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Residence Hall Students' Attitudes Toward Resident Assistants with Learning Disabilities

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Abstract

The degree of attitude change of college students living in residence halls toward peers with learning disabilities (LD) serving as resident assistants (RAs) was investigated. This longitudinal study involved 45 traditional-aged undergraduate students and 24 RAs. Farrell and Harckham -s (1988) instrument for assessing attitude toward college students with LD was used. After one semester of interaction with RAs with LD, RA attitudes toward peers with LD remained favorable, and student attitudes became more favorable.

Learning disabilities (LD) are lifelong disabilities that affect all facets of a person's life (National Joint Committee on Learning Disabilities, 1985). With the passage of the Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 (specifically Section 504), access to postsecondary education has been expanded for students with disabilities (Brinckerhoff, 1986). The number of college students in the United States self-identifying as having learning disabilities has risen from 0.6% (Deshler, Schumaker, Alley, Warner, & Clark, 1980) to 12.2% (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1987), or more than 1.5 million college students. The increasing numbers of students with LD attending postsecondary institutions (Brill, 1987; Report on Educational Research, 1990) comprise the largest single group of college students with disabilities receiving university-wide services (King, 1988). These services include classroom accommodations, personal counseling, individually designed career decision-making assistance, and academic support services.

Nathanson (1983) pointed out that difficulties in the teaching/learning process often result from faculty discomfort or unfamiliarity with students with disabilities. Since these students sometimes require observable classroom accommodations, other students without disabilities may experience similar discomfort, unfamiliarity, and concerns regarding academic integrity when learning about students with LD. However, a limited number of these investigations have addressed issues related to attitudes toward college students with any type of disability (e.g., Amsel & Fichten, 1990; Fonosch & Schwab,

1981; Kelly, 1984; Leyser, 1989; Nathanson, 1983; Stovall & Sedlacek, 1983). Fewer have specifically focused on issues related to attitudes toward college students with LD.

Minner and Prater (1984) studied the attitudes of college faculty toward students with LD, and found that faculty held low expectations regarding their academic potential. Matthews, Anderson, and Skolnick (1987) reported that a majority of faculty at one northeastern university were willing to grant instructional accommodations to students with LD that did not "lower certain course standards involving instruction, assignments, exams, and academic policy" (p. 49). Nelson, Dodd, and Smith (1990) extended the research of Matthews et al. (1987) by comparing faculty willingness to provide instructional accommodations by faculty academic department. Results indicated that while faculty were willing to provide accommodations, concerns were identified regarding academic integrity. Faculty in the School of Education were more willing to provide accommodations than were faculty in the Schools of Business or Arts and Sciences. Dodd, Hermanson, Nelson, and Fischer (1990) surveyed faculty at an American Indian Tribal College to determine faculty willingness to provide instructional accommodations to students with LD. Results demonstrated that the faculty had been providing accommodations and were willing to continue providing them.

Two studies addressed the attitudes of both faculty and student affairs staff toward college students with LD (Aksamit, Morris, & Leuenberger, 1987; Farrell & Harckham, 1988). Results obtained in each study were similar, indicating that student affairs staff held significantly more favorable attitudes toward college students with LD than did faculty members.

This article describes a longitudinal study of residence hall student attitudes toward student resident assistants (RAs) with LD. The hypothesis was that non-LD students and RAs who experienced continued close interaction with RAs with LD would demonstrate significantly more favorable attitudes toward students with LD than would non-LD students and RAs who did not experience continued close interaction with RAs with LD. In this study, the groups consisted of (a) non-LD students residing in a living unit with an RA with an LD, (b) non-LD students residing in a living unit with a non-LD RA, (c) an RA staff having one or more members with an LD, and (d) an RA staff having no members with an LD.

Residence life programs and staff will encounter increasing numbers of challenging situations from college students with LD. Residence life staff members who are unfamiliar with the strengths, deficits, and needs of students with LD may unintentionally provide ineffective or inappropriate services. Examples of unsatisfactory services include assigning a student with spatial perception deficits to a residence hall located far from classrooms and academic support program offices (Garrett & Welch, 1988); making inaccurate appraisal of a student with social skill deficits in a roommate conflict resolution meeting; providing incomplete assistance to a student making a transition to residence hall living (McGuire, Hall, & Litt, 1991); neglecting the use of multi-modal approaches in residence hall educational and paraprofessional program efforts (Vander

Putten, Clemetsen, & Russell, 1989), or unintentionally attributing low intellectual ability to a student with visual perception deficits during in-hall academic counseling efforts.

Method

Participants

The participants consisted of 45 undergraduate students (residents) in two on-campus residence hall living units and 24 upper division undergraduate students employed as RAs in the same two residence halls at a medium-sized public university located in the midwest. They comprised four groups: (a) one group of female undergraduate students (n=23) living in a residence hall unit assigned to an RA with an LD, (b) one group of male undergraduate students (n=22) living in a residence hall unit supervised by an RA without an LD, (c) one RA staff group (n=12) including RAs with LD, and (d) one RA staff group (n=12) consisting of RAs without LD. The 24 upper division students employed as RAs comprised two residence hall paraprofessional staffs, and each staff consisted of six women and six men.

