



Barriers and Bridges to Learning as Perceived by Postsecondary Students with Learning Disabilities

Technical Report Number 01

Joseph W. Madaus, Sally S. Scott, and Joan M. McGuire

University of Connecticut

Universal Design for Instruction Project
Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability

To Cite: Madaus, J.W., Scott, S. & McGuire, J. (2003). *Barriers and bridges to learning as perceived by postsecondary students with learning disabilities* (Tech. Rep. No. 01). Center on Postsecondary Education and Disability, University of Connecticut.

This report has been developed under a grant from the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Postsecondary Education (#PR333A990036). The opinions contained in this manuscript, however, do not necessarily reflect the viewpoints or policies of the USDOE.

Abstract

Four focus groups were conducted with students with learning disabilities at three postsecondary institutions in the northeast. The objective of each focus group was to determine the students' perceptions of what constitutes a positive college course, of instructional strategies and methods employed by professors that enhance student learning, and to determine the students' perceptions of barriers to learning. Results indicated that students were positive about faculty who set clear expectations, were consistent, and treated learning as a process. Students reported profiting from a variety of specific instructional strategies. Inconsistency on the part of a professor was perceived as a barrier to learning.

Barriers and Bridges to Learning as Perceived by Postsecondary Students with Learning Disabilities

Issue

As increasing numbers of students with diverse learning needs access postsecondary education programs, there is a need to design innovative instructional methods that ensure equal academic access. In order to identify such methods and be aware of the challenges and barriers to equal access to instruction we spoke with college students with learning disabilities (LD). These students provided insights into barriers faced in obtaining equal educational access and effective instructional strategies used by college professors.

Research Questions

- What are the perceptions of college students with LD related to the attributes of a good college course?
- What are the perceptions of college students with LD related to teaching methods and strategies that promote learning?
- What are the perceptions of college students with LD related to the challenges and barriers experienced in college instruction?

Method

Four focus groups were conducted with students with LD at three postsecondary institutions in the northeast between May 2000 and April 2001. Two groups were conducted at Hudson Valley Community College

(HVCC), and one was conducted at both Northern Essex Community College (NECC) and at the University of Connecticut (UConn). Each of these institutions is a partner school in the Universal Design for Instruction (UDI) project and is closely involved in grant activities.

UDI Project staff facilitated the groups at NECC and UConn. The head of the HVCC UDI team facilitated the focus groups on that campus. An interview protocol (Appendix A) designed by UDI Project staff was used to guide each session. Student responses were audio taped and transcribed.

A total of 23 students participated in the four groups. Each student was registered with the designated office for students with learning disabilities on their respective campus. Demographic data was obtained on 15 of the students. There were nine males and four females. The range of ages was 19 to 42, and the students ranged from second to tenth semester status. The range in number of semesters receiving support services was one to ten. Eleven majors were represented.

Executive Summary

Analysis of the data was clustered into the following broad categories: “Positive Attributes of a Good Class,” “Effective Strategies that Promote Learning,” “Negative Experiences and Barriers to Learning,” and “Advice to Faculty.” In general, students were positive about faculty who set clear expectations, were consistent, and treated learning as a process. While they spoke favorably about interesting course content, they were

more positive about content that is delivered clearly and at an understandable level. The students reported profiting from outlines of notes, pause and question procedures during lectures, reading guides, and study guides, noting that these strategies and materials helped to guide them and keep them on track. Professors who were viewed as inconsistent (e.g., between lectures and texts; between lectures and exams) or course structure that was perceived as inconsistent (e.g., between lectures and labs; grading procedures between TA's and professors) were reported to be negative experiences.

There were few differences noted related specifically to the issue of learning disabilities. Some students did state that instructional supports such as outlines of notes and reading guides helped compensate for particular weaknesses. However, what clearly distinguished a positive class experience from a negative experience were the particular attributes and attitudes of individual professors. Students spoke positively of professors who made it clear that they respected the fact that the student had an LD, and made it clear that they would work with the student. These professors accepted that the student had different learning needs and communicated this clearly to the student. When asked if there were courses in which the learning disability was not an issue, the students pointed towards the attitude of the professor as the most significant factor in creating such an environment.

Conversely, students reported negative experiences with professors who either would not accept the fact that they had an LD and needed particular accommodations, or who were generally insensitive to a student's particular needs. Students expressed strong frustrations with situations in which they had to "convince" a faculty member that they had a learning disability and required particular accommodations. Additionally, the students stated that they did not want professors to be judgmental, nor did they want faculty to lower their expectations simply because the student self-disclosed a learning disability.

Detailed Findings

An overview of responses to each interview question follows. Illustrative comments and responses from participants are included.

