ABSTRACT
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attending college at an ever-increasing rate. Although federal regulations
opened higher education to college SLD, enrolled students often found that
accommodations represented a small proportion of their service needs. Based
upon extensive literature review, investigation of current delivery models,
and a qualitative case study, an alternative service model was developed to
facilitate academic success and personal growth for college SLD. This new
model was based upon students' assets, not deficits, and was offered with the
hope that this approach would assist students in moving from dependency to
self-reliance and from mere access to higher education to full participation.
A comprehensive college tutorial program called Learning Partners was
implemented and focused upon individualized academic tutorials and
relationship development. This college tutorial program can serve as a model
to design similar programs or to make recommendations for successful
postsecondary support. (Contains 2 appendixes and 16 references.) (JDM)

Running Head: FROM LEARNING DISABILITY TO LEARNING POTENTIAL

An Alternative College Service Model:

From Learning Disability to Learning Potential

Marjorie J. Carter-Davis and Kathryn B. Launey

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An Alternative College Service Model: From Learning Disability to Learning Potential. Davis, M. J. & Launey, K. B.

Abstract

Students with learning disabilities (SLD) have been attending college at an ever-increasing rate (HEATH Resource Center [HEATH], 1999). Although federal regulations opened higher education to college SLD, enrolled students often found that accommodations represented a small proportion of their service needs (Branker, 1997; McGuire, Hall, & Litt, 1991). Based upon extensive literature review, investigation of current delivery models, and a qualitative case study, an alternative service model was developed to facilitate academic success and personal growth for college SLD. This new model was based upon students' assets, not deficits, and was offered with the hope that this approach would assist students in moving from dependency to self-reliance, from mere access to higher education to full participation and beyond traditional assumptions (Carter-Davis, 2000). For the past two years, a comprehensive. college tutorial program called Learning Partners has been the successful implementation of the asset model focusing upon individualized academic tutorials and relationship development. SLD in this program have been found to contribute to their learning and educational community and to become self-reliant learners. This college tutorial program can serve as a model to design similar programs or to make recommendations for successful postsecondary support.

An Alternative College Service Model:

From Learning Disability to Learning Potential

College students with learning disabilities (SLD) have been attending postsecondary

institutions at an ever-increasing rate (HEATH Resource Center [HEATH], 1999). By 1998,

approximately 41% of freshman with disabilities reported a learning disability. Although federal

regulations opened higher education to SLD, enrolled students often found that accommodations:

(a) represented a small proportion of their service needs (Branker, 1997; McGuire, Hall, & Litt,

1991); (b) represented an outgrowth of the deficit model of understanding LD (Patton &

Polloway, 1992); and (c) inappropriately addressed their needs (Brinckerhoff, Shaw, & McGuire,

1992). What SLD can do has often been overlooked; their assets were usually unknown or

hardly recognized (Carter-Davis, 2000). In fact, Brinckerhoff et al. (1992) encouraged higher

education administrators to replace traditional access services with models that focus upon

independence and self-reliance.

In a small, two-year liberal arts college SLD frequently voiced their need for services

beyond the federally mandated accommodations that were being provided. For example,

students noted that extended time was of little value if they were unaware of what to do with that

time. Likewise, copies of lecture notes were insufficient to compensate for memory deficits

without instruction in learning strategies and mnemonic devices. Yet, SLD in college were being

successful despite their perceived deficiency. An investigation of the research on successful

college SLD revealed patterns of common characteristics. Successful college SLD: (a) had a

solid understanding of their learning disabilities (Greenbaum, Graham, & Scales, 1995; Stage &

Milne, 1996; Vogel & Adelman, 1992); (b) persevered despite setbacks (Barga, 1996; Branker,

1997; Greenbaum et al., 1995); and (c) utilized their interpersonal relationships through

networking (Barga, 1996; Stage & Milne, 1996). As a result, this brought into question the deficit model for serving college SLD and encouraged thinking about learning disabilities from different perspectives, perhaps considering their learning capabilities instead of their deficiencies (Carter-Davis, 2000).

Method

In response to direct observations of SLD, the literature review, and a successful pilot study, a qualitative research study to explore the capabilities of college SLD was launched. The setting was a small, two-year, liberal arts college in the southeastern United States. In the first semester, the program consisted of 11 SLD taught by one learning specialist trained in both learning disabilities and school psychology. Students were expected to attend a minimum of two tutorial sessions per week, either one-on-one or in small groups. They received study skills training within the context of tutorials and in a semester-long, college orientation class. Access to the tutor was unlimited from 8:30 to 5:00 Mondays through Fridays by appointment.

