

Financial status affects success of students with learning disabilities

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A new University of Iowa study found only one third of undergraduates from 11 universities who reported having a learning disability were receiving accommodations. Credit: Tim Gouw.

College students who receive special accommodations because of a

learning disability say they have less difficulty completing assignments and more contact with faculty outside of class than peers who don't receive extra help.

A new study by the University of Iowa, however, found that only one third of undergraduates from 11 universities who reported having a [learning disability](#) were receiving accommodations.

The disparity might come down to two things: a desire to be independent and money.

"Some students with learning disabilities go to college, and they want to manage on their own," says Karla McGregor, a professor in the UI Department of Communication Sciences and Disorders and lead author of the study. "They don't want the extra help."

However, this study found there's more to the disparity than a wish to go it alone.

Post-secondary educational facilities are not mandated to identify students with learning disabilities. It's up to the student to self-identify, and that's where the money comes in. Many universities require documentation of a student's learning disability in order to qualify for special accommodations. Screenings, interviews, and tests to confirm the existence of a disability can cost as much as \$5,000.

"Accommodations are free, but the tests to prove you have a learning disability are not," says McGregor.

According to the study, 50 percent of the wealthiest students with a learning disability reported receiving accommodations; only 30 percent of low-income, working-class, and middle-class students with a learning disability said they received extra help. In addition, the study found the

rate of accommodation was higher among out-of-state than in-state students at the various universities studied.

"This too could reflect affluence as out-of-state tuition is typically two- to five-times greater than in-state tuition," the authors write.

The study, "The University Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities," was published May 17, 2016 online in *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice*.

Data for the UI study came from responses to the Student Experience in the Research University survey (SERU) administered in 2014 to undergraduates at 11 four-year, doctorate-granting public universities in the U.S. The survey queried undergraduates about campus climate, time expenditures, obstacles and supports for learning, academic success, engagement in and out of the classroom, and overall satisfaction.

In 2011, the National Center for Educational Statistics found that at the postsecondary level, 31 percent of all students with disabilities have learning disabilities. In recent decades, students with disabilities of all kinds have become increasingly represented on campuses nationwide as federal legislation, including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), has fostered greater inclusion.

Transition from secondary to post-secondary levels, however, has created challenges for students with learning disabilities.

"It's not surprising, then, that postsecondary students with LD take longer to earn a degree and are more likely to leave postsecondary schooling without earning a degree than other students," the researchers note.

Just 34 percent of students with learning disabilities complete a four-

year degree within eight years of finishing high school, according to the National Center for Special Education Research, compared to 56 percent of all students nationally who the National Student Clearinghouse reports graduate within six years.

McGregor says that in 2014 the UI, one of the participating universities, was allowed to add two questions to the nearly 200-question survey: "Do you have any learning disabilities that affect how you read, study, or do your course work?" and "Do you currently receive accommodations from campus due to your disability?"

Overall, 5.96 percent of respondents to the survey reported they had a learning disability.

According to the study, students who reported having a learning disability perceived more bias against people with disabilities on their campus than those who reported no disability. They also reported more faculty contact outside of class, more non-academic and skill-based obstacles to university success, and less satisfaction with the university experience.

"All those things point to the fact that if you are trying to earn a college degree and you have a learning disability, you are going to face obstacles, and it will be harder," says McGregor.

Regardless of disability status, older students reported greater financial obstacles than younger students, but this was particularly true of students who reported having a learning disability.

"These older students with learning disabilities really found it difficult," McGregor says. "They didn't make lower grades, but they reported spending more time to earn those grades. This is a message that learning disabilities are not going to affect everyone the same way, and they

present more challenges to older students."

McGregor admits the primary limitation of the study is that detail was sacrificed for scope.

"It would have been interesting to know what types of learning disabilities the students have," she says.

McGregor plans to continue investigating the specific types of learning challenges [students](#) with learning disabilities face in higher education.

More information: Karla K. McGregor et al, The University Experiences of Students with Learning Disabilities, *Learning Disabilities Research & Practice* (2016). [DOI: 10.1111/larp.12102](https://doi.org/10.1111/larp.12102)

Provided by University of Iowa

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