

Teaching Students with Disabilities

Strategies and Guidance
for Faculty

INSIDE

CONFUSED ABOUT
SPINA BIFIDA?

TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE
WITH OUR QUICK QUIZ.

(See page 4)

IN BRIEF

Gallaudet University and the developer of a video relay translation system are improving interpretation services for those who are deaf. The system enables users to place video relay calls through a sign language interpreter and broadband Internet connection.

A specially adapted golf cart allows people with disabilities to hit a ball without standing up. The "Model Tee" was developed by the University of Southern Mississippi.

University of California researchers are testing an electronic eye implant that acts as an artificial retina to restore sight.

Several universities have reported that drugs to lower cholesterol may be useful in treating multiple sclerosis and other autoimmune diseases such as rheumatoid arthritis and type 1 diabetes.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

A student registered for your class shows up at your office with a monkey. She explains it's a service animal that will be attending class with her. Judging from the monkey's behavior, you believe it will disrupt the class. Do you have a right to exclude it?

(See page 2)

How can you tell if it's a learning disability or a language problem?

For nonnative English speakers, diagnosis can be tricky

College campuses are becoming increasingly diverse. As more students with English as a second language fill your classes, it's easy to get confused.

If a student is doing poorly, is it that he has a learning disability? Or is it that his problems have more to do with not fully mastering English?

Imagine yourself suddenly immersed in a foreign country with a different language. Some might consider you learning disabled if they didn't know the language was new to you.

So how can you know for sure if it's a new language or LD causing a student's underperformance? Students with LD usually have language problems, but so do students learning a new language.

First of all, students have to self-identify and show documentation of a disability to be eligible for accommodations in higher education. So you can turn to your disability service officer for guidance concerning students who have made the case that they are disabled.

(See LANGUAGE on page 2)

WHAT SHOULD YOU DO ...

if a student says his phobia is affecting his classwork?

Ask him if he has gone to the campus counseling service for help. Then check with your disability service office for specific advice.

See more on page 4.

turn to your disability service officer for guidance concerning students who have made the case that they are disabled.

Changing your courses for students with disabilities makes sense, professor says

A few years ago, several students with disabilities asked University of Arizona geosciences professor Terry Wallace for accommodations. His immediate reaction was, "If you just put your mind to it, you can pass without all this special attention," he says.

But after reflecting on the matter, he conferred with staff in his campus disability resource center.

What came next could lead you to consider partnering with your campus disability service officer to create an optimum learning environment for all students.

"We would like more professors to contact us, and we would like to contact them," says David Corsi, a disability specialist at the center.

The office staff helped Wallace by explaining the implications of different disabilities. And they worked with him to redesign

his course to accommodate students with visual, hearing and learning impairments.

Wallace, one of the nation's leading seismologists, is now also a major advocate for students with disabilities. He has changed his way of teaching, testing and assigning homework.

"The purpose is not to teach students how much they can regurgitate. We have to realize that students learn in different ways," he says.

Wallace lets students learn at their own pace and comfort level. He has adjusted his own schedule and found new ways to make his class more friendly. For example, he:

- Repeats important concepts several times in lectures.
- Uses real volcanic rock and topographical maps to help students who are blind.
- Puts the lecture outlines on the Web.

(See CHANGE on page 3)

But the disability specialist may not have all the answers. "Is it a lack of education, a lack of English, a learning disability, or all three?" asks **Deborah Shulman**, an LD specialist at **Cabrillo College** (Calif.).

Making the call is not easy, she says.

Shulman conducts extensive interviews with students and also tests those who have been in the country awhile.

LD is not the result of an individual's cultural or linguistic background, yet those factors can lead to academic difficulties, Shulman says.

And a student's conversational ability in English may not be indicative of his ability to learn in the new language, she says.

While it takes only two or three years to acquire basic communications skills, it can take seven years to develop the cognitive skills required to do well in academic settings.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

The **Americans with Disabilities Act** states that even if a requesting party has a disability and the animal is a service animal, access still may be denied in some cases.

