 college students has LD. Not only are increasing numbers of LD students going on to college, their aspirations for postgraduate studies are high as well. In 1998, 51 percent of first-year college students who reported having a learning disability indicated a desire to pursue a degree beyond the bachelor level according to HEATH.

Nearly all institutions (98 percent) that enrolled students with any disability in 1995-'96 provided at least one support service or special accommodation for these students. However, public two- and four-year institutions were much more likely to provide services than were private schools. In addition, the larger the institution, the more likely it was to offer special services for students with disabilities, reports the National Center for Education Statistics.

Loring Brinckerhoff is director of the Office of Disability Policy at Educational Testing Service (ETS), serves as a disability consultant for Harvard Medical School (Boston, Massachusetts), and privately advises high school students with disabilities in their transition to college. He initiated learning disability support services at the University of Wisconsin-Madison and later directed the learning disabilities support office at Boston University (Massachusetts) for five years. "We've come a long way," says Brinckerhoff. "When I started in 1983, there were less than a dozen colleges and universities that had comprehensive services, and now there are between 1,200 and 1,500. Look at that [number] mushrooming in 20 years—that's extraordinary. But certainly the range of services runs the gamut, from the minimum under the law to comprehensive programs. I don't think there are any colleges today that do nothing. I think they've been battered, beaten or sued by now. The Americans with Disabilities Act has brought college presidents to new levels of awareness. They realize that they could lose their federal funding under Section 504 [of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973], and that gets a college president's attention."

Dyslexic and Distinguished

What college would not want the luminaries listed in the sidebars throughout this publication included among their alumni? Those noted from today's world have all spoken publicly about their dyslexia—many of them were not diagnosed until their children were tested for the condition. Those from the past are believed to have been dyslexic, based on school records, memoirs and personality profiles.

Everyone in this group can (or could) read. Yet all would tell you that reading requires great effort. Yale University School of Medicine researcher Sally Shaywitz, M.D., author of *Overcoming Dyslexia*, says, "Dyslexia is a paradox, particularly in our society, where reading ability is often taken as a proxy for intelligence. It's assumed that if you're a good reader, you're also highly intelligent, and if you struggle to read, you must be not-so-smart. Dyslexia violates that assumption, because people who are dyslexic can be highly intelligent and also be slow readers. In fact, some of the most accomplished people in every domain are people who are dyslexic."

Why are so few women on this list? It's another misconception that dyslexia affects more boys than girls. Some experts say that school problems often cause girls to withdraw and boys to act out, thereby gaining the attention they need for identification and diagnosis. Then again, history is full of men, and herstory is just being written.

IT'S THE LAW

There isn't a college administration in existence that isn't familiar with the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, Section 504—the first civil rights law that specifically addressed students with disabilities at the postsecondary level. Familiarly known as “Section 504,” and even “504” if you're on intimate terms with it, the law mandates that all colleges and universities in the United States that receive any federal assistance cannot discriminate in the recruitment, admission or treatment of students with disabilities. It allows students with documented disabilities to request modifications, academic support and auxiliary aids that allow them to participate in and benefit from all of the activities and programs that colleges have to offer.

In the late '80s, the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) took Section 504 a few steps further. ADA prohibits discrimination based on disability by “places of public accommodation,” including private schools, colleges and universities. While 504 is broad in its language, the ADA has a set of detailed rules that cut across the entire campus. These rules have created a greater awareness of institutional responsibilities to provide access to all campus facilities, services and programs. It's no coincidence that colleges began developing programs for students with learning disabilities around this time. One researcher noted that for many institutions, the ADA “served as a wake-up call regarding compliance mandates and issues that they generally had not paid any particular attention to under Section 504.”

Another law that has made an impact on postsecondary education is one that covers students with disabilities from the elementary grades through high school. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act—known as IDEA—guarantees a free, appropriate public education in the least-restrictive environment. Under IDEA, an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) must be developed for each student with a disability, based on the results of a comprehensive evaluation. Reauthorized in 2004, the updated IDEA includes a greater emphasis on effective transition services—initiated in middle school and carried on through high school—that focus on making a successful transition to college. What this means to higher education is that students with learning disabilities are coming to campus more prepared to handle the demands of college-level coursework. While special-education programs are not always ideal, many of these students—who at least had the advantage of having their LD identified—have benefited from tutoring and gained access to the accommodations that can bring them to the level of their

peers in the classroom. In the process, more of these students have learned to be comfortable with their disabilities and to advocate for their needs.

IT'S REAL, IT'S COMMON AND IT'S LIKELY TO BE DYSLEXIA

“Within the last decade—particularly in the past five years—there’s been a virtual explosion of knowledge about learning disabilities,” says neuroscientist Sally Shaywitz, M.D., professor of pediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine (New Haven, Connecticut). “And let me clarify something right away: 80-90 percent of all people who have a learning disability have a reading disability. And those students we’re talking about, who are applying to college, are going to have dyslexia.... People misunderstand dyslexia. They think it’s an odd problem affecting only a small number of people. [In fact] it’s a very common reading disorder, affecting one in five people. It’s not that they can’t read, but that reading requires great effort.”

In her bestselling book, *Overcoming Dyslexia*, Shaywitz describes dyslexia as a neurologically based phonological weakness, whereby dyslexic readers have trouble translating letters on a page into the sounds they represent. Slow reading is the primary symptom of dyslexia in an accomplished young adult. “It’s an unexpected difficulty,” says Shaywitz, “because the person seems to have all the cognitive equipment you need to be able to read and learn and understand. The person has good intelligence—often that can be superior intelligence. The person is well motivated, and they’ve had reasonable reading instruction. Everything seems to be in place to predict good reading ability, but it’s not there. And now we’ve learned why.”

Shaywitz and her husband, fellow Yale professor Bennett Shaywitz, M.D., have been using functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) to scan the brains of dyslexic and nonimpaired readers in their ongoing Connecticut Longitudinal Study, begun in 1983. The Shaywitzes, who co-direct the Yale Center for the Study of Learning, Reading and Attention, have found scientific evidence of a functional disruption of the neural systems involved in skilled reading. “What we’ve learned,” says Sally Shaywitz, “is that people who are dyslexic have a glitch in that system in the very back of the brain—a system called the ‘word form area,’ in the left side. As these readers struggle, they develop other areas in the brain that compensate, and those allow them to read fairly accurately, but not rapidly or fluently.”

Art

Ansel Adams—remembered for his striking black-and-white photographs of nature and his photo essay of a U.S. Japanese-American internment camp during WWII

Malcolm Alexander—sculptor whose bronze commissions include the Alaska Statehood monument and a 9-foot Jimmy Stewart in his hometown of Indiana, Pennsylvania

Chuck Close—painter who made grids on photos and copied them cell by cell as larger-than-life portraits, beginning with “Big Self-Portrait,” his pioneering work

Robert Rauschenberg—world-renowned painter, sculptor, photographer and printmaker noted for his role in moving American art from abstract expressionism to pop

Leonardo da Vinci—Renaissance painter, architect, engineer and mathematician best known for “Mona Lisa,” called the mostly widely recognized painting in the history of art

This discovery was monumental. The fMRI images clearly show heightened activity in the area of the brain doing the work. In people with dyslexia, the area of the brain that takes over for the word form area is on the right side, the side associated with creativity and visual-spatial thinking. It's a neurological leap that requires more brain time than what the non-dyslexic needs, and it may account for the fact that dyslexic thinkers often approach problem-solving in a less linear way than ordinary thinkers. Some dyslexics say they think in images, in color, in multi-dimensions—frequently described by others as thinking “outside the box.”

Brain scans of dyslexic readers put to rest the notion that dyslexia doesn't exist. Shaywitz remarks: “I often hear that the diagnosis of dyslexia is somehow vague or lacking precision. As a physician, I'm always amused by these comments. The diagnosis of dyslexia is as precise and scientifically informed as almost any diagnosis in medicine.”

SEEKING CEREBRODIVERSITY: THE VALUE OF STUDENTS WHO THINK DIFFERENT

A highly memorable ad campaign for Apple Computer featured a full-page, black-and-white photo of a legendary hero who dared to live outside the box—John Lennon, Albert Einstein and Amelia Earhart, to name a few—along with the words “Think Different” and a tiny Apple logo. The statement caught the attention of strict grammarians everywhere who asked: “Shouldn't that be ‘Think Differently’?” Aha, that was the point. If the word had been expected, nobody would have noticed, and it wouldn't have been that different.

