

THE FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION

STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES WHO ARE ADMITTED TO THE  
UNIVERSITY USING ALTERNATIVE CRITERIA: HOW DO THEY FARE?

By

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## ABSTRACT

Many post-secondary institutions now have programs for special admission considerations for students with learning disabilities (LD's). These programs review information to determine the eligibility of students with disabilities who may not otherwise meet minimum standards for admissions. This study examines the academic success of students with LD's admitted through a Special Admissions Committee (SAC) when compared to students admitted through the "normal" process. An analysis of documentation of 45 undergraduate students submitted to an SAC indicates that they have lower high school GPA's and lower standardized test scores than their non-LD counterparts, but have similar levels of success (as measured by comparing cumulative college GPA's, number of failed courses, and outcome status three semesters after matriculation).

## STUDENTS WITH LEARNING DISABILITIES WHO ARE ADMITTED TO THE UNIVERSITY USING ALTERNATIVE CRITERIA: HOW DO THEY FARE?

As a growing number of young adults with learning disabilities (LD) seek post-secondary schooling as a means of achieving their occupational and educational aspirations, college admissions committees are increasingly faced with decisions regarding admission procedures for these special students. Since the passage of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, the number of students with disabilities on college campuses has been steadily increasing (Bursuck, Rose, Cohen, & Yahaya, 1989). Currently, students with learning disabilities are the fastest growing group of college students with disabilities, comprising 40% of those reporting a disability (Heath Resource Center, 2001). Today, approximately one in eleven students enrolled in post-secondary studies has a disability. This is a three-fold increase over the number reported in 1978 (Rothstein, 2003).

To comply with Section 504 and encourage enrollment of students with disabilities, many post-secondary institutions have developed and implemented programs for special admission considerations for students with disabilities. These programs are designed to review information to determine the eligibility of students with disabilities who may not otherwise meet minimum standards for admissions. Often times, these programs are comprised of a committee of university or college employees who are knowledgeable in the field of disabilities, such as faculty members or admissions administrators (Mcguire, Madaus, Litt, & Ramirez, 1996). These program committees search for evidence from voluntarily submitted information (e.g., psychoeducational reports, letters of recommendations) that indicate that the applicant has the potential for success in post-secondary education, in spite of the disability. Once admitted, students with disabilities may voluntarily take advantage of various accommodations and academic services tailored to fit their academic needs.

The issue, however, remains that disproportionately fewer high school graduates with LD's have college aspirations (67%) when compared with the non-LD population (84%) (Rath & Royer, 2002). The number of students with LD's enrolled in college has been increasing in recent years due to the availability of accommodations and services and a rise in special admissions committee recruitment (Rath & Royer, 2002). Research shows various rates of post-secondary graduation for this population. Sitlington and Frank (1990) reported that in a survey of 911 high school graduates with LD's, 50% enrolled in a post-secondary education program, but only 7% were still in school one year later. Rath and Royer (2002) found lower graduation rates for the LD population (24%) as compared to the non-LD student graduation rate (43%) after six years of enrollment.

Murray, Goldstein, Nourse, and Edgar (2000) had even more depressing findings: the graduation rates for their studied LD population were only 3.6%, compared to 62.1% for students without disabilities. Ruban, McCoach, McGuire, and Reis (2003) found that students with LD's enter college less academically prepared, with lower SAT scores, and lower rates of achievement than their non-LD counterparts. Interestingly, however, they graduate at about the same rate and within the same time frame.

Availability and use of support services are thought to be factors facilitating success in post-secondary education for the college LD population (Vogel, 1986), although internal factors (e.g. motivation) may also contribute to the students' success or failure (Vogel, 1986). Raskind, Goldberg, Higgins, and Herman (1999) determined that powerful predictors of academic success include self-awareness, determination, activity, emotional stability, goal setting, and the use of support services.

The purpose of the current study is to examine the academic success of college students with LD's who are admitted to the post-secondary institution through a special admissions committee. Students with LD's admitted through this process were compared to students who were admitted through the "normal" process (i.e., they met the university's admission criteria) in order to determine if the students with disabilities experienced comparable success as their non-LD counterparts, despite not having met normal admission criteria. Data were collected to determine differences between the two groups in grade point average (GPA), number of failed classes, and status (e.g. still enrolled, dropped out, graduated) three semesters following admission. In addition, for students with LD's admitted to the university, data were collected on the rate of usage of accommodations. More specifically, we investigated whether LD students take advantage of course waivers and course substitutions and whether the waivers and substitutions that they received coincide with their documented disabilities.

