

A Sense of Belonging: First-Year Students with Learning Disabilities' Campus Engagement

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First-year students that identify as having a learning disability are an at-risk subgroup of students self-identifying on college campuses. Many of these students choose not to disclose their learning disability upon admissions to the university because of their concern about being accepted in the university culture. This research is from a two-year study of the experiences of a group of first-year students with learning disabilities transitioning to a private, selective, coeducational, 4-year University in the Midwest. Qualitative data of focus group interviews and semi-structured individual interviews present the findings of the study. Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) stages of student development theory are presented through Hadley's (2009) interpretation of their experiences.

Background Information

Transitioning from high school to college life can present challenges for many first-year students with learning disabilities. For a number of these students, their lack of academic readiness combined with a campus environment that does not provide a sense of belonging may influence their persistence and early departure from college (Jehangir, 2010). Many first-year students with learning disabilities struggle to navigate the college culture and manage the path to the college experience. Unlike their high school experience, once on a college campus, students with learning disabilities are expected to persist in and make sense of an environment that is riddled with barriers and biases. In such a culture, students with learning disabilities might begin to feel invisible and unwelcomed (Reynolds, Cooper, & Hadley, 2014).

Review of Literature

Reynolds et al. (2014) noted the importance of the university culture to ensure that students with learning disabilities are accepted and have every opportunity to flourish in the college community. Lechtenberger, Barnard-Brak, Sokolosky, & McCrary (2012) agreed by highlighting the significance of staff, academic advisors

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and faculty support in assisting at-risk students' adjustment to the campus. The researchers define at-risk college students as those who are under-supported and have less social support on campus compared to other students. Baxter Magolda (2014), however, emphasized the importance of student "self-authorship" or the student's ability to construct personal meaning from their positive and negative experiences in their new environment. Students with learning disabilities as a marginalized student group might recognize institutional classism and further retreat from the dominant culture norms (Jehangir, 2010). Students with learning disabilities are generally more successful in their persistence in the college environment when they are willing to disclose their disability and feel a sense of belonging at the university (Vaccaro, Daly-Cano, & Newman, 2015). Although students with learning disabilities are continuing to transition to college, oftentimes they have trouble feeling a sense of belonging in the college culture (Hadley, Hsu, Addison, & Talbot, 2017). Self-identifying and requesting support is the first step the student with a learning disability needs to make to start their engagement in the university culture (Daly-Cano, Vaccaro, & Newman, 2015; Kirby et al., 2008). Strayhorn (2012) emphasized that a sense of belonging can be particularly important for students who are typically marginalized in the college environment by the dominant culture. In addition to disclosing their learning disability, receiving accommodations for classes, and developing supportive relationships with their peers, students with learning disabilities also reported establishing relationships with faculty as essential for their sense of belonging.

Theoretical Lens

The purpose of this research is to share the lived experiences of a group of first-year students with learning disabilities during transition and adjustment to the collegiate experience. The study follows the students over a two-year period in which they participate in a series of focus group and semi-structured individual interview sessions. Through the context of the three initial stages of Chickering (1969), Chickering and Reisser (1993) and Hadley (2009)'s developmental theory of *developing competence*, *managing emotions*, and *developing autonomy*, the students are interviewed and share their experiences during their freshman and sophomore years. Chickering (1969) and Chickering and Reisser (1993) proposed that the early vectors were the most difficult for students to master. Chickering has written at length about the developmental experiences of students while in college. He has focused on their entrance to college and the skill sets needed to adjust and be successful in the college environment. *Developing competence* has to do with the student's ability to obtain the necessary academic skills to be successful in the college environment. *Managing emotions* relates to the student responding appropriately to challenging situations. *Developing autonomy* reviews the student's testing of various levels of independence such as moving away from academic supports they had used while in high school.

Method

Participants and Sampling Procedures

This two-year qualitative study was conducted at a private, selective, coeducational college in the Midwest. There were approximately 300 students on campus who reported being diagnosed with a learning disability and about 100 of those students were 1st year students. To request their participation in the study, an invitation letter developed by the researcher and mailed out by the campus Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) was sent to the students who met the specific research requirements of entering this university right out of high school and providing testing evaluations defining their learning disability. Students who responded were interviewed and chosen by the researcher to participate in the study (Cresswell, 2012). Although the 10 students in this study were diagnosed with dyslexia and/or reading-related issues, the academic concerns they presented were primarily related to their writing problems. Over the course of two academic years, the group of 10 students participated in a series of focus group and semi-structured individual interviews.