Gordon Sherman, executive director of the Newgrange School and Education Center (Princeton, New Jersey) and former head of the Harvard Dyslexia Research Laboratory at Beth El Deaconess Medical Center (Boston, Massachusetts), is credited with coining the word “cerebrodiversity.” It's a term he uses to define the heterogeneity of human brains and the resulting profiles of cognitive strengths and weaknesses. Sherman tells us that cerebrodiversity results from genetics and subsequent interactions of the

Business

Richard Branson—founder of British Virgin Atlantic and the Virgin Megastore empire, providing travel services, music, media and entertainment

John Chambers—president and CEO of Cisco, developer of secure Internet networking systems for home, education and industry

Barbara Corcoran—founder of one of New York's largest residential real estate agencies; author of *Use What You've Got and Other Business Lessons I Learned From My Mom*

Henry Ford—revolutionized industrial production using the assembly line to build affordable automobiles; credited with the creation of a middle class in U.S. society

William Hewlett—co-founder of Hewlett-Packard, one of the world's largest information technology corporations

Ingvar Kamprad—among the top of the *Forbes* list of wealthiest people; founder of IKEA, the multinational furniture company based on affordability and easy assembly

Paul Orfalea—founder of Kinko's, the low-priced copy shop for college kids that grew into a global business powerhouse

Charles Schwab—founder of Charles Schwab, pacesetter in the discount brokerage business, and Schwab Learning, offering resources to students with learning differences

Diane Swonk—senior managing director and chief economist of Mesirow Financial, among the most successful and innovative financial services firms in the country

brain with the environment throughout life. At a recent conference of the International Dyslexia Association, he said, "I would suggest that all this variability, this cerebrodiversity, results in learning differences, and I would suggest that that's a good thing for our species. When we think about it in this way, we know that structural differences and processing differences—cerebrodiversity—are an adaptive advantage for any species, and it moves us beyond the disability paradigm.... Variance absolutely defines the human brain. It's fundamental."

Thomas G. West, author of *In the Mind's Eye* and *Thinking Like Einstein*, is affiliated with the Krasnow Institute for Advanced Study at George Mason University (Fairfax, Virginia), an organization devoted primarily to interdisciplinary brain research. More than a decade ago, the publication of his award-winning book *In the Mind's Eye* (now in its 14th printing) began to get the world thinking about how advances in computer-visualization technologies should be expected to transform education and the workplace. If this came to be, he suggested, it might also change the perceived value of people with high visual-spatial abilities who can be remarkably adept at understanding complex patterns in business, the sciences and other fields. The book investigates the lives and work of 11 legendary high-achievers with strong visual-spatial abilities who also showed evidence of classic dyslexic traits or varied, significant language and memory difficulties—among them, Leonardo da Vinci, Winston Churchill and Albert Einstein.

When the book was translated into Japanese, the title became *Geniuses Who Hated School*. West quotes a letter from Einstein, in which he wrote: "As a pupil I was neither particularly good nor bad. My principal weakness was a poor memory and especially a poor memory for words and texts." The young Einstein would rather be punished than try to repeat a text from memory. His teacher of Greek told him, "You will never amount to anything."

THINKING LIKE EINSTEIN

John "Jack" Horner can relate to Einstein. He flunked out of college seven times. Wearing a red flannel work shirt, he looks more like a lumberjack than a university professor. He is regents' professor of paleontology at Montana State University (Bozeman) and curator of MSU's Museum of the Rockies. Horner and his graduate students have made some of the most important

“C” STUDENT MAKES SUPERIOR GOVERNOR

Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, has dyslexia. “School was always very hard for me,” he says. “Fortunately, I had some things I was quite good at, which gave me a chance to keep a sense of myself when I was having trouble in school. I was a good athlete, and I’ve always been a pretty good leader, and I always got along well with people. I think that in the long term, having to struggle with dyslexia was a great asset for me, because I learned how to work very hard and have compassion for those who struggle.”

Indeed, Caperton has worked extremely hard throughout his career and has shown a concern for people in his work. Serving two

terms as governor of West Virginia, he turned its \$500 million debt into a \$100 million surplus, earning praise from *Financial World* magazine for leading “the most-improved state in the nation.” West Virginia’s advances in education technology gained national recognition when Caperton was honored with the Computerworld Smithsonian Award. He taught as a fellow at Harvard University’s John F. Kennedy Institute of Politics and founded the Institute on Education and Government at Columbia University (New York City, New York). *USA Today* called Caperton “an education crusader” for his College Board efforts to bring AP courses to more inner-city and rural students.

dinosaur discoveries in history, including the first dinosaur eggs in the Western Hemisphere and the bones of a huge *Tyrannosaurus rex* that may have weighed 13 tons. A recipient of the MacArthur Fellowship—often called the “genius grant”—Horner served as adviser and role model for all three *Jurassic Park* movies.

“My high school experience was not very good,” he says. “Nobody knew about dyslexia then. Most people just thought I was lazy because I couldn’t get through the tasks that were set up for me. I really loved science, and I won all the science fairs in our region. But that was because there was no time limit on it. I could do my research at my speed. And of course, science projects have more to do with creative stuff than reading.”

Horner got into the University of Montana (Missoula) because at that time anyone in the state with a high school diploma could attend a Montana college of his or her choice. “At the end of my first quarter,” he says, “they put me on probation because my grades were less than a ‘D,’ and at the end of the second quarter, they dropped me.” After two years in Vietnam, he returned to college to try again. He continued to flunk out every quarter, but a letter his adviser wrote to the dean kept him in school. “He said I was

“I don’t read out loud very well today,” he says. “I’m a good speaker, but I usually do it from notes. If I have to read a speech [from a script], I have to practice it harder than other people. I misdial about three out of 10 phone calls I make because I switch numbers around. Things like that just never go away.”

“I laugh and say when I was interviewed for this job,” reveals Caperton, “I thought to myself, ‘I wonder if they’ll look at my SAT scores?’ I can promise you, there were a lot of people [being interviewed] who had higher scores than I did! There are people who go to the very best schools in the country who are not good test-takers and do not have the highest SAT scores, but they have certain skills and abilities that make them very attractive [college]

candidates.... I had a ‘C’ average at the University of North Carolina [Chapel Hill], which is what I needed to graduate. I wasn’t Phi Beta Kappa, like my sister, but I did well enough. By that time, I’d overcome a lot of my difficulties, and I had learned how to deal with them.”

Caperton offers this insight to students: “You can go into almost any field and find people with learning disabilities who’ve had extraordinary lives. You know, life isn’t about reading out loud and taking spelling tests. There will be some things that will be very hard for you in school, but if you have the guts and determination to get through those things, you can be successful. We mostly learn from our problems. We don’t learn nearly as much when things are smooth.”

clearly trying really hard, and I knew a lot about dinosaurs, but he couldn’t figure out what was wrong with me. The highest GPA I ever received was 1.8. I simply could not get through the assigned reading in time for the tests.” When he had taken all the classes that interested him, Horner moved on.

“I really wanted to be a paleontologist,” he says, “so I sent letters to all the English-speaking museums in the world looking for a job, and I was hired at Princeton University (Princeton, New Jersey). At Princeton, I saw a big sign that said, ‘Would you rather see a movie than read a book?’ and a whole bunch of other questions I answered ‘yes’ to. I went into that office and learned I had dyslexia.”

Horner later accepted his dream job back in Montana, as museum curator at MSU. He was digging up dinosaur bones and being published in *Nature* and *Scientific American*. The University of Montana took notice and awarded him an honorary doctorate. He says, “That same dean who had dropped me all those times told me, ‘I hope this makes up for our mistakes.’ ”

At MSU, Horner teaches graduate courses in paleontology and even a first-year honors course in literature. “The aim of it is to get kids to use their

imagination, to think synthetically,” he says. “Rather than take information from a book and regurgitate it, I want them to get information from lots of different places and make new ideas. I try to make them think like a dyslexic.”

Horner says his proudest achievement is “producing good graduate students.” One of them, Mary Schweitzer, Ph.D., found flexible blood vessels inside a *T. rex* thigh bone. “No one thought that could be possible,” he says, “because the expectation is that dinosaur bones are fossilized. It’s an exciting discovery that raises a lot of questions about DNA and proteins and all sorts of things.”

“If you really want to get people to be critical thinkers,” he says, “you need to give them the space and time to create. I tell my students with learning disabilities that I would rather that they come up with one creative idea in a whole semester than regurgitate every day. If it takes them a long time to read something, then take the time.”

WIDENING THE CIRCLE

Are there other Jack Horners in school today? For all the research that shows that the number of students with learning disabilities is growing on college and university campuses, the following statistic from the Higher Education Research Institute’s annual report “The American Freshman: National Norms” is disturbing: Only 2.8 percent of full-time first-year college students surveyed in 2004 indicated they had a learning disability. This figure does not account for students who are beyond their first year, people with LD who are part-time students, those who chose not to report their LD, and those who had an unidentified learning disability. Still, less than 3 percent is far below the incidence of LD in the general population—known to be around 20 percent. If the college campus is to be a microcosm of intelligent society, a number of institutions have more work to do to present themselves as places where LD students will be welcomed and supported. Doing so would potentially persuade more students to self-identify themselves as LD or encourage more LD students to attend traditional four-year institutions.