## **Method**

### Participants

This study was conducted at a large Southeastern university that offers special admissions consideration to students with documented LDs. Participants consisted of 45 undergraduate students with a diagnosed learning disability admitted to the university under special consideration by the Special Admissions Committee (SAC). All students who were admitted through the SAC with various matriculation dates from September 1997 to January of 2002 were included in the study. Applicants can voluntarily submit information regarding their disability to the SAC at the time of admission. This five-member team, comprised of two university faculty, the director and assistant director of the university's Student Disability Resource Center (SDRC), and one administrator from the admissions office, meets quarterly to review the applicants' folders. If the applicant with LD is not qualified according to university standards (e.g., high school grade point average, SAT/ACT scores), the SAC examines supplemental documentation (e.g., psychoeducational reports, letters of recommendation, personal statements) to search for evidence that the applicant can succeed in college despite the LD. Once admitted,

students may voluntarily register with the SDRC to take advantage of accommodations (including course substitutions and waivers) designed to meet their specific learning needs. The applications of students who already meet the university's standard criteria for admission are reviewed via the normal admissions process (i.e., they are not reviewed by the SAC).

Of the 45 student participants, 23 (51%) were female and 22 (49%) were male. Participants had various matriculation dates ranging from September 1997 to January of 2002, and they enrolled in the university at various points: 12 participants entered in the summer semester as Freshmen (indicating first time in college), 17 entered in the fall or spring semester as Freshmen, and 16 entered in the fall or spring semester as transfer students (indicating previous enrollment at another college or university). Participants had various matriculation dates ranging from September of 1997 to January of 2002. An additional 45 undergraduate students (18 female and 27 male) at the same university without a diagnosed LD or any special admissions considerations were utilized as a comparison group. This sample was selected randomly from a database of students admitted under normal admissions procedures. Participants were matched with the control group based on their starting semester and incoming status (i.e., freshmen starting school in the summer semester; freshmen starting in the fall or spring; transfer students starting in the summer; transfer students starting in the fall or spring).

### Procedures

Documentation that was voluntary submitted at the time of application as part of the student's application was reviewed for all 90 participants. General data gathered consisted of university matriculation date, type of LD (for the LD sample only), high school cumulative GPA, SAT scores (verbal and quantitative), and ACT scores (English, mathematics, reading, science, and composite).

University transcripts were reviewed and semester information was gathered for three consecutive semesters, not including summer. Data were collected for cumulative GPA and number of courses failed. To determine college success, outcome statistics were taken following the third consecutive semester of enrollment, not including summer. This outcome semester was unique to each participant as it depended on the student's matriculation date. For example, a student with a matriculation date of September 1998 would have his or her status examined for January 2000, following the fall (1998); spring (1999); and fall (1999) semesters. Status upon completion of the third semester was indicated as one of five outcomes: re-enrolled, graduated, withdrawn/dropped, on academic probation, or dismissed for academic reasons.

## **Results**

For the sample of students with LD's, the following diagnoses were indicated in order of frequency: 14 (31.1%) mathematics LD; 9 (20%) writing LD; 5 (11.1%) reading LD; 9 (20%) co-morbid LD's; 5 (11.1%) diagnoses classified as "other"; 8 (17.8%)

Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD); and 15 (33.3%) diagnoses of unknown type.

A series of independent t-tests were used on the following pre-college variables (see Table 1) to determine group differences in academic performance prior to university admission: high school GPA (for freshmen only), transfer GPA (for transfer students only), and all SAT and ACT scores. A Bonferroni correction was used to control for family-wise error ( $\alpha = .05/10$ ; corrected  $\alpha = .005$ ). When compared to the non-LD group, the LD group had lower high school GPA's,  $t(56) = -6.97, p = .000$ . The LD group also had lower standardized test scores in the following areas: SAT Verbal  $t(62) = -4.29, p = .000$ ; SAT Quantitative  $t(62) = -4.96, p = .000$ ; SAT Total  $t(62) = -5.33, p = .000$ ; ACT English  $t(45) = -3.56, p = .001$ ; ACT Math  $t(45) = -4.27, p = .000$ ; ACT Science  $t(45) = -3.47, p = .001$ ; and ACT Composite  $t(45) = -4.06, p = .000$ . No difference was found between the two groups in the area of ACT Reading  $t(45) = -2.80, p = .008$  or transfer GPA's  $t(27) = -1.95, p = .061$ .