The students represented all four of the academic units on campus: arts and sciences, business, education, and engineering. Participants included 8 females and 2 males. Table 1 lists the student participant demographic data.

TABLE 1

Student Participant Demographic Data

Student Name	College/School	Major/Minor
Alison	Business	Marketing
Ann Marie	Arts & Sciences	Undeclared
Christine	Business	Marketing
Emily	Business	Marketing
Jennifer	Education	Elementary
Laura	Education	Elementary
Matt	Business	Management
Mike	Engineering	Mechanical
Molly	Arts & Sciences	Undeclared
Rachel	Arts & Sciences	Undeclared

Data Collection

During the academic year, the 10 students participated in focus group and semi-structured individual interviews where they discussed their experiences transitioning to a college campus. Focus group interviews were two hours long

and the semi-structured individual interviews were one hour long, and both were audio-taped. Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) noted that focus groups support the researcher in gathering common feelings and perspectives that the students may share. The semi-structured individual interviews supported the researcher in asking specific questions to all the students. In addition, the individual interviews allowed for the researcher to ask additional questions and the students to raise additional concerns (Gay et al., 2012). Cresswell (2012) affirmed the importance of using the students' viewpoints to give meaning to the data. Table 2 lists the research questions asked in focus group interview session 1 during spring semester of the student's first year. That focus group interview had to do with the students' *developing competence*. Table 3 shows the research questions asked in the semi-structured individual interviews, which relate to the student's *managing emotions*. Those individual interviews were conducted during the students' fall semester of their sophomore year. In Table 4 are the research questions asked in the second focus group interview during the student's spring semester of their sophomore year.

TABLE 2

Research Questions Asked in Focus Group Interview #1

Developing Competence

1. How competent do you feel in your role as a college student?
 2. How has your sense of competence changed since you were a first-year student?
 3. What do you think contributed to this change?
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TABLE 3

Research Questions Asked in Semi-Structured Interviews

Managing Emotions

1. What are some of the emotions you experience, both pleasant and unpleasant, related to your role as a college student?
 2. When do these feelings emerge: What seems to prompt them?
 3. What do you do with or what do you do about these feelings?
 4. How well do you feel you manage your emotions?
 5. Which emotions do you wish you would manage better?
 6. What is there about the way you manage them that you wish you would change?
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TABLE 4

Research Questions Asked in Focus Group Interview #2

Developing Autonomy

1. How able do you feel to make decisions on your own and to manage your own life as a college student?
 2. How has your sense of autonomy changed since you were a first-year student?
 3. What do you think contributed to this change?
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Data Analysis

Inductive analysis was the format for interpreting the data. Patton (2002) described the inductive analysis process as going through the student interview transcripts, attaching codes, and giving meaning to words and perspectives that frequently emerge from the data. Through this process, the researcher selectively attached significant codes to words, phrases, events and circumstances, identifying what was possibly important about them and differentiating them as important to the study's findings. The researcher coded by going through the focus group and individual interview transcripts and color-coding each meaningful word, phrase, and scenario with different color highlighter. Those highlighted themes were then transferred to note cards, where the researcher assigned meaning to identified themes.

The focus group and semi-structured individual interviews provided triangulation by collecting data through several methods (Newman & Benz, 1998). Newman and Benz offer that the more sources the researcher looks at the more likely he/she is to have a complete view of the phenomenon. The researcher also "member checked" with the student participants to make sure interpretations were accurate (Newman & Benz, 1998). Additionally, the researcher "peer debriefed" by talking with the Director of the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) (Newman & Benz, 1998). The researcher then examined coded transcripts and identified themes in order to theorize and speculate how Chickering's (1969) and Chickering and Reisser's (1993) stages of development were or were not accomplished by students in the context of research questions.

Limitations

Gay, Mills, and Airasian (2012) describe limitations as an aspect of the study that the researcher cannot control but believes might negatively affect the findings of the study. This study is limited because of the small student population studied at one university. Also, the study only researched one learning disability and only Chickering's first three vectors were reviewed.