For example, if the animal's presence would result in either a safety threat or a fundamental alteration of the course, you could tell the student her monkey couldn't accompany her to class.

Service animals are not necessarily dogs, so in this case, the student's monkey could legitimately be one.

And while there is no specific requirement that an animal be licensed or certified as a service animal, the student should be able to demonstrate it is trained to assist her.

Here are some more tips for dealing with this challenging situation:

- Ensure the student is registered as disabled with your institution's disability service office.
- Determine if the monkey is a service animal or just a pet. The ADA states animals must be "individually trained to provide assistance to a person with a disability."
- Ask the student to explain how the monkey helps with her disability. Service animals usually guide people with visual impairments, alert people with hearing impairments, and help those with mobility problems by pushing their wheelchairs or fetching dropped items, etc. ■

The issue is exacerbated by students who use English primarily on campus, but revert to their first language at home, Shulman says. This slows their mastery of English.

Adding to the confusion is the fact that it's not uncommon for students with LD to go undiagnosed until they enter college, when language skill demands increase. The same can apply to foreign students who never showed signs of LD in their native language.

College-level English is complex, and that's when a student's disabilities can surface, Shulman says.

Of course, foreign students may have had poor preparation for college in their native countries, she adds.

And the confusion doesn't end there. Trying to test students who are bilingual to see if they have LD can be tricky. There are few standardized tests in other languages to determine if individuals have LD, and the usual instruments created in English often do not translate well into other languages.

Also, some students don't score well on tests administered in English because they use "Spanglish."

Finally, there is a drastic shortage of qualified bilingual experts who can administer tests to these students. ■

Accommodations usually the same as for English-speaking students

Students whose second language is English and who have learning disabilities usually require the same accommodations as those who are English-speaking, says **Deborah Shulman**, an LD specialist at **Cabrillo College**.

But the type of accommodations depends on students' degree of LD and their proficiency in English.

This is why the disability service office should see that they have language testing prior to making any decisions.

Common accommodations for these students include:

- **Additional time.** Translating from one language into another when taking a test or doing an assignment takes time. That plus LD is even more challenging.
- **Note-takers.** Even students who do well at processing what they hear often have bad spelling.
- **Tape recorders.** These can also help ESL students who have good auditory processing skills.
- **Priority registration.** This allows students time to find professors who understand their issues and are willing to work with them. ■

Teaching Students with Disabilities

Publisher:
Kenneth F. Kahn, Esq.
VP, Marketing and Customer Service:
Jana Shellington

VP Editorial:
Claude J. Werder
Editorial Director:
Daniel J. Gephart
Senior Editor:
Paula P. Willits, Ed.D.

If you have a question, comment or suggestion, please contact Editor Paula P. Willits, Ed.D. at (561) 622-6520, Ext. 8669 or e-mail pwillits@lrp.com.

Marketing Director:
Marcy Witt
Product Group Manager:
Anna McMahon

Copyright © 2003 LRP PUBLICATIONS



This publication is designed to provide accurate and authoritative information regarding the subject matter covered. It is provided with the understanding that the publisher and editor are not engaged in rendering legal counsel. If legal advice is required, the service of a competent professional should be sought.

Teaching Students with Disabilities is published semiannually by LRP Publications, 747 Dresher Road, P.O. Box 980, Horsham, PA 19044-0980, (215) 784-0860. Editorial office: 360 Hiatt Drive, Palm Beach Gardens, FL 33418. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to *Teaching Students with Disabilities*, 747 Dresher Road, P.O. Box 980, Horsham, PA 19044-0980. Authorization to photocopy items for internal or personal use, or the internal or personal use of specific clients, is granted by LRP Publications, for libraries or other users registered with the Copyright Clearance Center (CCC) for a \$2-per-document fee and a \$1.50-per-page fee to be paid directly to the Copyright Clearance Center, 222 Rosewood Drive, Danvers, MA 01923. Fee Code: CCC(978)750-8400/03/\$2+\$1.50.