“This is a population that has always existed,” says Ted May, director of University Disability Services at the University of Denver (Denver, Colorado), “but their access to education in the traditional sense has been thwarted—because they might not have learned in the usual manner; or they might not have been able to take tests and show their knowledge; or they might not have been able to sit still in a class that required them to listen to

someone speak for 50 minutes. Historically, people like that have been shunted aside, or they entered the dark hole of not making the grade. I think we lose a lot of talent, intellect and ability [when we let that happen].”

Like the University of Denver, Grinnell College (Grinnell, Iowa) has been working to make their institution welcoming to LD students as part of their mission to champion diversity. “We define access and diversity pretty broadly,” says James Sumner, Grinnell’s dean of admission and financial aid. “We were coed from the beginning. We weren’t the first college to admit African Americans, but we were among the first five. There is this unusually strong foundation of egalitarianism here, and it plays out in so many ways”—including becoming increasingly aware of students with all sorts of differences. Says Sumner, “We’ve wanted to make sure that we are accommodating to students with physical limitations and learning disabilities.”

Benjamin Kent, director of academic advising at Augsburg College (Minneapolis, Minnesota), agrees with a broad definition of diversity that extends beyond racial, ethnic and religious inclusion to what he terms “cognitive diversity.” He says that having a wide variety of students at Augsburg creates “not just an opportunity for the students with disabilities, but an opportunity for all of our students, staff and faculty to learn from those who are having to work in different ways to achieve their goals—and that’s been a good thing for our campus culture.”

Augsburg has not only opened their doors, they’ve put out a very large welcome mat. Kent says, “I think Augsburg was one of the first schools to recognize that there’s more you can do than just expect students to manage a learning disability, an attention-deficit disorder, or psychiatric, emotional or behavioral issues. You can provide services that *help* them manage these situations—and in many cases, flourish. We take pride in the idea that we seek out academically qualified students with disabilities to try to help them succeed.”

For Lynn University (Boca Raton, Florida), welcoming students with learning disabilities is an inherent part of the culture of their institution, too. Marsha Glines, dean of Lynn’s Institute for Achievement and Learning, says, “The gift for all of us is taking students who’ve been at risk, in many cases, or those who just haven’t been embraced by the educational system they’ve been exposed to, and watching [what happens] when we turn things around for them. These are not traditional students for whom learning comes easily. They’ve had to work harder or work differently. They bring character [to our campus]. They

Education

Ann Lesley Brown—a leading educational theorist at UC Berkeley’s Graduate School of Education, known for her pioneering, real-life experiments in the classroom

Sylvia Law—professor of law, medicine and psychiatry at New York University School of Law and co-director of the Arthur Garfield Hays Civil Liberties Program

Nicholas Negroponte—professor of media technology at MIT and founder of MIT’s famed Media Lab; founder of *Wired* magazine and author of the bestseller *Being Digital*

Roger Wilkins—professor of history and American culture at George Mason University who shared a Pulitzer Prize for Watergate coverage at *The Washington Post*

have great ideas, but they haven't always been able to articulate them in written form. They have struggled, so they have a richness of personality. It's a journey for all of us, and that's the challenge, to help them find themselves and identify their learning styles, passions and affinities. That really is part of the mission of this university—to honor these students and provide them with opportunities that they might not have at other institutions. It's not within the mission of every higher ed institution to do that, and that's OK, because if you're going to do it, you need to take it very seriously.”

HEARD IT ON THE GRAPEVINE

Even those institutions that welcome LD students aren't apt to actively recruit them, but there are some notable exceptions. A few colleges maintain a presence at annual learning disability conferences and regularly appear at the growing number of LD college fairs across the nation. Landmark College (Putney, Vermont) exists solely for students with learning disabilities and attention disorders and hardly needs to recruit, but does. Other, more traditional institutions also take their shows on the road, including Curry College (Milton, Massachusetts), known for more than 30 years of success with its Program for Advancement of Learning (PAL), and West Virginia Wesleyan College (Buckhannon), which offers Lindamood-Bell, a highly effective, privately developed learning program for students with dyslexia.

Florida's Lynn University sends admission representatives to high schools for non-traditional learners, but it's not their first priority. “Every university has to have a compliance model, but that's not who we are,” says Lynn's Marsha Glines. “It's part of our mission to honor these students and provide them with opportunities they might not have elsewhere. But when we market, we say that this is just one of the things we think we do well. There are a lot of other good things going on here that have nothing to do with this piece.”

Diane Quinn, director of the University of Arizona's (Tucson) Strategic Alternative Learning Techniques (SALT) comprehensive program, says, “It's clear that there's an active grapevine among families of students with learning disabilities and ADHD. These parents talk to each other, particularly if they're in school systems where there are resources for support, or where there's at least a supportive climate. Early on, these networks were funneling students to us in significant numbers, so much so that we had more students than we had space for.” Now SALT has the

capacity to serve more students and they recruit nationwide. “We’re just trying to put a more personal face on the program with some of the high schools that have sent us successful students in the past—those are relationships you always want to build.”

Loring Brinckerhoff of ETS adds that educational conferences such as those sponsored by the International Dyslexia Association (IDA) and the Learning Disabilities Association (LDA) are attracting the attention of parents. “Parents talk to each other,” he says, “and parents know [their kids] have rights under the law—they’re not favors. I feel very definitely that students with learning disabilities are being identified sooner than before because parents are more tuned in. That’s a good thing. And students exiting from high school are realizing they want a piece of the postsecondary pie just like anyone else.”

When a college does want to reach out to students, it must keep parents in mind, too, especially since parents of an LD student more often find it necessary to participate in the college admission process because the student may still be learning how to manage on his own. Helen Lindsay, whose son now attends college in Boston, says her role was “the coach of a long-distance runner.” Progress is often slow for an LD student, and the goal seems far off. Parents and other adults can provide the encouragement that keeps the student on track.

MAKING A MATCH

What’s the best way for LD students to find the right college for them? Robert Shaw, executive associate dean of the college at Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island), shares this insight: “My perception—which I think is accurate—is that admission officers at most schools with a selective process are getting fairly attuned to learning disabilities and understand that the LD diagnosis by itself doesn’t disqualify someone. But I think that high school guidance counselors aren’t necessarily confident that that’s the case. So the message to them is that there are a lot of schools now that are very supportive of students with learning disabilities. Twenty years ago, I could have listed on a couple of hands the schools that had established programs for LD students. Now when people ask which schools [they should be looking at], I suggest they [first] think about the other things they care about in a college ... because the chances of finding several schools in that group with good [LD] services are pretty high now.”

Entertainment

Scott Adams—creator of the *Dilbert* comic strip and the Dilberito, a vegan microwave burrito fortified with 100% daily value of 23 essential vitamins and minerals

Harry Belafonte—winner of the Grammy Award for Lifetime Achievement in music and known for his work in civil rights, UNICEF and the Peace Corps

Nicole Betancourt—Emmy-winning filmmaker for her documentary *Before You Go*, a diary of her father’s life and death from AIDS

Steven J. Cannell—best-selling crime novelist and creator, writer and producer of dozens of popular TV shows, including “The A Team” and “The Rockford Files”

Walt Disney—animator, voice actor, film producer, director, screenwriter, theme-park developer and father of Mickey Mouse

Whoopi Goldberg—stand-up comedian and Oscar-winning actress; awarded the Mark Twain Prize for American Humor by the JFK Center for the Performing Arts

Anthony Hopkins—Oscar-winner for his role as Hannibal Lecter in *Silence of the Lambs* and the 2006 recipient of the Golden Globe Award for Lifetime Achievement

John Lennon—Beatles songwriter, singer, guitarist and political activist; voted #8 on the BBC’s “100 Greatest Britons of All Time”

Henry Winkler—actor (“The Fonz” in TV’s “Happy Days”), producer, director and author of children’s books featuring dyslexic characters

Brinckerhoff agrees: “I tend to encourage students to pick the institution first and the LD services second. The first cut in my mind needs to be the curriculum and the character of the institution—what their high cards are.” After the student has come up with a list of priorities and identified some good choices, he advises, “Then do the second cut, which would be the LD match.”

But what if it turns out that the school a student loves is lacking the level of services needed? “Then the option is to try to fill the gaps through private resources,” says Brinckerhoff. “I’ve had students who’ve been set on a particular school—it could even be an Ivy League school—where the level of support is minimal, so we would have to look for resources in the community to augment what’s available on campus. Now these institutions are going to do the minimum, absolutely, and that might be books on tape, or note-takers or extra time on tests, but some of these students really need specialized tutorial support and that’s not mandated under the law—that’s icing on the cake.”

Augsburg graduate Dayle VanderLeest ’04 did it another way. She chose Augsburg College because of its Center for Learning and Adaptive Student Services (CLASS). “My high school experience wasn’t the greatest,” she says. “I knew I wanted to go to college, but as a student with learning disabilities, I wasn’t pushed to do that at all. It was all about getting through high school and going to a tech school, or whatever. So I did my own thing, taking advanced science and math courses—nothing the LD teachers could even help me with. I had note-takers in my English and reading classes, so I knew I needed a college with a specific program for students with learning disabilities. With CLASS, I had one-on-one academic support from my learning specialist. I used that a lot in my freshman year, and over the years, I became more independent, and I could do it on my own.”