Attributes of a Good Class

The students at both NECC and HVCC spoke positively of classes that are small in size and that offer individualized attention. Class sizes for these students have ranged from approximately 8 to 30 students. One student felt that this provided a "homier feel." Others acknowledged that such small class sizes allow for more one-to-one interaction with faculty. One student explained the contrast and the corresponding disadvantage of a large class:

I went to school before...they [lecture courses] were all over a hundred, some of them. I mean they were huge. The entire room, one of those auditoriums was full of students. I never went to

see the teacher. It's just, it's not inviting. They give their lecture and walk out of the room.

With the exception of class size, each of the remaining positive attributes discussed by students across the four groups related to qualities that an individual instructor brings to the classroom. These attributes are described in the following sections.

Effective Strategies that Promote Learning

Each group spoke at length about the attributes of effective instructors and the strategies they used to promote learning. Across the groups, the following themes emerged: Effective instructors are approachable and available, clear in content delivery and course expectations, and are engaging and challenging. Effective instructors also try to recognize and focus on the individuality of each student.

Approachable and available. The most common descriptors of good instructors occurring throughout the focus groups were "approachable" and "available." Students frequently used such phrases as "he took the time" or "she's available." Students reported meeting with these professors before and after class, in either the classroom or in the professor's office, and often, the students told of being invited to these meetings by professors. A student at UConn described how helpful it was when a professor "told me that if I had any questions, don't be afraid to approach him at any time...email him, see him outside of class." He summarized that the professor told him that "if you're not understanding, make sure that you go to see him." Other students told of professors who

scheduled weekly appointments with students, and of those who invited students to meet with them on a regular basis.

Students also described the value derived from support provided by professors outside of the classroom setting. It was noted as particularly helpful when instructors were active in lab sections. As one student said, “they’re actually in the classroom and they’re actually sitting there helping you...and you can tell they’re having a good time.” Students also commented positively on instructors who stayed after lab sessions to provide additional assistance. One student spoke of a professor who took students around the campus to visit learning resources such as the library and the learning assistance center. The student noted a greater willingness to access these resources later because of this effort by the professor.

Clarity. Students in each group spoke positively of professors who are clear and consistent with course expectations and who provide explicit information about the course. When asked to describe the attributes of the best course taken at the college level, one student at UConn stated that the professor set clear expectations at the outset of the semester. Another student from this group concurred, stating that a different professor “was really clear as to expectations.” The students from each group appeared to feel more at ease and comfortable with professors who are very clear about assignments, and who follow the course syllabus. Rushing through course material with a focus on quantity at the expense of student

understanding was noted as a negative aspect of a class. The students preferred professors who monitored their progress regularly and provided continual feedback such as personal comments and feedback on papers.

The students in each group also considered clarity in the delivery of course content to be a hallmark of an effective instructor. According to the students, effective instructors explain concepts in detail, but without going off on tangents or losing sight of the main concept being discussed.

Students at each school stated that it was helpful when they were provided with outlines of lectures or copies of lecture notes ahead of time, and when lecture materials are presented visually as well as orally. This visual presentation included the spelling of complex words and connecting terms or small details to a larger concept. Students at each institution described how this helped them to pay more attention to the lecture, rather than trying to write down everything said in class. A student at UConn explained that when notes are not available, “you’re not even paying attention to what he is saying, you’re just writing, writing, writing.”

Comparatively, when notes are provided, the student explained “you can pay more attention to them instead of writing.” Likewise, a student at HVCC stated that when lecture notes are provided, students “get more from the lecture because they listen and pay more attention to what is being said.”

One student offered the following as an example of how a professor aided her comprehension of the course material:

The professor would leave all of the notes as he went through the lecture on the board. These notes would include a lot of detail and spelling of difficult words. As the professor lectured he would start on the left side of the room and work his way to the right, filling the boards up with notes. He would leave it up throughout break and would only erase it after getting permission from all of the students.

This student believed that this professor's approach to delivering class lectures benefited her tremendously because she could continually look back to make connections and get accurate spelling of subject matter terminology.

Clarity was also a central theme when students described the benefit received from organizational techniques offered by professors, such as reading guides, chapter outlines, and study guides. A student at HVCC explained how a professor was especially helpful in this regard, stating, "in each chapter she gave us an outline of exactly what she was going to cover." Likewise, a student at UConn stated that when faced with large amounts of reading, "sometimes its really hard for not even the LD kids to pick out important details...I think it's very important for the teachers to give us...key points to focus on. I mean, we're gonna do it."