- Uses a machine that replicates the sound of a volcano exploding for students who are deaf.

In a 150-student class that lasts a little over an hour, he may use 90 visual aids. And in his natural disasters course, the main emphasis is not on students' ability to write. "I make them write, but I am not grading the fact that they don't have well-constructed sentences. I want them to organize their thoughts," he says.

He also uses aids in homework. For instance, he assigned a lesson on tsunamis that included topographical maps that allowed students to feel the physical characteristics of the Earth. "I can talk about tsunamis and how they are triggered, but the understanding has to be reinforced by my maps," he says.

"I've learned how to make sure students can learn in different ways. By doing that, I can reach all students."

It's more work in the beginning, he says, but it's worth it in the end. ■

Professor offers tips on making course changes

Changing a course to accommodate students with disabilities takes cooperation and coordination between professors and the disability service staff.

Terry Wallace, a **University of Arizona** geosciences professor, learned a lot from his DS office. He conferred with them after being asked by several students with disabilities to make accommodations for them.

The following are his recommendations to other professors:

- Don't be afraid to make major changes in the way you design and teach a class.

- Accept that everyone is different. Disabilities manifest themselves in different ways and require different accommodations.

- Constantly ask students for feedback. This lets you know if they are learning. Use the feedback to make ongoing changes.

- Use aids to improve learning. Visual aids are needed by deaf students, and audible or textural aids are good for students with visual disabilities.

Put your lecture notes on the Web to allow students to preview them and refer to them after the class.

- Rearrange homework and testing. Consider using the computer for homework assignments and exams. Consider eliminating time limits for exams. In many cases, they are not important.

- Repeat important parts of lectures at least three times. Do the same when giving oral exams and homework assignments.

- Evaluate students' progress at least twice during the semester. Don't make all the assignments due at the end of the course. ■

Students with learning disabilities may lack strategies to handle stress

There's stress and then there's stress.

There's the stress all college students face, and there's the stress faced by students with learning disabilities, says **Daniel J. Berkowitz**, assistant director of disability services at **Boston University**.

Students with LD are subject to external pressures all college students face, plus their disabilities, which often leave them with ineffective coping strategies.

Many students arrive on campus with few coping or advocacy skills to help them handle the stress, he says.

"Look at the average high school. It has resource rooms and people to advocate for students. Now, all of a sudden, students are being told they need to talk to their professors, something they have never done before. That is a serious stress factor," Berkowitz says.

Students with LD attending Boston University attend a weeklong transition program held just before the start of the fall semester to learn advocacy skills. They role-play with staff members who act as professors.

Peer group counseling also helps some students with LD, but not necessarily all of them. For example, some LD students may not want to talk about their issues.

Also, if the peer group of LD students has no structure or leadership, the harm done may outweigh the good.

So what can you do to help your students with LD adjust to campus life with as little stress as possible?

First, get to know the 12 warning signs of stress overload listed below. Then, if you see the same signs for several weeks in a row, take your concerns to the next level by steering the student to professional counseling.

Refer him to the campus counseling center and discuss the situation with your disability services officer.

Being proactive is important. Students who do not deal with their stress eventually give up and drop out of school or are asked to leave because of their inappropriate conduct.

12 warning signs of stress overload

1. Dramatic increase or decrease in academic efforts.
2. Major changes in attitude or temperament (irritability, lack of enthusiasm, carelessness).
3. Withdrawal or outbursts.
4. Overactive or distracting behaviors (fidgeting, nervous tics, jumping from task to task, showing difficulty in concentrating, being prone to accidents, and sighing).
5. Complaints of fatigue and vague illnesses.
6. Problems sleeping.
7. Headaches or stomachaches.
8. Drug and/or alcohol use or abuse.
9. Increase in allergic or asthmatic attacks.
10. Avoidance of school or testing situations by direct refusal or convenient illness.
11. Loss of appetite or excessive eating.
12. Antisocial or disruptive behaviors. ■

Did you know?