DECIPHERING THE “D” WORDS

Difference or Disability?

Many parents and educators prefer to say that a student has a “learning difference,” rather than a “learning disability.” Using a softer word helps protect the child’s self-esteem, which of course, is a good thing. The harsher word “disability” is loaded with not-so-nice definitions that include “incapacitated,” “impaired” and “dysfunctional.” One offending dictionary even goes so far as to call a disability “a physical or mental handicap that prevents a person from living a normal life.”

On the other hand, professionals in the field of psychoeducational evaluation know that the term “learning disability” is legally required to describe children who have qualified for special-education services under the provisions of IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. In fact, the words “specific disability” must be used in a student’s documentation in order to meet the criteria of IDEA.

“Learning disabilities” is a category of several specific disabilities. The term means a disorder in one or more of the basic psychological processes involved in understanding or using spoken or written language. It may show up as a problem in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, spelling or math, despite having at least average intelligence. It does not include those who have learning problems that are primarily the result of visual, hearing or physical handicaps; mental retardation or emotional disturbance; or of environmental, cultural, educational or

economic disadvantage. Learning disabilities can occur along with—and be complicated by—behavioral disorders, such as attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Disease?

A learning disability is not a disease. It can’t be caught, and it can’t be cured—not even with pills, diets, exercise, medical treatments or devices, including whirling tables and colored glasses. (Yes, there are some “practitioners” who try to pass off such “remedies.”) It can’t be resolved by growing up, paying attention, trying harder or being more like your sister.

The condition lasts for a lifetime but may change over the years, or even from day to day. No two people with learning disabilities are alike. Symptoms range from mild to severe, and each affected person has individual strengths and weaknesses.

However—and here’s the good news—diagnosed learning disabilities can be managed and overcome with hard work practicing specific learning strategies; with assistive technology, such as books on tape and text-to-voice computer software; and with appropriate accommodations, such as extra time on tests.

continued on next page

Dyslexia

Dyslexia is a specific learning disability—and the most common one. Experts say that 80-90 percent of people with learning disabilities have dyslexia.

Simply put, dyslexia is difficulty with language. For people with dyslexia, intelligence is not the problem—the problem is language. They may have difficulty with reading, spelling, understanding language they hear, or expressing themselves clearly in speaking or writing. An unexpected gap exists between their potential for learning and their achievement in school.

Dyslexia runs in families, and it is neurological in origin—dyslexic brains are literally wired differently than ordinary brains. Consequently, people with dyslexia often show talent in areas that require visual, spatial and motor integration skills.

Current research shows that about 15 to 20 percent of people have dyslexia to a moderate degree. Up to 5 percent of dyslexic people have severe, long-lasting reading disabilities that require specialized instruction throughout their education. Therefore, a teacher can expect that in an average class of 25 students, one or two will have significant problems and several more will have milder problems with reading, writing and related language skills.

Have you heard the joke, “What do dyslexics, agnostics and insomniacs have in common? All three stay up at night contemplating the existence of dog.” No doubt it gets a laugh, but it’s based on a

widely held misconception that people with dyslexia see words backwards. Researchers say that’s just not true. What is known is that many dyslexic children and adults have significant directionality confusion—left and right, up and down, and trouble with words like “before” and “after.” Directionality confusion shows up in reading and writing when letters are similar but point in different directions, such as b-d, b-p, n-u or m-w. What’s more, readers with dyslexia may substitute similar-looking words in a sentence, even if it changes the meaning, such as “sunrise” for “surprise,” or “house” for “horse,” but that’s another difficulty.

More “D” Words

In addition to dyslexia, there are other specific learning disabilities, but they occur less frequently. Dyscalculia causes people to have extraordinary problems doing basic arithmetic and grasping mathematical concepts. People with dysgraphia have difficulty forming letters or writing within a defined space. They need extra time and effort to write neatly, and despite their efforts, their handwriting may be almost illegible. Auditory, memory and processing disability describes problems people have in understanding or remembering words or sounds because their brains fail to understand language correctly. This can often be mistaken as a hearing problem, but in fact, an individual with this disability is not able to process or memorize information. People with nonverbal learning disorder (NLD) can be precocious readers with advanced vocabularies, but they may lack motor coordination and have trouble with visual-spatial-organizational skills.

ADHD

ADHD, or attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder, is often thought of as a learning disability, but it's really a neurologically based behavioral disorder that can severely impact learning. (ADD is an older name, which is now considered to be a subset of ADHD.) It's characterized by distractibility, impulsivity and restlessness. Research shows that as many as 25 percent of college students with ADHD will also have a specific learning disability.

David Parker, director of the University of Connecticut's (Storrs) program for students with learning disabilities, says, "I think it's really important for people to understand that LD and ADHD are very different. The two conditions can coexist, but LD is a language-based processing disorder and ADHD is a performance-based executive functioning disorder." Parker supports the theory of ADHD advanced by clinical neuropsychologist and educator Russell Barkley. According to Barkley, ADHD isn't necessarily an issue of inefficient processing of auditory or visual input, and it doesn't necessarily involve decoding difficulties and spelling problems. It's about people's self-regulatory systems and their abilities to use their executive functioning to essentially stop and plan before they act.

Parker cautions: "Where a learning strategies model works with LD students, it isn't particularly effective with ADHD. These students have a different set of needs. If a student says to me, 'I knew I had ADHD in high school, but they called it a learning disability,' I'll want to find out whether that meant a formal diagnosis—with a capital 'L'

and a capital 'D'—or whether that meant the ADHD in and of itself created learning difficulties for the student."

Accommodations

Today's technology affords LD students accommodations like never before, from text-to-speech software to screen reader to text enlarger. But, an example of one of the most frequent accommodations required by students with dyslexia—and one of the most misunderstood—is the need for extra time for reading.

Neuroscientist Sally Shaywitz, M.D., professor of pediatrics at the Yale University School of Medicine (New Haven, Connecticut), describes functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI) images that reveal how reading is accomplished in a dyslexic brain: "It's as if on the express highway to reading, there's a road block. You can get off the highway and take a secondary, country road, but that path is bumpier, more circuitous. It will get you to your destination, but it will take a lot longer."

Knowing that is critical, she says, because "it tells us that we have a neurobiological validation of the need for extra time by people who are dyslexic. It's not that they want an advantage, or that they're trying to get away with something. There's absolute, rigorous, neurobiological evidence of the need for that accommodation. We wouldn't say to a person who has a motor impairment that you can't use the wheelchair to get across the street—because that would give you an advantage. We shouldn't tell people who are dyslexic that they can't have extra time."

GETTING IN, STAYING IN

Even with the growing number of traditional four-year residential colleges that welcome students with learning disabilities, the majority of LD students who enroll in postsecondary education of any type enroll in two-year community colleges. Since few LD students have a stellar academic record in high school—struggling goes with the territory—it stands to reason that those with lower GPAs, missing pieces in a college-prep curriculum and depressing scores on those high-stakes entrance exams will gravitate toward schools with an open admission policy. Community colleges are the lifeline that many LD students seize when other options are out of reach.

THOSE PESKY ADMISSION REQUIREMENTS

To be fair, it's not that easy for admission offices to recognize the diamond in the rough. Yale researcher Sally Shaywitz observes: "Young men and women who are dyslexic may manifest what seem to be a confusing array of contradictory findings: honors and failures; commendations and warnings; the 99th percentile in some areas and the 9th percentile in others; brilliant thinker and hopelessly slow reader—all in the same person. [They] experience awesome highs and devastating lows. One day they're praised for incisive thinking, so that they feel they must be very smart. And the next day, a disappointing performance on a multiple-choice test makes them feel, as [one student] told me, 'really dumb....'"

But for those students whose academic hopes are higher, it's encouraging to note that more colleges are proving that they're willing—and in some cases, delighted—to take a second look at applications from promising students who can explain why they didn't make the grade in high school and show how they're managing their learning challenges. A growing number of colleges and universities are using an admission model that differs from the norm—perhaps the most profound example includes making standardized test scores an optional admission requirement. More than 700 institutions nationwide have followed the lead of Bates College (Lewiston, Maine), which in 2004 released the findings of a 20-year study that found virtually no difference between the academic performances of students who submitted SAT scores and those who did not. The two groups also had the same graduation rates. The study also found that the test-optional policy has helped Bates nearly double its applicant pool and attract a more diverse student body. When a student decides not to submit a test score, these colleges will base their admission decisions on writing samples, résumés,

project portfolios, letters of recommendation, interviews and other indicators of a student’s performance and promise. This is a big first step.

