Postsecondary Education for Students with Learning Disabilities: A Synthesis of the Literature

by Charlotte Mull, Patricia L. Sitlington, and Sandra Alper


Summary

In this article, a systematic analysis and synthesis of published research from 1985 to 2000 recommending or reporting on postsecondary education programs for students with learning disabilities is described. The authors found 26 articles which met the criteria of recommending services or describing services presently available. Eleven program factors examined were definition of learning disability, characteristics of adult learners, type of institution, special admission procedures, assessment services, program accommodations, support services, instructional adjustments, instructional staff training, direct staff training, and program evaluation.

This is an extremely important and timely literature review since the largest number of students with disabilities participating in college are those with learning disabilities. The number of college freshmen with learning disabilities has increased tenfold since 1976; this has resulted in this particular group becoming the fastest group of college students with disabilities receiving services. In this paper, Mull, Sitlington, and Alper systematically analyzed published research over a 15 year period. The authors extensively looked at Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 which has been the defining legislation for the determination of accommodations at postsecondary institutions. The ADA, of course, expanded coverage to all programs and services regardless of whether or not they received federal financial assistance, but still did not change the compliance regulations. This literature review was important because it took into account not only Section 504 but the implications of ADA. Although the picture that the authors identified from the research on the recommendations for services is basically positive, their study had some disappointing findings. Although all the articles reviewed recommended a variety of support services for students with LD, few addressed the need to evaluate the effectiveness of those services. A second disappointment, according to the authors, was the relative lack of discussion on staff training. Clearly, the success of program accommodations, support services, and instructional accommodations are dependent on the professionals who work daily with students with LD. This is especially true as the concept of universal design has spread into many institutions who are trying to deliver services to students with disabilities.

The authors indicate several implications for practice. For example: they feel that students need to be prepared to determine which of the accommodations and supports used at the secondary level will also be needed at the postsecondary level. The students need to be trained in the use of the increasing number of assistive technology devices. Secondary teachers need to be aware of the demands of postsecondary education environments so they can work with the student in more efficient ways to acquire skills, supports, and accommodations. More emphasis needs to be placed on the training of staff at the postsecondary level, such as faculty, resident staff, admission staff, etc., to work with individuals with disabilities. This is particularly true for those who provide indirect service to these students, such as faculty.

The authors indicate while it has been 28 years since the passage of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, many of the recommendations and requirements of Section 504 are still not being addressed in the literature. The transition to postsecondary education is a key outcome of the transition process for individuals with learning and other disabilities. Hence, it is of utmost importance that students be
trained to identify and request the accommodations and support service that they need to be successful and that those that are in the college environment know how to work with and help support those students to increase the likelihood of retention and graduation.