Through an intrinsic qualitative case study (Stake, 1995) data was collected and analyzed using three methods: (a) non-participant observations of students in their natural learning environments during tutorial sessions (LeCompte & Preissle, 1993; Marshall & Rossman, 1999), (b) student interviews and a final focus group ten weeks later (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; LeCompte & Preissle, 1993), and (c) constant conversations with the tutor that were recorded in a journal (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Spradley, 1979). The observations and conversations were recorded in journals, and taped student interviews were transcribed. Through the data, patterns of learning began to emerge which were confirmed by the students during the final focus group (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

After this initial qualitative case study, the program continued, expanding to 35 students supported by one part-time and two full-time tutors. Subsequent data were collected using anonymous, written evaluations and ratings by student participants (see Appendix A). Students' qualitative assessments of participation in the program were also obtained (see Appendix B). A separate program evaluation was conducted in the second semester of the second year. Data analysis of the latter is in progress.

Findings

Students remembered when they were diagnosed as LD at a young age, when being different was especially difficult (Carter-Davis, 2000). All students affirmed that they learned from their experiences, but the manner in which they learned reminded them of their differentness. For these students it was a constant struggle between determination and frustration.

All the students recounted meaningful relationships with parents, tutors, teachers, or coaches who understood and encouraged their learning potentials. Participants described learning profiles and strategies that relied upon utilizing assets. Students developed new learning strategies or expanded old ones. Success in college was viewed by students as valuable, either as a doorway to the future or as a goal that they shared with significant figures in their lives. Each one had clearly defined indicators of success: putting forth maximum effort, developing as a person, or graduating from college.

Students in the study developed a sense of community. The program itself provided a forum for discussion and support that students responded to by unanimously requesting that the college orientation course continue for a second semester. As students increased their participation in discussions and tutorials, they became less passive learners and participated more

actively in their educational activities and decisions. Students were observed to evolve from minimal responders to tutor-initiated questions to enthusiastic initiators of clarifying questions.

As the semester neared completion, the participants began to take ownership of the program. Students came to assume the responsibility for arranging future tutorial sessions. They posed for photographs used to represent the program and participated in a fund-raising event. Two students volunteered to describe the program in a regional meeting of exceptional children's directors. In numerous ways, these students publicly identified themselves as members of this program.

Interpretations

The students in this study confirmed the assets derived from the literature; perseverance, knowledge of LD, and networking were found beneficial and necessary for their learning (Carter-Davis, 2000). Thorough analysis of the data, however, provided new insights into learning that extend beyond the previous assumptions. As students moved toward self-reliance key learning concepts were revealed: (a) care and respect, (b) critical consciousness, (c) discourse community, and (d) empowerment. These four factors supported and sustained self-reliance in SLD.

Participants in the study identified the importance of being comfortable with the tutor and feeling safe within the learning lab. Trust and mutual respect defined the atmosphere while the tutor made connections with her students and encouraged them to make connections among themselves. Students came to visit or to report on their progress as well as to receive academic support. In this environment, SLD were willing to take increasing academic and social risks, allowing for a substantially more active role in their own education. As part of the orientation class, students in the program watched a transition video especially designed for SLD. Hearing others discuss the impact of their unique learning styles opened the floodgates. In the safety of

the lab, students actively exchanged personal tales of tragedy and triumph, cementing the bonds among them. Later, this comfort zone was extended beyond the lab, allowing students to share their experiences with the community at large.

Students developed a critical consciousness that went beyond an understanding of their learning disabilities. Students noted an increasing awareness of their impact on their environment, including academic settings. Most of the students knew generally how they learned best when they joined the program. Additionally, the asset model provided a fertile environment for growth. While refining a greater understanding of themselves, SLD also learned how self-awareness increased the likelihood of their success. One student discovered that his memory for details was enhanced if he discussed academic topics with his peers. Therefore, he initiated numerous study groups supported by the tutor. In addition, he formed study groups in the residence halls. Another young man found that asking critical questions in class focused his attention and slowed the lecture to a more comfortable pace. Yet another, in order to smooth his relationship with a professor, asked her to play an active role in his presentation project, winning her enthusiastic support.

Students developed a discourse community. The forum provided by the program allowed the students to discuss and assimilate their experiences with others who had similar pasts. Students stated that it was easiest to bond with peers whose experiences most nearly matched their own. For example, students diagnosed LD in reading reported more comfort interacting with others of the same diagnosis. The students demonstrated great empathy for one another. Their interactions within the lab clearly reflected the fact that the bonds they established extended to their residential lives. Away from the lab they studied together and confided in one another. They encouraged each other to follow through on those actions most likely to lead to

academic success such as good attendance, strict adherence to professors' expectations, and use of tutorials.