Results

Developing competence

The stage of Hadley's (2009), Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) *developing competence* was the context for the initial focus group interview. According to the researchers, in this stage of growth, students are seeking to acquire the needed academic skill sets to successfully complete college-level work. Each student began the focus group by sharing a little about themselves and why they are interested in participating in this research. Students also reviewed their first semester in college by discussing their professor's expectations for their courses as well as adjusting to living away from home and on campus. In discussing adjusting to their academic challenges, a number of the students discuss their placement in "special classes" and "resource rooms" because of their learning disability. All of the students describe their primary learning disability as dyslexia, which causes them to struggle with reading and writing. The students agree that the amount of work in their college classes is a lot compared to what they had to do in high school.

Mike, the male Engineering major, shares that while in high school he had tutoring after school. He says he went to the campus Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD) because he knew he would need help with his writing assignments. He seems disappointed when he talks about the limited staff in OSD and the very limited resources available to students. Christine, the Business major, says her college classes have been challenging, but she has learned to try and stay caught up on her assignments. She says she knows it takes her longer to get things done. She says she goes to the library a lot because she cannot study in her dorm room. Molly chimes in that she is always struggling with some area of her writing so she uses the campus writing center for help. She says when she was in high school she had the same tutor for help, but since using the writing center she has to get help from whatever student is working. She says the writing support has not worked out well for her because there have been times when she turns in her paper to her professor and the problem with the paper is her "usage of pronouns." She says the next time it may be the "tense" she is using. She says she wishes she could have just one specific tutor to work with her. Jennifer, the Education major, says she misses having someone tell her what to do. She says her college work is a lot of responsibility and that she is used to someone "telling me I need to do this and that by a deadline." She goes on to say she did better academically first semester than she is doing now because she says "I just got lazy."

Managing emotions

The outline for the semi-structured individual interviews was Hadley's (2009), Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) stages of *managing emotions*. Almost everyone in the group says they have experienced some level of

"homesickness," "missing friends," and times when their feelings are challenged. Rachel, the Arts and Sciences major, reports that she was diagnosed around the third grade as having a learning disability so she has had years to "deal with it." She also says that all through high school she had personal tutors to help her with her assignments. She also says that somewhere along the way she learned that she needed to do "more" because of her learning disability. She says the college experience has allowed her to "procrastinate more" because her professors do not "baby-feed" her everything. She says when she procrastinates it makes her "stress" about her classes, and sometimes it is hard to get herself back on track. She sums up her feelings by saying her college academic life is an adjustment from high school because she misses having someone make things more structured for her. Matt, the Business major, says he misses having the opportunity to turn in extra credit assignments to improve his grades.

Personal tutors are a common issue the students raise in their adjustment in their college experience. The students express concern about their privacy regarding their learning disability and the need for the comfort of having someone available just for their support. Alison, a Business major, describes her reading and vocabulary as so problematic that at times she tries to substitute words when she is not sure of what she is reading and it usually does not make sense. She says that has caused her problems in some of her classes and has forced her to meet with her professors. She says that since they usually figure something is going on with her at that point, she discloses her learning disability. Alison's comments prompt several of the students to add that "specific, clear comments from professors are really helpful on their writing assignments." Both Christine, a Business major, and Laura, an Education major, talk about being aware of how long they are in their classes, the class size and whether the class meets early morning or late afternoon. Christine talks about giving a lot of thought to her class schedule because she has a hard time staying focused in certain classes during certain times of the day. Christine also discusses that it is important for her to "like her teachers and feel that she can ask them questions."

Developing autonomy

The phases of Hadley's (2009), Chickering and Reisser's (1993) and Chickering's (1969) *developing autonomy* was the context for the second focus group interviews. In discussing taking more responsibility for their learning disability and managing their presence on campus, the students immediately emphasize the difficulty of their classes. As a group they agree that because of the demands and quantity of their course work, it is hard to manage without academic accommodations. Ann Marie, the Arts and Sciences major, immediately says that although she enjoys her History class, "there is so much reading to do each week." Alison, a Business major, adds that even though History is one of her required "cluster courses," she "has no interest in it whatsoever!" She admits that she has been to every class and that is a big deal for her. Christine, a Business major, shares that she feels her professors often move through course work too quickly. She

seems angry when she describes feeling frustrated by her Science teacher because she says “the class is not a good learning environment.” She says “I will never take him again.” Rachel, an Arts and Sciences major, says “Philosophy . . . I just don’t get . . . anything else I can handle.” She says Philosophy is so over her head and she also says “I don’t feel like I am learning anything.” Christine adds “I think it is stupid to take a Science class when I am in Marketing.” She seems angry when she says “This is my life and I know what I want to do.”