Based on his study of the prodigious thinkers featured in his books *In the Mind’s Eye* and *Thinking Like Einstein*, Thomas G. West envisions using a variety of new tests and instruments in the admission process to measure strengths that have never been assessed by a traditional college-entrance exam. “When I talk to university groups,” says West, “I try to remind them that a good deal of what universities are proud to teach has been discovered by such individuals.” Accordingly, he explains: “What we need to do when we think about admissions is to get better at distinguishing not only the students who are good at taking tests and getting their papers in on time, but also those who are extraordinarily creative yet full of peaks and valleys in their academic abilities. Of course, just having LD or dyslexia doesn’t mean you’re going to be brilliant, but admission professionals need to recognize this unexpected pattern of highs and lows in academic performance. Indeed, some argue that when you look at extreme levels of giftedness, you will often find LD in some form as well.”

“If you’re talking about attracting real talent to a college or university,” says West, “I believe you have to look beyond the student who’s going to get good grades and not cause any trouble to the one with the peaks and valleys ... to see that in spite of these difficulties, there’s something shining through. If you’re going to question such students, you must spend time looking at the areas of strength—the little glimmer—and ask them to talk about it at some length, with details about how much time they spend on it, what their parents say about it and why they love it.” He laughs and adds, “Presumably, if these people do well and you do well by them, after they graduate they’re going to give you some money—or perhaps make a name for themselves that you’ll be proud to be associated with.”

A SECOND LOOK

Admission decisions remain in the hands of admission officers, yet there are situations in which disability specialists inform the process. “I’ve worked with our admission office, where there’s a huge depth of understanding,” says Yale neuroscientist Sally Shaywitz. “We’ve accepted many, many dyslexic students, because Yale likes students who are critical thinkers, who have good reasoning abilities and who love to learn. Our admission officers are

Exploration

Ann Bancroft—Arctic explorer, team leader, speaker and educator; the first woman in history to cross the ice to both the North and South Poles

Charles “Pete” Conrad, Jr.—NASA astronaut, commander of Apollo XII, the second lunar landing; business development leader in the commercial space industry

clearly attuned to the competencies of these students. They appreciate that the qualities they're looking for go far beyond what test scores have to say about a person. We also offer a partial waiver of a foreign language requirement, because we know that if you have difficulty mastering the basic phonology—the sounds—in your primary language, you're going to have difficulty with a secondary language.”

If a student self-identifies during the application process at Lynn University, the admission office may direct them to send their documentation to Dean Marsha Glines. “I review all the testing for these students and make recommendations back to admissions. We look at the whole package,” she says, “because many students with the cognitive potential have not done well in school, for a million reasons. We look at IQ scores and subtests on a WAIS or a WISC (Wechsler Intelligence Scales for Adults/Children). If the cognitive potential is there, even though the achievement isn't, we know that we can reach that student.”

Usually LD students must wait until an institution has accepted them before they can apply to special programs. But the University of Denver and the University of Arizona advise students to apply simultaneously to both the institution and the program. “It's more of a timing issue,” says Diane Quinn, director of UA's SALT Center. “We're pretty popular, and we tend to fill up quickly, so we want students to apply even before they know they're going to be accepted to the University. That way, we can offer them admission [to our program] in a timely fashion if they're successful.” Students who are admitted to SALT after their first semester—when they're likely to be struggling academically, or even on probation—do not do as well as those who get in on the ground floor. “That's a pretty hard hole to pull them out of,” says Quinn.

The University of Iowa (Iowa City) offers admission to applicants who meet their published criteria for class rank or admission index score and high school curriculum requirements. “There are any number of students with some form of learning disability who meet our regular admission standards,” says Michael Barron, assistant provost for enrollment services and director of admissions. But for students who don't measure up and believe there are other factors that ought to be considered, Iowa offers an individual review process. Students are invited to submit a letter of explanation describing the obstacles they've overcome, adverse conditions or illness, or limiting cultural, linguistic or economic factors—whatever has prevented them from

fulfilling their academic potential. Two letters of recommendation are also required from teachers or counselors who can support the student's ability to be academically successful in a competitive undergraduate environment at a research university.

"It's very important from a legal standpoint, and especially from a fairness standpoint," says Barron, "that there be an admission process where students can put their best foot forward." Students who reveal that they have a learning disability or attention disorder that has compromised their high school record are encouraged to follow the individual review procedure. They also frequently provide an activities list and résumé of their honors and awards. "When a student puts all that on the table," says Barron, "it becomes a more holistic review. You have the ability to take all things into consideration."

"Students with the right knowledge about themselves and the right attitude, who have already demonstrated an ability to accommodate their disability, make pretty good candidates for admission to Iowa," says Barron. "It has been our experience that if they continue their self-advocacy and use of accommodation techniques, students who were not otherwise admissible will persist here and graduate at about the same rate as students who are given regular admission and do not present any learning disability."

CROSSING THE FINISH LINE

While the number of LD students in postsecondary institutions has increased dramatically, there's evidence that many students with disabilities don't make it to graduation. They've moved from an environment where they had been carefully guided—home and high school—to a world where they're expected to achieve on their own. Education is no longer a right but a privilege for those who are qualified to do college-level work. Higher ed institutions are not required to identify a student's weaknesses and remediate them. And they're under no obligation to make major changes in academic programs to assist students with disabilities. As adults, LD students are expected to take full responsibility for their education. They can choose whether or not to ask for help—and whether or not to listen to a learning specialist. Their parents never see a grade report unless the student signs a waiver allowing it. Everything is different, and LD students are at greater risk for failure because of their learning disabilities.

Government

Gaston Caperton—president of the College Board; two-term governor of West Virginia, the state *Financial World* magazine called "the most improved in the nation" under his leadership

Winston Churchill—prime minister of the United Kingdom during WWII and a Nobel laureate in literature

Gavin Newsom—young mayor of San Francisco known for bringing businesses and volunteers together to provide essential services for the homeless

Nelson Rockefeller—former governor of New York; 41st Vice President of the United States; art collector and philanthropist

David Parker, director of the University of Connecticut's (Storrs) program for students with learning disabilities says that two important environmental changes can greatly affect an LD student's transition from high school to college. One is the massive increase in the amount of reading required. "Obviously for many LD students, we know that's a big concern," he says. "And the amount of feedback they're going to get from their instructors about how they're doing is greatly reduced once they come to college. The extent to which they can quickly survey the landscape, recognize how this is really different from high school, and understand what they need to do to get help will determine their ability to adapt to their new environment."

"I spent a lot of time trying to convince myself that I didn't have a disability," says Emily Danielson, a senior at Grinnell College. "I was encouraged by my high school and my parents to wean myself off accommodations, and I was able to convince myself that it wasn't that big of a deal. I had created these coping mechanisms, and I studied really, really hard, and that was able to pull me through [high school]." But when she tried to wing it at Grinnell—without accommodations—"it was horrible," she says. "I discovered that college is a lot harder than high school—surprise!" In her sophomore year, Danielson reluctantly went to the dean of academic advising, who was happy to help her set up a support system that includes books-on-tape, a word processor for in-class exams and extended time on tests. It has made all the difference for her.

Amanda Grant-Saul, a 2003 graduate of the University of Arizona (Tucson) and a former SALT Center participant, advises high school students to "know your disability." She says, "I'm a strong believer in knowing your IEP [Individualized Education Program developed for high school students with disabilities] and using your IEP meetings to learn how to advocate for yourself. If you can do that in high school, it's going to make it easier for you in college. A lot of students with disabilities have had parents or a system that supported them, and that system's really gone when you get to college. It's so important to practice those skills now, so that when you get to college you'll be able to say, 'I know what it means to be dyslexic, or to have dysgraphia or an auditory processing disability, and here's what I need to be successful.' "

"One thing my teachers told my parents and me growing up was, 'He may have a disability, but he works 10 times as hard as the people who get A's, and that's a good trait to have,' " says Jonathan Siegel, a 2005 University of Arizona (Tucson) graduate, and now a graphic design student in California.

“In high school, the big thing for a lot of kids like me is they’re scared to admit they have a learning disability. You want to be popular, and you don’t want people to know that you have this problem. A lot of going to the SALT program is getting over that. If you can do that, you’ll be much more inclined to be successful.”

Among the qualities that David Parker notes in LD students who are successful at UConn is self-determination. He says that students who know themselves, have important goals that matter to them, and have already developed or are open to developing skills to accomplish their goals are ahead of the game. “What that also includes,” he says, “is openness to seeking out and using assistance when they’re encountering new expectations. During that first semester at college—with so much change going on in their lives—students with learning disabilities can benefit from working with the services available to them, not only to implement accommodations in their courses, but just to learn more about the impact of LD on their lives.”