After determining that the LD group entered the university with lower GPA's and test scores than the non-LD group (with the exception of transfer students' GPA), t-tests were used to compare the university success of the two groups, as indicated by their cumulative GPA and number of failed courses. Again, a Bonferroni correction was used to control for family-wise error ( $\alpha = .05/2$ ; corrected  $\alpha = .025$ ). Results indicated that the students with LD's did not have significantly lower cumulative college GPA's than the students admitted through normal admission procedures  $t(88) = -2.18, p = .03$ . There were also no significant differences in the number of failed courses between the two groups  $t(88) = 1.87, p = .07$ .

Only 11 (24.4%) of the students with LD's received course substitutions or waivers. All substitutions/waivers were for math, and all recipients of these accommodations had a documented math LD. The remaining 34 (75.6%) students with LD's passed all core courses (i.e. math, writing, and reading related courses) without the use of substitutions.

To assess overall college success, data were collected on enrollment status three semesters after the matriculation date (Table 2). Each participant was assigned to one outcome status: Reenrolled, Voluntarily Withdrawn, Placed on Academic Probation, and Dismissed for academic reasons by the university. In this analysis, Chi-square tests were used to compare the outcome status of each of the two groups. Results indicated no real difference between the two populations for any of the outcomes [Reenrolled,  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = .91, p = .34$ ; Withdrawn,  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = .00, p = 1.0$ ; Probation,  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = .00, p = 1.0$ ; and Dismissed,  $\chi^2(1, N = 90) = 2.05, p = .15$ ]. This indicates that in this sample, students with LD's succeeded at the same rate in post-secondary education as did the non-LD students. Therefore, despite not having met normal admission criteria, there was little that differentiated the college student with an LD admitted under special conditions from the non-LD student three semesters after matriculation.

## Discussion

College admissions committees today are faced with a dilemma: they must decide whether to alter the entrance requirements for students with disabilities seeking admission into their university without simultaneously jeopardizing the standards upheld by the school for the general student population. In order to justify accepting this select group of students through special admissions procedures, college admissions committees must seek to understand whether students with LD's can succeed in college despite their disability. As an increasing number of students with learning disabilities apply for acceptance into universities, finding an answer to this issue becomes more and more vital.

In an attempt to understand the population of college students with LD's, this study examined the academic success of those who were admitted through a special admissions committee. We compared this population to students who were accepted into the university under "normal" procedures in an attempt to determine differences in the college success of the two groups. Specifically, we looked at differences in GPA, number of failed classes, and enrollment status three semesters following admission. Additionally, for students with LD's, we collected data on the rate of usage of accommodations coinciding with their documented disabilities such as course waivers and course substitutions.

When compared to the non-LD group, the LD group had lower high school GPA's and lower standardized test scores on all areas of the SAT and ACT except for reading. However, after having been enrolled in college for three semesters, students with LD's did not have significantly lower cumulative college GPA's, and nor did they have a significantly higher number of failed courses. Furthermore, there were no significant differences in enrollment status three semesters after the matriculation date. These results suggest that although there are significant differences in academic credentials between the two groups upon entering college, the students with LD's seem to be able to keep up with their peers by achieving comparable academic success. Additionally, of these students admitted through the special admissions committee, only 24.4% took advantage of course substitutions or waivers. This indicates that the remaining majority are able to pass classes related to their disability without the use of course waivers, ensuring that the standards of the university are not being unduly compromised to accommodate students with LD's. We are not saying that students with disabilities should not have such accommodations made available to them, but simply that their curriculum is largely similar to that of their non-LD peers.

The findings of this study are significant in that they demonstrate that despite not having met normal admission criteria, there seems to be little that differentiated the college student with an LD admitted under special conditions from the non-LD student. This is promising information for university programs with these types of special admissions committees because it indicates that student applicants with LD's, while they may have lower high school GPA's, transfer GPA's, and standardized test scores, are entirely capable of producing college level work that is comparable to the general student population. These findings were similar to those of Ruban et al. (2003) who also found

that students with LD's succeeded in college to the same degree as their non-LD counterparts.