Engaging. Students in each group expressed appreciation of instructors who can engage both an entire class and individual students. Multiple students reported benefiting from professors who keep a course interesting and relevant. A variety of methods were described, including hands on activities and frequent group interactions. However, the most critical method of making information interesting was presenting it in an

understandable manner that made it relevant to the students. One NECC student described a professor's useful approach in this way: "he could give you things to look at. If you didn't understand that text he would relate it to another text that you might have a far better grasp on, because it was more current." Making connections between past learning experiences and associations was reported to aid student attention and retention. One student summarized this point by saying, "I find good teachers can somehow bring some association to what they're teaching to real life experience, to something the student understands."

Challenging. Several students spoke positively of professors who challenged them to learn. This included professors who treated learning as a process (e.g., encouraging students to continually submit work for feedback and subsequent improvement, thus providing an opportunity for students to engage in a process of reflecting upon faculty suggestions regarding their work). Students reported benefiting when professors use pause and question techniques during lessons to challenge individual students or an entire class to engage in problem solving. One student described a professor who "didn't give it to you, you had to learn it by yourself." Another described an interaction with a professor related to a course paper: "And she'll just give me more ideas to go on, like, if I'll be puzzled about what to put in the next sentence, she won't like put it down...she'll make you think and she'll ask you questions...she'll give you key words that make you think and figure it out on your own." This student

also appreciated the fact that this professor also “complimented you for learning.”

Recognizing individuality. The students expressed appreciation for professors who tried to offer individualized attention to students. This attention focused not only on their needs as a student with a learning disability, but also on their broader needs as a student. For example, several students expressed an appreciation for professors who recognized that not everyone in the class has the same level of understanding and were willing to slow down in order to assure the overwhelming majority of the class reached understanding before he/she moved on. One student from HVCC shared an experience from an English course in which the professor wrote on the board in cursive script. The student explained to the professor that he had difficulty reading cursive. From that point on, the student said, “she very nicely shifted over to printing out all the materials either on a computer or on a typewriter...and if she wrote anything on the board she made sure it was on the paper.”

Students from each group spoke highly of professors who personalized the learning experience. Personalized feedback on papers and exams was positively regarded. One student described a professor who wrote personal notes that would say things such as “I understand where this could possibly be because of your disability. This is how you could work on it. I would like to talk to you about it.” Another student noted that a professor would hand students individualized notes in class

complimenting them for participating in a class discussion. Students spoke about how these individual connections helped build their self-confidence, and that it seemed that the professor would really go the “extra mile to make it personal, like a one-to-one class.” As one HVCC student stated, it is helpful when a professor will provide students with “that extra boost.”

Students also expressed appreciation of professors who were receptive when a learning disability was disclosed. A UConn student shared the story of a positive interaction with a professor related to a test accommodation disclosure. As the student said, “I was really nervous about bringing the accommodation letter...but he sat down and talked about...what I would do, the entire process, like I guess he knew and understood it.” Another UConn student spoke highly of a professor who was not only open to the fact that students had learning disabilities, but that “he was eager to help me at all times.” A student at HVCC summarized what professors can do to best meet the needs of students with LD by stating, “just be sensitive and ask the student what he needs.”

Strategies and Methods that Hinder Learning

When asked what teaching strategies or methods hinder learning, students at each institution described nearly the converse of the characteristics of an effective instructor. For example, students spoke of difficulty when professors present material too quickly, focusing on “quantity rather than quality.” The students also expressed frustration

when an instructor presents material visually, but does not allow it to remain visible for extended reference. One student commented, "It's almost like that's the only way the teacher can remember what it is. So they put it up for their memory, then they take it down, so we didn't learn anything from it."

The students voiced concerns about professors who are unclear in a variety of areas. This included being unclear in overall course expectations and demands. One student described the problem as follows: "there's some professors who say 'tough. We're going to have a test on this every day we meet. I expect this test read by the time we meet.' You know, which could be 500 pages. A student with a learning disability, such as myself...you're not going to get through a text that's over 500 pages. I mean, it took me over four hours to get from page, probably, 45 to page 188." Other difficulties are experienced when a professor does not follow the course syllabus consistently or when the professor delivers disjointed, "off target" lectures. As one student stated:

I think that's another key to students who may have ADD or ADHD or some kind of disability: is the material going to keep your interest? Otherwise you're going to lose their interest. Like in Anatomy and Physiology ...I've taken it twice. I have to retake it for a third time. Both times my interest was gone out the window within the first 45 minutes because they sit there and start talking about a topic, then they go off on a tangent somewhere, and you have no clue where they are going.

Students were also concerned about professors who are not clear regarding course assessment, including, for example, testing students on information not taught in class. One student suggested that “one of the things that professors should look at is when they say they’re going to give an exam on one thing, they should stick to their syllabus.” Students at UConn spoke of a lack of consistency as negative, and provided several broad examples, including when there is variation in terms used within lectures, between lectures and text readings, or between the terms used in lectures and on exams. Additionally, the students expressed frustration with inconsistencies in expectations and grading between professors and teaching assistants.