Law

David Boies—special trial counsel for the U.S. Department of Justice against Microsoft and lead counsel for Al Gore in the 2000 Florida vote-count litigation

Erin Brokovich Ellis—legal researcher whose dogged investigation of a contaminated California water supply led to a \$333 million settlement

Jeffrey H. Gallet—former family court judge and later federal bankruptcy court judge advocating literacy programs as a method of crime prevention

LEVELING THE PLAYING FIELD

Institutions typically provide one of four levels of support to students with learning disabilities: 1) *minimum*—the compliance model, providing only basic, legally mandated requirements; 2) *more*—coordinated services, staffed by at least one professional and offering moderate support programs; 3) *most*—structured programs with more professional staff, providing comprehensive services that usually involve a fee; and 4) *mega*—essentially Landmark College, an entire higher ed institution devoted to students with LD and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Under the provisions of the ADA and Section 504, colleges and universities are required to provide “reasonable accommodations” to students with acceptable documentation that specifically describes their need for them. Each college has the right to determine its own guidelines and adhere to them. Accommodations are often described as ways to level the playing field, offering disadvantaged students the same opportunity to succeed as their peers. The minimum accommodations that institutions must provide to students with documented

disabilities include extra time on exams; permitting tests to be individually monitored, read orally, dictated or typed; the use of note-takers; the provision of adaptive technology; the provision of materials in alternate media; and—we don't hear much about this one—the opportunity to register to vote.

BLAZING THE TRAIL

One of the early pioneers in serving students with learning disabilities was Brown University (Providence, Rhode Island). In 1984, five Brown students with dyslexia approached the dean of the college and asked for some minor accommodations that would support their needs, and Robert Shaw, whose background is in educational psychology, was handed the assignment. “We were obviously under the mandate of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, but ADA had not been passed yet. Frankly, we really didn't think about it that much—just what would be educationally useful for these students. The key ingredient was time. These students always struggle with having enough time to finish things, so we made a formal option of a reduced course load with reduced tuition, so they would take three courses per semester instead of four and pay for only three. Then we also allowed exam accommodations and extended time on exams and also made someone available to them.”

Shaw became the mentor for the small group of dyslexics and says, with a laugh, “I used to call myself a doorbell. I was someone they could talk to.... And that made sense with five students, and even with 40. But now that we have 165 students, we've had to bring in a lot of recruits [to help]. We decided that the best folks to help would be the faculty, so we've made a very conscious effort to educate them about the needs of students with dyslexia, attention-deficit disorder and physical disabilities.” Shaw adds that Brown's open and flexible curriculum is attractive to students who would be discouraged by a multitude of core requirements.

The University of Denver's Learning Effectiveness Program (LEP) is heading into its 25th year. A comprehensive program that presently charges \$2,800 a year, it currently serves 225 students with LD and ADHD. Combined with the program that arranges legally mandated accommodations, DU serves around 630 students with learning disabilities, from undergraduates through law students. “When I came here 10 years ago,” says Ted May, director of University Disability Services, “the LEP population was at 87. In the last six years, we've seen big spikes in the numbers. The comprehensive programs

are growing across the nation, and the students who know they want this type of support are going to be well educated about the schools that offer it. At DU, we've developed a pretty solid reputation because we emphasize to students that in order for the program to work, they've got to be invested in it. We don't run after them."

Another structured program frequently cited for excellence is the University of Arizona's SALT program, which, in its 25 years, has evolved from a cramped basement office to a freestanding department with its own building funded by \$4 million in private donations. SALT charges \$4,200 a year for lower-division students (less for upper division), and the cost is clearly acceptable since the program is at full capacity with 560 students, most of whom come from outside Arizona.

SALT is proof that students who are usually regarded as being at high risk for academic failure can be very successful in the university environment, according to Director Diane Quinn. She points with pride to the fact that retention and graduation rates for SALT students (75-80 percent graduate in five years or less) are higher than those of the University's general population (currently, 57 percent graduate within six years).

UPLD, the University of Connecticut's Program for College Students with Learning Disabilities, marked its 20th anniversary last year. David Parker, director of the program and assistant professor in the department of educational psychology, says, "From the beginning, the belief was—first and foremost—that students with learning disabilities are very often bright enough, talented enough and ambitious enough to pursue an education in a Research I setting—a very competitive environment. But due to the cognitive nature of their learning disability, they might also need direct instruction in learning strategies and an orientation to a metacognitive approach to processing information."

Parker explains that UPLD does not provide remedial work or content tutoring. Instead, their learning specialists work with students in their current coursework to develop learning strategies that are based on an assessment of the students' particular strengths and weaknesses. Students learn more efficient ways of processing information—in areas such as reading for main ideas, or writing with greater clarity or studying for essay exams—and develop skills they can carry with them throughout the university. There are no additional fees for these services.

Literature

Agatha Christie—acclaimed mystery writer; creator of retired police officer Hercule Poirot, featured in more than 30 novels, including *Murder on the Orient Express*

Samuel Clemens—under the pen name Mark Twain, published works of fiction, nonfiction and satire, including *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*

John Grisham—criminal defense attorney and former member of the Mississippi House of Representatives; author of acclaimed legal thrillers, including *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief* and *The Runaway Jury*

John Irving—Academy Award-winning screenwriter and author of *The World According to Garp*, *The Cider House Rules* and many other bestsellers

Wendy Wasserstein—Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright who followed feminist struggles in *The Heidi Chronicles* and *The Sisters Rosensweig*

William Butler Yeats—Irish poet, dramatist and playwright; Nobel Prize laureate with "Sailing to Byzantium" among his celebrated poems

At Nicholls State University (Thibodaux, Louisiana), LD students can take advantage of the Louisiana Center for Dyslexia and Related Learning Disorders, where Karen Chauvin is interim director. The Center was established in answer to the Louisiana state dyslexia law, which provides for the education of dyslexic students in the regular classroom. It trains education majors at Nicholls in the methods of teaching reading, writing and spelling that work best for children with language-based disabilities. Not only does the Center serve LD students on campus, it has drawn more of them to the University. “In south Louisiana,” says Chauvin, “most kids go to college where they live, and they end up staying there. But the Dyslexia Center has brought us students from a lot of different places, exposing our local kids to people with many different backgrounds and experiences—something they might not get otherwise.”

Fees for LD services at the Center are \$450 a semester, and that provides students with unlimited tutoring specific to their needs. Chauvin notes that they can get some remediation in reading and math, “but normally, by the time students reach the college level, they’re adult learners, so they want to learn what’s pertinent to them at the time. If that means they want to learn the chapter in the history book, as opposed to learning how to decode words, then that’s what we give them. We provide the services they need to get through their classes.”

The Center offers overnight camps for dyslexic middle school and high school students to give them a taste of what it’s like to be a student with learning disabilities on a college campus. College students in the Nicholls LD program serve as counselors. “It has been good for both the campers and the counselors,” says Chauvin. “It helps the college students see what dyslexia looks like—outside of themselves—and it helps them work through some of their own issues. For the younger kids, it has been inspiring for them to see college students with dyslexia.”

At Augsburg College, the Center for Learning and Adaptive Student Services (CLASS) serves 210 students with learning disabilities out of a total enrollment of 1,705 undergraduate day students. CLASS works with students who have learning, attention, psychiatric or other cognitive disabilities and provides a range of services and four professional learning specialists.

In the past few years, Augsburg has become known as a supportive college for students with Asperger syndrome (AS), a neurobiological disorder known variously as high-functioning autism and a nonverbal learning disability. Individuals with AS have average to superior intelligence but marked deficiencies in social and communications skills. “We don’t have a special program for Asperger’s,” says Benjamin Kent, director of academic advising and achievement, “but people are aware of the level of service we provide for students with complex combinations of disabilities, such as the student who has LD issues and also depression and obsessive-compulsive disorder. The number of students we’re serving with Asperger’s is typically over 10, and in some semesters, we’ve had 20. Some schools may have one or two, but professionals at other colleges tell me that accommodating this many AS students is unprecedented.”

Other challenges can impact learning, as well. Augsburg also offers a program in partnership with the Hazelden Center for Youth and Families designed for college students recovering from chemical dependency. StepUP provides substance-free housing, ongoing support, and extracurricular team-building and community activities for students in recovery who are committed to achieving academic success.

MAGNETIC SCHOOLS?

Art schools and science and engineering universities are often thought to be dyslexia-magnets. They seem to attract the students who thrive in a right-brain atmosphere. It may be urban myth, but Nicholas Negroponte, dyslexic founder of the Media Lab at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, is credited with calling dyslexia “the MIT disease.” It’s not a disease (see the sidebar about the “D” words), but the point is not lost.

Susan Lush, associate dean of academic affairs at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts (SMFA; Boston, Massachusetts), speaks to the art school attraction: “Most art school administrators suspect that there are more students with learning disabilities enrolled at their institutions than there are at other types of schools, although it’s difficult to prove this.” In addition to its own arts curriculum, SFMA offers academic courses and degree programs through Tufts University (Medford, Massachusetts). “I find that many of our students do not self-identify,” she says, “other than casually—no documentation submitted—since they may not need accommodations in studio classes.”