Instrumentation

Farrell and Harckham's (1988) instrument for assessing attitudes toward college students with LD was used in this study. Respondents were presented with a 24-item questionnaire containing statements addressing students with LD in higher education. Reaction to each item was measured in Likert format, ranging from strongly agree (1) to strongly disagree (4). Items in this instrument include:

Most students with learning disabilities do not cause problems on campus.

Students with learning disabilities should be permitted to take untimed classroom tests.

Admitting students with learning disabilities will require the university to lower its standards.

Students with learning disabilities can look forward to leading normal lives.

The college should not have to make special accommodations to students with learning disabilities (Farrell & Harckham, 1988).

Procedure

Collection of data was completed at the beginning and end of the Fall semester, 1989. Data were collected from the residents during unit meetings, and from the RAs during staff meetings by the Residence Hall Director. The RA position involved a wide range of job responsibilities, including peer counseling, conflict resolution, teaching, and interpretation of institutional policies. As a result, the frequency and type of interaction between RAs and residents varied over the course of the semester. Some residents, particularly those in residence hall leadership positions, interacted with RAs on a daily basis. Other residents saw their RA as infrequently as once per week.

Results

A non-parametric two-sample Mann-Whitney U test was applied to the pre-survey and post-survey means for each of the four groups (Table 1).

Mean attitude scores increased overtime for all groups, but only the pre-post attitude scores of the residents supervised by the RA with a learning disability were statistically significant.

Table 1 Mann-Whitney U Test of Changes in Students' Attitudes Toward Students with LD

Group	n	Presurvey Mean	Postsurvey Mean	U
Residents with LD RA	23	71.35	76.00	140.00*
LD RA Staff	12	77.00	77.10	63.50
Residents with Non-LD RA	22	69.32	72.23	168.50
Non-LD RA Staff	12	74.08	74.73	64.00

* $p < .05$

Scores of the RA staff group with LD members increased only slightly; however, it is important to note this group demonstrated a higher pre-survey mean score ($x=77.00$) than the other three groups.

Discussion

Diversity education efforts that address issues of ethnicity and sexual orientation have recently become integral components of many university residence life departments. While students of color; lesbian, gay, and bisexual students; and students with visually identifiable physical disabilities are recognized as full members of these diversity education efforts, students with LD are sometimes identified as a "hidden minority" on campus. Diversity education efforts must address issues related to students with LD to ensure a complete representation of diversity, and to foster more favorable attitudes toward students with LD.

Leyser (1989) identified four factors that influence faculty attitudes toward college students with physical disabilities: (a) faculty gender; (b) level of faculty familiarity with disabilities; (c) faculty academic discipline; and (d) faculty experience with students with disabilities (Morris, Leuenberger, & Aksamit, 1987). This matrix is easily adaptable to identify factors that influence undergraduate students' attitudes toward students with LD (Vander Putten & Clemetsen, 1992). Two relevant factors in this longitudinal study were (a) level of familiarity with disability and (b) experience with students with disabilities. These factors can be used to identify, or assist students to self-identify whether they would benefit from educational workshops on issues related to college students with LD. For example, if student awareness levels were limited to stereotypes of people with LD, or if students had no experience interacting with people with LD, educational workshops in the residence hall may be useful.

The results of this study indicate the ability of paraprofessionals to effectively model favorable attitudes toward college students with LD and to facilitate the development of these attitudes among undergraduate students. Factors that may have influenced the

higher mean scores of RAs with LD include the upper division status of the RAs, the prevalence of elementary education majors who had completed coursework in mainstreaming students, and familiarity of the RA staff members with the staff members with LD before the Fall semester, 1989. For example, an RA with performance deficits related to writing may delegate tasks such as making signs or taking meeting minutes to another unit member. An RA with sequential processing deficits may delegate tasks involving completion of a series of subtasks to unit members. As a result, undergraduate students were able to observe firsthand and develop a meaningful understanding of students with LD in college.

Limitations

Several potential problems exist in the research design. Second, frequent student room assignment changes hindered the completion of accurate longitudinal studies in residence halls longer than one semester in duration. The degree of change in student attitudes toward students with LD may be greater after a full academic year.

Nevertheless, these initial research results provide an incentive for additional assessment of the effectiveness of educational efforts addressing issues involving college students with LD. Given the paucity of research on this topic, studies that examine student attitudes with respect to factors such as age, housing arrangements, gender, extent of familiarity with LD, and experience with students with LD will make important contributions to the field of postsecondary education for students with LD.

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Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973, § 504, 29 U.S.C. § 794(1980).

Author Notes

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