Spina bifida is the most frequently occurring permanently disabling birth defect. It affects approximately one out of every 1,000 newborns in the United States. Those with spina bifida are born with an opening in the spinal column. But how does this condition affect them academically? Take the quiz below to test your knowledge:

Spina bifida

- | | | |
|------|-------|--|
| True | False | 1. All people with spina bifida have some degree of paralysis. |
| True | False | 2. Most students with spina bifida have normal intelligence. |
| True | False | 3. A mild form of spina bifida is very common. |
| True | False | 4. Those with spina bifida often have learning disabilities. |
| True | False | 5. Those affected with spina bifida are prone to latex allergy. |
| True | False | 6. Spina bifida is caused by a combination of genetic and environmental factors. |

1. False. Many people with spina bifida have only a minor fault in one vertebra in the lower back. This leads to few, if any, side effects. But the larger the opening and the higher up on the spine, the more serious the consequences, including paralysis.

2. True. Those with spina bifida range from retarded to gifted in intelligence, with most testing in the normal range of IQ.

3. True. Estimates vary, but between 5 percent and 10 percent of people may have this condition, called spina bifida occulta (or hidden). Often they become aware after having a back X-ray for an unrelated problem.

4. True. Students with spina bifida may have problems with memory, comprehension, attention, sequencing, organization and reasoning. Of course, there is a wide variation in performance. Those who had hydrocephalus (an accumulation of fluid in the brain due to spina bifida) experience the most learning problems.

5. True. Research studies have discovered that up to 73 percent of those with spina bifida are sensitive to latex. Scientists theorize that sensitization develops because of early, intense and constant exposure to rubber products through repeated surgeries, diagnostic tests, examinations and bladder/bowel programs.

6. True. Research has indicated that a complex interaction of genetic and environmental factors are involved. Folic acid prior to and during pregnancy significantly reduces the incidence.

Note: With the serious form of spina bifida, one or more vertebrae fail to form properly, leaving a gap that causes damage to the spinal cord. Paralysis results below the damaged area when nerve signals between the brain and the body are interrupted. People with this condition may need surgeries and extensive medical care. Some have shunts implanted in their brains to provide drainage of spinal fluid from around the brain. Many have various degrees of incontinence.

Possible accommodations: Appropriate accommodations depend on the severity of the student's symptoms. However, common accommodations include a quiet room for test-taking, modifications for wheelchairs, note-takers, and extended time on tests. ■

Some phobias are serious, but they cannot always be accommodated simply

Some phobias impact one or more major life functions. But according to counselors at the **University of Virginia**, how much you can do to accommodate a student's phobia depends on the person, the institution and the severity of the phobia.

Social phobias are common. These include anxiety disorders and agoraphobia, according to **Jennifer Maedgen**, director of the Learning Needs and Evaluation Center.

She prepares letters students can take to their professors to start the ball rolling for one-on-one meetings.

Sometimes if the students with social phobias are too anxious about meeting individually with their professors to discuss what may help them in the classroom, a staff member accompanies them or talks to the professor alone, Maedgen says.

Specific accommodations have to be done on a case-by-case basis because every student is unique, she says.

For example, if a student with a fear of dogs enrolls in

a class where a blind student has a service animal, it's a matter having one take the class at another time.

But it's not practical to move a lab on the 10th floor to the ground floor because a student has a fear of heights.

The **American Psychiatric Association** classifies phobias into three categories:

- **Specific phobias.** Generally, an irrational fear of specific objects. The most common objects are animals.

- **Social phobias.** An irrational fear of being watched or humiliated while doing something. These usually develop after puberty and peak after age 30.

- **Agoraphobia.** This very serious phobia causes people to fear being alone in any situation where they believe escape would be difficult or help unavailable.

If you suspect a phobia is affecting the academic performance of any of your students, suggest they visit the campus counseling center for help. Also, check with your campus disability office staff for specific advice. ■