One limitation of this study is that we cannot conclusively say *why* students with LD succeeded. For example, perhaps this group of students availed themselves of the classroom accommodations, tutors, note-takers, readers, and other services offered to them free of charge through the Student Disability Resource Center. If so, this may have helped them to compensate for, or overcome, their academic weak areas. On the other hand, a recent study by Canto, Proctor, and Prevatt (2004) found no differences in academic performance between students with LD who do register for services following an evaluation, and those who don't, implying that the type of aforementioned accommodations and services are not imperative for the success of the college student with LD. Rather, the unexplained success of our students could be attributed to hard work, careful course selection and choice of a major, good academic advising, and students' own motivation. They may also be applying study skills and other strategies learned in high school while still under the watchful eye of concerned parents and teachers. Finally, the review process and acceptance rate of the Special Admissions Committee may be a causal factor, as the SAC members are very selective in their decisions regarding which students demonstrate evidence of academic potential in spite of their not meeting normal admissions criteria. On average, the SAC committee accepts only 20-30% of all applications reviewed, therefore ensuring that they are admitting only that minority of students with LD who have a very high probability of succeeding in college. It is hypothesized that we would have found much different results if the SAC had imposed less stringent criteria for admissions.

Further research is desired in order to further compare the similarities and differences among students with LD's and non-LD students. Specifically, it would be interesting to follow both groups of students for a longer period of time in order to explore their rates of graduation, cumulative GPA's upon completion of their academic programs, and employment/graduate school placements after college graduation. As evident by the current study, only a low percentage of students with LD's use course waivers and substitutions. Future studies may wish explore reasons for this and possible effects of not using waivers and substitutions in the area of their LD. Furthermore, universities offer a wide variety of other support services for students with LD's to help them achieve in college. For this reason, more research is needed to determine the types of services offered, the rates of usage of these services, and the success of students with LD's who use these services. It would also be interesting to compare the academic success of students with LD's that were admitted as transfer students versus students admitted as freshmen. Finally, future research is needed to compare the success of students entering college with a prior diagnosis of LD versus those diagnosed for the first time while in college.

Table 1

*High School and College Data for Students With and Without Learning Disabilities*

	<u>LD</u>			<u>Non-LD</u>		
	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>	<u>M</u>	<u>SD</u>	<u>n</u>
High School GPA	2.81	.44	29	3.66	.48	29
Transfer GPA	2.78	.47	13	3.11	.45	16
ACT English	18.38	4.33	21	22.77	4.10	26
ACT Math	17.52	4.29	21	22.88	4.28	26
ACT Reading	19.62	5.11	21	23.58	4.72	26
ACT Science	18.62	4.10	21	22.42	3.41	26
ACT Composite	18.62	3.99	21	22.92	3.27	26
SAT Verbal	480.34	69.05	29	553.14	66.50	35
SAT Quantitative	464.48	91.91	29	569.43	77.28	35
SAT Total	944.83	142.59	29	1120.57	121.24	35
Cumulative GPA	2.38	0.73	45	2.75	0.89	45
Number of failed courses	1.56	1.66	45	0.96	1.38	45

Table 2

*Outcome Data for Students With and Without Learning Disabilities*

	<u>LD</u>	<u>Non-LD</u>
Re-enrolled		
Yes	31	35
No	14	10
Withdrawn		
Yes	9	9
No	36	36
Probation		
Yes	2	2
No	43	43
Dismissed		
Yes	2	0
No	43	45

### Status of Learning Disabled and Non-Learning Disabled Students After Three Semesters of Enrollment

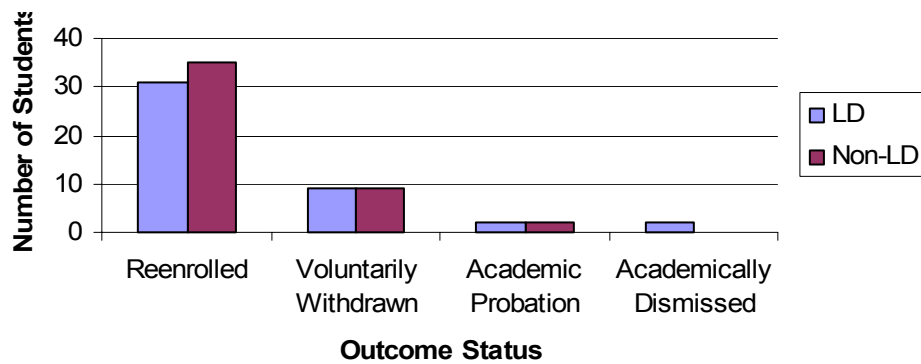


Figure 1

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