As discussed previously, students in each group strongly stated that an understanding and appreciation of the difficulties their learning disabilities create was important. The students did not appreciate professors who were skeptical of the need for accommodations or regarding the nature of a learning disability in general. Regarding disclosure, one student said, “If I tell you that I have this problem, I don’t want to have to convince you.” Several students conveyed experiences with professors that made them feel uncomfortable. One student described an incident with a professor who told her that learning disabilities were “psychosomatic” and violated her confidentiality by asking her questions about her learning disability during a class discussion. Another student told of an experience in which a professor mocked a

request for a note taker in front of the entire class. Another student described a situation when he arranged extended time on an exam with his professor. However, the professor moved him several times during the exam. The student also told of a professor who whistled while proctoring an exam held in his office.

The students spoke of how these incidents occasionally lead to the decision to not disclose the presence of a learning disability, and to subsequently not get the accommodations needed. As a result, some students found themselves receiving low grades or needing to withdraw from courses. Such experiences led a student at HVCC to “interview” his professors at the outset of the semester. He stated, “you can tell from the tone of their voice, their attitude...whether they are willing to work with you.”

Generalizations about learning disabilities were also offensive to these students, and were likely to lead to students not asking for assistance. One student from NECC was troubled when a professor stated, “I’ve had you type of people before” after the student self-disclosed. Because of such experiences, a student at UConn expressed a desire that professors not be judgmental or lower expectations simply because a student has a learning disability. As the student said, “don’t just expect us to be dumber...they’re like, ‘oh, you’re one of those people’...then I don’t want your help.” Another student from NECC voiced concern that some professors assume that if a student is doing well in a

course, he or she could not really have an LD, and thus the student does not need additional help. Instead, as the student said, professors “have to realize that I’m coming to you because I don’t want to fail. And they should be looking at that as an accomplishment, that we’ve made it this far. You want to continue to do well.”

Summary

It appears that what creates an accessible and memorable course for these students with LD are primarily the personal attributes and attitudes that professors bring to the classroom. The themes found throughout the focus groups were well summarized by the responses to the final question posed to each group. When asked what advice they would give to faculty, the students suggested that faculty be clear and straightforward in their expectations, become involved and engaged with their class, and that they be “compassionate” regarding student needs. These themes, and the characteristics of both positive courses and effective college instructors were remarkably consistent across these groups of students from three institutions that vary widely in terms of mission, size, and academic competitiveness.

Appendix A
Focus Group Protocol

Protocol Sheet

1. Introduction/Purpose/Ice Breakers. Staff will define “good teacher” clearly, noting that this may or may not be one of student’s “hardest” professors, but is one of the people student “learned the most from.”
2. Describe the best course you’ve ever had in college.
 - What made the class stand out?
 - What did the instructor do to make the class so positive?
 - What was the syllabus like?
 - What was the textbook like?
 - What kinds of teaching methods stood out to you?
 - What kinds of class activities stood out to you?
 - Did these professors employ technology such as the World Wide Web, multimedia platforms, and PowerPoint in teaching? Did these methods make a difference to you?
 - Did the professor use group projects or cooperative learning exercises? (If yes) How helpful were these methods for you?
 - Describe the evaluation methods. What kinds of tests were used? What kinds of papers were assigned?
3. When you are in a classroom, what faculty teaching methods positively affect your learning?
 - Do these effective strategies vary from subject to subject?
 - What teaching strategies are helpful to you in large lecture halls?
 - What teaching strategies are helpful to you in smaller classes?
 - What teaching strategies are helpful to you in seminar classes?
 - What teaching strategies are helpful to you in lab courses?

4. a. Have you experienced barriers to learning because of your learning disability?
 - Tell us about this.
 - How frequently do you experience these barriers?
- b. Have you experienced barriers to demonstrating your knowledge or understanding of course materials?
 - For example, have you experienced barriers in test taking? Tell us about this.
 - How frequently do you experience these barriers?
 - What was one of the most unique barriers that you've experienced because of your LD?
 - How often do you think that college students with LD experience barriers in classroom instruction?
 - What things could have your professors done to eliminate these barriers?
5. Have you ever had a teacher or a course where your learning disability "was not an issue"? What things did the teacher do to make this so?
 - If yes, were the things you just described unique to that teacher?
6. What other effective things have professors done to help you access course information and material?
7. What other things can faculty do, either in instruction or in testing to lessen the impact of your LD in the classroom?

8. Summary/Recap of emerging themes by staff
 - Is there any other advice that would you give to faculty to improve their teaching?
9. Wrap-Ups/Thank You's