Medicine

Dr. Baruj Benacerraf—Nobel laureate in immunology and pathology who donated his share of the prize money to find a cure for cancer

Dr. Delos M. Cosgrove—chairman of the department of thoracic and cardiovascular surgery at the Cleveland Clinic; prominent in the field of heart valve repair

Dr. Fred Epstein—internationally renowned pediatric neurosurgeon who developed unprecedented techniques for the removal of brain stem and spinal cord tumors

Dr. Edward Hallowell—psychiatrist and founder of The Hallowell Center for Cognitive and Emotional Health; focuses his practice on living with attention deficit disorder

Dr. Graeme Hammond—cardiothoracic surgeon specializing in developing methods for xenograft, transplanting tissues from one species to another

Dr. Florence Haseltine—obstetrician, gynecologist and expert in reproductive endocrinology; director of the Center for Population Research at the National Institutes of Health

TO TELL OR NOT TO TELL?

It's probably the most frequently asked question from parents of LD students: "Should my son/daughter reveal a learning disability during the admission process?" Answers from the professionals range from "absolutely" to "not unless you have to" and tend to cluster in the category of "it depends."

James Sumner, Grinnell College's (Grinnell, Iowa) dean of admission and financial aid, says, "The traditional thinking—and I still worry about it—is that if the student does identify herself as having a learning disability, that somehow that's going to work against her in the admission process. So one of the messages we try to deliver in all of our communications with prospective students is that if this is an important part of who they are, then they should feel comfortable in letting us know that. At the same time, we know that not every student and every family feels that way, and we do hear about it at different

stages—after a student is admitted and before they make the decision to enroll; after they've decided to enroll and paid their advance deposit; and once they arrive on campus."

"We tell applicants that it's not going to penalize them if they self-identify in the DU admission process," says Ted May, director of University Disability Services at the University of Denver (Denver, Colorado). "But we're also very clear that they should check with other institutions they're applying to, because the culture might be different [elsewhere]. You want to make the right choice about disclosure."

Admission consultant Loring Brinckerhoff agrees that the disclosure decision should be approached on a case-by-case basis. He says, "If you're looking at a Brown University, for example, which has a nice track record of working with dyslexic students, and by and large, your profile is

In her role as academic adviser, Lush works with many of the students with learning challenges. "I find that the most common disability mentioned is ADHD," she says, "followed by problems with processing speed and math—although there's no math requirement here, so that's not necessarily an issue. We also have quite a few students with reading and writing problems, though not as many." She reports that SFMA provides a writing center with one-on-one tutoring help and a text-to-voice software program for students with dyslexia. "I'm trying to create a confidential database for help with tracking these students," she adds. "But like most art schools, we're small and have a tight budget that doesn't allow for much professional development."

similar to other Brown students, except for foreign language, we'll say, then I think it would be fine to disclose. But Boston University—we've learned this [as a result of litigation initiated by LD students]—requires foreign language for graduation. So if you have a learning disability whereby you avoided foreign language in high school and were applying to a place like Boston University, you might be ill advised in that context [to even consider applying]. So you better do your homework."

Brinckerhoff offers several examples of institutions with long track records of exemplary LD services—the University of Connecticut (Storrs), Curry College (Milton, Massachusetts) and the University of Arizona. Since LD programs have been funded for years at these colleges, he says, "It's a safe hunch that the admission people are enlightened. It's going to be easier to disclose in a setting like that, where the institution already has a commitment. But if you're applying to an institution where a good-natured assistant dean is wearing three hats, and she's dealing with

international students, gay and lesbian students, and students with disabilities, what does that tell you in terms of priorities?"

"I can't imagine a situation where a student does not self-disclose," says Frank Sachs, director of college counseling at The Blake School (Minneapolis, Minnesota) and immediate past-president of the National Association for College Admission Counseling. "If they're doing wonderfully without support, then it's not an issue. But otherwise, absolutely, you have to self-disclose. I think the level of sophistication today on the college side is so great that there's more risk by not disclosing. At many schools there are learning centers established specifically to deal with these students. For example, if I know [the University of] Wisconsin [Madison] has the McBurney [Disability Resource] Center, and I think I have a student that fits there, I'll write a note saying 'You should run this student through McBurney,' because I just know they're going to get a better read."

THE WHOLE SHEBANG

Landmark College (Putney, Vermont) is known as the premier institution of higher education designed exclusively for students with learning disabilities and attention disorders. Founded in 1985, the residential college currently serves 400 students from 40 states and 14 countries. The faculty/student ratio is 1:5, and every professor is trained to teach LD students.

Landmark has established what it calls a "strategy/skills integration program." The comprehensive program includes non-credit proficiency development courses that enable students to acquire the basic skills needed for rigorous college-level coursework and credit-bearing college courses that also incorporate skills and strategy development. Degree programs lead to

associate in arts degrees in general and business studies, and more than 95 percent of Landmark graduates go on to pursue bachelor's degrees at competitive colleges and universities. Life at Landmark includes access to sophisticated assistive technology and a range of typical student activities, sports, study abroad programs and honors organizations. All this comes at a high price—more than \$40,000 a year in total costs—but financial aid and potential medical tax deductions can bring down the cost.

CHECK, CHECK, DOUBLE-CHECK

While nearly all LD programs require appropriate documentation to access their services, there are some exceptions. “We staff a reading lab, writing lab, math lab and science learning center,” says Joyce Stern, director of academic advising at Grinnell, “and tutoring is free in any subject. Help abounds at Grinnell, and it’s not stigmatized, so that a student with a learning disability does not have to be ‘qualified’ to get tutoring. If they’re struggling, they simply can go access it, just like their classmates.”

Grinnell also provides specialized accommodations tailored to the unique needs of students with a diagnosed condition. One example is Kurzweil text-to-speech software, which Stern’s staff uses to scan the texts an LD student needs. “That’s hours of time for us,” she says, “but we know that if a student gets even a day or two behind in their reading, then it’s going to be very difficult to catch up.”

Even some comprehensive fee-based programs, like the University of Arizona’s SALT program, no longer require documentation. SALT found that many students who were diagnosed early in school had been given access to resources that enabled them to improve their academic performance. Consequently, they may have been declassified from the special-education system. These students were still struggling, using tutors and whatever resources their family could muster, yet they no longer met the criteria for documentation. “We know these are lifelong issues,” says Director Diane Quinn, “and I got awfully tired of turning these students away. Why would I want the University to admit what looks like a viable student, only for the SALT Center to say, ‘You’re on your own’? That didn’t make any sense.”

CHANGING THE WAY WE THINK, TEACH

In 1995, the Emily Hall Tremaine Foundation undertook pioneering research to measure public awareness and understanding of learning disabilities. A follow-up study five years later compared more recent attitudes to the benchmark. While some progress has been made, two-thirds of Americans (65 percent) still link learning disabilities with mental retardation (down from 85 percent in 1995), when, in fact, most people with learning disabilities are of average or above-average intelligence. The report states, “This one disconnect alone has potentially devastating consequences, whether thinking about how individuals with learning disabilities are treated by other people or how they are educated....”

The University of Denver’s Ted May says, “When I first started teaching 25 years ago, there was a stigma associated with learning disabilities. Somehow [the thinking was that] these people were intellectually inferior to the normative group out there. I think it’s still around, but the stigma is lessening, to a degree.”

Even well-meaning people who misunderstand LD can cause heartache for students with learning disabilities. Grinnell College senior Emily Danielson says, “The typical experience I’ve had is that professors have been interested and accommodating but completely in the dark [about how to help]. There were a few cases where they’d given me extended time on a test, but then they’d ask me to read aloud in class. It would be so embarrassing. It was something they should have remembered, but they didn’t, because it’s not on their radar.” Danielson adds that if she reveals to friends that reading is hard for her, a common response is that it takes everyone a long time. “They’re trying to make me feel better,” she says, “but it’s really diminishing the difficulties I have.”

Most institutions promote a “disability awareness week,” where they strive to raise the consciousness of students and faculty about all disabilities. But Lynn University pulls out all the stops when it brings some big names to campus for faculty training and public presentations about learning disabilities. Lynn’s dynamic speakers have included pediatrician Mel Levine, author of the popular *All Kinds of Minds*; Howard Gardner, Harvard University (Cambridge, Massachusetts) psychologist and author of *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* and *Intelligence Reframed*; and Brown University graduate Jonathan Mooney, co-author of *Learning Outside the Lines: Two Ivy League Students with Learning Disabilities and ADHD Give You the Tools for Academic Success and Educational Revolution*. By assigning a high priority to

Science

Thomas Edison—prolific inventor with 1,093 U.S. patents, including a durable light bulb, phonograph and motion-picture camera

Albert Einstein—awarded the Nobel Prize for physics for his explanation of the photoelectric effect; proposed the theory of relativity; and contributed to the development of quantum mechanics, statistical mechanics and cosmology

Michael Faraday—physicist and chemist who made significant contributions to the fields of electromagnetism and electrochemistry

John R. (Jack) Horner—world-renowned paleontologist whose team recently discovered soft tissue in a *T. rex* thigh bone; author of *Digging Dinosaurs* and *Dinosaurs: Under the Big Sky*

Daniel F. Tully—award-winning structural engineer and architect who holds U.S. patents on the hyperbolic paraboloid shell construction used in his unique building designs

discussions of how people learn, Lynn has helped to dispel myths and change attitudes.

