

# Self-directed learning helps some students reach goals, study suggests

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Students with cognitive and learning disabilities that were taught the fundamentals of self-determination were more likely to access mainstream curricula and achieve their academic and other goals, according to new research by Karrie Shogren, a professor of special education in the College of Education. Credit: Photo courtesy College of Education

(Phys.org) -- Students with cognitive and learning disabilities that engaged in a self-directed learning program were more likely to access mainstream instruction and achieve their academic or other goals, suggests research by Karrie A. Shogren, a special education expert at the University of Illinois.

Shogren, a professor in the College of Education, examined the impact of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) on [students](#)' achievement and access to general education instruction. The program, which focuses on goal-setting and problem solving, aims to impart self-determination skills that will help students with disabilities be more successful when they transition to the workplace or college.

Studies have suggested that young adults with disabilities that have greater self-determination – that are able to effectively make decisions, solve problems and advocate for their needs – are more likely to be employed, to attain postsecondary education, earn higher wages and have better quality of life.

“Self-determination is really that set of skills and attitudes that allows students to self-direct their lives – to be autonomous, to self-regulate their behavior and then feel empowered,” Shogren said. “We know from other research that self-determination is a very strong predictor of positive outcomes for adults with disabilities, so we want to provide instruction that impacts those characteristics. Students with disabilities don’t always have the best outcomes, especially when compared to students without disabilities, so we really need to teach some of these skills.”

More than 300 students with intellectual and learning disabilities that were receiving [special education](#) services participated in the study. The students, who ranged in age from 13-21, were recruited from 20 school districts in Kansas, Missouri and Texas.

The students were randomly assigned by campus to the control group or to the treatment group, which received instruction using SDLMI during the first year. Both groups of students engaged in SDLMI during the second year.

At the beginning of the first year of the study, all of the students had low levels of engagement in tasks that could be linked to general education standards, particularly the students with cognitive disabilities. After participating in the SDLMI instruction, students' general education access scores increased significantly – by 1.5 points for students with learning disabilities and by more than 2 points for students with intellectual disabilities.

Students with intellectual disabilities that received SDLMI instruction were much more likely to achieve their transition-related goals, but not their academic goals. The opposite effect was found for students with learning disabilities.

“Our hypothesis is that teachers may be emphasizing different goal areas for different students,” Shogren said. “Academic goals may be emphasized more for students with learning disabilities than for students with cognitive disabilities, for example. We can't say that conclusively because we didn't directly study that, but we know that SDLMI impacts goal attainment.”

Although several teaching strategies that promote skills related to self-determination have been developed in recent years, teachers seldom use these instructional methods in the classroom because there's been little evidence that they have the intended outcomes.

“In special education, historically, a lot of our instructional practices – even those aimed at fostering self-determination – have been very teacher-directed,” Shogren said. “Teachers are in charge of the learning, setting the goals and what students are working on. We're really interested in making it more student-directed and having students be involved in the process of setting goals related to their learning, but not necessarily changing the content of what they learn. Students are often going to be learning the same things.”

Susan Palmer and Michael Wehmeyer, faculty members at the Beach Center on Families and Disability at the University of Kansas, developed the SDLMI in the late 1990s. Palmer and Wehmeyer were co-authors on Shogren's study, along with Kendra Williams-Diehm, of the University of Oklahoma, and Todd D. Little, of the University of Kansas.

Reports on the research were published recently in the journal *Remedial and Special Education* and the journal *Exceptional Children*.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

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