Emily, a Business major, concedes that she still feels the need to “use tutors a lot for her classes.” She also says unlike her freshman year, this year, her professors are encouraging her to take her tests in the classroom with the other students rather than have them proctored in the Office for Students with Disabilities (OSD). Matt, a Business major, states that this year he has been taking some of his tests in the classroom rather than having the test proctored in OSD. He seems proud when he says he passed his History test after taking it in the classroom with the other students. Alison, a Business major, adds that several of her teachers this year have announced in class to let them know if students need “anything, extra time or whatever.” Mike, an Engineering major, says that he usually lets his professors know if he needs help and then also signs up for tutoring. Matt says that he has not had a professor that was not willing to help him. He also says this year he has mainly gone to professors for help and sometimes gets help from his roommate. Rachel, an Arts and Sciences major, says it is easier for her to go to her professors to ask questions this year than it was last year because she feels comfortable doing so. Christine, a Business major, says this year as a sophomore she feels more pressure to do well, because she feels her parents viewed her first-year as a time of adjustments and expect more from her this year.

Discussion

In discussing Hadley’s (2009) updated account of Chickering and Reisser’s (1993) and Chickering’s (1969) developmental stages of *developing competence*, *managing emotions*, and *developing autonomy*, the students spent quite a bit of time comparing and contrasting their experiences related to accommodations. In addition to feelings of loneliness and missing family, most of the students talked about how their learning disability practically causes them to live a life of isolation. One of the students says that she told one of her teachers that it will not bother her if she is asked questions about her disability in class. She says she has rationalized her disability as learning differently. But in her next statement she does not want her teachers to stereotype her “as turning in things late.” A number of the students expressed concern about going across campus to receive tutoring and other accommodations and services. One of the students says that in high school everything was provided in her high school building. A number of the students are receiving extra time for testing because of their learning disability or have had their tests proctored. Several of them share that it has been “embarrassing” and/or “uncomfortable” when their classmates question what is going on with them when they leave to take their tests. Some of the students say that because of their dyslexia,

at times they might invert numbers and/or reverse words while reading. Because of this, they generally do not volunteer to read something in front of the class. One of the students shares that she was at the lunch table with several friends and another friend who is dyslexic asked her about being dyslexic and she said that everyone just laughed. She used that example to say that she has learned to laugh at herself and not let the learning disability define her too much.

The change from high school to college can be challenging for most students but particularly for students with learning disabilities. These students transition from the high school setting of having many services to a college environment where only “reasonable” accommodations might be offered. Adaptation to a new culture where students must seek out support and may not have the skills to ask for what they need becomes yet another issue for students with learning disabilities. In addition to the student’s deficits related to their disability, students often arrived on campus unsure of themselves and struggling with issues around self-esteem.

Conclusion

Research suggests that if students with learning disabilities are not equipped with or are unable to develop goal-directed, autonomous behavior, they might live in isolation on campus. It is the responsibility of the Division of Student Affairs to assist students with learning disabilities in their adaptation to campus and helping them feel a sense of belonging. At-risk students with learning disabilities might not identify themselves as someone needing attention or support until they are too behind in their classes. It is important to note that students with learning disabilities experience more academic barriers than their peers without disabilities. They are likely to come to campus with self-esteem issues, questions about needed services, and concerns about their course accommodations. Along with Academic Affairs, triangulated efforts offered through the various support services of Student Affairs can provide comprehensive services for students. Helping students with learning disabilities to feel that they belong on campus ties in to providing services and supports they need to be successful. Accessible classrooms, note-taking services, and extended time for tests are common accommodations on campus. Intrusive advising models that reach out to students before they arrive on campus and compensatory counseling services that assist students in addressing their learning disability are also proactive ways of keeping students with learning disabilities’ priority on campus.

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