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL

Last fall, the Landmark College Institute for Research and Training (LCIRT) received a \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Education to develop a curriculum for five community colleges across the country that's effective for students with learning disabilities. The grant follows a similar one received three years ago that funded guidebooks and professional development workshops for faculty at 19 colleges and universities in Vermont. In addition, Landmark runs summer institute courses for high school teachers and college faculty on its campus, one-day enrichment workshops on topics such as assistive technologies, and online courses. Landmark's learning specialists also travel to colleges and universities for customized on-site training. They're known for being leaders in ADHD coaching, a new approach to helping students with executive function disorder become better able to set goals and manage their lives, and also for developing strategies for teaching foreign language to LD and ADHD students.

Linda Hecker, LCIRT director of educational services, says, "Because our students don't necessarily learn automatically in the traditional lecture-classroom mode, we've had to really dig in and look at how the learning process works—what facilitates learning and what gets in the way of learning. The best practices we recommend for teaching students with learning differences are going to be beneficial for the full range of diverse students [in any classroom].... Teachers need to have a repertoire of different ways to enhance learning. There's no one-size-fits-all [approach]."

THE UNIVERSITY GETS UNIVERSAL

What if professors didn't have to provide different accommodations for each LD student in their classes? What if the university compliance office didn't ever have to look at another piece of documentation again? It's not Utopia—it's Universal Design. It works in architecture and city planning, and it has utility in higher education, too. In order to provide easy access for wheelchairs, cities created the sidewalk curb cut, a design feature that turned out to be enormously popular with stroller pushers, cyclists, skateboarders and transients with shopping carts. They all love the curb cut, which

demonstrates the principle that when simple adaptability is built into a design, everyone uses it. The idea behind Universal Instructional Design (UID), also called UDI (Universal Design for Instruction) and UDL (Universal Design for Learning), is that accommodating various learning styles will benefit everyone, from the LD student who needs to see the lesson demonstrated visually to the native Swahili-speaker who's not fluent in English.

Robert Shaw, executive associate dean of the college at Brown University, was instrumental in the development of the Ivy Access Initiative, funded by the U.S. Department of Education. The five-year project was a joint venture with Columbia University (New York City, New York), Dartmouth College (Hanover, New Hampshire), Harvard University and Stanford University (Palo Alto, California). The project began in 1999 with a series of focus groups, surveys and interviews on all five campuses to assess issues and concerns from students with hidden disabilities, along with faculty and administrators. The information from these assessments was used to develop workshops for faculty and graduate students that demonstrate how to apply principles of UID in order to make instruction more accessible to all students. "I think a lot of folks saw the need to try to move away from an individual accommodation model," says Shaw, "to a more universal model that won't require quite such intensive arrangements for each individual student. If you could create an educational environment that was more flexible in the first place, then a lot of the individual accommodations would take place organically and naturally. You wouldn't need to send out special notes to each professor about each kid. That just struck a lot of people as a good idea, not only at Brown, but at other schools, too."

Joan McGuire and Sally Scott, David Parker's colleagues at the University of Connecticut, have developed a research-based UDI project that incorporates nine guiding principles for college instruction that are most effective for diverse learners. They offer examples (www.facultyware.uconn.edu) of ways to make instruction more equitable, flexible, intuitive and perceptible. Among their suggestions is using varied instructional methods and web-based courseware, so students with diverse needs (e.g., vision, learning, attention or English as a second language) can be accommodated. Another example includes offering textbooks and other reading material in digital format, so these students can access materials through traditional hard copy or with various technological supports (e.g., screen reader, text enlarger or online dictionary). UConn is collaborating with five other colleges that have established UDI learning

Sports

Bruce Jenner—Olympic gold-medal winner in the decathlon, a 10-event test of speed, power and endurance that determines "the world's greatest athlete"; motivational speaker and business leader

Earvin "Magic" Johnson—legendary NBA basketball star whose foundation supports community organizations serving inner-city youth

Greg Louganis—Olympic double gold-medalist and World Champion diver

Nolan Ryan—Baseball Hall of Fame pitcher known for his disciplined work ethic and a fastball that approached 100 miles per hour

Jackie Stewart—winner of 27 Grand Prix Formula One auto-racing championships

communities on their campuses to study the exploration and implementation of these and other approaches to teaching students with hidden disabilities.

METAMORPHOSIS

Lynn University's Marsha Glines is full of energy. "My belief is that learning ought to be exciting," she says. "It ought to be social, and it ought to be incredibly rewarding—and it hasn't been for many students. The goal of our whole department is to reframe learning so that it feels the way it ought to."

Glines is dean of Lynn's Institute for Achievement and Learning, which acts like a think tank for brainstorming in disability education. The Institute's Metamorphosis Coaching Program is an interactive, innovative course designed for students who struggle with issues of attention, distractibility or executive functioning. Typically these are students with ADHD who have trouble with organization, sequencing, follow-through, decision-making and memory. Glines explains, "Most universities in the country teach study skills and time management, and for any of us who have done that, it's tedious; it's boring. And it's boring for the students—they've heard it all before. Our idea was to have students develop their own learning environments based on what makes them most comfortable and determines their best success. Do they need natural light or artificial light? Do they need to be alone? Have things around them?"

Glines' innovative approach enables students to become cognizant of their own learning needs while immersed in flora and fauna at the nearby Gumbo Limbo Nature Center in Boca Raton and at a butterfly garden on campus. "When I first told my faculty, I said, 'We're going to build a butterfly garden and look at the whole metamorphosis process in nature. We're going to study what butterflies need to survive on campus, and students will learn about college survival in the process.' Their [initial] reaction was, 'Omigod, what's she talking about?' ... and they have been wonderfully supportive ever since. Instead of us dictating to students how they should be studying, they emerge with their own understanding of why they need sleep, proper nutrition and everything else necessary for learning." The Metamorphosis program charges an additional fee and includes field trips, guest lecturers and a coach who meets privately with each student once a week. The program has been so successful that the university is hiring another full-time staff member, and 60 students are expected to participate next fall.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The best measure of the success of these programs comes from the students themselves—invariably, they are the ones who would have fallen through the cracks in a traditional college or university setting. There are thousands of success stories out there from all the schools we talked with, and these are just two from alumni of the University of Arizona’s SALT program.

Amanda Grant-Saul ’03, now a graduate student at the University of Pennsylvania (Philadelphia), says, “Because I felt so successful with the SALT program, I went in right away to [Penn’s] Weingarten Learning [Resources] Center and set myself up with somebody to read over my papers. Because of SALT, it has been an easy transition to get my master’s. Penn is definitely an academic school, and I’m doing great [3.9 GPA].”

Joe Zebas, ’93 UA and ’97 UA Rogers College of Law, is a civil rights attorney in New Mexico. He points to his defeat of Wal-Mart in U.S. Federal Court in a race-discrimination case as his greatest victory so far. “SALT is a wonderful program,” says Zebas. “SALT took this overwhelming institution—a university of 30,000-plus undergraduates—and made it a somewhat small liberal arts college for me. SALT taught me how to communicate with my professors and helped me to learn how to handle and work with my dyslexia instead of constantly having to battle it.”

Research and experience have shown that students with learning disabilities and attention disorders are just as bright, motivated and promising as other students—and sometimes, more so. Those who have been doing so for quite some time say that welcoming LD students to their institutions of higher education is a good thing. They say it has been worth the time, cost and pedagogical challenges to achieve a learning environment that’s exciting, diverse and rewarding for everyone.

The University of Denver’s Ted May describes the cornerstones of DU’s Learning Effectiveness Program as “transformations” and “relationships.” He explains: “I think we sometimes miss in education that it’s a mutual learning process. It’s not just about how we help the student transform. Any action is going to be transformative for all the people involved. [Remembering that] helps keep us on our game as academic counselors. We’re not just here to shape someone or to fill up the glass. We’re here to develop a relationship, and it’s through that relationship that change is going to happen. And it’s going to happen everywhere.”

About the Author

Veteran writer Christine Stern has worked in education marketing with The Lawlor Group for more than 15 years and is well versed in the complexity of the needs, goals and challenges facing higher education. As the daughter-in-law, spouse, mother and colleague of gifted dyslexics, Chris also understands the tremendous challenges facing those with learning disabilities. As such, she brings great professional and personal perspective to this important story. Ms. Stern welcomes your comments at jssternfoundation@earthlink.net.

For more information about dyslexia and other learning disabilities, see: www.ldonline.org (LD Online); www.interdys.org (the International Dyslexia Association); www.ncl.org (National Center for Learning Disabilities); and www.hellofriend.org (the Ennis William Cosby Foundation).

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