Students were empowered by their participation in the program. Success led students to a sense of self-efficacy. In turn, self-efficacy led to greater self-reliance and, eventually, greater effort. However, this was not usually a consistently upward trend. Early success was followed by a great burst of independence that frequently included reduced reliance on academic supports. A balance between total independence and necessary academic support was usually achieved within the second year. It was important for the tutor to constantly adjust her level of involvement and the types of interventions used.

Like all young college students, SLD's struggles are multifaceted. For example, "Amy" started her freshman year requiring help with every step of the reading and writing processes. By the end of the first semester, she used an electronic speller and dictionary to write independently. Amy used the speller to select a word and then read the definition to confirm her choice. The following semester, as her confidence in her skills increased, the content of her writing improved, more closely matching her oral language. The tutor prefaced writing activities with discussions that related the assignment to the student's personal experiences. Also, around this time, Amy started reading "for pleasure" for the first time in her life. She came to the lab approximately half as many hours as she had initially. In her third semester, she tried to be equally successful with less effort and greater independence. During this semester she came to the lab mostly for a friendly ear as she struggled to determine her identity and goals. As a first generation college student, Amy questioned her decision to pursue a postsecondary education. She also said that her parents' pride in her accomplishments was an enormous burden to her. Generally, she resisted academic help, preferring at that time to struggle on her own. In her fourth semester, the young

lady seemed more at peace. She had a clear vision of what she wanted to do and an understanding of the level of commitment success required. She asked for academic support for only those activities she found most difficult, but enjoyed working independently in the lab after discussing assignments with the tutor. She recognized and relied on her strengths and was comfortable asking for assistance when she needed it. By that time, she was one semester away from an associate's degree.

Implications

The movement from the deficit model to the asset model is summarized in Table 1. Through the asset model SLD can contribute to learning by: (a) reflecting and analyzing their educational experiences, (b) taking action and defining their place in higher education, and (c) including themselves in the academic community and reinforcing their contribution to the academic community. External influences are important factors for SLD as indicated by their responses to the environment, recognizing when they are being cared for and respected, and knowing when others believe in their potential and regard them as capable human beings. Students with LD demonstrate their learning potential and their desire for increased access to learning environments by (a) participating and becoming active learners, (b) contributing to their learning and the learning of others, and (c) finding ways to meaningfully profit from educational opportunities. Ultimately, SLD evidence self-reliance by (a) making their own educational decisions, (b) thinking critically to question and name their world, and (c) understanding that they have knowledge that will benefit themselves and others.

Conclusions

Students with LD are capable learners who are finding ways to succeed in college. Reasonable accommodations, though available on college campuses, are perhaps one form of

many resources needed for SLD in order to be successful and profit from higher education. The asset model is offered with hope that other colleges/universities will begin to examine the services offered to SLD and to extend services beyond accommodations to include pedagogical responses to learning issues. For we have witnessed what happens when SLD develop quality relationships, demonstrate their growing self-efficacy, create a community and learning environment, and realize their voice. They are, indeed, on the road to self-reliance.

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Appendix A

Fall 2000 Evaluation

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
LLP provided the services that I needed to be successful this semester.	57%	38%	5%	0%	0%
Now I have a better understanding of how I learn than before enrolling in LLP.	20%	65%	15%	0%	0%
The learning specialists have responded appropriately to my learning needs.	81%	14%	0%	5%	0%
Through LLP, I developed strategies/ skills that are helping me to be a successful learner.	43%	52%	5%	0%	0%
The computer technology has been a valuable resource for my learning.	65%	30%	5%	0%	0%
I am proud of my accomplishments this semester.	57%	28%	10%	0%	5%

Appendix B

<u>Fall 2000: Examples of Student Comments</u>

Program Outcomes: Students' Perspectives for Academic Year 2000-2001

Participation in this program has helped me...

"...push myself to [do] things I did not think I could do."

"...with my independence."

"...in my study habit in both developing and perfecting learning strategies."

"...to be my own person."

"...[by] providing me with someone to discuss the things I don't understand with. By doing this I usually end up helping myself."

Table 1

Summary of Differences Between Deficit and Asset Models

Deficit Model	Asset Model
No voice, no choice	Praxis
Intraindividual problem	External influences
Access	Learning
Dependency	Self-reliance

(Carter-Davis, 2000)

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